Everyone against the One...

CONTR'UN

THERE
&
BACK AGAIN

Writings by Shawn P. Wilbur

Saturday, November 02, 2013

PROUDHON ON "LIBERTARIANS" IN 1858

I've been working my way through those sections of Proudhon's *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* which I didn't have to consult carefully while writing the chapter on the State, as the next step towards organizing the Proudhon book. There have been a few moments when I've kicked myself for not going back and looking at sections, and more than a few where passages I read through in 2008-9 look very different to me now. There are two studies which I've never even begun to really do justice, but, so far, the most interesting surprise has come from a rereading of the First Study, on "The Position of the Problem of Justice," which I've felt pretty comfortable with.

In that study, Proudhon attempted to show that two prominent tendencies, which he frequently identified as "communism" and "individualism," cannot lead to an adequate theory of justice. In the argument he was covering some of the same ground that Pierre Leroux had covered in his essay on "Individualism and Socialism." He was also returning to a version of his own opposition of "community and property," from *What is Property?* and moving beyond the "synthesis" proposed in that work to a theory of liberty and *immanent justice* that would incorporate the notion of the antinomies.

It's a key moment in the development of his thought, but what struck me this time through was a shift in his vocabulary that I had not previously noticed. For what appears to be the first and last time in the writings I have been able to search, Proudhon spoke of *les libertaires*—the libertarians. This was in 1858, the same year that Joseph Déjacque launched his newspaper, *Le Libertaire*, in New York. But while Déjacque was using the term in what would become its standard form for many years, to designate anarchists, Proudhon seems to have anticipated the libertarians of the 20th century, using the term to designate the proponents of *laissez faire*, and free markets in which all interests would be harmonized to the extent that they were truly understood, provided the "interference of authority" was prevented.

It's a peculiar, and rather prescient, moment. It should not, of course, surprise, given Proudhon's back-handed acknowledgment of some kind of "market anarchy," but the term *libertaire* is not one that we associate with Proudhon. I had, in fact, pretty well convinced myself that he had not used the term. (I notice that a friend and colleague, whose working translation of the study I had access to, had highlighted the term where it first appeared.) But to find that he had indeed, however briefly, used the term, and in very much the sense used by the modern proponents of *laissez faire*, while, of course, consigning those he designated by the term among those who cannot construct an adequate theory of justice, adds another interesting wrinkle to the intellectual history, as well as to the present-day wrangling over labels.

Here's the section:

VI. — The mind goes from one extreme to the other. Advised by the failure of Communism, we are driven to the hypothesis of an unlimited freedom. The partisans of that opinion maintain that there, at base, no fundamental opposition between interests; that men all being of the same nature, all having need of one another, their interests are identical, and therefore easy to grant; that only ignorance of economic laws has caused this antagonism, which will disappear the day when, more enlightened with regard to our relations, we will return to liberty and nature. In short, we conclude that if there is disharmony between men, it comes above all from the interference of authority in things which are not within its competence, from the mania to regulate and legislate; that there is nothing to do but let liberty do its work, enlightened by science, and that all will infallibly return to order. Such is the theory of the modern economists, partisans of free trade, of *laissez faire, laissez passer*, of *every man for himself*, etc.

As we see, this is not yet to resolve the difficulty; it is to deny that it exists. – We have only to make your Justice, say the libertarians, since we do not admit the reality of the antagonism. Justice and utility are synonymous for us. It is enough that the so-called *opposing* interests are understood for them to be respected: virtue, in the social man, just as in the recluse, being only selfishness properly understood.

This theory, which makes social organization consist solely of the development of individual liberty, would perhaps be true, and we could say that the science of rights and the science of interests are merely one and the same science, if, the science of interests, or economic science, having been created, the application did not encounter any difficulty. This theory would be true, I say, if the interests could be fixed and rigorously defined once and for all; if, having been equal from the beginning, and later, in their development, having advanced at an equal pace, they had obeyed a constant law; if, in their increasing inequality, we did not encounter so much chance and the arbitrariness; if, despite so many shocking anomalies, the slightest project of regularization did not raise sharp protests on behalf of affluent individuals; if we could already foresee the end of the inequality, and consequently of the antagonism; if, by their essentially mobile and evolving nature, the interests did not continuously create obstacles, creating new and worsening inequalities between them; if they did not tend, despite everything, to invade, to supplant one another; if the mission of the legislator were not precisely, in the end, to consecrate by his laws, as it emerges, this science of the interests, of their relations, of their balance, and of their solidarity: a science which would be the highest expression of right if we could ever believe it to be complete, but a science which, coming always after and not before the difficulties, forced to impose its decisions through public authority, can very well serve as an instrument and auxiliary of order, but could not be taken for the very principle of order.

By these considerations, the theory of liberty, or enlightened self-interest, irreproachable on the assumption of an accomplished economic science and a

demonstrated identity of interests, is reduced to question-begging. It believes realized things which cannot ever be realized; things whose ceaseless, approximate, partial, variable realization constitutes the interminable work of the human race. So, while the communist utopia still has its practitioners, the utopia of the libertarians could not receive the least beginning of execution.

VII. — The communist hypothesis and the individualist hypothesis being thus both set aside, the first as destructive of individuality, the second as chimerical, there remains one last part to take, on which, in any case, the multitude of the peoples and the majority of legislators agree: It is that of Justice.

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Friday, November 15, 2013

JOSEPH DÉJACQUE'S STYLE

I've finally completed a first-draft translation of Part I of Joseph Déjacque's *The Humanisphere*, which is not long, but has to be one of the most difficult translation tasks I've attempted. I decided to start from scratch, despite the existence of several previous attempts, because I encountered some obvious problems and missed references. If I had known quite how many difficulties I would encounter, I might not have taken the task on, but I'm glad I did.

Déjacque's style is at once fascinating and maddening. Taking Scandal, as often as not, for his muse, he had a tendency to rant a bit, and sometimes much more than a bit, and the rants often took the form of catalogs of the offenses of capitalism, the church, Civilization, etc. Sometimes the sentences would be semi-colon-spliced catalogs of catalogs, in paragraphs sometimes 500 or more words long. On top of that, Déjacque was fond of literary references and often almost purely gratuitous word-play. He was apparently one of those writers who never met a metaphor he couldn't mix, and sometimes things spiraled out of his control a bit, and the reader finds themselves in a sort of cascading free-association of ideas and images. But one of his most interesting tricks was to construct passages in which two or more metaphors or sets of associations were sustained. The French word *lame* meaning both "blade" and "wave," Déjacque constructed a passage which kept both sets of associations in play. Whether or not the argument is enriched by the maneuver is open to debate, but from a purely aesthetic or technical point of view, the result is engaging.

My favorite of these double metaphors comes to its climax in the following passage:

"The great barons of usury and the baronets of small business walled themselves up [literally "crenelated themselves"] in their counting-houses, and from the height of their platform launch at the insurrection enormous blocs of armies, boiling floods of mobile guards."

He was talking about the repression of the uprisings in June 1848. Because Déjacque saw capitalism as a financial feudalism, and because he was Déjacque, it wasn't enough for the repression of the June Days to be war; it had to be a war that was like another war, with forces deployed against the people as if from siege engines. So we have "bloc(k)s" of armies from symbolic trebuchets, and metaphorical cauldrons of boiling mobile guards.

It's all fascinating, and a bit mad, and will require some combination of fine editing and footnotes to present clearly. But I'm really looking forward to that stage of fine-tuning. It isn't every text that gives you so much to work with.

Since Part III was completed some time ago, along with parts of Part II, I expect to have a working draft of the entire work by the end of the year, and then a comrade and I will tackle any additional fine tuning and correction that is necessary. For those who have yet to experience any of *The Humanisphere*, a rough draft of the translation is available online.

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November 28, 2013

ON PROUDHON'S INCOME TAX PROPOSAL

Here's a bit from *The Theory of Property* (which I have been working on some again), which discusses the relationship between Proudhon's famous proposal to the provisional government and his developing theory.

