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Writing power: An anarchist anthropologist in the looking glass of critical theory

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Abstract

This is a case study in the anthropology of anthropology. Its ethnographic focus is on a contemporary critical anthropologist, rather than on the figure of a colonial or nationalist scholar who is explored from a critical perspective of contemporary scholarship. I chart an episode in political biography and scholarship of Maxim Kuchinski, a Russian anarchist and ethnographer, and contextualise his views in a shifting landscape of critical theory. The broader change I am concerned with here is that from 'the social' to 'power' as a key explanatory category. The goal of this article is to explore how the category of power enables a particular ethnographic vision. If much of current anthropology explores Foucauldian micro-physics of power, what are the macro-physics of these micro-physics? What is the cosmology of power in the anthropology of power?

Keywords

anarchism, critical ethnographic authority, power, the social, Spinoza

To be able not to exist is lack of power, whereas to be able to exist is power (as is self-evident). (Spinoza)

Tea in a Moscow café, summer 2008. I am meeting with a friend and colleague, Maxim Kuchinski. We are discussing my research project on socialism and anthropology for which he is a sympathetic commentator and one of my informants. Maxim is an anthropologist and an active anarchist. We discuss the 'invention

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of society'. The contribution of radical socialist theory to this invention, I argue, has been overlooked in recent genealogies of 'society' and 'the social'.

Maxim is sceptical about 'invention'. Society as such was discovered, not made. But he agrees that socialist thought puts a great emphasis on the manufacturing of a particular kind of the social:

The social equals equality, and the role of social movement is simply to guard it; you protect it from the outside evils such as the state or capitalism, but then you want to step aside and not no interfere with it otherwise.

And then he adds:

the problem is that you cannot really step aside: egalitarianism needs to be consciously built and maintained; this is what you want, rather than what is already there; and this building requires a careful orchestration of power, which has a *natural tendency* towards hierarchy and imbalance. (emphasis added)

'Would this be, from your point of view, here and now [in post-socialist Russia] or everywhere?', I ask. He replies that this is universally the case. If one does not constantly and purposefully intervene, power creates imbalances and differentials.

Maxim's anarchism illustrates a move in socialist anthropology from a 'discovery' of the social to that of power. Alejandro de Acosta noted recently that Kropotkin's most interesting claim in his famous 1904 depiction of mutual aid is that it *just happens*, 'all the time, in animal world and in human societies of all sorts'. Mutual aid does not require intervention, neither philosophical nor political – 'not even a theory of mutual aid' (de Acosta, 2009: 27). This sociality is eventually corrupted from the outside, by the state and capitalism, but it at base it is still there. While the egalitarian nature of the social in Maxim's remarks echoes Kropotkin, in Maxim's view the social is not a given but a conscious construct, whereas what is given, what *just happens*, is the imbalance of power. How does one get from Kropotkin's 'point A' to Maxim's 'point B'? How does this socialist theory replace the naturalness of equality with that of power imbalance? Exactly how is this power discovered and naturalised after, and as a replacement of, the discovery of society?

But Maxim's comments also struck me as uncannily familiar in another context. It is widely accepted in anthropology today that social and cultural processes are always-already embedded in relations of power. Power differentials are immanent in sociocultural forms which operate as a normative filter that naturalises them, that is, puts them in a form that can be simply taken for granted. This normative comes without saying because it goes without saying, with implicit claims to be true, universal and natural. This approach, which could be summed up as a 'power turn' in anthropology, is good for critically exploring truth claims. But Maxim's remarks prompt me to question a truth claim that is behind these explorations of truth-claims – namely that these normative filters are 'always-already' embedded in power. If this is true, how does it not make this fact of embeddedness universal as

well as what this embeddedness is in? And then, if so, doesn't this explanatory framework naturalise power in the same move in which it de-naturalises these normative filters?

The goal of this article is neither to defend 'the social' and 'culture' against 'power' (cf. Sahlins, 2002) nor to give an overview the 'power turn' in anthropology in any exhaustive way. It is to explore ethnographically how the category of power enables a particular anthropological vision. What makes it rely on power as an explanatory category? And, if power in this view has a 'natural' tendency towards imbalance, what is 'nature' in this argument? If much of current anthropology explores Foucauldian micro-physics of power, what are the macro-physics of these micro-physics? What cosmology of power underscores this anthropology of power?

