
Book Review

Unstable universalities: Poststructuralism and radical politics

Saul Newman

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In *Unstable Universalities*, Saul Newman argues that the future of radical politics lies in poststructuralism, post-anarchism and the anti-globalisation movement. Newman draws, first, on poststructuralist theory broadly conceived, including theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Alain Badiou. With these he argues for an anti-essentialist position, whereby history and identities are contingent. This shows the centrality of political articulations, according to Newman. History does not develop according to a necessary logic, and political identities must be articulated, so radical politics depends on the active articulation of radical political demands and the creation of radical political identities.

Second, as in his earlier work, Newman makes a case for post-anarchism. With Marxism, anarchism shares the critique of capitalism, but unlike Marxists, anarchists are critical of the state and of traditional Marxist forms of organisation (in the Party and so on). Like Marxists, anarchists believe in a human essence, and it is the rejection of this essentialism that leads Newman to speak of *post-anarchism*.

Newman finds, I think rightly, convergences between poststructuralism and (post-)anarchism. These in turn converge with key elements of the anti-globalisation movement. This movement is anti-capitalist, but not based on a traditional class analysis or on the working class as the revolutionary agent. The anti-globalisation movement is also anti-state, objecting to the new security measures of the state among other things. Finally, the movement does not organise itself in a hierarchical fashion, but in more horizontal networks. Nonetheless, Newman believes that there is still a need to organise, and this happens around a universal frontier constructed against capitalism. This frontier is not a natural or given one, but must be constructed. It must be constructed in a negative fashion against something (here, capitalism) and in an affirmative fashion, which for Newman implies the creation of



‘autonomous space[s] ... in which new modes of living are possible’ (p. 188). The anti-globalisation movement thus has a universal dimension, and this universality is a constructed universality. To the extent that it is a constructed and contingent universality, it is also an ‘unstable universality’.

The argument for a universal dimension to radical politics runs like a red thread through the Newman’s chapters on postmodernism, power, the subject, ethics and democracy. Newman first situates radical politics against the background of postmodernism, which has shattered many of the certainties on which older radical politics rested (for example, the idea of a human essence). Nevertheless, Newman believes that radical politics cannot do without a dimension of universality. Newman adds that a theory of radical politics needs an account of power. In this context, he makes a case for an anti-authoritarian interpretation of radical politics, something that goes hand in hand with poststructuralism and post-anarchism. Newman believes that, today, the state and sovereignty are important sites of radical political struggles, especially with the new security measures that are supposed to be a defence against terrorism. Importantly, difference and fragmentation are not necessarily subversive, but may in fact be the way in which power is exercised in contemporary capitalism because it helps diffuse resistance. Radical political theory also needs an account of the subject, and here Newman makes the case for a Lacanian position that takes our subjectivity as the interruption of our subject positions, that is, of our identities. Drawing on Derrida, Newman then argues for an anti-authoritarian ethics with a universal dimension, an ethics that is sensitive to difference but does not give up on universality even if only in a Derridean sense of to-come. Finally, he argues that democracy is an ambiguous institution. On the one hand, liberal democracy is increasingly shallow and authoritarian. On the other hand, and drawing on Lefort, Laclau & Mouffe and Derrida, Newman believes that democracy has the potential to institute contingency; that is, radical democracy can be open to alterity and anti-authoritarian while also challenging the basic capitalist structure of contemporary society.

I agree with most of the points Newman makes about radical political theory and practice, although I am more pessimistic than he about the potential of the anti-globalisation movement as a global transformative force. I think Newman is right to highlight the issues pertaining to the state and sovereignty and to highlight the anti-authoritarianism that connects poststructuralism, (post-)anarchism and the anti-globalisation movement. Finally, Newman’s emphasis on universality is an important contribution to radical political thought today. As he rightly argues, universality is a necessary part of radical politics, as long as that universality is conceived in the right way. *Unstable Universalities* is an important contribution to contemporary poststructuralist theories of radical politics.



Although they do not affect my general agreements with Newman, I do have some differences with him over more specific points. In some places, for instance, he rejects the state, rights and liberalism outright, but this is mostly based on vague and undifferentiated accounts of these. In other places, he – rightly, I believe – stresses the ambiguity and radical potential of rights, democracy and demands directed at the state. Similarly, Newman often confuses sovereignty with the state so that the (contemporary capitalist security) state comes to exhaust sovereignty. Here I believe that sovereignty appears more ambiguous if we take it in a more general sense. In that case, we can also talk of sovereignty essential to democracy (of ‘the people’) and to anti-authoritarianism (of ‘the individual’), both of which are essential to the radical politics that Newman favours.

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