*Everyone against the One...*

# CONTR'UN


## TOWARD AN UNGOVERNABLE ANARCHISM

*Writings by Shawn P. Wilbur*

# *Mutualism and Beyond*

## An Introduction

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In the first week of December 2012, I found myself traveling back from southern California on the train, having just spent an exciting, but rather strange weekend at a gathering sponsored by the Liberty Fund, discussing the work of Gustave Molinari with a fairly star-studded cast of classical liberals, market anarchists and libertarian capitalists, including Roderick Long, Gary Chartier, Charles Johnson, Sheldon Richman, Matt Zwolinski, and David Friedman. I had been invited on the strength of my work on Proudhon, my acquaintanceship with several of the other participants, and my somewhat oppositional interest in the work of Molinari and Frédéric Bastiat. I came away with the sense that the classical liberals have treated Molinari much as anarchists have treated Proudhon, and perhaps with similarly unfortunate results. Although the time allowed to us only permitted a sampling of several of his works, I experienced just a bit of *déjà vu*. The difficulties we had in getting a clear overview of Molinari's works looked rather familiar, suggesting—to me, at least—that, like Proudhon, he was grappling with a sort of progressive social science.

One of these days, perhaps I'll get a chance to come back and address the questions I still have about Molinari, but the immediate effect of the experience was to give me a little different look at the work I was doing on Proudhon's philosophy and social science—and a real spark of inspiration. In the course of the trip home, I wrote up an extended outline for a volume summarizing my own work on "two-gun" mutualism.

Four months later, I had abandoned the project, and had distanced myself, in at least some contexts, from the term "mutualism."

The essays in this first issue of CONTR'UN cover the intellectual and emotional roller-coaster of those months, as I struggled to decide what, in the much-clarified vision contained in that book-outline, was really worth publishing, and what probably wasn't going to be useful to the anarchist movement. And it contains the first elements of the relaunched study that emerged. While the result is therefore something of a theory-laden "personal zine," I hope it is also useful as an example of a long-time anarchist struggling to come to terms with just what "anarchy" and "anarchism" have meant, and might mean.

CONTR'UN continues two volumes of LEFT-LIBERTY, a zine published in the context of the Alliance of the Libertarian Left, and two issues of THE MUTUALIST, which was a rough-and-ready theoretical journal for the emerging "neo-Proudhonian" faction of mutualists. Unlike its predecessors, CONTR'UN makes no pretense of any organizational affiliations. It is solely an expression of my own labors in search of an "ungovernable" form of anarchism, which is both a worthy addition to the anarchist tradition, faithful to some of its most

demanding calls, and a useful toolkit for attempting to solve the sorts of practical problems that confront us under this stage of capitalism, governmental domination, patriarchy, etc. It can't help but reflect my own position as a well-educated member of the growing "reserve army of labor," my interests in philosophy and radical history, my own negotiation of a variety of social norms and roles, and my history as a laborer in the book trade and the field of "higher education."

The material has mostly been previously published on one of my blogs, and hovers somewhere between the conversational style common on the internet and a more formal sort of scholarly argument. Readers can expect arguments that seek to cut right to the heart of complex systems of thought, as well as long meditations on what may seem like rather minute details. Much of this volume deals with the complexities of Proudhon's use of key terms, and readers are cautioned to expect some seemingly familiar terms to be used in unfamiliar ways, as well as some unfamiliar terms—or even newly minted ones—to appear at important points. I've tried to only introduce these sorts of complexities where they are demanded, either to understand the texts being examined, or to clearly highlight key elements in this scheme of "ungovernable anarchism" that I'm beginning to lay out.

The missing piece in what follows, and the chief impetus for many of the changes in my thinking over the past few months, is a book-chapter I wrote on Proudhon's theory of the State, "Self-Government and the Citizen-State," and a number of blog posts written during the composition of that work. That material can be found collected separately in the second issue of CONTR'UN. I recommend that collection as a simple introduction to the Proudhonian sociology and philosophy.

— SHAWN P. WILBUR

Wednesday, November 14, 2012

# Anarchism's Ungovernability, and What it Means to Be a Mutualist

Some time back I posted an unexpectedly controversial post on "The Ungovernability of Anarchism." My goal was to start to talk about how the things that we are in the process of learning about the early phases of the anarchist movement, together with the struggles we are currently having to determine the limits of the tradition, raise interesting and potentially troubling questions about the ways in which we can lay claim to the various aspects of "anarchism." I fully intended to "raise the bar," but what I said was taken, by a variety of folks with an interest in some sort of "governing," in pretty much the opposite sense. Although I have not returned to the subject directly on the blog, I've hardly left it in my own thinking about anarchist organizing, mutualist school-building, etc.

Let me run through the argument once more:

The word "Anarchism" marks a variety of things, among them an elusive and contested Ideal, a historical Tradition, and a present Movement.

- As an Ideal, Anarchism runs on ahead of us as we chase it, constantly revealing greater freedom and unchallenged forms of authority, provided we pay close attention. The Ideal is ungovernable, and that is a good thing. We can't get too smug, and those who would settle for "liberty on the low bid," and attempt to reduce Anarchism to their level, just make it clear that they're not paying attention at all.

- As a Tradition, Anarchism has always been more diverse than most of us can easily be comfortable with, as an attentive reading of the most uncontroversial histories of the movement quickly demonstrates. This is a fact that we should probably learn to live with. Sure, it's a little hard to know what to do with the earliest explicit expressions of anarchism, with their wild fantasies (Humanispheres, Cossack invasions, etc.) and their occasional glaring errors (anti-semitic and anti-feminist elements, for example), but in attempting to cleanse the tradition of stuff that makes us uneasy, we've neglected some elements that arguably ought to please, or at least amuse us (the fact that Proudhon's feminist adversaries were also mutualist activists, Humanispheres, Cossack invasions, etc.) We can acknowledge that Bellegarrigue, who produced *Anarchy: A Journal of Order*, was some sort of market anarchist, and it won't be the end of the world. Our denials look too much like opportunistic history to reflect very well on us. We don't have to go there again, and Bellegarrigue probably isn't going

to make a modern capitalist any happier than a modern communist. None of us claim the whole Tradition anyway.

- As a Movement, in the realm of practical struggles and in our ideological struggles about how we will relate to the Ideal going forward, let's try to at least be practical. Internal struggle is part of our Tradition, and is probably dictated by our relentless Ideal. We constantly face new questions, and new threats, among them elements that would just *love* to govern Anarchism to some narrower end. When we identify with the Movement, we presumably take on a relation to the Ideal and the Tradition (even if the latter may be somewhat antagonistic), and we necessarily enter into some kind of relation of basic solidarity with others who similarly identify. We don't all have to play nice. We don't have to welcome anything that appears in opposition to the Ideal, even if it has some validation from the Tradition, but we should probably have more sense than to squander or wreck what we have inherited and presumably share. Some kinds of sectarian squabbling will arguably drive the project of Anarchism forward. Others obviously don't. Some kinds of toleration on the fringes enrich that project. Others clearly imperil it. So we need to take responsibility for the actions we take on this very field of conflict. We can't hope to govern or rule the movement, without putting ourselves in conflict with our own Tradition and Ideal, but that's not a reason to be indifferent. Quite the contrary.

These concerns have come up again recently in some discussions about defining Mutualism. Because Mutualism is, in essence, in the process of being reintroduced after a period of a relative dormancy, Mutualists find themselves in the midst of a complicated process, where we are simultaneously recovering a Tradition (which was itself in search of its Ideal), distilling our Ideal from that Tradition, and trying to build some sort of Movement. That's a lot to be tackling all at once, and it's complicated by the fact that the differences within the Tradition of Mutualism has been arguably a bit more complicated than those facing the broader anarchist movement, so that what we have in practice are several new Mutualisms, which have different understandings of the Ideal, different identifications within the Tradition, and different relations to other parts of the Anarchist Movement. So people, both inside and outside the circle of self-proclaimed "Mutualists," can find the situation pretty frustrating. Me, too...

So, under these circumstances, what does it mean to "be a Mutualist"? Let me propose some potential criteria, based on my observations about Anarchism more generally:

1. Our Ideal is Reciprocity of the highest order. References to the Golden Rule are a good place to start, but let's be clear: There's no treating others as we would be treated that falls much short of treating others as the

unique individuals that they are. And there is nothing easy about that sort of standard. We will fail, as often as not. Hopefully, we will also learn, pick ourselves up, and do better the next time. We will try our best to approach our ideal in all sorts of practical circumstances, knowing that, as Proudhon put it, we progress "by approximations." We will build with the understanding that someday soon we'll probably be building again, better, on firmer foundations. At least we're unlikely to be bored...

2. Our Tradition is a rich source of examples of how to apply, and how not to apply, our Ideal. And there's lots of that Tradition still to be unearthed. To "be a Mutualist" is not just to adhere some abstract ideal, but also to identify with the Tradition, diverse as it is, and to make the best possible use of what has been bequeathed to us by the individuals who struggled before us. It's a Tradition which has been appropriated and used by other traditions, often in ways which obscure or misrepresent it, and it is not always the sort of tradition that will inspire comfort for those associating with it, particularly in an era dominated by more-or-less fundamentalist politics. But it is a rich tradition, full of unexplored and unexploited resources. Those who attempt to claim the name, but obscure that wealth, should not necessarily expect to be welcomed.

3. After all, our Movement is, in many important ways, still to come. Because of the multiple labors facing Mutualists at the moment, and because sometimes these labors feel more than a bit Herculean, it would be nice if they did not also feel *Sisyphean*. One of the most difficult aspect of the reluctant school-building I've taken on with regard to Mutualism has been the balancing act between making clarifying the Tradition, suggesting a somewhat different relation to the Ideal, and maintaining a sort of general solidarity with those who approach those things differently. It probably isn't obvious to many of the folks embracing the Mutualist label at this point what combination of brute force and restraint has been deployed to keep open a rhetorical space in which "Mutualism" could mean not just something fairly specific, but several fairly specific somethings, but these things don't just happen. All of these elements—including Ideals, Traditions, definitions, rhetorical gestures, gestures of inclusion or exclusion—amount to a kind of shared means of production for continuing to produce Mutualism, and if there is going to continue to be such a thing we need to practice a bit of careful stewardship with regard to our available resources. Sometimes that means nothing more than being careful when we speak for "The Movement," when we say "we" instead of "I," or "is" instead of "could be."

More—or perhaps just more explicitly—than other Anarchist schools, Mutualism is probably always going to be a little bit stuck between an Ideal that

constantly outruns us and a series of practical Approximations about which we can never be too smug. While our critics think of Mutualism as the *milquetoast* version of Anarchism, I would challenge would-be Mutualists to think of it as a particularly demanding, *high-risk* approach, a very *anarchistic* Anarchism, refusing the archies of the community and of the market.

