

Everyone against the One...

CONTR'UN



THE ANARCHIC ENCOUNTER

Writings by Shawn P. Wilbur

Thursday, August 01, 2013

HOW DOES PROPERTY BECOME CAPITALIST?

In the debates over “property,” things often bog down pretty quickly around various assumptions about the relationship between “property” and “capitalism.” Arguably, nearly all the most contentious elements in the debates tend to be bundled up in the competing definitions of those two terms, so a good deal of unpacking is necessary to come to grips with the most important concerns. There is, for example, a fair amount of technical stuff about “alienation” and the “commodity form” that needs to be brought into some kind of communication with narratives about “self-ownership” and “free markets,” if we are to bring the more polar positions into a real debate. Folks like Kevin Carson have certainly started that work, but in general the debates don’t seem to have altered much.

Without any pretense that the sort of interventions I’ve been making here are likely to shift the debate in any great way, I think it may be worthwhile to pursue a small, but perhaps important, clarification of what I’ve been saying about “self-ownership.” From a perspective rooted in Proudhon, the core of “capitalism” is the implicit right of the holders of capital to accumulate more capital, whether by appropriating the products of social labor or collective force, or by using their advantages in the market to appropriate the products of individual labor. That’s the *droit d’aubaine* or “right of increase,” which treats the products of collective force and those *appropriable* products of individual labor as “windfalls” which the capitalist may legitimately claim. That “right” seems to be fairly completely *naturalized* as a part of the bundle of “property rights,” but is it necessarily so?

The familiar divisions of “property” into “simple property” and “simple possession,” or “personal property” and “private property,” seem to suggest that there is nothing inherent in the broader category of “property” which necessarily links it to “capitalism” (in the specific sense I’m giving the word here, but probably also in any of the other, competing senses.) “Anti-propertyarians” tend to focus on the potential uses of “property” at least as much, and often much more, than on anything essential to it, and “propertyarians” have often rightly objected that this is not a very useful way of distinguishing between types of “property.”

So let’s take a step back, and look at that broadest sort of “property,” with an eye to then examining once again the notion of “self-ownership” or “property in one’s person,” which seems to be at least one critical point at which the various schools of thought tend to part company.

What is “property”? What is it, that is, when taken in its most general sense, before we attempt to establish its attendant “rights” and such?

“Property” appears to be little more than one of the characteristics of *the self* or *personhood*, which comes into play when it is examined from the

perspective of conflicts over material resources. On this reading, *property* is a concept similar to *identity*, which is a characteristic of the self or person when examined in the context of social interactions, where some distinction between actors is required. In both cases, we're dealing with useful approximations. We know, on reflection, that any stark distinction between the *self* and the *other* is likely to involve some degree of philosophical violence, some substitution (in Bataille's terms) of a *limited economy* for a *general economy*, with some necessary *accursed share*. The argument in favor of *anarchist property* would do well to address a series of potential *alienations* and *approximations* in the formation of even the most basic *property*, in order to determine if this is the sort of norm that is truly useful to us, particular given its practical history. But, remember, nobody seems to really be attacking *property* at this level. And perhaps we can point out a little more clearly just where some of those practical problems have had their source.

If we accept that there is a broad sort of property, which simply designates what is "one's own," what is "proper to the self," without any assertion of specific rights and norms, we immediately encounter a complication, since "the self" is not a static thing. To too clearly delimit its boundaries is essentially to condemn it to death. The dynamic nature of the self is the problem that makes more concrete conceptions of property necessary, and it is that dynamic nature that introduces the first complications to the notion of "self-ownership" or "property in one's person." While critics object to the way that those ideas seem to split the self, perhaps we have to acknowledge the extent to which the self is always splitting from itself, always redrawing the boundaries of the *proper* in ways that our property theories will have to account for. But different ways of accounting for this problem will have different consequences. I want to sketch out two possibilities, one roughly *mutualist* and the other arguably *capitalist*, which diverge based on their understanding of what is involved in "property in one's person."

The *mutualist* approach (and I take this to be roughly the model for any sort of anti-capitalist anarchist approach) is likely to emerge from some prior theory about selves and their relations, like the beefed-up version of the Golden Rule I've proposed in the past. If we are to "do unto others," then we need a means of identifying them, which seems to presuppose a theory of identity, and since we want to apply our ethic in the material realm, we're going to need to make at least some engagement with the "mine" and "thine." But that engagement can be fairly simple. If the self is something that perpetually "mixes" with the environment, with other selves, and with itself, then property emerges simply as a secondary question, when we are trying to determine how to specify those "others," and the question of rights can be largely folded back into the question of how we should treat them. Proudhon's mature model of property rights basically accounts for equal regard for individuals as they are, with its "rights of use," which amount to equal protection of "possessions," and a recognition that we are all evolving and need room to evolve, experiment, and

even err, with its “rights of abuse.” From that basis, all of the specific questions about real property, capital accumulation, and the disposition of labor-products are likely to find their answers in norms regarding just how much of the “mix” that individuals are a part of can be attributed to them. The introduction of elements from Proudhon’s sociology, such as the theory of collective individuals and his account of the nature of liberty, will shape those norms, restricting individual property in some regards and possibly expanding it in others, while reshaping the why system in significant ways. But there doesn’t seem to be any reason to believe that any right of increase is likely to be implied. There is, perhaps, a *right to live and evolve* which needs to be made more explicit, but that is probably something rather different.

The alternative reading of “self-ownership,” which seems to be fairly common among capitalists, presents the “splitting” within the self in what seems a significantly different way. It’s surprisingly common to see the argument that the self “owns” the body, perhaps because of some original labor-mixing, although it is a little unclear how the disembodied self mixes with anything. Self-ownership is then a bit more paradoxical, or maybe just malformed, and amounts to *body-ownership*, or the ownership of a first *capital*. Now, if we imagine that the self is always already an assemblage of the capitalist+capital variety, then it’s not hard to imagine that life itself is all about increase, and from there many things about our current predicament are probably a lot clearer. This sort of *naturalization*, which deals with alternatives by presenting a world in which *there is no alternative*, is familiar, of course. We can go back to 19th century arguments that the workers were *proprietors* because they possessed arms and legs, and therefore did not constitute a separate, antagonistic class.

Obviously, there’s a lot more to be said about these competing understandings of self-ownership and how they relate to our debates about property, but I think there is at least the beginning of a suggestive, and potentially important insight here. I think it has been very useful to shift the debate about “increase” from the practice of the various forms of “usury” to the principle of the *droit d’aubaine*, but that “right” is one which we have not, it seems to me, managed to situate very specifically in the larger discourse on property. I think this is a start, and that placed alongside the observations on the consequences of Locke’s provisos, it gives us both some idea of the range of potential property norms which might be derived from fairly traditional sources and the potentially significant consequences of apparently small differences in the way we understand our basic premises.

Wednesday, August 28, 2013

Summary notions

With the first two issues of the Contr'un zine now available, I feel like perhaps I've reached the end of a necessary, but awkward transitional phase. Before moving forward, let me underline and elaborate on a few propositions or realizations that I consider key:

- *Anarchism is ungovernable*, and anarchists should probably learn to embrace that face. It doesn't imply any sort of compromise. On the contrary, it sets the bar for all of our theories, practices, and the no-doubt necessary squabbles over boundaries very high. It ought to discourage dogmatism and complacency.
- Not every aspiring anarchist need concern themselves with every aspect of anarchism. Some find no pleasure or utility in grappling with anarchism's history, or the vagueries of "the movement," or certain kinds of anarchist theory, and those who do will undoubtedly do so in a variety of not-always-compatible ways. But to the extent that we do engage with these things, and particularly as we engage with each other in the context of these concerns—if we mean anything by "anarchism" that we think is, has been, could or should be shared—we should probably try to learn to proceed and engage in ways that are not ultimately aimed at governing the concept, or governing each other, by governing its manifestations. There's a fine, and not always determinable line between "governing the concept" and the sorts of more-or-less internal advocacy and struggle that are necessary for the improvement of those manifestations, and the most careful of us should probably expect to cross it sometimes, just as the most engaged should expect to fall short of any really serious standard of "being an anarchist." And that's just fine: "humanity proceeds by approximations." We don't need to "call ourselves on our shit" so much as we need to make new, hopefully better mistakes the next time—and the next time, and...
- Proudhon boiled the whole of anarchism's "social system" down to *equality*, *collective power*, and the principle of *justice*. On one level, then, under anarchism we simply see a particular sort of *encounter* acted out, over and over again: equal individuals meet, find the means to balance their individual interests, and from their association arises *something else*—a *collective* something with the potential to emerge as *another individual*, with interests of its own, which must then figure in the balancing of interests that is *justice*. In that "system," justice between equals is the ethical principle, the design principle for norms and institutions, and the criterion of judgment. Any number of *encounters* may take place, involving

any number of *individuals*, on any number of *scales* and creating any number of *associations*, but the basic elements remain the same. The social field of play remains level, the status of the individuals—whether self-conscious *free absolutes* or various sorts of *collectivities*—remains equal before whatever norms and conventions we adopt, and those norms and conventions always remain subject to critique on the basis of their relationship to the most general, practical sort of *equality* and *justice-balance*.

- Norms, conventions, rules, laws, rights—no matter what language we use to talk about the more persistent aspects of our mutual *self-government*, the things that that language represents can never assume any authority in and of themselves. They cannot be allowed to become *archies*. Arguably, that means much more than to say that they must not be backed by state or police powers, violence or the threat of violence. If we accept Proudhon's summary, it is really a question of preserving in each encounter a sort of positive *lawlessness*, and, in part, we may do this by acknowledging that each encounter is a *new* encounter, that there is no ready-made system for projecting ourselves into the future, even just a moment at a time. And yet that is what we do, moment after moment, world without end—unless, of course, the world ends. We pile up knowledge and experience in all of those moments, but nothing is certain. Along the way, we will undoubtedly accumulate some useful approximations, some developing but always revisable account of *best practices*, and some long, long lists of practices that *really f*cking suck* and that freedom-loving people will never want to see practiced again. But any *anarchism* worthy of the name is going to be pretty relentlessly suspect of anything that looks like *permission* or *prohibition*—both practices which demand some position of authority from which to regulate our encounters in some *a priori* manner.
- Let's underline again this notion of a society without permission or prohibition, and emphasize that all of our anarchic encounters will require something more of us than just asserting our “rights” or fulfilling our “duties” with regard to one another. Every act of association will involve an act of creation, specifically the creation of some bit of some *possible world*, and creative acts involve some sort of *erotics* as much as *economics*. There is a lot that needs to be looked at with regard to how all this creative stuff plays out, but let's start by saying that none of the familiar language for it—*society, community, market, etc.*—gets us too far.
- “Liberty is the mother, not the daughter of order,” and free institutions are in some fundamental sense the issue of our social intercourse, our wayward children. They will have their own interests, and reason, which, despite their origins in our own more-or-less self-interested interactions,

may well not be in line with our reason and interests. Endowed with force, but not with the means to reflect and negotiate, their interests and their reason will ultimately be our problem. They must inevitably fall under our tutelage, or else run wild, manifestations of our own irresponsibility, endowed with our own force. Whether or not we then let these feral children have their way, we certainly can't allow ourselves to be so far mistaken as to take them for our social arbitrators.



Thursday, August 29, 2013

The Anarchic Encounter: Economic and/or Erotic?

It seemed appropriate to break off the previous post mid-*encounter*, if you will, in order to highlight even more emphatically the fundamentally *fecund* nature of the interactions I've been describing. The sort of anarchy that I have been starting to describe is not just *without rulers*, without any legitimate hierarchy, whether governmental or invested in other institutions, but largely *without rules* as well. It is not without *history*, if by that we mean an accumulation of experience and experiment, on the basis of which each new experiment is not a from-scratch affair, but might be assumed to take its place in a trial-and-error sort of *progress*. And that history may provide sufficient guidance for many, even most of our encounters, but there is probably no point in talking about *anarchy* if ever encounter is not also informed by the notion that, as we have put it, "another world is possible."

