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The once-Marxist-now-post-modernist Anglo-American academic intelligentsia feels compelled to endlessly reinterpret the largely forgotten anti-globalist/capitalist demonstrations held around the turn of the 21st century. Very briefly, leftist post-modern misanthropy was replaced by the "post-Seattle new anarchist euphoria." (CAS, p. 20)

The post-modern intellectual elite decided that anarchism best described the genesis, organization and practice of anti-capitalist demonstrators, many of whom consciously identified themselves as anarchists. But these academic converts of Foucault regard "classical anarchism" as old-fashioned. The disciples discovered that "traditional anarchism" seemed to be founded upon scientific and rationalist worldviews - ideas the French postmodern gospel fundamentally opposes. "Outmoded ideological ideas of revolution" and fusty old class struggle also had to be rejected because postmodernism has revealed how power is diffuse, everyone dominates someone else and the working class no longer exists, if indeed it could ever have existed at all. (CAS, p. 272)

The post-moderns are dismissive of "faith in the miracle of the event of revolt which is coupled with the inevitable defeat of such revolts by power. The result is that we are left in the situation of fighting (losing) an endless war alternating between the eruption of revolt out of nothing and then its inevitable return to nothing." (AS, p. 114) There's a traditional response to the abject defeatism and pessimism expressed in the misanthropy of postmodernism: The Revolution Is Dead. Long Live The Revolution!

Purging Science and Reason

It is tempting to dismiss post-modern drivel as sophistry, but one cannot ignore the missionary zeal with which these elite professors announce their intent to "purge traditional anarchism of its 19th century naturalist and essentialist philosophy with its many epistemological shortcomings." (AS, p. 109 & CAS, p. 20) This necessitates debunking the idea that anarchism has any rational or material basis in scientific knowledge, nature or human behavior. The "poststructuralist salvage operation" will also "infuse anarchism with new analytical and theoretical vigour" (CAS, p. 20) by rejecting any "rational and future orientated schema." (CI, p. 258) The apparently discredited notions of rational or scientific argument and truth are to be rejected along with any attempt to construct universally applicable or commonly agreed aims and agendas. But a political movement that seeks no program and fails to justify its reasonableness or reasons for its existence will clearly not be infused by anything much at all. The assertion that scientific and cultural knowledge is often "partial," "local" and "contingent" doesn't mean that nothing can be known about nature or human behavior and that we shouldn't attempt general agreement about how social and political life might be better organized.
All of the authors in these collections (Anarchist Studies is an academic anarchist journal, increasingly dominated by attacks on the most basic anarchist ideas and premises) are very impressed that anti-capitalist demonstrations in 1999 were autonomously self-organized in cyber-space by a leaderless, non-hierarchical, globally interactive network of individuals and an assortment of "affinity" groups including knitting clubs, urban gardeners, AIDS support, soup kitchens, pacifist-Christians, animal rightists, anti-road-campaigners, etc. The web-created "movement of movements" was the first time in history that such a globally scattered and diverse mixture of groups could exchange ideas and collaborate together in cyber space. Post-anarchists regard the formation of the movement of movements as a momentous break with all previous history of radical opposition to capitalism.

But, the 'movement of movements' is anarchic only in the derogatory or negative sense of lacking any ideology common program or unified political affiliation. The interaction or gathering of a large number and wide variety of ideologically nondescript left-liberal groupings in Cyberspace and at periodic demonstrations is directionless and hence anarchic. (CI, pp. 257-8) Adecao after the historic emergence of the 'movement of movements,' it is clear that diffusion, disparity and difference hasn't translated into anything very much. Capitalism was bankrupt in 2008, but the anti-capitalist movement is hardly anywhere to be seen. During the most recent global powerfest (2010) hosted by Canada, the anti-capitalist circus managed to scare shoppers in downtown Toronto when a few 'extreme radicals became violent.' But Toronto was some 200 miles from the actual meeting venue; the activists were completely excluded from the actual site and so condemned to spectacles not even on the margins.

