

Dossier

The Little *objet a* of Anarchist Philosophy

Daniel Colson. (2019) *A Little Philosophical Lexicon of Anarchism From Proudhon to Deleuze* (Jesse Cohn, Trans.). New York: Minor Compositions.

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Lacanian theory maintains that the “object” of psychoanalysis is that which one is never without. Put another way, the “object” is actually not an object at all: it is the *objet petit a*, which is the cause of the subject’s desire. Lacan was fond of the following expression: “anxiety is *not without* an object.” Lacan was an anti-philosopher. As such, he has a different point of departure than Daniel Colson, the philosopher. Lacan offers us an alternative to the sort of “object” offered to us by Daniel Colson and Jesse Cohn in their little dictionary of anarchist philosophy. For Lacan, the *objet*

petit a resists symbolization. As a product of this resistance it gives rise to fantasies within the imaginary. The object therefore radically resists incorporation into the body of knowledge. This explains why the *objet a* is so important for the clinical treatment of body-events such as nervous ticks, headaches, muscle tremors, nail biting, and so on: it is a rupture within the body revealed, in a form which is devoid of any authentic knowledge or meaning, as a symptom. Colson's "object" may indeed be more comforting, but it is, for that reason, much more symptomatic.

The object for psychoanalysis is never comfortable. It is an uneasy object that can never be made use of and which inevitably repeats itself within discourse, thereby producing tremendous anxiety: "anxiety is not without an object" (Lacan, January 30th, 1963). When one confronts the object in this way it cannot but produce a certain degree of anxiety in the subject. Thus, it is not that one *has* or *makes use* of an object for diverse purposes, as the philosopher does, and it is not that one is *without* an object – as the atheist or nihilist claims (because this would imply a simple and naïve negation of the object (e.g., this is the way many anti-Lacanian commentators describe "lack") – it is not that we are simply forever in search of some object to fill out the lack-in-being. Rather, any object at hand is already in the here-and-now fundamentally lacking. Things are therefore simultaneously much more obscure and much more precise: the subject is *not without* an object because the object resists. And is this not what Max Stirner meant when in his short essay on "Art & Philosophy" he wrote: "art makes the object, and religion lives only in its many ties to that object, but philosophy very clearly [...] places its pulverizing hand upon all the business of making objects [...] and so breathes the air of *freedom*." Stirner is here articulating an "object" which may be destroyed – certainly not the object that one is never without – and yet, why? Because he was in search of an alternative to the object-making enterprises of philosophers!

Consider, for the moment, the object as defined by many of today's naïve philosophers. It is clear that here Lacan is not an atheist like Stirner and yet neither is he a philosopher: he is, as Alain Badiou put very well during his famous 1990s Lacanian seminars, an "anti-philosopher." Lacan seemed to have reduced the philosopher's discourse to the desire for mastery. The philosopher builds grand conceptual systems that appear at

once to make a pretense at having the definitive dictionary on truth. Thus, the structure of the philosopher's discourse is akin to what Lacan named "university discourse" because it locates truth not as a "half-saying" but rather as an attempt to "say it all" or "have the last word" on truth – like any dictionary. Indeed, it is from the attempt to impose a meta-language that it, like Colson's book, provides a definition even for the word "definition." No wonder the main place to go today to understand anarchist theory is none other than the university. Indeed, I, myself, have profited immensely from anarchist scholarship within the university. However, such a discourse constructs revolutionary statements only by reinventing the discourse of mastery: the anarchist who wishes to surpass the latter discourse, as all anarchists profess to do, should interrogate what within their own discourse gives rise to more ingenious forms of mastery. It is not only or exclusively an examination of so-called "micro-fascisms," so fetishized by anarchists these days, but also, and more brutally, an examination of the "micro-anarchist" affirmations which give rise, unconsciously, to new and more insidious forms of fascism.

For this reason, I became interested (after decades of anarchist work) in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan put the problem of 'revolution' in no uncertain terms: "the master's discourse has only one counterpoint, the analytic discourse." Whereas the master's discourse is structured so that it may be propelled by a single meaningless (nonsensical) signifier, the analytic discourse attempts tirelessly to dislodge the discourse of mastery by exposing it as a primordial decisional structure of discourse as such. The master discourse propels only a signifier, such as, "Definition" (see Colson, 2019: 66). In other words, the master signifier, denoted in Lacanese as S_1 , is, in this example, "Definition." The top formula of the master's discourse reads: $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$. This implies that the signifier gives rise to a response, what we denote with S_2 , typically from the subjected student/professor who does the difficult and rigorous work of coming to define the concept.

