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“I am an Anarchist”: 170 years of anarchism

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August 27, 2010

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The quotes in the above article come from the forthcoming Proudhon anthology “**Property is Theft!**” This book, the most comprehensive anthology of Proudhon’s work to date, will be published in December 2010 to mark the 170th anniversary of Proudhon’s classic “**What is Property?**”

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So Proudhon and the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin had more in common than differences. Even a cursory glance at revolutionary anarchism shows the debt it has to Proudhon. Bakunin, unsurprisingly, considered his own ideas as “Proudhonism widely developed and pushed right to these, its final consequences.”

Conclusion

While Proudhon may not have been the first thinker to suggest a stateless and classless society, he was the first to call himself an anarchist and to influence a movement of that name. This is not to suggest that libertarian ideas and movements had not existed before Proudhon nor that anarchistic ideas did not develop spontaneously after 1840 but these were not a coherent, named, *theory*. Nor is it to suggest that anarchism has to be identical to Proudhon’s specific ideas and proposals, rather they have to be consistent with the main thrust of his ideas – in other words, anti-state and anti-capitalism.

Anarchists are not Proudhonists, Bakuninists, Kropotkinites, or whoever-ists. We reject the idea of calling ourselves after individuals. However, we can and do acknowledge the contributions of outstanding thinkers and activists, people who contribute to the commonwealth of ideas which is anarchism. Seen in this light, Proudhon should be (for all his faults) remembered as the person who laid the foundations of anarchism. His libertarian socialism, his critique of capitalism and the state, his federalism, advocacy of self-management and change from below, define what anarchism is.

Today, anarchists are continuing the task started in 1840: replacing capitalist statism with anti-state socialism.

In 1840, two short expressions, a mere seven words, transformed socialist politics forever. One put a name to a tendency within the working class movement: “I am an Anarchist.” The other presented a critique and a protest against inequality which still rings: “Property is Theft!”

With “**What is Property?**” Pierre-Joseph Proudhon became one of the leading socialist thinkers of the nineteenth century and the libertarian movement was born, that form of socialism based on “the denial of Government and of Property” and which did “not want the government of man by man any more than the exploitation of man by man.”

Proudhon’s ideas played a key role in the development of revolutionary anarchism in the **International Working Men’s Association** (IWMA). Their application in the Paris Commune of 1871 was praised by Marx (although he did not mention the obvious source). Michael Bakunin proclaimed that “Proudhon is the master of us all” while for Peter Kropotkin he laid “the foundations of Anarchism.” It is easy to see why, for Proudhon was the first to discuss most of the ideas we associate with anarchism: the critique of property and capitalism; critique of the state; socio-economic federalism; free association; socialisation of the means of life; decentralisation; the abolition of wage-labour by self-management; and so on.

Critique of the State

Proudhon subjected the state to withering criticism. While recognising that the state had exploitative and oppressive interests of its own, he clearly saw its role as an instrument of class rule: “Laws! We know what they are, and what they are worth! Spider webs for the rich and powerful, steel chains for the weak and poor, fishing nets in the hands of the Government.” The state protected the class system:

“In a society based on ... inequality of conditions, government, whatever it is, feudal, theocratic, bourgeois, imperial, is ... a system of insurance for the class which exploits and owns against that which is exploited and owns nothing.”

For Proudhon, the state was “the EXTERNAL constitution of the social power” by which the people delegate “its power and sovereignty” and so “does not govern itself.” Others “are charged with governing it, with managing its affairs.” Anarchists “deny government and the State, because we affirm that which the founders of States have never believed in, the personality and autonomy of the masses.” Ultimately, “the only way to organise democratic government is to abolish government.”

For Proudhon democracy could not be limited to a nation as one unit periodically picking its rulers. Its real meaning was much deeper: “politicians, whatever their colours, are insurmountably repelled by anarchy which they construe as disorder: as if democracy could be achieved other than by distribution of authority and as if the true meaning of the word ‘democracy’ was not dismissal of government.”

