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# Proudhon: Neither Washington nor Richmond

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July 16, 2013

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vious and so such attacks on Proudhon fail to convince – particularly if they are generalised to *all* anarchists, as if Proudhon's opposition to strikes or his sexism were remotely applicable to the likes of Bakunin, Kropotkin or Goldman!

Dismissing a theory based on the personal failings of those who advocate only convinces the superficial. Proudhon rejected many of the assumptions of his times, yet he did not rise above all of them. Yet we can overcome the limitations of Proudhon *the man* by Proudhon *the theorist*. His errors are best addressed by applying the best of his ideas, as contemporary (Joseph Déjacque) and subsequent (Bakunin and Kropotkin) anarchists did by pointing out that he ignored his own lessons. Hence the development of the best of Proudhon's ideas into consistent egalitarianism across genders, support of strikes and unions, social ownership of both the means of production and its output (libertarian communism) and social revolution.

plete the hopes of French reactionaries and fascists by helping turn a man of the left into a man of the right.

We should be discussing more important subjects than the (recognised and lamented) limitations of specific individuals. Socialist politics is not a popularity contest and so this does not get us very far. Indeed, its only feasible purpose is to put people off political threats when you consider your own ideas weak in comparison. Simply put, if you do not feel confident of winning the argument once people are familiar with the ideas in question then the best thing to do is ensure that no one reads them.

The problem with Proudhon is that for all his great insights and analysis, he also made some glaringly stupid comments and mistakes. He simply did not, for example, see the *very* obvious contradiction in his egalitarian and libertarian ideas and his defence of patriarchy and his (occasion) racist comment. He was all too often a “man of his times” and used language which in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries would simply not be tolerated. Thus the use of terms of “inferior” and “superior” in relation to races, terms which can be quoted out of context to give a radically false impression of his ideas.

This, sadly, was precisely what Schapiro and Draper did while ignoring how Proudhon repeatedly proclaimed equality of races and civil rights for all, regardless of colour and race, in his published works. That quotes like these were ignored by the far-right writers who sought to appropriate Proudhon goes without saying, but why should anarchists? Particularly as they are in published texts and, as such, had influence – unlike a single private rant and a few passing anti-Semitic comments.

The likes of Proudhon, Bakunin, Marx and Engels were people of their times and so it is unsurprising that certain of their opinions shock and disgust us. The question is, are these views at the core of their politics or do they reflect personal bigotries in contradiction with them? In all four cases, the answer is ob-

“every individual is a child of his time” (Hegel)

The British anarchist Albert Meltzer once noted that since Marxists find it hard to critique anarchism, they usually attack anarchists. In the case of the earliest anarchist thinkers, Proudhon and Bakunin, this is often easy to do as they were not consistently libertarian in their views.

Kropotkin, infamously, supported the allies during the First World War, Bakunin and Proudhon uttered various racist remarks while Proudhon’s sexism and defence of patriarchy is simply atrocious. From this the conclusion is drawn that anarchism *itself* is suspect and awkward facts such that Kropotkin was very much in the minority while both Proudhon and Bakunin explicitly argued for racial equality are ignored.

So by concentrating on these (non-libertarian) aspects of their ideas and personalities the malicious can pain a radically false impression of what they stood for as well as their legacy. They are aided by two factors.

First, that there has been little of the relevant work is available in English. Whether it is Proudhon, Bakunin or Kropotkin the bulk of their writings have never been translated and, as a result, it makes it harder (but not impossible) to fact check and draw upon other material to present a truer picture.

Second, these subjects (racism and sexism, in particular) are unpleasant and few people like to dwell upon them – particularly with people whose contributions to anarchism are so significant. There is a tendency to idolise those who added so much to a movement and anything which reminds us that they are merely human and so, like us, able to make mistakes and say stupid things is often avoided. This is the case in all movements, including Marxism. Marxists, while having the added problem of being named after an individual, have had an advantage that anarchists are, rightly, unwilling to focus on personal failings of individual Marxist thinkers in favour of more

substantial critiques (like whether their politics would produce a free society).

As such, it behoves anarchists to look at the likes of Proudhon in all their aspects, including those which are at odds with the other ideas they expounded so well. For if we do not do so, then those seeking to attack anarchism will do so – and they have, repeatedly. That such attacks paint a radically false impression of the ideas of these thinkers should go without saying but, sadly, they have an impact far wider than the poverty of their argument and evidence merit.

This can best be seen from Proudhon who has been subject to much selective quoting. Indeed, his treatment shows that including references does not ensure an accurate account of someone's ideas is produced. We will show this by discussing a hitherto un-translated chapter entitled "Slavery and the Proletariat" from Proudhon's classic 1863 work *The Federative Principle*<sup>1</sup> on slavery in America as this shows Proudhon at his best, as an advocate of equality between races as a necessary part of equality between individuals.<sup>2</sup> This, as will be shown, is in stark contrast to some of the received wisdom about the French anarchist.

## Proudhon: Warts and All

In an article about Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* on the webpage of the *International Socialist Organisation*, Todd Chretien<sup>3</sup> states that "Proudhon openly supported patriarchal fam-

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<sup>1</sup> "L'esclavage et le prolétariat.", Third Part, Chapter IX, *Oeuvres Complètes* [Lacroix edition] 8: 227–34. Translated by Ian Harvey and available in full at: [anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)

<sup>2</sup> Special thanks to Ian Harvey for taking the time to translate this chapter, not to mention his contributions to *Property is Theft!* which ensured this anthology is as comprehensive as it is.