The student/professor proposes something like the following definition, for "Definition:" "[i]n libertarian thought, the definition is opposed to the concept" (Colson, 2019: 66). In place of the master discourse, the student/professor provides a system of meaning, which, by all conscious measures, attempts (inadequately) to triumph over the master signifier or

discourse. We might write this in the following way: $S2 \rightarrow a$, whereby the student, from the place of knowledge, seeks to integrate into a consistent dictionary of knowledge that which has not yet been known, *objet petit a*. It is striking, then, that Colson's definition of "Definition" is written as follows:

Whereas the concept emerges from the midst of things in order to bring to light and express *focal points* of meaning [...] the definition [...] always attempts to fix things within pre-established limits, within a reductive and oppressive order. In place of the definition, libertarian thought affirms the indefinite, the unspecified, [...] and conditions of a new world can emerge (Colson, 2019: 66).

The "focal points" of meaning are similar to S1s. Colson mistakenly understands them as "concepts," which, through their 'quilting effects,' give rise to any discourse at all (whether university, hysterical, or master). It is the indefinite object, which is almost certainly the *objet petit a*, which gets put to work for the "new world" of knowledge where $S2 \rightarrow a$. How are we to escape from this endless recuperation of the object? It is first important that we recognize that it is a structure of discourse, a discourse which repeats its structure throughout each and all of its statements, and from which, for the subject of that discourse, there is no possible escape. The analytic discourse, on the other hand, introduces an essential provocation; the analyst is neither master nor student, but exists only in the role of *objet petit a*. The analyst succeeds by embodying the *objet petit a* of the analysand's discourse and reflecting it back upon the subject.

Returning to the formula of university discourse: a line separates the conscious articulation of the discourse from its repressed or unconscious determinations. The full formula of university discourse may be written as $S2/S1 \rightarrow a/\$$. Beneath the slash – S1 and \$ -- indicate an unconscious truth and a product of the discourse, respectively. The truth of the discourse is that it is still nonetheless structured and anchored to another discourse, the master's discourse (S1). This is why, in Lacan's seminar ... *Or Worse*, he maintained, repeatedly, that every discourse only exists in relation to another discourse. Colson's definition of "Definition" – "the conditions of a new world can emerge ..." – clearly demonstrates that

the subject wants to know nothing of its unconscious determinations, it wants only to *affirm*, and to affirm a knowledge which is not at all a knowledge of the unconscious determinations of those *affirmations*. Finally, what is produced is not at all a “new world” but rather new forms of intellectual subjection, $\$$. So afraid is the university anarchist afraid of expressing this truth that he returns endlessly to the cycle which compelled his discourse in the first place: ‘post-anarchists have recuperated our ideas into the establishment of the university! They do not know what *we know* about anarchism!’ The field of ‘anarchist studies,’ therefore, strives always, and impossibly, toward a coherent organization of S_2 through appeals to *ever more inclusions, every more voices, ever more knowledges*.

This is why Jesse Cohn’s introduction to Daniel Colson’s *A Little Philosophical Lexicon of Anarchism From Proudhon to Deleuze* is perhaps the most essential and important references for understanding the discourse of contemporary anarchist studies today. Cohn praises the “translational” strategies of anarchists and invites each reader to translate in their own way the indefinite *objet a* into their own symptomatic fantasies: “[m]ay it be a useful tool [object] in your hands. May it modify you – and may you modify it” (Cohn in Colson, 2019: 18). It is an invitation to bring the *objet a* into circulation so that it might contribute to the development of ever more novel translations, and yet who is the subject of such an effort? It is the very figure Cohn and Colson wished to avoid: the “monad.” The monad, a figure with “neither doors nor windows,” gives rise to a “neo-monadological” figure who is somehow able to find a “door” or a “window” precisely by manufacturing more “objects” and “tools.” Yet these objects are not transparent, like the *objet petit a*, they are clouded in ink: consistent, accessible, translatable, orientable objects. Cohn writes:

Rather than seeking to transcend differences in the overarching unity of the ‘universal’ or to reduce all struggles to a single category (class, gender, race, ecology, etc), forces engaged in social struggles can link up with one another, [...] (Cohn in Colson, 2019: 8).