My famous proposition of July 31, for a tax of one-third on income, one-sixth to profit the farmer or tenant, one-sixth to profit the nation, should not even be considered as an application of my principles. It was a question, let us not forget, of immediate solutions, from day to day. In the crisis which struck all the forms of production, agriculture, manufacturing industry, commerce, income [*rente*] remained, inviolable and inviolate; agricultural products declined by half, land rent did not decrease; the tenants saw their wages reduced by fifty percent; the proprietor did not accept a reduction in his rent; taxes had been increased by the famous 45 centimes, and the *rentier* of the State received his annuities; he even received them in advance. In a nutshell, labor produced less by half and paid just as much to the right of *aubaine*. Celui-ci, receiving as much as in the past, bought the products at half the cost. The Republic was short on resources. So I made my tax proposal. By giving up a third of his income, the national [*domanial*] proprietor was still less effected by the crisis than the average laborers. The collection/allocation of the tax being entrusted to the diligence of the debtor, it would have cost the State neither costs of inspection, nor costs of receipt. The tax relief of one-sixth for the profit of the tenant and farmer was a compensation arriving just to the appropriate persons, without

costing a penny to the tax authorities; the government finally found a considerable resource, as easy to realize as it was certain.

Despite the scandal that was made around my proposal and the developments that I had given it, I persist in saying that I had found a solution of irreproachable circumstances, and of a complete efficacy; and that all the detailed expedients imagined then and since, have weakened the institution of property more than my project, without pulling us from the crisis.

To say that I expected the solution of the problem of property from the success of my proposition would be absurd. I was aiming then at comprehensive solutions, the plan of which is sketched out in my *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century.*

The liberty of the agricultural laborer being, from the economic point of view, the only reason to be for property in land, I naturally had to ask myself: How can society help the agricultural workers to replace the idle proprietors? To which I responded: By organizing the *crédit foncier* [land bank].

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Sunday, December 15, 2013

AN OBSCURE PROUDHON VOLUME

The Besancon archive contains a number of Proudhon's manuscripts, but also several scanned books, one of which appears to be quite obscure:

Comment les affaires vont en France, et pourquoi nous aurons la guerre, si nous l'avons : à propos des nouveaux projets de traités entre les compagnies de chemin de fer et l'Etat / par P.-J. Proudhon : A. Schnée , 1859.

That's roughly "How Business Goes in France, and Why We Have War, If We Have It: Regarding Some New Plans for Agreements between the Railroad Companies and the State." Unsurprisingly, given the title, some of the contents resemble Proudhon's other writings on the railroads, while others are obviously an anticipation of War and Peace, which he would publish in 1861.

It's really strange to run across a book-length work by Proudhon that I don't recognize. But this one seems quite obscure. Proudhon mentioned it in one letter, as it was about to be published. Darimon mentioned it in passing as well. One of the very few scholarly mentions I've found so far calls the published version a "partial" version of an existing manuscript.

I've been reading bits and pieces of this, and translating the section on the "General Theory of War." Like a number of the more obscure volumes, it is a bit of a mixed bag, but parts of it are very interesting.

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Sunday, January 19, 2014

A MILLION WORDS

It's been quiet here on the blog, which usually means I've been busy elsewhere. This time is no exception. The next phase of the work on Proudhon involves writing up some truly introductory material, which is always slow, meticulous work. The Corvus Editions project is at another awkward transitional point, unsurprisingly given the state of the book trade, so I've been trying to take a hard look at the viable options there. And I've also made a number of publishing commitments, which are taking big bites out of my work day. Mostly, though, 2014 looks like it's shaping up to be what I initially thought 2013 was going to be—a year largely dedicated to translation.

Back in November I took another look at the plan for the Bakunin Library, as the publisher and I negotiated the contents of the *Bakunin Reader*, and started to schedule what I would need to accomplish myself to make sure that we could complete the Bakunin Library volumes on a fairly regular schedule with the available translation help. Then I took a look at the translation projects that I had discussed with other publishers—works by Joseph Déjacque and Ravachol—and the short list of works that I have been puttering away at, in some cases for years. I roughed out a schedule that for November and December that would let me finish ,*The Humanisphere The Adventures of Nono* and ,*The Theory of Property* make a good dent in *The Claque-Dents* and still devote a lot of time to Bakunin—as long as I kept at the translation work steadily just about every day.

Things went pretty well in the first stage, and I pushed through the final sections of *The Humanisphere* very rapidly. That draft translation has passed through the hands of a comrade, who made some very useful suggestions, and I'm in the process of working through the manuscript again, smoothing the translation where Déjacque's prose allows.

In late November, I laid out a more formal schedule for December-February, with the goal of pretty well clearing the decks of old projects and getting ahead of schedule on the Bakunin material. Some rethinking of the structure of the Bakunin Library has sent me on a second pass through Bakunin's work, searching for overlooked gems and exploring the possibility of some small, topically focused volumes. I've been coming to terms with just how huge *The Knouto-Germanic Empire* really is. On November 28 I started an experiment, attempting to translate the equivalent of 2740 words each and every day. That's roughly 5 1/2 pages per day, which can either be pretty simple or darn near impossible, depending on the texts. I tried to create a mix of easy and difficult texts, on different subjects and in different styles, that would keep me interested and give me a fighting chance at keeping up the pace. The mixture of *forced march* and *labor of love* is not the easiest balance to strike.

At the end of December, I had translated just over 95,000 words (plus at least 6000 words of revision of old partially-edited machine translations dating back five years or so.) *Nono* and *The Theory of Property* have been added to the revision pile, and *The Claque-Dents* is more than half completed. I need to steal a couple of full days to clean up *Theory of Property*, which I worked on for too many years for it to be an entirely consistent translation, and at some point I need to complete the very interesting appendix (from 1855) on the Perpetual Exhibition, an extension of the Bank of the People which resembles in some ways the projects Anselme Bellegarrigue was proposing at roughly the same time in *Le Commanditaire.* There has been a steady stream of new translations appearing at the Bakunin Library blog. The *Bakunin Reader* is shaping up to be what I think will be a very useful volume, and I'm at the point where most of the lengthy translations are either complete or nearly so.

By the time I reached the 45th day of the experiment, I had translated in a month and a half roughly what I had translated in the previous year and a half, and I had learned some interesting lessons. First, Proudhon is comparatively tough going, and I *really* need to take the time to work up a glossary of 19th century French financial terms before I do too much more with the Perpetual Exhibition proposal or the revision of The Theory of Property. That may have to wait until Spring. In the meantime, I'll probably get back to work on *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*. Second, I love Fourier's crazed prose, but translating it so that anyone not already immersed in his general can make heads or tails of it is an enormous challenge. I have been making ridiculously slow headway on a very short collection of the works on gastronomy. Third, no matter how appealing, or how different, anarchist programs may be, I can't translate more than one of them at a time. I have been making steady headway on Emile Armand's *Anarchist Individualist Initiation*, but an interesting individualist program is still, in important ways, a program, and I probably won't throw myself into it wholeheartedly until I'm done with Bakunin's secret societies. Fourth, Bakunin is full of surprises and I'm having a lot more real fun with that work than I had expected.

Probably the biggest realization, or perhaps re-realization, which will probably shape the future of Corvus Editions as much as my translating schedule, is that an awful lot of what keeps me going with all these projects is the exploratory work and the work that at least potentially expands and opens up the conversation about anarchism. If I'm not working on at least a few things that absolutely nobody is waiting for, I'm probably not doing it right. As December went along, I found that a couple of the texts I was working on—the *Initiation* and *The Claque-Dents*, both of which I like very much—were getting left until the end of the day. So I've been mixing things up a bit, so that at least some of what I'm working on is entirely new to me. January should see a complete translation of Flora Tristan's strange, but fascinating *The Emancipation of Woman, or, The Testament of a Pariah*, and probably also an interesting section from Jenny d'Héricourt's *Woman Affranchised*. I've been

mixing in short sections from Ernest Coeurderoy's beautiful, over-the-top *Hurrah!!! or the Revolution by the Cossacks* when nothing else moves me at the end of the work day. I'm trying to mix in more shorter, and recently uncovered texts, like the letter by d'Héricourt that I just posted to the Black and Red Feminist History blog. Even at a good, steady clip, something like the *Initiation* is many months worth of work under current circumstances. That's easier to keep at if there are also some good items that get translated and posted the day I find them.

I'm 52 days into the experiment, which means that if I can do what I've done roughly six more times, that will be a year's worth of translating, and a year's worth of 2740 words each day is just over a million words of new translation. It's sort of a crazy New Year's resolution to make, but that feels like a worthy goal. Because I know I'll have to take a week or two off to deal with publishing projects and the other parts of my life that occasionally intrude, I'm expecting I will take about a month off in 2014, and spread twelve months of work over the thirteen between December 2013 and December 2014.

As February rolls around, I'll have to be thinking very hard about how to financially sustain the project, with some mix of Corvus Editions, selling off some things and perhaps some form of crowd-sourcing. *A Million Words of newly translated anarchist-related material* seems like the sort of thing that *ought* to be sustainable, but it's often very hard to tell what, if any, support there is out there. For now, I'm just want to put it out there that the project is ongoing. Wish me luck!

