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Towards an anarchist sociology¹

A serious scholar is one who takes the Pope at his word and discounts the words of rebels. A ranter is one who takes rebels at their word and discounts every word of the Pope. (Fredy Perlman, 1983: 183)

Objectivism and relativism not only are untenable as philosophies, they are bad guides for fruitful cultural collaboration. (Paul Feyerabend, 1995: 152)

Introduction

The ‘politics’ of knowledge has long been a concern of the humanities and social sciences. The decisions taken about which areas of society are regarded as being worthy of study, how they should be researched and the relative usefulness of the findings raise many questions about power and how it is manifested within particular societies. The ideological implications of these issues extend to questioning the role of the academic just as much as the legitimacy of State agencies who might turn research recommendations into potentially harmful social policies. In recent decades such questions have become part of the Marxist project to look at the intellectual means of reproduction in modern capitalist societies, as much as they have informed a generation of feminist sociologists keen to critique the politics of knowledge for their patriarchal assumptions. At the same time, however, the neoliberal economic agenda, in the ascendancy since the late 1970s, has asked its own questions about the politics of knowledge, to the extent that it has posed serious challenges to both established academic practice *and* socialist and feminist resistances to it.

As both Zygmunt Bauman (1987) and George Monbiot (2000) have noted, in recent times the priorities within the academy have changed, and the intervention of corporate interests into the production of knowledge has raised questions about its very constituency, particularly claims for ‘value freedom’. Moreover, the role of the academy, at least in many Western countries, has changed to incorporate these new priorities. Not only are there particular priorities to maximise student intake at all costs, but any research that is allowed to

be conducted requires framing within the intellectual rationale and financial remit of corporate competitiveness. To many on the Left, these market-driven and frequently anti-intellectual agendas have destroyed genuine research cultures and the search for knowledge as an exercise in itself.

The argument that follows takes a somewhat different and perhaps less nostalgic view of these matters. From an anarchist view, none of these things are particularly surprising, mainly because the parameters of what is being debated are limited by their assumptions about the organisation of society itself. So, regardless of whether the academy is being organised around market-driven, or State-orchestrated philanthropy, the assumptions that underpin it are based upon many of the same premises. This is to say that the social structures and sets of relations integral to sociological theory are as hierarchically based as those bodies that fund such methods of intellectual inquiry. There is, then, a mutually reinforcing intellectual agenda that sometimes, perhaps unknowingly, reproduces itself.

How one attempts to pursue a sociological method of inquiry without succumbing to either the interests of power structures, or their intellectual worldview, is a pertinent, and extremely complex, set of concerns. To accomplish this in a manner that is consistent with anarchist principles is therefore a significant challenge. Nevertheless, the potential benefits that could emerge from such a venture extend further than a hypothetical enclave of academic anarchists; there are areas of mainstream and even progressive sociology that can be assisted to resolve apparent contradictions within their own research. This is especially the case within the fields of the study of social movements and theories of 'reflexivity', but more broadly into the study of organisations and the nature of power itself. Some of these will be discussed in greater detail below, but it is first worth reflecting on where there are existing areas of sociology that might offer assistance in the development of an anarchist sociology.

Early indicators

On first viewing, the evidence is not good. To date, the role of anarchism in researching and analysing societies past and present has been rather marginal, and apparently ineffectual, outside of the anarchist milieu itself. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, an explanatory framework deriving from such obviously politicised assumptions forming the basis of any understanding of the world can be seen to transgress the sociological notion of value freedom. This is in spite of the institutionalisation of an equally politicised, but apparently more developed set of analyses of the world, Marxism. This forms something of a second reason: that Marxism has had a very long and dominating influence in the social sciences and humanities, especially since the 1960s. Anarchism has never achieved more than a toehold in the academic sphere and its intellectual depth has constantly been called into question, mainly because, as Alan Carter

(1989) points out, its concepts of history and society are seen to be too fluid and less sophisticated.

Moreover, any move away from exclusively materialist accounts of change to consider matters of psychology, human nature and people's 'need' for authority is seen to be too unscientific. Ironically, such materialist accounts are utterly unable to reconcile the disparity between their *own* justification for hierarchies and the social-constructed 'naturalness of competition' which is used by those who seek intellectual legitimacy for capitalism. In this respect, a sociology that examines the social construction of authority and its meaning in an authoritarian environment is inevitably going to be marginalised.

