In 1994 the global apparatus of the neo-liberal economic order was solidifying, with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Association; and at the same time contestation was signalled by the Zapatista uprising. It was also the year that a small but significant book by a new figure in post-Marxist thought was published, called The Political Philosophy of Post-Structuralist Anarchism. This book sought to update and renew the anarchist tradition, by highlighting the restrictive features of traditional anarchist theory, and the possibilities of fruitful engagement with poststructuralist theory. Academic publishers have published a variety of scholarly contributions that are avowedly postanarchist or include a major section of the knowledge factory. Other volumes are expected to join them soon.

Newman nonetheless adopts an almost entirely postanarchist standpoint. He is wedded to an enlightenment rationalist – and indeed positivist – account of knowledge, and is associated with the state (p. 4). These classical anarchist assumptions are not only philosophically unsustainable (pp. 58-59), but also produce hierarchical political practice. The knowledgeable elite armed with vanguard knowledge leads the masses in confronting the state and leaves other micropolitical oppressions untouched. In seeking out the authoritarian moments in anarchism, Newman seeks to make an anarchist critique to anarchism itself (p. 51).

Thus, the first conflict Newman identifies in anarchism is that between its commitment to freedom versus the fixed essential self. If humans are essentially good, or prone or determined to a particular type of benevolent social relationship, this severely restricts human freedom to produce its own destiny. It also leads to an anti-politics, as such essentialism leads to a view of the good that is coming from natural social harmony which the state disrupts or distorts. Newman has similar criticisms of classical anarchism’s essentialism, and this has led to objections to this characterisation. Significant classical anarchists such as Errico Malatesta (Life and Ideas, p. 73) viewed the concept of ‘natural harmony’ as ‘the invention of human laziness’. In addition, Peter Kropotkin – who of course Newman specifically cites as an essentialist (p. 39) – perhaps in part in unacknowledged reply to earlier critics – he nonetheless asserts a social essentialism on classical anarchism.

Newman’s thesis – “to affirm anarchism’s place as the one true radical political tradition, as a radically anti-foundationalism rejects. In addition, the principle of ‘equality’ is a potentially unstable and potentially contradictory concept. After all, appeals to equality suggest a shared value structure by which differing phenomena or agents may be assessed as ‘equal’, which is something that Newman problematises with his emphasis on singularities and rejection of moral norms (p. 7). And as contemporary feminist critics have pointed out, demands for ‘equality’ suggest that there is some standard by which all other entities are measured by, such that gender equality appeal for women to measure up to the standard of ‘man’, and thus privilege the ‘male’. Thus, appeals to equality are actually reassortments of a hierarchy of values and identities.

I am sympathetic to the main thrust of Newman’s thesis – ‘to affirm anarchism’s place as the one true radical political tradition, as a fundamental anti-hierarchical organisation and distribution of power, which anarchists have always engaged in, from the unions and revolutionary syndicates to insurrectionary committees. There is evidence of such anarchistic practices in these organisations reflected in how to avoid recreating hierarchies. Newman is right to point out that the state is not just a set of coercive institutions but is evident in the structure of our everyday social relationships. This is a view he finds in the (pre-post) anarchism of Gustav Landauer (pp.161-62), and the last great modernists, the Situationists Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem (pp.65-66), who borrowed it from the Marxian-thinker Henri Lefebvre. As a result, it is hard to see what anarchism is bringing here which is not already part of anarchist self-reflection.

By seeking out the aporia in anarchism (even where they are not always present) Newman usefully acts as a spur to re-think postanarchism. Are there perhaps some inherent limits or conflicts in his postanarchism? Whilst sympathetic to Newman’s account of anarchism/postanarchism sharing an open commitment to ‘equal liberty’ (pp.20,24) or ‘equality’ (pp.144-45), namely the view that freedom and equality are mutually defining rather than in conflict, it does present a number of problems for postanarchism. It does, for example, suggest differentiation core to postanarchism, something which Newman’s anti-foundationalism rejects. In addition, the principle of ‘equality’ is a potentially unstable and potentially contradictory concept. After all, appeals to equality suggest a shared value structure by which differing phenomena or agents may be assessed as ‘equal’, which is something that Newman problematises with his emphasis on singularities and rejection of moral norms (p. 7). And as contemporary feminist critics have pointed out, demands for ‘equality’ suggest that there is some standard by which all other entities are measured by, such that gender equality appeal for women to measure up to the standard of ‘man’, and thus privilege the ‘male’. Thus, appeals to equality are actually reassortments of a hierarchy of values and identities.

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of a Hegelian, modernist mindset that recreates hierarchy (p. 148 and p.153).