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Saturday, January 25, 2014

HISTORY AND POSSIBILITY

This year's million-word translation push has a couple of different motives behind it. At a basic level, it's a way to make productive what looks like an otherwise disastrous year for me. Last year was a year of wrong guesses, *zigs* that probably should have been *zags*, and an increasingly isolation on most fronts. I'm having to rethink a lot of things, make even more of my very limited resources, and try to keep my chin up through the process. In the past, really bad years have meant that *Liberty* got scanned and much of the deep background research that informs current projects got done. But in terms of realistic prospects, this might be the worst year of all, and it will be necessary to make whatever I fill my days with to keep sane also contribute as much as possible to some more viable projects going forward.

The compensation for last year's stress and alienation has been a really exciting rediscovery of *anarchy* and *anarchism*, which has, naturally, brought its own quota of stress and alienation along with it. But in many ways the

notion of the *anarchic encounter* has been the more-or-less mutualist principle I have been trying to isolate and articulate for about a decade now, and the discovery of the tensions in Proudhon's idea of *anarchy,* and all of the speculations that have arisen over the last year regarding that discovery, has clarified some of what was still unclear to me about what a genuinely *neo*-Proudhonian account of anarchism should probably involve. I feel surprisingly calm and confident with regard to what I've been calling "the little Proudhon book," which is slowly but surely coming together in the hours not occupied by wrestling with translation. In fact, I've written parts of three "little Proudhon books," with different styles and emphases for different audiences, and even toyed with resurrecting the "Two-Gun Mutualism" project.

I spent much of 2012 and 2013 trying to decide whether I should be directing my anarchist projects towards a narrower audience, which might or might not be there, with an interest in those provocative outliers in radical history of which I've ended up making something of a specialty, or towards a broader audience, more likely to be concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of anarchism than the details, however fascinating, of the movement's history. Corvus Editions has always been a bit split between a commitment to reprinting what seems useful and otherwise unavailable across the tradition and a more focused agenda of challenging the hegemonic account of "anarchist history." That's undoubtedly been a problem from a commercial standpoint, as anarchist consumers are at least as driven by brand loyalty as other consumers, and perhaps often more so. One of the lessons learned fairly definitively in 2013 was that my perceived personal demographics was always going to be more important in face-to-face *movement* settings, like anarchist book fairs, than whatever content I quite literally brought to the table at the events, a lesson that, along with the changing economics of book- and zine-fairs, has pretty well taken me off the circuit for 2014. But the theoretical and historical lessons of the same period, that new clarity about the origins of anarchism, might well have pushed me in the same directions anyway.

I continue to be very extremely interested in archiving the full range of anarchist materials, and will no doubt continue to do so, and will probably even continue to publish collections of more familiar anarchist figures, but I will most likely do so, at least for the near term, primarily in digital form, developing the new Libertarian Labyrinth catalog. I will also have some opportunities to publish some more introductory and mainstream material with other publishers, starting with the anthology from the Anarchisms Archive and an Emma Goldman collection drawn from *La Frondeuse*. And, of course, I will be dedicating a lot of my time and energy to The Bakunin Library, which is moving steadily forward, and which has become a lot of fun, along with being a lot of work. In some cases, those projects will expand the received "canons" quite a bit, often simply by actually presenting texts which have always been presumed to occupy a place in the central literature of the tradition, but simply haven't been read much. The slow-but-steady work on Proudhon amounts to the same

sort of transformation of the "canonical" body of work by actually presenting it. I think that what I've done so for with Proudhon demonstrates that this sort of transformation can be fairly radical. But correcting the historical record is really just a means to other ends for me, ends which have much more to do with future possibility than an accurate rendering of the past.

While I suppose, based on the responses, or lack thereof, that it has not always been clear, most of my work from about "The Lesson of the Pear-Growers' Series" (originally posted November 21, 2007 on the now defunct *on ALLiance* blog) has had one foot in a sort of *atercratic* counter-history of anarchism and its related traditions, not quite an alternate history, but a persistent marking of possible points of divergence from the history of the anarchist tradition that we are all, to one extent or another, more of less forced to accept. It is the "Two-Gun History of the World" section of *TGM: Rearmed* that seems most likely to really still *need* writing, if the work that I've done and continue to do is going to have any of the impact that it seems capable of having on the way we think, here and now, about *anarchism, anarchy*, etc. It seems to me that, despite all of our loud resistance to "history" and "theory," that one of the things that defines anarchists at present is a rather peculiar certainty about just those things. It seems like everyone I encounter "knows" substantially more about Proudhon than I expect I will ever learn in whatever lifetime of study is left to me, while at the same time apparently possessing an exhaustive understanding of "property," of "mutualism," and of a really astounding number of other topics that seem extremely complex and thorny to me.

Finding myself stuck between an *anarchy* and an *anarchism* that seems more and more ungovernable and a kind of empty "certainty" that seems to be the main strategy for governing those things, it seems likely that if there is not simply an unconquerable *differend* between approaches, then the only strategy for breaking down the impasse is to uncover more and more of the *possibility* hidden within the tradition, behind our rather empty *certainty* about that tradition's ultimate meaning. For me, that undoubtedly means more and more engagement, but also more overt, systematic engagement, with the growing constellation of alternate references I have been gradually assembling.

If last year's work was in large part a reassembly of the greater part of my theoretical writings around the concept of the *encounter*, and that seems to have been the case, it appears that this year will begin a similar reassembly of historical references around that notion of *atercratic* or "two-gun" counter-history. So expect much more of folks like Claude Pelletier, Gustave Lefrancais, Eliphalet Kimball, Flora Tristan, Jenny P. d'Hericourt, Calvin Blanchard, Joseph Perrot, Jeanne Deroin, Andre Leo, Lewis Masquerier, Joshua King Ingalls, etc., etc. And expect a fresh infusion of weird science and invention, fiction and poetry, and perhaps even a bit of the genuinely *alternate history* I've been squirreling away in my "Distributive Passions" notebooks. Certainly expect that style and art will play a different and more prominent role. If the result looks a bit like anarchist history's equivalent to steampunk, that's okay with me, but

the point is to highlight the extent to which the history that we think we know already contains worlds full of possibility, ripe for our own use, without any need to make much of anything up.

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Monday, January 27, 2014

SCRAPING SOME RUST OFF THE "TWO GUNS" OF MUTUALISM

As I mentioned in the last post, one of the results of turning my back on the "Two-Gun Mutualism" project, and focusing specifically on the anarchic "social system" of "the encounter," has been to reawaken my interest in the abandoned *TGM: Rearmed* book project. Much of that interest comes, as I've said, from my continuing interest in that *atercratic* counter-history that I expect will be occupying a lot of my time in upcoming months. But there is another element of my original mutualist project which I have had a hard time clarifying specifically enough to really do it justice, an element invoked in different ways in two unfinished essays—"The Anarchism of Approximations" and "Two-Gun Mutualism and the Golden Rule"—and then again more recently in some posts beginning to deal with the notion of "guarantism." I that most recent material, I made a somewhat clumsy attempt to draw the material on the "two guns" of anarchist theory into the new toolkit.

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.

The notion of "Two-Gun Mutualism" was always a metaphor that needed more development, a poetic provocation to audiences that showed little interest in being provoked. For me, it was the convergence of a desire to suggest that mutualism, rather than being some tame reformism, was really—if we took up the challenge and played our hand with sufficient boldness—among the most

radical currents in anarchism. It's that dangerous, revolutionary edge that I've been examining in an *anarchy* and *anarchism* that seem more and more *ungovernable*, and its the centrality of that ungovernable anarchism to Proudhon's project that threatens to make a "Two-Gun History of the World" the provocative story of how the modern anarchist sects emerged through the *dismembering* and *taming* of a revolutionary mutualism. For better or worse, most modern adopters of the "mutualist" label have been considerably more modest in their claims for it, so that aspect of the earlier project never really drew much more than some derisive comments and a few in jokes with friends. But even in distancing myself from the metaphor I've never abandoned the conviction that the apparently middle-of-the-road anarchism that I began to explore not all that long ago was really, on closer examination, something powerful and more than a little dangerous.

The old sidebar description was more provocation, but I always felt like it was a provocation that got to the heart of something really wrong with an awful lot of the anarchist theory I encountered, particularly in the days of the left-libertarian ALLiance, though certainly not just, or even primarily, from within those circles.

ANARCHIST THEORY IS A BRACE OF RUSTY PISTOLS...