A third reason has been the integration or misuse of anarchist or anarchist-related literature, the most famous of which is Guy Debord's *The society of the spectacle*, (1987 [1957]), the full implications of which have been subsumed into postmodernist treatises on the processes of signification within consumer culture. Indeed, it is through the controversial discourses of postmodernism and poststructuralism that anarchism has been referenced in the social and philosophical sciences, sometimes as an argument for relativism. However, this has often taken the form of a *commentary on* the work of French poststructuralist philosophers of the 1970s and 1980s rather than an *engagement with* the anarchist canon itself.

However, some poststructuralist writers are now beginning to explore the relationship between their own premises and those of anarchism. As is discussed below in more detail, the work of Andrew Koch (1993, 1997) and Todd May (1994) can be usefully employed in analysing the micro-politics of power, which in turn can feed into larger questions about societal structures and ideology.

Questions of methodological power have been central to the concerns of feminist sociologists, who in the 1980s began to reformulate old conundrums about objectivity, the politics of research and the academic litmus test of value freedom. This overlapped to some degree with work in radical (social) anthropology circles. In different ways, these viewpoints challenged the right of 'experts' to speak on behalf of the people that they were researching and raised questions about the value of the research to those people.

A final area for consideration is science, which has had its fair share of political debates about method, truth and research communities. The increasing breakdown of disciplinary boundaries since the 1960s has meant that some of these issues have impacted on the social sciences, especially work by Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn and particularly Paul Feyerabend. For our purposes, it is the latter's development of an 'anarchist epistemology' in *Against method* (1988) as well as his calls for public accountability of science (1979), which can provide something of a touchstone to developing sociological inquiry in this area.

More recently, the popularity of chaos and complexity theories in the natural sciences has prompted an equal (and sometimes opposite!) reaction in their social scientific counterparts. The radically different view of the role of cause and effect in the organisation of natural and social phenomena, coupled with the

apparent vindication of the anarchist tenet of self-organisation in the natural world, has made these philosophies something of a theoretical hot potato.

The usefulness of poststructuralism and complexity will be assessed in due course, but firstly it is necessary to establish why these critiques have emerged in the first place. To accomplish this, we must return to the foundations of sociology as an academic discipline, look at its relationship with anarchist methods of inquiry, and then consider why an anarchist sociology must be guided by very different criteria.

From Enlightenment to deception: what's right and wrong with sociology?

Common histories

Anarchism and sociology share something of a common intellectual background as ideas shaped by Enlightenment developments in philosophy, science and technology during the late eighteenth century. Both succeeded in harnessing the new rational perspectives, in conjunction with the liberatory political philosophies of the spirit of the French Revolution, and evolved a particular set of ideas about how the world could be investigated and changed. From their origins, both anarchism as a political philosophy and sociology as a discipline have been preoccupied with the interrelationship between the individual as an active creator of social meaning and the organisation and construction of collective meaning within either a specific group or society in general.

Their differences lie in their respective founding intentions. Anarchism emerged as a revolutionary ideology that linked an age-old current in political radicalism with resistance to new forms of State surveillance and bureaucracy, the growing power of industrial capital and the limitations of the parliamentary system as a vehicle for progressive social change. Anarchism formed a rationalistic philosophy based around the benefits of a Stateless, self-determined form of social organisation, which respected the freedom of the (responsible) individual and legitimised the 'natural' tendency towards co-operation. Crucially, it embraced the 'darker' side of the Enlightenment, theorising that real change could only be truly realised if revolutionaries acknowledged the problems that the ego might pose for political organisation.

Conversely, sociology began as both a 'response to the demand of the modern State aiming at the "total administration" of society' (Bauman, 1988: 228) and as a form of inquiry linked to the need for social reform. On the one hand it was geared towards providing 'a huge apparatus of "social management" . . . [and] expert social management knowledge' through 'mass, statistical research' (Bauman, 1988: 228). On the other, it was concerned about the social impact of the new urban ways of living, of the consequences of the loss of traditional rural communities and cultures, of the alienation of the work practices of the industrial era, and the problems of sanitation, disease, poverty and crime. The commit-

ment to social reform as well as legitimisation of the status quo is an important aspect of the history of sociology – from Durkheim’s classic study of suicide (1970 [1897]), to the Chicago School’s work with the urban marginals and drifters in the 1930s (Bulmer, 1984; Atkinson, 1990). Even within the most conservative and reactionary of all of its perspectives – Functionalism – there is an attempt to reintegrate the dysfunctional parts of the social structure – i.e., criminals – into the social body. Early sociology, however, unlike early anarchism, was less likely to see dysfunction as an institutional rather than an individual matter.