I call this ethnography 'writing power' to signal its continuity with as well as difference from the historiographic turn in anthropology of the 1980s. Maxim is not the exemplary anthropologist depicted by the 'writing culture' school – the earlier 20th-century scholar, who worked in a colonial situation, who was emphatically uninterested in it, but whose as-if neutral gaze at as-if untouched traditional societies was, it is argued, ultimately enabled by power imbalances of this colonial situation. This translated into a classic ethnographic authority, the 'science of participant-observation' (Clifford, 1983: 120). Studies of such participant-observation techniques made an important critical argument for a different kind of anthropology, but the figure of the critic remained on 'this' side of this historiographic divide. Such a critic could be exploring anthropology anthropologically, but was unlikely to become the subject of this kind of critical exploration. Here, in contrast, I am interested in what I call a 'critical ethnographic authority' that derives its explanatory power from positioning itself as critique and defines ethnographic action as critical intervention rather than merely the 'science of participant-observation'. Critique here refers not merely to the Enlightenment reflexivity that clarifies concepts (Marcus and Fischer, 1999: xvi), and not to cultural critique that holds Euroamerican modernity against the mirror of cultural otherness, but to a kind of critique that aims to change the world, rather than simply to contemplate it, to use Marx's famous dictum.

This kind of critical anthropology estranges, alienates and transforms the 'home' world of Euroamerican modernity into the critic's most significant 'Other' and implicates a different topography of ethnographic practices. From the time of Engels and Kropotkin, such a critique first and foremost objectified capitalist modernity and the modern state as the 'Other' from the point of view of radical alterity of the constructivist 'Self' of this exploration. Below, I use the notion of the 'line of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) to describe the constitution of this 'Other' as a point of departure. Other forms of difference (hunter-gatherers, gift economies, peasantry, etc.) are subordinate to the dynamic of this line of flight of the critical 'Self' away from capitalist modernity as the 'Other'. To use the language of the Cold War era, the main split between this 'Other' and the 'I'/eye' of the anthropologist is that between the 'first' and the 'second' worlds – of capitalism and

critical alterity – rather than the ‘first’ and the ‘third’ worlds drawn on the post-colonial template.

The ‘second’ world is an umbrella term for different socialist articulations, from the Paris Commune to Soviet-style socialism and Maoism, but also peasant-socialist, utopian, socialist-feminist and anarchic communities and movements. But the borders of this ‘second’ world are contested within this critical discourse. The lines of flight are both external and internal. For Maxim as an anarchist, this ‘Other’ encompasses Soviet socialism, which he sees both as a case of totalitarianism and a state modality of capitalism that has become only more blatantly capitalist since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even more importantly, Maxim’s remarks about power, with which I started this article, came not when we discussed this ‘Other’ but the critical ‘Self’. We talked about how it was necessary to be vigilant in the milieu of anarchists themselves, who constantly generate a statist and neoliberal political ‘mainstream’, and how this dangerous potential needs to be constantly opposed.

Maxim depicted this as a process of internal ‘othering’ in 2000 when he gave a paper at a conference panel that I organised and for which I asked him to reflect on relations of power among anarchists. I have known Maxim even longer – from 1989 when he came as a high school student to an open day at Moscow Institute for Ethnography, Russian Academy of Sciences, where I was a graduate student at the time. In this article, I discuss a case of anarchist action which he participated in and reflected upon. Then I contextualise Maxim’s views in social theory and its philosophical foundations that shift from Hegel and Hobbes to Spinoza. In what follows below I draw on my lasting dialogues with Maxim, but many of the links that I make and most conclusions are mine.

Critical ethnographic authority

We advance to the field, so to speak, in advance (*V pole my vydvigaemsia kak by zaranee*).

With this phrase Maxim started his paper on relations of power among anarchists (Kuchinskii, 2000). ‘We’ are the ‘Rainbow Keepers’ (*Khraniteli radugi*), a Russian anarchist organisation to which Maxim belongs and which is involved in a wide variety of activities from ecological to anti-globalisation movements. The ‘field’ is the field of political action as well as of fieldwork: as an anthropologist, Maxim works on the ecology and indigenous social organisation of the Russian North.

In both cases the field is fundamentally political. In fact, it is not two separate fields but a single one that, for Maxim, bridges academic institutions, research field sites and arenas of anarchist political action. This field activity is mostly short term, akin to ‘surgical strikes’, although it is prepared well ‘in advance’. Russian anthropology hasn’t yet fully embraced the notion of long-term fieldwork, but for Maxim, ‘advancing to the field in advance’ carries a long-term notion of the field strategy

and confrontation of Gramsci's 'war of attrition'. Below, I discuss Maxim's paper (Kuchinskii, 2000) and events in the summer of 2001 when the Rainbow Keepers protested against the construction of a Lockheed Martin plant for incinerating nuclear missile engines in Votkinsk, an industrial town east of Moscow. The protest ended up as a failure, and Maxim and several other anarchists were arrested for 'hooliganism'. In Votkinsk prison, Maxim used ideas from his 2000 paper on power among anarchists to write an open letter to the Rainbow Keepers about power dynamics during the protest, and he also started to draft a research article about cultural ecology and traditionalism in the Kola Peninsula of the Russian North, where he restated the problematic of cultural ecology as that of ecology of power (Kuchinskii, 2007).