Given this, Proudhon did not think seizing political power could transform society. This was confirmed when he was elected to the French National Assembly in 1848: “As soon as I set foot in the parliamentary Sinai, I ceased to be in touch with the masses; because I was absorbed by my legislative work, I entirely lost sight of the current events ... One must have lived in that isolator which is called a National Assembly to realise how the men who are most completely ignorant of the state of the country are almost always those who represent it.” There was “ignorance of daily facts” and “fear of the people” (“the sickness of all those who belong to authority”) for “the people, for those in power, are the enemy.”

Thus, rather than having some idealistic opposition to the state, Proudhon viewed it as an instrument of class rule which could not

purpose were their own” flew “in face of the simplest logic” and was “a truly farcical change of costume.”

Communist-Anarchism

Proudhon’s lasting legacy is his contribution to anarchism. It is little wonder that he has been termed “the father of anarchism” for while anarchism has evolved since Proudhon’s time it still bases itself on the themes first expounded in a systematic way by the Frenchman. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anarchism without Proudhon – even if a few anarchists may wish to.

Modern, revolutionary, anarchism developed within the IWMA and reflected the federalist and self-managed vision expounded by Proudhon. It rejected his reformism and transformed his call for a “revolution from below” into a literal support for a social revolution. With reformism rejected as insufficient, the revolutionary anarchists stressed the need for what would now be termed a syndicalist approach to social change. Rather than seeing workers’ co-operatives and the “organisation of credit” as the focus for social transformation, unions, strikes and other forms of collective working class direct action and organisation were seen as the means of both fighting capitalism and replacing it. Proudhon’s dual-power strategy from 1848 was applied in the labour movement with the long term aim of smashing the state and replacing it with these organs of popular power. It also rejected Proudhon’s anti-communism in favour of going beyond abolishing wage-labour and advocating distribution according to need rather than deed as both more just and consistent (i.e., the extension of the critique of *wage-labour* into opposition to the *wages-system*). It also rejected Proudhon’s support for patriarchy in the family as inconsistent with the libertarian principles he advocated against capitalism and the state.

of free associations.” In opposition to various schemes of state socialism, Proudhon argued for a decentralised federal market socialism based on workers’ self-management of production and community self-government.

From Mutualism to Collectivism

Proudhon’s ideas developed and evolved as he thought through the implications of his previous insights. They also reflected, developed and changed with the social and political context. He influenced the developing working class movement and was influenced by it. For example, he often called his libertarian socialism “mutualism,” a term invented not by him but by the workers in Lyon in the 1830s.

This did not stop with his death in 1865. The ideas Proudhon championed continued to evolve as working class people utilised them to understand and change the world. Mutualists were instrumental in forming the IWMA in 1864 and it was in that organisation that libertarian ideas evolved from reformist to revolutionary anarchism. The debates on collective ownership in the IWMA were primarily between socialists heavily influenced by Proudhon. All sides agreed on workers associations for industry, disagreeing on the issue of collectivising land.

By 1871, the transition from reformist mutualism to revolutionary collectivism as the predominant tendency within anarchism was near complete. Then came the Paris Commune. With its ideas on decentralised federations of communes and workers’ associations, the Commune applied Proudhon’s ideas on a grand scale and, in the process, inspired generations of socialists. Sadly, this revolt has been appropriated by Marxism thanks to Marx’s passionate defence of the revolt and his and Engels systematic downplaying of its obvious Proudhonian influences. As Bakunin suggested, Marx and Engels “proclaim[ing] that [the Commune’s] programme and

be captured for social reform. The state “finds itself inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat ... The problem before the labouring classes ... consists, not in capturing, but in subduing both power and monopoly.”

Critique of Property

Proudhon’s analysis of property was seminal. The distinction he made between use rights and property rights, possession and property, laid the ground for subsequent socialist theory as well as his analysis of exploitation and his vision of socialism.

Property allowed the owner to exploit its user (“property is theft”) as well as creating oppressive social relationships between them (“property is despotism”). These are interrelated, as it is the relations of oppression that property creates which allows exploitation to happen and the appropriation of our common heritage by the few gives the rest little alternative but to agree to such domination and let the owner appropriate the fruits of their labour.