We should ask ourselves a very important question: what exactly constitutes ‘difference’? Colson’s response is unequivocal: “anarchism (from Stirner to Bakunin) affirms the absolute singularity of beings”

(Colson, 2019: 66). Colson recognizes “difference” as a multiplicity which exceeds the “police order,” and this, precisely, is reminiscent also of Jacques Ranciere’s multiplicities as “non-parts.” However, on this point, it seems to me, we have recourse to one of two very clear answers: first, we might understand by “difference” or “multiplicity” an assortment of singular “ones” or “atoms,” or, if you like, “monads.” In this case, each individual monad is a one onto itself which, through a so-called “transversal of ones” which form a multiplicity that we may properly name a “group” or “collective.” For Colson, this is the only possibility of solidarity. But there is a second possibility: “difference” might be understood in a more Badiouian way as “differences of differences” or as “multiplicities of multiplicities,” or “pure multiplicities.”

To be very clear, I share with Cohn & Colson – as well as Shawn Wilbur and a number of other critics of “post-anarchism” – an aversion to the typical and naïve solution which posits hegemonic “universalism” as the only solution for revolutionary solidarity and struggle. In this problematic account, a single concept, whether it is “class,” “gender,” or “race,” gets sole epistemological priority over any definition, S2. In other words, I agree that the “hegemonic” universality of the “concept” is not the way forward for revolution praxis, and I agree that many of the interpretations of Marxism which have forced this universality are simply inadmissible. It is even possible that this was the very point of the *split* that occurred, or, rather, *intervention*, that occurred within the International between the Marxists and the anarchists: the anarchists here took up the analytic discourse and demonstrated to the Marxists their lust for power. We might even maintain, as most anarchists do by necessity, that the state and revolutionary part can never adequately represent the interests of its people or public (e.g., its multiplicities). However, here we should be careful not to return to the naïve multiplicity of monads or ‘ones’ which animate most populist discourse today.

In any case, this does not at all mean that we need to abandon the concept of universality. Indeed, it is the anti-postanarchists who are here the true relativists or subjectivists for refusing to engage with the determinations of their discourse: neo-monadology is here only another attempt to renew the monad by drawing new walls, by locking new doors, that is, by imprisoning oneself within the prison-cell of S2s. Against

the neo-monadology of consistent multiplicities – which are, within capitalist discourse, nothing but commodities or “lathouses” – we should affirm a new revolutionary universality against the consistency of differences that make up the dictionaries of the neoliberal university. The definition will not rise up against the concept as expected because it is anchored to it, oriented by it, rotating around it like an inmate around the center of his cell. The concept should here be redefined as that which gives rise to the ‘empty form’ within any monad, within any definition, and which, precisely through this ‘empty form’ exposes not the indefiniteness of the object but rather the infinity of the real. Put another way, there is a universality that may be shared but it is not through the manufacturing of definitions and objects: it is through the sharing of lack itself.

As anarchists, then, we should affirm a new revolutionary love which takes the Lacanian axiom of castration as its affirmation: “love is giving what you do not have.” This might be counter-posed to the other infamous statement on love declared by Lacan: “love is what makes up for the lack of a relationship.” We might retranslate this in our own way as follows: (1) love is what makes up for the lack of an object, and (2) love is giving what you do not have, the sharing of lack. Cohn & Colson are here sharing with us precisely what they *have got*, an object of knowledge: they make up for the lack of an object (castration). On the other hand, the more revolutionary position: sharing what one doesn’t have is a truly beautiful declaration because it paints a picture of a lover who does not have to prove his love through objects of exchange (diamond rings, flowers, and so on), through the articulation of theories or philosophies, etc. Not at all! For the revolutionary lover it is quite the opposite, in fact: he shares precisely what he *does not have*, that is, what is impossible for him to share at all. The lover shares an impossibility, a miracle, which is itself a small revolution. It is only in this very refined sense that we can truly claim, as we so often do, that “anarchists make better lovers.”