Picking up threads from Proudhon's early works—"the synthesis of community and property"—and his mature works—"the antinomy does not resolve itself"—and the wonderful image of the two pistols from Pierre Leroux's "Individualism and Socialism," we get a silly name for a fairly heady, potentially risky project: to arm ourselves with both individualism and socialism—two ill-kept old implements indeed—and to try to make them serve the needs of an anarchism that slights neither individualities (at a dizzying range of scales) nor collectivities (ditto), when it's all too obvious that neither one is quite the tool for the job. It's a tactical, transitional project, an opportunity to gather ourselves, and tend to our tools, before the next campaign...

The brace of rusty pistols, apparently necessary for the struggles ahead, but also as likely to blow up in our faces as to do us any good, seems all to apt a way to describe an awful lot of our rhetorical toolkit. For example, it's hard to see much of anything in an awful lot of what passes for debate in online political forums except a sort of constant *blowing-up-in-our-faces*, which we hardly seem to notice, imagining all the while that we're mowing down opponents.

But there was more to the adaptation of the image from Leroux's essay than just some edgy language and a nod-and-a-wink to friends for whom images of pistols and such are a more common political stock in trade. The stories that Leroux told about the standoff in the French Revolution and the massacre in the Rue Transnonain, the backdrop for his examination of *individualism* and *socialism*, were there to illustrate a sort of general dynamic, according to which fear leads to fratricidal violence. For the Pierre Leroux of 1834, individualism and socialism were the two faces of that single dynamic, the two paths by which that fratricidal violence seemed inevitable, if some means was not found to

harmonize the two extreme, one-sided, *simplist* impulses—if some means was not found to head off the runaway *fear* before it became fundamentally self-destructive violence. By 1848, of course, a number of attempts at synthesis had been made, many of them under the name of *socialism*, but we know that as the 19th century progressed, the two concepts diverged once more and the circumstances of their origins were mostly forgotten.

Four years ago, when I began the essay "Two-Gun Mutualism and the Golden Rule," I had a lot of stories to tell, and bits and pieces of several of them found their way into the essay. That's one of the reasons that there was never a second part of the work. It was both a little overwhelming to continue and specifically more than a little overwhelming to continue without any real feedback. The third and final post in the series took on Leroux's antisemitism and Proudhon's anti-feminism directly, in what I think are ultimately terms as damning as anything written by critics like Déjacque. Allow me another long quote:

In "The Gift Economy of Property" and other writings, I have suggested some alternatives to Proudhon's final approach to property—alternatives which are no less highly charged, but are perhaps less martial in their approach. I'm not certain that there is anything in that work, however, that clearly raises it to or above the level of The Theory of Property. But we can perhaps more clearly see the dangers of the progressive approach if we look at Proudhon's response to potential changes in the institution of the family, and in gender roles. Proudhon was at once progressive and conservative when it came to most economic questions, and questions regarding institutional government. Even when he advocated the conservation of existing forms—or when he advocated a strengthening of private property, provided it was widely distributed—it was with the understanding that those forms would fulfill a substantially new function. When it was a question of changes to the family, he instead denied progress, at best bringing new justifications to bear for institutions which would ultimately pull against the general trajectory of his libertarian thought. With regard to women's rights, his thought was worse than simply conservative. In "picking up the pistols" with regard to property, he sought to shelter individuals in such a way that liberty was preserved for all, and progressive change had a space within which to occur. When it came to women, his impulse was to shelter them from change. The defenses of the traditional family that he developed could just as easily have supported any number of non-traditional living arrangements. A strong case could be made—and was being made at the time—that the aims of the family could be at least as well addressed by other forms. The patriarchal rights that he ultimately defended were, like the private property rights of *The Theory of Property*, an intensification—Leroux might have said "exaggeration"—of existing rights, and we might suspect that they were driven by nothing other than "horror"—again the word is Leroux's—of the polar alternative. Proudhon once again "picked up the pistols," but because he turned against his own stated principles—affirmation of progress, opposition to

the absolute, movement by an indefinite sequence of approximations—and, most seriously, quite simply denied women full participation in society, he could hardly do better than the soldiers in the Rue Transnonain. "[W]e are ordered to do this, we are compelled to obey, though it makes us as wretched as you..." Treating the traditional family and patriarchy as providential, Proudhon could hardly avoid discharging both pistols at women in general, jeopardizing his entire project in the process.

But to move forward with this critique of a *horrified* Proudhon, it was really necessary for me to feel like I had moved the conversation past the default treatment of Proudhon as simply *horrifying*—at least for some segment of my specific audience. And that's something I've never really felt. There are, of course, any number of pressures within the anarchist milieu's that make any hint of sympathy for those already cast out, however summarily, even in the course of criticism, grounds for at least a cold shoulder.

More than anything, of course, I suspect that I had simply not made the case for sympathy, had not sufficiently clarified the *potential horror,* we might even say the *lurking fear* at the heart of the anarchic "social system." Perhaps I have now made a good start at that, though not in those terms. But I suspect those who stuck with me through the lengthy exploration of the anarchic encounter last year won't have too much trouble attaching that slightly Lovecraftian label to *all the things we find we cannot say* with any certainty about the *anarchic encounter*.

For the "little Proudhon book" I'm currently writing, I've been keeping things simple, and relatively comfortable. If we throw out everything not included in the simple anarchist "social system" as involving illegitimate authority of some sort, and embrace that notion that "another world is possible" at literally every encounter, then part of what opens for us is a way of remapping what is anarchistic in any given social setting, a sort of *anarchology* by which we could sort out what does and doesn't conform to our ideal. That's an important addition to the toolkit, and one which, in some ways, reduces our uncertainties about the project of anarchism. We can simply focus on whether or not given *relations*—and *relations* are all that a Proudhonian social science lets us talk about with any degree of certainty—make the cut, and if not, how we can relate with one another in a more anarchistic manner. The approach seems as marvelously adaptable as it is straightforward—once we accept the notion that we'll be traversing that "dizzying array of scales," a move made possible by Proudhon's particular approach to the question of "individuals."

And then we try to apply our *anarchology* in pretty much any real-world context, and nothing seems all that simple anymore. The elegant design of the tools in our kit doesn't change the complexity of the problems we have to solve, and *we find ourselves facing the universe of relations with just one tool.* That pushes a lot of the responsibility for ingenuity back onto us, and that sort of focused responsibility is just the sort of thing that can push us to one sort of "exaggeration" or another.

We begin by isolating an encounter, and identifying its elements: individuals, manifestations of collective force. But our *individuals* are always already *groups*, and themselves manifest collective force. These complexities will scale both upwards and downwards, just as far as we choose to pursue them.

We'll never pursue them "all the way," and yet we have to proceed with organization, with practice. Our commitment to *contr'archy*, to the negation of everything that might emerge as *an archy*, even when it calls its self *anarchy*, enlists us on the side of active *ungovernability*, demanding *chaos* before *governmentalism*. The more we succeed in this side of our anarchism, the more the dark star to which we've hitched our wagon may begin to look like a black hole. It is not coincidental that Proudhon's transitional summary, *The Philosophy of Progress*, took the form of a discussion of the criterion of certainty, and that ultimately he never identified any criterion beyond *justice*, understood as *balance*. Proudhon claimed that if he lived a thousand years his thought would always be driven, in part, by his opposition to the absolute.

So if we are attempting to rethink our "two gun problem" in a context broad enough to address Proudhon's failures with regard to questions of gender, or even to extend it to what I've gestured at as "The Larger Antinomy," perhaps we've identified one of our "guns" in what we might call *anti-absolutism, contr'archy, negation*, etc. In the essay on the larger antimony it seems important to me to also highlight the extent to which that side of the antinomy was also fairly conventionally *gendered*, or at least genderable, as *feminine*.

And if anti-absolutism and contr'archy are one "gun," then the other must be practical, institutional *progress* and *guarantism*. If we naturally fear that the first emphasis will simply carry us away, or carry our anarchism away from our very real, practical needs, we also always have to fear that any or all of our *approximations* may settle into *archic* forms. Proudhon's was not sparing in his scorn for the various patent-office utopias of his contemporaries, often employing the anti-absolutist side of his thought as a wrecking ball, but neither was he bashful about promoting the virtues of his own practical projects.

If we were to pose this rethinking of the essay on "Individualism and Socialism" to a particularly long-lived Pierre Leroux, I like to think that he wouldn't have too much trouble picking up the threads of his own argument and arguing for a harmonization of the two complementary projects. Unfortunately, I share Proudhon's sense that harmony is less likely than antinomic balance. If, on the other hand, we were to present the matter to a Proudhon headed on towards his "thousand years," it's harder to know if he would recognize what I believe I have drawn fairly directly from the implications of his thought.

