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Proudhon: “start by being right”

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This article discusses various claims made against Proudhon by the likes of Engels, Schapiro, Draper and others. Some are correct (if usually exaggerated), most are false. It argues that any critique Proudhon should start by being accurate, something which should go without saying but all-too-often is ignored. It first appeared in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2025).

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In short, the premise of the claims made in this “review essay” are demonstrably false – easily so. Nazism no more trod “in the footsteps of Proudhon” in economic terms than when he called for “the free and universal commingling of races under the law of contract only”.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ “General Idea of the Revolution”, 596.

allowing associations (co-operatives) to form, displacing capitalist firms and ending wage-labour.

So much for “the ‘missing link’... between Proudhon’s approach to economic questions and National Socialist ideology – specifically, the link between the French thinker’s highly moralising critique of ‘interest’ and the Nazi party’s antisemitic call for the ‘breaking of interest slavery’ as laid out in its twenty-five-point Program of 1920.”⁶² Yet rather than reflecting Proudhon’s anti-Semitic tendencies, as Meithing suggests, the “organisation of credit” was seen as the means to achieve the “organisation of labour” required to abolish wage-labour and exploitation, address the negative effects of the division of labour, and so on. In other words, achieve a transformation of production.

Now, you can say this was an optimistic strategy, that capitalism cannot be reformed away so easily, but it is a strategy based on an awareness that exploitation occurred in production by means of wage-labour and that it was to be abolished by association. Proudhon was very clear that under capitalism the workers have “sold their arms and parted with their liberty” for “the capitalist... has paid nothing for that immense power which results from the union of workers and the convergence and harmony of their efforts... by their formation into a workshop” and so “[u]nder the regime of property, the surplus of labour, essentially collective, passes entirely... to the proprietor.”⁶³ Indeed, no one who had *read* him could claim otherwise.

⁶² Meithing, 106. Significantly, Meithing does not mention any of the 25 points which are completely opposed to Proudhon’s views – nor does he say whether its demands of “nationalisation” of trusts, land reform and abolition of “unearned” (non-labour) incomes should also be considered as “antisemitic calls”, perhaps for obvious reasons as they are likewise plundered insincerely from general socialist demands to gain popular support. Needless to say, the Nazi regime *privatised* the nationalised firms it had inherited from the Weimar Republic, showing the worth of these points.

⁶³ “System of Economic Contradictions”, *Property is Theft!*, 212, 253.

I will start with an admission. Once, a long time ago, I wrote a letter to a Marxist paper angrily proclaiming how dare they use Proudhon to attack anarchism when he was *not* an anarchist. Suffice to say, this just showed my ignorance – not least in being unaware of the source of the article’s attacks, it being a rehash of Hal Draper rather than some original piece.

Luckily it remained unsent (not least because it got a bit long...) for I made a terrible mistake – I took the time to read Proudhon. This was driven by my work on *An Anarchist FAQ* and the need to present anarchist views on capitalism. As many have noted, unlike Marxism, there is not a huge amount of anarchist writings on economics. The exception is Proudhon, particularly in the 1840s. So I read the first two *Memoirs* on property (as translated by Tucker) and these opened my eyes. I then moved onto volume 1 of *System of Economic Contradictions* and, while hard going in certain chapters (whose relevance to analysing capitalism is hard to grasp), it was not the book I had been led to think it was by Marxist accounts. All this motivated me to work on *Property is Theft!*¹ and whilst working on other projects, I have kept an interest on Proudhon ever since.

I mention this to put the following discussions in context for it is all too easy to think that just because someone proclaims something it means they know what they are talking about, particularly if they have academic credentials. Worse, it is all too easy to assume that they are being accurate and would not just distort or make things up. Even “peer review” can mean little, if the subject is relative obscure and the peers in question know little about the subject and assume an honesty which may, with a little investigation, be proven to be lacking.

So nothing should be taken for granted when reading about Proudhon (or anarchism in general). If a claim looks strange, it

¹ *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011).

is always worthwhile investigating whether it is actually true or not. If a reference is provided, I've discovered it is always wise to check the source to confirm that it is as suggested (I've found that in far too many cases it does not). However, I appreciate – from experience! – that this can be time consuming and difficult to do as the material can be hard to access. Still, it should be done. Distortions, however, can sometimes have an element of truth about them. This makes them plausible – as will be shown, Proudhon *did* write “All this democracy disgusts me” and he *was* anti-Semitic. However, context and accuracy *matter*. This may involve discussing unpleasant subjects but that does not mean allowing inaccuracies or exaggerations to go unchallenged. Doing so may see the accusation of “apologetics” levelled but that would be a superficial response.

Yet criticism can be valid in spite of this. Marxists, for example, never note that the valid criticisms they make of Proudhon – his racism, sexism, opposition to strikes² – are those made by later anarchists. They also rarely criticise him on any substantial aspect of his ideas, preferring to recount flaws in his personality. Rarely is any context presented, such as noting that his (measured) support for small-scale property was reflective of his era (and that he was resolutely in favour of collective property where appropriate), nor any alternative (if Proudhon is to be denounced for opposing forced collectivisation of peasants, then that should be clearly stated). Nor do they mention the overlap in Proudhon's disgraceful views with others of his time, including Marx and Engels.

In his marginal notes to *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Proudhon wrote “You always joke beforehand: start by being right.” This applies to the criticisms levelled at Proudhon I am about to discuss. There is plenty to criticise in his ideas and we should do

² There is an irony in the defenders of Lenin and Trotsky denouncing Proudhon for his opposition to strikes when the regime their heroes ruled used troops to break strikes, declaring martial law and shooting strikers.

industrial capital which had begun in *What is Property?* and continued in *System of Economic Contradictions* as well as the alternative of association. That Miething references Neumann suggests he is equally ignorant on how Proudhon's critique of capitalism began *within* and extended *from* the workplace.