Does this not also point us toward the proper way to translate Richard J. F. Day’s very relevant ethics of “groundless solidarity?” Day’s anarchist ethical commitment should be read from within the framework of the ‘lack of an object’ (after all, his commitment in his 2005 book *Gramsci is Dead* was to a “Lacanian anarchism”). He defined his ethics in the following way: “groundless solidarity means seeing one’s own

privilege and oppression in the context of other privileges and oppressions, as so interlinked that no particular form of inequality – be it class, race, gender, sexuality, or ability – can be postulated as *the* central axis of struggle” (Day, 2005: 18). It is not that privilege (or lack thereof) should be the guide for serious revolutionary struggle but rather that the inner universal dimension of the *objet petit a* should be at the fore. In other words, we might think seriously about the famous lyric from the Canadian anarchist punk band Propagandhi: “I recognize one form of oppression and now I recognize the rest!” It is through an understanding that within each social monad there is something missing – within its symbolic system, within its very dictionary – that we might finally fashion for ourselves a possible way forward. It is not therefore for us to find a transversality across the multiplicities but rather to find within each multiplicity a fundamental schism and to forge solidarity campaigns with those who, within each multiplicity, are exposing the determinations of the discourse.

It is only when the *objet a* is moved from the place of the ‘non-part’ (to borrow Ranciere’s terms) as that which seeks incorporation into the body of knowledge or politics, toward, finally, the *objet petit a* as the agent of the discourse itself, that we can finally transition into the revolutionary analytic discourse. But this perhaps what Cohn & Colson explicitly wish to avoid (likely because of an inability to understand or render consistent the knowledge of any Lacanian intervention). The *objet a* must be fashioned into an object of philosophy – it must be fashioned into something intelligible and consistent – so that one can avoid a much more traumatic existential encounter with it. Colson writes that “[i]n the theory of desire as lack, the encounter with the other becomes impossible” (Colson, 2019: 14). What we should notice here is that it is actually quite the opposite: in *any other* discourse, the encounter with the Other (written with a capital ‘O’ to distinguish it from the little “other”) becomes impossible! It is only through the Lacanian intervention that one might form a true universality with others based upon the “loving” axiom that one gives what one does not have. In other words, it is because Lacanian theory begins by positing a fundamental problem or obstacle in the social relation (‘mutual recognition,’ as Cohn puts it) that we can, paradoxically, finally establish an authentic and more enduring social link. This is much more promising

that beginning with the position of the *possibility* of social relations only to suddenly realize, after all of that, that there are unconscious determinations precluded any such link. Colson opts for “analogy” to solve this problem. Cohn summarizes his position:

Colson proposes the Proudhonian concept of ‘analogy’ as an alternative to the kind of reductive strategic analysis in which every form of power must ultimately be tracked back to a single source [...] (Cohn, 2019: 8).

Analogy is a strategy picked up also from Judith Butler – whose work similarly celebrates the endless sliding of S2s against the determinations of the master discourse, S1 – which attempts to find one that is “like” another, within a vast system of of consistent multiplicities. It is possible, they claim, to affirm some “like-ness,” some common ground, even while, fundamentally, avoiding the problematics of identity. But this is what we must very much not do: an identity is here nothing more than a concept, and the formulation of power discussed here presumes that the concept of identity asserts definitional power. Yet, it is because of this definitional power, within which we are all imprisoned and implicated, that we can even assert the lack or non-identity – the slippage of signifiers. Thus, there is a blind-spot here which remains unarticulated and which determines the discourse as if from behind. Alenka Zupančič points this out very well in her new book *What IS Sex?*, whereby she demonstrates that identities will never tame the *objet petit a*, and, moreover, it is because of the real disruptive force of the non-relation that identities/concepts are constructed at all.

At times it even appears as though Gilles Deleuze, Daniel Colson, and Jesse Cohn are articulated a discourse which wishes to *become* that very blindspot. They wish to be capable of doing as the master does: taking a discourse from behind (S1 stands behind S2) and providing it with determinations which it did not consciously desire. In other words, the strategy of Deleuze and Colson is here reduced to intended to become the unconscious master of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon! We have to be very careful here because if the analogy of ‘taking a discourse from behind’ doesn’t render obvious what is at stake here – that is, a certain rape analogy – then it should be nonetheless clear that we wish to do away with precisely that type of aggression within anarchist thinking.

