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Anarchy and Democracy: Examining the Divide

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This piece is the fifth essay in the June C4SS Mutual Exchange
Symposium: “Anarchy and Democracy.”
Author’s note: For those interested in the details of
Proudhon’s analysis of authority and the justification of the
divide between authority and anarchy, my essay
“Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Self-Government and the
Citizen-State” may provide some clarification.

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cal strategies that perhaps our tradition has demonstrated obscure more than they clarify.

we try to bring to bear against it. Hegemony does not mean entire domination, of course, and authority is far from the only principle at work in our societies or our thought processes. So we have a good deal of opportunity and power to resist, particularly if we focus our energies and go about our work with care.

I don't mention the present hegemony of authority as a discouragement, but in order to suggest a way around the temptation to cling to democracy. After all, if we have not conceived of anarchy simply as the absence of the principle of authority, and of the institutions explicitly based on it, but as the focus of a new series of experiments, through which we might progress towards a more complete fulfillment of our ideal, then we can perhaps imagine a different sort of society, within which it is anarchy that is the hegemonic principle. Long before we have eliminated all the authoritarian remnants from our thinking, and before we have fully reorganized our institutions along anarchistic lines, we ought to experience a general shift in incentives, as the radical changes we have been able to make facilitate more of the same. We can probably expect a very different sort of stability to emerge—no Weberian “iron cage,” certainly—but it seems likely that confronting our interdependence squarely, without allowing ourselves the tools of hierarchy and “legitimate” imposition,” will indeed lead us beyond the heady early days of an anarchist revolution, when nearly everything we attempt will be fraught with previously unexamined difficulties, toward some new sort of status quo, however fluid in may seem in present terms.

But it's hard to imagine how we would even begin to shift those basic structures of incentives while clinging to any of the central concepts of the present order. And those for whom “democracy” still remains an essential anarchist keyword seem either to be clinging to those concepts or to be clinging to the language currently associated with them, engaging in rhetori-

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then we should understand that either we have failed or that we have been backed into that corner by inescapable circumstances. Democracy, understood from this anarchistic point of view, would appear primarily as an indicator of poor planning or *force majeure*—and certainly as an indication that there are lessons still to learn.

I can understand the reluctance of some people to think of their project in terms that will necessarily confront them with *failure* on a pretty regular basis, particularly in the long and difficult transition from a fundamentally authoritarian, governmentalist society to one that begins to resemble, in practical terms, our political ideals. But I'm not sure what the alternative is, if we acknowledge that our ideals are really revolutionary. The one truly untenable alternative seems to me to be modifying our ideals and retaining some "pure" form of democracy.

Progress and the Anarchic Series

If we understand democracy in Proudhon's terms, as the distribution of authority onto the greatest number of heads, then the notion of "pure democracy" almost has to appear as a sort of ultimate anarchist nightmare: the pure hegemony of the principle of authority, so dispersed in its manifestations as to be impossible to come to grips with; the final incorporation of the belief in the impossibility of anarchy in our common sense; *self-government* in the most insidious of forms, based on the internalization of hierarchy as essential to the self. That worst-case scenario is just that, but it isn't entirely alien to what we experience in societies that have long been governed by the principle of authority.

One of the reasons that the anarchist struggle is so difficult is precisely because authority is ubiquitous, or very nearly so, in our social relations, in our education, and therefore it is at least never entirely divorced from the critical perspectives that

recourse to *practices* that we think of as “democratic.” It is difficult to imagine a society in which we are not at times forced to subordinate some interests to others, to engage in conflicts from which not everyone can emerge winners, and, in those instances, to engage in practices like voting. That seems unquestionable. But that doesn’t tell us how we should feel about the obvious mismatch between those imposed practices and our principles. And, again, the very thing that inevitability lacks is a connected principle.

We don’t treat the survival of some members of the Donner party as an argument in favor of the principle of cannibalism. We’re much more likely to treat their experience as a cautionary tale about poor planning or simply as an example of the untenable situations that are sometimes forced on us. If we’re following the logic of anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, it isn’t clear to me why we should treat democracy much differently.

It seems clear to me that nearly all of the arguments for attempting to incorporate democracy into anarchy involve some confusion of principles, or a confusion of principles and practices. And, unfortunately, those confusions often look a lot like those used in the attempt to prove that anarchy is itself impossible, such as Engels’ attempt to dismiss anti-authoritarians by conflating authority and force. It is less clear to me why so many people who presumably have some investment in the notion of anarchism struggle so mightily to fully embrace anarchy, but that’s not because the challenges inherent in anarchy are not absolutely apparent. Instead, I’m just not sure why anyone would embrace anarchism if they had serious doubts about the possibility or desirability of anarchy.