Another world is possible at every moment, and we should expect our commitment to an ungovernable anarchism to confront us with unforeseen possibilities on a pretty frequent basis. We will always build on a foundation composed of equal parts accumulated historical experience and consciousness of radical possibilities. At every encounter, it will be up to us to decide what sort of world it is we are building towards *at that very moment*.

And every moment, every association, every decision to build in a particular manner will have its consequences—its *offspring*. If we understand the social world as Proudhon did, as inhabited by "any number of *individuals*, on any number of *scales* and creating any number of *associations*," with all of the "collective individuals" brought into the world by our encounters and associations figuring in the *justice-balance*, then we're going to have to find the means to negotiate a new range of possibilities and responsibilities (or at least a new set of terms with which to negotiate it.)

Unfortunately, Proudhon, who has given us so much in the way of social scientific apparatus for approaching the clearly economic side of these questions, is considerably less help in tackling other aspects. As much as he has had to say about anarchistic *commerce*, he is not the person we would expect to enlighten us much on the subject of *intercourse*.

There are, of course, some approaches even to these other concerns in Proudhon's writings. In his critical phase, he was certainly not above adding some sexy bits to his analysis of "property." [See "Varieties of Proprietors: Lovers, Husbands, and Mother Hens," and the linked material, for an introduction to this side of Proudhon's discourse.] Over and over again, we find him referring to the *infertile* nature of proprietorship, but I have yet to find equally engaging treatments of the *fecundity* of the alternatives.

Fortunately, Proudhon's work is far from the only reference point I've identified for the analysis of property on the blog, and for some of the other figures I've had occasion to invoke the *fecund* was something of a preoccupation. Let's consider, for example, what our old friend Walt Whitman might have to add at this stage of our review.

What if we understood this *economic* formulation by Proudhon:

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

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

as in many regards equivalent to this overtly erotic formulation by Walt Whitman:

Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase,
always sex,
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.
To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so.

?



Saturday, September 07, 2013

The Anatomy of the Encounter

If I'm right about Proudhon's anarchism, then everything depends on understanding the nature of what I've been calling the *anarchic encounter*. (If I'm wrong, I wish someone would point out where I've gone astray.) If we apply the lessons of Proudhon's critical period, and take up the tools of his transitional period, nothing is exactly simple, but we know that amidst all the complexities one pattern repeats which at least has very few moving parts—"an equation and a collective power." I've been encouraging people to think of this repeating pattern, this repeating *moment*, as a creative moment, pregnant with possibility. "Another world is possible," every time equal *uniques*, *free absolutes*, meet on a terrain shaped by any number of histories but no structures of authority. And from the *association* of these free absolutes something else is inevitably born, though at the scale we're talking about it may be a rather ephemeral *something*. But we know that our focus on any one instance of this *encounter* is just a sort of "Crusoe economics" in a field that may or may not turn out to be primarily economic, and we have at least made a start at wrestling with the more powerful, persistent varieties of these offspring of association—the State, the Market, etc.

But it's hard to address relations at those much more extensive scales, if we can't come to terms with the fundamental dynamics of the *encounter*. So we'll linger just a bit longer and play with those few moving parts.

1. We begin with these *free absolutes*, these *uniques*. According to the first, Proudhonian designation, we are dealing with individuals, groups organized according to an unfolding law of development, but with a consciousness of their nature and a capacity for self-reflection. They may, on the one hand, be inclined to *absolutism*, to taking their internal law for the law of the world, but they are also capable of recognizing another like themselves, and understanding that in a world of absolutes either some must be masters of others, or there must be balance. With no criterion of certainty for their observations or judgments, beyond the apparently similarity—in this absolutist dimension—of these otherwise unique beings, with incommensurable experiences and unknowable essences, they find themselves with *equality*, Proudhon suggests, as the only basis on which to proceed from individual isolation to *society*. And this is the heart of Proudhon's "system." Although he doesn't share the same vocabulary, or a number of philosophical assumptions, his free absolutes rather closely resemble Stirner's "unique," which is always in an important sense a singular being, irreducible even to a *class* of uniques. The singularity of the *unique* is not simply a unity; it is not simple, and it is in-progress—or it is, like Proudhon's "Revolution," always in the midst of a play between

conservation and progress, change and persistence. Resisting any reduction to static singleness and simplicity, these subjects of the *encounter* are one sort of *contr'un*.

2. We have these *selves*, which might be just as well designated as these *others*, meeting on a terrain without hierarchical elevations, without laws of the land. While there are any number of material constraints on every encounter, and any number of histories weighing on the moment, the thing that we should probably be concentrating on is the enormous range of possibilities facing every new encounter, presenting options for new associations. If Proudhon's whole anarchic social system begins with an *equation*, then to follow him onto the terrain of *his* anarchy, we probably have to set aside a lot of our usual guides—a priori axioms, natural laws, rights and duties, even some kinds of “common sense.” Or if we choose to employ them, we probably have to really *choose* to employ them, to take responsibility for them. By Proudhon's criteria, these guides are likely to resemble the outcomes of metaphysical speculation—we can't help but speculate, but our generalizations are at best *approximations*, which we should jettison as soon as our observations of relations, the real matter of all the sciences, prompt us to. By the time Proudhon has had his way with philosophy and the various sciences, equality stands as essentially the sole criterion for a whole range of operations and justification—balance—appears to be the essence of method. (Though, naturally, we speak of *essences* only with reservations.) Whether or not we follow Proudhon this far in practice, there seem to be lots of good reasons to attempt to at least understand where that move would leave us. If at first it appears a bit like Dr. Suess' Prairie of Prax (meeting-place of the stubborn, stationary Zax), maybe that's not too far off, except that our north-going and south-going *absolutes* are budding mutualists, and they can be assumed to find means to either associate or step aside.
3. We have *association*, *mutualism*, the constructive side of anarchy, and before we have any issue from the encounter, we have an assemblage of sorts, a coming-together which is not fusion and does not create a single, simple individual—or does not *simply* create one—but creates what I what to call the *mechanism of justice*. Proudhon had, in the “Catechism of Marriage,” identified what he considered the “organ of justice” in the married couple, but as we attempt to avoid the obvious missteps in that work and push beyond some of Proudhon's weaknesses I think we can generalize from his observations and locate the relationship that he gave special prominence at the heart of the family wherever the *encounter* leads to *association*. Stripped of the categorical roles Proudhon couldn't abandon with regard to men and women, and rid of the fairly unavoidable phallic associations of the term “organ” (which were remarked upon by at least

one of Proudhon's female contemporaries), we have another sort of contr'un, and a comparatively simple sort of collectivity, which is presumably the mechanism by which balance is achieved between individuals and interests which are not simply unique, but in important senses are incommensurable. But the details are perhaps a little counterintuitive. There is no question of these individuals and interests taking their place on some scales of justice, because their assemblage is *itself the scales of justice*. Together, *our free absolutes make incommensurable things equal*, according to a convention—*exchange*, or perhaps *equal exchange*—according to which that sort of operation is possible. For those who assume that Proudhon's understanding of mutuality never developed beyond his equal-pay speculations in *What is Property?* there is probably a fairly rude awakening awaiting. The conventional equality obviously can't be just anything. We know at least that there are quite a range of explanations for familiar relations—such as those surrounding property and its rights under capitalism, or the State as “external constitution of society”—which just don't hold up to any sort of scrutiny, and which are irreparably compromised by their dependence on fundamentally authoritarian or governmentalist notions. The material consequences of various conventions have demonstrated, or will demonstrate, their insufficiency. No instrumentalization of *equality-in-uniqueness* is likely to satisfy completely. At the same time, perhaps many approaches will satisfy under many specific conditions, in the context of specific moments, specific encounters.

4. Alongside these other concerns, there will be the question of what will issue from these coming-together—and here we should probably just let the sexy word-associations snowball—what we will be bringing into the world as a result of our associations. Like children, these new collectivities will tend to have minds or at least interests of their own. They will be organized according to their own laws of development, and while they may be expected to exhibit valuable sorts of collective reason, and powerful sorts of collective force, these expressions will be both somewhat *alien* and, in at least the usual senses, *inarticulate*. They will not be *free* absolutes, but absolutes of another sort. And we may have to assume a sort of tutelage over them, taking responsibility for loosing them upon the world, even as our basic principle suggests that when we encounter them it must be as at least *potential* equals.

From this point, the isolated encounter obviously begins to weave a web of new encounters—and we never really start with the *isolated* encounter, being always already in relations with a range of persistent collectivities, including families, States, markets, etc. We are always navigating a complex web of relations.

What I want to suggest, with regard to Proudhon's philosophy and social science, is that if we are armed with his critique of all that might be based on authority or governmentality in those relations, then we can take the next step by beginning to analyze them on the basis of this notion of the *anarchistic encounter*, a notion which we can also apply moving forward into new relations.

As a next step, I want to compare the encounter with a more overtly commercial sort of exchange, or transaction, and see what the contrast reveals.



Sunday, September 08, 2013

A note on “external constitution”

I would hope by now that the practical application of Proudhon's theory of the State, or more precisely of the theory of society underlying it, would be clearer than perhaps they were when I first published the chapter. But it can't hurt to clarify things.

Clarifying the history of anarchist anti-State thought is arguably useful, and probably even important, given the current struggles over the scope of anarchism's critique. The sole focus on the State is a tool of entryists of various sorts, and while there is nothing in Proudhon's development that suggests we should be any friendlier to any existing State, the clarifications about what the early anarchists actually opposed in the State point to the heart of the broader anti-authoritarian critique. And that gives us some clearer points of comparison, when the would-be suitors come knocking.

So what's the heart of the critique? It looks to me like “authority” is always connected to something like “external constitution.” The chapter on the State and the writings since its publication should give some sense of the consistency of Proudhon's thought. With justice identified as the sole criterion for a whole range of projects, and balance the mechanism of justice, we can start to grasp the ways in which all of Proudhon's various criticisms and constructions revolved around a single logic.

When we look at the anarchist encounter, with its formula of equality plus collective power, there is no question of an external force or entity “realizing” the tiny society present, as the State was presumed to do in the broader society, and very little room even for a unifying principle to regulate the association or lack thereof. Equality, as Proudhon presented it, is a principle which arguably pulls in the opposite direction.

If the “authority” that anarchist anti-authoritarians oppose is then any sort of governance, any attempt to assert an outside force or principle as the source of organization, then it becomes a question of examining the forces, principles, assumptions, axioms, utopias, and forms of common sense that we bring to our anarchism, in order to determine which can be rendered compatible with the limited social system and which must be treated as incompatible with it. In the rest of this series of posts on the encounter, I’ll start by doing my best to banish everything that seems even potentially banishable, and then see if at least some of those elements, having been, as Proudhon put it, “rid of absolutism,” can be reincorporated in some balanced manner. As a bonus, I think I’ll also be able to finally spell out in fairly specific terms, just what I think “mutualism” means, and how I think it might be best to use the notion moving forward.



Monday, September 09, 2013

Encounters and Transactions

I expect that for many of the readers of this blog, the most significant of the dangling questions is the one opened in the post on “Anarchy, understood in all its senses.” I’m surprised that there has not been more comment on the main points in that post, which demonstrates that for Proudhon, in one of the works that social anarchists have generally championed, the anarchy of the *laissez faire* market and the anti-authoritarian anarchy of the anarchists were in some senses so closely connected that Proudhon was indifferent to which meaning was applied to the word “anarchy,” and that the connection was obscured for English readers by poor translation. We have been able to shrug off similar provocations by figures like Anselme Bellegarrigue, who referred to the Revolution as “purely and simply a matter of business,” largely because those figures don’t feature as more than footnotes in our understanding of the tradition. But it’s a little different story when we’re talking about the details of a work which already enjoys broad, roughly *canonical* status.

