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Review of *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*, by Catherine Malabou

Conor O’Dea

Catherine Malabou, *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), 268 pages.

Anarchism—so diverse, so difficult to reduce to one authority, including its own—is the privileged theoretical and practical constellation of a situation in which the non-governable bears witness everywhere in idioms unknown to the language of principles. (219)

Catherine Malabou has been reworking the history of philosophy in incredibly potent and novel ways for over three decades. This reworking frequently takes form under the powerful reconception she has developed of the term *plasticity* (defined most simply by Malabou as the capability of “both giving and receiving form” (2005, 8)):

Something shows itself when there is damage, a cut, something to which normal, creative plasticity gives neither access nor body: the deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers herself. These types of beings impose a new form in their old form, without mediation or transition or glue or accountability, today versus yesterday, in a state of emergency, without foundation, bareback, sockless. The change may equally well emerge from apparently anodyne events, which ultimately prove to be veritable traumas inflecting the course of a life, producing the metamorphosis of someone about whom one says: I would have never guessed they would “end up like this.” A vital hitch, a threatening detour that opens up another pathway, one that is unexpected, unpredictable, dark. (2012, 6)

This fluid (dis)continuum, which invites both destruction and change while offering a capacity or a channel for persistence, marks her surgically precise but reconstructively bold transfigurations of Heidegger (*The Heidegger Change* 2011), Hegel (*The Future of Hegel* 2005), and Kant (*Before Tomorrow* 2016). I cite this trilogy of works, in particular, to underscore Malabou’s fearless proficiency as a reader of the history of philosophy. This is a mantle she takes up once again in

Stop Thief!, an eviscerating exposure of a hidden metabolism in 20th century European continental philosophy, one that consumes and uses anarchy as fuel for its thought but refuses to acknowledge its indebtedness to the anarchist's banquet. While the negative moment of this book is about forcing a confession from a variety of ways in which philosophical anarchy has been deployed, pushing those concepts to admit the lineage of political anarchism, the broader construction here is to think "[t]he absence of government. This book was sparked by the question of how to understand this phrase. It invites readers to look at anarchism anew, forgoing hegemonic habits and the evaluative gaze" (2), an invitation that leads the reader to confront the concepts of the ungovernable and non-governable. Malabou asserts that:

The non-governable is not the ungovernable. The ungovernable refers to something that is out of control, like a vehicle that cannot be driven. In terms of morals and politics, it evokes a lack of discipline and disobedience, insubordination. The ungovernable is, and remains, nothing but the opposite of the governable. It resists and opposes what it assumes, namely, the priority of government. By contrast, non-governability refers neither to a lack of discipline, nor to errancy. And it does not refer to disobedience; rather, it refers to that which remains radically foreign to commanding and obeying in both individuals and communities. The non-governable is neither the opposite, nor a contradiction, of the logic of government. It is other. The other to (not of) government. The mark of its impossibility. The anarchist critique of government is not, in fact, a bias. It is not based on the idea that governing is "bad" but rather that governing is not possible. This impossibility is inscribed differently in the real, as a network with connections that are at once ontological, psychical, practical, artistic, and biological. Its landscapes are not those of a state of nature, nor of a space of uncontrolled outbursts of passion. Nor can they be summarized as a cartography of resistance. They correspond to regions of being and psyche that governing can neither reach [n]or manage. (23)

Particularly critical to the tracing of the absence of government is a painstaking examination of *archē* from Aristotle onwards, one perpetually haunted by its "unfoundability," which Malabou describes as "a critical examination of the archaic paradigm reveal[ing] that *anarkhia* haunts *archē* upon its emergence, as its necessary flaw. Anarchy is originary, inscribing contingency in political order" (11). Malabou continues her discussion, maintaining that "[t]he anarchic virus infecting *archē* from the start is the inability of political order to found itself. This order thus reveals its dependence on that from which it is supposedly cut off." Finally, Malabou states that "even though it is concealed, the contingency of *archē* thus derives from a paradoxical revelation of its heteronormativity" (12).

But this absence is also a doubled absence; the denegation of *an-archē* by *archē* is echoed in the distancing from anarchism by the very philosophers who strive to think of anarchy: the ontological anarchism in Reiner Schürmann, Jacques Derrida's *archē*-writing, Emmanuel Levinas's anarchic responsibility, Foucault's anarchaeology, Agamben's profanation and destituent power, and

Rancière’s democracy and disagreement. Malabou characterizes this absence as a wilful three-part absencing. There is an unthought in it, perhaps deemed unthinkable, whereby philosophy has not yet come to terms with the anarchism that forms part of its very ground. Then there is profound theft:

Is it too much to claim, then, that there has been a *philosophical theft* of anarchy from the anarchists? A theft concealed, knowingly or unknowingly, by an apparent concern for theoretical and political distance? Something dangerous, shameful, explosive, enclosed in the underside of consciousness, something that philosophers have shifted from hand to hand? How else can we understand their silence? The concept of anarchism is not just any concept. One cannot claim to invent it, to play on the privative prefix (*an-arkhia*) or simply borrow it from the dictionary without knowing how it was innovated by political anarchism. (19)

Finally, and importantly, there is a *disavowal*: this unthinking theft is made possible only by denial and repression, by the philosophical unconscious’s trenchant and viscous kettle logic.