Prison has consistently been a writing venue for radical theorists. Maxim was arrested and detained on numerous occasions before and after the Votkinsk protest, although, unlike Kropotkin, Gramsci or Negri, he never served a sentence. But even if one is not literally in prison, one is always in one metaphorically – in prison or internal exile in the 'enemy's home' world of modernity, capitalism or state socialism.

Exile is also a key motif in a narrative of origin for Russian academic ethnography. Participant observation there has roots in Siberian exile in which late 19th-century radical socialists found themselves after being sentenced by the Tsarist regime for their revolutionary activities. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, this exile yielded detailed ethnographic studies, which went hand in hand with colonial critique of the Tsarist regime (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2008).

The torch of 'repressed ethnography' was carried during the Soviet period when anthropologists (as frequent victims of Stalinist purges as any other intelligentsia), developed specific ethnographic concerns. For the generation of Maxim's teachers, when he started graduate studies in Moscow Institute for Ethnology in 1995,¹ it was not merely acceptable but in fact quite radical to be primordialist and to stress 'real traditions' and cultural continuity. If the state was based on the ideology of social constructivism, then studying cultural continuity and the resilience of traditions as vessels of organic, rather than constructed identity (such as 'primordial' ethnicity) was subversive. Maxim admits that his initial interest in anarchism was also due to the fact that anarchist anthropology presented a vision of resilient organic sociality. But anarchism also offered for him a way to be left-wing but not Soviet. His 'line of flight' – his critical distancing from this organic sociality and subsequent embrace of power as a foundational category of analysis – happened throughout the late 1990s.

Votkinsk

In July 2001, Maxim and other Rainbow Keepers went to Votkinsk. Since Soviet times, Votkinsk had hosted a ballistic missile production company, and a new plant for incineration of nuclear missile engines was to be constructed on that site. This was deemed ecologically problematic (and it was for this reason the project had been relocated to Russia from the USA). The Votkinsk population was by and

large against this project, but it proved difficult to translate this into legal action: a regional high court declared invalid the results of a 1999 city referendum that had voted this project down by an overwhelming majority. But only a little more than a half of the voters took part in the referendum. The missile production company, one of the main employers in town, threatened to fire those who were going to vote.

Rainbow Keepers established their protest camp in mid July in response to this ruling. They set up information stalls, distributed leaflets and held a series of public gatherings. But these drew rather small crowds. Police violently dispersed the Rainbow Keepers' protest in front of the Lockheed Martin Votkinsk offices and, at the end of July, anonymous intruders broke into the camp and set one of the tents alight. By mid August the protesters were looking for ways to radicalise their action and the Votkinsk public. They blockaded several roads and picketed the entrance to the Votkinsk administration. The picket line lasted a week before the police dispersed it and arrested some of the anarchists for hooliganism. Maxim and several others of those arrested were detained for 15 days in jail.

Sporadic protests continued outside prison. The camp was attacked again by masked men from far-right groups armed with baseball bats, iron bars and knives. The camp was destroyed. The jailed activists went on hunger strike. Maxim, feeling a burst of creative energy despite the hunger strike, turned to writing. He drafted an open letter to the anarchist movement. In his view, the camp effectively collapsed not when it came under attack but earlier, when the anarchists started the blockade of the city administration, changing the centre of the protest from the camp to the picket line. This change, in his view, was due to the dynamics of power relations in the movement itself and ultimately led to the failure of the protest campaign.

Power and hierarchy among anarchists

The starting point of Maxim's letter was in sync with anarchism's main proposition: to the extent that hierarchy is visible, it needs to be avoided. Then he added an important qualification: making hierarchy visible is itself an anarchist power move. It legitimises the movement as a whole as a critical depiction of state and market hierarchies. But it can also be, and often is, a critical intervention in the movement itself. In the open letter to Rainbow Keepers, Maxim is ultra-careful not to be understood to be making such a power move, that is, not to give his voice of critical authority any claim to be a 'centre' of the movement or starting a new faction ('I would like to state from the start that I belong to no factions, and actually I doubt the existence of any in our movement').