Proudhon has frequently been characterized as a “market anarchist,” of course, and *The General Idea of the Revolution* has often been the work used to support the characterization. And perhaps that is less surprising, given that the book was specifically addressed “to the bourgeoisie,” than the work’s place in the anarchist canon. Whether the corrected translation is likely to make the work more or less accessible to the various anarchist factions is a question that strikes me as very interesting. On the one hand, the terminological indifference seems to suggest a closer kinship between the anarchy of the market and the

anarchy of the anarchist tradition. On the other, all of the *many* damning things Proudhon said about the anarchy of the market can now be tracked much more accurately towards their target. Where does “market anarchism” fit in all of this? Is there, as I asked in the earlier post, “a sort of *anarchism* that we might associate with this [anarchy of the market], and, if so, is it perhaps a sort of *absolutist anarchism*? Answering that question requires coming to grips with how the transactions of various proposed markets compare in their basic structure to the *anarchic encounter*. Unfortunately, there’s no very easy way to answer that question, as the assumed structure and function of “the market” varies rather dramatically, even just among market proponents. But we can certainly make a good start at determining general criteria for how the question could be answered in individual cases, and explore a few possibilities.

Let’s review the critical analysis of the State. Proudhon presented the existing State as a usurpation of the power of a real collectivity, under the pretext that the social collectivity could not *realize* itself. The assumption of governmental authority by a part of society over the rest amounts to an imposture, and a not terribly convincing one at that, with the usurpers pretending to be an organ society, but somehow outside and above society as well. Now, Proudhon went on to assert that there is indeed a State, which is in some sense an organ of that society, so it does not follow from that assertion that this State could perform the role of government. This State is simply one of the various non-human “individuals,” collective absolutes, which exists on the social terrain, and which, according to the bare-bones “social system” we’re exploring, encounters other individuals as equals. The collective reason and interests of the State have their place in the balance of justice. Perhaps *free* absolutes even have certain responsibilities towards them, but I’ve already suggested that those responsibilities are not of *obedience*, but of *tutelage*. The existing theory of State-rule seems to be a failure of logic, but rule by the citizen-State would be a failure of justice, and perhaps several sorts of failure in that realm.

We can apply a similar analysis to the Market—by which we will, for now, designate a range of possible emergent structures, collective “individuals,” capitalist usurpations, etc., without seeking to pick and choose too much. Proudhon’s practice ought to suggest to us that there will be places in an anarchist sociology for critical and constructive applications of the term, and a variety of practical approximations that might be designated by it. For the moment, it is less important to know what the Market is than to know how to make sense of it however we happen to encounter it. Would-be market anarchists can then make up their own minds if and how their proposed institutions might measure up alongside Proudhon’s “system.”

We can easily pick out some uses of the term, or related terms, which are obviously analogous to the usurping State. When we hear talk loose talk about the growth or health of “the economy” we’re generally hearing one of two things: when the reference is to some sort of statistical average, then we can

probably just say that we're dealing with a *spook*, in Stirner's sense; when it is clear that the reference is to the prosperity of a particular segment of the economy, one of those "what's good for General Motors..." or trickle-down appeals, then we're dealing with a confusion of parts and wholes that really just amounts to *usurpation* from an anarchist point of view.

Would-be anarchist capitalists sometimes fall into these forms of "vulgar libertarianism," but in those circles, and in left-leaning market anarchist circles, there are treatments of "the market" that are somewhat harder to judge. The common notion that markets are an emergent form, displaying something very much like Proudhon's "collective reason," shouldn't be hard to accept for anyone who has followed the reasoning here this far, but I do think there are questions that need to be answered about the relationship between the market and the individuals who engage in the relations from which it emerges. Sometimes, for example, it appears rather precisely like the market is the external realization or justification of the individual transactions, and as if the reason of the market is assumed to be of a higher order than individual reason.

There are quite a variety of specific explanations of how markets emerge, what role they play, and what sorts of individual relations are likely to result in particular outcomes—too many to safely make blanket responses. What we can say, however, is that to the extent that market forces or market logics are used to justify what would otherwise seem like injustice with regard to individual actors, we have to be rather suspicious that the market has been elevated above the individual free absolutes from whose actions it presumably emerges. This is fairly clearly a problem in those cases where an "invisible hand" is invoked as if it was the real agent in market relations, with the content of individual self-interested acts being a matter of relative indifference, provided that the market itself remains "free." Whether more sophisticated approaches should also sound alarm bells remains, for me, something of an open question.

Back in early 2011, Sheldon Richmond and I had a brief exchange regarding Bastiat and the notion of the "double inequality of value." Readers might be interested in looking, or looking again, at the "Note of Bastiat and Double Inequality" I posted that I posted at the time, with an eye to comparing the elements in play in Rothbard's model of exchange with those in what we've been calling "the encounter." It still seems to me that Bastiat, like Proudhon, was not simply promoting "the anarchy of the market," but suggesting that free-market conditions are conducive to association and thus harmony, by means which look a bit more direct and creative than perhaps we see in Rothbard or Condillac. It seems to me that, in this particular instance, we might find means of reconciling Bastiat's position with Proudhon's very limited "social system," while I find it hard to see any interpretation of the Rothbard/Condillac position which does not complicate Proudhon's model, by positing a different criterion for justice in exchange, or by positing some form of external realization of otherwise uncoordinated acts.

My suspicion about “market anarchism” in general is that the best of it walks a fine line between elevating a genuine collective actor, an emergent market, to a position above human individuals and obscuring a mechanism perhaps very much like Proudhon’s with a language which obscures, perhaps even for its proponents, just quite how anarchistic things really are. On the social anarchist side, there is undoubtedly a similar sort of balancing act involving notions like “society,” “community,” “the commune,” social classes, various other sorts of identities, etc. And, in this moment of attempting to very ruthlessly identify all of the possible obstacles to encounters as anarchic as Proudhon seems to be have been describing, I’m inclined to think that pretty much all talk of rights and duties, permissions and prohibitions, including much of the talk of liberties from quarters very concerned not to moralize, such as egoism, have the potential to obstruct the anarchic encounter—at least to the extent that the hard lines and *a priori* criteria that come with them are presumed to be *absolutes*.

Of course, one of the things we have been learning from Proudhon is that if the absolute can be eliminated—even just sufficiently identified—then virtually every sort of concept may find a role as a practical approximation. So that’s what we have to look at next.



Saturday, September 21, 2013

Is that a scepter in your invisible hand?

We’re following what should by now be a familiar trajectory: in a *critical* moment, concepts and institutions are knocked down on the grounds that they are *absolutist*; in a subsequent, *constructive* moment, we can expect a fair number of those same concepts and institutions to be set back on their feet, but with the difference that we treat them now as *approximations*, and we put them into balance with other approximates. In some instances, the differences between *absolute* and *approximate* forms may be nearly complete, while in others it may be that a good knocking-down is all that is required to eliminate the absolute, as the real problem is not with the concept or the institution, but with our relationship to it.

What is different in this particular examination is that what we are looking at are various conceptions of *anarchism* itself. The stakes are high. If we’re committed to *progress*, and acknowledge the *ungovernability* of anarchism, then we are forced to think of every existing attempt at anarchism as an *approximation*, and most like more than just one approximation. Radical social change is not likely to be a one-size-fits-all affair. Obstacles to anarchy will come

in various shapes and sizes, and we're going to have to be able to distinguish between them. And then we're going to have to become mighty adept at transforming them from obstacles to aids, whether that means tearing them down and rebuilding them, or just looking at them differently.

It isn't clear that the familiar distinction between *reform* and *revolution* will serve us particularly well. The key is in each instance to be genuinely *radical* in both our critiques and our constructions, to get down as close as we can to the *roots* of things.

There's no reason to think that will be particularly easy, and lots of reasons to suspect precisely the opposite. This anarchism thing is likely to keep us on our toes.

We've assembled a lot of our toolkit. If Proudhon's approach has brought us new problems, it has also brought us new tools. We have a sort of template for the *anarchic encounter*, and we have a sociological approach which allows us to adapt that template to a tremendous range of possible situations, at a wide variety of scales. There is something quite elegant about Proudhon's use of *justice as sole criterion*, but most of us have plenty of cautionary experience with some of the other contenders for anarchistic criteria, such as "voluntaryism" or the "non-aggression principle." And I think nearly all of us with experience with the debates around mutualism have some sense of how the less rigorous formulations of Proudhon's "systems" can bog down in quibbles about what is or isn't "mutual" or "reciprocal," just as surely as those other systems run up against problems with defining what is "voluntary" or what counts as "aggression." When the tool-kit is simple and the problems are complex, we have to bridge the potential gap with the care we take in our analyses. We aren't going to build a meaningful free society with slogans.

But the truth is that we love our slogans, and we tend to love our favored approximations. And we're soaking in a culture that is arguably more and more *fundamentalist* in all sorts of ways, which means that anarchism suffers from multiple sorts of attacks, confronting the sort of dogmatism from outside which is increasingly hard to break down, but also arguably sapped from within by a similar sort of tendency to rigidity. Living under siege, as we unquestionably do, it's hard to cultivate the sort of relationship to anarchism that would arguably allow us to move forward most easily, and most readily avoid the traps of an anarchism turned absolutist, and degenerated into ideological dogma. It's hard to imagine being too comfortable asking ourselves, on a regular basis:

*So, what's still authoritarian about my anarchism?
What needs to be fixed today?*

And yet that's probably just the sort of relationship we need to build, if we are going to keep pushing on towards our ideal.

What would it mean to "have a relationship with anarchism"? What would that involve? We can apply Proudhon's sociology, and guess we are likely to

have several relationships, with several sorts of anarchism. That's really what the posts on "ungovernability" were gesturing towards: the various ways in which individual anarchists find themselves in relations with the various things that "anarchism" has meant, and how those relations shape our relations with one another.

One of the things that was not clear in those earlier posts was the extent to which our relationship with those *anarchisms* must, in order to remain a part of our anarchism, be fundamentally equal. If we accept Proudhon's notion of the one criterion for justice, and we don't want to install injustice right at the heart of our anarchisms, then it's important that we find the way to encounter anarchism itself one-on-one, understanding all of the complicated connections we make in the process, but not subordinating ourselves to any of that. Virtually every form of anarchism has its favored institutions or expected *emergent forms*, its own particular manifestation of "the tradition," etc. and all of these non-human actors will occupy their place in the complex balance of justice. None of them should probably be exempt from the sort of scrutiny we've been proposing for all actors in all potentially anarchic encounters—whether we call them "the State," or "the market," or "society," or "the commune," or even "anarchism."

The thing I'm working around towards here is, I suppose, a relationship with anarchism which, once we've done the work of chasing away the spooks and cutting through a fair amount of smoke and nonsense, comes down to treating the tradition, and the movement, as something like a comrade, rather than the foundation of our political identity. It involves a step away from the sort of anarchist identity that is almost inescapably absolutist, the kind of relationship with the ideal, the tradition, and the movement which either renders us *subject to anarchism*, or else devolves into "*l'anarchie c'est moi.*" Putting a scepter in an invisible hand is really no more appealing, no more anarchistic, if the hand is presumably that of libertarian revolution.

What the corrected translation of General Idea of the Revolution suggests to us is that this coincidence of "anarchism" and an "invisible hand"—*the invisible hand*—is perhaps not so far-fetched. If we go back and pick up a number of Proudhon's other insights—the observation that the *collective reason* is of a different character than *our reason*, and the realization that Revolution always involves both *conservation* and *progress*—then perhaps we can begin to flesh out the potential details of this peculiar *comradeship with anarchism* that I am proposing.



Saturday, September 21, 2013

Mutualism Revisited

Six months ago, I announced, after a lot of soul-searching, that I was going to abandon “mutualism” as a description of my politics, and opted to scrap the *Two-Gun Mutualism: Rearmed* book and begin work on a book examining the lessons of Proudhon for the broader anarchist movement. I always knew that it was going to be easier said than done. If the “mutualist” label covers too much ground, and what passes for a “mutualist movement” is too heterodox to move forward together, pursuing a neo-Proudhonian anarchism outside of that particular rhetorical framework was pretty well guaranteed to be very lonely work—not least because I was simultaneously in the midst of discovering that anarchism itself was rather different in its origins than I had previously suspected. What I discovered added a number of strange, new wrinkles to the story of the relationship between Proudhon, mutualism, and “market anarchism,” placing the *anarchy* of the anarchists and “the anarchy of the market” in much closer proximity than I think almost any of us would have anticipated—and at the same time seeming to draw a much firmer line between them than Proudhon’s rhetoric might otherwise suggest.