Newman states explicitly at critical junctures of the book that: “Postanarchism is not [...] an abandonment or movement beyond anarchism. On the contrary, postanarchism is a project of radicalising and renewing anarchism – of thinking of anarchism as a politics.” (pp. 4-5) and “Postanarchism is not a specific form of politics; it offers no formulas or prescriptions for change. It does not have the sovereign ambition of supplanting anarchism with a newer name”, but is rather a “celebration” of anarchism (p.181). This is a position that is consistent with Newman’s arguments against Modernist discourses of progress. However, such assertions seem inconsistent with his other claims that anarchism requires a substantive break, which postanarchism offers – “if anarchism is to remain relevant to political struggles today, it must construct new understandings of politics, ethics, subjectivity and utopia which are not grounded in essentialist or rationalist ontologies and which eschew guarantees of the dialectic” (pp.163-64) – and that postanarchism provides grounds to think of anarchism “in new ways” (p. 182).

Newman seems to suggest that postanarchism provides a way of refreshing or reviving anarchism. This is an attractive project, but not one without a number of problems. The first is that whilst there is much to agree with in Newman’s account of postanarchism, it is hard to see, bar its more academically sophisticated mode of expression, how it differs significantly from the internal critiques already part of anarchist and other radical traditions. Take, for instance, Newman’s account of the role of utopianism in anarchist thought, which, like so much of the book, is cogent and insightful. As Newman points out, utopias are not blueprints to determine action, but ways of critiquing present social forms as well as ways to inspire (pp.67-68, pp.138-39). Such an account of utopia one which was already significant in anarchism, drawing as it does from Georges Sorel and Kropotkin. Moreover, the idea that the utopian should be embodied in the practices of the here and now, such as contesting the state in our daily action (p. 163), sounds exactly like the principle of prefiguration – the means embodying the goal – which has been one of the main distinguishing features of anarchism since its earliest classical forms under Michael Bakunin and James Guillaume.

If these characteristics are already present within the classical anarchist canon and within contemporary (non-post prefixed) anarchist tradition, what does Newman’s postanarchism add that is new? It is, first, a welcome reassertion that fluid, anti-hierarchical practices are already a core feature of anarchism. Newman’s postanarchism also rightly highlights the ethical in radical politics, another longstanding feature of anarchism. Here, though, Newman cites Emmanuel Levinas and the concept of the encounter. This posits that in dealing with others we unsettle the sovereignty of our ego and also disrupt others with whom we engage; in relation to others, we have therefore a “radical responsibility for the other” (p. 55). The encounter between academic poststructuralism might radically unsettle anarchism, but rather than produce new anti-hierarchical social relations, it might simply act to assert the sovereignty of the academic discourse. Radical discourses have gone this way before. Terry Eagleton laments that when Marxism encountered academe its trajectory was altered: Socialist analysis which was a resource “among dockers and factory workers ha[s] turned into a mildly interesting way of analysing Wuthering Heights” (After Theory, p.44). In this case the danger is that whilst poststructuralist engagements provide useful aids for encouraging anarchists to reflect on their practice, they might override anarchism into a discourse associated only with those located in particular educationally-privileged locations and thereby domesticate and dominate (like the reviled vanguard) radical activity. It is this fear that explains some of the hostility to postanarchism and poststructuralism in anarchist forums less centred on academe (see for instance libcom.org).

There are mitigating factors against this academic colonisation. Newman clarifies – and therefore democratises – some complex debates from within the realms of high theory, making them more accessible to the non-specialist reader. He deserves at least a pint for making sense of the Simon Critchley versus Slavoj Zizek dispute (pp. 111-15); for making the argument between Ralph Milliband and Nico Poulantzas clear and relevant (pp. 76-77), and for explaining and critiquing potentially obscure concepts such as Negri’s constituent and constituted power (pp. 87-89) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s post-socialism (pp.89-93).

Also attractive is Newman’s optimism, drawing from examples of militancy like the aforementioned Zapatistas, peasant and landless protection of the commons in Brazil, Peru and West Bengal and factory occupations in Europe (pp. 174-75). It is a refreshing change from discourses of defeat, retreat and retreatment to hear a knowledgeable theorist propose “that an insurgent political space has already emerged, characterised by new experimental forms of political practice and organisation that are anarchistic in orientation” (pp. 167-68). If he is right it will make for more interesting times.

This article is based on the review that appeared in Anarchist Studies Vol. 16 No. 2 (Autumn 2010). Benjamin Franks is the author of Rebel Alliances: The means and ends of contemporary British anarchisms (AK Press, 2006) and co-editor of Anarchism and Moral Philosophy (Palgrave, due out October 2010).