Maxim follows as well as depicts a particular geometry of anarchist fieldwork, anarchist meetings and anarchist thinking. This is, as he put it in his paper, 'the flat circle without the podium' (Kuchinskii, 2000: 3). The aesthetics of this formula is in an explicit contrast to the organization of meetings of Soviet collectives where 'the podium' was the place where such collectives' chairmen or Party leaders were seated and from where they effectively controlled who could be called to speak as well as the topics of speeches.

The anarchist 'circle without the podium' has a membership that is not well defined as a matter of principle. It includes people who 'do not consider themselves anarchists and constantly state that'. They hold different views, such as anarcho-communist, anarcho-syndicalist, Marxist autonomist, or identify through practices ('radical greens' or 'anti-militarists', 'anti-globalisers'). The circle can be marked with a symbol such as a black banner or letter 'A', 'or something with that' (Kuchinskii, 2000: 1–2). Yet to participate, to be a member of the movement is defined not so much by gathering under such a banner, but as 'getting it'. Members are those 'who are getting it' (*vrubaiuschiesia*), 'those switching on' as in 'switching on light', from colloquial for 'switch' (*rubil'nik*). This is not merely to have 'negative attitudes to the dominant system of power' and 'coercion' in all forms: economic exploitation, inequalities based on gender and sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. Equally important is to 'switch on' the fundamentally informal character of egalitarianism of the anarchist milieu.

Those who are 'getting it' are by and large young people; very few are over 30. But for Maxim, hierarchy, or at least potential for hierarchy, starts from the categorisation of membership as 'youth' (*molodezh*) and 'young pioneers'. The problem is that these categories are opposed to other categories such as 'central' (*tsentrovye*) and 'father' (*batia* 2000: 5–8). The latter can be equally young but these categories imply more experience and informal authority. Informal markers of this authority – pins, chains, rings and other *fenechki* (tokens) – are continuous with Soviet-era informal counter-culture (clarifying this in our conversations, Maxim refers to Schepanskaia, 1993). Such symbols signal a long-term commitment to the movement rather than any kind of claim to a central role. Getting the informal and contingent character of authority is an important part of 'getting it'. Leadership that necessarily emerges in the course of campaigns is accompanied by an aesthetics of vulgarity ('you would not "normally" urinate into someone's pocket – so he urinated into my pocket' [2000: 7]). Yet the leader 'is just another person with whom I had a drink'.

Maxim is sensitive to the fact that political authority exists and can be accumulated. One can become an anarchist leader. He is also sensitive both politically and ethnographically to the fact that this leadership can go only without saying, without announcing itself. Leaders are visible only as 'indispensable' members of the meeting. 'These are the people without whom the meeting cannot start or whose departure means the end of the meeting' (Kuchinskii, 2000: 3–4).

Yet this does not mean that this person can issue orders to others. It is like the textual authority of classics of anarchist thought. They are very important for the movement. Indeed, Maxim recognises them as markers of authority: they are alluded to; their work is given as examples, but they do not dictate anything because they are dead or far away. This is not to say that other kinds of authority are not created or accumulated in the anarchist movement. However humorous and informal symbols of authority and hierarchy are, as Maxim admits, they still create potential for hierarchy and thus need to 'be rooted out in the heads of those who are using them'. The anarchist movement generates very informal authority and belonging, but also forms of command authority. The latter are opposed as

'mainstream'. In fact, accusations of being 'integrated into the dominant system' are very widespread in the scene.

In sum, we see two lines of flight. The first is the constant flattening of the circle of the meetings and other activist practices that is achieved by egalitarian conduct and by aesthetics of egalitarianism, informality and vulgarity. This is the line that segments radicalism into ever more radical radicalism. The other line of flight is *from radicalism to political and social mainstream*. Some leave the movement; plenty of others who remain attempt more traditional forms – 'yet another NGO' or a political party – although others will oppose this. Such opposition often takes the form of accusation, such as addressing someone jokingly as a 'father' or 'duce' or 'Fuhrer'. 'Father' (*batia*), a joking reference to the Russian Civil War-era anarchist leader, 'Father' Makhno, suggests this person is developing authoritarian tendencies. But it actually signifies the opposite – that this 'father' is really one of us and that he appreciates the joke. Such accusations are quite frequent, but this does not lead to equally authoritarian purification campaigns. If 'tendencies' continue, you split and establish another movement. Thus the movement constantly splits into new segments. These segments are not fixed organisational forms, they are not factions but replicas of *movement*. To put it differently, this segmentation *is* movement, which has as a starting point the opposition to a coercive authority and replicates this opposition through a chain of dissociations in lines of flight, flight from flight, and flight from that.