That discovery made it possible, even necessary, to approach *anarchy*, and *anarchism*, with the same mixture of critical and constructive tools that I had been applying to concepts like “the State,” and prompted some adjustments in the ongoing project of coming to grips with the general dynamic of anarchism. This is interesting territory, in part because an *encounter* with anarchism is something that would have been impossible for Proudhon. Many, if not most of the arguments dismissing “old stuff” and “dead philosophers” as useful in the present aren’t very convincing, but here’s a genuine difference: for Proudhon, and for others among the pioneers of anarchism, engagement with the idea had to be an act of creation, experimentation, and communication. There was no anarchist tradition to fall back on, no existing cultural capital to hoard, and no blueprints for “being an anarchist,” beyond a general experimental approach dictated by some initial definitions. If we shift our focus to Joseph Déjacque, apparent inventor, during Proudhon’s lifetime, of the “you’re not an anarchist, you’re a liberal” response, and the game has changed. Something collective has emerged, and Déjacque has that, and Proudhon, to engage with. The change in the game is significant.

There is a lot that we should examine, eventually, about Déjacque’s two manners of propagating new ideas, and his preference for scandal, in the context of the critical/constructive dichotomy and the watershed that Frédéric Tufferd marked between roughly Proudhonian and Bakuninist forms of social analysis. Certainly, the extent to which social change can be provoked by the work of reason was estimated very differently by Proudhon and Déjacque, and there is now perhaps plenty of evidence that Proudhon was always more

“successful” with scandal (“property is theft!”) than we was “injecting truth drop by drop into minds that are already prepared.” But was the “success” of Proudhon’s scandals a success for anarchism? It’s hard to say exactly, since anarchism as we know it emerged in the context of those scandals, and has treasured them, without always understanding very well what more reasonable appeals were behind them. The anarchism that we have individually encountered was born, at least in part, of scandal, and has conserved a strong connection to those origins.

But for now let’s stick closer to the question of *what happens* when Déjacque responds to Proudhon. One very important thing happens: when Proudhon said “I am an anarchist,” he opened up a realm of positive possibilities; when Déjacque argued that Proudhon was in fact *not* an anarchist, or not an “entire anarchist,” he opened up a space between Proudhon and anarchism itself, acknowledging, if only tacitly, the emergence of that *collective something* (movement, tradition, shared ideal) which invariably haunts all of our discussions about anarchism. Déjacque was among the first to encounter *anarchism itself*, at a stage where it was little more than an idea—when, in reality, it was probably largely a *spook*—and played an important role in finishing the job that Proudhon had started, of launching this new *something* into the world. After Déjacque, I would argue, the game changes substantially once again.

None of these operations, however, go off without a hitch. Proudhon sabotaged his own scandals and fell short of his expressed ideals. Déjacque, launching anarchism at the same time he was attempting to correct or govern it, can probably be credited as the inventor of *anarchist sectarianism*, and of a type of *anarchist identity* which has the tradition has conserved to this day. When we get over our slightly malicious glee at seeing Proudhon taken down a few pegs, there is a lot about Déjacque’s essay on “The Human Being, Male and Female” that might give us pause. Between the notion that Jenny d’Hericourt needed a defender, and the idea that the right way to straighten out Proudhon for his coarse, anti-feminist rants was to call him names and attack his masculinity, there are reasons to think that Déjacque was not himself perhaps an “entire anarchist,” or entire *feminist* for that matter—but where we come down on those questions will undoubtedly depend on whether we think the likes of Proudhon (whatever we think that means) deserves more than the *scandalous* treatment.

On that question, I suspect, *anarchism* itself is likely to be called in as a judge. We, who have inherited the results of at more than 150 years of encounters explicitly related to anarchism, generally have a pretty clear sense of what is and is not permissible for “allies” and towards “enemies.” We have conventions based on that long history of internal and external struggle. We can assume, with some confidence that many of those conventions serve to protect aspects of the anarchist movement that are probably worth protecting. The

question, though, is whether the conventions are themselves anarchistic, whether there is any anarchistic rationale for calling on our conventions as a means of judging individual anarchists, etc.

I have a lot of thoughts about these issues, and about the uses and perils of what we might call anarchist identity politics. What seems clear to me at the moment is that there is a tension between the sorts of conventional ways in which anarchists relate to each other and/or relate to “anarchism” in its various more-or-less collective, persistent senses and the dynamic of the encounter we see described by Proudhon. There are reasons to believe that at least a certain sort of *anarchistic encounter* is rather far from conventional anarchistic practice, among “allies” and especially with regard to “enemies.” Based on this observation, it seems to me that there is probably at least some utility in pursuing an analysis of how we think about “being an anarchist” and how that structures our relations, using the tools that Proudhon has provided us. Those unconvinced about the analytic apparatus can judge the study by its consequences. Those already convinced of its consistency with anarchist principles are faced with more immediate concerns, but perhaps also provided with at least some of the means of dealing with them.

There is just a bit more to say about the potentially *absolutist* concepts and institutions which may work against the interest of individual anarchists in pursuit of the anarchistic ideal—the constructive side of the question, by which we potentially bring back in, in variously modified forms, some of the same potential obstacles we just dismissed. Since we have raised the stakes considerably now, by including various manifestations of *anarchy* and *anarchism* among the elements potentially in need of reform, I think it makes sense to sketch out that side of things before we go too much farther into what is necessarily a difficult exploration. First, however, an aside and a much-delayed return to the question of “mutualism:”

Back in the early 1990s, in my brief career as an internet sociologist, I wrote a series of papers examining the popular but hotly contested notion of “virtual community.” At the time, of course, I wasn’t using the Proudhonian toolkit, but more and more I find that some of the questions I was pursuing then are connected to issues I am wrestling with now. The collective actors of the present analysis are not, I think, so different in some ways from virtual communities. But as I was working through the arguments in this post and the previous one, beginning to chart the process by which perhaps anarchists began to encounter, and identify with, anarchism as such as much as other anarchists, I was reminded of my days on the edges of the “cyberpunk movement,” and some observations I made about the dynamics of that subculture when it felt itself under attack. As a sort of long footnote to this post, allow me to suggest the paper that resulted: “Running Down the Meme: Cyberpunk, alt.cyberpunk, and the Panic of ‘93.” I will undoubtedly come back to it down the road.

That leaves the issue of “mutualism.” In our present vocabulary, the problem with mutualism has been that the collective *something*—or, more accurately, *somethings*—represented by the word seemed to be working, as such things “work,” at cross-purposes with the project in which I found myself engaged, and perhaps with all such projects, despite the solid grounding of that project in the mutualism of Proudhon. It made sense to withdraw participation, to the extent that this was possible, in this particular association. Given the way that our debates within anarchism tend to focus so strongly on questions of identity and identification, it still makes sense to me. But, were those conditions different, or should they differ in the future, there would be good reason, I think, to reinstall the notion of mutualism right at the heart of the sort of anarchistic project I’m pursuing. However, in keeping with the approach to social study that we’re borrowing from Proudhon, one difference would be necessary: rather than identifying a political identity, an allegiance to an ideological current or a movement—rather than referring to any sort of *essence*—we should keep our eyes on *relations*, under which circumstances “mutualism” might very aptly describe the dynamic we find within the anarchic encounter, where the whole mechanism of justice is composed of the agents involved in an act of social creation, without the mediation of outside authority. There would be no sense in calling ourselves “mutualists,” though perhaps we could in some transitory sense prove ourselves such in the act, because this mutualism is nothing but the basic dynamic of this very demanding conception of anarchism. Whether there would be any point, or any justice, in calling ourselves “anarchists”—whether there is any point and any justice in that, according to the standards we are applying here—is a question that we’ll probably have to wrestle with quite a bit more.



Sunday, September 22, 2013

Note on Contr’archy and Guarantism

One of the more difficult tactical questions in this new phase has been the question of vocabulary, of how to stock this “toolkit” that we’ve been assembling. I would love to keep the truly esoteric terminology to a minimum, but even jargon has its uses—chief among them the highlighting of concepts which are themselves more than a bit esoteric. I have a great deal of faith in readers’ abilities to negotiate complex discussion of property, capitalism, socialism, association, etc., without recourse to anything more than the sort of

clarification one would expect in any careful study. But when it is a question of historical concepts, or when we are negotiating the twists and turns of this anarchistic analysis of the various manifestations of anarchy and anarchism, well, perhaps it makes sense to underline the potentially alien nature of the concepts in question. When I first introduced *contr'archy* and *guarantism*, the poles of our new version of “the larger antinomy,” I didn’t necessarily expect much understanding of either concept, but perhaps now, as we have spent quite a bit of time exploring the way in which anarchistic critique can be turned on anarchy or anarchism itself, that first concept is beginning to assume a somewhat more definite form. As we turn, in the last sections of this series on “the anarchic encounter,” to questions of practice, I hope that the second term will also begin to acquire a bit more clarity.

As we are also currently in the midst of clarifying the relations between this phase of exploration and those that have come before, I suppose it makes sense to note that these new poles of this new antinomy are much like the “two guns” the last phase, transferred for the moment to the realm of method and practice. Instead of our old “brace of rusty pistols,” individualism and socialism, we have, on the one hand, the principled opposition to everything of an absolutist or hierarchical nature, an analysis always open to the devils in the detail, bound to sacrifice everything else to a relentless consistency, should the critique lead that way, and, on the other, we have the commitment to make the sort of real change, material improvement in conditions without which no principles, however obsessively pursued, really amount to much. As with the antinomies more familiar from earlier studies, we can probably say that either emphasis, without the balance of the other, is unlikely to take us where we want to go, but from this we cannot simply fall back on some compromise or middle way—particularly if Proudhon is our guide. For him, we must not forget, liberty was always something enhanced as much by the complexity and intensity of complication and conflict as it was by the mere absence of constraint.



Friday, September 27, 2013

The Third Gift

One of the consequences of adopting this model of the *encounter* as a key tool is that we are confronted more directly with the ways in which Proudhon’s sociology complicates oppositions like that between *individualism* and *socialism*. On the level playing field we’re exploring, both individual human beings and all of the collective *individualities* enter the encounter as what I’ve been calling

equal uniques, individuals, but on potentially very different *scales*. In the context of the analysis of Proudhon's State-theory, I raised the practical difficulties of realizing this sort of encounter in practice between individuals of such different scales, and/or between free absolutes and collective individualities, but I think we're seeing that perhaps there are real difficulties even when we're just dealing with human individuals. Equal *uniques* in the sense we've been borrowing from Stirner are without a *type*, they are in this specific sense "the only ones." This sense that seems to separate us all more or less absolutely is, of course, perhaps the one sense in which we can all be united as equal in a context that is truly anarchic. The *type* is already the beginning of the *hierarchy*.

Is it desirable to pursue this sort of equality-in-uniqueness? The obvious objection is that in focusing on individuality, we are likely to neglect the social. But we've come to this essentially egoist emphasis by a somewhat different path than most egoists, arguably even those, like James L. Walker, who mixed more than a bit of Proudhon into their philosophy. I've already suggested that we'll have to distinguish between actual *spooks* and real, though collective *individualities*. And if we are happy to think of each individual as "the only one" in the sense of not being in any sense typical, there doesn't seem to be any way to construe those individuals as alone, even in the limited, phenomenological sense that people like have John Beverley Robinson advanced. But with equal uniqueness we are positing at least some sort of fundamental incommensurability between individuals, and their experiences and values. And we always run the risk of overstating that gap in any particular context, particularly as we are also positing any number of persistent products of association, links between human individuals stable and organized enough to count as social actors in their own right. But, again, we are united at the same time we are dividing. By leveling the field on which individuals of various scales encounter one another, we hardly leave ourselves means to distinguish between individual and social, in any hierarchical sense. If we are to balance the interests of the actors that we find on that terrain, we'll either end up addressing what we usually think of as individual and social, or we'll have failed to do justice in some way.

We're not *just* interested in precise accounts of the most specific details, nor *just* concerned with the general state of social collectivities, and our analysis can't *solely* focus on either principles or consequences. All the aspects of Proudhon's tend to force us to eventually look high when we start off looking low, or left when we start off looking right. If we find ourselves *zigging* a lot without also *zagging*, we can probably suspect we haven't followed through completely. That means that a lot of the ways that we usually *type* our practices may not work for us.