Sunday, January 27, 2013

## Anarchy is order! (Wait! What?)

I have often seen the phrase "anarchy is order" attributed to Proudhon—and to Bakunin, and Bellarrigue, and Elisee Reclus, and a French singer-songwriter named Leo Ferre. Often the phrase is actually Bellegarrigue's ("Anarchy is order; government is civil war") or the phrase "Anarchy is order without power," cited as appearing in the *Confessions of a Revolutionary*. That latter phrase does not seem to appear in that book (and I've searched pretty carefully) and it doesn't really sound all that much like Proudhon. There are a number of places where he talked about the relationship between anarchy and order, and lots of places where he talked about the fact that liberty is the principle (or "mother," in the famous phrase) of order. Curiously, though, the closest I could come to the actual phrase so often cited was this passage from *The General Idea of the Revolution:*

Croit-on qu'on lieu de rétablir les justices seigneuriales et les parlements sous d'autres noms et d'autres formes, de refaire l'absolutisme en le baptisant du nom de Constitution, d'esservir les provinces comme auparavant, sous prétexte d'unité et de centralisation; de sacrifier de nouveau toutes les libertés, en leur donnant pour compagnon inséparable un prétendu *ordre public*, qui n'est qu'anarchie, corruption et force brutale; croit-on, dis-je, qu'ils n'eussent acclamé le nouveau régime, achevé la révolution, si leur regard avait pénétré dans cet organisme que leur instinct cherchait, mais que l'état des connaissances et les préoccupations du moment ne leur permettaient pas de deviner?...

The passage has been translated as:

Can it be believed that, instead of reestablishing the seignorial courts and the parliaments under other names and other forms, of re-erecting abolutism after baptising it with the name of the Constitution, of enslaving the provinces as before, under the pretext of unity and centralization, of sacrificing all liberties, by giving them for an inseparable companion a pretended public order,

which is but confusion, corruption and brute force—can it be believed, I say, that they would not have welcomed the new order, and completed the Revolution, if their sight had penetrated the organism which their instinct sought, but the state of knowledge and the distractions of the moment did not permit them to conceive?

The French reminds us that even as late as 1851, Proudhon often still used the word "anarchie" to describe disorder, so here we have a claim that "order... is only anarchy," but it is a "so-called public order" which is "only anarchy, corruption and brutal force." John Beverley Robinson, in his translation, chose to render "anarchie" as "confusion" in this case, and the title of the section in which the passage appears, "Anarchie des forces économiques," as "Chaos of Economic Forces."

Robinson may have rendered a service at the time, but it's one of a number of similar decisions that probably trip up us a bit now, when arguably it would be nice *not* to be shielded from all the tensions in Proudhon's work. I think that *The General Idea*, which is, I think, generally considered one of Proudhon's least controversial works, but which comes from a period where he was certainly not averse to bold, complex statements (such as the infamous *The Revolution as Demonstrated by the Coup d'Etat of December 2*), might read rather differently as an anarchist text in which "anarchy" as often as not means disorder.

Unpacking this sort of potential contradiction in arguably "foundational" texts is, of course, a sort of high-risk enterprise, for a variety of reasons. But my sense is that we have every opportunity to gain from the encounter. Our current sense of the significance of these texts, however well or ill-founded is already a string to our bow. Nothing says that the understanding we have built is worthless, even if it turns out it wasn't quite what Proudhon had in mind. And nothing commits us to whatever else we find in a rereading and rethinking. I think it is probably inevitable that our readings of historical texts will tend to have a double character anyway, with a present-oriented interpretation working alongside whatever we are able to glean about the contexts of composition and original composition. A text like *The General Idea* is fairly comfortably ensconced in the anarchist literature at this point, despite the many strange elements it contains. Perhaps our understanding would be opened up by treating it as it appears to have been originally presented: a work in which two visions of "anarchy" must almost certainly have been in play. I wouldn't be surprised if there was another *antinomy*—another of those productive contradictions Proudhon was so fond of—to be grasped in the play of *anarchies* and *order*.

Monday, February 04, 2013

## Collective force and the problem of authority

God, philosophy says finally, is, from the ontological point of view, a conception of the human mind, the reality of which it is impossible to deny or affirm authentically;—from the point of view of humanity, a fantastic representation of the human soul raised to the infinite. — Proudhon, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*

In Proudhon's writings we encounter the notion that what lies behind the most durable examples of *authority*—chief among them the famous pair, God and the State—is, in fact, collective force. It is *our own* force, the force of *society* or *humanity*, to which we attribute a "higher" power and authority when we encounter it.

This notion has two important elements:

1. We really do encounter *something*, for which we need to account, since it is tied up with ourselves;
2. We are mistaken in associating these manifestations of collective force with a *higher* realm than our own, and attributing *authority* to them.

But having recognized manifestations of collective force as such, we would also be mistaken to assume that these organized collective beings have interests and reasons which are necessarily similar to, or compatible with, our own individual interests and reasons.

If we try to think about what anti-authoritarianism looks like in the context of this analysis, perhaps the majority of our concerns can be addressed by adjusting what actors we recognize and how we recognize them. We need to demystify notions like God and State, but we can't deny the organized bodies of collective force that do in fact exist. We need to be rid of the real "spooks," and learn to confront our own power when we find it coming around to meet us in slightly alien form—without elevating it as either a god or a demon. We need to learn how to benefit from the "collective reason" of these collective beings, and we need to learn how to come together differently when that reason, and the interests that go with it, are inimical to our own, and to the principles of justice and equality. There are lots of ways to approach this complicated set of tasks, some of which would answer to familiar names like "anti-statism," but probably not in the ways they do at present. The temptation to elevate Humanity in the place of God has largely passed us, but maybe not so with Society, or Nature, or the Market. And perhaps we still engage in a bit of idolatry in the ways we demonize the State.

For those who like clarity, without fundamentalist reduction, there may be some appeal in this focus on correctly identifying forces, on demystification, and on the leveling/*horizontalizing* of our critical framework—even if it runs counter to a lot of our current critical language and logic. There's nothing simple about the practical integration of these mute-but-powerful collective actors into our anarchism, but perhaps the difficulties will seem less as we really grapple with the theoretical problem.

Tuesday, February 12, 2013

## Statism: It's not just for dentists anymore...

The story of anarchist *anti-statism* turns out to have an unexpected wrinkle, in which that tale crosses another story of anarchists and terminology that is rather bizarre. In attempting to clarify Proudhon's treatment of "government" and "the state," it has been necessary to follow those terms through a rather large number of texts and context, which add up to a rather dizzying number of uses, in order to draw some general conclusions about the shift in Proudhon's thought from what we might now think of as an *anti-statist* position to an analysis in which we find room for an *anarchist state*, but none for any *governmental principle*. Part of the difficulty has, of course, been the close association of anarchism with *anti-statism* in the present, which leads us to believe that Proudhon should have been an *anti-statist*, and leads us to take his strong critiques of the state, in texts like "Resistance to the Revolution," as evidence that he was a foe of *statism* at first, and then changed his mind.

The problem is that *statism* (*étatisme*) was not only not a keyword for Proudhon, but it does not seem to have been a keyword for much of anyone—in the sense generally given to it by anarchists—until the 1890s or so. Proudhon was among those who spoke of *governmentalism* (*gouvernementalisme*) as early as the 1840s, but *statism* does not seem to have become a common term among anarchists until the twentieth century, probably as much as a result of discussion of Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* as anything else (although that book was apparently not translated into either French or English until relatively late in the century.)

Among non-anarchists, *statism* appears as in the nineteenth century as another word for *statecraft* or *state's rights*, and *statist* appears as a synonym for *statistician*.

*Statism* also appears as a word meaning something like a tendency to immobility. For example, in *The Dental Cosmo*s in 1882, we find that:

"Every atom has a side of energy and a side of statism. When we find it awakened into energy we do not know the immediate cause of its awakening."

Here, however, we are not dealing with an origin in English or French, but with a word from Alwato, coined by Stephen Pearl Andrews and included in his serialized essay on "The Science of Universology" in *The Index* in the 1870s—and our tale has come back around to an anarchist's use of the term *statism*, but hardly the one we might expect. The connection to dentistry is an interesting one, and traces to a brief and very local enthusiasm for Alwato and universology among a couple of dentists prominent in the debates about dental nomenclature in the late nineteenth century. Among my nearly-completed pamphlets is a surprisingly large collection of articles from the dental journals relating to the adoption of Andrews' terminology....

Sunday, March 31, 2013

## Closing a chapter

I've been doing a lot of wrestling for some time now with my place in the universe of anarchism, and contemplating the best way to perhaps get a useful hearing for the insights of my last decade or so of thought and research. While much remains unclear, the one thing that seems clearest to me at this point is that my reluctant role as mutualist movement-builder is almost certainly a misapplication of the talents I possess, and that the specifically mutualist context probably detracts from what are arguably broader insights about anarchist theory and history. So while I may yet have a lot of thinking and writing to do about mutualism and mutualists, and while, ultimately, the most radical and useful things I find at the heart of the anarchist project are essentially what I have been calling "two-gun mutualism," I am inclined to do my best from here on out to leave the label behind me. Two-gun mutualism was always intended as a transitional program anyway. I'm just transitioning a little sooner.

Monday, April 01, 2013

## Beyond Mutualism

It's really not an April Fool's joke: I'm preparing to leave "mutualism" behind as the way I describe my politics. It's a reinvention that I have been contemplating for a long time, but there are obviously associated costs, given the amount of energy I've invested in attempting to restore the good name of the anarchism of Proudhon and Co. I certainly stand by all of that work—which will naturally go on, though in a somewhat different context.

Mutualism was always unstable ground on which to try to build. You can go back to some of the very first posts on this blog and find Kevin Carson, Larry Gambone and I attempting to clarify the various things that "mutualism" means and has meant, or look at my more recent work on "the ungovernability of anarchism" to see some more mature thoughts on those same complexities. I have no doubt that there might well be some good work left in that much-contested political label, but my own personal experience is that the costs of keeping the term viable seem to be—at this point in time, and for me—considerably higher than the benefits of continuing to fly it as a flag.

In important ways, the battle that Kevin, Larry and I were engaged in when this blog launched—the struggle to restore mutualism to its proper place among the anarchist traditions—has been rather spectacularly won. The hegemony of the sort of anarchist history which simply sidelines mutualism has largely broken down, and the strong arguments in its defense—anarchist history of the *Black Flame* school, for example—can't simply rely on general agreement. The work to restore Proudhon to his place in the anarchist canon is well underway, and a wide range of more-or-less mutualist figures now enjoy at least a certain amount of name recognition. Ben Godwin's mutualist banner, featuring Proudhon, Ezra Heywood, William B. Greene, Jeanne Deroin, Dyer D. Lum, Herman Kuehn, Alfred B. Westrup, Clarence Swartz and Sidney H. Morse, has become a sort of stock visual representation of the school—and if anarchists are still hazy about what some of those folks actually accomplished, we've still come a long way from where we were even a few years ago. Iain McKay and Crispin Sartwell have done their share in exposing wider audiences to key figures, and Charles Johnson, Roderick Long, and others—some of them some distance outside the traditional limits of the anarchist movement—have done important work, broadening and enriching that canon. I like to think I've done a little myself, with my archiving, translating and publishing endeavors, as well as in the various attempts at interpretation and extension of mutualist theory that I've engaged in.

But one of the problems with the contemporary mutualisms or neo-mutualisms has been the fact that they have necessarily had one foot in a still-obscure past and one in some boldly projected future. We ended up with a variety of rather unlike things bearing the same "mutualist" label because the

burial of the original mutualisms had been fairly complete. As a result, we uncovered the mutualist tradition in roughly reverse historical order. First came the Tuckerite footnote, then the adaptation by Greene, and only later any real engagement with the philosophy and social science of Proudhon, his contemporaries or his predecessors. All of the modern confusions of Carsonian vs. neo-Proudhonian vs. proto-communist mutualism have quite naturally been the result—and all sorts of more-or-less organization tensions have naturally followed from them.