Of course, the identification of the 'father' is only partly a joke. The grain of seriousness is in an invisible but salient threshold that separates the joke solely as a joke from the same joke as an accusation. At this point of uncertainty yet another line of flight is visible. Many become disillusioned 'with critique for critique's sake' and 'dissatisfied with systems of power relations within the movement, and with the lack of positive utopias' (Kuchinskii, 2000: 2). These leave the movement, although not necessarily for the political mainstream, but very possibly for an explicitly apolitical outlook or religion. In other words, there is fluidity between the movement and other forms of political organisation, and also between politics and meanings of being apolitical (which are of course fully political in this case).

Maxim understood what happened in the Votkinsk protest that summer in terms of these dynamics. In his open letter, he described an effective disintegration of the protest into two: the camp and the picket line. Once the line was established, people in it seemed to be claiming the political centre of the protest that was alternative to the camp. 'From the point of view of traditions of Rainbow Keepers', Maxim reminds the readers, 'the protest action is *one* of the activities of the camp', yet, 'from the point of view of traditions of democratic organisations [the coalition of organisations involved in this protest], action is the main form of activity'.² Action – the establishment of the picket line – was from the latter point of view an attempt to call the camp off and to constitute the blockade as the centre of the campaign. Maxim admits: 'I was shocked to see how the next day the zealous Arthur cut the flag pole.'

Exchange of 'power' and 'the social'

Maxim was of course not the only person within the movement who commented on these events. But across conflicting interpretations as to who did what there emerged the spectre of central authority that seemed to be forming within the protest and flexing its muscles to take it over. Let's extend this critique of hierarchy to a broader positioning of anarchism in critical social theory.

The spectre of central authority is here the spectre of the party organisation that is based on the authority of class analysis. Anarchists oppose this not only on the grounds that such an authority recreates the state hierarchy, but also on the grounds that, as Todd May (2009) observes, 'domination', the central analytical category of anarchist thought, has a broader analytical purchase than the Marxist category of 'exploitation', which is too narrowly linked to the economics of labour and class. This makes anarchism highly relevant for the 'power turn' in critical theory. But I would like to qualify this relevance with two points.

First, in Marxism since Lenin and Gramsci there is already a clearly visible flight from economism, and indeed a replacement of economic exploitation with power as the key explanatory category. The 'critique of political economy' gradually yet unmistakably moves to the 'political' away from the 'economy'. On the state-socialist side, the 'political' takes centre-stage to legitimise socialism with 'Russian' or 'Chinese' characteristics in societies where the development of capitalism and the commoditisation of labour did not happen on the scale and to the degree described by Marx in *Capital*. In the western context, the 'political' takes precedence to explain the opposite: why socialist revolutions do not occur even in societies where these processes proceeded seemingly in accordance with the *Capital*. But in this transformation, the analytical scope of the 'political' itself is changing. It spreads to all areas of everyday life, away from the institutions of the state and political parties. The 'political' becomes hegemonic and, in this form, pervades seemingly non-political ('depoliticised') arenas, from the family and the body to scientific knowledge. Marxist Autonomist thinkers like Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno articulate this diffusion by conceiving of working-class politics as outside traditional organisational structures and by extending the notion of labour to all forms of work in society (so-called 'immaterial labour'), rather than restricting it to the commodity form. Similarly, in anthropology and Marxist cultural history, the analogy with the commodity form and commodity fetishism becomes central to the understandings of how hegemony works (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991; Scott, 1985; Williams, 1985). But this is only an analogy meant to give an understanding of 'habitus' and 'culture' as suffused with subtle forms of domination, rather than being actually derivative from commodity relations.

Second, back in the 19th century, for both Marx and classic anarchist thought, neither the category of exploitation nor that of domination was sufficient without another category – the category of 'the social', which applied to the totality of human history and which was most visible in its two poles, the long beginning ('primitive communism') and foreseeable end ('scientific communism'). It is

in relation to this 'social' that *both* 'exploitation' and 'domination' were historically contingent interruptions and indeed exceptions. Why then, is Maxim's anarchism different from Kropotkin's? Why is the activist chronotope of Maxim so different from the classic anarchist one? Why in a world defined, in Maxim's words, by 'a *natural tendency* towards hierarchy and imbalance' is there no place for natural societal equality?

When I put this to Maxim, he pointed in response to the work of historian Aleksandr Shubin (1998, 2007) on anarchist social experiments in the early 20th century: to bitter lessons of anarchist governance during the Russian Civil War (1918–21), when the anarchist army of 'Father' Makhno exercised considerable and violent sovereignty in Ukraine and southern Russia; and to the inability of anarchists to transform their movements into an effective fighting organisation during the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), despite their profound theoretical influence on the Republican government and on the Spanish left more generally.