Similarities did exist in terms of support for the role of science. Sociology made it quite clear from early in its history that it was a ‘science of society’ with many of its early practitioners following a ‘positivist’ method of inquiry. This commitment to objectivity, through pursuit of the same laws of observable cause and effect that governed the natural sciences, was also seen as a value-free one. Equally committed to such ideas were a number of the ‘classical’ anarchists. For instance, both Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1923: 150ff.) and Mikhail Bakunin suggested that it was through science that humans could realise their true social natures, the latter arguing that ‘natural laws were in harmony with human liberty’ (1985: 34). He did, however, question the right of these *savants* to use it to rule, as science should be ‘the property of everybody’ (1985: 62). These ideas about science and power were not lost on Peter Kropotkin who worked within the fields of natural biology, geography and sociology, and whose most famous work *Mutual aid* (1993) was designed to test Darwin’s ideas on the competitive nature of the non-human (and by default) human world.

The application of the respective ideas of sociology and anarchism into either social policy or the realm of everyday life is clearly something where the former has enjoyed more success. However, the ideals of anarchism have also trickled into the public realm, particularly in town planning at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (Hall, 1988; Ward, 1992). Indeed the utopian dreams of several generations of planners, architects and builders seem to have been touched by the anarchist or libertarian socialist ideas of writers from Kropotkin to Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford, Paul Goodman and Colin Ward.

The completely different aspirations of sociology and anarchism, as well as their respective positions within society, do mean that there are a number of barriers – intellectual and practical – that lie in the way of developing a radical, anarchist sociology. The following discussion considers some of these differences by looking at the assumptions behind the established sociological literature on social movements and offering some suggestions as to how anarchist theory would be of advantage to developing a more tangible understanding of this area of study.

Problematic assumptions (I) – the natural (social) order of things

In *American power and the New Mandarins* (1969), Noam Chomsky makes the point that when bourgeois historians interpret turbulent moments in history they typically ignore movements that utilise co-operative strategies because they

are alien to the liberal-bourgeois concept of historical change. A similar observation is made by Michael Maffesoli (1996: 56) with respect to theorists of social movements who are unable to acknowledge the existence of social or political groups who organise without hierarchies. Such assumptions can be illustrated using the now well-established debate about the so-called 'new social movements' and the various analytical approaches to them (a good overview of many of these debates is provided in Welsh, 2000).

The principal claim of the initiators of this debate was that the environmental, women's, peace and civil rights movements since the 1960s constituted a new distinctiveness in protest history. These new movements were the harbingers of major social, cultural and technological shifts within Western societies, through which new contestations around information and particular quality of life issues were beginning to take place. According to such writers as Jürgen Habermas (1981), Alain Touraine (1981), Claus Offe (1985) and Alberto Melucci (1989), these movements not only contrasted with 'old' social movements that were more connected to the struggles and concerns of the labour movement, but their organisational rationale was somewhat different. In particular, the new social movements were anti-hierarchical, self-organising and pursued non-instrumental goals that were linked to politicised lifestyles and so-called 'post-material' values. Political activism was seen to be more 'direct' than those using conventional political channels and carried out in a media-friendly manner.

Problems within this first wave of new social movement theorists are well documented, particularly in terms of the ahistorical nature of such claims, given that the movements in question all have long histories themselves, most of which demonstrate the same characteristics (D'Anieri *et. al.*, 1990; Bagguley, 1992; Lichterman, 1996). Such a macro-sociological and historical approach gives little impression of what movements think and feel, and it overlooks how movements reproduce themselves over time and fulfil multiple functions at the same time. Nevertheless, many of the assumptions of its leading thinkers remain, such as Melucci's claim that the purpose of these movements is to pose a symbolic challenge to authority and then go on to produce new élite groups (or simply wither away).

Whilst the predominantly European Marxist writers behind 'new social movement' theory were focusing on the large-scale changes, an emerging North American school of political scientists was concentrating on *how* such contemporary movements mobilised (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). What has become known as the 'resource mobilisation theory' (RMT) considered social movements as rational enterprises whose driving force is the 'pursuit of limited interests based on utilitarian cost-benefit calculations' (Joppke, 1993: 5) with the intention of inclusion in or influence upon the mainstream political process. Thus, collective action can be accounted for only by changes in resources, organisations and opportunities within a given set of parameters. Such a critique leaves out other mobilisation issues: motivation, solidarity within movements, egalitarian sensibilities and the kinds of meanings that individuals attach to political

action. Given RMT's concentration upon organisational efficiency and lobbying and funding strategies it is not surprising that movements possessing different structures, agenda and broad visions of social change are under-investigated or sidelined. Moreover, such assumptions about intention and access to the public sphere are really only a mirror of the ideological hegemony of US liberal pluralism (Meyer, 1995: 169).