For Proudhon, bigger was not better, in the sense that society could take precedence over the individual, or the other way around. But if he did not associate any sort of virtue with particular *scales*, the same is probably not true

of intensities, which, for Proudhon, were bound up with the question of liberty. If we adopt the notion that freedom is essentially the measure of the intensity and complexity of the contradictions within an organized relation, we find ourselves with another of these concepts which is relatively blind to scale, but we also find a strong incentive to pursue complex analyses, so that we do not simply miss the play of freedom, and constructions which respect the complexities we expect to find in anarchic relations.

If these are our considerations as we come back to the problem of the anarchic encounter, then perhaps the sort of obsessive deepening of the chasm between individuals that I've arguably been engaged in looks a little less like some sort of atomistic impulse run amok. There is, of course, always something a bit amok about the *contr'archic* tendency to make our anarchism ever more so, but the antidote for that extremism seems to be a balancing tendency which we might suspect is going to be fairly naturally bound up with that first project. As we increase intensity, we always court the possibility of things blowing up in our faces, but, one way or another, that seems like an occupational hazard we should expect.

To better understand the dynamics of the encounter, perhaps we need to add just a bit of complexity to Proudhon's simple model. In practice, in the midst of lives which are very deeply, strongly structured by all manner of hierarchical or potentially hierarchical elements and connections, to encounter one another in an anarchic manner probably necessitates a sort of preliminary encounter between the individual actors and the possibilities inherent in anarchy. That's probably going to involve some staring into the abyss, some shrugging off of the hierarchies will almost inevitably be available to us, and a recognition of the other as another equally unique individual.

That recognition brings us onto familiar territory. It is a part of what I have been describing as "the gift of property," though perhaps it is a part that we haven't really explored yet. So far, the "gift of property" breaks down into a couple of different gifts, roughly corresponding to the rights of *use* and *abuse*, as Proudhon understood them:

1. A conscious ceding of all that we might claim of *our own* in others; and
2. An affirmation of the right to *err* in the process of learning to manage one's own.

But there seems to be another aspect of the gift, which perhaps we should just call the gift of anarchy, by means of which we relinquish all the things that might prevent the encounter from being truly anarchic. This is where anarchism differentiates itself from voluntarism, which seems content with the persistence of existing authority, provided no "new" authority is exercised. There seem to be similar weaknesses to at least some nominally libertarian forms based on "non-aggression." Somewhat ironically, what this suggests is

that these systems are specifically inadequate to grant each their own, and secure the sort of anarchic property that we've been pursuing.

So, does this approach mean that we are done with all of the typical classifications through which we tend to approach our encounters with one another? Not exactly. There is still plenty of room in our scheme for those real persistences which operate as social actors. But perhaps we need to let those actors enter encounters as individuals of sorts, and take their own places in the balance of justice.



Monday, October 14, 2013

Practicing the Encounter: Appropriation (and Ecology) - I

Let's get a little practice with all the tools we've been assembling. And, to do so, let's stick, for the moment, with the question of property. It's been one of my more or less explicit beliefs for a long time now that property theory may be transformed from a tool of capitalism into a tool useful to anarchists, simply by reexamining it very closely with a set of presuppositions informed by the insights of anarchism and ecological science. I've also been fairly emphatic that one of the reasons that this has not happened to any great extent, despite the emergence and/or reemergence of anarchistic schools with a fairly significant interest in questions of property, is that we have tended to focus on questions of *abandonment*, rather than on the question of initial *appropriation*. It's probably also the case that in at least some of the "libertarian" capitalist circles where anarchists were once likely to be challenged most seriously on questions of principle, there has been a recent retreat from well-developed, principled arguments, for vague position such as voluntaryism, uncertain predictions about most "efficient" practices, and bald assertions about natural "liberties." I think, however, that a different, and potentially more interesting, set of challenges have emerged as a result of the examination of genuinely anarchist theory, and there is no particular need in this instance to bounce ideas off those of our adversaries in order to refine our understanding.

For the moment, I am just going to take it as a still-controversial *given* that some sort of theory of "property," in the general sense I have been giving it, is not just useful, but probably unavoidable for anarchists. While we want to avoid the (mis)conceptions by which property becomes capitalist from the outset, and we are, as anarchists, committed to opposing the sorts of hierarchical, "propertarian" structures that we see all around us, we probably still have a need to distinguish between the *mine* and *thine*, to make specific judgments

about the just distribution of both “natural resources” and the fruits of labor, and to make judgments about *responsibility* in various senses which never stray very far from the question of “one’s own.” There are a lot of reasons why it would be *nice* if anarchist theory could bypass the question of “property,” but my experience is that failing to confront the problem doesn’t make it go away, while acknowledging that it is indeed a *problem*, and settling down into problem-solving mode, has in many ways caused the problem to diminish in importance. And now, with the model of the *encounter* established as a key element of our anarchistic toolkit, it seems possible to position the *problem of property* as one part of the larger *problem of the encounter*, the problem we can expect to be solving, and re-solving, as long as we seek to practice anarchistic social relations.

There is a very thorny analysis of property in the context of this encounter of equal uniques, with more or less incommensurable values, which still has to be on our agenda, and which will involve a more head-on encounter with some of the varieties of egoism, but I suspect it may be easier to work towards that question through a somewhat less abstract, speculative look at *appropriation*. In the past, engaging in a sort of variant reading of Locke, I’ve identified the elements that would probably be necessary for a complete, coherent theory of just appropriation:

1. An understanding of the subject of appropriation (“individual,” “collective,” irreducibly individual-collective, etc.;
2. A theory of the nature of that subject’s relation to itself as “self-ownership,” “self-enjoyment,” etc.;
3. A theory of nature (active or passive? productive? capable of “projects” worthy of acknowledgment?) and of the relation between nature and the subject of appropriation;
4. Some answer to the question “is there a right of appropriation?”—and some reasonable account for any such right, grounded in the previous elements;
5. A theory of justice in the exercise of appropriation (provisos, etc.);
6. A mechanism for appropriation;

That still looks like a fairly useful list, but a number of the elements look rather different to me than they did in early 2011.

Some of the questions look considerably simpler than they once did, and others look enormously more complicated. Having rather thoroughly embraced Proudhon’s sociology in this examination, the answer to the first question seems to be “irreducibly individual-collective,” at least in the sense that we have been looking at all potential subjects as at once *individualities* and *collectivities*.

Let’s take a moment and define those two terms a bit more precisely. They both refer to the range of individuals recognized within Proudhon’s sociology, but designate different aspects of those individuals. Since every individual is

also a group, since the unity of the individual is itself a matter of the organization of elements according to a specific, developing law of organization, there are occasions where the different designations will be useful, and since we are not just talking about individual humans, let's let these other terms designate the full range of possibilities.

Now, despite my recourse to borrowing from Stirner's vocabulary, we're starting from a place rather different than at least *some* egoist would probably choose. Someone like John Beverley Robinson, for example, suggested that egoism involved the realization by the individual "that, as far as they are concerned, they are the only individual." We are isolated by what we might call the *opacity of the other*:

For each one of us stands alone in the midst of a universe. We are surrounded by sights and sounds which we interpret as exterior to ourselves, although all we know of them are the impressions on our retina and ear drums and other organs of sense. The universe for the individual is measured by these sensations; they are, for him/her, the universe. Some of them they interpret as denoting other individuals, whom they conceive as more or less like themselves. But none of these is his/herself. He/she stands apart. His/her consciousness, and the desires and gratifications that enter into it, is a thing unique; no other can enter into it.

However near and dear to you may be your spouse, children, friends, they are not you; they are outside of you. You are forever alone. Your thoughts and emotions are yours alone. There is no other who experiences your thoughts or your feelings.

This is probably not the only way to interpret Stirner's position, and Robinson is not terribly consistent, if this understanding of the unique as "the only one" is supposed to be taken at all literally. In any event, it seems to involve an almost entirely opposite response to this problem of *opacity* from that made by Proudhon, for whom the world seems to be filled with an unknown, but unquestionably large number of at least potential *others*, which must, by his sole criterion of *justice*, be encountered as *equals*.

Does it make sense to extend our range of possible *subjects of appropriation* to include everything that fits Proudhon's criterion for an *individuality*? He talked about approaching rocks as equals in some contexts. Must we stretch our theory of appropriation to accommodate sedimentation?

We can probably dodge some of the worst of this particular dilemma, since there theoretical conundrums that are unlikely to come up in any practical context. So learns turn to those which are indeed likely to come up. They are probably bad enough, when it comes to shaking up our view of what property theory is all about. We're familiar with a range of arguments which claim that non-human animals may have as good a "right" to resources as human beings, despite their inability to, say, claim those "rights" in the conventional institutions. It isn't clear that the counterarguments have much behind them that isn't ultimately derived from some version of *divine command* or simply

anthropocentric assertion. We may reject the *panpsychist* intuition that seems to lurk behind Proudhon's hesitation at drawing a firm line between animal, vegetable and mineral (or we may not), but that still leaves a lot of candidates for some sort of reasonable claim to be subjects of appropriation, even if we're just now thinking of individuals of species within the animal kingdom. And we have no reason to believe that we can stop there. After all, we have introduced the notion of *individualities* that are also *collectivities* precisely because we know that the claimants who must be accounted for in the balance of justice come in a variety of scales.

Some of the collectivities for which we probably have to account are easy enough to recognize. In a given workshop, for example, whether or not we decide that individual laborers have separate claims to some portion of the fruits of the collective labor equal to their individual input, Proudhon's theory of collective force leads us to believe that some portion of the products is the result of the association itself, and so we might say that the association was among the subjects of appropriation. Most of the practical disagreements among anarchists probably come down to differences of opinion about at what scale we should identify the subject of the property relation, with individualists looking towards the human individual and communists looking towards some relevant *collectivity*. Where the Proudhonian approach differs from these is in not choosing a particular scale, because there doesn't seem to be a clear criterion for doing so, and attempting to produce a relation of justice among *individualities* of various scales. We might, then, find instances where a family, or a city, or a federation, or perhaps in some case, even humanity, seemed to be the appropriate subject of property relations (weeding out, of course, all the instances where those terms refer to *spooks*, usurpations, etc.) And if we accept the theory of collective force it becomes fairly hard to find a reason to exclude these *collectivities* from our account, since they expressions, at least in large part, of the associated actions of agents that we would be hard put to exclude from the realm of equal uniques.

What we have accepted on the basis of social science has its equivalents in the realm of ecological science. When Proudhon moved from the critique of property to that of the State, he simply shifted his attention from one form of oppression of human beings by human beings to another. With a greater appreciation of our material interconnectedness within ecosystems, and the interconnectedness of ecosystems, perhaps there is another, analogous critique that needs to be made. There are probably a variety of ways in which the collective force and the fact of association involved in our *de facto* ecological associations are harnessed and turned against us, both by denying them and by affirming them in fundamentally political ways. The "debates" about anthropogenic climate change seem full of political arguments posing as ecological ones. But the thing that we can no longer entirely deny, despite all of our politic ducking and weaving, is that we are connected, and connected with nonhuman nature, in ways which are not reducible to the best of our sociological

or economic models. What we are understandably slow to conclude from that is that those models, which tend to treat “nature” simply as a store of “resources,” “unowned” prior to human appropriation, may not really be up to the tasks to which we attempt to apply them.

Alongside a range of social *collectivities*, ranging from individual couples to whole societies, we have to consider the possibility that our potential subjects of appropriation may include a range of natural communities, perhaps culminating in that *universal circulus* that Pierre Leroux, Joseph Déjacque, and others spoke about. As in the case of social *collectivities*, we find ourselves confronted with associations in which some of the associated force with which we are confronted is our own, but, in contrast with them, much of it comes from *individualities* that we are much less likely to include in our present discussions of property. I don't think the Proudhonian philosophy or sociology leaves us any easy way to leave out these previously excluded elements, but even if we were just to focus on the traditional concern for the protection of the property of individual human beings from invasion or destruction there seem to be enough potential “downstream effects” to call for at least some reconsideration.

So, assuming we accept that something like the full range of potential subjects of appropriation have to figure in our account, what implications does that have?