As noted, 1848 saw a change in rhetoric with the raising of the need for “the organisation of credit”. This reason for this is no great mystery – the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution meant that practice came to the fore rather than analysis. The “organisation of credit” was viewed *as the means*, the “organisation of labour” remained the end. Proudhon makes this very point in his letter to Louis Blanc in the early days of Revolution:

“Your plan to organise national workshops contains an authentic idea, one that I endorse, for all my criticisms... all the workshops are owned by the nation, even though they remain and must always remain free... By virtue of its over-arching mandate, the Exchange Bank is the organisation of labour's greatest asset... it should then be my honour to put before you a project relating both to the course to be followed and to the new form of society to be defined and created among the workers.”⁶¹

For Proudhon, rejecting organisation of labour by the State, *labour has to organise itself*. You cannot predetermine the actual forms of a free society, they need to grow organically based on real needs and interests. All you can do is present the principles – democratic workers associations, federalism, etc. – and a means of achieving it. Rejecting revolutionary means (expropriation), there is only one way of doing so – the organisation of credit to enable workers to buy their means of production,

⁶¹ *Property is Theft!*, 296–7.

organisation of labour” as a goal. This was seen as a solution to numerous issues related to *production* – the division of labour, collective force, exploitation and wage-labour. This built upon his earlier analysis in *What is Property?* which explained how exploitation occurred because the boss appropriated the “collective force” workers produced *within production*. To suggest that Proudhon did not understand that surplus value was generated “in the sphere of production” simply shows an ignorance of his ideas.

This can be seen in Neumann’s work, whom Miething quotes indirectly. Yes, Neumann did suggest that “[i]n singling predatory capital, National Socialism treads in the footsteps of Proudhon, who, in his *Idée générale de la Révolution au dix-neuvième siècle*, demanded the liquidation of the Banque de France and its transformation into an institution of ‘public utility’ together with a lowering of interest to one-half or one-fourth of 1 per cent”. Yet that work argued for much more, including “Capitalist and landlord exploitation stopped everywhere, wage-labour abolished” by means of workers associations in which “all positions are elective” and where “the collective force, which is a product of the community, ceases to be a source of profit to a small number of managers and... becomes the property of all the workers” while “the division of labour can no longer be a cause of degradation for the worker.”⁵⁹

Neumann proclaimed that “National Socialist anti-capitalism has always exempted productive capital, that is, industrial capital, from its denunciations and solely concentrated on ‘predatory’ (that is, banking) capital.”⁶⁰ If he were better acquainted with Proudhon’s ideas he would have known that the *General Idea of the Revolution* repeated his critique of

so – but let us do so *accurately*. We must reject invention, caricature and exaggeration when we discuss his ideas, we must provide the necessary context not to excuse, minimise or downplay things but to understand them and their relative importance within his ideas as a whole. If we “start by being right” then our critique will be all the more valid and our understanding of his strengths and weaknesses will be stronger.

The Housing Question

It is not only *The Poverty of Philosophy* which saw the founders of Marxism distort Proudhon’s ideas. While questionable commentary on Proudhon exists in *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*, Engels’ *The Housing Question* is worth discussing.

Engels’ 1872 work is part of a polemic within German socialist circles and sought to defend the Marxist orthodoxy against those influenced by the French anarchist seeking “to transplant the Proudhonist school to Germany”. He also somewhat incredulously suggested that Marx had “delivered a decisive blow precisely to the Proudhonist ideas as far back as twenty-five years ago” – if so, then why was he having to do so in 1872?³

Engels suggests that Proudhon’s aimed to solve the housing question involves a scheme in which the workers “become part-owner” of dwellings by “paying annual instalments” via their rent. So, if a worker lives in a rented property then the rent they pay goes towards buying the house. For the amusement of his readers, he paints a picture of a worker moving from rented accommodation to rented accommodation and accruing a tiny fraction of each one:

⁵⁹ “General Idea of the Revolution”, 596, 586.

⁶⁰ Franz L. Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 320.

³ *Marx-Engels Collected Works (MECW)* 23: 238, 317.

“Supposing that on the day... when the redemption of rent dwellings is proclaimed, Peter is working in an engineering works in Berlin. A year later he is owner of, if you like, the fifteenth part of his flat consisting of a little room on the fifth floor of a house somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Hamburger Tor. He then loses his job and soon afterwards finds himself in a similar flat on the third floor of a house in the Pothof in Hanover with a wonderful view of the courtyard... Subsequent removals, such as nowadays are so frequent with workers, saddle him further... And now, of what use are all these shares in flats to our Peter? Who is to give him the real value of these shares... when the redemption period has elapsed and rented flats are abolished, [and housing] belongs to perhaps three hundred part owners who are scattered all over the world?”⁴

In this way “the *individual worker* becomes owner of the dwelling” in Proudhon’s scheme.⁵

Given how obviously impractical this proposal is, the equally obvious question is: did Proudhon actually advocate such a scheme? Consulting the work and pages explicitly referenced by Engels⁶, the answer is a resounding *no*:

“all payments made as rental shall be carried over to the account of the purchase of the property, at a price estimated at twenty times the annual rental. “Every such payment shall purchase for the tenant a proportional undivided share in the house

⁴ MECW 23: 328.

⁵ MECW 23:238, 386.

⁶ MECW 23: 387.

to the language of the NRZ which meant something quite different in 1948 than it did one hundred years later.”⁵⁷ If only that author had applied this position consistently...

Suffice to say, Proudhon’s personal bigotries played no role in the subsequent development of anarchism (needless to say, a single, private, unrepeated and unread until the 1960s rant played *none*). Ultimately, I take the judgement of the likes of Gustav Landauer, Daniel Guérin and Rudolf Rocker over that of a few members of the Nazi party and those whose claims are less than convincing upon investigation.

The Organisation of Credit

Proudhon is often portrayed as a one-trick pony for whom credit reform was the be-all and end-all of his ideas. This is nonsense and shows a shocking ignorance of his ideas (being ignorant of Proudhon’s works – or anarchism’s – has never given anyone pause before they expound upon them). This can be seen in Meithing’s “Review Essay”:

“Neumann and Massing were among the first after Marx to point to Proudhon’s fixation on the sphere of circulation when criticising the workings of capitalism, and that he lacked an understanding that exploitation happens through the generation of surplus value in the sphere of production.”⁵⁸

Yet before 1848, credit played no great role in his ideas. A chapter on it appeared in the second volume of *System of Economic Contradictions* but the focus of that work was a critique of capitalism with repeated, albeit passing, references to “the

⁵⁷ Draper and Haberkern, 189, 204, 209.

⁵⁸ Meithing, 106.

where he took an unpopular position. If, as suggested, Proudhon's anti-Semitism was a defining feature of his views then he left his readers with only occasional and in passing remarks to work this out.

