

Philosophy's "Thieving Disavowal of Anarchism"

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a review of

Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy by Catherine Malabou, trans. Carolyn Shread. Polity Press, 2023

Catherine Malabou's challenging, provocatively titled book reminds us how philosophically radical anarchism is, beginning with Pierre Proudhon's deceptively simple decision to call himself an anarchist in the 19th century. It then investigates a curious fact about post-WWII European philosophy: that so many of its most celebrated figures were drawn to the idea of anarchy, yet dismissed anarchism as a political philosophy: a "thieving disavowal of anarchism," as Malabou calls it.

It's an important point, because some of these thinkers continue to be very influential, including in anarchist circles. They asked or provoked important questions—what is democracy? what is politics? what does it mean to be an anarchist?—and added important new understandings of power and domination, governmentality and resistance. Some of them created significant mischief as well, by caricaturing anarchism and insisting that anarchy and anarchism are two separate things.

Malabou is a well-known French philosopher and academic—her doctoral supervisor was French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and she once co-authored a book with him—who has written on neuroscience, epigenetics, psychoanalysis, and feminism, among other matters. *Stop Thief!* is her first book on anarchism, and her analysis offers a fresh perspective on what makes it unique and important as a philosophy, not just a political movement.

She doesn't examine anarchist thought in detail, however, and her focus is Western, going back to Diogenes and Aristotle and avoiding the work of non-European, non-US anarchist thinkers. That's because her concern is how postwar European philosophers appropriated elements of anarchist philosophy, without acknowledging their debt, but making their own, backhanded contribution to the tradition in the process.

The philosophers Malabou examines are Reiner Schiirmann, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Ranciere. But she starts by contrasting Marxism's obsession with history to anarchism's affinity for geography, by way of thinkers like Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, who themselves were leading geographers. They crafted a new, more horizontal way of understanding political and economic realities in place of Marxism's "vertical readings," Malabou argues.

Anarchism has never been simply an attack on the State, she reminds us, but is "first and foremost a fight against the mechanics of domination" in "all domains of life." Proudhon and the anarchist thinkers who came after him carried out a "semantic revolution" that was critical to all of the philosophers Malabou discusses in her book by proposing that anarchy is not chaos but "the highest expression of order" (Reclus) and that the "archic" order is actually a disorder because it is "not founded on free consent."

"Archie," from the Greek arche, is a key word for Malabou, establishing sovereignty and power in government as the first principle of political life. "There is not a treatise in classical political philosophy," she tells us, "that does not begin with joint consideration of sovereign and governmental authority, considered as absolute starting points." But that this is an error: anarkhia—disorder—precedes arche, and perpetually shadows it.

To be an anarchist, Malabou says, implies “absolute resistance to arche despotique”: to “domestication” by systems of domination. Anarchism itself is “the only political form that is always to be invented, to be shaped before it exists, precisely because it depends on no beginning or command... This plasticity is the meaning of its being.” Reducing it to one authority, even its own, is impossible.

The six philosophers Malabou discusses each helped to decenter the “archic paradigm” in Western philosophy, she argues. Levinas anarchized the term “election” to mean not the choice of a candidate for public office—another builder of the State—but a choice to act without coercion: “without any rule being presented to consciousness or to the will.” This kind of election can only happen in a really free society; it is not a “national affair but a global revolutionary ferment.”

Foucault, who Malabou calls “one of the only twentieth-century philosophers who takes [anarchism] seriously in the realm of politics,” took on Thomas Hobbes’s notion that the State—the sovereign—is necessary to organize society such that humanity’s brutish nature is kept in check.

The state of nature is society, Foucault argued back, and the State is the site of a permanent war between those who hold power and those who don’t. This is the essence of politics, and it began as soon as sovereignty and the State came into existence.

A key distinction for Malabou is between the ungovernable and the non-governable. The ungovernable rebel against authority, but all too often, in so doing, reinforce it, either through their defeat or by letting it coopt them. For the non-governable, to be governed is simply not possible: “indifference to power, indifference to the logic of command and obey.” Reading between the lines, this is the thing that Big Brother is most intent on eliminating in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is anarchism in its essence, or for Foucault, the “limit-experience” that pushes politics to the brink.

Agamben makes a similar point: that transgression—an offense against law or established authorities like the State or the church that can often feel liberating—can actually bolster the thing it aims to tear down. What we need instead, he argues, is a way to speak about power without borrowing anything from language that confers a “sacred” dimension on it: to reveal the political dimension of God, even. This gives us the capacity to “deactivate” authority and render it inoperative. The job of anarchism, Malabou says, is to explore its potential to go beyond transgression and become this means of deactivation.

Rancière, who Malabou calls “one of the great thinkers of anarchy,” asks us to reclaim the term “democracy” from the State by going back to its original meaning of “radical equality.” This exposes the contradiction in modern-day, so-called democratic politics: While it promises equality in public life, this never translates into “arithmetic” equality, namely, equal distribution of the common good. Capitalism and the State solve this problem by setting the masses to menial, exhausting tasks that give them no time to participate fully in public life.

Real politics, Rancière argues, is not found in the phony politics of elections and representative bodies, but outside of them, which is “the sphere in which wrongs can be formulated expressed, judged.” There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as democratic government, he contends, because democracy, in its original meaning, is not governable. “The political,” Malabou notes, “is the anarchic form of community.”

What would a state of “radical equality”—or anarchy—look like? It is “a constitutional bazaar, a harlequin’s outfit,” he writes. “It is properly the regime that overturns all the relations that structure human society.”

Rancière and the others remind us not to ignore the anarchy in anarchism, and that democracy and real politics are, fundamentally, anarchist. So, why were they so reluctant to come out as such? Explaining this failure comes close to baffling her, Malabou admits. “The anarchist problem since Proudhon is precisely to think about politics without the aid of hegemony,” she notes, and this is roughly the same challenge that Agamben raises.

The six philosophers covered in *Stop Thief!* share a few core criticisms of anarchism: a “benevolent confidence” in human nature’s ability to create a just society without coercion, and a nihilistic infatuation with violence, terrorism, and death. But the same can be said of any radical political movement. A third, more devious objection is that anarchism faces a double bind: that to be an anarchist is to obey a command, which would be very un-anarchist, akin to the command to be spontaneous.

Anarchism is different, Malabou replies, because it is the only political philosophy that anchors itself in the non-governable, with its radical foreignness to domination. Non-governability merges with being, she says, which could care less about power and so is unlikely to reproduce it.

The philosophical challenge for the left was therefore to figure out how to “think” being and politics together. Communism tried, but only by resorting back to arche, which resulted in “terrifying [and violent] dead ends.” Anarchism hasn’t solved the problem so far either, Malabou admits, but with its grounding in non-governability, it is much better equipped to do so. “The real anarchist,” she says, “is being itself.”

Derrida, Foucault, and company missed this ontological aspect of the problem, Malabou argues, which may be why they could not see that their own analysis ought to have led them to anarchism. It’s a compelling point. She also suggests something a little more mundane, however. All six of the philosophers she discusses began their political development as Marxists, although some moved on and all had criticisms of at least some aspects of the faith. But Marxism saturated continental philosophic circles in the decades following World War II, and endowed them with its own snobbism.

For a philosopher, “there’s no shame, and never has been, in declaring oneself a Marxist,” Malabou notes, but “calling oneself an anarchist is almost indecent.” How about “non-governable?”

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