A variation on these themes is the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) model, originally coined by Eisinger (1973) and evolved in particular by Tarrow (1994) and Kriesi *et al.* (1995). The theory assesses a movement's opportunities for political action on the basis of electoral potential, ability to lobby/alter decision-making at an élite level, and the actual power of the State to repress or tolerate political movements. The wider the range of options for the campaigning group, the more likely it is that they will have some access to the political structures. Conversely, the fewer political options available for a movement, the more likely it is that they will operate outside the political system. In POS, the particular group is conceptualised in terms of how it plans and organises depending on the relative strength or openness of the State and political system. This is, of course, to presume many things about how the people in political movements choose to participate and what they think about the things that they actually do.

The POS model can also be seen as too instrumental: it assumes that there are certain steps taken by particular types of groups which necessarily aim to engage with the political mainstream. It also ignores the cultural dimension to the movement. Clearly, some movements will 'fail' to influence the apparatus of the State yet possibly enjoy widespread cultural influence, motivate large numbers of people and create new lifestyle practices and ideas. For instance, the anti-roads movement of the 1990s in the UK 'failed' to stop many of the roads it contested, yet its influence on society was massive, influencing other movements, launching political bands and publications, and even leading to soap opera representations within the media.

To date, many of the assumptions behind new social movement theory, RMT and POS remain intact, although there have been attempts to develop models acknowledging culturally-specific formations and rationales (Koopmans, 1995; Duyvendak, 1995) and to synthesise these main approaches (McAdam *et al.*, 1999).

The instrumentalism behind much of the aforementioned theoretical material raises a more general problem within sociology: the prevalence of 'rational choice' or 'game theory' as viable explanations for human action. One such example of this, which has generated considerable debate, is the so-called 'Prisoner's dilemma', whereby the most logical and least risky course of action for an individual is always the one that does not involve co-operation with other people. Whilst this is an extremely complex area of theory, it is worth noting Graham's (1989) observation that this kind of thinking can easily become a justification for the intervention of the State because it legitimises the egotistical

side of individuals (and implicitly justifies sovereign authority). The individualistic tendencies of this position have been noted by a number of commentators, including Singer (1997).

Thus again we see sets of assumptions influencing how particular sociological phenomena might be investigated, despite the fact that some of the aforementioned literatures are broadly sympathetic to the aims and objectives of the movements in question, yet they leave huge questions unanswered. It is to the broader ramifications of this lack of sophistication that the discussion now turns.

Problematic assumptions (II) – instrumental thought

An additional area of concern is the use of instrumental and rational choice approaches within much of sociological theory. In his studies of rationality and modernity, Max Weber (1930) argued that much of the development of Western industrial societies involved an instrumental approach which prioritised the ‘ends’ of actions over their ‘means’ (see also Szerszynski and Tomalin, chapter 11 in this volume). Later theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979) argued that this type of rationalisation lay behind the domination of nature by humans, an idea that has been influential on a number of contemporary ecological thinkers (Dobson, 1990). Indeed, for Jürgen Habermas (1981) the emergence of new social movements can be attributed to the instrumental processes of the increasingly interventionist State during the 1960s.

Yet sociology *itself* can also be seen to reflect this instrumental approach. The eco-sociologist Alwyn Jones (1987) has suggested that instrumental and anthropocentric positions are prevalent in sociology and support what he calls the ‘industrial growth model’ of society. Jones draws on some of the psychoanalytical aspects of Herbert Marcuse’s work, those of libertarian socialist and radical Catholic Ivan Illich, as well as ecologists such as E. F. Schumacher (1976) and Fritjof Capra (1982). He claims that sociology still prioritises technological as opposed to human-based strategies for social organisation and everyday life, to the detriment of the environment, human values, community and politics. Indeed, Jones points to the problem of dualistic concepts that lie at the heart of sociological assumptions – as well as much of Western thought in general – as being something of a barrier to developing a more holistic method of inquiry. The obvious dualism is one of human and nature. Bart Van Steenberg (1990) is sympathetic to this position, and talks about the need to develop a completely different paradigm in the social sciences based on acceptance of new notions of ‘holism’.

