

Translators' Introduction to Daniel Colson's "Anarchist Readings of Spinoza"

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Set foot in a French anarchist bookstore—say, the Librairie Publico on the Rue Amelot in Paris—and you will find, in addition to shelves full of books and journals originating in France, written to a Francophone audience, shelves full of works in English and translations from English. It would be difficult to find the like in any American anarchist bookstore. This is perhaps true of many other languages and of many other kinds of publishing in many other country. English is, after all, the imperial language *du siècle*. Nonetheless, the results are lamentable: while French, following our current controversies and reading our classics, enjoy full access to the spectrum of Anglo-American anarchist theoretical discourse, we cannot say the same of theirs. Part of what we Anglophone readers are missing, wrapped in our protective linguistico-imperial cocoon, is aptly represented by a growing body of work by Daniel Colson, a sociologist at the Université de Saint-Étienne in Lyon. We have had a first glimpse of it in the form of a single essay, "Nietzsche and the Libertarian Movement," included in the 2004 anthology, *I am Not a Man, I Am Dynamite!: Nietzsche and Anarchism*,¹ but Colson's primary contributions—his two books, the *Petit lexique philosophique de l'anarchisme de Proudhon à Deleuze* (2001)² and *Trois essais de philosophie anarchiste: Islam, histoire, monadologie* (2004)³—remain unavailable in English. This is much to the detriment of English-speaking scholars still seeking to validate anarchism not only as an object of study—an historical curiosity, say, or an exhibit in the museum of political ideologies—but as a subject position from which to study everything else, a project of inquiry.

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However, Colson does not make a traditional defense of the anarchist tradition, a variant of which appears in the recent work of David Graeber, for instance (in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* and *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire*).⁴ Conceding the deficit of theoretical glamor in the anarchist tradition—e.g., “there’s no anarchist theory of the commodity form”—Graeber spins a vacuum into a virtue: if “anarchism does not tend to have much use for high theory,” this is because “anarchism is mainly about the ethics of practice.”⁵ While there is some truth to this apologia (Marx’s *chef d’oeuvre*, after all, was *Das Kapital*, while Proudhon’s was *De la Justice*), it dovetails too neatly with the reigning assumption in nearly all scholarly studies of anarchism—namely, that anarchism is not a coherent body of thought, but something essentially “irrational,” like a belief system (perhaps an offshoot of Gnostic mysticism or millennialism) or an instinct (a rebellious “impulse”).⁶ Colson, on the contrary, proposes to take anarchists seriously as thinkers, as the creators not only of sophisticated collective practices (e.g., the affinity group, the spokes-council, the decentralized federation) but also of conceptions of the world or ontologies.

In this respect, Colson’s contribution is truly distinctive—and in ways that might at first fail to meet the eye. Indeed, at first glance, a British or American reader might imagine this work to be nothing new: Colson’s books can be placed among a body of work in English under the general heading of “anarchism and poststructuralism” or (somewhat misleadingly) “postanarchism,” joining books such as Todd May’s *Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994)⁷ and Saul Newman’s *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (2001).⁸ In fact, like both of these authors, Colson takes a great deal of inspiration from Deleuze, one of the two pole stars listed in the title of his *Petit lexique*. However, the interpretation Colson gives to Deleuze, to post-structuralism, and to anarchism is unique, and he takes these in surprising directions. The chief surprise is in the deftness with which Colson avoids what has heretofore been one of the major problems besetting attempts to link post-structuralism with anarchism. While they clearly admire and value the precedent set by anarchists, May and Newman both treat it as yet another defective discourse, founded on an essentialist “belief” in the goodness of human nature. Once this discourse is put through the wringer of anti-essentialism, not much is left: at best, the anarchist tradition is retained in an attenuated, abstract form—a “critique of representation” which is

perhaps better left to academic philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard or W. V. O. Quine. Thus, in their eagerness to get (to paraphrase Newman's title) *from* anarchism *to* post-structuralism, May and Newman both seem compelled to leave the entire history of anarchism behind, to shed its defining texts and experiences as a kind of dead weight: serious discussion of Bakunin ends a third of the way into Newman's book, and May simply stops talking about Bakunin midway through, as if he (and all the other voices of anarchism, from the Magón brothers to the *Mujeres Libres*) has nothing more to say to us. Colson makes this past *speak again*.