It is crucial that the horizon of Maxim's immediate response is the history of anarchist practice, and not universal history or the ontology of possible worlds. The latter, together with universalist and evolutionary assumptions that underlie the writing of both Marx and Kropotkin, now appear questionable. Maxim's thoughts mirror directly the changes in the approaches to power in English-language anthropology since the 1980s that firmly grounded the problematic of power within the historical horizon of modernity. For instance, in discussions of colonial, developmental or neoliberal 'governmentality', or of 'sovereignty' that re-emerges or coexists with 'biopower', what is taken for granted is that the forms of power relations that we encounter ethnographically are different modalities of modernity. Once the focus of research shifts to understanding these modalities, it is clear why Foucault- or Schmitt-inspired categorical distinctions appear more important than structural and evolutionary divides between 'modern' and 'non-modern', 'Western' and 'non-Western' relations of power, or Weberian classifications of 'traditional', 'charismatic' and 'rational' forms of authority.

Maxim's main foreign language is Spanish, not English, and the picture of these anthropological developments is not as familiar to him as to his Anglophone counterparts. Yet, mid- and late 20th-century critical theory, and this theory's departure from evolutionary macro-narratives, have created common ground between these anthropological locations and Maxim's views. It is on this common ground, when evolutionary assumptions are abandoned, the social reality around the social critic becomes total and holistic in the sense that it cannot be explained with reference to another reality that is *outside* it – such as free subject, human nature, and another historical time – the whole world appears as a post-structuralist labyrinth that includes its own exit (Derrida, 1973: 104). Basic human nature, for instance, cannot be posited outside of culture and, at the same time, explain it – as Derrida (1966) puts it, with reference to Lévi-Strauss. Commodity relations can no longer be explained with reference to transcendental sociality that exists in non-alienated form outside capitalism (Heller, 1976). Similarly, for Foucault (1979), the outside of power relations does not exist and resistance cannot take us there.

Modern forms of domination appear simultaneously more total and more subtle, and incorporate resistance in a dialectic that valorises power. I argue that it is at this point that power is analytically privileged in a new way.

If this radical outside is not achievable, political struggles cannot be based on a strategy rooted in this teleology of the outside. Struggle is not about breaking into this new world but is rather a ‘war of attrition’ (Gramsci) or ‘tactics’ (Foucault). These are aimed at partial and temporary advances, rather than a total revolution, and acknowledge a possibility of retreats and losses (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Nothing can be guaranteed forever – except the very fact of struggle.

Now, the implication of this emphasis on tactics is Hobbesian. Whatever is achieved has to be maintained by a constant act of will. If reality is constructed, it also can be either deconstructed and un-made, or it can simply drift away. Let us read Maxim again: egalitarianism ‘is what you want, rather than what is already there; and this building requires a careful orchestration of power, which has a *natural tendency* towards hierarchy and imbalance’. For Marx and Kropotkin, socialism and communism too was something they wanted and not what was already there. But for them tendencies towards hierarchies and power imbalance were not natural. On the contrary, they were historically specific distortions of something else – of natural propensities for mutual aid and egalitarian organisation. But if what is left of this socialist macro-narrative is this view of tactical intervention, the world without this intervention, the world as it is, is in a ‘state of nature’.

But this is a ‘state of nature’ without a transcendental subject. It is without the universal logic of history and society of classic socialist thought; without Hobbes’s God or free individual; and without a ‘bigger’ scientific truth such as that of evolution, which can provide a ‘outside’ model for understanding society. If this state of nature is without transcendence, then this perspective, as Warren Montag astutely put it, is not Hobbesian but Spinozist (1996: 100). Montag comments on Althusser and Foucault, but indeed a rediscovery of Spinoza occurs across critical theory after the 1960s.

Spinoza and the naturalisation of power

Spinoza’s world is that of infinity. Hence, it is relevant for the post-structuralist labyrinth that includes in itself its own exit: it is infinite in and of itself. In this infinity, the world’s Creator, a transcendental mind such as God, does not exist prior to or outside it. He is immanent in this world and not transcendental to it. The Creator is not outside (before) the world that he creates, nor is the world as a completed object of creation outside (after) the Creator. Hence it is important for the critique of the notion of the ‘outside’.