Clearly, sociology has always worked with notions of ‘holism’, the principle that in order to understand any complex system you had to first understand its parts, from which more general rules could be advanced. Van Steenberg sees traditional efforts within sociology to be holistic as being too deterministic and reductionist, unable to grasp the fact that society is an interdependent network

of processes that constantly influence each other. In other words, he seeks to understand the parts through the workings of the whole (although not to the exclusion of the parts). Despite the fact that sociology attempts to problematise dualistic approaches, much of it is still based on an anthropocentric worldview that places the rational or scientific in opposition to the religious or spiritual, nature against culture, and, in terms of methodology, divides the subjective and objective positions.

Whilst sociology has been slow to address the instrumental elements within itself, a number of sociologists have begun to address the wider implications of instrumental approaches within society. In particular, the work of Ulrich Beck (1992) and Beck *et al.* (1994) – who might loosely be described as the ‘reflexive modernisation school’ – suggests that recent decades have witnessed a radicalisation of the very processes that formed modernity. So, as societies become aware of their own contradictions (such as pollution, health scares, addictions and stress at work), their policies become less instrumental and are increasingly organised around managing these difficulties. This is the era of what Beck calls the ‘risk society’, in which the new social movements are prime movers in ushering in post-instrumental values and policies.

There are, however, a number of limitations to the ‘reflexive modernisation’ thesis. It suggests that new social movements are helping to radicalise the thinking of those who administer the scientific, technological policies of State and capital. This might be said to be a ‘limited’ notion of reflexivity, in that the very people who are causing the social and ecological problems of the world are being asked to solve them (McKechnie and Welsh, 1994). From an anarchist perspective, it is important to acknowledge the part that hierarchical structures and the profit motive have in perpetuating these problems. That the reflexive modernists do not really get to grips with the antiauthoritarian and non-hierarchical nature of some of the contemporary ‘new social movements’ is perhaps indicative of this.

In the language of environmental political theory, the assumptions of Beck *et al.* might be construed as part of a ‘shallow’ rather than ‘deep’ ecological critique, which ignores the fact that instrumental attitudes to the natural world and the social worlds are fundamentally linked.² So, even in some of its more progressive areas, we see instrumentalism underpinning basic assumptions.

Problematic assumptions (III) – what is good research and who is it for?

If anarchist sociology is concerned with analysing the construction of authority in a variety of different contexts, from a methodological point of view, the relationship between the researcher and the researched must be central. The issues discussed in the previous section on instrumental rationality are therefore extremely pertinent to the means and ends of research: what gets studied, who funds it, who benefits from it? And, above all, how is it carried out, and by whom?

A useful starting point is the aforementioned work of philosopher of science

Paul Feyerabend in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Against method: outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge* (1988 [1975]), Feyerabend argues that scientific claims of objectivity need to be demystified and that science should be placed alongside rather than above other forms of knowledge or beliefs about the world. He suggests that, far from being objective and rationalistic, many scientists are actually anti-rationalist, and authoritarian with it too. Feyerabend's commitment to the democratisation of information, anti-élitist perspectives and flexibility of method have been seen to be in the spirit of anarchism even though he rejected anarchism as a political philosophy. Although he was often associated with his famously misunderstood slogan from *Against method* – 'anything goes' – Feyerabend was a staunch advocate of the value of demystifying the boundaries of the researcher and the researched. Influential across the disciplines, his work also needs to be seen in the context of the breaking down of the disciplinary boundaries between the natural and social sciences during the 1960s.

One example of this has been the critiques of science from feminist and ecological perspectives that emerged in the 1980s, leading to a new academic branch of sociology (Bijker *et al.*, 1987; Woolgar, 1988). Developments in 'post-colonial' anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) can also be seen as illustrative of the shifts in conceptual as well as disciplinary boundaries, with the 'authority' of the white European male voice increasingly coming under fire from both marginalised academic communities and 'research subjects'. This issue of accountability has been particularly developed by feminist sociologists, including Stanley and Wise (1993) and Roseneil (1995).

This feminist strand of sociology acknowledges the importance, in qualitative and especially ethnographic research, of the relationship between the evolution of ideas in the research process and the emotional journey undertaken by the researcher. For Roseneil (1995), this must preface the whole research process, in the form of an 'intellectual autobiography', which documents the personal reasons for the research. As well as collapsing the old dualism of 'individual' and 'society' (Ribbens, 1993: 88), it also provides the opportunity for new forms of sociological discourse to emerge from personal writing, assuming that it is more comment than catharsis. It also tackles the issue of the hegemony of particular schools or methods within sociological circles which often 'forbid' non-scientific ways of representing data (Chaplin, 1994).