That—from my perspective, at least—is how the costs of this whole "mutualist" thing have come to soar well above the level of its benefits.

But there is another problem with the mutualist renaissance, which we might call a sort of "retrospective" character. While I think all the active currents of new mutualist thought present at least pieces of a fairly powerful strategy for moving forward—and indeed share a great deal in those terms—it is almost inescapable that a revived mutualism would be seen, and to some degree see itself, in terms of an anarchist history which, if it has significantly relaxed its strictures against mutualism, still treats mutualism as a particular school, with a particular, largely preliminary role to play in the development of anarchism. Subsequent developments in the tradition have established what is important about mutualism in terms of their disagreements and differences, and it has been the hardest of tasks to simply present the philosophies of the early-to-mid 19th century on their own terms and in their own vocabulary. (Think, for example, of the critiques which claim that Proudhon abandoned anarchism by "abandoning" an anarchist anti-statism which arguably wasn't even a *thing* for another decade or two.) We're encouraged to think of mutualism as what is left of anarchism when all the cool, revolutionary stuff has been claimed by other traditions, when it might make as much sense to say what mutualism was before we chopped it up, parceled it out, and did our level best to *govern* it. I'm perfectly happy to take things that far, but even if we didn't, there are lots of questions we might raise about whether our present tendency to define anarchistic schools according to the institutions and conventions they privilege or prohibit is faithful to the original vision of anarchist anti-authoritarianism that we all ultimately inherited. And then there are simply practical concerns that arise when we allow a contemporary political philosophy to be defined by the 19th century approximations that its historical proponents themselves understood as experimental and "approximate." There are lots of useful things that might be said about "mutual banking," Josiah Warren's "time store" or particular formulations of "occupancy and use" property norms, but they aren't, alas, the things that there has been much opportunity to say in the usual debates.

One of the results of the deeper and deeper delving into the history of mutualism has been a steady chipping away at most of the accepted wisdom about the tradition, and the neo-mutualists that have attempted to delve and build at the same time have naturally created difficulties for themselves. Our

story, once freed from the dismissive narratives of mutualism's would-be gravediggers and successors, leads off in dozens of interesting directions, many of them unexpected, and we find "mutualism" dissolving off into a lot of different stories, some of which (like the role of women in early mutualist associations) those intent on dismissing mutualism might not be so pleased—or at least consistent—to silence. But mutualism does indeed dissolve in those expanding histories—at least to a very great extent—and we are left with something more general, and potentially more interesting: an anarchism that looks more than just a bit different from our own.

I have often talked about the necessity, in the work on property, of solving the problem of our basic opposition to property by confronting it seriously and *pushing through*. That has ultimately been my experience with mutualism as well. It has been necessary to take it on, and take it very seriously, in order to *push through* and see what sort of anarchism might be hidden on the other side. The realization that I might be most of the way *through* mutualism has been dawning on me as I have begun work on *Two-Gun Mutualism: Rearmed*, increasingly conscious that the very last thing I'm interested in doing is establishing yet another anarchistic "school" or identity, another way of disciplining the tradition. That way, it seems to me, lies the same old shit, the very stuff that often makes me ready to discard anarchism altogether.

But there is this body of accumulated work, much of which seems useful or even important, all laid out in the book outline, and no shortage of loose ends hanging here on the blog, so what does a shift away from mutualism mean for ongoing projects?

My hope is to proceed so that none of the really good stuff gets abandoned, but everything that does get pursued gets a more useful treatment than I can be certain of giving it in the context of a more-or-less partisan mutualist work of theory or history. And I think that moving away from the specific mutualist context will remove some obstacles to making sense of my work, which, after all, has come to cover a lot of territory that is not "mutualist" by any stretch of the imagination. Some of the fun of organizing the book has been *precisely* the partisan nature of it, the audacious project of retelling early anarchist history in a way which ought to have repercussions for the way we think of anarchist history in general—the "Proudhon's revenge" element. But arguably all of that sort of fun will be clearer—and stripped of at least some partisan silliness—if it is a question simply of reexamining anarchist history, without the mutualist lens. There is more than enough of interest in all the variations of what we might call "pre-classical" anarchism and the lingering influence of the "utopian" predecessors, without making a mutualist history, and there are a variety of elements that it will be easier to represent fairly, on their own terms, if there is no partisan lens at all.

Historical objectivity being out of the question, of course, my current plan for a reorganized *TGM: Rearmed* is attempt as much as possible to rely on that other anarchism which seems to be lurking in our anarchist past as the lens. Of

course, anarchism has been what it has been and will be whatever we make of it, and to avoid as much as possible the "true anarchism" debates, I'm inclined to steal a word from Claude Pelletier and call the lens-anarchism "atercracy," and treat the unabashedly revisionist history as a sort of alternate timeline, a series of historically grounded speculations on what might have been, in the interest of carving out another usable historical account from the same material as the one that a resurgent mutualism has struggled against. If I do the sort of minimal reorganization I'm currently envisioning, the first volume will be rechristened something like *The Spirit of '58*, and focus on the story I've already begun telling in piecemeal fashion, from Etienne de la Boetie to the Paris Commune, with Proudhon and Déjacque situated at center stage, emphasizing the constructive side of anarchism. And then the second volume, *Dancing with St. Ravachol*, can address the more strictly negative side of anarchism, reaching back to at least Déjacque and Coeurderoy and forward into at least the 20th century. In the process of telling the story—and its various *might-have-beens*—the bits of *TGM: Rearmed* that at least some people are anticipating—the material on the "gift-economy of property" and "Proudhon for lovers"—will undoubtedly find their place, or be published separately.

Ultimately, and other concerns aside, the shift in focus will probably give me a better platform from which to spin off various other bits of radical history, like the oft-delayed *Rogues* radical biography project and some introductory author anthologies. *The Mutualist* will be a casualty of the adjustment, but I expect mutualism.info will receive the same sort of intermittent development that it has in the past.

I'm sure there will be lots of complications and concerns to deal with as I extricate myself from a familiar context and set out on a somewhat new course, but I've reached a point where I don't see—for myself—any way forward which does not involve a broadening of context.

I'll post links to whatever follow-up sites emerge, and to the *Travels in the Libertarian Labyrinth* volumes as they are completed. Beyond that, things will probably wind down here pretty quickly. Thanks to those who have followed along.

Monday, April 15, 2013

## Instead of a Book... a Different Book

With the essay on Proudhon and the state finally in the hands of the reviewers, I've been able to think a little more seriously about what portions of the *Two-*

*Gun Mutualism: Rearmed* book are both of general interest and unlikely to be better dealt with in the context of the *Atercracy* project. After recontextualizing and "rebranding," there is still a basic study of Proudhon's thought and its modern application that remains to be written. Here's a tentative outline of the "replacement" text:

EVERYTHING IN THE BALANCE:
Exploring the Theory and Practice of Proudhonian Anarchism

Introduction: The Long Road Back to Proudhon

Part One: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: An Introduction and Restoration
I. The Philosophy of Progress
    Two Kinds of Truth
    The Nature of the Revolution
II. Anarchism: Critical, Constructive and Ungovernable
III. Absolutes and Free Absolutes: Proudhon's Theory of Beings
IV. In the Balance: Proudhon's Theory of Justice

Part Two: Neo-Proudhonian Explorations
I. A Gift Economy of Property
II. State and Market as Collective Beings
III. Proudhon for Lovers
IV. Thinking Like an Anarchist
There are also a few purely practical observations on topics like occupancy and use, mutual banking, and the cost principle that I want to eventually write up, and those will probably appear on the mutualism.info blog.

Tuesday, April 16, 2013

## The future of the Libertarian Labyrinth archive

There's been a sort of elegiac quality to many of the responses to my recent change in focus and keywords. For me, although there are obviously costs involved with shifting from rhetorical ground that I've invested a lot in, the changes almost all seem like upgrades and improvements. It's a question of making the body of work I've done and the body of materials I've collected as useable as possible. That seems to mean a less partisan focus for the writing and the continuation of some ongoing improvements in the archives. Last year's

big project was to improve the citations for materials in the Labyrinth wiki, and the additions of COinS metadata to a large number of articles. This year's move from a Mediawiki-based archive to one built on the Omeka platform means that cataloging data will take center stage, allowing me to begin to specialize the archive for research purposes. I've been wanting to bring together my various bibliographic projects for some time, and Omeka seems to be the right platform to do that. Omeka also provides much greater control over text formatting, so it will be possible to present the documents in the archive with more of their original formatting intact, and makes it easy to attach pdf/A file facsimiles where that seems most appropriate. It has a powerful, if complex, advanced search system, which will let researchers zero in more closely on the desired records. In fact, making the most of the system's capacities will probably be an ongoing project. The raw catalog may be a little less inviting to casual browsers than the wiki, but the ability to build exhibits will mean that I will fairly quickly be able to give the key collections a rather attractive presentation. Indeed, the ability to more easily curate and display individual authors' *oeuvres*, the content of particular magazines, or annotated texts (etc.) will free me up to use the catalog not just as a text repository, but as the bibliographic reference that I've angling towards for some time. At the same time, a developing partnership with my friends at The Anarchist Library means that some materials from the archive will also get distribution there, and in a little more systematic manner than we've managed so far. We're currently working together on improving the cataloging system for both sites, with vague visions of anarchist union catalogs no doubt dancing in various heads.

I'm hoping for a sort of Grand Opening about June 1. There are 2000+ wiki articles and blog posts to at least look over, in order to migrate all the texts currently available to the new archive, and there are indexes and finding aids to update. There are hard decisions to be made about metadata schemes and maybe a little reprogramming of some plugins to be done. But there is already a lot of information on the new site, with over 1000 bibliographic entries migrated and more texts input each day, and I would be interested in any feedback on the general look and feel of the place.

Sunday, May 12, 2013

## Everything in the Balance

I've had a chance recently to reread some old and in-progress translations from Proudhon's writings about philosophy, and naturally the impact of those writings changes as my understanding of Proudhon's larger project grows. But

I'm honestly a little embarrassed that the material from the opening sections of *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* hasn't made a stronger impression on me before now. Those sections, which discuss the nature and purpose of philosophy, the role of metaphysics, the accessibility of philosophical thought to the masses, and the relation of philosophy to justice, make a fairly remarkable set of arguments, many of which are what we would now probably call *anti-foundationalist* in character. In *The Philosophy of Progress*, Proudhon described his project in terms of an *opposition to the absolute* and an *affirmation of progress*, and challenged the idea of a criterion of certainty. In Justice, he asserts his criterion for, well, just about *everything*, and it turns out to be *justice*, understood as *balance*—and specifically as a balance between terms assumed to be equal in standing. The "anarchic encounter between equally unique individuals" turns out to be form of even the most basic exercises in gathering knowledge.