Simply put, you could read most of Proudhon's works – especially his most famous – and not come across a single anti-Semitic (or anti-feminist, for that matter) remark (if they were removed, it would not be noticed nor impact on the arguments made). This is not to excuse them but simply to put them in context. For the actual Nazi, anti-Semitism is violent, fanatical and open. Nazis are aggressively and obsessively anti-Semitic and cannot address any topic without returning again and again to how the Jews are to blame for whatever is wrong in society. Such remarks are not passing nor limited to a sentence or two in a book of hundreds of pages, a few letters or a handful of entries in private notebooks. The two are hardly equivalent.

None of this is to suggest that Proudhon was not anti-Semitic. He was and this is shown by his occasional public and private remarks. However, these repulsive views are not fundamental to his ideas and can be ignored without impacting his argument. As such, his politics and programme cannot be considered anti-Semitic – despite his personal bigotries. The latter are in contradiction to the former, meaning that the best of Proudhon can be used to critique the worse.

Proudhon's anti-Semitism, like his sexism, reflected the culture of his time. He used many of the words, expressions, assumptions and stereotypes then commonplace. However, whilst this is acknowledged for others it is usually not for Proudhon. So, we read of how "the reader is subjected to excerpts taken out of context which depend for their effect on Marx and Engels' frequent resort to the kinds of racial and ethnic terminology which were common in their day *and therefore are no indication of the specific views of the writer*", that their works "are full of the language which was typical of the period" and how Rosdolsky's comments were "a reaction

he lives in, and in all buildings erected for rental, and serving as a habitation for citizens.

"The property thus paid for shall pass under the control of the communal administration, which shall take a first mortgage upon it, in the name of all the tenants, and shall guarantee them all a domicile, in perpetuity, at the cost price of the building...

"For repairs, management, and upkeep of buildings, as well as for new constructions, the communes shall deal with bricklayers companies or building workers associations, according to the rules and principles of the new social contract."⁷

Note well that in Proudhon's scheme that housing is "under the control of the communal administration" and that the tenant gains "a proportional undivided share in the house he lives in, and in all buildings erected for rental, and serving as a habitation for citizens." In short, the aim is to achieve *social* ownership of housing and the rent paid does not accrue ownership to the individual worker but rather the commune (after all, unlike the individual worker, housing does not move). So, clearly, the worker gains access to *all* such social housing in *every* commune.

It should be noted that, Proudhon makes the same suggestion for land and once the rent paid equalled its price it "shall revert immediately to the commune, which shall take the place of the former proprietor, and shall share the fee-simple and the economic rent with the farmer." Then "all the communes of the Republic shall come to an understanding for equalising among them the quality of tracts of land, as well as accidents of culture. The part of the rent to which they are entitled upon their

⁷ "General Idea of the Revolution", *Property is Theft!*, 576.

respective territories shall serve for compensation and for general insurance.”⁸

Engels, in short, either cannot understand Proudhon’s argument or deliberately seeks to distort it. The answer seems to be the latter for in 1851 he accurately noted that Proudhon’s scheme meant “converting interest payments into repayments, all real wealth being concentrated in the hands of the State or the communes” and suggests that “it takes far too long” as these are “systematically protracted measures, extending over 20 or 30 years”.⁹ He summarises his take on Proudhon’s ideas as follows:

“Proudhon has now also come to the conclusion that the true meaning of property rights lies in the disguised confiscation of all property by a more or less disguised State, and that what abolition of the State really means is intensified state centralisation.”¹⁰

While clearly ignoring Proudhon’s arguments for decentralisation, Engels does however recognise that his argument was for *social* rather than individual ownership. He also quotes Proudhon in the notes of an aborted review around the same time: “With every instalment of rent the tenant will acquire a proportional and joint share in the house he occupies and in the totality of all buildings let for rent and serving as dwellings for the citizens. Property thus paid for will pass by degrees into the hands of the communal administration.”¹¹ So Engels *did* know what Proudhon had actually advocated but decided to distort his ideas.

Engels also takes the time to repeat all the standard Marxist nonsense about Proudhon, for example that he had “an

⁸ “General Idea of the Revolution”, 578–9.

⁹ *MECW* 38: 421–2.

¹⁰ *MECW* 38: 418.

¹¹ *MECW* 31: 560.

As is well known, the Nazis took their inspiration for their race laws from the United States. Proudhon, discussing race in America, publicly stating the need to “free the blacks and give them citizenship” for the “federative principle here appears closely linked to those of the social equality of races and the balance of fortunes. The political problem, the economic problem and the problem of races are one and the same problem, to be solved by the same theory and the same jurisprudence.” He opposed calls to deport the Slaves to Africa, stating they had “acquired the right of use and of habitation on American soil”. Moreover, “the principle of equality before the law must have as a corollary, 1) the principle of equality of races, 2) the principle of equality of conditions, 3) that of ever more approached, although never achieved, equality of fortunes” In short, “must not all Anglo-Saxons, those of the North and those of the South, receive them in comradeship and welcome them as fellow citizens, equals and brothers? Now the consequence of that measure will be granting to blacks hitherto kept in servitude, along with freedmen, equal political rights.” In addition, economic reform was necessary and so it was “prudent and just that [the American State] also bestows upon them land and ownership.”⁵⁵ It is doubtful that any Nazi would approve of any of this or his hope that races intermingle and interbreed.

Given this sample, I would say that the notion it is “clear that the French thinker’s seemingly occasional hostile remarks agglomerate into a fully-fledged antisemitic worldview, undergirding everything from his critique of authority to his eventual embrace of patriotism” is hard to maintain.⁵⁶ Besides, with the popular prejudices of the time, there was no reason for Proudhon to hide his views. After all, he had no qualms about exposing his sexism nor his views on subjects – like Poland –

⁵⁵ “Du Principe fédératif”, *Oeuvres complètes de P.-J. Proudhon* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868) 8: 228, 232, 233, 234, 231.

⁵⁶ Miething, 106.