It is perhaps the respective relationships that exist between the researcher and the researched that have caused most controversy, and in particular, questions of obligation, responsibility and emotional involvement. Much has been written on this particular topic: when does one stop researching and will this affect anybody, if, for instance, the researcher is involved in a sensitive subject area, such as staffing a 'help-line'? Here we can see the debate about rationality and reason re-emerging so that one does not take such an instrumental approach to one's research 'subjects'. Or, to locate this within an anarchist framework, one attempts to equate the means of an action (or method) with its ends.

A useful pointer in these matters is Michael Burawoy's observation on contem-

porary ethnography: that the research process is more a type of collaboration than objectification (1991: 291). Whilst this is something to be aspired to, the parameters of a researcher's involvement is a controversial point. Most famous in this regard is French sociologist Alain Touraine who sees the research process as an opportunity, suggesting that the researcher is vitally placed to give the 'subjects' a 'greater capacity for historical action' (1981: 145). This method, which Touraine calls 'sociological interventionism', is one that acknowledges the fact that the researcher is *already* immersed within and influencing the culture in question. Touraine is not interested in the partiality question and believes that new spaces for knowledge open up in such situations. However, sometimes too much reflexivity creates problems, with the presence of the researcher fuelling existing conflicts (Ferguson, 1991; Armstrong, 1993: 30), or creating resentment if too much collaboration leads to an accusation of misrepresentation (Kurzman, 1991: 265ff.).

In addition, there are structural factors that can impact on any idealised anarchist research practice, and these may ultimately invalidate claims for an anarchist sociology within a formal academic context. Research organisations and universities might 'own' the research that gets done in their name with the final veto as to its future usefulness. Moreover, there are grey areas in terms of researching sensitive topics legally. Academics investigating football hooligans (Armstrong, 1993), drug dealer activity (Fountain, 1993) and sexual harassment in sports clubs (Yorganci, 1995), all found themselves in difficulties in respect of either wanting to report findings to the police or trying to avoid police interference with their research. In America, one researcher (Scarce, 1994) went to jail in order to protect his sources (animal liberation activists).

Recent developments: poststructuralism, chaos theory and anarchism

Disregarding the reasons why anarchist perspectives in the social sciences may have been either deliberately excluded or just failed to make an impact, two areas of theory in the last two decades or so have effectively begun to change this. This is not because poststructuralist or chaos theorists have any gravitation towards an anarchist perspective, more that the theories lend themselves to such interpretations. The principal reason for this is because at the heart of these paradigms are critiques of hierarchical, predictable and generalised theories of both the natural and social worlds. These theories fundamentally question the temporal, spatial and ontological assumptions of the Enlightenment, of Modernism, and of Cartesian and Newtonian world-views. They have impacted on everything from microbes and weather systems to theories of revolution. The main purpose, therefore, of engaging with these areas of theory is because they offer a variety of analytical tools that can be of assistance in conceptualising the place of power in contemporary (as well as past) society. Moreover, the application of these concepts can add to and enhance the kind of perspectives that have been discussed so far.

Poststructuralism and anarchism

Poststructuralism stems principally from a group of predominantly French theorists who have exerted considerable influence on cultural and political theory in the last thirty or so years, much of it emerging out of critical reflection about the ‘failures’ of May ’68. The main writers are Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Julia Kristeva and (the later work of) Roland Barthes. In different ways they came to be labelled as poststructuralist on account of the fact that they broke with the rigorousness of existing structuralist, Marxist, linguistic and psychoanalytical models of historical explanation, models that posited particular ‘fixed ideas’ about subjectivity, meaning and social change. Poststructuralists have regarded such rigidity as oppressive on account of the fact that it can lead to objectification and the exertion of power (Koch, 1997: 102). As with postmodernist theorists, there is a perceived need to deconstruct the absolutism that underpinned or emerged from the humanistic Enlightenment, as well as any notion of general historical laws or patterns. This has resulted in a commitment to critiquing dominant conceptual dualisms such as nature/culture and Self/Other, in order to reveal the extent to which such oppositions are social constructions. Moreover, poststructuralism favours a view of the ‘decentred’ subject that is far more dynamic in its construction than under structuralism, and this is seen to reflect the increasing heterogeneity of subject positions in a multi-cultural, postcolonial world.