I encourage anyone interested in Proudhon's thought to read that material, and apologize in advance for some minor, but nearly all obvious, defects in the current form of the translation. More specifically, I encourage anyone who does read it to be open to the more extreme implications of this business of taking balance as the criterion—as the closest thing to a foundation that perhaps we have. If we understand the mature, post-*coup d'état* Proudhon as starting by placing *everything* in the balance of justice, then I think that while the difficult, later works do not become any easier to grapple with, we can at least more easily eliminate some of the preconceptions which hinder our engagement with them.

Friday, May 17, 2013

## Proudhon on method, and the "system" of society

[The bolded section is a great bit of clarification by Proudhon.]

*Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*
from the Study on Ideas

LVIII. — *System of public reason, or social system.*

How many times have I heard addressed this compliment that the jealous critic would undertake, for the honor of the century, to withdraw, if he comprehended its scope: You are an admirable destroyer, but you do not build

anything. You throw people in the road, and you do not offer them the least assistance. What do you put in the place of religion? What do you put in place of government? What do you put in place of property? One says to me now: What are you putting in place of this individual reason, which, for the need of your cause, you are reduced to deny the sufficiency?

Nothing, my good man, for **I intend to suppress none of the things of which I have made such a resolute critique. I flatter myself that I do only two things: that is, first, to teach you put each thing in its place, after having purged it of the absolute and balanced it with other things; then, to show you that the things that you know, and that you have such fear of losing, are not the only ones that exist, and that there are considerably more of which you still must take account.** Of this order is the collective reason.

One asks what is the true system, the natural, rational, legitimate system of society, since none of those previously tested were resistant to the secret action that disrupts them. This has been the constant preoccupation of socialist philosophers, from the mythological Minos to the director of the Icarians. As we had no positive idea of Justice, nor of the economic order, nor of social dynamics, nor of the conditions of philosophical certainty, a monstrous idea has been made of the social being: it has been compared to a large organization, created according to a formula of hierarchy which, prior to Justice, was his own law and the very condition of its existence; it was like an animal of a species mysterious, but which, following the example of all animals known, should have a head, heart, nerves, teeth, feet, etc. From this chimera of an organism, which all have tried their best to discover, Justice was then deduced, that is to say that one attempted to make morality emerge from physiology or, as they say today, right from duty, so that Justice was still placed outside of conscience, freedom subject to fatalism, and humanity fallen.

I have refuted in advance all these imaginations, by exposing the facts and principles which exclude them forever.

With respect to the substantiality and organization of the social being, I have shown the first in that surplus of effective power which is proper to the group, which exceeds the sum of individual forces that comprise it; I gave the law of the second, showing that it reduces itself to a series of the weightings of forces, services and products, which makes the social system a general equation, a balance. That organism, society, the moral being *par excellence*, differs essentially so much from living beings, in which the subordination of organs is the law of existence. That is why society is averse to any notion of hierarchy, and thus made the formula: All men are equal in dignity by nature and must become equivalent in conditions through work and Justice.

Now, as a being is organized, such will be its reason: that is why, while the reason of the individual affects the form of a genesis, as can be seen by all the theogonies, gnoses , political constitutions, syllogistics; collective reason reduces itself, like algebra, by the elimination of the absolute, to a series of resolutions and equations, which means that there is really not, for society, a system.

It is not a system, indeed, in the sense that usually attaches to this word, but an order in which all relations are relations of equality, where there exists neither rule nor obedience, neither center of gravity nor of direction; where the only law is that everyone abide by Justice, i.e., balance.

Does mathematics constitute a system? It does not fall into anyone's mind to say so. If, in a treatise of mathematics, some trace of systematization is detected, it is due to the author, not at all the science. It is thus in the social reason.

Two men meet, recognize their dignity, state the additional benefit that would result for both from the concert of their industries, and consequently guarantee equality, which means economy. There is the whole social system: an equation, and then a power of collectivity.

Two families, two cities, two provinces, contract on the same footing: there is always only these two things, an equation and power of collectivity. It would involve a contradiction, a violation of Justice, if there were anything else.

Tuesday, June 04, 2013

## The Pleasures and Perils of "Getting Back to Basics"

I've talked a bit, in this period of personal and political transition, about the effects of working backwards through the anarchist tradition, "chipping away at ... accepted wisdom." I would hope that the practical difficulties shine through in most of my recent work, whether it is the attempt to grapple with Proudhon's developing notion of the State, in the period before anti-statism was really a *thing*, or the discovery that his idea of "anarchy" may have been a bit more complicated than we generally acknowledge. I'm in the last throes of revising my essay on the State right now, and find myself forced to unlearn nearly as much as I'm learning–as quickly as humanly possible–and then forget parts of what I'm un/learning, temporarily, so that something actually gets written. Some of these maneuvers have been easier than others. Coming to terms with Proudhon's developing property theory was hard, given the importance placed on his famous statement that "property is theft," and filling in the blanks between 1840 and the 1860s took me on a wild ride through his works. Translating *The Philosophy of Progress* and *The Celebration of Sunday* gave me some important signposts for mapping Proudhon's general itinerary, and some more recent dips into his collected correspondence have confirmed that Proudhon himself recognized a major transition–what he called, in what is *perhaps* a bit of characteristic overstatement, a "complete transformation"–in

the period immediately following the *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon, a shift from *critical* to *constructive* work.

One of the more disorienting experiments of the last few months has been attempting to take Proudhon at his word–at least provisionally–when he declares property defeated, "never to rise again," at the beginning of a life-long examination of the problems involved with it, or when he makes these claims about "complete transformation" in his work. With some real confidence about the broad trajectory of his project–drawn from those signposts he himself left us–I've been trying to entertain a wide range of possibilities with regards to the details, reading and rereading texts with an eye to the fine points, particularly concerned with the patterns of keyword-use, and the places where they might break down.

I didn't really expect *anarchy* to be as troublesome a notion as it has become, despite a long-standing suspicion that, for Proudhon, it was not *quite* the same, absolutely central concept that it has become for those of us who have inherited the tradition. Anyone who even dabbles in anarchist history can cite examples of anarchists using "anarchy" to mean disorder, since the term was not widely used for self-identification until late in the 19th century. But in *The General Idea of the Revolution*, where he paid quite a bit of explicit attention the senses in which various terms should be understood, and where he used the term *anarchy* to designate both his political ideal and chaos and "anarchie économique," he went out of his way in two passages to link the two usages, describing the general trajectory of progress in these terms:

> Le premier terme de la série étant donc l'Absolutisme, le terme final, fatidique, est l'*Anarchie*, entendue dans tous les sens.
>
> The first term of the series being thus Absolutism, the final, fateful term is Anarchy, understood in all the senses.

The Robinson translation obscures the range of "senses," of course, which means this troublesome passage has been hidden in plain sight for a long time now. And I have yet to do a sufficiently exhaustive survey of Proudhon's use of the term to be sure of anything, except that the complications are probably not yet exhausted.

It has been an interesting challenge to track the various *critical* and *constructive* uses of notions like *property* and *the State*. It's a little different sort of problem when the keyword that seems to have slipped free from its ideological moorings is *anarchy*. On the one hand, it's extremely *exciting* to think that the old dog perhaps has some "new" tricks to show us, right at the point of its origins. On the other hand, these are the *foundations* we are talking about, and while some of us have been talking about the anti-foundationalist elements in Proudhon's thought for awhile now, I think perhaps we've tended to assume that *anarchy* was going to remain relatively unscathed as things

developed. Instead, it looks like maybe *anarchy* is going to be the site and occasion of some of the most interesting and challenging developments to come.

This is the stuff that was looming on the research horizon as I wrote up the outline for the *Two-Gun Mutualism* book, and it has loomed considerably larger in the meantime–to the extent that I'm pretty sure addressing it, and laying out the nitty-gritty details of how to rig your "occupancy and use" property so that it is ecologically sustainable *and* provides the basis for a traditional mutualist currency (etc.) are probably two separate projects. For better or worse, given what I perceive to be the state of the anarchism movement(s) at the moment, focusing a bit more philosophically on that business of "anarchic encounters between equally unique individuals" has honestly seemed like it was of more immediate and practical use. Thus, *Everything in the Balance*, which will at least be a good, close look at those old "foundations," and the *Atercracy* project–my *Great Leap Sideways*–which will, I hope, let me work around and through this potential "slipping free" on the part of the concept of *anarchy*.

As I mentioned, the ANARCHISMS Project is a sort of bridge, built of as many individual conceptions of *anarchism* and *anarchy* as I can assemble, with the goal of highlighting at least some of the dizzying complexity that the tradition has either suffered or enjoyed, depending on your perspective, in the historical archive. But one of the rules of *that* game is that the texts included will be in at least some very broad sense *orthodox* and also fairly *programmatic*. That still leaves a lot of the material I've been dealing with–all the near-misses, close cousins, precursors, experiments, and roads-not-taken that the Libertarian Labyrinth was originally created to document–outside the envelope. The project can provide a much-extended variety of anarchist canon, a body of evidence in support of the hypothesis of the *ungovernability* of the anarchist tradition, but it is ultimately still a project about *what "*anarchism*" is*, even if it seems likely to open that question up to a range of interesting concerns.

There is, arguably, another sort of ungovernability lurking beyond the concerns I have addressed so far, the fact that the events of history seldom really conform to our after-the-fact categorizations, which pretty much always seem to beg *some* question or questions which perhaps we should address. There are specifically anarchistic theoretical concerns about how we deal with "raw" history, some of them relating to the way Proudhon conceptualized "the Revolution" in works like his famous "Toast." But, honestly, there are also just plenty of indications that we've been pretty slipshod and ideologically-driven in the way we have dealt with our own tradition–as well as indications that we can do better.

So I'm in the midst of *trading up* (as I see it) a bunch of interesting, but presently also very frustrating, questions and conflicts within the little world of resurgent "mutualisms" for some more basic questions about how we got to the place in our questioning and conflicting that we occupy today–questions about the various things that Proudhon meant by "anarchy," about Dejacque's invention of the "you're just a liberal" attack, about "anarchists" who never

claimed, or explicitly rejected, the label, about the failures and missteps of the tradition, and about the bits and pieces of anarchism scattered far and wide in the most unlikely places. I want to take one big step to the side and look at the histories from which we have gleaned "the tradition" in a context where nobody needs to worry that it's an ideological attack–or the end of everything–if it turns out that things weren't really the way we "remember."

*Anarchism is what it is*, and, warts and potential misconceptions and all, *anarchism is where I've chosen to stand my ground politically*. But I hope that perhaps this other thing–this Atercracy–this sort of parallel-Earth reflection of often-familiar events, may have some potential to enrich the anarchist tradition.

Thursday, June 20, 2013

## Assembling the New Toolkit

There's been a long and rather pregnant pause between the decision that I really needed to adjust the way I was approaching my work and the beginning of the new phase. Honestly, I really enjoy those periods where you realize that everything you think you know about the things you really care about is just a little (crucial) bit wrong, particularly when the realization has been dawning for some time. It's best just to get these things out in the open and let the situation breathe, so you can move on. But those times are also terrifying, and the waiting can be exhausting—and as often as not you don't get to them with much left in the tank in the first place.

The silver lining of my particular recent crisis is that it has put me in a place where I can feel both a bit *expert* and a bit *out of my depth*—which is an exhilarating mix, but also perhaps precisely the sort of place that you might expect someone who really espoused the "anarchism of approximations," which has absorbed so many of my waking hours for a fair number of years, now to live. Presently, I'm a little uncertain just what "anarchism" is—but I'm pretty certain that an uncertainty of that sort is an appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, part of *being an anarchist* (assuming *an anarchist* is something that one can *be*.)