Furthermore, this crucial question of a transcendental ‘outside’ is replicated for the ‘inside’ – for parts (Spinoza’s ‘substances’) and their relations in this infinite world. For Hobbes, this was a ‘multitude’ of individuals who were constantly in a state of war with one another. The individual is categorically prior to (and ‘outside’

in this sense) both this state of a war of all against all, as well as of 'peace' or an order that is made by voluntary subjection of this individual to the state. This is not the transcendental 'outside' of the Creator, but of the individual free subject, whose mind and this mind's capacity to think freely, consent or engage in discourse is distinct from the body and other material realities and practices.

It is Spinoza's departure from transcendence that gives Althusser (1971) and Foucault (1979) a philosophical foundation for thinking outside dualisms of mind and body, consent and coercion, discourse and material practices. Ideas disappear into actions in Althusser's conceptualisation of ideology, just as Spinoza's God disappears into His Creation. In a similar fashion, Foucault's disciplinary power disappears into the subjects that are made by it.³ Ideological, discursive and disciplinary apparatuses do not convince you but *move* you as heterogenous effects of *force* (Montag, 1995, 1996: 103).

Of course, Foucault's thinking about power does not extend beyond modernity. He naturalises power only by taking it for granted, that is, by not explicitly addressing the scope of power as an analytical category. Neither Althusser nor Foucault also do not very explicitly link their discussion with the universalist perspective of Spinoza himself. But Marxist Autonomist thinker Antonio Negri does, and so do some of his anarchist critics. Let's follow this discussion from Spinoza to Negri and an anarchist critique of Negri by sociologist Daniel Colson, with a caveat by anthropologist David Graeber.

In Spinoza's infinity of the world and God's immanence in it, God *equals* nature. The two can be substituted or used, as Spinoza famously does, as a qualifier 'God, that, is, nature' (*Deu sive Natura*). But what *is* it to exist? It is a different question from that of *what* exists, God or nature, or God as nature. In God's existence in relationship to nature, to exist is to create and existence is creation. But to exist is not merely to create but also to be able to create, to have a creative potency. If the creator (God) is in this creative power immanently co-extensive with the creation (God = nature), existence is immanently co-extensive with this creative potency. If God is immanent in nature, nature itself is suffused with creative capacity. Therefore, if God = nature, existence = power: 'To be able not to exist is lack of power, whereas to be able to exist is power (as is self-evident)' (*Posse non existere impotentia est et contra posse existere potentia est (ut per se notum)*) (*Ethics* I: 11:3).

Spinoza's two Latin terms that are translated into English as 'power' – 'command' (*potestas*) and 'potency' (*potentia*) – reveal its relational character. The infinite world is a unity in movement – the unity, or identity, of the Creator, the capacity to create and the created. But at any given moment in time, all these things ('substances') except God can be seen as separate and finite. These things can move by themselves or by other things. The energy of 'outward' movement is *potentia*, whereas its influence on other things is *potestas*. But this is actually the same power considered from two relational ends. It is energy, or gravity, to use terms closer to those of Spinoza's own time. What I experience as someone's command or coercion is this other person's or entity's

potency; and potency is here a stronger notion for the overall rational framework of power as it is related to the infinity of God. Repression or coercion is productive or constitutive not simply by being coextensive with subjects that are being coerced or repressed but also as having a *potentia* to coerce or repress.

Negri's *Savage Anomaly* (1999) makes Spinoza himself an instance of his own perspective on immanence. At the time of writing his last and unfinished work, the *Treatise on Political Authority*, Spinoza, from Negri's point of view, is on the verge of formulating the secular and radical view of *potentia* as a self-liberating constitutive force. Or, putting this in another way, the self-liberating constitutive force – secular, radical and political – is a *potentia* of Spinoza's perspective. But in his close reading of radical thought's engagement with Spinoza, Daniel Colson astutely observes that Negri's argument depends on a retrospective move from the *Treatise*, which Spinoza did not finish before his death in 1677, back to the *Ethics* (2005 [1663]). Negri reads Spinoza politically by arguing that his political thinking is homologous to the structure of argument in *Ethics* and, furthermore, is *potentially* in *Ethics*.

This homology is retrospective and teleological. Colson highlights how Negri sees Spinoza 'finally becoming himself'. In this move by Negri, however, Spinoza's political thinking becomes not quite about immanence. As a retrospective argument from the point of view of 'finally' becoming a secular political self, in this teleological temporality what we see is an a posteriori argument about an a priori transcendental, recognisably Hegelian (Colson, 2007: 111) political self of the emergent autonomous subject. In turn, Graeber argues that this final becoming was not quite final as Spinoza's writing was not finished. This 'final' becoming is about a *recognition* of immanence, and not by Spinoza but by Negri. Immanence assumes truth that is diffuse in the world and invites 'prophecy' as a 'revelation of hidden truths about the world'. In prophecy, the world speaks to us directly through the figure of the prophet, as opposed to the transcendental mind of the scientist, who is speaking about the world from a detached perspective. And:

Negri has always been quite up front about his own desire to play a similar role for what he likes to call 'the multitude'. A [radical] political discourse, he [Negri] says, should 'aspire to fulfill a Spinozist prophetic function, the function of an immanent desire that organizes the multitude'. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 66 in Graeber, 2008: 13)

These anarchists' statements by Colson and Graeber are similar to what Maxim describes as anarchist power moves. These are segmentary moves that denounce a potential of someone becoming a 'father' or 'leader' – or, in this case, prophet. It is clear what is being fled from. But where does this line of flight lead? Graeber suggests an opposition to the very logic of opposition and segmentation. For him, this oppositional logic reproduces a regime of truth and authority of knowledge that characterises mainstream academic or Marxist political 'vanguardism'. Graeber proposes instead an inclusive model of movement by consensus rather than faction, and by 'direct democracy' (2009a, 2009b). For Colson, direct

democracy has to be beyond politicisation and the true anarchist reading of Spinoza needs to complement political power with other forms of constitutive power. Spinoza's *potentia*, as Colson clarifies by quoting Deleuze, does not make a distinction between things that can be called natural and those that can be called artificial.

He proposes

[the p]lane of immanence and unity of composition, or, in the vocabulary of [anarchist] Bakunin...the 'universal...combination of the infinity of particular actions and reactions which all things having real existence incessantly exercise upon one another'...the physico-chemical model, whether...human or not. (Colson, 2007: 116)

Here, power is naturalised in a form of causality that sets in motion these multitudes, or 'assemblages' of human and non-human beings – rather than reducing non-human beings to human ones, and human beings to political ones.

*

We come full circle, back to Maxim's observation that 'power has a *natural tendency* towards...imbalance'. We are able to see now that 'nature' is energy here, and not the biological nature of the evolutionary perspective. My argument was that the Spinozist macro-physics of this nature as energy complements Foucauldian micro-physics. I would like to conclude with two questions. One is about the critical agenda of equality. How 'the social as egalitarian' can be maintained, to put this in Maxim's words, even as 'something that you want, rather than what is already there'? It follows from this naturalised view of power that equality is a balance that is achieved by opposition to something of a greater potency. Whatever else comes into this (ideas about fairness, protection of environment, employment, etc.), the basis for it cannot be in the discovery of the naturalness of the imbalance of power itself. And this basis can no longer lie in the authority of the discovery of the social, as it did for Marx and Kropotkin. The basis for this is, rather, a radical ethics that takes the form of the categorical imperative. In the history of socialist thought this is not new. In the late 19th century, these were the 'voluntarist' formulations of Nikolai Mikhailovsky (1906 [1879]), who argued that such an imperative – a view of society as it should be – constituted a 'positivist' basis for socialist movements and for socialist sociology. But this leaves another back door for transcendence.

My other question is about the multitude that includes human and non-human agents. This corresponds of course to the radical democracy of Actor-Network Theory and its 'Parliament of Things' (Latour and Wiebe, 2005). Yet, while this radical democracy is at ease with forms of political power as well as with its 'physico-chemical model, whether...human or not' (Colson, 2007: 116), the parliament of things does not really extend an invitation to god (see Asad et al., 2009).

Colson reiterates time and time again that anarchism has, since Bakunin and Proudhon, taken aboard much of Spinoza but opposed his religious views. Maxim and other Rainbow Keepers are more at ease than Colson with including members who are openly religious. But there is a larger question here. To take a 'plane of immanence' seriously is difficult without it being *of* something. On Spinoza's grounds, it is the immanence of God; on materialist grounds, it is the immanence of nature, that is, the unity of nature in the multiplicity of its transformations; on radical socialists' grounds, this is the immanence of the social or productive power in the multiplicity of its transformations. For me, there isn't necessarily a contradiction here. If the infinite complexity that we are dealing with is indeed infinite, then parts of it are not necessarily finite, and thus it is quite possible to infinitely expand the relevance of each of these signifiers. But this is why I confine myself here to a merely historiographic exercise: despite this theoretical possibility, it is interesting to observe how at different times God, nature, the social and power are generalised to stand for the totality of the plane of immanence.

Notes

1. This is the same institute that he visited in 1989, but by then 'ethnography' had been renamed 'ethnology'.
2. I quote this letter from Maxim's personal archive of Rainbow Keepers correspondence.
3. The genealogy of this perspective on power goes from Spinoza to Nietzsche and then to Foucault. Nietzsche is also important for anarchist thought (see Colson, 2007).

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