

# The Anarchism of Intellectuals

*by Cyril Legrand*

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**Whether conceived as advocacy of disorder or as “the highest expression of order”, as the abolition of the state or as state-led deregulation, anarchy feeds on every ambiguity. This is the case even in contemporary philosophy.**

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About: Catherine Malabou, *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*, translated by Carolyn Shread, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2023, 268 p.

Catherine Malabou’s latest book can be read as the story of a misunderstanding: the conceptual and political misunderstanding surrounding anarchy and anarchism.

The terms “anarchy” and “anarchism” are admittedly confusing. Long synonymous with chaos and disorder, they have been used since the nineteenth century to *also* designate an organized political movement—which has taken on a variety of forms—and a social ideal—described by contrast as “the highest expression of order” by Élisée Reclus.<sup>1</sup> As if this ambiguity were not enough, anarchism, which is by definition anti-state, is now sometimes associated with forms of state deregulation and withdrawal. Malabou herself strangely adds to this confusion when she uses the term “*de facto* anarchism” (in contrast to “dawning anarchism”) to designate the anomie of a social world “condemned to a horizontality of desertion,” or when she evokes “the anarchist turn in capitalism,” Donald Trump’s anarchism, “cyber-anarchism,” or “market anarchism.” This is all very perplexing.

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<sup>1</sup> Élisée Reclus, *Discours à la séance solennelle de rentrée du 22 octobre 1895 de l’Université nouvelle de Bruxelles*, online.

What Malabou euphemistically calls the “polymorphism of anarchism”—where one might be tempted to see a certain conceptual *disorder*—is aggravated by the specific subject of the book: namely, the way in which a number of contemporary philosophers have recently taken up the concept of “anarchy” without declaring themselves anarchist and have thereby engaged in a “paradoxical form of anarchy without anarchism.”

## Anarchy Without Anarchism

Indeed, none of the concepts eruditely discussed by Malabou in the central chapters of the book—Reiner Schürmann’s “principle of anarchy,”<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas’s “anarchic responsibility,” Jacques Derrida’s “responsible anarchism,” Michel Foucault’s “anarcheology,” Giorgio Agamben’s “profanatory anarchism,” and Jacques Rancière’s “staging anarchy”—refers directly to Proudhon, to Bakunin, or to the movements for which these two nineteenth-century thinkers provided the inspiration and theoretical groundwork. On the contrary, the philosophers under study generally make a point of explicitly distancing themselves from anarchist thinkers and movements, and sometimes even adopt political positions far removed from theirs: Levinas clearly defends the necessity of a state, Rancière argues for a kind of police force, and Foucault remains fundamentally attached to the principle of government. At no point does any of them go so far as to call into question what Proudhon termed “the governmental prejudice.” As Malabou observes:

Let me repeat my point: Not for a moment do philosophers consider the possibility that we might live without being governed. Self-management and self-determination are not serious political possibilities for any one of them. In the final analysis, government is always safe, even if it takes the form of self-government.

Malabou emphasizes that while none of these philosophers is strictly anarchist, all of them have inevitably been influenced by anarchism: Whether they like it or not,

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<sup>2</sup> Born in Amsterdam in 1941, this French-speaking German philosopher was among other things a member of a kibbutz in Israel, a Dominican novice, a student of Heidegger, a Dominican priest who defrocked five years after his ordination, a lecturer at various American universities, and a Doctor of Letters and Humanities at the Sorbonne. He died of an AIDS-related illness in New York in 1993. He was the author of three major works: *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington, MA, Lindisfarne Books, 2001), *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), and *Broken Hegemonies* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003).

whether they acknowledge it or not, the philosophers of anarchy are indebted in one way or another to anarchist thinkers and movements. This is primarily evident at the terminological and conceptual level. For as Malabou recalls, it was Proudhon who first gave a positive meaning to the concept of “anarchy”: “Without this revolution in meaning, none of the philosophical concepts of anarchy developed in the twentieth century could have seen the light of day.”

More fundamentally, one could hypothesize that all of these philosophers have been influenced by the radicalness attributed to anarchism (rightly so, though at times in a rather folkloric manner): Beyond the word itself, it is the gesture of anarchism that fascinates and inspires. The imaginary that has developed around anarchism, and more specifically around the anarchist bomber of the late nineteenth century, is no doubt largely unfounded (very few attacks were actually carried out), but it has nevertheless left a profound impact on the intellectual world, on literature, and on legislation.<sup>3</sup> Philosophy—in particular that which presents itself as “deconstruction” (a translation of Heidegger’s *Destruktion*)—may well be haunted by this imaginary of radicalness and destruction.