The same can be said for the other work indicated, *Manuel du Spéculateur à la Bourse* (1857), which mentions Jews twice in over 500 pages, once in the way suggested. What is more important – a single anti-Semitic remark made in passing or the many pages on workers’ associations that book? I think sensible readers would agree it is the latter and reflects the aim of the work. Significantly, this work did not suggest “all authority... as being under secret Jewish control”⁵⁰ but rather that “[i]n a society based on the principle of inequality of conditions, government, whatever it may be, feudal, theocratic, bourgeois, imperial, is reduced, in the last analysis, to a system of insurance of the class which exploits and owns against that which is exploited and owns nothing.”⁵¹ This repeats a similar class analysis of the State made in other works, including *System of Economic Contradictions* and *General Idea of the Revolution*.⁵²

As for “a belief in Jews as inventors of constitutions, as protectors of political authority”, this appears to refer to Proudhon’s discussion of the 1848 Constitution in *Confessions of a Revolutionary*. It is an *interesting* take on it, given what Proudhon suggests that the origins of political authority are in religious authority and uses the Biblical account of the history of ancient Israel as evidence. Is referencing the Old Testament anti-Semitic? This chapter is in *Property is Theft!* so readers can make their own judgment on the matter.⁵³

In terms of “a *Völkisch*, racist and xenophobe notion of citizenship”, this is hard to square with Proudhon’s comment that 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.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Miething, 106.

⁵¹ *Manuel du spéculateur a la Bourse* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1857), 138.

⁵² *Property is Theft!*, 222, 226, 566, 571.

⁵³ “Confessions of a Revolutionary”, *Property is Theft!*, 429–30.

⁵⁴ “General Idea of the Revolution,” 597.

aversion to the industrial revolution” and wished “to drive the whole of modern industry out of the temple”. He suggests that Proudhon’s use of the term the “productivity of capital” was “an absurdity that Proudhon takes over uncritically from the bourgeois economists” and that he “differs from the bourgeois economists in that he does not approve of this ‘productivity of capital’, but on the contrary, discovers in it a violation of ‘eternal justice’” as it “is this productivity which prevents the worker from receiving the full proceeds of his labour”. It would be abolished by “lowering the rate of interest by compulsory legislation”.¹²

It is strange to read Engels proclaim that Proudhon “aversion” to industry when earlier he had noted “Association in *big industry*. Here, then, *compagnies ouvrières* [workers companies]... This is the solution to the *deux problèmes: celui de la force collective, et celui de la division du travail* [two problems: that of collective force, and that of the division of labour].”¹³ In terms of “the productivity of capital”, yes, Proudhon did use the term but only to proclaim that the theory is a “fiction” as “all value is born of labour” and so contrasts the “the theory of the real productivity of labour” with “that of the fictitious productivity of capital”. Engels seems to think that proclaiming something a fiction equates to “uncritically” taking it over. This, for Proudhon, *does* violate justice as this requires that “all labour must leave a surplus, all wages be equal to product” so it appears that he is to be mocked for opposing the exploitation of labour by capital.¹⁴

The notion of justice has been one which has driven many socialists and working people to change society and it does Engels little favours to mock it so. Needless to say, he adds that “this justice is still called ‘eternal justice’... later on, nothing

¹² MECW 23: 325, 331.

¹³ MECW 38: 414–5.

¹⁴ *Système des contradictions économiques* (Paris: Guillaumin et Cie, 1846) I: 16, 18, 305.

more is said about eternity, but the idea remains in essence”¹⁵ and so he appears unaware that Proudhon used the term just once (and ironically at that) in *System of Economic Contradictions* compared to four times by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. As it stands, developments in biological science have indicated that a sense of justice is a product of our evolution and so it is Engels and Marx who have been judged wrong by history.

Finally, Engels claimed that Proudhon had in 1851 appropriated, without acknowledgement, Marx’s ideas as his own. In a letter to Marx, he proclaimed that he was “convinced” that the Frenchman had read *The Communist Manifesto* and Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France* as “our premises on the decisive historical initiative of material production, class struggle, etc., largely adopted” and a “number of points were indubitably lifted from them – e.g., that a *gouvernement* is nothing but the power of one class to repress the other, and will disappear with the disappearance of the contradictions between classes”.¹⁶

The claim is false – Proudhon had concluded that the state was an instrument of class power before the *Manifesto* was penned.¹⁷ In 1846 he had noted that the state was “inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat. No political reform can solve this contradiction... The problem before the labouring classes, then, consists, not in capturing, but in subduing both power and monopoly... generating from the bowels of the people... a greater authority, a more potent fact, which shall envelop capital and the State and subjugate them.”¹⁸

Suffice to say, very little of what Marx and Engels proclaimed against Proudhon can be taken at face value and

¹⁵ MECW 23: 378.

¹⁶ MECW 38: 434–5.

¹⁷ Engels does not explain where Proudhon would have come across these works, given he did not read German.

¹⁸ *Système* I: 363–4.

After this somewhat lengthy aside, I return to Miething. There is a contradiction in his suggestion that Proudhon’s anti-Semitism is “omnipresent” and “the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish sentiment in Proudhon’s thought” while, at the same time, acknowledging that these are “seemingly occasional hostile remarks.” *Property is Theft!* has a single anti-Semitic remark out of over 700 pages. Including everything else I’ve read by and about him, the number increases but it is still less than 20 out of thousands of pages. If, as Kier does, you go through all of Proudhon’s voluminous writings you could produce a pamphlet of quotes: but compared to – in the Lacroix edition – the 26 volumes of Proudhon’s *Oeuvres Complètes*, 8 volumes of posthumously published writings and the 14 volumes of correspondence, plus the hundreds of pages of his notebooks and other writings, it would small. Yes, they would span his whole life, but they would still be “occasional” by any objective measure.

Miething states that “most all element central to antisemitism could have been detected from early on” and presents a list of works. It is useful to evaluate a few of the claims to indicate their worth.⁴⁸

In terms of “the association of Jews with money, speculation and exploitation”, he references *What is Property?* in which there is **one** sentence that states “ancient and modern Jews” – amongst others – practice theft “by cheating... by swindling... by abuse of trust, and... by games and lotteries.”⁴⁹ This sentence, perhaps needless to say, is irrelevant to his argument and his analysis of how exploitation occurs under capitalism.

⁴⁸ Miething, 106. It should be noted that some of his list reflect popular opinions/bigotries of the time and in this Proudhon was reflecting his rural Catholic upbringing (as with his views on marriage and women).

