

PHILOSOPHY AND ANARCHIST CRITIQUE

Salvo Vaccaro

Università degli Studi di Palermo

It is easy to think of anarchism as a political theory in the modern “storm” brought about by the rational enlightenment versus the darkness of religious dogmas and the political theology that inspired theory and practice of absolute sovereignty first, and constitutional sovereignty afterwards. It may also be conceived as an extreme form of the politically charged theories of the Enlightenment, as opposed to other contemporary political theories such as liberalism and utopic socialism first, or Marxist socialism at a later stage. As such, over two centuries later, it is subject to the wear of time, to the post-modern nullification with which some seek to liquidate the certainties of a blind, all-powerful reason already denounced, in its defining aporia, by Adorno and Horkheimer.

This simple prediction is equally easily denied by Catherine Malabou who, in the book *Au voleur! Anarchisme et philosophie*¹, addresses this matter demonstrating how, despite the hegemony of Marxism in European culture of the 20th century, notwithstanding the eradication of anarchism both from a theoretical standpoint – the allegation of childishness made by Lenin, look who’s talking! – and a political one – from Machnovscina in revolutionary Russia to 1936 Spain, whose libertarian revolution was

¹ Puf, Paris, 2022; english translation *Stop Theft! Anarchism and Philosophy*, Polity Press, London, 2024; Spanish translation *Al ladrón! Anarquismo y filosofía*, Kaxilda, Donostia, 2023; Italian translation *Al ladro! Anarchismo e filosofia*, eleuthera, Milano, 2023.

thwarted by Stalinism, opening the door to World War II –, a significant sector of philosophy and political philosophy of the 20th century, in all fairness the most radical wing of that sector, has had a serious reflection about the anarchist way of thinking, merging with it, sucking its lifeblood, rearranging and renewing it in an interesting and fruitful manner, “stealing” some of its key elements, and finally denying the very political *côté* of anarchism itself.

If we observe this same exact trend from the standpoint of political action, this is not surprising, as any political and social action that breaks into the stage of History and influences geography by bringing about a novelty worth being taken into consideration has carried along libertarian methods and *ethos* from several decades ago, present in their organizational methods, forms of association, customs, and discursive practices. This tendency is especially evident in Western civilization since the fall of the Berlin Wall, which symbolically marks the end of geopolitical bipolarism, the end of the fascination of Marxism, and the collapse of party systems. The emerging movements on the long wave of the 1968 turning point – minus the authoritarian push applied by the Leninist tactic of the armed struggle – have adopted libertarian practices: from the omnipresent Black Bloc to Occupy Wall Street, from Indignados to Siglobal (who oppose the fake market-driven globalization of neoliberalism that denied the planet-wide globalization of human, social and species connections, so visible today that the very future of the Earth is at stake), from Marcos on the heights of Chiapas to Rojava on the Kurdish ones.

Malabou registers the split of what should be conjoined, that is, the philosophical level of anarchy as denial of the original foundation that inspires the eternal narrative of the equally original privilege of power, and the discursive level of anarchist practice, that takes place mostly on the side of denial of authority, shamefully leaving behind, in my opinion, the level of philosophical reflection which is however unavoidable to disclose a consciousness foreclosed by *arché*. And she delves into the reasons why Reiner Schürmann, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière face, in their own specific research paths, the question of *arché* and of the reason of its *an-archist* denial, finding the philosophical rifts that prevent these thinkers from translating an-archist philosophy into the theoretical practice of anarchy – political, social but, in my opinion, mostly ethical. Regarding the lack of an anarchist practice (which once would have been called militance) in those authors, historical contexts, theoretical upbringings and political experiences, it might serve to provide some *de facto* superficial explanation, which Malabou appropriately does not take into consideration, rather focusing on a strictly philosophical denial.

The first philosopher that Malabou chooses to address is Reiner Schürmann, who sheds light on the emergence of an anarchist ontology, when praxis is no longer legitimised by a theoretical *arché*, and is therefore deemed to have no origin, no commencement equivalent to command, as ventured by Aristotle. Nevertheless, Schürmann links the anarchist deconstruction of metaphysics to the principle of anarchy itself, borrowed from Heidegger, who carefully steers clear of using the term *anarchy* in his vast output. Schürmann correctly differentiates the sequence of origin of things in the presence of *arché* in a dual meaning of the concept, denouncing how classical ontology abuses a pre-existing presence which originates from an original *arché*, whereby itself is incorrectly based on primeval chaos, imposing itself (and posing) as a stealthy *arché*. However, Schürmann himself carries out a deconstruction of the ontological deconstruction of anarchy by describing it as a principle, but by doing this he ends up rendering meaningless the power of the negative, which prevents *anarchy* from becoming one of countless *archic* pretences of something. Therefore, Malabou wonders why Schürmann assumes anarchy as a form of ontology without highlighting political denial as a disruption of the chain of command/commencement that does not seek to operate a replacement with any other *arché*. Maybe the fear that arises from standing at the edge of the chaotic abyss, which is hard enough to sustain from a philosophical point of view, entails having to take a step back both in its political dimension and in committing to an anarchist deconstruction of the prevailing metaphysics.