Incidentally, in another perverse twist, is it not the case that this is what Daniel Colson aims to do with Proudhon's discourse? His is an attempt to rid Proudhon of everything despicable, everything deplorable, everything he which is in excess of Proudhon's discourse – *the objet petit a* (e.g., misogyny, racism, and so on) – and to transform or translate his discourse, from behind, into what one finally fantasizes his discourse to precisely be able. This is an inadequate attempt to tame the *objet a*. There will always be another anarchist who will claim: "Yes, but still: Proudhon was immoral." The attempt is therefore futile, and a wasted effort, and the only recourse will be further wasted efforts.

At the same time, there is another perversity (structurally speaking). Cohn recommends not to take this approach (e.g., taking a philosopher from behind) even while he proclaims that this is what the post-anarchists do: "post-anarchist" discourse is said to apply "corrective lenses" to "classical anarchism" through "French theory" (Cohn in Colson, 2019: 9). And the anti-postanarchists maintain that the post-anarchists haven't adequately understood the historical circumstances of anarchism (e.g., all of its rich ethnographic data, its references and resources, its diverse voices, and so on); in a word, it is a critique of post-anarchist theory for not engaging at the level of university discourse. Our response should be very direct: the anti-postanarchists care only about knowledge and therefore refuse fundamentally any actual experience. It is they, therefore, who are the true university scholars of the movement: the only way to include "experience" into a discourse is to recognize the important place of the *objet petit a*, an experience typically reserved for the clinic. We can see this fundamentally in Cohn's assertion that "English-language works of postanarchism [mine included, no doubt] have not been deeply informed by the historical experience of anarchism. Relying on a few key thinkers taken as anarchist counterparts to Marx and Engels, as filtered through certain dominant interpretations of those thinkers' texts, the anglophone postanarchists have too often been content to ignore a plethora of other anarchist voices (including the voices of women, non-Europeans, and anybody from the post-World War II generation [...])" (Cohn in Colson, 2019: 9).

Here, my reply should suffice to demonstrate the perversity of this very ironic formulation: 'welcome, Jesse Cohn and Daniel Colson, to the

camp of the post-anarchists!' On the one hand, it is that which you deny that you are here more fully coming having to reckon with: in the charge that the post-anarchists are too scholarly, the work of the anti-postanarchists reveals itself as even more scholarly! Here, the little dictionary on anarchist philosophy demonstrates, paradoxically, that it cannot avoid doing precisely what the post-anarchists are apparently doing (for example: the book focuses only on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Gilles Deleuze, both are French theorists, and barely even mentions Mikhail Bakunin, and other voices; it certainly does not provide any engagement with the voices of women, non-Europeans and so on, except, finally, as filtered through the ideological lenses of anarchism). I am tempted to ask what might happen if the voices of women, people of colour, refugees, and so on, were, in fact included within the volume? What we would find is that they were not all that the fantasy had cracked them up to be: what if they are voices – such as I hear from many of my close refugee and Muslim colleagues, brothers/sisters, and friends – that that critique and want to do away entirely with anarchist doctrine for being blasphemous? In other words, what if, as Freud boldly proclaimed more than a decade ago, the neighbour or other is here fundamentally a 'non-idealized' who provokes the consistency of our discourse?

The only revolution offered by Cohn & Colson is therefore full integration into university discourse, and yet this nonetheless is impossible anyway (indeed, this impossibility is what sustains the discourse, keeps it moving within its endless cycle of scholarship). It is not therefore that the post-anarchists are at fault (I am, nonetheless, an anarchist studies scholar) for working within the university, even though there is a sense in which there is a moral problem with working within the University for many anarchists. Quite the opposite: the post-anarchists are active in making interventions at the level of discourse, which, inevitably, produce very real effects in the world. This is quite different from a discourse which celebrates "an infinite capacity to interpret and reinterpret the signification of events and facts" (Judith Butler in Colson, 2019: 15), or S2 → *a*. Anarchist discourse should not today aim "to demonstrate the possible (and paradoxical) theoretical *coherence* of a movement that resolutely calls for anarchy" (Colson, 2019: 20) but rather it should go much further and be much more courageous. Beyond false

moral outrage and appeals to knowledge or historical depth, anarchist discourse today will need to find a significant way to pose a challenge to the master discourse. It remains my contention that Lacanian psychoanalysis is the only way forward.