⁴⁹ *What is Property?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 199.

were all by nature counter-revolutionary, and therefore they had to be fought not merely in the present situation, which found them in the camp of the counter-revolution. No, they had to be *exterminated*. Brotherhood with them was precluded; the only thing to do was to fight against them until they were annihilated.”⁴⁵

Ironically, almost everything Marxists denounce Proudhon for can be found in Marx and Engels – even the support for slave-holding States in wars (although it must be stressed that was *not* Proudhon’s position during the American Civil War⁴⁶). Engels favoured America against Mexico in the 1846–8 war over Texas because it “was waged simply and solely *in the interests of civilization*”. However, this “example was even less cogent as far as the argument about ‘civilization’ was concerned. The immigrants from the United States who rose against Mexico in 1836 were *planters, owners of Negro slaves*, and their main reason for revolting was that *slavery had been abolished in Mexico in 1829...* These features of the Mexican-American conflict show now inappropriate, in fact perverse, was Engels’ illustration.” He also supported “the energetic Yankees” who had “snatched [‘magnificent California’] from the *lazy Mexicans*, who did not know what to do with it.”⁴⁷

I could go on but there is very little point as the anarchist critique of Marxism is not based on the personal bigotries of Marx and Engels. That this is primarily the typical Marxist one of anarchism *is* of note – and can be dismissed with a simple *people in glass houses should not throw stones*.

⁴⁵ quoted by Rosdolsky, 90.

⁴⁶ “Proudhon on Race and the Civil War: Neither Washington nor Richmond”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* No. 60 (Summer 2013)

⁴⁷ Rosdolsky, 159–60. Draper does not dwell on Engels’ clearly racist statement, simply suggesting it “would be a digression here to demonstrate why what Engels was getting at was not an early variant of what came to be called ‘Social Imperialism’”. (Draper and Haberkern, 71)

without taking the trouble of verifying whether it is accurate or not.

Engels does make a valid point when he noted “the fact that one cannot see how [in *General Idea*] the factories are to be transferred from the hands of the manufacturers to the *compagnies ouvrières*, since interest and land rent are to be abolished, but not profit (for there will still be competition).”¹⁹ Given Proudhon’s position that labour is the source of value and that wages must equal product, he did not think that lowering interest rates would do this directly but rather allow workers to get sufficient credit to create their own companies and so secure the “full proceeds” of their labour by abolishing wage-labour. Of course, once workers associations had displaced capitalist firms, all their earnings would technically be “profit” (i.e., surplus over costs) as labour would not long be bought and so no longer be a cost.

This does not mean that Proudhon’s solution to the housing question cannot be questioned. It is reformist in nature and dependent on the State being pressured into passing the appropriate legislation as well as a transformation in the nature of the local council. Kropotkin’s position of immediate expropriation of housing by the tenants (and of workplaces by their workers) is more straightforward. However, rather than critique Proudhon’s policy for being too slow, *The Housing Question* saw Engels knowingly misrepresent it. If Proudhon really was the dunce Marx and Engels liked to portray him, such shameful activities would not have to be sunk to.

¹⁹ MECW 38: 38: 419.

Hal Draper on Proudhon: anatomy of a smear²⁰

For some, the verdict of history is of little consequence. Marxists in particular seem unconcerned that every mainstream Marxist movement and revolution has become authoritarian, at its worse dictatorial, at its best bureaucratic. Rather than socialism, state-capitalism has been created time and time again. Whether it is nationalisation within the bourgeois State or turning a whole economy over to the bureaucracy, the anarchist vision of a self-managed socialist society and economy has never happened via the Marxist route in spite of the latter's oft-repeated claim of a common goal.

Some, however, have not this dent their enthusiasm. Hal Draper is often pointed to as defending "real" Marxism, as Alan Johnson put it: "Democratic Marxism: The Legacy of Hal Draper".²¹ Considered a scholar of note amongst many Marxists, libertarians are less impressed for Draper's dislike – hatred – of anarchism is quickly seen from his writings. Indeed, it is not hard to conclude that his lifework sought what most people would consider the impossible – namely, portraying a movement with a legacy of centralised, bureaucratic and authoritarian structures as genuinely democratic while painting another with a legacy of federal, participatory and self-managed organisations as secretly aiming for tyranny.

Johnson suggests that Hal Draper "looked at" the "elitism and authoritarianism" of those Marx attacked, including "Proudhon ('all this democracy disgusts me')."²² This echoes

²⁰ "Hal Draper on Proudhon: Anatomy of a Smear", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* No. 77 (Fall 2019)

²¹ Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds (eds.), *Marxism, the Millennium and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

²² Johnson, 202.

disappear from the face of the earth, but also entire reactionary peoples. And that too is an advance."⁴² This call was no one-off:

"And one day we shall *take a bloody revenge on the Slavs* for this cowardly and base betrayal of the revolution... *the Czechs, the Croats and the Russians can be certain of the hatred of the whole of Europe and the bloodiest revolutionary war of the whole West against them... hatred of the Russians* was, and still is, the first revolutionary passion of the Germans; that since the revolution a hatred of the Czechs and the Croats has been added to this... we can only secure the revolution against these Slav peoples by the most decisive acts of terrorism... We shall fight 'an implacable life-and-death struggle' with Slavdom, which has betrayed the revolution; a war of annihilation and ruthless terrorism, not in the interests of Germany but in the interests of the revolution!"⁴³

For Draper these peoples were "nationalities, or Balkanized fragments of nationalities. which were then acting as stooges for pro-czarist Pan-Slavism" and so presumably deserved to be wiped out.⁴⁴ Karl Kautsky, in contrast, had the honesty to admit that Engels "proclaimed that, except for the Poles, the Slavs

⁴² quoted by Rosdolsky, 86.

⁴³ quoted by Rosdolsky, 85–6. It should be of note, surely, how often the Germanic peoples represented the interests of "civilisation" or "the revolution" for Engels, allowing him to justify and excuse their imperialism and colonisation of other races – who should presumably express "*gratitude for the pains the Germans have taken to civilize the obstinate Czechs and Slovenes*" (quoted by Rosdolsky, 100).

⁴⁴ Draper, 155. Draper skilfully avoids these genocidal quotes in spite of reading the articles they appear in and Rosdolsky's study. The orthodox can be consoled that "Rosdolsky has produced an account which completely distorts the evidence." (Hal Draper and E Haberkern, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution Volume 5: War and Revolution* [Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011], 190).

times (twice in letters and four times in his *Carnets*).³⁸ He did write a letter to Marx rejecting his call to work together³⁹ but this hardly qualifies – no more than suggesting “Marx is the tapeworm of socialism” (*Carnets*, 24 September 1847).