Why do I say this? Since writing the original "Two-Gun Mutualism" essay, I've had a lot of opportunity to engage with Proudhon's thought. Recently, while finishing up the translation of *The Theory of Property*, I encountered a chapter which looked more than a bit like a repetition of material elsewhere in the book—until I realized that what really seems to be at stake was an account of the shifting balance of power between State and family with regard to property.

What doesn't seem to have been true about Proudhon's attachment to small-scale production does seem to have had a parallel in his eventual attachment to small-scale, specifically family-based property. We can probably say that when it came time to balance property against property and property against the State, Proudhon's concern with balancing anti-absolutism against progressive guarantees was pushed at least slightly aside. There is a kind of accidental minarchism that enters his practical proposals, despite plenty of indications that his theoretical commitment to anarchism had not diminished. His mistaken beliefs about women's capabilities seem to have conspired with the complexity of the problem he confronted to undermine the degree of justice which he could actually incorporate in his proposed solution.

As I said in the "Two-Gun Mutualism" essay, it's a serious, really disastrous failure, but it's probably just one of many that anyone wishing to take up Proudhon's sociology will have to guard against. And one of the ways to begin to take precautions is probably to think about the lesson Leroux presented to us as simply one illustration of a more general danger. It might be, after all, that focusing on "individualism" and "socialism," out of all the various manifestations of some larger antinomy, might be as disastrous as getting swept up in a particular opposition between men and women, or the family and the State. We can probably pretty easily point the evidence of that fact. The balancing act of anarchist justice has to at least aspire, even in its practical manifestations, to a positive care and inclusiveness equal in intensity to our commitment to negating and tearing down authoritarian structures. And then we have to be able to take those two intense tendencies and find some means of striking a balance between *them*. The sort of *positive anarchy* that Proudhon was seeking will demand pretty much everything we can give it, and it is likely we will always still fall short in our various *anarchisms*.

I personally see that as the attraction, as much as the danger of would-be anarchist activity, but it's obviously a bit of both, and there is an important sense in which attempting to drag anarchism back out onto the rather bare stage proposed by Proudhon threatens to increase both the dangers and the attractions tremendously. Leroux's concern was that the two primary means of thinking about society at the time he wrote his essay were dangerous weapons, more likely to do harm than good to those who attempted to use them. For him, there was another way forward, a way to not pick up the guns by devoting oneself to a project of harmonizing extremes. There is, I think, a good deal to admire in that approach, but if Proudhon's general analysis was correct, we still have to set it aside, at least for the foreseeable future, along with any notion of lasting harmony.

To take on this theory of the encounter as the entire anarchist social system is necessarily also to, as we've been putting it, "pick up the guns," and take on all of the dangers that come with it. It is to knowingly position ourselves in a position where we have to resist the urge to give way to any of the powerful impulses held in tension within our model and method. We can expect that when

we have scraped all the rust off our brace of pistols they will not be less deadly, even to ourselves, but potentially more so, just as they will be more capable of harm to others if we fail to use them with care.

There is a lot of "scraping" yet to do before it is even clear just what sort of tools this "brace of rusty pistols" is and can be, but I'm once again finding myself drawn to the metaphor, and perhaps also to a specific identification with "mutualism." But what remains for me to confront are some enormously thorny questions about anarchism and identification itself.

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Thursday, January 30, 2014

THE CHALLENGE IN PROUDHON'S THOUGHT

Part of the project here has to be presenting a picture of Proudhon that is a more useful alternative to those we have inherited. I have been arguing that there is a Proudhon who is not the failed precursor we so often think of, but who is instead a pioneer who still remains in some very important ways out in from of us, waiting for us to catch up. So what is the defining character of *that* Proudhon's thought? I still can't think of a more exemplary text for addressing that question than *The Philosophy of Progress*. In the past, I've indicated his central concerns fairly broadly, but let me repeat two short passages from that work, in order to zero in on a very important dynamic. First, there is the "if I could live a thousand years" passage, which constantly comes back to me as a sort of challenge, as I try to engage with Proudhon's thought as a living, ongoing project:

If, then, I could once put my finger on the opposition that I make between these two ideas, and explain what I mean by Progress and what I consider Absolute, I would have given you the principle, secret and key to all my polemics. You would possess the logical link between all of my ideas, and you could, with that notion alone, serving for you as an infallible criterion with regard to me, not only estimate the ensemble of my publications, but forecast and signal in advance the propositions that sooner or later I must affirm or deny, the doctrines of which I will have to make myself the defender or adversary. You would be able, I say, to evaluate and judge all my theses by what I have said and by what I do not know. You would know me, *intus et in cute*, such as I am, such as I have been all my life, and such as I would find myself in a thousand years, if I could live a thousand years: the man whose thought always advances, whose program will never be finished. And at whatever moment in my career you would come to know me, whatever conclusion you could come to regarding me, you would always have either to absolve me in the name of Progress, or to condemn me in the name of the Absolute.

And then there is this:

"What could a few lapses, a few false steps, detract from the rectitude of my faith, the goodness of my cause?... You will please me, sir, to learn for yourself what road I have traveled, and how many times I have fallen along the way. Far from blushing at so many spills, I would be tempted to boast of them, and to measure my valor by the number of my contusions."

This is, in many ways, Proudhon at his best. And one of the things that we know about Proudhon is that he was not always at his best. But Proudhon himself seems to have known that, and provided us with a challenging view of what he himself thought was constant in his thought.

The first passage contains everything we need to identify Proudhon as, on the one hand, a thinker with fixed commitments (opposition to the absolute, commitment to progress) and, on the other, a thinker whose thought is always changing and will never be complete, even if he could live a thousand years. The second passage simply reminds us that if your thought is constantly evolving, even for a dozen years, let alone a thousand, you're going to spend a good deal of time being at least partially wrong.

In terms of our critical encounters with Proudhon in the present, we need to be clear whether we are engaging with those commitments that he considered essentially eternal or whether we are dealing with evolutions in their application to particular problems. We can then judge Proudhon on the consistency with which he applied his own principles, and we can differ. But the way that we overtake Proudhon's thought is not by pointing to another of his hard-earned contusions, but by traveling, and falling, and picking ourselves up again (and again), and showing ourselves finally capable of advancing that project (opposition to the absolute, commitment to progress) across the lost time and forward beyond what we might expect a long-lived Proudhon to have accomplished.

If we really want bragging rights over the grand old man, it seems that our challenge is clear: Think about all that Proudhon accomplished between 1839 and the beginning of 1865. Consider the potential of the project he set in motion. Now think of the nearly 150 years that have passed since his death, and the almost complete neglect of his project. What would it take for us to make good on the promise of that restless, experimental, determined, *anarchist* thought, even just to pick up it where Proudhon left it in 1865, let alone to realize the promise of the years lost?

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Monday, February 10, 2014

PROUDHON'S THOUGHT AS A POTENTIALLY TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE WITHIN CONTEMPORARY ANARCHISM

I'm through the first couple of days, and I expect the bulk of the action, in a marathon week-long "Ask Me Anything" session on Reddit's DebateAnarchism forum. So far, it has been a surprisingly civil and instructive experience, and certainly an interesting way of testing out my *rapprochement* with the "mutualist" label. Many of the questions haven't strayed far from the common questions of coexistence—"can theory *X* be compatible with theory *Y*"—or those concerning the basic concepts and vocabulary that dominate the usual capitalist vs. anti-capitalist debates, but, as I had hoped, there have been a *few* opportunities to break a bit of new ground. The most interesting of those instances, I think, came when a friend asked a question about the future of mutualism, which summons up for me all my ambivalences about school-building with the movement, but also seems to require tackling some specific applications of Proudhonian sociology that I've been approaching rather gingerly so far. The answer is probably bolder than anything I've written yet on what I see as the potential of mutualism, so I'll just reproduce it here in its entirety:

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Q.—Where do you see the (Neo-)Proudhonian side of Mutualism, or even Mutualism as a whole, in the next 15-20 years? Do you think it will be as known about and understood as anarchist Communism has become?

A.—15-20 years can be a long time. 20 years ago almost nobody knew much about Proudhon and mutualism except a few phrases. Even the standard dismissals were less well-known before mutualism started to reemerge and give people an occasion to be dismissive. So things can change rapidly. On the other hand, it's one thing to make people aware that there is another school of thought out there and another to push past the mostly rote rejections. And what I take to be the "best case" for mutualism is sort of complicated, so that's an additional difficulty.