<sup>3</sup> "The poverty of Proudhon's anarchism", 9<sup>th</sup> May 2013, [socialist-worker.org](http://socialist-worker.org)

## In Conclusion

The translator of Rosdolsky's work quotes a letter from one British Marxist asking for it not to be translated as it would "create confusion in the anti-imperialist movement" and be "used by the opportunists to attack Marx-Engels." This position, the translator notes, was "distressingly prevalent on the English-speaking left."<sup>4</sup> Anarchists can do better and follow in Rosdolsky's footsteps especially since Proudhon's actual legacy on race (as expressed in *The Federative Principle* and elsewhere) is not represented by a single, private, never repeated rant written in December 1847, a rant usually quoted without indicating its source.

This does not mean that Proudhon (any more than Bakunin) was a paragon of anarchist consistency but rather was a person rooted in a specific historical context, a human being like any other with all the contradictions, complexities and confusions that that implies. They made comments which were reflective of the wider culture they grew up and lived within) and which could not reflect what happened 100 years later nor the scientific developments we now take for granted.

While we may wish great thinkers to be better than us, the fact is that they share our limitations and, as such, never totally live up to the ideals they express at their best. Thus Proudhon argued publicly for racial equality and when so doing did not make an exception for Jews yet this was combined with personal bigotries which were sometimes expressed in print (more so in his correspondence). Proudhon did not attempt to explain this inconsistency (much like Bakunin who did the same).

That the worse of Proudhon's sexism and racism came to light after his death does little to mitigate their stupidity yet Proudhon, in spite of his many limitations (sexism, racism, reformism, opposition to strikes), deserves better than the likes of Schapiro and Draper. They should not be allowed to com-

marks by Marx and Engels as well as their siding with slave states against abolitionist ones and calls for national hatred and the annihilation of whole peoples. Strangely, most Marxists (rightly) condemning Proudhon for his bigotries are silent about this.

To state the obvious, Marx and Engels “had exactly the same position vis-à-vis the Jews” and “both of them shared their antipathy to the Jews with very many other socialists of the past (including, to mention only a few, Fourier, Proudhon and Bakunin).”(197) However, as Rosdolsky suggests, it was “only after the Dreyfus case [in the 1890s] was the peril of anti-Semitism recognised in all its magnitude and unequivocally opposed” (201) and so we should not inflict views shaped by events and developments in culture and science that occurred after Proudhon, Marx and Engels died upon them. To ignore this obvious point for anarchist thinkers while assuming it for Marx and Engels, as many Marxists do, seems hypocritical.

So this sort of approach is of little use. For example, Tristram Hunt raises “the rather ahistoric question as to whether Engels was a racist” and notes that in “his elemental outbursts... there are palpably racist inclinations”: “Like many in his milieu, he certainly thought western Europeans were more civilised, advanced and cultured than Africans, Slavs, Arabs and the slaves of the American South.” (*The frock-coated communist: the revolutionary life of Friedrich Engels* [London: Allen Lane, 2009], 262–3) Few sensible people who dismiss Marxism simply on these grounds particularly, as Rosdolsky suggests, “it is very easy to put three-quarters of the thinkers, writers and politicians of the past into the camp of anti-Semitism.” In terms of Marxist theory, the idea of “non-historic” peoples “stood in contraction to the *materialist conception of history*” and “smacks of metaphysics” while it “explains absolutely nothing.” (197, 128) That Proudhon’s (few) racist comments are equally in contradiction with anarchism should go without saying but, sadly, such common sense seems lost on a quite a few Marxists.

ily forms<sup>4</sup> and held stridently anti-Semitic views, writing, for example, “The Jew is the enemy of humankind. They must be sent back to Asia or be exterminated. By steel or by fire or by expulsion the Jew must disappear.”

Given that Marx’s book was written in response to Proudhon’s *System of Economic Contradictions*, the uninformed reader may think that Chretien was quoting that work. This is not the case. While Chretien is right that these “certainly are despicable views” it is simply distortion to state “they are not what made Proudhon popular, nor are they the views he most openly popularised.” This is because this was never “openly popularised” but rather a single, never repeated, rant in his private notebooks from 1847 unknown to the wider public until the 1960s.

Hal Draper, whose hatred of anarchism bordered on the pathological, also transformed this one-off private rant into a core part of Proudhon’s ideas by asserting that he “advocated a pure-and-simple Hitlerite extermination of the Jews” as well as “a program of government persecution of Jews in mass pogroms as well as political extermination.” (*Socialism from Below* [Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1992], 193)

The intellectual dishonesty of this should be clear and, unsurprisingly, neither of them prove that this was anything more than a passing rant. Significantly, no attempt is made to show that Proudhon held this view before 1847 or after, either publicly or privately. In terms of the former, it is the case that Proudhon’s anti-Semitism is limited to a few passing Jewish stereotypes (which, sadly, reflected French culture at the time)

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<sup>4</sup> Chretien is right to point to Proudhon’s anti-feminism and defence of patriarchy as being lamentable aspects of his ideas yet he fails to note Proudhon was expressing the traditional patriarchal views of most of the French working class, the class he was part of. Nor does he mention that Marx did not consider that Proudhon patriarchal views worthy of public criticism (which is important to note if you wish to play the “my dead thinker is nicer than yours” card).

in a few of his minor articles and books. A reader consulting his most important works would not come across a single anti-Semitic remark and many proclamations in favour of racial equality. To quote one of his most famous and most constructive works (*General Idea of the Revolution*):

“There will no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland, in the political sense of the words: they will mean only places of birth. Whatever a man’s race or colour, he is really a native of the universe; he has citizen’s rights everywhere.” (*Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* [Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011], 597)

There is a tendency to assume, at least implicitly, that a thinker does not change their opinions nor raise and discard ideas. This seems the case with Marxists, where the idolisation of Marx has produced a tendency of implicit assumption that their *Collected Works* can be quoted regardless of when the texts were written, as if it were the case that everything essential was contained in, say, *The Poverty of Philosophy* or *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* and the rest is just an extended footnote.