Proudhon’s genius and the power of his critique was that he took all the defences of, and apologies for, property and showed that, logically, they could be used to attack that institution. By treating them as absolute and universal as its apologists treated property itself, he showed that they undermined property. This meant that “those who do not possess today are proprietors by the same title as those who do possess; but instead of inferring therefrom that property should be shared by all, I demand, in the name of general security, its entire abolition.”

Property “violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism.” It has “perfect identity with robbery” and the worker “has sold and surrendered his liberty” to the proprietor. Anarchy was “the absence of a master, of a sovereign” while “proprietor” was “synonymous” with “sovereign” for he “im-

poses his will as law, and suffers neither contradiction nor control.” Thus “property is despotism” as “each proprietor is sovereign lord within the sphere of his property.” Freedom and property were incompatible:

“Thus, property, which should make us free, makes us prisoners. What am I saying? It degrades us, by making us servants and tyrants to one another.

“Do you know what it is to be a wage-worker? To work under a master, watchful of his prejudices even more than of his orders ... Not to have any thought of your own, to study without ceasing the thought of others, to know no stimulus except your daily bread, and the fear of losing your job!”

Property produced exploitation, which occurred in *production*. Like Marx, but long before him, Proudhon argued that workers produced more value than they received in wages:

“Whoever labours becomes a proprietor ... And when I say proprietor, I do not mean simply (as do our hypocritical economists) proprietor of his allowance, his salary, his wages, – I mean proprietor of the value he creates, and by which the master alone profits ... *The labourer retains, even after he has received his wages, a natural right in the thing he has produced.*”

Property meant “another shall perform the labour” while the proprietor “receives the product.” The boss also appropriated the additional value produced by collective effort (what Proudhon termed “collective force”). Thus 100 workers co-operating in a workplace produced more than 100 working alone and this excess was kept, like their product, by the employer who also appropriated their surplus-labour:

beliefs, its languages and its customs.” His mutualist society was fundamentally democratic:

“We have, then, not an abstract sovereignty of the people, as in the Constitution of 1793 and subsequent constitutions, or as in Rousseau’s Social Contract, but an effective sovereignty of the working, reigning, governing masses ... Indeed, how could it be otherwise if they are in charge of the whole economic system including labour, capital, credit, property and wealth?”

Rejecting *state* socialism, Proudhon proposed “a solution based on equality, – in other words, the organisation of labour, which involves the negation of political economy and the end of property.” He favoured *socialisation*, genuine common-ownership and free access. The “land is indispensable to our existence, consequently a common thing, consequently insusceptible of appropriation” and “all capital ... being the result of collective labour, is, in consequence, collective property.” Against property, Proudhon argued for a society of “possessors without masters” with self-managed workers’ associations running the economy:

“under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership ... We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers’ associations ... We want these associations to be models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.”

He later termed this the *agro-industrial federation*. Unsurprisingly, then, Bakunin talked about Proudhon’s “socialism, based on individual and collective liberty and upon the spontaneous action

tions of government; on the other, the initiative of the masses ... revolution from above is ... inevitably revolution according to the whims of the Prince, the arbitrary judgement of a minister, the fumbings of an Assembly or the violence of a club: it is a revolution of dictatorship and despotism ... Revolution on the initiative of the masses is a revolution by the concerted action of the citizens, by the experience of the workers, by the progress and diffusion of enlightenment, revolution by the means of liberty ... a revolution from below, from true democracy”

For Proudhon, “revolutionary power ... is no longer in the government or the National Assembly, it is in you. Only the people, acting directly, without intermediaries, can bring about the economic revolution.” It is this vision which was taken up and expanded upon by later libertarians.

Anarchist Society

In place of capitalism and the state, Proudhon desired *libertarian* socialism based on socio-economic federation of self-managed associations.