I don't think there's any point in entering a popularity contest with communism or any of the other tendencies that people have built ideologies and firm identities around. If I have decided that "mutualism" is probably a good label to organize around, it was also pretty easy for me to walk away from that label for the better part of the last year and simply do the same work without the pretense that I was engaged in any sort of school-building.

It seems likely that mutualism or the Proudhonian element in anarchism will thrive to the extent that it can be made practically relevant to current struggles. There are all sorts of way in which the Proudhonian sociology might

enrich our understanding of those struggles, but most of them will involve overcoming both theoretical and ideological resistances. The basic challenges are to make up for 150 years of lost time, and, of course, to shift the perception of Proudhon's thought which has developed to explain and defend the neglect. That means that proponents are going to have to be very, very on top of their game, engaging seriously not only with the ideas that they consider fundamentally "their own," but with the ideas of the tendencies that currently hold a kind of hegemony within the anarchist movement.

It isn't going to be enough to just do battle with those who oppose mutualist ideas without really knowing them. It's going to be necessary to show that the whole history of anarchism might well have developed differently, and that the *potential* common ground between, say, mutualism and communism, not only exists but enriches communism, should it be acknowledged.

We might, for example, attempt to tackle the question of mutualism and the radical labor movement. Proudhon's "The Political Capacity of the Working Class" potentially has a lot to offer to those with a class-struggle focus. It certainly offers us a very different Proudhon than the one who was concerned about the efficacy of strikes in 1846, and it gives us a window in on the background of the First International. I'm back to work translating it. But let's say that a year from now we have a nice, clear English version of the text. There is still a work of interpretation and integration to be done—probably before much of anyone can be convinced to even read the thing. It's not enough to present the facts from 1864. It's necessary to drag them into the present, and even into a somewhat different present than most anarchists live in. We have a document from the relatively early days of the workers' movement, and we want to transport it into the waning days of a certain sort of workers' struggle. How do we make the ideas in it living and new? How do we account for the 150 years of development that we can assume Proudhon would have given the ideas, had he lived that "thousand years" he talked about? Part of the answer is undoubtedly to attempt to push things farther towards that more general model of "agro-industrial federation." Another might be to attempt to integrate the theory of individualities and collectivities from the works of the 1850s more completely into the proposals in "Political Capacity"—or even to scrap the material from 1864, except as a kind of dated example of implementation (the way I'm inclined to treat the mutual bank), in order to reimagine a 21st century application. But what does a model of class struggle, for example, look like, if we employ Proudhon's sociology? Social classes are easy to recognize as collective actors and as such they have to be incorporated into our understanding of social relations. But the sort of understanding of individual and collective interests we draw from Proudhon is going to mean that class solidarity looks rather different than it might to most self-identified class-struggle anarchists. Some theoretical problems are solved by acknowledging that the interests of, say, *the working class* (as a collective actor) may be different from, and even opposed in some instances, to those of individual workers. As a

consequence, the practice of solidarity in struggle probably requires some rethinking. The gains, in terms of insights into the dynamics of class societies, seem significant, and it seems they ought to pay off in terms of improved practice. But there is always going to be that moment when those committed to the interests of the working class have to come to terms with the fact that such a commitment walks a fine line between anarchist solidarity and an anti-anarchist *external constitution* of society by classes. Now, for neo-Proudhonians, I would hope that these sorts of awkward awakening would gradually become familiar, if not necessarily less traumatic. But if you haven't already signed on for the project, some of these adjustments are probably going to seem pretty damn extreme, costly and counter-intuitive.

Again, if we can correct the mistakes in Proudhon on sex/gender/family/etc—not, in my mind, a very difficult project, but a serious stigma to overcome nonetheless—then we're faced with a version of the same can of worms. Rethinking the politics of identity and identification around sexes, genders, families, etc., that are collective actors with potential interests of their own might well provide some exits from some really troubling cul-de-sacs, but the cost and perceived risk involved in rethinking the details is going to be substantial. In the end, I'm not sure that a shift from what we have now to a *mutualized* framework would be much more radical than the changes that have occurred in the related discourses in the last fifteen years, but the direction of the shift, and the negative perceptions to be overcome, mean that it would be a much more against-the-grain sort of transformation.

Face it, the approach that we've associated ourselves with poses all sorts of threats to our certainty and comfort, even in our own beliefs, at a time when there is already way too damn much uncertainty and discomfort, and in an era that is arguably at least a bit fundamentalist just about any which way you look. For me, the discoveries that the notion of "anarchy" was always a bit more complicated than we thought in Proudhon's though, the engagement with the ungovernability of anarchism, and the possibility of an absolutist anarchism, have all been exciting and useful work, but I expect a lot of people will have wildly varying mileage...

If there are people willing to be serious, committed gadflies, teasing out the instances where there are theoretical or practical advances to be made by applying Proudhon's thought, who are also willing to cover most of the distance to meet those of other tendencies who might be open to those insights, well, mutualism might well make a fairly serious, important mark on anarchism in the next couple of decades. But that "if" is obviously a pretty serious conditional...

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Friday, February 28, 2014

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Kicking free from the *mutualist* label in March and April of last year was part of an attempt to achieve two fairly specific outcomes: to clarify my own thinking about the core concepts of *anarchy* and *anarchism;* and to attempt to confront some *methodological* questions, particularly some key questions relating to anarchist *historiography*, which seemed to be eluding me. I can certainly recommend the exercise of jettisoning one's keywords as at least a potential means of focusing on ideas instead of words—not always such an easy task in our label-centric, more-or-less fundamentalist culture. And I hope that the emerging theory of the "anarchism of the encounter" strikes at least a few others as a return worthy of the gambit. I'm working now on a very simple presentation of that theory, stripped of most of its historical and factional baggage. "Simple" in this case is, of course, not *easy*. It's like the tip of the iceberg, *once you've whittled away the rest of the iceberg*. But there clearly is a moment when you can lift key insights out of their original contexts and see if they can make it in the wide world on their own. The methodological shifts have been more difficult to achieve, and the advance sometimes feels positively *glacial* to me—but both in the sense of slow-moving, and in the sense that lots of stuff seems to be getting moved around, if not in the daintiest of manners. What I announced some time ago as the *atercratic* approach to radical history has been a little more difficult to present in any very clear form, but by summer I expect that things will be taking a little more definite shape. In the meantime, I'll be spending some time setting things up here on this blog, as I try to tackle a group of questions that have emerged from my work on the Bakunin Library and my recent excursions into the history and theory of anarchist *collectivism*.

My intention is to spend quite a bit of my blogging time, and whatever free translating time I can muster, addressing the period from just before Proudhon's death in 1865, though the First International and the Paris Commune. I'll be translating more of Proudhon's *Political Capacity of the Working Classes* and material relating to the workers associated with the "Manifesto of the Sixty," as well as some texts by and about the group of Proudhon's friends who saw to the publication of his posthumous works. (See, regarding the last group, *The Execution of Gustave Chaudey and Three Gendarmes*.) I'll also be working away at some of the primary documents of anarchist collectivism, which I've started to assemble for a *Collectivist Reader*, as part of the Bakunin Library project. The focus here will be split in a familiar way, between concern for the details of history and attention to the ways in which the management of anarchist history has shaped anarchism itself. But an important part of what will be at stake for me in this segment of the journey will be a *return to mutualism as a keyword*, armed now with the lessons of the last year, and an attempt to address what I have recently identified as "the

challenge in Proudhon's thought," that is, the urgency of making what seems promising about mid-19th century anarchism take its place as a means of addressing our own struggles and concerns in the 21st century.

For readers of the blog, I would like to encourage you, as we move deeper into this particular phase, which I launched with the post on "scraping some rust off the "two guns" of mutualism," to take the challenge seriously. There is, it seems to me, plenty in "mutualism" that speaks very directly to our current conditions, but only if we are ready and willing to do a significant work of adaptation and translation. I can suggest some of the directions for that, but ultimately it's a work that has to be done by anyone who wants to take up any of these old labels.

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Wednesday, March 19, 2014

MAPPING MUTUALISM

As I've mentioned, several of my projects have been intersecting recently, and I've been feeling better able to start mapping out the various currents and traditions that we would have to account for in any really adequate history of mutualism. Let's just get some of those elements laid out so we can refer back to them:

Proudhon's own writings. We are fortunate to have a great deal of Proudhon's work now available online, including quite a number of the manuscripts. There are a number of articles that remain uncollected and there are some omissions in the *Mélanges* volumes. There are also omissions and questionable edits in the volumes of correspondence. And there is an enormous amount of translation to be done. But the body of work that is readily available is remarkable.