This triple of absence/absencing is read across and through these six figures who philosophically engage anarchy, each of whom is in turn investigated as a philosopher of anarchy and then interrogated as a denier of anarchism. Reiner Schürmann, who claims that “metaphysics stands upon an ‘ontological anarchy’ ... [and that] [t]he destiny of metaphysics is, throughout, the destiny in which principles wither away,” both explicitly distances himself from what he sees as the inadequacies of political anarchism, and still reads the entirety of philosophy’s history from within a singular archic paradigm:

“Why should [the] ford of philosophy be a single stone?” Schürmann asks, via René Char, on the final page of his book. Why, indeed, wouldn’t there be several stones, several fords? Meanwhile, it seems that the uncemented stones in the walls of Cuzco, those stones that hold together by themselves and whose mystery has never been fully solved, are, for Schürmann, still essentially, in principle, caught up with the foundations of a Greek temple. (60)

Anarchic responsibility is the auspice under which Malabou engages Levinas, for whom “the possibility of deposing the archic paradigm can no longer stem from either the fragility of its foundations or an inner exhaustion. The paradigm, in and of itself, is never exhausted. This possibility comes from elsewhere, from this outside, which is the ethical injunction as exposure to an Other [*Autrui*]. An absolute outside without negotiation or compromise” (63). But Levinas also maintains a careful distance, as exemplified by his use of “anarchy,” a distance that is ultimately founded on his substitution of the logic of election for that of government, one that fatally misunderstands the figure of the slave:

But slaves are not ruled or governed. Slaves can only be dominated. The master never “governs” his slaves. Slaves are non-governable. Levinas’s ethical anarchy

might have taken an entirely different course than the destiny of a future state if the two test cases of the non-governable—ethical responsibility and slavery—had been thought through together without the misleading mediation of the concept of servility. Ethical anarchy might have found in this thought of the non-governable the missing anarchist political orientation. Non-governability is not, and never can be, soluble in the state. (82)

For Derrida, Malabou attests, “[t]he ‘deconstruction’ of metaphysics is first of all a deconstruction of the value of *archē* that not only governs it, but also, in return, makes it an instrument of domination. *Archē* . . . names at once the commencement and commandment” (89). Derrida’s thought, however, falls victim to a quietist sort of messianism that ultimately props up a core of governability:

The beyond of the beyond is invested with a messianic dimension. Without a messiah, without even messianism, of course, but nevertheless available to a redemptive coming. . . . In this way, “pacifist” nonviolent anarchism stages its (re)entry. Deconstruction is saved from evil—and it turns out democracy is “undeconstructible.” . . . The undeconstructible nature of democracy would then simultaneously both mark and mask the undeconstructible nature of the drive for power. Nothing can be done to prevent it except installation of the governmental guard rail. (107)

In this way, Derrida either refuses or has forgotten “the very possibility of the non-governable” (110).

The last three thinkers move much more closely to a direct acknowledgement and deployment of anarchism; their “distancings” are thus much more subtle, nuanced, and veiled. Foucault, for instance, does not explicitly differentiate (as the other thinkers thus far have done) between anarchy and anarchism, but did state that he was not an anarchist because he could “not accept this entirely negative conception of power” nor “the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression” (112). But Foucault’s thought, particularly towards the end of his life, was richly threaded with expressions of political anarchy:

The anarchist bios of the Cynic remains extra-economic, outside of it. But does it incarnate, as has so often been argued, a narcissistic individualism, detached from all political concerns and busy only resisting that which threatens it? Obviously not. The Courage of Truth implies that the withdrawal from the political scene, made necessary by corruption and the devaluing of *parrēsia* [bold speech], is but the prelude to a rebound, an awakening that announces a new category of action. (140)

Somehow, however, Foucault stops short; even here, at the end, his own *parrēsia* a silent history:

Now, why didn’t anarchism, why didn’t this “great utopian rage” of a soul-body without *archon*, irreducible to all principles and all drives, appear more clearly?