When I started to explore mutualism, there was the feeling that I had stumbled onto some strange and fascinating variation on the social anarchism I knew, and it gradually dawned on me that the variation really made everything I knew vary in important ways, but at first the realizations were largely contextual. Exploring mutualism was largely a matter of rethinking that "anarchism" thing and getting the contents and contexts straightened out, in

accordance with a huge body of new information that I was constantly working my way through. But eventually, of course, the contextual adjustments not only began to raise some rather difficult questions about the content of "anarchism" as I had inherited it, but they made me think that perhaps, had I been paying the sort of careful attention that I like to think I do, they should have confronted me with this potential "slipping from the moorings" much sooner.

Oh, well. "Slow, but steady..."

Anyway, tardily or not, I've reached a point in my encounter with anarchism, particularly as it emerged in the thought of Proudhon, where I want to really pursue my previously stated belief that the first explicit anarchist was "more consistent than complete" in a series of studies here on this blog, while I look at a more *complete*, but less *consistent* canon of figures than we usually associate with "anarchism" on a new radical history blog. Over time, the two projects will converge, but that convergence is another matter than should probably be allowed to *breathe*, to have the benefit of its own long, fruitful interval.

What the two projects will have in common is their shared origin in the studies that I've undertaken here, and in the body of concepts and concerns that I have been assembling, sometimes no doubt with insufficient clarity, in that work. In order to simplify what will undoubtedly be a complex set of moves, and to make it easier for readers who have not been along for the whole, long ride this far, it makes sense to do some clarifying.

Let's start with some basic vocabulary:

*Ungovernability*—For Proudhon, it was "government" or "the principle of authority" that was the thing to strive against, whatever form it took. Real associations respond only to their own, internal laws. Society, if it is based in association, is ungovernable. Anarchy cannot be less so.

*Anarchy*—Let's save this word, in the context of the blog at least, for our (anti-)political ideal, our "blazing star" in that realm. We'll call our ideologies and the various traditions that we have constructed, or might construct around them *Anarchisms*.

*Mutualism*—While the term has come to represent a really wide, perhaps unmanageably wide, range of positions, if I use the term here, assume that I mean something fairly close to the position I staked out for the "two-gun" variation:

Mutualism is not a specific social, political or economic system. It is—at its core—an ethical philosophy. We begin with *mutuality* or *reciprocity*—the Golden Rule, more or less—and then seek to apply that principle in a variety of situations. As a result, under mutualism every meaningfully *social* relation will have the form of an anarchic encounter between equally unique individuals—free absolutes—no matter what layers of convention we pile on it. To the extent that our conventions, institutions and norms respect that basic premise, we can call them "mutualist." To the extent that we commit ourselves to viewing our relations through this lens, and exert ourselves in the extension of mutualistic

freedom, we can call ourselves "mutualists." We don't take anarchy lightly and understand that archic relationships and coercive force come in lots of varieties, and the *exertion* matters—if mutuality is reduced simply to an outcome of this or that system, mutualism as such almost certainly disappears.

And recall that I had characterized the practice of that mutualism as a matter of *Approximation*. If we can count on change as one of our few constants, if we have joined Proudhon in a commitment to *Progress* and against the *Absolute*, then we can't get too cozy with any of our institutional arrangements.

If we agree that the *Antinomy* "does not resolve itself," that productive conflict and contradiction are inevitable, and that *Justice* is a matter of allowing the various potentially warring elements to express themselves fully and in balanced fashion, then we will be on guard for *Simplism*, "the fault of viewing a complex question from only one side, of advancing on one side by retreating on the other, so that the real progress is null or negative."

There are other terms which we will have to assemble, many of them drawn from the works of Proudhon and his contemporaries, while a few have been cobbled together recently to serve perceived needs. But in rechristening this blog I've chosen to unite historical terms and neologisms under the banner of the *Contr'un*, a strange pseudo-French word—meaning something fairly close to "anti-authoritarian"—which appeared as the subtitle to Etienne de la Boetie's *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, and which Pierre Leroux appropriated as one of his keyword in the period from which anarchism emerged.

The term has actually been on the masthead for a long time, in the phrase "the multiplication of free forces is the true contr'un." It's not a phrase I have attempted to explain. Instead, it has been sort of a surveyor's market or blaze, marking a route that I knew the studies here would eventually have to take. I intend to allow this question of "the true contr'un," which we've inherited from Leroux, to remain a bit of a puzzle, at least for awhile, but let's at least start to grapple with its possibilities by returning to Proudhon's critique of governmental absolutism and his theory of collectivities and individualities, and suggest that it is *Justice* that we may expect to oppose the *absolute* One, and that the "organ of justice" is likely to be *social*, but that the social is impossible if there are not *Free Absolutes*, individuals inclined to conflict but capable of striking a balance.

In balance, *One* and *Contr'Un* may finally be, in at least some senses, one and the same.

Tuesday, June 25, 2013

## The Libertarian Labyrinth and the Antinomies of Anarchy

The articles on *ungovernability* were an attempt to deal with a fairly limited problem: we have a limited vocabulary with which to accomplish the work of anti-authoritarian social change, and arguably we have to use the tools at hand carefully. Without delving too deeply here into questions of *traditions, canons*, and *orthodoxies*, we can probably acknowledge that there are both good reasons to exert some measure of control over how broadly the traditional keywords of anarchism are applied, or misapplied, and equally good reasons—especially when we are talking about *anarchism* and *anarchy*—to leave room for those terms to "get away from us" a bit. The thing I've identified as "the Mutualist's Dilemma," the fact that our political identifications tend to associate us with both a largely unknown past and an unpredictable future, is the Anarchist's Dilemma as well, and if the "retrospective" character of anarchist development is considerably less pronounced in the broader movement, it may just be because there is less perceived need to address history at all. When we do attempt to go "back to basics" with any sort of historical perspective, the difficulties seem very familiar.

What the work on *ungovernability* didn't really address is that behind whatever we choose to call "the tradition," there is something even more ungovernable, the raw flood of events from which any sort of historical tradition must be assembled. That's ultimately what I was gesturing at, years back, when I first began to talk about the "libertarian labyrinth." If we do "movement history" or search for the limits of "the tradition," we find ourselves building a sort of ever-more-complex maze around the ideological points we have chosen to focus on, and there's not much choice but to wander back and forth, and back and forth, from the points we think we know down untraveled paths, hoping to find a break in the hedges that will lead us out onto some terrain better adapted to our goals. It's not quite as bad as that might make it sound, of course, since anarchism as we've inherited it isn't such a bad place to be, and even many of the dead ends we might explore in the neighborhood are interesting. A few are, of course, horrifying, but you'll have that. Anarchism is a fairly *high-stakes* endeavor—the sort of thing that can go very badly wrong if it starts to go that way.

In many ways, life within the labyrinth is just life. *Anarchism* is the movement towards *anarchy*, not *just any old thing*, and the struggles over just how that movement is to proceed are to be welcomed, as long as we keep moving forward. Anarchism, too, proceeds by approximation. So I can disagree with the conclusions of a *Black Flame*, while having a great deal of sympathy with at least parts of the project. There is really no question, when the issue is history and tradition, of somehow occupying a space in that "raw flood of events,"

without ideological or historiographic anchors on some firmer terrain—unless, that is, the point is simply to be swept away.

For all my frustrations with the anarchist movement, I don't see any advantages in pulling up anchor in that way. If anything, I'm prepared to push quite a bit harder against the *status quo* on some of the questions surrounding the definition of "anarchism"—but that's where my work as a theorist is, in some important ways, at least temporarily diverging from my work as a historian.

There are two *moments* or *movements* in the sort of history I've been doing. In one of them, the work opens existing generalizations about those *canons, traditions*, and *orthodoxies* to new data and new interpretations of old data, almost inevitably blurring the edges of things. In the other, it's necessary to make decisions about what is wheat and what is chaff. We can think of the process in terms of a progress by approximation, of the creation and recreation of "metaphysical" concepts (in the sense Proudhon gave that term in *Justice*), or perhaps, incorporating a bit more obvious "high theory" (from Georges Bataille, in this case) we could think about the relationship between "the tradition" and the "raw flood" as something like that between *limited* and *general economies* of *anarchism*. This last approach confronts us with the likelihood that there is always some "accursed share," some bit of "raw" anarchist history that must be excluded in order to formulate any given account of the tradition.

Sometimes it seems that the "accursed share" involved in maintaining "the tradition" is an awful lot of what we might otherwise call "anarchist history:" the deviations, heresies, and failures not useful as propaganda tools; the lives of anarchists beyond their political projects and commitments; the near-misses, close cousins, and the anti-authoritarian practices of those who never took on the label, or even fought against "anarchy" or "anarchism," as they understood it; etc.

It's the potentially treacherous, roiling mess of anarchisms, near anarchisms, and unexplored or unclassified potential anarchisms that I want to explore in a new radical history blog, which will launch fairly soon now, under the name "Dispatches from the Revolution—Atercracy." [Now live!] The word "atercracy" is a borrowing from, and tribute to, Claude Pelletier, a French worker exiled after the French Revolution of 1848, who settled in New York City to make artificial flowers and agitate for something fairly close to Proudhonian mutualism in the context of the Union Républicaine de Langue Française. For Pelletier, "atercracy" was another way of saying "anarchy," without the existing connotations of disorder and violence. For the purposes of the next phase of things here, I would like to use the term to signify that "general economy" or "raw flood" of historical events from which we draw our understandings of "anarchism"—and at the same time, over on the new history blog, I would like to make the question of whether or not this or that figure, or institution, or proposal, or event, "is anarchist" at least temporarily off limits. There will be no

shortage of other questions to ponder, as we take on all the material bound to rush in as we pull down that particular wall. And I will undoubtedly be provocatively concrete enough about "anarchism" here on the *Contr'un* blog.

So, that's one terminological monstrosity, which at least has a good, radical pedigree, however unknown it may be to most anti-authoritarian radicals, to mark a continuation of the exploratory project I launched with my first departures into the realm of mutualism and the first Libertarian Labyrinth archive. That leaves the three key-terms so prominently displayed in the header to be clarified, as I stop hemming and hawing here and get things really rolling again.

*Contr'un*, as I've said, is drawn from the subtitle of Etienne de la Boetie's work on voluntary servitude. It has been translated as "anti-dictator" and might, with a little Proudhonian spin, be rendered as something close to "anti-authority." But given all that we know about Proudhon's understanding of individuality and collectivity, his tendency to find antinomic conflict in pretty much everything, and his understanding of human individuals as "free absolutes," we might be tempted to think of the contr'un as a "counter-one," as an *antinomic one*. This *antinomic one* will take some time to describe, as we unpack its various aspects, but it will be the star of the show as I move forward with the work on *Everything in the Balance*. For now, longtime readers (or those interested in searching the archives) can think about what that notion might mean for the "gift economy of property," and how it relates to my flirtations with the thought of Stirner and Pierre Leroux.