The same can be said of Proudhon and so it does not escape the realms of possibility that in December 1847 something caused Proudhon’s (culturally reflective, but still inexcusable) anti-Semitic feelings to intensify so resulting in this rant. Significantly, Proudhon’s beloved mother died that very month so suggesting that it reflected an outlet for the deep despair he must have been feeling. Given that he never expressed this view before 1847 nor afterwards it rant should be considered as a quickly forgotten aberration produced by the pressures of a family crisis rather than indicative of his politics.

Given that Leninists habitually quote this passage without indicating that this was a solitary private rant not typical of

ily guess which movement’s papers they would have appeared in.<sup>11</sup>

Ignoring the genocidal ethnic cleansing proclaimed against the Slavs (bar Poles) and other “nonhistoric” people, Engels wrote of the war which “broke out over Texas” between Mexico and the USA and how it was good that “that magnificent California was snatched from the lazy Mexicans, who did not know what to do with it” by “the energetic Yankees.” (quoted, 159) He failed to mention that the revolt of 1836 over Texas which was the root of the 1846 war was conducted by “*planters, owners of Negro slaves*, and their main reason for revolting was that *slavery had been abolished in Mexico in 1829*.” (160) In fact in 1845 a majority of voters in the Republic of Texas approved a proposed constitution that specifically endorsed slavery and the slave trade and was later accepted by the U.S. Congress. Unlike Engels, Northern abolitionists attacked this war as an attempt by slave-owners to strengthen the grip of slavery and ensure their influence in the federal government and publicly declared their wish for the defeat of the American forces. Henry David Thoreau was jailed for his refusal to pay taxes to support the war and penned his famous essay *Civil Disobedience*. (Zinn, 155–7)

Rosdolsky rightly comments on how “inappropriate, in fact perverse, was Engels’ illustration.” (160)

So we find distinct parallels between the standard Marxist critique of Proudhon and the many racist and anti-Semitic re-

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<sup>11</sup> Although we must not forget the “Schlageter Line” of the German Communist Party in 1923 that involved co-operation with fascist groups under the slogan “national Bolshevism.” Joint meetings were held and continued until “the Nazis leadership placed a ban on further co-operation.” (E.H. Carr, *The Interregnum 1923–1924* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969], 183) In the early 1920s the USSR under Lenin recognised Mussolini’s fascist regime and entered into trade agreements with it. The USSR also entered into an agreement with the German state to supply weapons, prompting the council communists to wonder how many communists shot during the 1923 putsch were killed by Soviet supplied weapons.



to be exterminated” (quoted 90) Rosdolsky’s comments show the limitation of Leninist ideology:

“What Engels really wished to make ‘disappear from the face of the earth’ were the Slavic *national movements*, the political parties... and their leadership; it was against these that ‘ruthless terrorism’ had to be applied. The peoples themselves, the masses of their population, would be subjected by the victorious ‘revolutionary nations’ to a (not altogether peaceful) Germanisation” (86)

While Rosdolsky quotes the Russian proverb “You can’t leave out one word from a song” he decides to add a few. Engels is very clear and he writes of peoples and nations, *not* parties or movements. He did not call for a war between *classes* but between *peoples*. Thus it was Slavs *as such* and Jews *as such* which were counter-revolutionary by nature and had to be repressed (by means up to and including genocide). Rather than explain the actions of (a part of) these peoples by their class position or the class dynamics of the revolution, Engels explained them in terms of their nature. If the actions of these “nonhistoric” peoples is explained in this manner then there is little option than to conclude, like Marx and Engels, that these peoples had to be wiped out down “to their very names” or thrown “back into their ghetto.”

Regardless of what drove these rants, as Rosdolsky rightly states “it no way nullifies the fact that they made *entire peoples* the object of this hatred and proclaimed a ‘war of annihilation’ against them.” (87) If these anti-Semitic reports and articles about civilising or wiping out the Slavs had been published between 1918 and 1939 rather than in 1848–9 we could eas-

his public writings, the question arises why do they do this? Perhaps the answer can be derived from a comment by Lenin who, in May 1907, defended himself for the rhetoric he used against a group of Mensheviks:

“The wording is calculated to evoke in the reader hatred, aversion and contempt... Such wording is calculated not to convince, but to break up the ranks of the opponent... to destroy him... to evoke the worse thoughts, the worst suspicions about the opponent.” (*Collected Works* 12: 424–5)

The wording of Draper and Chretien reflects thus the “struggle to *destroy* the hostile organisation, destroy its influence over the masses of the proletariat.”<sup>5</sup> (*Collected Works* 12: 427) The “worse suspicions” and “worse thoughts” are produced and so potential recruits are insulated from ideas which may present a more consistent (if not always consistently *applied* by Proudhon and Bakunin) socialist alternative to the state capitalism of Leninism.

Quoting a single rant from his private notebook presents a false impression of Proudhon’s ideas on race. Worse, by not indicating where this text comes from it suggests a false context. To suggest that a never repeated comment made in a private notebook and completely unknown until over a century later was part of his public work or a central aspect of Proudhon’s ideas presents a completely false impression of both them and their influence – particularly given his discussion of race in *The Federative Principle*.