The aforementioned writers are often associated with anarchism because of their antiauthoritarian and micro-sociological analysis, which considers how people are shaped by, but also implicated in, power relations which do not derive solely from State and capital. For instance, in their book *A thousand plateaux* (1988) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use a biological metaphor to illustrate that power is not determined by a single set of influences – the rhizome. This, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is a ‘an underground rootlike stem bearing both roots and shoots’ (1996 edition: p. 1225). Rather than being interested in the role of structures, Deleuze and Guattari talk about the ‘lines’ that make up the constitution of contemporary relations. So, a ‘rhizome connects any point to any other point, . . . its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states’ (1988: 21).

Michel Foucault set out to identify the way that societies articulated and reproduced power relations through different ‘discourses’ such as sexuality, madness, punishment and medicine. He looked at how these were constructed in different historical ‘epistemes’ (or knowledge moments). Foucault’s metaphor was that of a body, where power seeps through millions of capillaries, except there are no real identifiable determining forces driving the flow of power and that they are highly localised to particular epistemes (1980: 142). For Foucault, power was so omnipresent in these epistemes that it also determined any form of

resistance to it on its own terms. The term he used was *agonism*: two forces that circle each other, defining each other and unable to exist without the other (1982: 221). This is an interesting notion and one which has much in common with the anarchist critique of how authoritarian relations (particularly the Marxist and Leninist models of political change) inevitably reproduce themselves through mirroring the (capitalist bureaucratic) structures which they are supposedly opposing.

The value of these perspectives to an anarchist sociology is, however, a mixed one. The poststructuralist approach to the understanding of power is useful inasmuch that it forges a better understanding of how power becomes reproduced in all kinds of complex ways and the extent to which people are implicated within these processes (Goaman and Dodson, 1997: 87). However, since post-structuralism tends not to prioritise wider historical contexts, there are problems relating a micro-historical and sociological perspective to the kind of understanding of historical change of relations of authority which would be of interest to anarchist sociologists. For instance, to return to the social movement literature, the question of how movements learn from each other or why some radical movements become institutionalised and others do not is difficult to answer from such a standpoint. Indeed, one of the more controversial poststructural interpretations of power – May's idea that not all of it is necessarily bad and it is a question of identifying the more legitimate forms (1994: 123) – is somewhat problematic from an anarchist perspective.

Chaos, complexity and anarchism

By contrast, recent developments in the natural sciences point to the need to fundamentally rewrite the assumed 'laws' of the physical universe and by implication the social one. Since the 1960s, similar discoveries, firstly in mathematics, and then physics, biology, chemistry, astronomy and meteorology, have come to be regarded by many as equal to or of greater importance than Einstein's work on relativity or Werner Heisenburg and Niels Bohr's on quantum mechanics early in the twentieth century. Although a full discussion of the science behind complexity and chaos theory is beyond the scope of this article, a number of pertinent observations can be made.

The principal idea behind these theories is that everything upwards from the smallest particle in the natural world to the migration of birds and the behaviour of weather systems is ordered in an extremely dynamic and complex manner. Simple systems can give rise to complex behaviour but complex systems can also give rise to simple behaviour. The point is that the universe pursues non-linear and non-determining patterns that make reductionist scientific explanations impossible. The examples most used to illustrate this vary from the famous butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world and causing tidal waves on the other, to calculating mathematical equations to six rather than seven decimal places and dramatically changing the application of the subsequent formula.

The implication of this, suggests Arran Gare (2000), is that all disciplines will have to take notice because these theories imply a removal of the boundaries of all disciplines, if not the creation of a new form of scientific investigation itself. Here we can return to Van Steenberg's (1990) discussion of contemporary holism and the characteristics that he attributes to the social world. The implications are that the social world can also be understood in terms of self-organising and spontaneous processes, where unity rather than conflict is a better analytical device and the determinism of many theories of historical change must be resisted. From an anarchist perspective this can be seen to vindicate the work of both Charles Fourier and Peter Kropotkin, some of it carried out well over a century ago. As Purchase points out (1994: 163), all of the current trendy scientific concepts such as complexity, diversity, emergence and self-assembly were researched by these writers and placed in the context of balanced natural and social eco-systems. These have long been part of eco-political and anarchist thought. Moreover, Purchase suggests that the fact that computer-generated particles *self-organise* when only supplied with a few programmed instructions as to how to function in a group further legitimates the anarchist claims for such 'holistic' kind of thinking.

