

Constructivism and the Future *Anterior* of Radical Politics

Thomas Nail

Jotwell review: Davina Cooper

Amongst those who favor equality, there is, it might be said, a reluctance to confront its apparent norms, premises and institutional tendencies. Yet, as a discourse and governance project, it is at least arguable that equality bears (or embraces) conventions of calculation, orderliness, categorization, legitimacy (as a precondition for equality or its result), boundaries and top-down assumptions of implementation and accomplishment. Unsurprisingly, critiques of equality, particularly more anarchist ones, tend to prefer difference, freedom, anti-identity politics, an aesthetic of non-equivalence, and open-ended non-institutional action.

Nail's (2010) article, invested in building a new radical praxis, poses a way through and between these constructed polarities. While Nail doesn't address equality directly, the issues he explores are of vital importance to thinking more openly, and reflexively, about equality within the context of a radical change politics. At the heart of Thomas Nail's article is the claim that radical politics needs to rebalance its focus; the almost exhaustive interest in cataloguing and pouring over what is wrong in the present needs to be supplemented more fully with greater interest in the social renewal posed by contemporary social experiments.

Intellectually, Nail's article is grounded in (and by) post-anarchism: "the explicit conjunction between post-structuralist political philosophy and anti-authoritarian politics" (75). Two key features characterize the version of post-anarchism considered by Nail: "the critique of all forms of authoritarianism and representation"; and "the affirmation of difference" (76). This latter is clearly distinguished from the "particularistic... logic of identity politics" (Newman 2007:3). Nail draws on the work of anarchist writer Saul Newman to identify difference as infinite, and as beyond (that is uncontained, and unanchored by) norms of social ordering. But what does this conception of post-anarchism mean for the kinds of organizations post-anarchism might seek to advance? And, importantly, how might post-anarchism respond to already *existing* social innovations, such as free schools, local currency networks and community councils?

In seeking to respond to these questions, Thomas Nail draws on two intellectual strands: the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, and the political project articulated by the Zapatistas. Brought into dialogue with each other, Nail explores three key dimensions of a post-anarchist political project. The first is a multi-centered approach to political diagnosis and engagement, in which no single struggle or social contradiction (class, gender, or race) constitutes the primary a priori explanation of what's wrong or the main axis (or vanguard) of struggle. Second, is the move away from strategies based on making demands on the state or seeking representation to a do-it-yourself politics of fashioning change. Key here is the idea of prefiguration, a concept also popular within feminist politics. Nail draws on Deleuze and Guattari to argue that prefigurative transformations aim to establish a new political present within the skin of the old, a present that is shaped by the future. While the manifestations of these 'backward-running' current may not necessarily be visible now, part of the process of transformation is to also change the dominant conditions of visibility so that that which was barely perceptible (the lines of the future) can become seen. The third dimension concerns the development of participatory politics. Representational politics has been deftly criticized within anarchist and anti-state scholarship; but far less has been said about what should take its place. Drawing on Deleuze, Guattari, and Zapatistas modes of decision-making and governance, Nail briefly considers plastic, adaptive, responsive forms of organizational structure and governance.

I was drawn to this article, written in the course of Thomas Nail's PhD research, for several reasons. I particularly like the fact that Nail counters the romanticization of a call to arms – the tendency of theorists to imagine that *now* is the time when things should kick off, when global capitalism should be fought through the imaginative actions of the subaltern or multitude, utterly ignoring all the social innovations and community projects that currently exist. This article also recognizes (in ways that have become scarce in much contemporary radical thinking) that ideas about change emerge from social movements as well as from professional theorists; and it raises important questions and issues about how radical change might be imagined, including through a politics which refuses the amplification of institutional power that comes from making demands on the state, at the same time as confronting directly and innovatively the question of (differently scaled) governance.

But what does it have to say about equality? On one level, equality is presupposed as a core dimension of a radical politics, at the same time the emphasis on difference beyond gender, race and sexuality etc., and on bottom-up forms of action begs the question: what form of equality is at stake? Gender equality might mean parity between gender-encoded groups; it might also mean relinquishing gender as a meaningful category of difference, of pluralizing and multiplying gendered categories of difference; or refashioning them – so gender is only salient, for instance, as a stylization of the body or in modes of social interaction. I take from Nail's article that an openness to difference, plurality and grass-roots lateral politics suggests different approaches to gender equality will emerge and be fought over, that certain possibilities may inhere in the future, but the development of these remains unclear to date. Part of the question of what equality is to become, of course, depends on how it is inhabited – the sites which take, and are given, responsibility to introduce or claim it. Nail's article, as an exploration of post-anarchist thinking relinquishes an equality politics anchored in demands upon the state (to change or to advance equality). But post-anarchism leaves me with several questions: do state-inflected institutional structures have any legitimate part to play in undoing systemic forms of inequality, given their presence in our current social landscape? Under what conditions or in what ways can they be used to do something more than to contain, diffuse and to control equality aspirations? And if equality is a project anchored in other sites and spaces (those beyond the formal structures identified with postindustrial liberal states), how might such a project appear – can equality look altogether different from the ordered forms of categorization we associate with the state's casting of equality governance?