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<sup>5</sup> Lenin’s aim was “to wage an *immediate* and merciless war of extermination” (*Collected Works* 12: 427) against opponents, although obviously in 1907 this was considered as a battle of ideas. Sadly, when the Bolsheviks seized power this soon became a literal war which, by 1921, was effectively a “merciless war of extermination” against all non-Bolshevik parties and groups.

## J. Salwyn Schapiro, Harbinger of Confusion

The key work in trying to present Proudhon as a fascist was American professor J. Salwyn Schapiro and his 1945 article “Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Harbinger of Fascism” (*The American Historical Review* 50: 4). This was subsequently referred to by Draper in his pamphlet “Socialism from Below”<sup>6</sup> and from there repeated by Leninists to this day. Sadly for Leninists Schapiro’s work is seriously flawed, attributing to Proudhon numerous ideas that he explicitly opposed. This can be seen from Schapiro’s account of Proudhon’s views on race.

First, what is his thesis? That there are “sinister overtones that haunt” Proudhon’s work and in “the powerful polemist of the mid-nineteenth century it is now possible to discern a harbinger of the great world evil of fascism.” (717) This is the worse kind of anachronism, seeking to (re-)define Proudhon in terms of an ideology that did not come into existence until 70 years after his death. A movement, in fact, which would never have appeared if Proudhon’s mutualism had been successful as the erosion of the state and capitalism Proudhon wanted would have removed the soil upon which fascism grew.

Even Schapiro had to admit to some difficulties in his case, such as the awkward fact that Proudhon’s “teachings [were] misunderstood as anarchy by his disciples” (737) and that there was “no hint of the totalitarian corporative state in Proudhon’s writings” as the “economic condition of France, in his day, was such that a totalitarian state of the fascist type was inconceivable.” (736) Apparently Proudhon conceived of something (a fascist regime) which was also “inconceivable”!

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<sup>6</sup> It should be stressed that Proudhon was the first socialist to argue the importance of social change “from below” against reform “from above”, which means that Draper smears Proudhon while appropriating his terminology. (*Property is Theft!*, 205, 398)

John-Paul Himka, the translator of Rosdolsky’s work, noted this newspaper contained “some embarrassing statements made by Marx and, above all, Engels with regards to East European peoples” and “had characterised most of the Slavic people... as nonhistoric, counter-revolutionary by nature and doomed to extinction. The statements, moreover, were saturated with insulting epithets... and ominous-sounding threats... Such sentiments had a particularly nasty ring in the immediate postwar years, in the wake of Nazi brutality in Eastern Europe...” (1)

Thus we find Engels’ asserting that the Slavs have been “forced to attain the first stage of civilisation only by means of a foreign yoke, are not viable and will never be able to achieve any kind of independence” and that the conquered should be grateful to the Germans for “having given themselves the trouble of civilizing the stubborn Czechs and Slovenes, and introducing among them trade, industry, a tolerable degree of agriculture, and culture!” (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 8: 238)

Worse, Engels proclaimed that “one day we shall *take a bloody revenge on the Slavs* for this cowardly and base betrayal of the revolution” and “hatred of the Russians was, and still is, the first revolutionary passion of the Germans”. The revolution could only be secured “against these Slavs peoples by the most decisive acts of terrorism” and “*a war of annihilation and ruthless terrorism*, not in the interests of Germany but in the interests of the revolution!” There would be “*a bloody revenge in the Slav barbarians*” and a war which will “*annihilate all these small pig-headed nations even to their very names*” and “will not only cause reactionary classes and dynasties to *disappear from the face of the earth*, but also *entire reactionary peoples*. And that too is an advance.” (quoted, 85, 86)

In short, Engels advocated ethnic cleansing in the name of the revolution against those whom he considered “nonhistoric” peoples. This was recognised by leading Marxist Karl Kautsky who, rightly, denounced Engels for advocating that “they had

We cannot hope to do justice to the numerous bigotries of Marx and Engels here<sup>9</sup> and so we will concentrate on what Draper would label “Hitlerite” if Proudhon had suggested it – what Engels termed “nonhistoric” peoples (usually the Slavs) as well as Jews. We will draw upon Roman Rosdolsky’s important work “Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ Peoples: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848.” (*Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, No. 18/19)

Unsurprisingly, given the times, Marx and Engels made numerous anti-Semitic remarks both in private and public. During the 1848 revolution, the paper Marx edited (*Neue Rheinische Zeitung*) published the reports of Müller-Telling who expressed “an all too maniacal hatred” of Jews (193). Engels wrote “very unpleasant passages on the (Polish) Jews” (116), describing them as “the very incarnation of haggling, avarice and sordidness” and the meanest of all races” with “its lust for profit.” The Austrian Jews had “*exploited the revolution* and are now being punished for it” while “anyone who knows how powerful” they were. He generalised by suggesting that “Jews are known to be cheated cheats everywhere” and, according to Marx, they had put themselves “at the *head of the counter-revolution*” and so the revolution had “to throw them back into their ghetto.” (quoted 192, 203,196)

Marx’s paper “did not dissociate itself from the anti-Semitic ‘popular opinion’”<sup>10</sup> (201) and its articles resulted in some of its backers who were Jewish to demand the return of their money as it preached “religious hatred.” (191)

Yet the despicable attitude expressed against Jews in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* is the least of the issues of concern here. As

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Fryer’s “Engels: A Man of His Time” in John Lea and Geoff Pilling (eds.), *The condition of Britain: Essays on Frederick Engels* (London: Pluto Press, 1996) can be consulted for those interested in such matters.