The contents of the newspapers that Proudhon was affiliated with. The most serious problem with the *Mélanges* collections is that the articles are lifted from their original context, and we can tell very little about the conversations that Proudhon was involved with. There were allies and adversaries of Proudhon active in the same papers, and some of those figures were very significant voices.

The works of Proudhon's collaborators and literary executors. Some of Proudhon's circle produced lengthy works, like Langlois' L'*Homme Et La Révolution* and Darimon's various histories, which continued or contextualized Proudhon's own work. A number of these figures also figured in subsequent chapters of radical history, often as adversaries in the stories told by Bakunin, Louise Michel, etc.

The workers of The Sixty and the "Proudhonian" workers in the International. The last phase of Proudhon's career saw him increasingly involved with the French workers' movement, and the individual workers

influenced by works like *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* went on to take part in the International, in a variety of cooperative ventures, and in politics. But, again, our understanding of them is complicated by the fact that they were opposed on some key points to what became the dominant currents in the International and the anarchist movement.

The collectivist anarchists. The collectivists made attempts to present themselves as the true inheritors of Proudhon's legacy, and it has been difficult to evaluate those claims, given the fairly obvious misunderstandings between factions and the fairly rapid eclipse of anarchist collectivism by anarchist communism.

The later, isolated Proudhonians. There seems to have been a steady stream of writers with an interest in developing Proudhon's thought, but without close ties to other elements in the anarchist movement. Joseph Perrot, P. F. Junqua, Edmond Lagarde, and a number of other explicit disciples of Proudhon published a fairly extensive literature.

The mutualists and individualists in the United States. Proudhon's ideas made a fairly immediate impact in the U. S., beginning in the 1840s, and *aspects* of his thought remained influential as the mutualism of figures like William B. Greene gave way to the individualism of Benjamin R. Tucker, James L. Walker, the various mutual bank enthusiasts, etc.

The tradition of Josiah Warren and equitable commerce. Although Warren held Proudhon's thought in something like horror, the French mutualist tradition and the movement for equitable commerce became thoroughly mixed in the development of individualism in the U. S.

The exiled French workers in the United States. While the French-speaking workers appear to have had limited contact with the American mutualists and individualists, we do find connections to Greene through the International, and we find fairly major developments of Proudhon's ideas in the works of figures like Claude Pelletier.

Other influences on Proudhon, Greene, etc. Some thinkers, such as Charles Fourier and Pierre Leroux, inevitably come back into our story because of their importance to later thinkers.

And this list doesn't even begin to deal with the influence of Proudhon beyond the French and English literatures. There is a fairly substantial Spanish-language literature to track down as well.

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Wednesday, March 26, 2014

RETURN OF THE PROUDHON SEMINAR

Starting in May, one of the projects I'll be working on is the evaluation, revision and/or annotation of the existing translations of Proudhon's works, starting with Tucker's translations of the first two memoirs on property. As

part of the process, I've proposed a group reading of the material. When we read *What is Property?* five years ago, in the original "Proudhon Seminar," our shared understanding of Proudhon's work was, I think, very different than it is now. I've recently come back to the work in a couple of different contexts and been amazed at how different it looks to me.

We've set up a "Proudhon Seminar" group on Facebook, to discuss this and other projects, but I expect the reading itself to take place on an email list or forum unassociated with the major social networking sites. I'll post updates here as they are available. [The group reading will now probably take place in the Fall of 2014.]

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Wednesday, April 02, 2014

PROUDHON ON THE CRITERION OF CERTAINTY (1841-1858)

I've pulled together some rough translations from Proudhon's *The Creation of Order in Humanity* with existing translations from the *Second Memoir on Property* and *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*. Together with *The Philosophy of Progress*, the collected texts cover some of the major stages in Proudhon's treatment of the question of "the criterion of certainty."

I remember really being puzzled, the first time I read the book on *Progress*, about the extent to which this summary of Proudhon's thought was focused on the question of certainty, and it has taken a long time, even after discovering his claim that the work on property was really a sort of diversion from his primary concern with the criterion of certainty, to come to terms with just how central the question of *certainty* is to the pursuit of *positive anarchy*. However, at the same time I was groping towards this understanding of Proudhon's work, I was also approaching the issue of certainty from a number of other directions in my explorations: in my work with the concept of "guaranteeism," in my slow development of Pierre Leroux's idea that it is *fear* that sends us toward violent extremes, and, of course, in the work on anarchism's "ungovernability." All of the work on the "anarchism of the encounter" really amounts to saying that *anarchism*, at least as it appears in that Proudhonian "social system," is the means by which we learn to live freely in a world where almost nothing is certain.

The most recent return to the idea of "two-gun mutualism" was another attempt to keep pulling all those various threads a little closer together. If there is a *core* to my work on anarchism, it is probably pretty close to that oh-so-slowly-developing "two-gun" project.

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Monday, April 07, 2014

Pruning the Rhizome

Disruptive Elements: The Extremes of French Anarchism
Ardent Press, 2014
available from Little Black Cart

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a review

> "Tant pis pour ceux qui souffrent et n'osent pas prêcher l'extermination et l'incendie!"

Most history worth bothering with *shakes things up*. This is particularly true of radical history, and of that branch of radical history that involves rediscovering and re-presenting primary works from various radical currents. Sometimes, the shake-ups are comparatively pleasant, and we find, unexpectedly, that we have inherited marvelous gems, glimpses into the personalities and practices of those who came before us. Sometimes, they seem more like attacks, and we find, perhaps, that our understanding of the past is flawed, in ways that have consequences for our present and future. Often, there is some of both aspects involved, and what arrives like an assault ends up enriching us. I doubt it will come as a surprise to anyone who reads this blog that I have a great deal of interest in, and affection for, those productive disruptions that shake our complacency and force us to come to new terms with the traditions in which we're trying to take our places.

Those productive disruptions come in a variety of shapes, sizes and degrees of intensity. Sometimes little discoveries shift enormous discourses, though most often slowly, as even radical master narratives tend to shift glacially when they shift at all. Others simply strike us, personally and immediately, with their energy. And energy is important for those of us battling in the trenches—such as they are—of movements like anarchism. There is an awful lot about those battles that can be very, very draining. That means we should treasure the instances where our tradition gives us the occasion to smile, laugh, snarl, show our teeth and our best "we mean it, man" grin. We are fortunate that *Disruptive Elements*, the new anthology of "extreme" French anarchist writings, includes a lot of those instances.

Let me get the basic pitch out of the way: *If you enjoy anarchist history, you should order yourself a copy of the book.* There will almost certainly be new material and pleasant surprises. The material ranges from Felix P.'s "Philosophy of Defiance" to assorted texts by and about Ernest Coeurderoy, Joseph Déjacque, Zo d'Axa, George Darien, Emile Armand, Emile Pouget, Octave Mirbeau, Albert Libertad, Emile Pouget, etc., together with some assorted material on egoism, free sexuality, naturism and critiques of "collectivism." The translations include quite a number of new pieces by vincent stone, together

with more familiar work by Wolfi Landstreicher, Robert Helms, Paul Sharkey, Michael Shreve, and several by yours truly. Like *Enemies of Society*, the collection is unabashedly individualist and often explicitly egoist in focus. Unlike *Enemies of Society*, I expect the selection here will be fairly accessible and interesting to those who are not, or not yet, committed to these "extreme" forms of individualism. I think I would also not be going too far out on a limb to say that the writing in this collection is considerably more accomplished as well. Some of anarchism's finest literary stylists are present in the ranks. Which leads to the second half of the pitch: *If you don't think you enjoy anarchist history, you should order yourself a copy of the book.* Some of this stuff really is *that good.*

Unfortunately, while I can recommend buying and reading *Disruptive Elements* to almost anyone with an interest in the general field, I can't do so without also expressing major reservations about the interpretive elements of the book. For better or worse, all those magnificent texts are put in the service of "a campaign of *guerrilla* historicism that has as its goal a paradigmal hijacking and a sweeping overhaul of existing, received doctrines about anarchism." The goal of this operation is to find "bona fide, non-diluted anarchist thought." The context is a sort of post-left historiography and, it seems to me, a somewhat avant garde aesthetic.

At this point, I don't suppose that anyone will be surprised to find that Proudhon has been brought in to be the villain of the piece: "the diseased branch of Proudhon needs to be pruned unceremoniously from the anarchist family tree."

Perhaps, on the other hand, people might be surprised to see my first post on "the ungovernability of anarchism" cited, more-or-less in full, as part of the argument for this "pruning."