At least the source of this rightly infamous quote is acknowledged. The same cannot be said of others. Hal Draper sought to dismiss a comparison to Marx’s numerous private anti-Semitic comments by arguing that Proudhon “advocated a pure-and-simple Hitlerite extermination of the Jews” and “a *program* of government persecution of Jews in mass pogroms as well as physical extermination.” To equate the two is “vile slander.”⁴⁰ Thus, a one-off rant in a private notebook, unread by anyone for over 100 years, becomes a “*program*”. Not that his readers would know that as Draper keeps its source hidden, presumably because few would consider it as constituting any sort of programme if they were aware of the facts.⁴¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly Draper does not mention that a leading socialist of the period who did call *publicly* for the extermination of whole peoples, Engels (as published by Marx). Engels looked forward to when “the Austrian Germans and the Magyars will gain their freedom and *take a bloody revenge on the Slav barbarians*. The general war which will then break out will scatter this Slav Sonderbund, and *annihilate all these small pig-headed nations even to their very names*.” The “next world war will not only cause reactionary classes and dynasties to

³⁸ Robert L. Hoffman, *Revolutionary Justice: The Social and Political Theory of P.J. Proudhon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 100.

³⁹ This included in *Property is Theft!* and often quoted in other works.

⁴⁰ *Socialism From Below* (Alameda CA: Center for Socialist History, 2001), 156.

⁴¹ This exchange, incidentally, took place in the same year Draper talked of Proudhon’s “Hitlerite form of anti-Semitism” (with quote) in his *The Two Souls of Socialism* and he did not bother to inform his readers of the source of this repulsive view there either. (Draper, 10)

David McNally’s pamphlet *Socialism from Below*²³, which likewise proclaimed that Proudhon “violently opposed democracy. ‘All this democracy disgusts me’, he wrote.” Both repeat Draper himself, who in his 1966 pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism* included a chapter entitled “The Myth of Anarchist ‘Libertarianism’” in which we find Proudhon’s “violent opposition” to “any and every idea of the right to vote, universal suffrage, popular sovereignty, and the very idea of constitutions. (‘All this democracy disgusts me ... What would I not give to sail into this mob with my clenched fists!’).”

Draper makes many claims against Proudhon and Bakunin (Kropotkin is thankfully excluded from his tender mercies), so many it would be difficult to address them all. Some are valid, like those on Proudhon’s disgusting sexism, others are exaggerated, such as those on his anti-Semitism, and others incomplete or misrepresentative. Many, however, are simply false. Here we discuss the claims on democracy by means of the quote happily repeated by his apostles.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Draper made it difficult to confirm his claim. Under “A Few References,” he helpfully proclaims “[f]or Proudhon, see the chapter in J.S. Schapiro’s *Liberalism and the Challenge of Fascism*, and Proudhon’s *Carnets*.” The latter run into multiple volumes and hundreds of pages. Schapiro is somewhat easier as he does appear to reference his quotes and claims in his attempt to paint the Frenchman as a proto-fascist. Thus we find on page 350:

“Proudhon’s contempt and hatred of democracy overflowed all decent bounds, and he descended to a degree of disgusting vilification, reached only by the fascists of our day. ‘All this democracy disgusts me,’ he wrote. ‘It wishes to be scratched where vermin causes itching, but it does not at all wish to be

²³ *Socialism from Below: The History of an Idea* (ISO, 1984).

combed or to be deloused. What would I not give to sail into this mob with my clenched fists!” (*Correspondance* XI: 197)

Suffice to say, his account is distinctly flawed – at best, it is selective; at worse, knowingly false. Refuting Schapiro’s work could be done by presenting the multitude of pro-democracy quotes and arguments by Proudhon which he studiously ignores but it is sufficient to look at this single quote – the one repeated in part by Draper, McNally and Johnson – to see his dishonesty.

As it stands, Proudhon did not write the quote provided for Schapiro combines three separate sentences into one passage without indicating any missing text nor that they appear on different pages (197 and 198). Context is likewise removed, along with the awkward fact that Proudhon is referring to different things on the two pages.

These sentences come from a private letter written on 18 September 1861 which starts by bemoaning how others on the left were attacking him as “a false *democrat*, a false friend of progress, a false republican” due to his critical position on Polish independence. Unlike most of the rest of the French left (“the democracy,” to use the term of the period), Proudhon opposed the creation of a Polish state. His reason is summarised in his letter:

“What is worse is that M. Élias Regnault... not responding to any of the *impossibilities* of reconstitution which I indicated, none the less persists in demanding the *reestablishment of Poland*, on the pretext that nobilitarian [*nobiliaire*], Catholic, aristocratic Poland, divided into castes, has a life of its own, and that it has the right to live this life *regardless!*”

vituperation [of Jewish people] that runs for decades through the private correspondence of Engels and Marx.”³⁵

Other authors state that Proudhon “was one of Karl Marx’s most important critics. His publicly expressed anti-Jewish sentiments were relatively mild, but his private sentiments were violent. The following entries from Proudhon’s notebooks, which were published in 1961, are instructive”³⁶ and the *Carnets* entry is provided.

The use of “instructive” as well as “entries” (rather than entry) are significant as the impression is given that this was a common feature of Proudhon’s notebooks. Yet, as one expert on Proudhon notes, expressions of anti-Semitism “remain rare in the *Carnets*: a dozen for all eleven Notebooks” and this entry is “moreover unique”. Proudhon, he adds, “did not hesitate to say publicly what he thought of the Jews”³⁷ (or on any other subject, for that matter). So if this were more than a one-off rant he would have not hesitated to let the public know. What motivated this horrific rant is unknown (although his emotional state may be guessed as his mother had died ten days before) but given that this infamous entry starts with “Write an article against this race” and this never appeared, it would suggest that it was soon forgotten.

While not stopping that entry from being abhorrent, this context is required simply to have an accurate understanding of the situation. Taking of accuracy, it should also be noted that Proudhon was *not* “one of Karl Marx’s most important critics” – he never mentioned Marx publicly and privately only a few

ory, No. 18/19 (1991), 191–207 (“Appendix: The *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* and the Jews”).