<sup>10</sup> A few years earlier Engels had suggests that the “success” of a crude anti-Semitic text entitled *Rothschild I. King of the Jews* “shows how much this was an attack in the right direction.” (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 6: 62–3)

Schapiro exaggerates Proudhon’s anti-Semitism to lay the ground for his assertion that Proudhon exposed “racialism” and “its division of mankind into creative and sterile races” which “led Proudhon to regard the Negro as the lowest in the racial hierarchy.” (729) Significantly Schapiro makes no attempt to prove this claim by anything as trivial as evidence. His sole attempt to do so was as follows:

“During the American Civil War he favoured the South, which, he insisted, was not entirely wrong in maintaining slavery. The Negroes, according to Proudhon, were an inferior race, an example of the existence of inequality among the races of mankind. Not those who desired to emancipate them were the true friends of the Negroes but those ‘who wish to keep them in servitude, yea to exploit them, but nevertheless to assure them of a livelihood, to raise their standard gradually through labour, and to increase their numbers through marriage.’ (729)

Schapiro fails to note that *War and Peace* was not written during the American Civil War. It was finished and presented to the publishers on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1860 and finally appeared in print on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1861 (George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* [Montréal: Black Rose, 1987], 233). The American Civil War started on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1861 and the North made abolition of slavery a war goal in 1862 (the following year saw President Lincoln issue the Emancipation Proclamation). So Proudhon’s comment in *War and Peace* was not related to the American Civil War although it reflected the tensions of the period and the possibility of war. In order to discuss Proudhon’s ideas on race *during* the Civil War as Schapiro claims he is doing we need to turn to 1863’s *The Federative Principle*, a work which he ignores – for good reason, as we will see.

What of the work he does quote from, *War and Peace*? Nowhere does Proudhon proclaim “the Negro as the lowest in the racial hierarchy” and while he notes “the existence of inequality among the races of mankind” he does not mention a “division of mankind into creative and sterile races.” This inequality of races is reflecting what Proudhon considers as marking his world but this does not mean, as Schapiro is keen to suggest, that he was happy with it. This can be seen, ironically, from Proudhon’s talk of “inferior” and “superior” races which he clearly does not consider as unchangeable and so argues that “a superior race” has to “raise” the so-called “inferior” races “up to our level.” Which means that “superior” and “inferior” was not considered as intrinsic (if it were then this levelling of races would be impossible) but rather a product of history – and just as economic inequalities could be ended, so could the racial ones (particularly given that he used the word “race” very loosely, talking, for example, of “the English race”). He was also very clear on who he was arguing against, namely those who would free the slaves by “making them perish in the desolation of the proletariat.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* [Lacroix edition] 13: 223) We will return to this point as it is an important part of Proudhon’s argument.

There is much about Proudhon’s arguments that are patronising and plain wrong. Sadly, it very much reflected the period and many on the left expressed similar viewpoints. Marx, for example, in the early 1850s argued that slavery in Jamaica had been marked by “freshly imported BARBARIANS” in contrast to the United States where “the present generation of Negroes” was “a native product, more or less Yankeeified” and “hence *capable of being emancipated*.” (*Collected Works* 39: 346) The many comments by Marx and Engels on the progressive role of imperialism in replacing traditional societies (habitually labelled as “savages” and “barbarians”) by capitalist social

(*Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984], 234)

If Proudhon did attack the Jacobin tradition and Rousseau as well as state socialism it was for different reasons and ends than the reactionaries. This does not mean we should glibly ignore his racism or sexism, far from it, but we need to put them into context. Proudhon’s private correspondence reflects his personal bigotries far more than his public writings however to trawl through these letters and private notebooks for the rare stupid and repulsive quote will do little more than distort his ideas and his influence. Indeed, by this method the most unlikely of people can be made to look to fascists – most obviously, Marx and Engels.

## **Marx and Engels, Harbingers of Fascism?**

First, it must be stressed that in no way is it being suggested that Marx and Engels were precursors of Nazism. Rather, we are using them to show how dishonest the selective quoting of the likes of Draper is by using an example closer to home than Proudhon.

Doing so shows the all too obvious weakness of this approach. As we will show, it is extremely easy to find equally racist remarks from both Marx and Engels towards numerous peoples but reprehensible as these are, no sensible person would suggest that Marxism should be abandoned as a result. That many of their opinions reflected the assumptions of their time and, like Proudhon, they often failed to rise above them is no basis to dismiss their contributions to socialism or the main thrust of their politics.

quote selectively or out of context.<sup>8</sup> His thesis would only be plausible if you were unfamiliar with Proudhon's writings and, thanks to the rhetoric used, it ensures that you would remain so and so his distortions remain unknown. His task is aided by there being little of Proudhon's voluminous writings translated into English (the first comprehensive anthology, *Property is Theft!*, only appeared in 2011).

This shows the importance of returning to the original texts and not relying upon summaries, particularly from critics. So, for example, those who read Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* probably think that Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* was presenting a fully worked out "system" in the same manner as the Utopian socialists. The reality is radically different: the "system" the book discusses is the *capitalist* system and its numerous contradictions (which could only be resolved by transcending it). There are a few passages which do present aspects of what a free society would be like but this minor aspect of a work whose focus is a critique of capitalism along with criticisms of those socialists who rejected this kind of analysis in favour of presenting detailed visions of future communities, whom he rightly labelled as Utopian long before Marx did.

Anarchists need to look at our history, warts and all, for if we do not then others will. As such, "Slavery and the Proletariat" from *The Federative Principle* is of interest for anarchists because it helps combat the false impressions about Proudhon's ideas by showing his position on race and his anti-capitalism. It confirms K. Steven Vincent's summary that "to argue that Proudhon was a proto-fascist suggests that one has never looked seriously at Proudhon's writings."