It looks like the consequences are fairly significant, beginning with the fact that there is likely to be very little that looks like *unowned resources*, which we could simply *homestead*, with or without the consideration of provisos.

It appears that every act of appropriation will involve an encounter.

Saturday, October 26, 2013

II.

The search for an anarchist theory of *appropriation* has led us into an interesting position. It is common to ask the proponents of property: *What happens when all the resources have been appropriated?* But we're faced with a more challenging question: *What if, in some very important senses, they always already are?* We have to be clear, because we are not yet really talking about property *rights*, or rightful appropriation, but describing circumstances under which little or nothing of what we might consider available for anything like “homesteading” is not already mixed up with *individualities* and *collectivities* that our Proudhonian sociology suggests we should treat as having at least some *weight* in the scales of justice. So far, we haven't found much ground on which to treat the weights of the various of the various claims of the various *individualities* as other than equal, but we also haven't begun to wrestle with some fairly obvious questions which arise from our expanded roster of potential subjects of appropriation.

We know that there are important differences between *free absolutes*, which are capable of reflection, responsibility, self-conscious action, etc., and the other *absolutes* which inform and/or are informed by their actions. Back in 2010, when I began to explore these aspects of Proudhon's thinking in the context of the Deepwater Horizon spill, the conversation took the predictable turn of focusing on the fact that non-human animals and ecosystems can't vote, represent themselves in court, purchase their freedom, etc. Proponents of "market environmentalism" rightly suggested that it was necessary for human actors to be convinced of the values represented by those non-human actors' stakes, but the question of whether those values could actually be represented in a market which considered those other actors as, or as composed of, "resources" which are legitimately appropriable, apart from humans setting limits on themselves, doesn't seem to have really registered. Our thinking on matters of economics and governments is, on the one hand, mostly *anthropocentric* and is, on the other, married to a notion of the human person which confines the subject of appropriation largely "between hat and boots." Capitalist property then arguably splits that person against itself, but that's not a sort of complexification that is likely to lead in any of the directions Proudhon indicated. Instead, the body becomes just another sort of resource.

Some of the differences between the "common sense" we have inherited and Proudhon's approach as ideological, and some are no doubt matters of dominant philosophical or scientific trends. I suspect we seem warring 19th century tendencies in Proudhon, who often seems ready to reduce his sociology to a sort of *social physics*, reminiscent of Comte's *positivism*, but also seems to flirt with some kind of *panpsychism*. As Proudhonian *antinomies* go, that would be neither particularly surprising nor particularly extreme, but I suspect that both aspects are at least a bit alien to most of us. We don't, I think, necessarily need to go the places that Proudhon's specific interests and influences took him, but we are undoubtedly better off attempting to be clear about what they might have been.

A more challenging question is just how literally we have to take all this business of *individualities* and *collectivities*. And once we've settled that, we finally do need to figure out how these other claims to property are to be dealt with in practical terms. For Proudhon, the first important question is whether or not there is *something there* in the places that we point to with words like *society*, *family*, *association*, *market*, etc., or whether we have misidentified collections of elements with no real organization for organize wholes. Such an error is always possible, and we should cultivate the egoist's disdain for *spooks* when we encounter them. But it has been an important aspect of radical thought to recognize that sometimes our misidentifications are of a different sort, as when we have mistaken our own social self-organization for the work of a State, or our collective force for divine power. Almost all anarchist factions seem to acknowledge, and even depend on the fact that there are emergent agent-like structures in society with at least something very like interests of their own. So the broad question of *collectivities* doesn't seem to me to pose particular

problems, however much particular structures of association may be denied by particular factions. I think that Proudhon's treatment of the State as something which *persists* suggests one of the criteria we might look at for identifying potential subjects of appropriation, and the fact that what seems to persist in this particular sort of *collectivity* is *human projects* is another. When it is a question of acknowledging that our associations might deserve a place in our considerations of what it means to live together in just relations, I don't think there is a much of a stretch, theoretically speaking, though I think most of us are ideologically predisposed to resist acknowledging certain collectivities. The notion that these collectivities might have interests in some ways at odds with the interests of those implicated in them is also probably not a great stretch for most of us, although, again, we may have ideological reasons to resist the notion in some instances. Communists may be loathe to acknowledge the market, and slow to acknowledge the potential space between the interests of the commune as such and the individuals who are a part of it. Capitalists can be expected to embrace and resist in a roughly opposite manner. But for those who are resistant, the escape route is probably a familiar one. We are dealing here, after all, with just another version of the "synthesis (or irreducible dialectic) of community and property." While Proudhon leads us to tackle the resulting tensions pretty much head-on, I think most of us are familiar with the ways in which *individualist* or *collectivist* theories adapt to accommodate the key questions posed by the opposing theories, without erasing either human individuals or all persistent forms of association.

In previous posts, I've tried to lay out the reasons that Proudhon felt he had no anarchistic grounds on which to exclude these social collectivities from consideration, but those who are unconvinced still have to deal with the fact of these human projects and the individual human interests which presumably lie behind them. Existing positions being somewhat flexible, as I've suggested, regarding their individual and collective aspects, perhaps there are other means to deal with the problems raised by Proudhon's analysis, although the question of the specific, possibly antagonistic interests and reasons of the collectivities strikes me as something that it at least not easily incorporated into most existing theories.

Incorporating ecological science, however, seems to pose a much greater challenge, even before its incorporation poses its own challenge to the conventional homesteading model of appropriation. With persistent social collectivities, we are presumably always dealing with human will, even if it is sometimes the effects of wills belonging to humans that are dead. Sometimes we are able to extend our concern to future generations, but generally without leaving the resource-management paradigm, within which most of nature remains fair game, except insofar as we impose anthropocentric consumption limits on ourselves.

Tuesday, October 29, 2013

III

“Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

The difficulties facing our theory of *just appropriation* seem enormous. Hopefully, they also seem familiar. We're still just trying to find a property that would not be *theft*, while still remaining property in some fairly strong sense. Theories of *possession*, to the extent that they remain concerned with matter of fact, don't get us where we need to go. In order to provide a principle for action they require some additional element, such as *respect*. But those additional elements always seem to throw us back into the realm of property. There does not seem to be any possibility of talking about just relations in a material sense without some material distinction between selves and others, which inevitably involves a distinction—though not always an *exclusive* distinction—between *mine* and *thine*.

This is not an equivocation or compromise. Nor does it even need to be an attack. The capitalists have had their say about what is *proper* to human being for long enough, but it's a rotten story, which has become worse over time, and a good, Stirnerian shrug of the shoulders is about all it takes to move us along. Whether or not capitalism itself is moving towards some final crisis, capitalist philosophy seems to be an increasingly slapdash affair, and we don't have to look much farther than its own philosophical touchstones to demonstrate the fact. Proudhon's critiques of the contradictions and impossibilities of capitalist property theories still stand up pretty well today.

So let's shrug those shoulders and move along. We're working with a model of anarchist relations that depend on *equality* (in the absence of any clear means of applying any specific hierarchy or authority) and a recognition of the *otherness* of the other, the *incommensurability* or *opacity* of individuals with regard to one another (which is ultimately just part of the same argument for equality.) We will move towards harmony and accord, but have to start without any *a priori* criteria for exactly how we'll get there. What we have is what is imposed on us by the conditions we recognize at the start: there will always be a first step, into the encounter, which we will have to make in a sort of principled isolation, and what I've been suggesting is that the principle is property itself, manifested in three “gifts.” There are plenty of ways of looking at the world which might lead us to think of it as fundamentally undivided, and might then lead us to associate that undivided world with our selves—with *our own*. We see versions of this in Stirner and in Whitman, and we might derive something similar from Déjacque or Pierre Leroux, or simply from the natural sciences. But, despite the truths captured by those various visions of the world, they

couldn't function for us as principles in any social setting, since the first appearance of a really *other* being would force us to at least supplement them with some theory of *property* (in the broad sense we have been using.) Similarly, we might, as some individualisms do, break down the larger collectivities into their component parts and simply refuse to deal with the social as such, but that leaves us without the means to account for any sort of collective force. And, in practice, though some individualisms attempt to dispense with the notion of society, the defenders of capitalism and capitalist property seem prone to positing some other, emergent collectivity in its place, whether explicitly identified as the market or simply gestured at as a realm of emergent good consequences. Among the hierarchies for which we seem to have no sanction is the hierarchy of *scales of analysis*.

Still, while we have no principled grounds on which to privilege any particular class of interests, we have the practical problem posed by the fact that, despite the wide range of possible subjects of appropriation, those free absolutes who can be expected to act according to principle and who can be held responsible for their actions seem to cluster pretty much entirely among individual human actors. Some collectivities can provide feedback in the form of consequences, but generally after the fact. What the complexities of our involvements and the opacity of the others demands is a principle of individual action which allows us to enter into various encounters well-prepared to *do justice*, in the sense of balancing all of the various interests involved at every stage of the struggle towards accord and harmony.

In that sense, then, the anarchism we are exploring is, as I have put it elsewhere, an *individualism*, but an individualism at a variety of scales. And the mechanism by which we enter the encounter with an anarchistic posture is the practice of the three *gifts of property*: the acknowledgment of the other as other, and the gift of those parts of ourselves most integral to that other; the gift of a space within which to explore, and err, in the practice of being a material self, without the inevitable errors fatally disrupting our gift economy of property; and the gift of anarchy, the relinquishing of all existing hierarchies and the advantages they might afford us, whether directly in the material realm or on more ideological terrain, which is the step by which we move beyond mere voluntarism. It is an individualism always already married to an aspiration that is social, that movement towards accord, harmony and justice, but we can't skip the individualizing step, nor the principle which attaches to it, without simply scrapping the whole analysis we've made here and starting anew.

We're circling an inevitable conclusion: if we want just appropriation, no matter the range of subjects we suppose, it's up to us—up to individual human actors, working through the tangled layers of our varied and potentially conflicting interests—to make it happen. We have to enter the encounter in all of our Whitmanesque *largeness*, representing not just our own interests—including, presumably, the interest in anarchism—but also that of the multitudes which we

contain, by which we are contained, and with which we are inextricably involved. And those are big shoes to fill.

There's not really that much more to say, at least at the level of principles. It has been clear since I entered the discussions of mutualism a decade or so ago that for Proudhon property is a problem. What has been dawning over time is the extent of the problem, and the extent to which it is possibly *the* problem, which must be solved if we hope to make headway with a range of others. The choices, it seems to me, are to find some means to avoid this particular problem, to tackle the questions of appropriation and ecology in some other terms, or to take on the problem, and to take on in process all of that Whitmanesque *largeness*, those *multitudes*, and, of course, those *contradictions* that Proudhon also considered so integral to our existence. The second approach seems to have a variety of advantages, not the least of which is that it is indeed direct, and as we have posed the question it is not just an approach to the question of property, but at the same time it is a direct approach to the question of ecology—and of anarchy as well.

So, if we move forward and begin to spell out a theory of anarchistic property, how do we proceed? With our explorations of the possible subjects of appropriation, we have the beginnings of a descriptive account of *possession*, an account of what has been appropriated by individuals in a strictly *de facto* sense. We have not account of property rights—and to the extent that rights are understood as realization or justification external to our very basic encounter, we know that we won't be going there. We know that the *droit d'aubaine* or *right of increase* is almost certainly off the table. In Proudhon's terms, we can expect the fruits of social labor to become social property; whether they are ultimately managed and consumed in common, or dispersed to individuals, the role generally assigned to the capitalist—essentially that of external realization of the association—is unlikely to be rewarded as it is at present. We know that exclusive, individual property is unlikely to be the default form, given all the ways in which even apparently solitary production is amplified by accumulated technological power, and, of course, given all of the overlaps in our descriptive account of present appropriation. We now that the liberty to appropriate unowned resources will be fundamentally meaningless, as we will be hard put to find resources which are not already involved in collectivities which are themselves already involved with us human individuals. Given all of that, however, I'm still not certain we will find any more elegant place to begin looking for our principle of just appropriation than in the “enough and as good” proviso of Locke.