³⁵ Peter Fryer, “Engels: A Man of his Time”, *The Condition of Britain: essays on Frederick Engels* (Pluto Press: London / East Haven, CT, 1996), John Lea and Geoff Pilling (eds.), 141.

³⁶ Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its legacy* (Atlanta : John Knox Press, 1987), 71.

³⁷ Pierre Hauptmann, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon : sa vie et sa pensée, 1809–1849* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982), 758–9.

an attack in the right direction” and that the “hatred against Rothschild and the money lords is enormous”.³² But then, neither were publicly vocal on the evils of anti-Semitism – just as they failed to challenge Proudhon’s very public sexism. As such, the following claim is simply wishful thinking:

“Many of the left intellectuals Marx and Engels most strongly criticised had antisemitic or proto-antisemitic leanings:... the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the co-operative socialist Charles Fourier, the radical philosopher Eugen Dühring, the insurrectionist socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui, and the revolutionary anarchist and pan-Slavist, Mikhail Bakunin. Marx’s and Engels’ criticisms of these and like-minded authors were directed in part at their anti-Jewish prejudices and more especially at the political and intellectual limitations of which these prejudices were symptomatic. These critiques indicate how actively and purposefully Marx and Engels confronted anti-Judaic and antisemitic currents running through the ‘left’.”³³

Surely these writers *must* know that that Marx and Engels made *no* mention of these author’s anti-Semitism when they attacked them? I am sure they sincerely wish it were true, but no evidence is presented because none exists. Indeed, Marx published anti-Semitic reports in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (NRZ) during the 1848 Revolution as well as his own and Engels’ anti-Semitic comments³⁴ – and it is worth noting “the stream of

³² MECW 6: 62–3.

³³ Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, *Antisemitism and the left: On the return of the Jewish question* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 33.

³⁴ Roman Rosdolsky, “Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ Peoples: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848”, *Critique: Journal of Socialist The-*

In other words, Proudhon is indicating that an independent Poland, as demanded by “the democracy” in France, would *not* be a democracy but rather a regime ruled by a nobility living on the backs of the peasantry (Schapiro notes Proudhon’s opposition to Polish independence but does not explain the reasoning for this). He then starts the next paragraph with these much repeated words:

“All this democracy disgusts me.”

Once this context is provided, it becomes clear that Proudhon is using his justly famous talent for irony against those on the left who violate their own stated democratic principles by supporting the creation of a feudal regime – if *this* is democracy, Proudhon was saying, then it disgusts him. This becomes clear from the rest of his paragraph:

“**All this democracy disgusts me.** Reason serves no purpose with it, nor principles, nor facts. It does not matter to it that it contradicts itself with every step. It has its hobby-horses, its tics and its fancies; **it wants to be scratched where the maggots itch, but it will not hear of comb nor scrubbing;** it resembles that beggar saint who, gnawed alive by maggots, put them back into his wounds when they escaped.” (**bold** indicates words quoted by Schapiro)

Schapiro removes without indicating most of this paragraph, including the key words that “it [the democracy] contradicts itself with every step.” He thus completely obscures Proudhon’s point, namely that these French democrats are contradicting their own claimed principles by supporting the creation of an aristocratic and caste-divided regime.

So, by selective quoting, Proudhon’s arguments *for* democracy – in which he wishes the democrats would be consistently in favour of democracy – are turned into their opposite.

The final sentence quoted by Schapiro appears on the next page. Rather than discussing democracy, Proudhon is referring to something else:

“Certain *patriots* have formed a small conspiracy to stop the sale of my pamphlets. On this matter, it has been said that I was *a secret agent of the Empire*; tomorrow, when they read my theory of taxation crowned by a council of State, they will say that I am a conservative, a proprietor, an Orleanist, a bourgeois!.... Fortunately, all that outcry will not make me change my mind. But what can you expect from a so-called progressive democracy, which is more fanatical, upon each appearance of an ideal, than the Inquisition?

“Sometimes I really want to fall upon this bunch of sods [*cette tourbe*] with fists flying; what do you think? Is it not time to avenge common sense, and to pull the republican idea from the jaws of this hydra, which terrifies writers and honest people! Come on, TWITS, YOU are a disgrace to the human mind! It is because of you that France today lags behind other nations!”
(**bold** indicates words quoted by Schapiro)

So Schapiro’s “this mob” is *not* referring to the people exercising their democratic rights but rather a group opposed to Proudhon’s ideas. Mob may be an acceptable translation of “tourbe” but not in this context, with its hoped for connotations of democracy being dismissed as “mob rule.” Rather, here it means not “the people” but “this bunch of contemptible people” – a “hydra” from whose “jaws” Proudhon sought to “pull the republican idea from”!

its core claims... the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish sentiment in Proudhon’s thought”, that his “research proves that the bulk of Proudhon’s anti-Jewish statements is not found in posthumously published material, but in books published in his lifetime”, with this “culminating in a notebook entry, which Proudhon added on December 26, 1847: ‘The Jew is the enemy of humankind. This race must be sent back to Asia or be exterminated. By steel or by fire or by expulsion the Jew must disappear.’”²⁹

As Miething admits, that entry was unknown until the 1960s when Proudhon’s *Carnets (Notebooks)* began to be published. To say that it came as a shock is an understatement. Unsurprisingly, this horrific rant is much quoted but often in misleading contexts. This warrants a digression.

The Marxist Internet Archive includes it with the comment “Proudhon’s privately expressed thoughts were elaborated on in the same year as this entry by his follower Alphonse Toussenel in his ‘Les Juifs, Rois de l’Epoque,’ *The Jews, Kings of the Era*.”³⁰ Sadly, the minimal research needed to determine that Troussenel was a follower of Fourier rather than Proudhon and that his book was published two years *before* this rant was penned was not done. It also failed to note Marx on this work:

“Paris was flooded with pamphlets — *La dynastie Rothschild, Les juifs rois de l’époque*, etc. — in which the rule of the finance aristocracy was denounced and stigmatised with greater or less wit.”³¹

Also unmentioned is that a few years earlier Engels had suggested that the “success” of a crude anti-Semitic text entitled *Rothschild I. King of the Jews* “shows how much this was

²⁹ Miething, 105–6

³⁰ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/proudhon/1847/jews.htm>

³¹ “The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850”, *MECW* 10: 51.