The last two terms, *contr'archy* and *guarantism*, are a neologism, derived from an obvious source, and a borrowing from Fourier, but borrowed already by Proudhon, with which I would like to mark two antinomic tendencies of anarchist practice. This first—which might easily have been *contr'anarchism*, were that not an even more barbarous coinage—will designate the tendency of the quest for "full anarchism" to sacrifice everything for the anti-authoritarian principle, while the second—which Proudhon sometimes used as a synonym for *mutualism*—will designate the drive to achieve a material amelioration of conditions, even if, at times, the *approximations* sacrifice the principle in ways that trouble us. At least for now, any *anarchism* seems stuck, in practice, negotiating some path between these two endpoints—striving to find the *balance* that Proudhon called *justice*.

How long these terms remain useful will depend on a variety of factors, but for now I think that there is some use in *making anarchism a little strange*, as well as in identifying a little more specifically the various elements we can expect to deal with in a more-or-less Proudhonian examination of anarchist theory. And the somewhat awkward borrowings from the tradition have their place as well, if only to remind us that even anarchist history and theory may be built on a foundation of suppressed voices. We'll keep at least some of those potentially silenced voices close by here as we make hard choices about anarchist theory.

Thursday, June 27, 2013

## To be a (synthetic, positive) anarchist

I want to turn next to some considerations of Proudhon's keywords, and the development of his use of terminology. This has been a key concern in my previous work on "property," and promises to emerge again as I look at the various things that Proudhon meant by "anarchy," and what then it meant to him to "be an anarchist." There are just a handful of places where he explicitly declared himself an anarchist, the most famous of them being from 1840, in *What is Property?* In 1853, in *The Philosophy of Progress*, he referred to that declaration, clarifying what he intended by it. The explanation is interesting:

"I wrote in 1840 that profession of political faith, as remarkable for its brevity as its energy: *I am an anarchist*. I posited with that word the negation, or rather the insufficiency of the principle of authority... By that I meant, as I later showed, that the notion of authority is only, like the notion of an absolute being, an analytic idea, powerless, from whatever direction one might come at authority, and in whatever manner it is exercised, to give a social constitution. For authority, for politics, I then substituted ECONOMY, a synthetic and positive idea, alone capable, in my opinion, of leading to a rational and practical conception of the social order. However, I did nothing in this but to repeat the thesis of Saint-Simon, so strangely disfigured by his disciples, and combated today, for tactical reasons that I cannot work out, by M. Enfantin. It consists in saying, based on history and the incompatibility of the ideas of authority and progress, that society is on the way to completing the governmental cycle for the last time; that public reason has gained certainty of the powerlessness of politics, with regard to the improvement of the condition of the masses; that the predominance of the ideas of power and authority has begun to be succeeded, in opinion as in history, by that of the ideas of labor and exchange; that the consequence of that substitution is to replace the mechanism of the political powers by the organization of economic forces, etc., etc."

The declaration seems to get a little lost as the clarification wanders off into Saint-Simon's work. He is asserting once again, as he did in his 1849 debate with Louis Blanc, that "*Anarchy* is the condition of existence of adult societies, as *hierarchy* is the condition of primitive societies: there is an incessant progress, in human societies, from hierarchy to anarchy." And he reaffirms his 1840 claim that anarchy is "the form of government that we approach every day." But there are also these philosophical considerations in play—and there is a very interesting shift from "negation" to "insufficiency."

If *being an anarchist* has something to do with the *insufficiency* of the principle of authority, but perhaps not its *negation*, and if it relates to the

"synthetic and positive idea" of "economy," well...? We obviously have some details to fill in.

Is the answer perhaps related to this summary statement from the "Study on Ideas," in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church?*

Two families, two cities, two provinces, contract on the same footing: there is always only these two things, an equation and power of collectivity. It would involve a contradiction, a violation of Justice, if there were anything else.

My inclination is to say that the answer to the question essentially *is* that passage—but for now I want to leave it an open question.

Saturday, June 29, 2013

## The General Idea of the Revolution (partially revised translation)

Since the question of Proudhon's understanding of "anarchy" is complicated by the fact that the English translation of one of the key texts, *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, obscures the range of meanings that term might have, I thought it would be useful to make available a revision of John Beverley Robinson's translation, which at least restores that particular complexity to the text. I have marked portions of the text in bold: first, I've bolded all of the instances in which "anarchie" was originally translated as "chaos," "disorganization," etc., and I have restored the term "anarchy;" second, I have highlighted a few passages where Proudhon either makes comments about how the term "anarchy" should be understood, or where he says things about "anarchy" which it seems to me the range-of-meanings question has particular consequences. The changes are not substantial, at least in terms of the amount of text modified, but I think they raise some very interesting questions, which will perhaps pose some challenges for all of us who have sought, to one degree or another, to build up from a foundation in (or explicitly distinguished from) Proudhon's work.

Sunday, June 30, 2013

## Anarchy, understood in all its senses

"The first term of the series being thus Absolutism, the final, fateful term is Anarchy, understood in all the senses."—Proudhon, *The General Idea of the Revolution*

In order to start to address the question posed in the last post, about what Proudhon meant when he said "*I am an anarchist*," we need to grapple a bit with the thorny question of how consistently he used his various keywords. One of the traditional methods of dealing with the complexities of Proudhon's arguments, including those terminological issues, has been to wave our hands and recall that he was a "man of contradictions," as if *contradiction* wasn't very explicitly a part of his theoretical apparatus, about which he had a lot of fairly specific things to say. I think we can come to considerably clearer terms with Proudhon's method. He left us quite a few explicit guides.

In "Self-Government and the Citizen-State," I made extensive use a distinction Proudhon made in his correspondence between *critical* and *constructive* periods. Let's explicitly add that distinction to the "toolkit" here, and explore some of the ways that it relates to some other concerns regarding the interpretation of Proudhon's work.

I have long emphasized the importance of the shift in Proudhon's use of keywords, marked explicitly in *The Philosophy of Progress,* when he opts to "preserve for new institutions their patronymic names." Early on, Proudhon had mocked Pierre Leroux for believing that "there is property and property,—the one good, the other bad" and insisted that "it is proper to call different things by different names." Hence the "property" vs. "possession" distinction. But he was, at the same time, already beginning to insist on a progressive account of some of his most important keywords—*justice* chief among them—which showed them progressing through radically different stages. Justice, for example, started its journey to more humane forms from beginnings in *force* and *fraud*. Harmonizing his choice and use of terms with his emphasis on *progress* was a critical moment in Proudhon's development, and also, of course, a real stumbling block in understanding that development if we do not take careful account of it. It doesn't explain *everything*, as sometimes it seems Proudhon was simply inconsistent in his choice of words, or tailored his expression to particular audiences, but it does give us another tool to attempt to resolve what may seem like real contradictions in his work (as opposed to productive or provocative *antinomies*.)

The explicit change in approach to keywords occurs roughly at the watershed between *critical* and *constructive* periods. And it is probably simplest to think of that period in the early 1850s precisely as a kind of *watershed*, where the predominance of approaches shifted from criticism to construction. Prior to it, we are *more likely* to see Proudhon's critical project at center stage,

and afterwards, we are *more likely* to see some of his experimental constructions. The work has a tendency, if you will, to *flow* in one direction or the other, despite a mixture of emphases at most points in Proudhon's career.

*The Philosophy of Progress* also provides us with two accounts of truth, which we might distinguish as *critical* and *constructive*. In the first, "the truth in all things, the real, the positive, the practicable, is what changes, or at least is susceptible to progression, conciliation, transformation; while the false, the fictive, the impossible, the abstract, is everything that presents itself as fixed, entire, complete, unalterable, unfailing, not susceptible to modification, conversion, augmentation or diminution, resistant as a consequence to all superior combination, to all synthesis." In the second, "All ideas are false, that is to say contradictory and irrational, if one takes them in an exclusive and absolute sense, or if one allows oneself to be carried away by that sense; all are true, susceptible to realization and use, if one takes them together with others, or in evolution." Together, they correspond to the two phases of the program that Proudhon presented in the "Study on Ideas" in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church:*

I intend to suppress none of the things of which I have made such a resolute critique. I flatter myself that I do only two things: that is, first, to teach you put each thing in its place, after having purged it of the absolute and balanced it with other things; then, to show you that the things that you know, and that you have such fear of losing, are not the only ones that exist, and that there are considerably more of which you still must take account.

Given these explicit indications of Proudhon's method, and context, we should have a pretty good chance of navigating through his texts successfully. We should be on the lookout for any reading which seems to commit us to *simplism*, which does not seem to have a complementary critique or construction lurking somewhere nearby. We might be inclined to anticipate that most keywords will have *absolutist* forms to be critiqued and *balanced* forms to take their place in various experiments and approximations. And that is at least part of what we find—but things get fairly complex fairly quickly, since, beyond all of the *individuals* that are always also *groups*, and the fact that *constructive* concepts only acquire truth in *combinations*, it appears that there really are few, if any exceptions to this rule we have proposed. Even *absolutism* seems to come in *absolutist* and *balanced* forms, forcing us away from any very simple reading of Proudhon's "opposition to the absolute." Even *anarchy* seems to appear in a variety of senses, some of which are perhaps also *absolutist*, and all of which we are presumably to understand, *together*, as the "final, fatal term" of an evolutionary series away from at least *absolute absolutism*. It will be useful to revisit the discussions of *property* and *possession* in this context in the near future, but for now let's at least begin to deal with the problem that's already on the table.

I've started a project—really a formalization of a process I've been using for some time now—assembling collections of all the passages in Proudhon's

collected writings and correspondence where he uses particular keywords. At the moment, I'm working through all of the appearances of the words *anarchie, anarchiste*, and *anarchique*, and their plural forms, and finding some very interesting things, not the least of which is that Proudhon *most often* used those terms to designate "economic" or "mercantile anarchy," which he associated with the goals of the economists, *laissez faire*, decentralization, and *insolidarity*. He also, of course, used the word *anarchy* to designate *self-government*, an English term he opposed to all of the authoritarian, governmental alternatives which would establish the rule of human beings over human beings. There is also the *anarchy* that, at least by 1863 and *The Federative Principle*, he came to think of as a "perpetual desideratum," an ideal form which human approximations would never quite achieve. That has created problems for those concerned with knowing whether or not Proudhon should still be considered "an anarchist." Putting these various notions of *anarchy* together, or deciding that they belong apart, is a project that may occupy us for a while.

I want to approach these questions by first giving Proudhon the benefit of the doubt. He was the guy we credit with first claiming the term, so let's be fairly careful before we decide we can detach him from it. And, of course, this toolkit we're assembling from Proudhon's works is a fairly complicated rig. Ultimately, in order to use Proudhon's work, we have to choose which of the various presentations of that work we're going to begin with, and I want to propose, for our purposes here, to take the works of 1851-1861, roughly as I've described them in "Self-Government and the Citizen-State," as that starting-place. What choosing those works, rather than, say, *What is Property?* or *The System of Economic Contradictions*, or perhaps just *The General Idea of the Revolution* by itself, gives us is precisely the toolkit of explicit writings on philosophy and method, much of which appeared in the period from 1853 to 1858, and enough of the slope on either side of our "watershed" to feel confident we're not missing the general development of things. I am actually fairly confident that the approach from that 1853-8 period is relatively consistent with both earlier and later works, but that's an assumption that is widely contested, with many interpreters differentiating the clear "property is theft" period from any of the more complicated formulations and/or considering the later work on federation as no longer anarchist.