It was over three years ago that I spent quite a bit of time talking about that proviso and its consequences, culminating in a series of posts examining under what circumstances the individual might feel themselves free to take “a good draught” of water from a river. My argument was that Locke's appropriation proviso demanded that unilaterally just appropriation was limited to circumstances where the resource was essentially *non-rivalrous*, a condition

very different from most modern interpretations of the very conditions for appropriation. Our good draught has to still leave a “whole river,” which seems like a problem since, as I put it at the time, “a quantity of water, X , minus some non-zero “good draught,” G , is unlikely to = X .” But we know that our appropriation of resources is not really, or at least not necessarily, any sort of simple subtraction from quantity X , but an intervention in systems—and ultimately in something like the universal circulus of Leroux and Déjacque—with some capacity for replenishing some of their elements. We really can pull the trick with the good draught and the whole river. We just have to wait, assuming that we have not also crippled the ability of the hydrosystem to do its ordinary work. So if we want to leave enough and as good just for humans, we have to manage our resource use in such a way that we do not diminish the virtually non-rivalrous character of the resource for ourselves and those others. If we are consuming resources in a way which diminishes the resilience of ecosystems, then we need to make sure that we are doing our level best to repair the damage we are doing. And because the mechanics of this stuff is enormously complex, there are going to be lots of instances where we simply can't know the consequences of our actions, and if we want to claim anything approaching just appropriation, then we're damn well going to have to walk softly.

Of course, if we were to incorporate ecological norms into our common sense about just appropriation, I suspect that we would pretty quickly learn quite a bit more about ecological science, and would find that at least some of the conceptual work necessary to at least begin to represent the interests of various non-human actors in our schemes of just property was perhaps not so difficult as it seems at the moment, when our common sense about such things is of an almost entirely opposing character. In terms of the mechanisms of representing those interests, I think there are any number of ways of approaching the problem of appointing surrogates or caretakers, once the work of analysis is well under way. I think if we were honest with ourselves, we might feel that we had a good deal of restorative work to do, before we could really feel that any further appropriation was justified. I suspect a lot of folks don't want to confront that sort of dilemma, but it may be precisely what is needed to break down barriers to more efficient resource use, reduction and reuse of waste materials, etc.

Let's stop there, with the understanding that there is a great deal that can and eventually should be said about anarchistic property, but also that the models and mechanisms so briefly sketched out here should at least suggest ways in which a number of other social problems might be addressed with our simply system of the encounter. Rather than belabor this particular line of thought any longer at the moment, I would like to turn my attention to other concerns, with the understanding that we will come back to the threads that remain hanging here.

SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

January 14, 2011

A note on Bastiat and “double inequality”

Sheldon Richman recently posted an interesting piece on “The Importance of Subjectivism in Economics: The double inequality of value,” over at *The Freeman*. In it, while praising Bastiat, he wants to supplement Bastiat’s account of the benefits of a market economy with “the subjectivist Austrian insight that individuals gain from trade *per se*.”

For an exchange to take place, the two parties must assess the items traded *differently*, with each party valuing what he is to receive more than what he is to give up. If that condition did not hold, no exchange would occur. There must be what Murray Rothbard called a *double inequality of value*. It’s in the logic of human action – what Ludwig von Mises called praxeology. Bastiat, like his classical forebears Smith and Ricardo, erroneously believed (at least explicitly) that people trade *equal* values and that something is wrong when unequal values are exchanged.

Sheldon does a nice job of reading through Bastiat’s *Economic Harmonies*, showing Bastiat’s engagement with the “double inequality,” as expressed in pre-Austrian form by Condillac, as well as referencing Roderick Long’s commentary on the “Gratuity of Credit” debate, concluding that, although the principle had been around for a hundred years, “neither Bastiat nor Proudhon fully and explicitly grasped the Condillac/Austrian point about the double inequality of value.”

Now, as Sheldon shows, Bastiat seems to have *thought* he had “grasped the point,” only to reject it. Indeed, when you look at his discussion of Condillac, he sounds a lot like Proudhon, positing “Exchange” as a more-or-less anarchic “association:”

“...the separation of employments is only another and more permanent manner of uniting our forces—of co-operating, of associating; and it is quite correct to say, as we shall afterwards demonstrate, that the present social organization, provided Exchange is left free and unfettered, is itself a vast and beautiful association—a marvellous association, very different indeed from that dreamt of by the Socialists, since, by an admirable mechanism, it is in perfect accordance with individual independence. Every one can enter and leave it at any moment which suits his convenience. He contributes to it voluntarily, and reaps a satisfaction superior to his contribution, and always increasing—a satisfaction determined by the laws of justice and the nature of things, not by the arbitrary will of a chief.”

And the two propositions about profit and loss (“The profit of one is the loss of another” or “The profit of one is the benefit of another”) are alternately true or false, depending on whether individuals are or are not associated. Compare Proudhon, from the “Revolutionary Program” of 1848:

“Who does not see that the mutualist organization of exchange, of circulation, of credit, of buying and selling, the abolition of taxes and tolls of every nature which place burdens on production and bans on goods, irresistibly push the producers, each following his specialty, towards a centralization analogous with that of the State, but in which no one obeys, no one is dependent, and everyone is free and sovereign?”

Indeed, somewhat uncharacteristically, Proudhon insists so strongly (in that same essay) on the individualization of interests that he talks about “complete insolidarity.” So, however incommensurable the subjective values may be, the dual profit seems to arise, for both Bastiat and Proudhon, from the combination of individualization of interests *and* association, and, in both cases, this seems to occupy some ground between purely emergent phenomena arising from market forces and the more explicit sorts of “utopian,” “communist” or state-socialist association from which Bastiat and Proudhon would both have been striving to differentiate themselves.

Now, it seems to me that the notion of the “double inequality” has at least two major components: 1) the assumption that exchange is conventional, because subjective values are incommensurable; and 2) the assumption that individuals will only trade under circumstances where they individually profit. That second assumption seems to depend a great deal on how you understand “profit,” and it isn’t clear that individual, subjective standards of “profit” are any more commensurable than the values on which they are based. But if we accept the notion that individuals “gain from trade *per se*,” it doesn’t seem to be a notion limited to “freed-market” transactions, and the subjective “profits” don’t seem incompatible with a certain amount of material loss. Like the arguments that claim we are all “proprietors” because we have arms and legs, I suspect this sort of “profit” amounts to pretty cold comfort in a lot of cases. More importantly, though, it points to what a strange thing “exchange” is from at least some Austrian perspectives. The “double inequality” is a rather *a-mutual* notion of exchange, involving no “exchange of values” or even a translation of them. Contrary to at least some of the senses of “catallactics” (“to admit in the community” or “to change from enemy into friend”), this sort of “exchange” seems strangely solitary.

The notion that individual values are subjectively incommensurable was hardly alien to the anarchists generally associated with labor theories of value. Josiah Warren had pretty thoroughly subjectivized “equal exchange” rhetoric as early as the 1820s. His “hour of labor” was, after all, merely a standard—an hour of a particular sort of labor—against which the subjective valuations of individual laborers could be measured. And Proudhon, for whom “equal exchange” was certainly a part of the mutualist program, the

incommensurability of values was basic. In *The Philosophy of Progress*, he wrote:

The idea of value is elementary in economics: everyone knows what is meant by it. Nothing is less arbitrary than this idea; it is the comparative relation of products which, at each moment of social life, make up wealth. Value, in a word, indicates a proportion.

Now, a proportion is something mathematical, exact, ideal, something which, by its high intelligibility, excludes caprice and fortune. There is then, on top of supply and demand, a *law* for comparison of values, therefore a *rule* of the evaluation of products.

But that law or rule is a pure idea, of which it is impossible, at any moment, and for any object, to make the precise application, to have the exact and true standard. Products vary constantly in quantity and in quality; the capital in the production and its cost vary equally. The proportion does not remain the same for two instants in a row: a criterion or standard of values is thus impossible. The piece of money, five grams in weight, that we call the *franc*, is not a fixed unity of values: it is only a product like others, which with its weight of five grams at nine-tenths silver and one-tenth alloy, is worth sometimes more, sometimes less than the franc, without us ever being able to know exactly what is its difference from the standard franc.

On what then does commerce rest, since it is proven that, lacking a standard of value, exchange is never equal, although the law of proportionality is rigorous? It is here that liberty comes to the rescue of reason, and compensates for the failures of certainty. Commerce rests on a *convention*, the principle of which is that the parties, after having sought fruitlessly the exact relations of the objects exchanged, come to an agreement to give an expression reputed to be exact, provided that it does not exceed the limits of a certain tolerance. That conventional expression is what we call the *price*.

Thus, in the order of economic ideas, the truth is in the law, and not in the transactions. There is a certainty for the theory, but there is no criterion for practice. There would not even have been practice, and society would be impossible, if, in the absence of a criterion prior and superior to it, human liberty had not found a means to supply it by *contract*.

This is, of course, the “equality in the long term” argument that is central to the “free market anti-capitalism” of Carsonian mutualism—and there’s no downplaying the importance of Kevin Carson’s rediscovery of the compatibility of subjective and labor theories of value. But it would be a mistake, I think, not to highlight the essential differences between the approach we find in Proudhon and that of Rothbard. It seems to me that, like the more solipsistic egoists, the Rothbardian economic actor acts in an essentially solitary manner: whether or not the exchange is “equal,” in either the long or short run, is not his concern, and the willingness of the other trader to trade is just another aspect of scarcity. Reciprocity is not a goal. Instead, it is assumed to be an outcome of “equal” profit-seeking. And the currency in even nominally mutualist circles of notions like “stigmergy”—“indirect coordination,” based on the interactions between actors and the *traces* of other actors—suggests a body of thought in which there is no clear distinction between the Golden Rule and “devil take the hindmost.”

There seems to me to be an enormous difference between exchanges which always work to the profit of all exchangers and exchanges, as we find them in Proudhon's account, that fundamentally don't work at all, until some convention—some mutual approximation—is constructed which bridges the gulf of incommensurability. That approximation is the law of exchange, and, for Proudhon, that law is equality—set up as the standard against which all approximation-by-exchange will be judged. The positing of the law of equality is, at the same time, the creation of the possibility of society (“equal” association), and the condition for that positing and creation is liberty—and liberty is the result of a prior complex interconnection of actors. Implicit association gives rise to liberty, which gives rise to explicit association, which gives rise to the conventions by which exchange and society become really possible.

Regular readers of the blog will probably already see familiar dynamics in this business of a mutual gift bridging the impossible differences between incommensurable regimes of value, but I'll leave more explicit explorations of all that for another day.

Where, ultimately, does Bastiat come down in all of this? Somewhere in between, I would guess, seeing in the laws of exchange something more natural and harmonious than Proudhon, the philosopher of economic contradictions, but still more concerned with explicit association and its empirical effects than Condillac or Rothbard.



Tuesday, August 21, 2012

A Tale of Three Provisos

“Must we say, with some who pretend to metaphysics, that property is the expression of individuality, of the personality, of the self? But possession largely suffices for that expression...” — P.-J. Proudhon, *The Theory of Property*

“I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe and am not contained between my hat and boots...” — Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

It's funny, in some ways at least, how Proudhon has earned a rather scandalous reputation for his work on property, while Locke remains the name to conjure with—even though “lockeans” may be fairly choosy about what elements of his theories they retain. There are some odd twists and turns in the property debates: the guy who said “property is impossible” ultimately proposed a pretty *laissez faire* approach to dealing with property inequality, while the one beloved by the *laissez faire* school proposed limitations on property which,

according to some critics of the provisos, render property impossible in practice. And both thinkers have frequently had “followers” who have been decidedly reluctant to be led. Those presumably friendly to Proudhon’s have tended to cling to one half of his dialectical treatment. And while it is no doubt provocative to say, following his mature thought, that “property is liberty” *because* property is essentially despotic, it is no less so when contemporary lockeans tell us that the “enough and as good” proviso is fulfilled precisely by *not* leaving resources unappropriated (because... the market...)

Proudhon and Locke are both fascinating figures, and their writings on property reward serious and repeated attention, but they present radically different problems. Proudhon’s treatment of the subject sprawls across his complete works, while the heart of Locke’s treatment has an almost poetic compression. As a result, it has been easier to use Locke to talk about Proudhon than *vice versa*—but there certainly are places where, in properly dialectical fashion, the attempt to bring Proudhon into dialogue with Locke has raised interesting questions about the principles of more conventional property theory.

