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Review: Proudhon's "What is Property?"

Anarcho

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Proudhon's work is a classic for many reasons. Not only did it put a name to a tendency within socialism ("I am an Anarchist") and raise a battle-cry against inequality ("Property is Theft!"), it also sketched a new, free, society: anarchy.

The bulk of the book contains Proudhon's searing critique of property. This rests on two key concepts. Firstly, property allowed the owner to exploit its user ("property is theft"). Secondly, that property created authoritarian social relationships between the two ("property is despotism"). These are interrelated, as it is the oppression that property creates which ensures exploitation while the appropriation of our common heritage by the few gives the rest little alternative but to agree to such domination and let the owner appropriate the fruits of their labour. The notion that workers are free when capitalism forces them to seek employment was demonstrably false: "We who belong to the proletarian class, property excommunicates us!"

Proudhon's genius and the power of his critique was that he took all the defences of, and apologies for, property and showed that,

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logically, they could be used to attack that institution. For example, to those who argued that property was required to secure liberty Proudhon rightly objected that “if the liberty of man is sacred, it is equally sacred in all individuals; that, if it needs property for its objective action, that is, for its life, the appropriation of material is equally necessary for all.” His critiques of the various rationales for property still hold true, showing how the defenders of property had to choose between self-interest and principle, between hypocrisy and logic.

He contrasts property with possession, the former being “the right to use [something] by his neighbour’s labour.” *Property* results in the farmer toiling for a landlord or the worker producing for a capitalist. *Possession* is when those who use a resource control it: the worker in a co-operative or the self-employed artisan. Only the former creates “the exploitation of man by man” and authoritarian social relationships.

This, he argues, is cause of capitalism’s inequality and crises, the contradictions (“property is impossible”) inherent in a system in which workers are exploited by owners. Long before Marx, Proudhon argued for a “scientific socialism” and that workers produced a surplus-value (*aubaine*, translated, as usual, as “increase”) which is appropriated by their boss:

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

The capitalist also unjustly appropriates the additional value produced by joint activity so while the boss “paid all the individual forces, the collective force still remains to be paid.” The “free worker

To conclude: there are ample reasons to read this libertarian classic, not least to discover why it made Proudhon the leading socialist thinker of the nineteenth century.

What is Property? or, An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Editors)

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge

1994

produces ten; for me, thinks the proprietor, he will produce twelve” and so to “satisfy property, the labourer must first produce beyond his needs.” Thus exploitation occurs within the workplace thanks to the worker having “sold and surrendered his liberty” to the proprietor.

Interestingly, Proudhon argues that as a “result of collective force,” all property becomes “collective” and “undivided.” Thus his analysis of exploitation *within* production is used to inform his vision of a free society.

So if we really seek liberty for all, we need to abolish property (“If the right of life is equal, the right of labour is equal, and so is the right of occupancy.”). Property must be socialised for just “as the traveller does not appropriate the route which he traverses, so the farmer does not appropriate the field which he sows” and “all accumulated capital being social property, no one can be its exclusive proprietor.” Workers’ self-management must replace wage-labour as managers “must be chosen from the labourers by the labourers themselves.”

In short: “those who do not possess today are proprietors by the same title as those who do possess; but instead of inferring that property should be shared by all, I demand, in the name of general security, its entire abolition.” Only *collective* ownership and management ensures workers are not exploited – not to mention liberty for all rather than a few for, whether on the land or in industry, the aim was to create a society of “possessors without masters.”

Proudhon’s vision of a society based on possession (free access, use-rights) has led some to suggest that he favoured small-scale property. This is not the case. All through “**What is Property?**” he argues for social, common, ownership of the means of production (the “land is indispensable to our existence, consequently a common thing, consequently insusceptible of appropriation”; “all capital, whether material or mental, being the result of collective labour, is, in consequence, collective property”).

This may be lost in Proudhon's forceful critique of "community." As usual, the term "community" (*la communauté*) is here translated as "communism." This causes problems as the ideas Proudhon was critiquing were that of the Utopian Socialists Saint-Simon and Fourier. These argued for highly-regulated communities run by industrial chiefs where income was dependent on both labour and the amount invested in the project. While his critique was prescient as regards centrally planned (state) communism, it does not apply to *libertarian* communism – particularly as Proudhon *explicitly* argues, like Kropotkin, for socialising land and the means of production.

Rejecting, like later anarchists, both capitalism and state socialism, he called for a "synthesis of communism and property," a "union" which "will give us the true form of human association." "This third form of society," he stated, "we will call *liberty*."

Significantly, Proudhon's proclamation for Anarchy was embedded in his discussion of why "second effect of property is despotism." Thus anarchist anti-statism is inherently bound-up with its anti-capitalism – and has always been so. He was well aware that property "violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism." While anarchy was "the absence of a master, of a sovereign," "proprietor" was "synonymous" with "sovereign" for he "imposes his will as law, and suffers neither contradiction nor control" (It is **landlord** for a reason!). Thus "property is despotism" as "each proprietor is sovereign lord within the sphere of his property" and so freedom and property were incompatible.

His arguments for Anarchy in the book's final chapter follow a discussion of animal sociability. This is remarkable in its topicality as modern biology, in the form of reciprocal altruism, has drawn remarkably simple conclusions in its discussions of the evolution of ethics – not to mention the obvious links of both to Kropotkin's equally vindicated "**Mutual Aid**."

From his analysis of the social nature of animals and humans, from the feelings of justice that produces, Proudhon drew the conclusion that the society of the future would be an anarchy. As with the economy, association is the social form of a free society of equals (or, to use a more modern term, self-management). While federalism is not explicitly mentioned (Proudhon does so over a decade later), it is implied in his critique of "communism" – if you reject the centralised control of property in utopian communities, you would hardly support a centralised social structure.

And this is what strikes the reader, namely how much of later *revolutionary* anarchist (and Marxist!) thought is contained in this classic from 1840. While we can quibble over certain aspects of his presentation (which he subsequently improved upon) and reject his repulsive patriarchal bigotries as irrelevant and in contradiction to his other ideals, the fact is that Proudhon defined what anarchism is (libertarian socialism), laying the foundations of later libertarians like Bakunin and Kropotkin built upon.

So the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* series should be praised for presenting "**What is Property?**" in a fresh translation. This was required as the previous translation, by Benjamin Tucker, had its limitations (such as rendering Proudhon's battle-cry as "Property is Robbery"). Tucker also translated the Second Memoir, 1841's "**Letter to M. Blanqui on Property**", which this edition excludes. His Third Memoir, 1842's "**Warning to Proprietors**", still awaits translation.

While the book's introduction is useful in its presentation of the context and evolution of Proudhon's ideas, it stops at the publication of the book proclaiming that this is not the place to discuss it. Quite the reverse! Saying that, given that the works suggested for further reading go from the essential and serious (K. Steven Vincent's "**Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**") to the ridiculous and malicious (J. Salwyn Schapiro!) perhaps this is for the best.