In any event, it’s not hard for me to suggest one place that democracy can quite consistently take within anarchist relations. Wherever democracy seems to suggest itself as *necessary* (in the strong sense of that term), where it seems that the best we can do is to take turns imposing on one another,

Philosophical Considerations

If we had the luxury of sticking to the *philosophical* terrain, the question of distinguishing anarchy and democracy would, it seems to me, pose very few problems. Certainly, it would be unlikely to pose the persistent, seemingly intractable problems that it does at present. *Anarchy* describes the absence of rule, while *democracy* describes rule by “the people,” and it seems fairly uncontroversial to maintain that the two concepts fall on opposite sides of a divide marked by the existence of *rule*, of *archy*, however narrow that divide might sometimes appear. On the two sides of that divide, relations are structured according to two distinct, opposing principles of social organization. On the one side, there is the *principle of authority* or *governmental principle*, which provides the rationale for hierarchical institutions like the State, capitalism, the patriarchal family, etc. On the other, there is an *anti-authoritarian* or *anarchic* principle, perhaps still only vaguely understood, which might form the basis of social relations free from hierarchy, claims of authority, and the various forms of exploitation that seem to inevitably arise from them.

Still, even this terrain can be difficult to navigate when we attempt to clarify the relationship between these two concepts, and their underlying principles, as we inevitably must do when we turn back to the very practical aspirations of anarchists: the transformation of relations based on the principle of authority into anarchic relations.

It seems that the infamous “problem of the transition” also has its conceptual side.

Can we, for example, think of the transition from *authority* to *anarchy* as movement along some kind of spectrum—perhaps with increasingly libertarian forms of democracy as a kind of bridge—or is the situation more complicated? If we can identify some kind of continuous pattern of development, an evolutionary line that passes through both democracy and

anarchy, then perhaps the problem of the divide is less serious, and the possibility of talking about one in terms of the other is opened.

Consider a text like “Civil Disobedience” (1849), where perhaps Thoreau’s language suggests just this sort of *governmental spectrum*, with “no government” as its final term:

“I heartily accept the motto,—‘That government is best which governs least;’ and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—‘That government is best which governs not at all;’ and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.”

And consider how that phrasing recalls Proudhon’s definition from *What is Property?* (1840): “Anarchy, absence of master, of sovereign, such is the form of government that we approach every day...” There is obviously a sort of paradox involved in the notion of a “government... which governs not at all,” but we might try to get around it by imagining that government was something essentially quantifiable and that the transition would then be an “elimination of the absolute” (to borrow Proudhon’s phrase), bit by bit, until none of the original quantity remained.

The distinction between “big” and “small,” or “more” and “less,” government is, of course, a very common one. But perhaps one of the very clear lessons of the Trump era is just how slippery and uncertain those distinctions can be. We see things like the obviously inadequate attempt to quantify “government” by the number of regulations in place, without any more direct measure of the impact of the regulations. We are forced to weigh the “size” of one piece of preemptive legislation against all the various bits of local law that it governs in advance. And, ultimately, when we examine the range of legislative forms employed and attacked by the present regime,

hierarchy” is just hierarchy that is sanctioned by whatever it is that we imagine sanctions hierarchy. The reigning principle does not change, while the condition for anarchy seems to be precisely a change of principle.

That doesn’t make the practical difficulties any less real, but, again, these are not questions that have been ignored by anarchists. Both Proudhon and Bakunin left open the space for one sort of “law,” *inevitability*, since we clearly must do what we cannot not do, but this bit of rhetorical play changes nothing about every other potential sort of legal order. The middle ground denied by Proudhon isn’t going to emerge from this sort of rhetorical slippage. As much as we might shuffle the words around, the two principles of *anarchy* and *authority* seem to remain distinct.

The thing that distinguishes inevitability from every other “law” is obviously its independence from any principle. So perhaps the thing that unites the governmental series and the anarchic series is precisely the continuing reign of that one “law.” Certainly, we can’t be indifferent to the real constraints on any particular instance of anarchy. We are not, after all, idealists, believing that even a complete revolution in the realm of principles would be enough to establish an anarchist utopia, within which all relations could always be structured according to our ideals. And this is arguably what Bakunin was addressing in the long aside in “God and the State,” where, in what might seem like a sudden reversal of his anti-authoritarian argument, he made room for “the authority of the bootmaker.” It is also almost certainly what Proudhon was addressing all through the works of the 1860s, and our tendency to read works like *The Principle of Federation* as a break with his anarchist thought probably says more about our own appreciation of the difficulties of our project than it does about his theoretical consistency.

If we look the difficulties square in the face we are confronted with the likelihood that we might continue to have

In this context (“*archy* or *anarchy*, no middle ground”), it is likely that anarchy is the easier of the two terms to define, and in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* Proudhon did indeed give a brief definition of anarchy as a “social system:”

“Voilà tout le système social : une équation, et par suite une puissance de collectivité.”

(That is the whole social system: an equation, and consequently a power of collectivity.)