The fact that such a holistic approach has been overlooked or under-acknowledged is a moot point, but there are clearly huge implications for *any* kind of sociological theorising. How, for instance, does one evaluate the effects of particular events or sets of circumstances on people and how their ideas are subsequently diffused into the rest of society? How does one begin to research this, setting aside the aforementioned problems of 'intervention' and value freedom aside? Many sociological perspectives are hierarchical in their assumptions about both the structure of society and the analytic tools best suited to understand it. However, more flexible perspectives based on the complexity sciences are beginning to make an impact on the social sciences, particularly in terms of thinking about historical contingency and the potential that people have at conceptualising their own likely impact on events (Smith, 1998). It is also, as Urry (2003) notes, an increasingly valuable theoretical tool in understanding the process of globalisation and people's diverse experience of it.

Although it is possible that this supposedly new scientific paradigm might well revolutionise social theory, it is also possible that it will not. There is already evidence to suggest that, as with Darwinism and socio-biology, chaos and complexity have been used to justify free market philosophies and competitive theories of human organisation and behaviour by management theorists and stock market analysts. However, as Chesters (2003) notes, there is only a certain amount of conceptual applicability, as it becomes hard to talk about autonomy, self-organisation and networks meaningfully in hopelessly hierarchical contexts. Happily, as he indicates, there is considerably more 'fit' between these theories and the mobilisations of the alternative globalisation movement. Certainly theorising in terms of the self-organisational activities of large groups of people who may be otherwise 'hidden from history' but have unacknowledged impact on events would clearly serve sociology better.

Why develop an anarchist sociology?

This chapter has considered the possibility of developing an anarchist sociology and acknowledged some of the theoretical terrain on which it might be formulated or, alternatively, organised in opposition to. I have suggested that some of the founding rationales behind sociology in the nineteenth century, such as instrumental attitudes towards pursuing research in the name of industrial progress and social cohesion, might have negative impact on those being studied and their environment. The fact that sociology can be seen to have often mirrored the hierarchical structures of society in terms of its assumptions about organisation and change, mitigates against interpretations of history that might prioritise alternatives to dominant currents. By examining social movements, for instance, it is often possible to locate the political assumptions of the powerful in the analytical assessment of the phenomena in question. Theories of new social movements, resource mobilisation and political opportunities can all be seen to have overlooked the possibilities that political movement cultures are highly complex and dynamic processes that do not necessarily behave in ways consistent with static or generalised models of protest.

An additional area of concern for anarchist sociologists has been how research is carried out and the extent to which methodological processes can become forms of power. Although academic research is frequently linked to dominant corporate or State-related interests, the last twenty or so years has witnessed the evolution of much more reflexive forms of sociology. This has largely emerged through feminist research agendas, which have tended to treat fieldwork as though it is a collaborative and mutually beneficial experience, for those being studied as well as the researchers.

Whilst these developments offer great potential in terms of the breaking down of pre-existing structural barriers in society, there have also been a number of theoretical perspectives such as poststructuralism and complexity, whose philosophical premises have been seized on by anarchists as being potentially beneficial. The reason for this is down to the perception that discourses which emphasise analytical flexibility, multi-interpretations of power and influence rather than determinism and stasis, are far more accurate interpretations of the world. From a sociological perspective this makes a lot of sense, particularly if these theories can assist in the unmasking of power and can contribute to a better understanding of the world.

To develop an anarchist sociology is to offer a different explanation of why particular social problems emerge, based on a different vision of how society is and ought to be. The development of an anarchist sociology is, however, still in its infancy, and the institutional possibilities for its emergence are probably somewhat limited. However, what is important is that there is enough evidence already to be able to advocate a substantial anarchist research agenda. There are endless research questions to be formulated: how is power formed and perpetuated? why do people desire their own oppression? how should we research these

things sensitively? and what should we do with the results when we get them? If anarchists stick to the kind of principles that most have long held in their hearts, then there may well be answers to these questions. The opportunity for an anarchist sociology to emerge in a contemporary context should therefore not be underestimated.

Notes

- 1 Many thanks to Chayley Collis and James Bowen who have long suffered my preoccupation with this subject area and made significant contributions along the way. A number of these ideas were presented to the Anarchist Research Group in London in January 2001. Thanks to all those who attended the meeting and provided useful feedback. Much of the work in this chapter can be found in my PhD thesis: 'A sociology of environmental protest: Earth First! and the theory and practice of anarchism', Manchester Metropolitan University, 2001. Electronic copies are available from the author at jonathanpurkis@yahoo.co.uk.
- 2 I am using the phrases 'shallow' and 'deep' ecology in a very generalised manner. My use of 'deep ecology', for instance, is much more similar to the social ecology perspective of Bookchin (1982, 1996a) than to the deep ecology thinkers such as Naess (1973, 1989) or Devall and Sessions (1985).