The rising number of jobless and homeless people and the declining pay and pensions for the average working stiff is testament to the resilience of capitalism and the inability of the 'movement of movements' to concretely challenge it. These failures also partly result from an unhealthy preoccupation with process, pacifism and political correctness. The inward focus upon the internal processes by which movements or groups conduct their affairs eclipses the aim of effecting change in society. The festival experience and inclusion within collective processes results in the "self-revolutions" of the participating individuals and the "union of separateness" in the mass orgasm of carnivalistic abandon during the protest festival. Actions are viewed as successful because they provide positive "subjective experiences" of collective organizing and the mass euphoria gained from participating in the carnival against capitalism. (CI, pp. 83-99) But clearly similar experiences can be found in following a football team or seen at Hitler's rallies. (CI, p. 98) "Distributed networks can be used for divergent ends including finance, production, policing, war and terror. There is nothing inherently anarchist or even progressive about network forms and practices." (CAS, p. 215)

Anarchism, Essentialism & Scholarship

One unappetizing ingredient in these compendiums is continual bellyaching by elite intellectuals concerning their role and the practice of 'radical' university research. But it is the poor standard of (anarchist) scholarship and philosophical rigor that concerns me most about post-anarchy in the academy. For example, Peter Kropotkin suffers the most appalling misrepresentation and is continually summarily dismissed for his allegedly naive scientific or ethical essentialism.
According to the post-modernist gospel, committing the sin of essentialism places one's ideas at the pre-dawn of human intellectual thought.

Kropotkin practiced and preached ethical relativism through his robust revolutionary rejection of bourgeois morality. It was only following the horrors of World War I (which he supported) and the Russian Revolution, in the dwindling twilight of Kropotkin's very long life, that he seriously and unsuccessfully focused upon ethical enquiry. He only partially completed one volume on the History of Ethics and died before he could even begin to write his own moral theory (which was to be the second volume of his Ethics). It is ridiculous to suggest that a philosopher is an ethical essentialist when they never written one single word of their proposed theory of Ethics.

In his youth, Kropotkin was a close associate and outspoken supporter of Sophie Peroskovaya, who with her co-assassins killed Tsar Alexander II. Kropotkin's pamphlets and articles justifying the tsaricide resulted in his expulsion from Switzerland and his imprisonment in France. In consequence of his earlier unqualified support for terrorist violence, Kropotkin struggled to articulate a coherent moral viewpoint upon a series of outrages committed later around the turn of the 19th century. Kropotkin's moral ambivalence with respect to terrorism and violence has been widely discussed in the scholarly literature. (For in-depth analysis consult Martin Miller, Kropotkin, and Brian Morris, Kropotkin) The American anarchist Emma Goldman, in her Living My Life, described herself as a disciple of both Sophie Peroskovaya and Kropotkin. She also in both theory and practice (through supporting her companion Alexander Berkman's assassination attempt) rejected bourgeois moral condemnation of individual acts of politically motivated terrorist violence. Why turn to Foucault for philosophical guidance when Kropotkin and Goldman's relativism is so abundantly self-evident? (Even if I do not personally entirely agree with Kropotkin's, Goldman's or the post-modern approach to the question of ethical relativism and political violence.)

There are elements of naturalism (a form of essentialism) in Kropotkin's ideas upon the evolutionary sources of morality. This is very obviously because Kropotkin opposed metaphysical or religious interpretations that proclaim that all that is good in the world is god-given. (AS, p. 140) In different historical periods, contexts and societies morality is culturally expressed in many different and contradictory ways. But, if one is looking for a non-religious or evolutionary account of the origin of morality, then a study of the evolution of social, collective and cooperative behavior in nature is the only starting point (as Darwin and then Kropotkin suggested), regardless of whether it conforms with post modern strictures:

The swarming of bees offers a lesson in complex non-hierarchical decision making. Multi-species aggregations at waterholes often offer lessons in peace-keeping. And, of course, as Kropotkin demonstrated so many years ago, many, many species of animals offer tutelage in mutual aid both within and across species. Such lessons can help us in our efforts to devise a theory and practice of natural anarchism. (CAS, p. 242)

The extremely romantic conception of nature as essentially or naturally good or cooperative is continually and falsely attributed to Kropotkin. One author rues how he "can't adopt either the positive essentialism of Kropotkin (human nature as good) or the negative essentialism of Hobbes (human nature as bad). On the streets you see both, often in quick succession. So-called
human nature as I have experienced it is in conflict with itself." (CI, p. 237) But Kropotkin, in his introduction to Mutual Aid, admits that it is a subjective and partial account. Moreover, Kropotkin points out how mutual aid and group psychology have frequently led to inter-group conflict and international warfare.