What this past speaks of, for Colson, is a heretical ontological tradition—"a thought too sulfurous to take its place in the official edifice of philosophy"—which seeks to escape the categories into which philosophical thought has been corralled: humanist/anti-humanist, essentialist/constructivist, foundationalist/anti-foundationalist, etc. These were the antinomies that emerged so starkly during the famous 1971 debate between Chomsky and Foucault—an encounter in which two of the world's preeminent anti-authoritarian thinkers failed to understand one another.⁹ For Chomsky, Foucault's radical social constructivism seemed to offer no ethical foundation for resistance to oppressive power—if we are just what power makes us, how can we ever rebel against it?—while Foucault saw Chomsky's Enlightenment-derived essentialist conception of "human nature" as itself a kind of ideological screen, obscuring from view the historical forces and power relations that produce our ideas of what is just, right, and "natural." Proudhon and Spinoza, on Colson's account, help us to think our way out of this antinomy by radically reconceiving the relationship between freedom and power. They do so in a way, moreover, which at once affirms something of Foucault's anti-foundationalism and constructivism—"that which seems to be in the principle, at the beginning, only comes afterwards, is only an effect of composition"—while at the same time reaffirming Chomsky's concern for the "radical autonomy" of the human subject from the historically local and politically partisan "forces that make it possible." In defiance equally of essentialist and antiessentialist dogmas, in short, Proudhon and Spinoza render an ontology of freedom.

In the best tradition of French philosophy, Colson establishes connections and syntheses that are at once intuitive and counterintuitive. It is scarcely surprising, for example, that Colson would discuss Negri and Deleuze, two thinkers who, more so than any others, have influenced

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the nature and scope of contemporary debate about Spinoza's metaphysics and politics. At the same time, however, Colson explores a relatively neglected and frequently overlooked intellectual tradition—the tradition of anarchism—to motivate his critique of Negri and his comparatively favorable analysis of Deleuze. It is precisely this dexterity and ingenuity that makes Colson such an interesting thinker, not just to anarchists but to scholars of European philosophy more generally.

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from this essay, however, is that the thought of anarchist philosophers like Proudhon and Bakunin is very much alive. Like Deleuze, Negri, and Balibar, Colson strives to read against the grain—to seek out and unearth new possibilities and revolutionary potentialities within “established” philosophical concepts. But what he discovers in so doing is that he and his peers are unwittingly participating in a much older European tradition. After all, Proudhon and Bakunin and countless other lesser known anarchists were reading against the grain long ago. To understand this is not just to understand our anarchist forebears, but to understand something about ourselves.

Certainly, Colson makes us listen again to the voice of Deleuze, attending to what we have so far failed to hear, or heard very mutedly, as when he remarks during a 1980 seminar on Spinoza: “It is antihierarchical thought. It is almost a kind of anarchy.”¹⁰

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¹ John Moore and Spencer Sunshine, eds. *I Am Not a Man, I Am Dynamite! Nietzsche and Anarchism*. New York: Autonomedia, 2005.

² Daniel Colson. *Petit lexique philosophique de l'anarchisme de Proudhon à Deleuze*. Paris: Librairie Général Française, 2001.

³ Daniel Colson. *Trois essais de philosophie anarchiste: Islam, histoire, monadologie*. Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2004.

⁴ Graeber, David. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2001 and *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007.

⁵ Graeber, David. “Interview with Mark Thwaite,” in *Ready Steady Book*, 16 January 2007, <<http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=dauidgraeber>>.

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⁶ Turcato, Davide. "Making Sense of Anarchism: Anarchists, Historians, and Rationality." Presented at European Social Science and History Conference, 29 February 2009.

⁷ Todd May. *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

⁸ Saul Newman. *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001.

⁹ Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault. *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*. New York: New Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. "Spinoza 25/11/1980," trans. Timothy S. Murphy, in *Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze*, <<http://www.webdeleuze.com/pdf/uk/Spinoza/251180.zip>>.