Yet, while the philosophers under study have clearly drawn inspiration from anarchism and have even “stolen” the concept, they have also partially betrayed and diluted its meaning. As Malabou observes, none of them has taken this inspiration to its limit; all have remained “at the edge of the radicalness they advocate.” And this not only because they have not dared to declare themselves anarchist, but also because their attachment to the governmental prejudice has prevented them from deepening their own deconstructionist approaches. As if through symmetry, their lack of political radicalness has been accompanied by a lack of philosophical radicalness. This is what the central chapters of the book attempt to demonstrate.

## **The Anti-intellectualism of Anarchists**

According to Malabou, not only is the philosophy of anarchy influenced by anarchism, but the anarchist movement would in turn benefit from the influence of this philosophy: “Philosophy makes it possible for anarchy to undertake the work that anarchism did not do.” One should therefore engage in the deepening, radicalization,

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<sup>3</sup> See Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l’anarchisme*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 2001.

and “rejuvenation of classic anarchism,” in line with what has come to be known as “post-anarchism.” Specifically, one should: deconstruct the rationalism, positivism, and naturalism of classic anarchism along with Schürmann, Derrida, and Levinas; desubstantialize the concept of power along with Foucault; renounce the fetishization of excess and the celebration of transgression in favor of desacralization and profanation along with Agamben<sup>4</sup>; and engage in a broader rethinking of social and political emancipation along with Rancière. Since the late 1990s, a number of authors and activists described as “post-anarchists” have claimed to pursue one or the other of these endeavors.

However, there seem to be some fundamental limits to this rapprochement. Anarchists’ reluctance to engage with philosophy, which Malabou deplors and deems “paradoxical,” does have its reasons. The works of Schürmann, Levinas, Derrida, and Agamben—and to a lesser extent those of Foucault and Rancière—are undeniably highly theoretical and speculative and sometimes even completely abstruse. Moreover, reading and understanding these works require mastery of specialized academic knowledge, or at least of a set of philosophical landmarks and references that are far from being widely shared. Anarchism, which is oriented more towards practice and revolutionary organizing than towards speculative elaboration, remains for its part profoundly anti-intellectual<sup>5</sup> and wary of excessive theoretical detours. Malabou acknowledges this “hostility to philosophical reflection” and finds it regrettable: “Anarchism must open itself up to philosophical dialogue.” It should be noted, however, that this hostility concerns a *certain* kind of philosophical reflection, namely that which involves too many mediations and is only accessible to an elite. To be suspicious of intellectuals—of their sophistications and of the power they sometimes arrogate to themselves—is obviously not to reject intelligence and reflection as such. Anarchists are not so much against philosophy—or even metaphysics—as they are against its academic capture and speculative inflation, which sometimes veer into Byzantine complexity, as is the case in the philosophical works discussed by Malabou.

In fact, one wonders to whom the book is addressed: Given that the central chapters are devoted to erudite commentaries on difficult authors who themselves

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<sup>4</sup> As Malabou points out: “Because transgression is hemmed into the symbolic order, it always leads to a reconstitution of the sacred.” Consequently, “the anarchism of transgression, the basic lining of capitalism,” should be replaced with “a profaning anarchism that gives up fetishizing excess, celebrating the mystery of ecstasy, eroticism, and what lies outside itself.”

<sup>5</sup> See Sarah Al-Matary, *La haine des clercs. L’anti-intellectualisme en France*, Paris, Seuil, 2019.

tend to use sophisticated references, it is difficult to see how these various reflections—which might be said to constitute an “anarchism of intellectuals”<sup>6</sup>—could directly feed into the practices of anarchist activists as Malabou seems to expect. As Renaud Garcia writes in *Le désert de la critique. Déconstruction et politique* (L’Échappée, 2015, pp. 25 and 44): “The adoption of the deconstructionist ‘tool-box of ideas’ by the most radical currents of social critique actually contributes to making [this critique] unintelligible to most of the people who might be interested in it.” And Garcia later asks: “Who are the deconstructionists writing for?”