Anyway, if we begin in this period where Proudhon had begun to talk explicitly about his philosophy and method, some questions naturally present themselves. For example, what sort of definition of "anarchy" would meet the criteria for *truth* that he laid out in 1853? Are the difficulties of formulating a *true idea* greater if the notion in question is *anarchism* or *being an anarchist?* Under what circumstances could an *ideology* be *true*, given these criteria? I think that it is fairly uncontroversial to believe that Proudhon, who thought of himself as "the man whose thought always advances, whose program will never be completed," might have had an evolving notion of what it meant to *be an*

*anarchist*, but my sense is that the real problems of interpretation arise from the fact that there are so obviously several ideas in play.

So we have to ask ourselves whether the various, apparently different, meanings of "anarchy" can be accounted for as alternately *critical* and *constructive*, or *absolutist* and *non-absolutist?* Or do some of them perhaps arise in contexts where Proudhon had not clarified his method enough for us to easily apply those definitions? I want to take time in another post to really work through the developing theories of *property* and *possession* in these terms, but I think we can point to a number of possible kinds of relationships between concepts which might have parallels in the treatment of "anarchy, understood in all its senses." For example, in *The Theory of Property*, we find discussions of *property* in its absolutist form, retaining the "right of increase" and the rest of its mystique, and unbalanced by any effective countervailing force. We also find discussions of a *property* which has lost its authority and many of its attendant "rights," as a result of the critique of absolutism, and we find that property balanced by a "State" which has also been stripped of its authority. Alongside these, we find a somewhat negative treatment of *possession*, now understood as equivalent to *fief*, but the issue seems to be that it is now an *approximation* that Proudhon has moved beyond:

But is that the last word of civilization, and of right as well? I do not think so; one can conceive something more; the sovereignty of man is not entirely satisfied; liberty and mobility are not great enough.

There are, it seems to me, a lot of ways for ideas to fall short of *truth* in Proudhon's terms, and only approximate means, in combination with other aspiring *true ideas*, to approach it. Can *anarchy, anarchism, anarchist*, etc., be exempt from this general rule? If not, then the treatment of anarchy as a perpetual desideratum is probably no objection to treating the later Proudhon as an *anarchist* after all, at least by the terms he established in the period where we are focusing our attention. That would leave open the question of whether the early notion of anarchy as self-government could be understood in some other terms, consistent with the work of an early-period Proudhon who had a different idea of how ideas and ideologies might work.

My immediate thought is that there is at least some evidence in both *The Celebration of Sunday* and *What is Property?* that Proudhon *always* leaned towards a progressive account of truth-in-ideas.

If we can make sense of the various senses of "anarchy" with the help of Proudhon's statements about philosophy and method, then we need to sort them out in those terms. It's not, I think, too hard to accept that "self-government" might involve a series of progressive approximations, or to understand Proudhon's "perpetual desideratum" in much the same sense as William Batchelder Greene's "blazing star" or my own "ungovernable ideal." It's a little harder to know quite what to do with *ideals* in Proudhon's thought. In the context of his treatment of *metaphysics* (in the opening sections of Justice in the Revolution and in the Church), we probably have to treat any "anarchist

ideal" as an unavoidable but unscientific speculation about the *in-itself* of anarchy or a reflection of our sense that we are *not there yet*, but not ultimately the sort of engagement with *relations* that Proudhon was concerned with. We probably don't have to take on all of Proudhon's quasi-comtean positivism to see some value in emphasizing anarchy in the context of specific, individual interactions.

The most ideologically charged question that arises from sorting out these various anarchisms, which Proudhon apparently considered closely enough connected to sometimes gesture at them *en masse*, is undoubtedly the relation between *anarchy as self-government* and the *economic anarchy* which he sometimes quite explicitly connected to the concept of *laisse faire* and the goals of the free-market economists. Proudhon's discussions of *economic anarchy* are fascinating, since they are largely negative, and perhaps even more so than his discussions of property, but, like the treatments of property, they periodically turn positive, and we see instances where *laissez faire* seems to be presented as a key element in *mutualism*. The parallels with the property theory suggest a very interesting set of possibilities. The transformation of *property* from *theft* to a potentially powerful tool of *liberty* occurred according to the critical itinerary we've already cited: first the *absolutist* elements of property were identified and critiqued, and its fundamental *untruth* established, and then those very same elements, now presumably rid at least of their aura of *authority*, were incorporated into a *balanced* (or *justified,* as balance and justice were one for Proudhon) *approximation* with the non-governmental *citizen-State* as the countervailing force. If there is a parallel treatment of anarchy, we'll probably find it in Proudhon's many statements about the close relation between *property* and *liberty*, and his opposition of *government* and *economy*. These have been the basis for the common claim that Proudhon advocated some kind of "market anarchism." Now, the "system" that Proudhon summarized as always reducible to "an equation and a power of collectivity" may conform to some definitions of "market," but I think the question of the relationship between the anarch*ism* that he actually advocated, *mutualism*, and *the anarchy of the market*, may be substantially more complex and interesting than we have generally made it.

In the context of the present discussion, one of the most interesting passages of *The General Idea of the Revolution* is this:

"...the Government, whatever it may be, is very sick, and tending more and more toward Anarchy. My readers may give this word any meaning they choose."

Given everything else he has said about the various forms of *anarchy*, it's pretty hard to imagine this means Proudhon was indifferent to the differences between them. But it does appear that he considered *anarchy* as an appropriate label for a variety of tendencies associated with the decline of government. One of those tendencies was obviously "the system of '89 and '93; the system of

Quesnay, of Turgot, of J.-B. Say; the system that is always professed, with more or less intelligence and good faith, by the various organs of the political parties," which he invoked in the 1848 "Revolutionary Program," and characterized as:

> Liberty then, nothing more, nothing less. *Laissez faire, laissez passer*, in the broadest and most literal sense; consequently property, as it rises legitimately from this freedom, is my principle. No other solidarity between citizens than that which rises accidentally from force majeur: for all that which relates to free acts, and manifestations of reflective thought, complete and absolute *insolidarity*.

But is *that* "the last word of civilization, and of right as well"? Was Proudhon really saying that there was no difference between himself and the economists with whom he had certainly expressed no shortage of differences? The continuation of the argument, in which he first seems to describe market anarchy and then explains how it will result in something that sounds more than a bit like anarchist communism, is a little hard to parse, but it appears that, however anarchic market forces may be and however non-governmental the resulting economic centralization may be, something else is required to maintain what I think most of us mean when we think of the outcomes of *anarchism*, and that missing element seems to be justice, a balancing of the forces of property and community—and suddenly we find ourselves facing what seems to be just one more of a series of formulas involving the balancing or synthesis of very similar elements, spanning Proudhon's entire career.

So what are we to make of this *economic anarchy,* which seems to be an anti-governmental force, but does not seem to be quite what Proudhon is aiming for? It seems to me that we have located a prime candidate for the category of *absolutist anarchies*. A range of more provocative questions are then raised, including, just as a start:

- Is there then a sort of *anarchism* that we might associate with this market anarchy, and, if so, is it perhaps a sort of *absolutist anarchism?* The answer, I think, from the Proudhonian perspective, will depend *on the* extent to which we think an aura of *authority* stills clings to notions like *property* and market.

- Assuming that *anarchy*, in this more general sense, can be rid of its absolutism, and that it makes sense to call oneself an *anarchist* as a means of signaling a commitment to both non-governentalism and anti-absolutism, how would we construct the larger system within which that form of anarchism would steadily increase in *truth?*

- What role can we expect all the complicated and complicating collective individuals that people the Proudhonian landscape to play in all of this? I

began to speculate, for example, on how "the market" might take its place alongside the citizen-state, in the "Notes on Proudhon's changing notion of the State," and the "Notes on the Notes" that followed. I'll undoubtedly have to come back to some of those speculations.

There is a lot more than could be said about the questions raised by Proudhon's sometimes puzzling discussions of "anarchy," and I want to keep coming back to clarify what I think he really meant, particularly as I get a chance to do additional research on some keywords that are only emerging as particularly interesting in this context. But I also want to spend some more time dealing with the methodological and philosophical issues.

I think an argument could pretty easily be made that what we see in Proudhon's approach to question of method, metaphysics, etc., is something very much like his anarchism or federalism, applied to the realm of thought. Indeed, there seems to be a strong suggestion in at least some of what Proudhon wrote that something like *mutualism* is essential in virtually all sorts of human endeavor. That seems like a notion worth following up on.

Saturday, July 13, 2013

## Proudhon and the coup d'état of 1851

One of the things that ought to be clear from recent developments here is that sometimes the most interesting, and also the most unexpected, insights into Proudhon's work come from double-checking those things that "everyone knows" about his work. It was, after all, in the context of tracking down how close he came to saying "anarchy is order" that I ran across the dubious translations in *The General Idea of the Revolution*, and that has led to a general scouring of his work for discussions of "anarchy" and "anarchism," which keeps raising interesting points about the early uses of that term.

When I started working through what I was finding, I was reminded that some of Proudhon's discussion of *anarchy* occurred in a work which has, in fact, been partially translated, but which is very seldom consulted, probably because of its unsavory reputation. Proudhon's 1852 work, *The Social Revolution Demonstrated by the Coup d'Etat of December 2, 1851* was partially published in a 1972 book, *December 2, 1851*, edited by John Halstead, collecting contemporary writings on the *coup*. The collection is a bit scarce now, and often not cheap if you can find a copy, but given the very small number of Proudhon translations available, its obscurity is fairly remarkable. It does not appear to

be, as it might be under other circumstances, one of the "grails" of the literature. Much of the reason for that is undoubtedly that the work has been treated as one of the great missteps of Proudhon's career, with the common claim being that it was written in support of Louis Napoleon's coup and regime. That's probably a fairly poor reading.

I think the simplest way to approach the work is to think about what Proudhon had already said about the nature of "the Revolution" and the workings of historical change, and to compare the common understanding of this work, which was addressed *in some sense* to the Emperor, with the widespread enthusiasm for *The General Idea of the Revolution*, which called upon the *bourgeoisie* to continue their own revolution. I'm sure for some, these questions of address are sufficient to banish both works, but nobody will be surprised if I'm not convinced. And those who find inspiration in the work that gave us the famous and beloved "to be governed" rant might perhaps find reasons to take a look at the more audacious later work.

*The Social Revolution* develops as I think a careful reader of Proudhon might expect. He had been predicting something very much like the coup for some time, and had ended up in prison precisely because he had missed very few chances to oppose Louis Napoleon. For him to argue then that the events of December 1851 had as much to do with broader historical movements than they did with the newly minted Emperor might be easily taken as a new affront, rather than any sort of support. In *The General Idea of the Revolution* he had spoken of the indifference of the people to governmental forms, so long as their interests were served, and he had called that indifference revolutionary, even while he was attempting to infuse "the Revolution in the 19th century" with an idea (*justice*, ultimately) which would both serve the interests of the people and avoid the pitfalls of false solutions like the coup. The more familiar you are with Proudhon's conception of progress the fewer surprises there are in the work, I think, but I suspect that for many readers the conclusion, "Anarchy or Caesarism," would come as a pleasant surprise, as he addressed in it, quite directly, whether or not he was, as is sometimes claimed, "rallying" to the new regime. I'm posting here the conclusion of that concluding chapter, which shows off some of Proudhon's infamous "patriotism" (in, I think, a not terribly unpleasant light) but also clarifies not just his posture towards Louis Napoleon, but to government and rulers in general.