The second philosopher taken into consideration is Emmanuel Levinas, whose an-archic (hyphenated) vision marks not only a difference with political anarchism, but also a distancing from any archic principle dating back to the origins of mediterranean philosophy, which can be found also in Heidegger, whose governmental dimension of the very act of thinking, as opposed to the truth of being, he critiques. Levinas aspires to detach himself from metaphysics, to find an Outside which is completely different from ontology, which cannot be archic because it is placed at the origin of everything, and this Outside is none other than the act of putting Oneself in contact with the Other, caught in its sphere of ethical responsibility. Responsibility means relating to others without obeying any command, obeying only to a primordial impulse that comes from the encounter with someone else's face, that "dictates" that I should listen to them, engage them, build a relationship without any kind of preset order. The order of the I-Other relationship is exactly the effect of the burden of ethical responsibility that does not subject to any predetermined order. Malabou wonders why Levinas resorts to the state and its institutions as necessary figures to preserve ethical anarchy from any danger of drifting and losing its meaning, maybe as a reason

for his support (albeit not without criticism) to the State of Israel, maybe as a reason for the abstract configuration of Jewish subjugation to the Egyptians as an original foundation of the birth of the State of Israel. The pretence of freedom from slavery that results in the Zionist project translates, in Levinas, into a resurfacing of state policy as a guarantee of the elevation of the Jews to the condition of chosen people. The denial of state slavery blinds Levinas, depriving ethical anarchy of the necessary support from a political anarchism.

The third philosopher is the theorist of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, who places himself in that thought movement that deconstructs, squared, its own deconstruction. Is deconstruction an anarchist action? The answer is binary, it's yes and no, aporetically together. Derrida has woven a debate, sometimes implicit, with anarchy, by having dialogues with Freud, Levinas, Lévi-Strauss, and Benjamin. In each of these reflections, the double ambivalence of deconstruction squared stops before the issue of power – in its political, psychic or ethical versions – as well as of its overcoming, glimpsed at the junction leading either to a reserve of chaos, functional to the restoration of power, or towards a different imaginary that thwarts power organizing life in a different way. Derrida remains always undecided, hanging in a delicate balance. Although, when addressing Freud, Malabou states that Derrida stops the deconstruction of the push towards power/command/influence and ends up accepting it, as if the three nouns were synonymous, but likening them to each other means condemning oneself to not be able to overcome them. This is probably due to a prejudice towards anarchism, a thought that, according to Derrida, has not completely come to terms with the question of power, concealing an unresolved fascination. But this is, probably, more of a revelation regarding Derrida himself rather than an element of anarchism...

We will discuss the fourth philosopher reviewed by Malabou at the end of this article, let's now focus on the fifth one, Giorgio Agamben. The act of partition which is at the foundation of politics and its pillar concept – sovereignty – generates a set of exceptions as an effect of its strength. Anarchism is exactly the act of deactivation of that strength, but for Agamben, by confusing and after all reducing the desecration of the sacred to a simple action of breaking the rules, symbolically or not, political anarchism could not grasp its importance, and ultimately failed. Agamben identifies an anarchic fault in the *arché* in its meaning of commencement and command: while the two appear conjoined, whoever is called to start a ruling dynasty actually shows his inability to rule, that is, to command, as he resorts not to the art of governing, but to the sacredness of lineage. Just because being, from Aristotle to Heidegger, takes shape within the sphere of commencement, of origin, or in only one of the two meanings of *arché*, this proves,

according to Agamben, the need of a binary device in which, freeing itself from the truth of being, the *arché* as command places itself within the pragmatics of strength, rather than of power as essence of the being. And strength has a vested interest in concealing the anarchic fault that splits *arché* in the junction between commencement and command. Nevertheless, says Malabou, doesn't the thought of anarchy only as the noticing of a fracture within the *arché* imply the risk of returning an archic principle? Doesn't the thought of anarchy only as desecration of the sacred come with the risk of legitimizing the sacred again? If breaking the rules comes with the risk of being recovered, as it has frequently happened in history, how can rule-breaking be boosted *ad infinitum* without being condemned to imminently – though likely not immanently – recovery?