Why did Foucault conceal the most revolutionary aspect of his philosophy beneath the well-behaved features of an apparently inoffensive ethic? Far from the polish of immanence, or a full form of life, Foucault’s subject, wrenched from itself, reveals a troubling truth despite itself: the limit-experience of politics is anarchism. (144)

Agamben’s profanation, the deactivation represented by the destituent state, offers another political gesture towards the opening of anarchy and anarchism:

Profaning is firstly a matter of suspending a power, an implementation, an actuality (*energeia*). The issue is, then, of understanding how the suspension of a power to act cannot be an action in itself. How profanation is not an act. How deactivation, destitution, neutralization can remain possible without actualization. For Agamben, authentically profanatory anarchy sits right in between potentiality and actuality. (146)

Agamben does not draw on the habitual synonyms of the word “profanation”: desacralization, disaffection, execration, violation, or blasphemy. Nor does he deploy common equivalents of the verb to profane: to degrade, to sully, to soil, to violate. He instead deploys terms like “deactivate,” “destitute,” “neutralize,” and “render inoperative.” These verbs and associated nouns have nothing to do with common associations with the term “profanation,” whose most extreme meaning is the violation of the sepulchre. Rather, they refer to a suspension of action, a reduction of pressure in each case.

Importantly, for Agamben, traditional anarchism failed to “deactivate” the sacred and thus could not desacralize government because it “failed to disclose the true political meaning of profanation, to identify the mechanism of exception as ‘the originary structure and limits of the form of the State’... it was not aiming at the correct target in its desacralizing operation” (149). But where Derrida’s quietist messianism leads us to a problematic core undeconstructability, neither can anarchy “be reduced to a summary execution of God. Despite everything, to do without the symbolic murder of God perhaps always amounts to paradoxically deifying this economy of saving, subtracting it from the possibility of a non-governable” (177). In this position of destitution, Agamben’s anarchy is one “without transgression or revolution, interminably stuck in an irreducible sacred zone, ‘lucid’ anarchy, cut off from all anarchism. ... [It is] only a version of the ‘unprofanable absolute.’ And its signifier above all: God” (177).

Jacques Rancière, our final figure, is, for Malabou, “the only contemporary philosopher who has clearly reformulated the core idea of anarchism” (181). For Rancière, several key concepts are tied to his rethinking of anarchism, among them democracy, disagreement, the distribution of the sensible, politics, and the police. For Malabou’s purposes, perhaps the police and politics axis is the most salient:

Politics is exactly that which disturbs police distribution, that is, the party political distribution of “politics.” But it manifests as an “unpredictable sub-

ject,” “in eclipses,” “intermittently,” sometimes it “occupies the streets,” and it is “born of nothing but democracy itself.” The confrontation between politics and police is always unexpected, emerging momentarily, temporarily. Therefore, “if politics implements a logic entirely heterogenous to that of the police, it is always bound up with the latter. The reason for this is simple: politics has no objects or issues of its own. Its sole principle, equality, is not peculiar to it and is in no way in itself political. (182)

In Rancière’s thought, the act of staging becomes an incredibly important part of this distribution, one that is understood metapolitically:

Metapolitics therefore refers not only to that which is happening, but also causes what is happening in the staged metamorphosis, or staged distribution of politics. ... Metapolitics “shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise, it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise.” (Rancière 1999, 16, ctd in Malabou 2024, 196)

Malabou concludes here that, despite the capacity for the ungovernable to be staged in such a manner, “the non-governable remains unrepresentable. The idea of the non-governable—the anarchist dimension of politics—eludes the archipolitics of proof, evidence, verifications, and exhibits. It can appear only as memory, that is, in the future. But this does not mean that it is unreal or phantasmatic” (207).

So, where does that leave us? In closing, I note two surprising absences in the set of figures Malabou confronts. The first is intentional, as he is woven through several other chapters, notably the ones on Foucault and Agamben: Gilles Deleuze. While Deleuze did not identify as an anarchist, Chantelle Gray’s exceptional *Anarchism after Deleuze and Guattari* (2022) exemplifies why this is an important interrogation. The second is Bernard Stiegler, whose understanding of default and of technics, whose thinking on *eris*, *stasis*, and *polemos* so beautifully complement Malabou’s plasticity and could further what it would mean to be non-governable (perhaps non-calculable). What I hope for most is that this excellent book is not her last on the subject, and that perhaps the next one is her reckoning with the plasticity of the non-governable.

For me, this text is at once an irruption and an explosion: an internal rebellion and the excision of a carefully hidden kernel. It is both forcefully discomfiting and deeply liberating, as if what seemed like an invidious ache, an ontological infection, actually conceals a more fulsome, granular truth around which a tissue of disavowal has formed. The swollen tongue becomes a split tongue—an unbinding of Janus. Against the foundation and backdrop of Aristotle’s *Politics*, Catherine Malabou offers both a hidden history and a way out—a becoming-plastic of the stultified and stillborn potential of a philosophical anarchism that would live up to its name and calling.

She accuses these thinkers of robbery and theft. What she masterfully undertakes here is a break-and-enter—one that leaves something behind instead

of taking something away. When thought wakes up to itself, it must confront this statue, this destructively explosive plastic anti-icon:

When it becomes as urgent as it is difficult to assign the non-governable to its place even as it is knocking ever more loudly at the door of consciousness, unconsciousness, bodies ...? That’s when we understand that these uncertainties are already openings toward other ways of sharing, acting, thinking. Of being an anarchist. (221)

Biography

Conor O’Dea is an independent scholar.

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