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Do you believe, I am asked at this moment, by an indiscrete, perhaps malicious curiosity, that the December 2 accepts the revolutionary role in which you confine it, as in the circle of Popilius? Would you have faith in its liberal inclinations? And based on this inevitability, so well demonstrated by you, of the mandate of Louis-Napoléon, would you rally to his government, as to the best or least worst of transitions? That is what we want to know, and where we await you!...

— I will respond to that question, which is a bit suggestive, with another:

Do I have a right to suppose, when the ideas that I have defended for four years have obtained so little success, that the head of the new government will adopt them straightaway and make them his own! Have the taken on, in the eyes of opinion, that character of impersonality, reality, and universality, which would impose them on the State? And if these ideas, all still young, are still hardly anything but the ideas of one man, from whence would come the hope that the December 2, who is also a man, will prefer them to his own ideas!...

I write so that others will reflect in their turn and, if there is cause, so they will contradict me. I write so that truth being manifested, and elaborated by opinion, the revolution, with the government, with the government, or even against government, can be accomplished. As for men, I readily believe their good intentions, but even more in the misfortune of their judgment. It is said in the book of Psalms: *Put not your trust in prince, or in the children of Adam,* that is to say in those who thought is subjective, *because salvation is not in them!* So I believe, and unfortunately for us all, that the revolutionary idea, ill defined in the minds of the masses, poorly served by its popularizers, still leaves to the government the full choice of its politics; I believe that power is surrounded with impossibilities that it does not see, contradictions that it does not known, traps that the universal ignorance conceals from it; I believe that any government can endure, if it wishes, by affirming its historical reasons, and placing itself under the direction of the interests that it is called to serve, but I also believe that men change little, and that if Louis XVI, after having launched the revolution, had wanted to withdraw it, if the Emperor, or if Charles X and Louis-Philippe had preferred to be lost [doom it?] than to continue it, it is improbable that those who succeeded them would have made themselves straightaway, and spontaneously, its promoters.

That is why I hold myself apart from government, more inclined to pity it that to make war against it, devoted solely to the homeland, and I join myself body and soul with that elite of workers, head of the proletariat and middle class, the party of labor and progress, of liberty and the idea, which, understanding that authority is nothing, that popular spontaneity is of no use; that liberty which does not act is lost, and that the interests that need to put themselves in relation with an intermediary which represents them are interests sacrificed, accepts for its goal and motto *the Education of the People.*

O homeland, French homeland, homeland of the bards of the eternal revolution! homeland of liberty, for, despite all your servitudes, in no place on the earth, neither in Europe, nor in America, is the mind, which is all of man, so free as it is with you! homeland that I love with that accumulated love that the growing son bears for his mother, that the father feels grow along with his children! I will see you suffer for a long time yet, suffer not for yourself alone, but for the world which rewards you with its envy and its insults; to suffer innocent, only because you do not know yourself?... It seems to me at every instant that you are at your last ordeal! Awaken, mother: neither can your princes, your barons and your counts do anything for your salvation, nor can your prelates no how to comfort you with their benedictions. Guard, if you wish, the memory of those who have done well, and go sometimes to pray at their monuments: but do not seek their successors. They are finished! Commence your new life, O first of immortals; show yourself in your beauty, Venus Urania; spread your perfumes, flower of humanity!

And humanity will be rejuvenated, and its unity will be created by you: for the unity of the human race is the unity of my homeland, as the spirit of the human race is nothing but the spirit of my homeland.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]

Sunday, July 14, 2013

## A Proudhonian summary from the manuscript writings

The project of working through Proudhon's works, keyword by keyword, has been rewarding for a variety of reasons. It's been nearly impossible to get a clear sense of the larger patterns in Proudhon's use of those keywords without that kind of survey, but the work has also unearthed some important explanations and summaries in unexpected places. The section of the State in *The Theory of Taxation* is certainly one of the most interesting, but in searching for the surprisingly scarce references to anarchy, I ran across some very interesting material in *Napoleon III*, a collection of manuscript writings published in 1900. Based on internal references, the early sections appear to date from about 1858. The first chapter begins with some "general reflections on the principle of command," posing a choice between "Archy or Anarchy," and those reflections begin with this interesting observation:

Anarchy expresses a very reasonable idea, the absence of authority and command, which is the true republican principle. We feign to make this word a synonym of disorder, confusion, chaos: it is in this sense that I myself, speaking in the language of everyone, have used it frequently.

It is sad that some republicans accept that synonymy...

I'm inclined to think that a certain *synonymy* was probably part of the power of the notion of *anarchy* from the beginning, and that it is hard to imagine Proudhon not exploiting it, despite his stated early desire to express new ideas with new words. But to the extent that the French republicans considered that synonymy *an end to the matter*, we know they would have been very far from Proudhon's complex vision. In our examination of Proudhon's development, we can mark another affirmation of anarchy as "the true republican principle" as late as 1858, and we find it alongside a discussion, in the second chapter, of the opposing principles of Liberty and Authority, which resembles the discussion in *The Principle of Federation*. That 1863 discussion, which treated *anarchy* as a "perpetual desideratum," is, as we have noted, sometimes taken as an abandonment of *anarchy* as Proudhon's political ideal. In *Napoleon III*, however, we find the affirmation of anarchy *and* we find the claim that "fidelity to principles exists in politics only in the ideal," which is essentially the argument from the work on federation.

I'll translate at least those two chapters as time allows, but for now I want to present another section from the first chapter, which amounts to one of the clearest summaries of Proudhon's political theory in the *constructive* period. Among the "new developments," in the context of the explorations here, is a *constructive* use of the term "government." There are a few passages that are perhaps not quite clear. Unfortunately, the manuscript writings sometimes offer fewer clues, and did not get the careful final editing that was one of Proudhon's

constant habits. But I think there is a lot here, all in one place, which helps to understand Proudhon's *constructive* project.

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1. — The fundamental principle of society is Justice.

2. — Justice is a faculty immanent in human nature, which unfolds by its own virtue, without any help from grace or supernatural excitation, nor from any impetus from the State.

3. — It is at once a sentiment and an *idea*. — As a sentiment, Justice is the principle of all legislation; — as an idea, the principle of all logic and all philosophy, the instrument of all certainty, and the guarantee of that truth.

4. — The goal of society is to establish Justice.

5. — *To establish Justice* is to render to each what naturally and legitimately belongs to them, without distinction of persons, conditions, talents, or aptitudes.

6. — One of the *consequences* of the establishment of Right is the progressive equivalence of conditions, of occupations, and of fortunes; par consequently the finale equality of well-being and happiness.

7. — Justice presupposes liberty; it is the agreement [pacte] of liberties. So its aim is not to limit liberties by the sacrifices that it imposes on them, with an eye to the augmentation of the State; — but to increase the power of each liberty, by the transaction — which establishes it itself, and which is Right.

8. — The transaction of liberties, from which the expression of their right arises, is not their *necessary association*. — Association is one of the *means* of human industry, of economic organization; it is not at all the general, universal, absolute, and necessary form; any more than *competition*, which is opposed to it, any more than *property*, which it is impossible to destroy.

9. — The satisfaction of the physical, intellectual and moral needs of each is the business of each; society only assists to the extent that it guarantees to each the respect of their rights, the tendency of which is equivalence, equilibrium.

10. — Justice is satisfied, and the social organization is complete, when the liberty of each leaves nothing to be desired; when the have the use of all their faculties and aptitudes, the free disposition of their person and their product.

H, — Liberty being the first of goods for the individual, save for the respect of Justice, which commands everyone and everything, association must only be employed, like everything that effects liberty, where it is indispensable; where the economic result sought cannot be obtained otherwise.

Industrial association is not the business of the State; it arises exclusively from the free initiative of the citizens; for an even greater reason, the State does not have a mission to create it everywhere, to make of it the **chemise** of the nation.

12. — The government, in a Society, the Power is neither democratic, nor monarchic, nor aristocratic; these words suppose a mass of questions that we can neither solve nor define. — The government is national, social.

It is the resultant of forces, both corporative and individual; — the expression of their equilibrium and of their synthetic will; consequently the most elevated, the most general application of right.

13. — Universal suffrage is one *hypothetical manner* of presuming the agreement of the masses, their resultant: in itself it is nothing, no more than the ballot box.

The sovereignty of the people is no more than the sovereignty of the prince, it is nothing. Justice is greater than both, independent of both.

14. — It follows that every popular plebiscite can be attacked in the name of right; that the homeland only exists for each on the condition of respecting right and that where right is collectively violated by the nation each citizen would have the right to oppose themselves to the nation, to repudiate its acts, and to declare themselves free towards it of every duty and commitment.

15. — In society, every citizen has right of government and right of justice. This right is never abdicated; the mandate is not a transfer of sovereignty; it is a *commission*.

Every election of representatives without a definition *of its object* is null.

There is no *blank commission;* that would imply a contradiction.

That is why the election of the representative, of the President, of the Emperor, is null. The mandate to *command everything* and *do everything*, in the name of the people, is absurd.

16. — Law results: 1) from public, prolonged, preliminary discussion, for the press, the meetings, etc: — 2) from the discussion of the large associations [corporations]: — 3) from their *transaction*. The law is not the will of anyone: the people are not infallible.

17. — The *transaction* is not the vote; the vote is only one means of arriving at a transaction. Every law voted for by 300 deputies, rejected by 150, is unjust.

The *transaction* is the compromise between the 300 and the 150.

18. — The transaction is the synthetic expression which results from all the opinions, for or against, expressed regarding the law.

19. — Every divergence of opinions leads to a synthesis, which is the general opinion, the *actual* law.

20. — The law is changing, depending on the state of the opinions, the divergence of which varies, and thus gives rise to a new *transaction*.

21. — Labor being assured, subsistence guaranteed to each, education partially paid for by the State and the communes, instruction will be *obligatory*, attendance at the school free.

22. — The aim of Society is the extinction of war: — the government does not presuppose any hostility with other governments, is animated with regard to

them by no hostile intention, its greatest efforts will tend to universal disarmament.

23. — The precautions that could demand defense transitorily will be entrusted to a special committee, named by the corporations, revocable by them, with a limited mandate; to which the State will be bound to provide all the means of action that depend on it. — Under a despotic power, the army never represents the *homeland* (Waterloo).

In short, the ministry of war is outside the government.

24. — The action of the State, is in any case the least possible.

It tends to step aside more and more. Every industrial or commercial initiative is strictly forbidden to it.

24. — The State does not make the bank, nor the exchange; it does not bankroll anyone; it is neither the cashier nor the creditor of the nation.

25. — The State does not owe recognition to anyone, neither to the soldier, nor to the worker.

Every citizen is bound to work for themselves until their last breath. The infirm and maimed are the responsibility of the families, corporations and communes: public assistance does not extend beyond that.

26. — In that assistance, the family has the largest share; the corporation the 2nd, and the commune the 3rd and least.

The budgets, wages, etc., must be regulated in that pension.

This is an entirely different world. Between the program of L. Blanc and this one, there is no compatibility.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]

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