

French mutualism beyond Proudhon

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There's been an interesting, if not terribly productive, discussion on Wikipedia, regarding the scope of the entry on Individualist Anarchism. It has been charged, with some justice, that the article overemphasizes Anglophone market anarchism, and virtually ignores a number of other currents that might be included with equal reason and justice. That's one way of thinking about the problem. I'm inclined to beat my usual drum, and suggest that this is another of those cases where Wikipedia simply has no way to resolve what *should* be in article when essentially all the scholarship has been partial or downright partisan, and where, in the end, there just hasn't been that much scholarship, even if there was some easy way (which there isn't) to include non-English-language sources to the mix. But, setting aside that sort of basic problem, the thing that strikes me about the Wikipedia pages on individualist anarchism is just how thin they are in general. Even the group around *Liberty* are pretty poorly represented. Anyway, one editor has recently attempted to increase the coverage of French and Italian illegalists, as well as figures like Han Ryner, E. Armand and Renzo Novatore, all figures that I have to admit I have spent less time exploring than perhaps I should have. I've spent parts of the last few weeks remedying some of that, although there is a lot of material that is going to take some tracking down. To be honest, none of what I read caught my fancy particularly, which won't stop me from going back for more as sources become available.

But being confronted with what I don't know about anarchism is always a challenge that pushes me back into Deep Digging Mode, and as I was trying to contextualize what I was reading and attempting to figure out what I think could or should be done with the article, I decided to dip back into Max Nettlau's 1897 *Bibliographie de l'anarchie*, which, despite its age and explicitly fragmentary nature, remains a valuable collection of clues for research. My thought was that even the market anarchist traditions were pretty poorly represented, even in my own work, especially when we step beyond the English-language sources. I had stumbled on a couple of nice texts, like *Les Nationalités considérées au point de vue de la liberté et de l'autonomie individuelle, par un prolétaire* [Hector Morel] (Bruxelles, 1862, 52 pp) and then subsequently found them mentioned in Nettlau's bibliography. So I took an afternoon a couple of weeks ago to start really digging through it for early anarchists and mutualists. I found a lot of names that require more digging, and I found a couple significant French mutualists hidden in plain site.

Alfred Darimon, for instance, was a collaborator with Proudhon, and his 1856 *De la réforme des banques* should be read in the light of his contributions to Proudhon's work on mutual credit

as the “solution of the social problem.” He was also the editor of *Idées révolutionnaires*, the 1849 collection of Proudhon’s journalism, and wrote a series of political histories which include numerous details about Proudhon and the revolution of 1848.

J. A. Langlois, another of Proudhon’s collaborators, and literary executor, wrote a two-volume work on *L’homme et la Révolution. Huit études, dédiées à P.-J. Proudhon*. (1867) It’s a careful elaboration and extension of Proudhon’s mature work, sometimes unfortunately faithful, and sometimes pleasantly innovative. In a moment that is a little of both, Langlois, while agreeing with Proudhon that women were essentially incapable of work outside the home, argued that this made women the only class of people who could justly collect a “rent,” for their household duties. Langlois is known to English readers through his introduction to Proudhon’s *Correspondence*, which Tucker translated for his edition of *What is Property?* It’s really superb, and is one of the things I have used to introduce people to Proudhon. (I’ll be bundling it up with William B. Greene’s recollections of Proudhon, the Stephen Pearl Andrews/Benjamin R. Tucker debate from *The Index*, and a couple of other things in a nice, thick Corvus pamphlet real soon now.)

Joseph Perrot was a self-described “disciple of Proudhon” who wrote a number of works attempting to develop mutualist thought. Writing in the 1880s, he was working alongside the collectivist and communist traditions, prior to the incorporation of Proudhonian federalism into anarcho-syndicalism, and it is interesting to see the connections he makes in that context. His casual anti-feminism and anti-semitism reminds us that the period was not necessarily one of progress on “thick” issues, but his work will probably reward the trouble of translation in other ways. Biographical information is sparse on some of these figures, but there was a Joseph Perrot killed in a battle with police after deserting from the military, at a time when it might have been our Proudhonian “disciple.”

There are others worthy of attention, including Georges Sorel, whose “Essay on the Philosophy of Proudhon” is really a fascinating reading of some of Proudhon’s more difficult texts. But let’s finish for now with the best title of the bunch, actually a doctoral thesis by Edmond Lagarde, from 1905, *La revanche de Proudhon, ou l’avenir du socialisme mutualiste*. Proudhon’s Revenge, and it comes as no surprise that it is revenge on old Karl Marx. Lagarde jettisons some of Proudhon’s currency and credit reform stuff, and I haven’t decided whether that constitutes a problem or not, but, in any event, I think what we see in Lagarde is a different kind of faithfulness than we encounter in folks like Darimon, Langlois or Perrot. Lagarde is comfortable with a set of terms that recall Proudhon’s early invocations of “laissez faire” and his suggestion that the way to abolish the robbery of property was to universalize it, but which are certain to still push some buttons. The conclusion of the work is pretty strong stuff, with invocations of reciprocity as the way to justice and the means of neutralizing the state and destroying Marxism. Labor and its rewards is the problem to be solved, and one solution looks a lot like Tucker’s universalization of dependence on wage labor, as the elimination of privilege tears down the divide between laborers and capitalists. There are, as Lagarde puts it, “two antagonistic solutions: the one marxist (collectivist), the other mutualist;”

But in the first, under the control of the State, everyone is waged;

While in the second, where labor is independent, everyone is a capitalist.

Let the proletarians judge these two formulas and choose the one that suits them best.

In the name of Liberty, of Morals, of Justice, they will repudiate the first in order to adopt the second.

And that will be the Revenge of Proudhon.

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