Let them critique anarchism, not a straw man of their own liking – perhaps then we can start to build a socialist movement fit for the 21st century, one which learns from the past rather than repeating it. And let us simply reply to those who reference Schapiro or Draper with the words “You are not even wrong” – and move on to more fruitful tasks.

Proudhon’s Anti-Semitism

There is no denying that Proudhon held anti-Semitic views, the question is how central they are to his ideas. For some, they are fundamental to his ideology and so, rather than an anarchist, he was in fact a Nazi. A recent attempt to suggest this was published in *Anarchist Studies*, namely Dominique F. Miething’s “Review Article: Antisemitism in the anarchist tradition”.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, seeing Proudhon labelled a Nazi in the leading academic journal on Anarchism did make me write a short reply but unfortunately no space could be found for it.

What to make of such claims? As Schapiro noted, a few Nazis did try to claim Proudhon as a precursor but why the word of a Nazi should be taken seriously is hard to grasp. That they would seek to appropriate Proudhon is understandable – Marx hated him, his reputation as a socialist could be used to bolster Nazi phoney radicalism, the lack of general awareness of his *actual* ideas, his traditional views on marriage, and so on – but why we should favour their interpretation over that of, say, Peter Kropotkin, Gustav Landauer, Rudolf Rocker, Sam Dolgoff – all of whom Miething admits “battled antisemitism”²⁸ – and Daniel Guérin is difficult to grasp.

What is the argument? Miething notes that Frédéric Krier in his 2009 book *Sozialismus für Kleinbürger : Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Wegbereiter des Dritten Reiches* shows as “one of

Schapiro again quotes out of context to turn a paragraph in which Proudhon clearly displays his support for democracy into its opposite.

Schapiro in his preface writes an “exhaustive examination of [Proudhon’s] writings convinced the author, reluctantly to be sure, that Proudhon was a harbinger of fascism in its essential outlook and its sinister implications.” (ix)

In reality, it is his selective quoting which is exhausting.

Nowhere does he mention Proudhon’s support for workers’ associations or that he seemed to have coined the phrase “industrial democracy.” Nowhere does he note Proudhon’s critique of “democracy” is rooted in an awareness that the liberal democracy Schapiro appears to champion is *bourgeois* democracy and, as such, simply not that democratic. Nowhere does he mention Proudhon’s advocacy of election, mandates and recall, his demand that power be decentralised and decentred into the hands of the working class in what he termed a “labour democracy” in 1864:

“Thus, no longer do we have the abstraction of people’s sovereignty as in the ‘93 Constitution and the others that followed it, and in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Instead it becomes an effective sovereignty of the labouring masses which rule and govern... I declare here and now that the labouring masses are actually, positively and effectively sovereign: how could they not be when the economic organism – labour, capital, property and assets – belongs to them entirely”²⁴

There are, in short, many forms of democracy. Some are Jacobin – centralised, top-down and inherently bourgeois. Others are libertarian – federalist, bottom-up and inherently

²⁷ *Anarchist Studies* 26:1 (Spring 2018).

²⁸ Miething, 108.

²⁴ “The Political Capacity of the Working Classes”, *Property is Theft!*, 760–1.

working class. Schapiro seemed unaware of the difference. The bourgeoisie like to portray opposition to its form of democracy – which is little more than electing masters – as being anti-democratic. Marxists like Draper mimic both this portrayal and this form of centralised quasi-democracy, even if they drape it with a red flag.

Schapiro seems to have a thesis in need of bolstering, so he was far from “reluctantly” cherry-picking from Proudhon’s voluminous works – presumably secure in the knowledge that few English-language scholars would be familiar enough with the originals to protest nor have the time to track down, verify and contextualise every one of his many claims. More, the American anarchist movement was small and easily ignored, particularly in academic circles.

Schapiro’s thesis may appear plausible to those with little or no awareness of Proudhon’s ideas, particularly given that he was far from a consistent libertarian (most obviously, his defence of patriarchy and his occasional public expressions of anti-Semitism) and his (unfounded) reputation of being “contradictory.” Likewise, his ideas developed over his lifetime and how he presented aspects of his ideas changed as circumstances changed (mostly obviously, in response to the failure to the 1848 Revolution). Moreover, libertarian socialist ideas can initially appear confusing given their challenge to the dominant assumptions within society. All this aided Schapiro in his task.

Moreover, refuting Schapiro’s claims – with multiple false, cherry-picked, incomplete claims on nearly every page – is time consuming: look what is required to debunk a single quote provided by him as evidence. Other claims are just as resource intensive to debunk, if not more so.²⁵ Little wonder his work has never been fully challenged.

²⁵ For example, see “Proudhon on Race and the Civil War: Neither Washington nor Richmond,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 60 (Summer 2013).

Given how Draper systematically addressed every perceived slight against Marx in exhausting detail (at least to his own satisfaction, if not others), his use of Schapiro’s work seems hypocritical. At best, he made no attempt to verify the account he recommended and embraced a work which chimed with his own prejudices. At worse, Draper checked and like Schapiro knowingly distorted Proudhon’s ideas.

Either way, Draper is responsible for spreading a distortion across the left – a distortion mindlessly repeated to this day. In this he follows his heroes Marx²⁶ and Engels, whose distortions are likewise repeated as if they were the considered conclusions of disinterested seekers of the truth.

Proudhon, to be sure, was a flawed individual with some very repulsive views on a few subjects – like all of us, he was a child of his time (and his bigotries, whether we like it or not, were all too reflective of the French working class of the time, his class). He had his periods of pessimism, his moments of hope. At times he fell below what we would expect, at others far above. In this he is like any other thinker, Marx included.

So let him be criticised for what he actually argued rather than practice invention. While we hope Marxists will rise to this challenge, we will not hold our breath.

Finally, we anarchists are not “Proudhonians” nor “Bakuninists” nor “Kropotkinites” and so do not hero-worship our comrades past. We criticise them when they are not consistent libertarians or when they are wrong. Proudhon, for all his flaws, defined much of what anarchism is, laid its foundations if you like, yet rather than attack these core elements of his theory, the likes of Draper concentrate on those few aspects (if actually accurate) which later anarchists reject or are (more often than not) simply false to paint a radically false picture of Proudhon and by implication anarchism *as such*.

²⁶ “The Poverty of (Marx’s) Philosophy,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 70 (Summer 2017).