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<sup>8</sup> The French reactionaries admitted as much: "the royalists saw Proudhon as their passport into nonroyalist territory... [their] interest in Proudhon was to be very selective... they knew what they were looking for and passed over anything else... Proudhon... was seen primarily as a bridge to the Left." (Paul Mazgaj, *The Action Française and Revolutionary Syndicalism* [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979], 176)

relationships are also relevant in this context.<sup>7</sup> Thus Proudhon reflected the ideas of his time with regards to race and like many nineteenth century radicals considered Western Europe as a "superior" civilisation that other peoples/races ("inferior") should follow. So, in and of itself, this reference does not prove what Schapiro wishes it to.

Significantly, Schapiro fails to discuss Proudhon's arguments in *The Federative Principle* which was (unlike *War and Peace*) written during the American Civil War and included a whole chapter on the issue of slavery and race ("Slavery and the Proletariat"). However, reading that chapter explains why – it sheds considerably more light on Proudhon's opinions on race than does *War and Peace* and shows that he was not the racist Schapiro seeks to present him as. A more accurate account of Proudhon's position on the American Civil War is given by Ralph Nelson:

"But it would be naive to think that it is just the peculiar institution of slavery that Proudhon detests. He finds in the North also the principle of inequality and class distinction. If he is critical of both sides in the war, it is because the federative principle is incompatible with inequality, whether the agrarian variety of master and slave or the modern version of capital and labour ...

"Proudhon didn't really believe that the Union side would emancipate the Negro, but would fix on deportation as the solution to the problem. The

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<sup>7</sup> Thus, for example, Marx proclaimed that the British were a "superior civilisation" to "Hindoo civilisation" and "India has no history at all." The mission of British imperialism was "the annihilation of Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia." (*Karl Marx on colonialism and modernization: his despatches and other writings on China, India, Mexico, the Middle East and North Africa* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969], Shlomo Avineri (ed.), 231–3)

union could be saved only by the liberation of the Negroes, granting them full citizenship, and by a determination to stop the growth of the proletariat. For what is gained for the former slaves, if emancipation means that they will become members of the proletariat? He notes that the situation in Russia after the emancipation of the serfs (1861) is analogous. Liberated serfs without land would be helpless. Economic guarantees must be developed alongside political ones. The corollaries of equality before the law are racial equality, equality of condition, and an approach toward equality of fortunes." (Ralph Nelson, "The Federal Idea in French Political Thought", *Publius* 5: 3, 41)

As Proudhon argued in Part One of *The Federative Principle*, "can a State with slaves belong to a confederation? It seems not, no more than an absolutist State: the enslaving of one part of the nation is the very negation of the federative principle." Thus "a better application of the principles of the pact" would be "progressively raising the Black peoples' condition to the level of the Whites." However, the North "cares no more than the South about a true emancipation, which renders the difficulty insoluble even by war and threatens to destroy the confederation." (*Property is Theft!*, 698–9) Here we see the same "levelling" arguments from *War and Peace*. In Part Three he is more explicit and argued for full equality between blacks and whites. To quote one of many relevant passages:

"To save the Union, two things were necessary through common accord and energetic will: 1) free the blacks and give them civil rights, of which the northern states only granted half and the southern states did not want to grant at all; 2)

of radical economic reform, whose last sentence was "HUMANITY DOES NOT WANT ANY MORE WAR" (*Oeuvres Complètes* 14: 330), into a work which proclaimed that "war was not a social evil that would be eradicated in the course of human progress"? (730)

This is a common aspect of Schapiro's article. On almost every point he attributes to Proudhon ideas the Frenchman repeatedly rejects, usually in the very books Schapiro references. He proclaims that Proudhon expressed nothing but "hatred of socialism" (732) yet while the Frenchman attacked specific forms of socialism (*state socialism*) he repeatedly proclaimed himself and his ideas socialist as "socialism... is the Revolution." We discover how Proudhon "welcomed the constitution of the Second Empire that established the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon" (727) in a book which was written *before* its creation. And best not ponder too hard how a book in which Proudhon stated he was "opposed to dictatorship and any type of *coup d'État*" and was "repelled by dictatorship," considering it "a theocratic and barbarous institution, in every case a menace to liberty," for the Revolution had to be "both democratic and social" and so having "defended universal suffrage," he did "not ask that it be repressed" but rather "that it be organised, and that it lives" (*December 2, 1851: Contemporary Writings on the coup d'état of Louis Napoleon* [Garden City, N.J.; Doubleday, 1972], John B. Halsted (ed.), 300, 276, 283, 289, 261) also saw him, according to Schapiro, "[f]orcefully and repeatedly" drive home "the idea that a social revolution could be accomplished only through the dictatorship of one man" and advocate "personal dictatorship"! (727, 732)

So much for Proudhon "the passionate hater of democracy and of socialism" who "first sounded the fascist note of a *revolutionary* repudiation of democracy and of socialism." (731, 734)

This explains why there are so few direct quotes from Proudhon's books in Schapiro's article. Schapiro did what the fascists did – trawl through Proudhon's works to find a few words to

racy”) to replace wage-labour from *What is Property?* in 1840 to his death 25 years later. (*Property is Theft!*, 610, 119, 744–53) This is particularly ironic as Proudhon’s position on the American Civil War was driven by his opposition to wage-labour and so opposition to *industrial* rather than just financial capital. Nor does Schapiro present the necessary historical context to show that Proudhon directed his fire against a specific *form* of democracy (the centralised and statist form advocated by the Jacobins and their followers on the French left) rather than all forms of it. Unsurprisingly, he completely ignores Proudhon’s many arguments for decentralised, federal and industrial forms of democracy, for example:

“Unless democracy is a fraud, and the sovereignty of the People a joke, it must be admitted that each citizen in the sphere of his industry, each municipal, district or provincial council within its own territory, is the only natural and legitimate representative of the Sovereign, and that therefore each locality should act directly and by itself in administering the interests which it includes, and should exercise full sovereignty in relation to them.” (*Property is Theft!*, 595)

And:

“Besides universal suffrage and as a consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the imperative mandate [*mandat impératif*]. Politicians balk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, does not appoint mandatories but rather abjure their sovereignty!... That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy.” (*Property is Theft!*, 379)

But what can you expect from someone who turns a book (*War and Peace*) written to understand and end war by means

energetically resist the growing [size of the] proletariat, which entered into no one’s perspective.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* [Lacroix edition] 8: 228)

It is hard to square this advocacy of racial equality rights with Schapiro’s thesis and, unsurprisingly, he does not mention it.

It must also be noted that many European and North American thinkers espoused some version of “racial equality” while also advocating racist beliefs. Moreover, many (white) abolitionists also held racist views with some arguing that once slavery was abolished the freed slaves should be expelled from the United States because they were an “inferior” race. This can be seen from Lincoln himself for while being opposed to slavery also proclaimed in a debate at Charleston in September 1858 that he had “not, nor ever have been, in favour of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races” nor “of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people.” If the two races did “remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favour of having the superior position assigned to the white race.” (quoted by Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* [New York: HarperCollins Books, 2003], 188) Lincoln “could not see blacks as equals, so a constant theme in his approach was to free the slaves and to send them back to Africa.” (Zinn, 188)

Given Proudhon’s critiques it seems likely that his words were addressed against Lincoln as representative of dominant anti-slavery perspective in America. It is therefore ironic, in the light of Schapiro’s claims, to read Proudhon dismissing these (racist) positions in *The Federative Principle*. “If Mr. Lincoln teaches his compatriots to overcome their revulsion,” he argued “grants the blacks their civil rights and also declares a war on [what creates] the proletariat, the union will be

saved.” He stressed “with regard to *black workers*, that physiologists and ethnographers recognise them as part of the same species as whites; that religion declares them, along with the whites, the children of God and the church, redeemed by the blood of the same Christ and therefore spiritual brothers; that psychology sees no difference between the constitution of the Negro conscience and that of the white, no more than between the comprehension of one and the other.” This meant that blacks should be “as free as the whites by nature and human dignity.” Therefore “the principle of equality before the law must have as corollaries: 1) the principle of equality of races, 2) the principle of equal conditions and 3) the principle of increasingly similar, although never completely equal, fortunes.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 230, 232–3, 234) In short:

“In a federal republic, the proletariat and slavery both seem unacceptable; the tendency must be to abolish them both... Instead of rejecting and humiliating those people, must not all Anglo-Saxons, both northern and southern, receive them in harmony and hail them as fellow citizens and equals?... grant equal political rights to both the emancipated blacks and those kept in servitude until now.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 231)

He opposed deportation as “a crime equal to that of the slavers” and instead argued that the slaves had “acquired the right of use and habitation on American soil.” As well as arguing that Black people were equal to Whites and had the right to live where ever they wished with full civil rights, he also argued against those who considered abolition of slavery the only goal that justice demanded that the freed slaves be given means of production (land, tools, workplaces) as well as economic guarantees. So “the conversion of black slaves to the proletariat” would mean that “black servitude will only change its form” rather than ended. These economic reforms had to be extended to the white proletariat as both “slavery and the proletariat are incompatible with republican values”

Thus “the federative principle... has for its first consequence the administrative independence of the assembled localities; for its second consequence the separation of power in each sovereign State; [and] for its third consequence the agricultural-industrial federation.” The latter was required “to shield the citizens of the contracting State from bankocratic and capitalist exploitation as much from the inside as from the outside.” This would end “economic serfdom or wage-labour, in a word, the inequality of conditions and fortunes” by “a combination of work to allow each worker to evolve from a mere labourer to a skilled worker or even an artist, and from a wage-earner to their own master.” (*Property is Theft!*, 712–3)

For Schapiro, Proudhon’s support for “possession” meant “the private ownership of the instruments of production” (721) and so ignores his many comments in support of social or common ownership. (*Property is Theft!*, 105, 112, 137, 149, 153, 377). Indeed, in 1849 he angrily refuted the suggestion he favoured “individual ownership” and stated he had “never penned nor uttered any such thing: and have argued the opposite a hundred times over.” Instead, he wished “an order wherein the instruments of labour will cease to be appropriated and instead become shared” or, as he put it in 1846, “a solution based upon equality,— in other words, the organisation of labour, which involves the negation of political economy and the end of property.” (*Property is Theft!*, 498–9, 202)

So if socialism, as Schapiro states, means “abolishing property altogether” (719) then Proudhon was a socialist, albeit one who favoured workers self-management of production over a centrally planned state socialism (better termed state capitalism). As the workers would manage their work and land/workplaces, the means of production would be socialised yet remain “private enterprise” (736) in the sense of not being government owned or run.

Needless to say, Schapiro ignores the numerous arguments Proudhon made for workers’ associations (“industrial democ-



not mentioned in his works on credit reform while the former are part of a general critique of capitalism which aimed to end both wage-labour (industrial capital) and usury (financial capital) by means of co-operative workplaces and credit. The claim that Proudhon focused on finance reforms and ignored the relations within production is not tenable given how often he stressed the need to organise labour and how the organisation of credit was viewed as the best means of doing so as it would reflect objective circumstances rather than the visions of a few reformers at the top (*Property is Theft!*, 288, 374–5, 499–500).