The last of the philosophers analysed by Malabou is Jacques Rancière, for whom the radicalism of political equality is already anarchic. After all, in the classic sense of democracy, if everyone has the opportunity to govern and to be governed, then no one has the standing to rule. Rancière theorized the dual tension between *politics* and *police*, the latter meaning the everyday of political order (not necessarily repressive in the specific sense of policing as a noun), and both polarities coexist because *politics* is seldom visible, while *police* constitutes the daily routine. Moreover, *politics* cannot be represented as imperfect and real as they may be – and not only because they cannot be reduced to a mere political representation. It certainly is possible, however, even advisable according to Rancière, to split the tension of this duality, but this is only possible in an aesthetic dimension, not in the political one, where the “original” act of distributing the sensible prevents the explanation of the radical equality of the politically present sides. The partition itself cuts the people's body, paving the way to the side of the sideless, undermining *politics* and creating *police*. For Rancière, political philosophy from Aristotle onward always sought to legitimize that partitive and exclusive cut, removing the difference between politics and police to link the latter to the former. Among several effects, Rancière includes also the denial of testimonial value of the right of expression of the word, which according to Malabou constitutes the denial of anarchy's possibility to express an anarchic politics according to the Rancière's original meaning.

I do not believe it is an intellectual gamble to believe that the only one, among the authors analysed by Malabou, who took a conceptual, even more so than a political, effort to fill the gap between philosophy and politics is Foucault. In his enunciation of the connection between philosophy and politics, respectively under the guise of *truth of knowledge* and of *necessity of power*, in an original manner, he even coined the new term *anarchaeology*, a further lexical portmanteau such as, for example, in the case of *governmentality*. Foucault in fact wonders:

what can he say about, or for, or against the power to which he is involuntarily subject? In other words, what can the voluntary bond with the truth say about the involuntary bond that ties us and subjects us to power? (Foucault, 2014, p. 77)

But, with more vigor, he immediately turns the question around and asks himself:

what does the systematic, voluntary, theoretical and practical questioning of power have to say about the subject of knowledge and about the bond with the truth by which, involuntarily, this subject is held? [...] given my desire, decision, and effort to break the bond that binds me to power, what then is the situation with regard to the subject of knowledge and the truth? [...] It is the movement of freeing oneself from power that should serve as revealer in the transformations of the subject and the relation the subject maintains with the truth. (Foucault, 2014, p. 77)

The bond between knowledge and power, between subject and truth, comes to be analyzed from a radical perspective, in the literal sense, which is different from skepticism or suspended judgement, and that has more to do with an etho-political stance:

It is an attitude that consists, first, in thinking that no power goes without saying, that no power, of whatever kind, is obvious or inevitable, and that consequently no power warrants being taken for granted. Power has no intrinsic legitimacy. On the basis of this position, the approach consists in wondering, that being the case, what of the subject and relations of knowledge do we dispense with when we consider no power to be founded either by right or necessity, that all power only ever rests on the contingency and fragility of a history, that the social contract is a bluff and civil society a children's story, [and] that there is no universal, immediate, and obvious right that can everywhere and always support any kind of relation of power. (Foucault, 2014, p. 77)

The conjunction between philosophical research and political critique in Foucault's philosophical journey can be traced through the following statement, made in connection with the philosophies of constant doubt which undermine the rock-like indissolubility of established truths: "the lateral approach on the opposite track [...] consists in trying to bring into play in a systematic way, not the suspension of every certainty, but the non-necessity of all power of whatever kind" (Foucault, 2014, p. 78). Doubtlessly, the thought of "This is anarchy; it's anarchism", pronounced by the French philosopher himself, must surely have been whispered by those present at the Collège de France on that January 30, 1980 while listening to this prospective overturn.

While there is absolutely nothing wrong in using those terms – he had used them himself during a conference at the Société Française de Philosophie almost a couple of years earlier on May 27, 1978² – and admitting that his interpretation could be discussed as it was «a bit rough» and sketchy, Foucault rejects the stereotype according to which the anarchist theories define power as inherently evil, having its final removal as their ultimate goal:

First, it is not a question of having in view, at the end of a project, a society without power relations. It is rather a matter of putting non-power or the non-acceptability of power, not at the end of the enterprise, but rather at the beginning of the work, in the form of a questioning of all the ways in which power is in actual fact accepted. Second, it is not a question of saying all power is bad, but of starting from the point that no power whatsoever is acceptable by right and absolutely and definitively inevitable. (Foucault, 2014, p. 78)