As in the Paris Commune, this federation’s delegates would be mandated and subject to recall by their electors: “we shall make them transmit our arguments and our documents; we shall indicate our will to them, and when we are discontented, we will revoke them ... the *mandat impératif*, permanent revocability, are the most immediate, undeniable, consequences of the electoral principle.” As in the Commune, the “legislative power is not distinguished from the executive power” and federalism ended the “unity that tends to absorb the sovereignty of the villages, cantons, and provinces, into a central authority. Leave to each its sentiments, its affections, its

“the labourer ... create[s], on top of his subsistence, a capital always greater. Under the regime of property, the surplus of labour, essentially collective, passes entirely, like the revenue, to the proprietor ... the labourer, whose share of the collective product is constantly confiscated by the entrepreneur, is always on his uppers, while the capitalist is always in profit ... political economy, that upholds and advocates that regime, is the theory of theft.”

Little wonder Rudolf Rocker argued that we find “the theory of surplus value, that grand ‘scientific discovery’ of which our Marxists are so proud of, in the writings of Proudhon.”

Self-Management and Association

Given an analysis of property that showed that it produced exploitation (“theft”) and oppression (“despotism”), the question of how to end it arises. There are two options: either abolish collective labour and return to small-scale production or find a new form of economic organisation.

The notion that Proudhon advocated the first solution is as false as it is common. He favoured the second solution: “it is necessary to destroy ... the predominance of capital over labour, to change the relations between employer and worker, to solve... the antinomy of division and that of machinery; it is necessary to ORGANISE LABOUR.” As “all labour must leave a surplus, all wages [must] be equal to product.” To achieve this the workplace must be democratic for “[b]y virtue of the principle of collective force, labourers are the equals and associates of their leaders” and to ensure “that association may be real, he who participates in it must do so” as “an active factor” with “a deliberative voice in the council” with everything “regulated in accordance with equality.” This requires free access and so all workers “straightway enjoy the rights and

prerogatives of associates and even managers” when they join a workplace.

Co-operatives ended the exploitation and oppression of wage-labour as “all positions are elective, and the by-laws subject to the approval of the members” and “the collective force, which is a product of the community, ceases to be a source of profit to a small number of managers and speculators: It becomes the property of all the workers.” Thus “industrial democracy” would replace the “hierarchical organisation” of capitalism. He denounced “the radical vice of political economy” of “affirming as a definitive state a transitory condition” the division of society into classes and looked forward to “the abolition of capitalism and of wage-labour.”

Significantly, this support for workers’ self-management was raised at the same time he proclaimed himself an anarchist. As “every industry needs ... leaders, instructors, superintendents” they “must be chosen from the labourers by the labourers themselves, and must fulfil the conditions of eligibility” for “all accumulated capital being social property, no one can be its exclusive proprietor.”

Socialism from below

While Proudhon urged a “revolution from below”, he also rejected violence and insurrection. While later anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin embraced the class struggle, including strikes, unions and revolts, Proudhon opposed such means and preferred peaceful reform. However, they shared a common vision of change from below by working class self-activity:

“Workers, labourers, men of the people, whoever you may be, the initiative of reform is yours. It is you who will accomplish that synthesis of social composition which will be the masterpiece of creation, and you alone can accomplish it.”

He urged workers to create new forms of economic organisation and to pressurise the state from outside. During the 1848 revolution he “propose[d] that a provisional committee be set up to orchestrate exchange, credit and commerce amongst the workers” and this would “liaise with similar committees” elsewhere in France. This would be “a body representative of the proletariat ..., a state within the state, in opposition to the bourgeois representatives.” He urged that “a new society be founded in the heart of the old society” by the working class for “the government can do nothing for you. But you can do everything for yourselves.” The proletariat “must emancipate itself without the help of the government.”

Given the nature of the state as a centralised, top-down structure organised to maintain class society, joining the government to achieve socialism was, for Proudhon, contradictory and unlikely to work:

“But experience testifies and philosophy demonstrates ... that any revolution, to be effective, must be spontaneous and emanate, not from the heads of the authorities but from the bowels of the people: that government is reactionary rather than revolutionary: that it could not have any expertise in revolutions, given that society, to which that secret is alone revealed, does not show itself through legislative decree but rather through the spontaneity of its manifestations: that, ultimately, the only connection between government and labour is that labour, in organising itself, has the abrogation of government as its mission.”

This suggested a bottom-up approach, socialism *from below* rather than a socialism imposed by the state:

“*From above* ... evidently signifies power; *from below* signifies the people. On the one hand we have the ac-