For example, “self-ownership” was not really a concept for Proudhon. His work contains all the elements for constructing a really interesting theory of the self, and indications of how that theory might manifest itself in the realm of rights, but his treatment of “property” has, in general, focused elsewhere. That’s the reason that I have had recourse to Stirner’s treatment of the *unique* and its *ownness* in the elaboration of the “gift economy of property.” For Proudhon, most of the concerns that we might try to address with “self-ownership—matters relating to “the expression of individuality, of the personality, of the self”—were matters of *possession*, rather than *property*. Perhaps, had he continued to develop the material he wrote in the 1860s, and pursued the consequences of those later works, he might well have traced parts of the problem of property back into the realm of *fact*. As it is, however, we’re left to work that part of the theory out for ourselves.

But the division of Proudhon’s property theory along the *fact/right* divide is a tool that he left to us, and perhaps it is one which may help us elaborate the points of contact between his theory and that of Locke.

Over the last few years, I’ve been sketching out some of the ways in which Locke’s most famous proviso—the requirement to leave “enough and as good” at the moment of appropriation—may be useful to mutualists in thinking about possible property regimes. It has been particularly useful to examine the tendency of that proviso to limit appropriation to *non-rivalrous* resources, when so many proprietarians insist that property can actually only apply to rivalrous ones. And I think it has been useful to treat the proviso on appropriation as a relatively successful attempt at determining how we might formulate guidelines for acts that are “permissible” in some *a priori* sense. Despite strong reservations about the whole discourse of “permissibility,” and a love/hate relationship with *rights-talk* in general, I think mutualists have a lot to learn from the attempts to discover natural rights and natural law.

But recently I have been feeling as if perhaps there was more clarification to do with regard to Locke's provisos, starting with some clarification of just what it is that the provisos condition when they establish whether or not we can claim property. There is, after all, a way of reading Locke's account which involves a *fact/right* dichotomy much like Proudhon's. Labor-mixing could easily be read in terms of proudhonian possession, as a matter of the expression and extension of individuality. If we were to make a fairly literal reading of this whole business of mixing the self with external resources, we could perhaps fairly easily sketch out the terms of a lockean theory of possession, and apply an ethic of mutual recognition and respect—and what we would have would be probably be pretty similar, in terms of consequences, to the systems of "possession" that anarchists have drawn from Proudhon's early works. While contemporary lockeans generally want to leap straight to the question of enforceable *rights*, a lot of the important stuff in Locke's scheme takes place on the *factual* side of things. If there is not "enough and as good," it is *still* the case that "something" of the self is mixed with the resources—which we would still be tempted to say are *appropriated*, as long as it is understood that we are not talking about legal or moral property. The proviso limits the circumstances under which a *de facto* "appropriation" (in the sense of an addition to the developing self) can create a socially recognizable or enforceable property right. And, let's be clear, Locke's appropriation proviso would set limits on "possession" that are not necessarily there in some of the more conventional anarchist treatments. And then the "gleaning proviso" set limitations on waste, or established a rationale for something like an "occupancy and use" regime, depending on how it is interpreted.

When Proudhon remarked that the champions of property were far more interested in limiting it than he was, he wasn't just trying to score rhetorical points. In some ways, the "non-proviso" approach to Locke's theory is just a more aggressive fulfillment of the same sort of *un*-limited property that Proudhon embraced in the 1860s. And that's something that mutualists should take seriously as we weigh the various possible paths forward from Proudhon's work. But there is an important difference between Proudhon's mature approach and that of the non-proviso lockeans: Proudhon ultimately took a consequentialist approach, embracing simple property despite, and because of, the fact that it was based on a principle which was indefensible by itself, while the lockeans claim that they are presenting natural rights, based on an essential property in person—self-ownership.

Now, we've already introduced a form of self-ownership in our "possessory" account of labor-mixing and its consequences. But is it the form of self-ownership which will get us to simple property by means of principles? Perhaps not.

After all, as we have been exploring a range of property theories, we have seen a range of theories of the nature and limits of the self, and a variety of positions regarding self-ownership as an *exclusive* affair. Stirner, for example,

has provided us with an account of *ownness* to supplement Proudhon's, but Stirner's approach does not require that *uniques* exist without overlap. Instead, we have a situation where *uniques* feed on one another—engage in “mutual utilization”—but, in important ways, the property of other *uniques* is simply not of interest to the individual self. And Pierre Leroux has given us an account of the self as “both objective and subjective,” with the consequence that what is inalienably proper to the person has to include “others”—which is certainly unlikely to lead to a property regime based on exclusive, individual selfhood.

For Proudhon, the description of property as “theft” and “impossible” was tied to his analysis of the various means by which the facts of possession were supposed to imply rights of property. He came to the conclusion that none of the arguments from principle adequately established the rights. He described the problem involved in these terms: “*Property is a man's right to dispose at will of social property.*” Now, we have no shortage of arguments about why the labor-mixing of individuals is never *entirely individual*, but perhaps we have a more basic issue to address.

The very notion of appropriation involves a notion of a self which is not contained, as Whitman put it, “between hat and boots.” We “mix” with all sorts of things around us, and with other people—as Stirner reminds us in the long section on “My Relations.” Interpersonal mixing seems as natural a part of what is proper to human being as other sorts. So if we want property rights to regulate an exclusive distinction between “mine” and “thine,” then we have to retreat back between our hats and boots—at least when we're talking about *proprietors*. And that means that the proprietor, the subject of self-ownership, will not have “self-ownership” in the entirety of the self. There is, in effect, a third proviso which we apply when we move from all the ways in which we mix with the world to those from which we are willing to recognize the creation of a property right. In that sense, there are no “non-proviso” lockeans, only those who reject the limitations on appropriation, waste or concentration, while maintaining a different proviso which also limits the circumstances under which labor-mixing can result in property rights.

This third proviso is, of course, something very close to one of the “gifts” on which the “gift economy of property” is based. There are obviously reasons why we might desire a property regime based on exclusive, individual domain. But if that's what we desire, and it requires a proviso which limits the derivation of rights from the results of labor-mixing, we need to be clear about that.



Wednesday, June 02, 2010

Responding to the Deepwater Horizon disaster

Kevin Carson has a new piece up at the Center for a Stateless Society, In a Truly Free Market, BP Would Be Toast, which argues that without federal regulation limiting liability BP would not only be facing liabilities that “stack up pretty tall against BP’s total equity,” but also that in a genuinely free market the demands of insurers would force companies like BP to take adequate precautions.

Kevin is absolutely right in saying that the Gulf spill is not the product of an “unregulated market.” It’s one of the great wonders of the modern world that, with news of the latest attempt to tweak the economy by this or that incentive a daily staple, the phrase “unregulated economy” still exists in the language. Of course, in this regard, the shenanigans of the the government look a lot like the daily shenanigans of the market. Clearly, an unhealthy fusion has taken place, but it’s hard to decide whether it’s more troubling that the market has been governmentalized or that the government is on the market. In any event, if we are going to include that “unregulated market” among the possible alternatives to the present debacle, it’s probably only fair to also consider the possibility of an “unmarketed regulation.” If it is obvious that the current economy is something of a botched job with regard to freedom, it should be equally obvious that the regulatory state is not fulfilling its functions in any coherent manner. If “the system is working” through this particular sort of malfunction, then that “system” is not government *per se*, but the bastard love-child of corrupt government and corrupt market, which is nothing other than the dominant present form of *privilege*.

I would like to think that in a “truly free market” it would indeed be easier to sue the pants off those who recklessly endanger the lives and livelihood of others. I would hope that in such an economy, where “all economic actors do business on their own nickel,” the process of accumulating enough nickels to dig a deepwater well would build in a certain amount of responsibility, long before we got to the stage of insuring the thing. But the problem with markets is that there are many kinds of value and interest which have a hard to finding representation. After all, sea turtles and brown pelicans don’t get any more of a vote in the market than they do in elections or campaign contributions. Private property conventions tend to establish a separation of interests not reflected in, or respected by, the circulatory systems of the biosphere—and while there are, arguably, very good reasons to construct a certain kind of property-privilege around each and every human subject, we play a dangerous game when we mistake the legal and/or conventional systems of property for a map of our actual degree of interdependence on one another and on non-human nature.

As I read western intellectual history, the revolutionary trend is more and more towards the recognition of universal interconnectedness as an objective

condition, and the checkered career of modern individualism has been determined by the fact that it is not immediately clear how we should deal with our undeniable experience of separate being, in the face of a whole lot of pretty persuasive evidence that the human subject is not, objectively, much more than a calm pool in the flow of everything everywhere. Faced with this basic and very thorny problem, the individual has had to shrink considerably, expand just as dramatically, or find some way to split the difference. Unfortunately, as often as not, we've remained sort of betwixt and between solutions to the dilemma, either stuck with pretty wishy-washy non-solutions or turning defiant. The defiance of ecological concerns has had a helpful, if hapless, ally in various sorts of naive anti-humanisms and primitivisms, in shallow "environmentalism," and in the tendency of half-baked attempts at environmental legislation to regulatory capture. Those who deny the last several centuries of natural science point to the failure to sell adequate regulation to the oil companies, and pretend that the failure of junk legislation is the vindication of their junk science. When they want to sway the base, they appeal to false populism and junk religion. Faced with the need to confront *all* the consequences of our advancing knowledge of the universe—both those that emphasize our individuality and those that pull in a very different direction—we're seeing denials of reality that would make flat-earth enthusiasts blush. Now, I don't expect everyone to be convinced of the need for a "gift economy of property," or to accept the sort of ecological ethics that I think are implied by pretty much all the best thought of the last couple of hundred years. But I do think that anyone who believes the market alone, or government alone, or any combination of market and government will solve the problems posed by the Deepwater Horizon spill—*without there first being a profound examination of the problems in precisely ecological terms, and with all the sacred cows of both market and government banished to other pastures*—probably needs to go back to the drawing board.

To be frank, the problem with something like Lew Rockwell's anti-environmentalism is that it is quite simply *stupid* to act like ecosystems are some sort of left-wing plot. You can't be a very useful "hero" for human liberty if you decide you "hate" the basic life support system of the human race. The problem with the back and forth around Rockwell's stupid statements is that it's quite clear that the "libertarian" defenders are absolutely married to their dubious principles, no matter how far they may be removed from reality.

For those who are not in a "til death do us part" relation with a particular vision of private property, the disaster (of still unknown and largely unknowable proportions) that has started in the Gulf poses a lot of hard questions about how a free and sustainable society can function—and it poses them in a way that is hard to ignore. Personally, I don't think there are any easy points to be scored for free markets, free governments, or their lack. All free institutions will be as wise and good—or foolish and bad—as the individuals that make them up and the internal connections that they forge. We're obviously faced with broken markets and corrupt regulatory regimes at the moment, but there wouldn't be much

improvement from *free-but-dumb* alternatives. There's no substitute, when it comes to engaging ecological concerns, for ecological thinking, and there are plenty of indications that we are collectively resisting that engagement with every means available to us. It seems to me that there are promising routes toward a solution beginning from virtually all of the usual anarchist starting points. In the next couple of issues of *The Mutualist*, I'll be looking at how the most expansive sorts of anarchist egoism and the most collectivist sorts of anarchist communism ultimately point to the need of at least *some* "two-gun," non-*simplist*, and essentially ecological balancing act.

What ecological thinking does for us is to show the sense in which the interests of the sea-turtle, or of an as-yet-unknown species of algae, are not isolated from our own. I think I am, in my own peculiar way, as good a methodological individualist as anyone. It just seems to me that some of our mutualist predecessors complicated the matter of identifying individuals in some interesting ways. Obviously, lots of those individuals can't be directly represented in our political systems. But that's a problem to be solved – which can, I think, be solved by carefully rethinking some basic concepts – not, a matter unconnected to human liberty.

If you look at the long development of our thinking about freedom and justice the trend seems to be away from one-size-fits-all law and towards an increasingly broad recognition of what actors must be considered. Sketching out a next step that some of us are already trying to take, Aldo Leopold said, "a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such." It seems to me that some nominal libertarians still want to rule something.