Foucault's stance on Anarchy accounts for the piercing clarity of an ethos which moves from a philosophical posture to a political practice, from a philosophical denial to a political one in a seamless fashion, if not for a slight tinge of the traditional feeling of anarchism, but still within its familiar air:

In other words, the position I adopt does not absolutely exclude anarchy—and after all, once again, why would anarchy be so condemnable? Maybe it is automatically condemned only by those who assume that there must always, inevitably, essentially be something like acceptable power. [...] So the position I am proposing does not exclude anarchy, but you can see that in no way does it entail it, that it does not cover the same field, and is not identified with it. It is a matter of a theoretical-practical standpoint concerning the non-necessity of all power, and so as to distinguish this theoretical-practical position on the non-necessity of power as a principle of intelligibility of knowledge itself, instead of employing the word “anarchy” or “anarchism,” which would not be appropriate, I shall make a play on words, since this is currently not very fashionable, let's again go a little against the trend and engage in word games (...). So I will say that what I am proposing is rather a sort of anarcheology. (Foucault, 2014, pp. 78-79)

² That is the conference *Qu'est-ce que la Critique?* [*Critique et Aufklärung*], which can be found in Italian in Michel Foucault, *Illuminismo e critica*, Donzelli, Roma, 1997, which I have examined in a couple of occasions: *Foucault: dall'etopoiesi all'etopolitica*, in “materiali foucaultiani”, nn. 7-8, IV/2015; *De l'èthopoiesis à l'èthopolitique*, in *La pensée politique de Foucault* (s. d. O. Irrera, S. Vaccaro), Kimé, Paris, 2017.

Play on words aside, this term defines exactly both the philosophical denial of the *arché* as a founding substrate of any stance that pretends to deny its contingency to call itself universal and super-historical, as well as, in the context outlined by Foucault – whose lessons, it is worth noting, were far from being the outcome of a spontaneous, albeit erudite, spoken word, being mostly pondered and written well in advance –, the affirmative ethos of a theoretical-practical, and therefore political, position, which sutures that hiatus denounced by Malabou. Rejecting the idea that anarchy is a more or less accessible *telos*, an *ou-topia* that one day will become a fully realized *eu-topia*, Foucault incurs in a crucial wrong-footing, placing anarchy as a rejection of the *arché* while establishing the *arché* as a strategy, both political and conceptual, to force a condition of domination of the few on the many. At the very core of this strategy lies the resource to disprove it philosophically and to oppose it politically.

Most likely, Foucault is the only one, among the radical philosophers that populated the European scene in the second half of the 20th century, to have developed a philosophical and political anarchism, with some episodes of “joining the fray” with libertarian struggles against mental institutions, prisons, political oppression, etc. This commitment can also be traced in his efforts towards revamping and renovating the terminology of this struggles, assessing a weaponry of theory that dates back to at least the previous century, down a path of continuity and discontinuity that can only be beneficial for both the anarchic thought and the anarchic action.

Obviously, the authors mentioned by Malabou would be fitting company along with Walter Benjamin, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, Gilles Deleuze, Cornelius Castoriadis, Miguel Abensour, Judith Butler, among other philosophers of the 20th century, who are equally non-anarchist as the ones taken into consideration, but have carried out a reflection on anarchism without any preconditions or ostracisms. The denial is not only attributable to a black hole-like phantasmatic fascination one must be worried not to fall into. It can also be found on the side of political practice, that is, of the construction of an anarchic discourse which is carried out, deliberately or not, by anarchist movements, which for their part, have widened, instead of tightening, the gap between philosophical anarchism and political anarchism.

First of all, in fact, one must take notice of the discrepancy, both in time and in context, of the conceptualisation of anarchism without underestimating it, dating back to Greek philosophy and making its way throughout the centuries until the definition of the anarchic political practice, which took place in the modern era, when the idea was legitimised into a world-transforming practice and is no longer confined within the realm of contemplative activities. This discrepancy has made it possible for a new,

not only lexical, distorted and misleading concept of anarchy and anarchism to assert itself, which is carried forward not by unlikely political “rivals” but rather, and mostly, by philosophers who are terrified before the abyss of a radical denial of an *arché* that is functional to acting as a pillar to legitimise political command in its strict sense. The modern defence of the correct etymological meaning of anarchy has therefore identified certain philosophical practices as an opposite target, reaching the awareness of a theoretical attitude in which the connection with political action is more rewarding than the reflective attitude of philosophy, often mistaken for the mere passive contemplation of what exists and of the way of being in the world.