## An Anarchist Ontology?

However, the fact that anarchism is on principle hostile to philosophical flights of fancy does not prevent philosophers from interrogating the philosophical or ontological foundations of anarchism—even if this leads them to the conclusion that there are no foundations. In reality, Malabou conducts precisely this sort of—properly philosophical—interrogation in her book: Is there a philosophy, or even an ontology, of anarchism? And if so, should one view philosophical an-archy as the philosophy of political anarchism? Does the lack of a principle of command ultimately rest on the lack of a metaphysical first principle? In short: Is it possible to develop an ontologico-political anarchism? Malabou has her doubts:

We must concede that all attempts to think being and politics together have been a disaster. From Plato’s “communism” to the mathematical totalitarianism of some forms of Maoism, through the Heideggerian night, the elaboration of connections between ontology and politics authorized by the original bricolage of *archē*, which, as we have seen, extends its reign in both fields, has given rise to nothing but terrifying dead-ends. [...] Why risk a new impediment? Wouldn’t it be better, far better, to make a cut between being and anarchism, to stop ontologizing politics and politicizing ontology [...]?

And yet, Malabou specifically attempts this ontologization of anarchism in her conclusion. She even goes so far as to claim that “this is the task dawning in anarchism” and that there is “urgency” in taking up these philosophical challenges. But unlike what is sometimes implicitly or explicitly the case in the various currents

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<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the last century, the Polish revolutionary Jan Waclaw Machajski (1866-1926) warned against what he called “the socialism of intellectuals”: a socialism which, by virtue of its emphasis on theoretical production and intellectual work, is particularly useful to the intellectual class as a stepping stone to power. See Jan Waclaw Makhaïski, *Le socialisme des intellectuels*, Paris, Seuil, 1979.

of anarchism, the ontology defended by Malabou does not rest on a first principle: Reason, Nature, Life, or even God (for there does exist a Christian anarchism, as illustrated in particular by Leo Tolstoy). The ontology on which anarchism must rest, or which constitutes an-archism, is literally without principle (*an-archē*): It is therefore, in the words of Malabou, a “plastic ontology.” As the author observes:

As the only political form that is always to be invented, to be shaped before it exists, precisely because it depends on no beginning or command, anarchism is never what it is. That’s where its being lies. This plasticity is the meaning of its being, the meaning of its question.

Malabou thus returns to a concept she has been working on since her first book, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*,<sup>7</sup> though she unfortunately does not develop it further. After pointing out that this idea was already present in Bakunin—who defined anarchism as a “plastic force” in which “no office petrifies, becomes fixed and remains irrevocably attached to a single person” (quoted by Malabou)—she elevates plasticity to the paradoxical rank of ontological principle of anarchism. This ontological anarchism does not constitute a defined and closed metaphysical system; on the contrary, it is at once flexible and plural, open and multiple, irreducible to a single hegemonic principle yet woven and dispersed between the different points of a “philosophical archipelago.” Anarchism is pluralism. What remains to be done is to trace its lines of flight.

In the very last pages of the book, Malabou addresses more concrete political considerations. Here Audrey Tang provides an unexpected source of inspiration: This Taiwanese cybernetician, free software programmer, and self-proclaimed “conservative anarchist” has been Minister of Digital Affairs in the Taiwanese government since 2016. Malabou expresses astonishment at the presence of an anarchist in government. However, she does not take offense at this state of affairs, but seems pleased by it: “Joining institutions to better subvert them. Many will respond: These are the words of the powerful. And yet...” It is as if the search for “the governmental prejudice” conducted throughout the chapters on Schürmann, Levinas, Derrida, Agamben, and Rancière came to a halt with the end of the textual analysis, at the very moment when the question of action, organization, and strategic choices— anarchism’s main concern<sup>8</sup>—posed itself more concretely. As if by giving anarchism a

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, London, Routledge, 2004; see also Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, and *Plasticité* (ed.), Paris, Léo Scheer, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to what Malabou suggests, anarchist participation in government is not new. During the Spanish Civil War, anarcho-syndicalists joined the two Spanish Republican governments—the central

philosophical (and academic) aura that it did not ask for, the ontologization of anarchism defended by Malabou paradoxically led to its depoliticization—for political anarchism is indeed hardly discussed in the book. As if, ultimately, “being an anarchist” were merely a matter of words.

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Republican government and the regional government of Catalonia—as part of the “united anti-fascist front.” Much has been written about this “betrayal” of libertarian *principles*. In particular, Errico Malatesta excoriated Pierre Kropotkin and the anarchists who, in the “Manifesto of the Sixteen,” openly supported the Sacred Union, referring to them as “pro-government anarchists” (“Pro-Government Anarchists,” 1916, online).