

**ARTICLE: A FEW THOUGHTS ON COLSON'S LEXICON****by Nathan Jun****28TH SEPTEMBER 2018**

Over the course of the past two decades, the global resurgence of anarchism and anarchist-inspired politics has inspired a renewed interest in “classical” anarchist ideas that has given rise to important (if frequently heated) debates concerning the meaning of anarchism itself. Colson’s approach is particularly interesting when considered against the backdrop of these debates. In the *Lexicon*, Colson describes the term “anarchism” as a “designation ... of the practices, ideas, movements, and organizations that identify themselves with anarchy” that is typically employed in one of two senses: first, “[a]s a freely available title, commensurate with that which it seeks to express ... [that is] at the service of all those who recognize in it the best means of designating what they feel, what they experience, and what they desire”; and second, “[a]s a classificational category in the register of the dominant order, comparable to many others (for example, ‘Christianity, Marxism, liberalism, syndicalism, feminism, etc.’) and in competition with them”.[1]

Contemporary disputes over the meaning of anarchism are almost invariably concerned with (a) identifying the general kind of which anarchism is a particular instance; or else (b) explaining what differentiates anarchism from all other instances of the same general kind.[2] In other words, they are disputes over what anarchism is a category of or, at the very least, over what distinguishes anarchism from everything else within that category. This, in turn, gives rise to a host of secondary disagreements concerning, for example, the relationship between contemporary anarchism and the anarchism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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For Colson, debates of this sort are side effects of “the classificational and identitarian register ... of the dominant order” – a register which seeks to ascribe more or less fixed identities to things by assigning them to more or less fixed categories.<sup>[3]</sup> If anarchism is classified as a political movement grounded in a particular ideology, for example, then it makes sense to define it (narrowly) in terms of the most historically prevalent features of that movement. This will not do, however, if anarchism is classified as a set of interrelated political ideas, beliefs, or sentiments that are designated as such regardless of whether and to what extent they have featured in political movements.

According to Colson, the classificational register of the dominant order tends by its very nature “to give birth to institutions locked up inside their own identities – each possessing an *interior* and an *exterior* – with their rituals of induction, their dogmas, their police and priests, their exclusions, their schisms, their anathemas and excommunications”.<sup>[4]</sup> When anarchism is understood first and foremost as a taxonomic designation within this register, it consequently runs the risk of “negating the anarchy of which it is the theoretical and organizational expression” and of “transform[ing] itself from the *direct* and *immediate* expression of *multiple* and *different* forces into an overarching entity ... analogous, in its own way, to all the great dominations (Church, Capital, State) that it claims to combat”.<sup>[5]</sup> For this reason, Colson thinks, anarchism is better understood (in accordance with the first sense of the term) as “a project that is common to a multitude of situations, to an infinity of manners of understanding, perceiving, and acting”.<sup>[6]</sup>

While this is scarcely a novel position – one finds traces of it, for example, in the “*sin adjetivos*” and synthesis traditions within classical anarchism – it is extremely significant nonetheless. If Colson is right, then arguments over the singular meaning of anarchism (and, by extension, of the relationship between contemporary anarchism and classical anarchism, anarchism and non-anarchism, etc.) are profoundly antithetical to anarchism itself. Indeed, one of the overarching aims of the *Lexicon* is to articulate an explanatory model that can adequately “characterize the multiple” without acceding to the representational and identitarian logic of the dominant order.

All of this resonates to a considerable degree with my own insistence on distinguishing between “anarchist” and “anarchistic” practices, ideas, movements, and organizations.<sup>[7]</sup> At the same time, however, the notion that the term anarchism means (or should mean) whatever those who use it *want* it to mean strikes me as extremely problematic, not least

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Lucien van der Walt rightly worries that extremely “broad church” approaches like Colson’s tend toward meaninglessness and incoherence. Where he goes wrong, in my view, is in swinging the pendulum fully in the opposite direction – a strategy which, as Colson rightly suggests, tends to come at the expense of anarchism’s “multiplicity”. For what it’s worth, my own approach – or the approach I am trying to develop, at any rate – is situated somewhere between these two extremes.

[1] Daniel Colson, *A Brief Philosophical Lexicon of Anarchism from Proudhon to Deleuze*, trans. Jesse Cohn (New York: Autonomedia, 2019), 23-24.

[2] Nathan Jun, “Anarchism and Philosophy: A Critical Introduction”, in Nathan Jun, ed., *Brill’s Companion to Anarchism and Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 2-3.

[3] Colson, *Lexicon*, 23.

[4] *Ibid.*, 24.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] See Nathan Jun, “Anarchism and Philosophy: Rethinking the Canon”, *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 79-111.