Secondly, we should not overlook the fact that the hypothesis of anarchic de-foundation/subversion of any regulatory frame that sets the philosophical statute of a political practice deprives political anarchism of a univocal criterion that assigns precise identities to each form of thought of action that it inspires. Thus came the belief that no anarchist can “certify” another one, and that the discriminating factor does not bear a political or theoretical sign, but a purely ethical one, that is, the link between action and thought in the sense of its intrinsic coherence. Ethic as in *ethos*, meaning an individual and collective behaviour compliant with the diagram of forms and styles of life – somehow ascetic – that are deemed significant in the anarchic scale of values.

Thirdly, therefore, it is not by mere coincidence that in the “pantheon” of political anarchism one can find some authors, some of which are also – but not necessarily – philosophers, whose output is closely connected and legitimised by a coherent militant political practice: this applies to Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, Malatesta, just to name the most significant, accredited and recognized masters of anarchism who, in joining thought and action, translated their full identification in their own person(al-ity) – today we might add, though not strictly “classics” for obvious reasons, Clastres (maybe), Bookchin and Graeber (but maybe not Hakim Bey). This status is not attributed, for example, to Godwin, Stirner, Landauer, and further back in time to de La Boétie (although he is the most innovative, considering the times he was operating and writing in, as well as the first to catch a glimpse of that contingent and integral weakness of the political authority that hinges on the will to serve, without which the sovereign is left naked and alone).

Equally unrecognized are the authors taken into consideration by Malabou who have faced an-archic philosophy without being anarchists, without taking some kind of stance within the anarchist constellation – which is plural and diverse and by historical-geographical context – and without joining any libertarian struggle (with the notable exception of Foucault, one should argue).

We are therefore facing a double denial, which weakens the strength of anarchic critique both from a philosophical point of view and more strictly on the political side. As demonstrated by Malabou, the incompleteness of philosophical critique stops at the gates of an imaginary which is radically open on the precipice of the lack of foundation, while the uncertainty of political anarchism towards the theoretical-philosophical approach deprives the critique of the political authority of a resource of legitimacy which is deeply rooted in collective imagination, that is, the *arché* as an unavoidable origin of eternal command, because it dates back to the beginning of time. The lack of a converging interpretation, albeit in the respective autonomy of the conceptual strategy of removal of sense, between philosophical *arché* and political *arché* downsizes the power of negative, turning the philosophical critique into one of many currents of thought of no consequence on the world, whereas political critique is reduced to one of the ideologies of modernity, as such rendered obsolete by hyper-modernity, in which it loses its sense and its grasp of the world.

Caught between a courtesan philosophy, at the service of the legitimisation of power, on one side, and a replicant philosophy which, while being subversive since it is aimed at transforming the world instead of simply reading it, ended up replicating the forms of domination, anarchism does not trust philosophy and positions itself as an etho-political discursive practice, suspending the ontological option Malabou seems to be gravitating towards. If, indeed, the domestication of being is the distinctive sign of Western philosophy, as Derrida would put it, then the non-governable is the sign of an anarchic thought that is indifferent to power and opposed to domination. The difference, theorized by Malabou, between *in-governable* and *non-governable* is indicative of the lack of familiarity between anarchism and power. In fact, the in-governable marks the outer edge of a dialectic between the rulers and the ruled, which came to be when out of political chaos the statehood option (or whatever name the political authority has been given over the course of several centuries) violently appeared through the *archaic* partition. In that fashion, the in-governable is brought back within the “score” in which that partition is moving, certainly marking its limit but, at the same time, formulating its “willingness” of recapture which, in turn, moves that limit forward to a new location, according to an infinite recursive dialogue.

But just at the time when that action was defining man according to the grammar of domination, a part was left out due to its refractory nature of being different, a part that is virtually present in every human being who declines it in their own way, that does not enter their sphere of contact and access, that positions itself as a founding denial of the pretence of domination. It is, indeed, anarchy in every one of us.

Bakunin's call to plasticity becomes all the more appropriate, maybe decisive, to escape the ontological labelling and elude its theoretical link. The figures of indifference are as numerous as oppressive, looming the ever-changing shapes of domination, whose operations of analysis and critique are moving according to a contextual punctuality that echoes Foucault's warning. The sign of the non-governable does not bring along a past where one can find solace in an *arché* that predates the idyllic command/commencement of a *lost paradise*; it does not have a future either, since it does not represent the upcoming projection into a definitive, messianic *telos*. The non-governable holds a trace of the past, foreshadows elements of the upcoming, but its time is the outdate, that no-man's-land where one can experience the interesting, where the fork between statehood and anarchy lies, where we can meet the conjoining disjunction between philosophy of anarchy and political anarchism.

References

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