This can be seen in *The Federative Principle* which, while predominantly focused on social organisation, discusses economic federalism and introduces a change in terminology – the “universal association” of the 1840s now became the “agricultural-industrial federation.” Yet the basic idea is the same and Proudhon acknowledges this by stating that “[a]ll my economic ideas, elaborated for twenty-five years, can be summarised in these three words: *Agricultural-Industrial Federation.*” (*Property is Theft!*, 714) The links to the universal association are clear enough:

“We are socialists... under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership... We do not want expropriation by the State of the mines, canals and railways: it is still monarchical, still wage-labour. 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.” (*Property is Theft!*, 377–8)

(*Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 233, 230, 229, 227) All this, like so much more, is ignored by Schapiro.

The analysis in *The Federative Principle* ties into comments made in *War and Peace*, where Proudhon did not discuss all possibilities as regards American slavery but focused on just one: turning chattel-slaves into wage-slaves. Hence his comment on “the hypocritical thought that, under pretext of emancipating them [the slaves], tends to do nothing less than cast them under the pure regime of force, and to make of them a proletariat a hundred times more abject and revolting than that of our capitals.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* 13: 222–3) This means his argument in 1861 would have been different if the dominant anti-slavery voices had sought to turn the slaves into free workers who had their own land and tools. As he clarified two years later, real emancipation required “providing possessions for the wage-workers and organising, alongside political guarantees, a system of economic guarantees.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 231) This position, as Howard Zinn noted, was shared by many Negroes at the time who “understood that their status after the war, whatever their situation legally, would depend on whether they owned the land they worked on or would be forced to be semislaves for others.” (196) For Proudhon, this position was a logical aspect of his ideas as all forms of inequality were linked and emancipation would be limited without social transformation:

“The federative principle here appears closely related to that of the social equality of races and the equilibrium of fortunes. The political problem, the economic problem and the problem of races are one and the same problem, and the same theory and jurisprudence can resolve that problem.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 232)

This reflected *War and Peace* that modern war was rooted in inequality and “whatever the officially declared reasons” it ex-

isted only “for exploitation and property” and “until the constitution of economic right, between nations as well as between individuals, war does not have any other function on earth.” Given this, radical economic reform was required and “[o]nly the toiling masses are able to put an end to war, by creating economic equilibrium, which presupposes a radical revolution in ideas and morals.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* [Lacroix edition] 14: 327, 272, 300)

Given this analysis that war was always driven by economic (class) interests it becomes clear why Proudhon could not side with either the North or the South as both were “fighting only over the type of servitude” and so both must “be declared equally guilty blasphemers and betrayers of the federative principle and banned from all nations.” (*Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 234) Rather than support the South, as Schapiro would have it, Proudhon attacked the North for its hypocrisy and centralising tendencies and the South for its slavery. His analysis is echoed by Howard Zinn who argued that the war “was not over slavery as a moral institution... It was not a clash of peoples... but of elites. The northern elite wanted economic expansion – free land, free labour, a free [national] market, a high protective tariff for manufacturers, a bank of the United States. The slave interests opposed all that”. (188–9) So slavery was never the driver for the war, regardless of how this has retroactively become the main cause (because this fits into the self-image and rhetoric of America far better than the grim reality).

There is an obvious flaw in this position of “Neither Washington or Richmond”, namely that “Proudhon suggests that nothing will have been gained if the blacks were freed only to become wage earners, as if the condition of the wage-earner were not closer to the realization of personal autonomy than the condition of a well-treated slave.” (Ralph Nelson, 43) Yet his fears should not be ignored as the Southern states “enacted ‘black codes’ which made the freed slaves like serfs” after the end

of the Civil War (Zinn, 199) As Negro newspaper put it: “The slaves were made serfs and chained to the soil... Such was the boasted freedom acquired by the coloured man at the hands of the Yankees.” (quoted by Zinn, 196–7) Unsurprisingly, the state “set limits to emancipation. Liberation from the top would go only so far as the interests of the dominant groups permitted.” (Zinn, 171–2)

Given Proudhon’s reformism and opposition to violence and war Proudhon had little choice. He could have argued for a slave revolt – but since he rejected insurrection by the working class in Western Europe, it was unlikely that he would recommend this libertarian position in America. Instead, he suggested reforms to avoid the possibility of war in *War and Peace* and the good example of economic reform to abolish wage-labour by the (capitalist!) North in *The Federative Principle*. Neither was realistic nor particularly libertarian but it is distortion of epic proportions to paint Proudhon as a Nazi as Schapiro did.

Significantly, Schapiro mentions *The Federative Principle* once in passing and does not quote from it. This is unsurprising as it destroys his claims that Proudhon opposed democracy (“In each of the federated states... universal suffrage form its basis” (*Property is Theft!*, 716)), favoured warmongering militarism (“A federated people would be a people organised for peace; what would they do with armies?” (*Property is Theft!*, 719)) while its discussion of agricultural-industrial federation and advocacy of workers associations refute Schapiro’s assertion that Proudhon’s “anticapitalism was not the same as that of the socialists who attacked capitalism primarily as a system of production” as he “launched his attack on capitalism as a system of exchange.” (722)

Anyone familiar with Proudhon’s ideas would know that he opposed *both* industrial and financial capital, *both* the system of exchange and of production. It is untrue to suggest that Proudhon “stress[ed] banking and Jewish bankers for his line of attack against the established order” (734) as the latter are