Infanticide and Ethical Relativism

Apparently cruel measures for dealing with surplus babies, the old and infirm were practiced in many hunter-gatherer societies as a method of conserving scarce resources in times of hardship. Kropotkin in Mutual Aid, in his attempt to counter Victorian ignorance, racism and Christian moralism, provided a detailed social and ecologically rationalized explanation of infanticide. Kropotkin argues that economic and ecological constraints favored group or cultural regulation of their populations according to the carrying capacity of their environment. Kropotkin observes how our ancestors did not seek to reproduce their genes at the expense of their group or environment (as Huxley and now Dawkins would have us believe).

Although nowadays infanticide is hard to understand, it must be appreciated that in times of famine a mother may not produce enough milk to sustain her child. In the absence of modern surgical techniques, abortion is dangerous and likely to kill the mother, who may already have dependent babies and children. Nomadic hunter-gatherers were unable to travel with too many very young babies, especially in harsh, changeable environments. Repugnant practices were a brutal, but necessary, means of ensuring the survival of the band and their environmental resources.

Kropotkin viewed such practices as an adaptive group response to regulate population and food supply that couldn't be judged by the standards of contemporary European society, which, Kropotkin believed was certainly not without its own horrors and hypocrisies.

When we see that these same loving parents practice infanticide, we are bound to recognise that the habit (whatever its ulterior transformations may be) took its origin under the sheer pressure of necessity, as an obligation towards the tribe, and a means of rearing the already growing children. The savages, as a rule, do not "multiply without stint," as some English writers put it. On the contrary, they take all kinds of measures for diminishing the birthrate. A whole series of restrictions, which Europeans certainly would find extravagant, are imposed to that effect, and they are strictly obeyed. But notwithstanding that, primitive folk cannot rear all their children. However, it has been remarked that as soon as they succeed in increasing their regular means of subsistence, they at once begin to abandon the practice of infanticide.

But if our scientist had lived amidst a half-starving tribe which does not possess among them all one man's food for so much as a few days to come, he probably might have understood their motive. So also the savage, if he had stayed among us, and received our education, may be, would understand our European indifference towards our neighbours, and our Royal Commissions for prevention of "baby farming."2
Kropotkin's discussion of infanticide in Mutual Aid reveals he did not believe humans to be essentially good and that he viewed morality, human nature and behavior as contingent and situational, varying with or relative to environmental, social and historical conditions.

Post-modernism embalms the Marxist corpse. French academic post-Marxists "never openly embraced the anarchist tradition." (CAS, p. 11) But they universally plundered it when the collapse of their beloved Communist Party left them with no useful or credible ideas to call their own. Post-modernism is the road-side debris left after the Communist Party truck-wreck was towed to the junk-yard of political history. The flag of the Marxist intelligentsia after passing through the consumer capitalist and neo-liberal washing machine resulted in the faded threadbare ideology of post whateverism. Post-anarchism is a new variant of this laundry fluff whose recipe comprises of random slices of libertarian Marxism, assorted cubes of communications theory, a dash of academic cyber-babble, and "generous evocations of Nietzsche" (CAS p. 19) - all dressed with lashings of French post-modern vinaigrette.

Some essays in these three recent collections of post-anarchist writings are among the least enjoyable reading material on Earth. They are jargonauts of arcana; avalanches of freshly invented confusing, long or foreign words that pile up on top of one another in quick succession. The unnecessary and unhelpful terminology intimidates and irritates, rather than invigorating, informing or impressing. It really depresses me that such philosophical pretentiousness and incompetence is invoked in the name of anarchism and funded by public universities.

Footnote


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