And the understanding is that the emergence of collective force does not itself threaten the basic relations of equality. Relations remain strictly horizontal. The development of collectivities only increases the variety of individuals, without in any way subordinating any of them. As an ideal and principle, at least, this seems clear enough, even if the practical details demand a good deal of innovative thinking on our part. But those practical difficulties should also be apparent, and it is when confronted with those practical complications that anarchists most often turn back towards democracy (and sometimes hierarchy, authority, the absolute, etc.) as elements that must somehow be carried over into anarchistic societies.

Practical Constraints

If anti-state capitalists are constantly called to wrestle with the question of “who will build the roads,” anarchists are faced with constant questions about decision-making practices: *Who will break the ties? How will you resolve the conflicts?* Even plenty of self-identified anarchists feel the need to leave some room for the “legitimate” or “justified” coercion of minorities. But these constructions just involve a sort of stuttering displacement of the same problem. “Legitimate authority” is just authority that has been authorized. “Justified

perhaps the clearest lesson is that within a *legal order* the influence of law is ubiquitous. Acts are finally either licit or illicit, permitted or prohibited, but in either case they are subject to some form of regulation. And what is true of the legal order seems to be true, in general, of most forms of social order under the regime of authority. Government seems to be a matter of *qualities*, rather than quantities—and perhaps the “quantity of government” never really changes. What seems necessary is to transform the quality of an enormous number of different relations, by reconstructing them on a new basis, according to a different principle.

In his manuscript writings on Napoleon III, Proudhon presented a stark choice:

“...archy or anarchy, no middle ground.

Archy can have one or several heads: monarchy, polyarchy, oligarchy, exarchy, heptarchy, etc.

If the polyarchy is composed of the wealthiest, or of the nobles and magnates, it is called aristocracy; if the people en masse is the preponderant element there, it is a democracy.

But the number of heads changes nothing in the end; as in the case of God, plurality is detrimental.”

The condemnation of democracy—an *archy* with *all the possible heads*—seems perfectly clear: “plurality is detrimental.” And in *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, Proudhon present a striking alternative to the spectrum we have been considering:

“Every idea is established or refuted by a series of terms that are, as it were, its organism, the last term of which demonstrates irrevocably its truth or error. If the development, instead of taking place simply

in the mind and through theory, is carried out at the same time in institutions and acts, it constitutes history. This is the case with the principle of authority or government.

The first form in which this principle is manifested is that of absolute power. This is the purest, the most rational, the most dynamic, the most straightforward, and, on the whole, the least immoral and the least disagreeable form of government.

But absolutism, in its naïve expression, is odious to reason and to liberty; the conscience of the people is always aroused against it. After the conscience, revolt makes its protest heard. So the principle of authority has been forced to withdraw: it retreats step by step, through a series of concessions, each one more inadequate than the one before, the last of which, pure democracy or direct government, results in the impossible and the absurd. Thus, the first term of the series being ABSOLUTISM, the final, fateful [fatidique] term is anarchy, understood in all its senses.”

In this account, democracy is, first and foremost, the last stand of absolutism, the ultimate rear guard action of government in retreat. It is the *most inadequate concession* of the principle of authority. We again have the notion of a governmental series, ranging from the most naive expressions of absolutism to anarchy (“in all its senses,” which is a qualification that certainly must be explored), but where the other formulations suggest a connection between the approach to anarchy and the *refinement* of democracy, government’s final form, the connection here is clearly more complicated.

The key to understanding how Proudhon understood the relationship between democracy and anarchy here is that qualification: “understood in all its senses.” For those who might have

encountered it in the published English translation, that phrase is necessarily a bit puzzling, because John Beverley Robinson chose to translate the French *anarchie* as “anarchy” only part of the time, generally when it referred to a non-governmental society, choosing a variety of other terms when it referred to political disorder, the “anarchy of the market,” etc. But when we return to the original text, it becomes clear that democracy is “anarchy” in the sense that it represents the final disarray of government and the opening to political violence, that this fragmentation of political authority is related to the emergence of the capitalist “anarchy of the market,” and that it is really only in a negative sense, and perhaps only in the case of a *more refined anarchy*, that democracy and non-governmental society are linked. It is the disorganization of government, but also its manifestation in more and more sites, and not its refinement, that comes with democracy. If the last term of the series “demonstrates irrevocably its truth or error,” Proudhon has perhaps suggested that, while delivering the judgment against the whole governmental series, that final term also suggests an alternative—another face of anarchy.

This would in fact be a classic Fourierist device, a *pivot*, marking a transition and the beginning of a new series. And the notion of an *anarchic series*, composed of various order combinations of the various kinds of anarchy, might turn out to be very useful to us.

As for our philosophical constructions, the distinction between anarchy and democracy seems both defensible and useful to anarchists, provided we can clarify, *at the level of principles*, this notion of “rule” or *archy*, which serves to distinguish all the forms of government from the forms of anarchy. Here, Proudhon is once again useful, particularly since his critiques of capitalism and of governmentalism are ultimately two aspects of a single critique of *authority* and the *exploitation* that almost always characterizes and supports it in social relations.