I'll confess that I was surprised, then amused, and then finally just annoyed, as it became clear that the Proudhon to be "pruned" was pretty obviously not at all the interesting, *disruptive* Proudhon that readers are likely to find here—*right alongside* the texts by Déjacque, Coeurderoy, Ravachol, etc. and even *central to* the discussion of ungovernability—but the Proudhon that "everybody knows," if by "everybody" we mean those with an axe to grind and those who haven't spent much time with Proudhon.

It is clear enough that this is a book that's looking for a fight—most obviously with "the left" and a couple of comparatively successful anarchist publishers. You'll excuse me for being much more interested in whether or not the book, and at least one of its editors, are looking for a fight with *me*. That is quite simply not clear. When the introduction talks about "retracing the elusive rhizomes" of anarchist thought, and employing my own work on the difficulties of disciplining the rhizomatic structures of anarchist theory and tradition, naturally I feel right at home. But then there are the moments when things get all arboreal, and all for the purpose it seems of cutting off the very limb that I have climbed so very far out on. The move seems strangely familiar, really. The

received doctrine is, after all, that the Proudhonian limb was pruned almost immediately following Proudhon's death. Some of the most significant resistance to that account has come from individualists, even egoists. Who pruned the Proudhon-limb? The collectivists, and then (again) the communists, and then (again) the defenders of various narrow, arboreal models of anarchist history or theory, often with some help from the marxists and various anti-anarchist critics—the anarchist mainstream, those who insist on particular forms of organization or the recognition of particular economic or social systems. I think some people call this "the left." The collectivist victory over the mutualists took the form of the collectivists claiming that they were, in fact, the true heirs of Proudhon's tradition—a fairly straightforward "hijacking," if even there was one. The same process has pretty well pruned Bakunin down to the most unappealing of stumps, and it seldom slow to sacrifice others if it serves present, ideological demands. Now another pruning—and a hijacking, but of what?—is being proposed in favor of an element of the post-left, but it isn't clear to me that the rationale is any more appealing.

Let's look at the "branch of Proudhon." Who has been responsible for the bits of recent green on this allegedly dead and possibly phantom limb? A motley assortment of individuals, both inside and outside of academic circles, all of whom have at least some investment in challenging "existing, received doctrines about anarchism." Hell, some of us even aim at what might be called a "sweeping overhaul" of our sense of anarchist history, theory and tradition. Does there seem to be any particular sign of disease? Of particularly Proudhonian disease? The laundry list of charges against Proudhon in *Disruptive Elements* is familiar:

- Awful writing
- An unappealing description of *anarchy* (and infrequent use of the word)
- Participation in the provisional government after the French revolution of 1848
- Antisemitic passages in his notebooks
- Misogyny
- Homophobia
- Sexual repression

There is also a somewhat jumbled reference to two works from 1851 and 1852, one of which was dedicated "To the Bourgeoisie" and the other of which was addressed to Louis Napoleon after his coup d'état. And the alternative to all of this is supposed to be a **consistency** (complete with boldface) which Proudhon presumably lacked, but Ernest Coeurderoy apparently possessed. (Hold that particular thought.) Now, I admittedly spend way too much time dealing with this sort of thing, but—and there's really no polite way to say this—if I'm going to be confronted with yet another attempt to dismiss Proudhon as a laughable "fraud," it would be nice to see something that wasn't:

- A matter of opinion, like questions about writing style;
- A matter of inflated rhetoric, like saying "misogyny" when anti-feminism or sexism is most accurate;
- A well-known inconsistency, like the antisemitic journal entry, which is notable as much because it contradicts so much else in Proudhon's work, as it is for its violent prejudice;
- A matter of anarchist dogma, like the anti-electoral stance, from before Proudhon himself popularized the dogma;

and it would be particularly nice if the sources cited were not nearly all available either on Wikipedia or in Larry Gambone's old introductory text. Again, there is a much, much fuller picture of Proudhon, and material addressing some of these questions, linked from the very same pages that the translations were drawn from. Anyone who is actually interested in those questions can pretty easily find other or fuller accounts of them, here or elsewhere.

Being uncertain how much of this apparent attack is inadvertent, I won't follow the metaphor of the "branch of Proudhon" much farther. The arboreal model seems, in any event, to be wrong, and a manifestation of sectarian and sometimes authoritarian tendencies within the movement. Anarchism is better understood as a rhizome, and the relationships between currents and schools will almost all have that complex, messy character. *You don't really prune rhizomes.*

But I want to come back to the question of *shaking things up*, of *disruptive elements*. For me, one of the more puzzling aspects of the book's frame, and the use of Proudhon as a foil, is the extent to which it introduces a number of rather domesticating elements into a collection that is supposed to inspire us with wildness, with opposition to civilization, and with passion. When it is a question of writing style, there are certainly more exciting writers among those in the collection, but some of that excitement comes at a price. Déjacque, for example, was a very uneven craftsman with the pen, prone to runaway prose that is likely to be an acquired taste for many. Coeurderoy, who might be the most consistent stylist of the bunch, was certainly capable of purple prose. As the concerns become more serious, the potential dissonance becomes greater. Déjacque's rather masculinist rhetoric and his own peculiar notions about women's proper roles (for which, see the Humanisphere) may be more acceptable to more modern anarchists, but, having raised the issue with regard to Proudhon, it seems far from consistent that he would get a free pass. But by the time we're comparing Proudhon's long-secret diary entry to Coeurderoy's long-standing, public proposal to solve Europe's problems by a full-scale Cossack invasion, Proudhon is receding as a particularly viable villain. And a really difficult problem emerges: If we are to keep feeling feeling (moral?) outrage at Proudhon's private thoughts about extermination by steel and fire, then we have to either treat Coeurderoy's much more sweeping invocation of a similar

extermination as just a bit of literary excess, or perhaps he have to consider Proudhon's fault as not desiring extermination *in public*, and *wholesale*.

Proudhon simply can't fulfill the role of real villain *and* milquetoast foil for these other, presumably more vibrant figures. What the really extreme emphasis on Proudhon threatens to do is to detract from the figures who are the main focus of the anthology. Because the attempted dismissal of Proudhon is ultimately not very convincing, Proudhon himself threatens to become one of the most distracting elements present. For me, that only seems right—at least in the general scheme of things. If it is really a rhizome that we are tracing, in search of alternatives to received dogma, then many of our best leads—many of the most disruptive elements—will come from engaging with Proudhon, his circle, and his more-or-less direct successors (as they have in the past.) But it really is unfortunate that an ill-conceived quarrel with Proudhon should disrupt this particular collection.

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Wednesday, April 09, 2014

MORE ON PROUDHON'S "THEORY OF PROPERTY"

I needed a change of pace for a couple of days, and went back to work on the still-daunting task of taking Proudhon's *The Theory of Property* from the current draft translation to something well-contextualized and publishable. There's a lot of work to do, including revisiting Proudhon's earlier works on property, finishing work on the Appendix, translating more contextual material and consulting Proudhon's manuscripts. Fortunately, more of the relevant manuscript material has become available, and I've been able to take some time away from other tasks to finish translating the "Disagreement Regarding the Posthumous Publication of Unpublished Works by P.-J. Proudhon." The "Disagreement" is interesting in a variety of ways, not the least of which is that it doesn't seem to challenge *The Theory of Property* in any of the now-conventional ways, down-playing its significance to Proudhon, but really seems to show that the main controversy among Proudhon's friends and followers was over how best to present his thought—and how to honor his own relationships with those various friends, divided as they were politically. I also got a chance to spend a little more time with Proudhon's two letters to Grandclément, who sent Proudhon a manuscript on property just at the moment when he was wrapping up the work that would become *The Theory of Property,* and confirmed for Proudhon the importance of the distinction between *allodium* and *fief*. What is interesting about the second letter is that in it Proudhon pretty well inverts our received sense of the relative importance of some of his later works. Here is the opening of that letter:

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Passy, February 28, 1863.

To Mr. Grandclément

Sir, I just read all at one go your last, excellent letter of the 25 of this month, and since I have a free moment, I am hurrying to respond to you right away. If I postpone even by two days, the difficulties accumulating, I could no longer do it.

Here is where my book on Poland is, that is to say my new work on *Property.* I do not have to tell you that property is a veritable ocean (?) to me—an ocean to drink—that its history alone would demand the sacrifice of a lifetime, and that I do not feel sufficiently Benedictine to bury myself thus under one single question. I am in a hurry to know, to comprehend a certain quantity of certain ideas, and, when the erudition does not advance as quickly as I would like, I hardly trouble myself for appealing to a divinatory faculty. — That is what happened to me, for example, with *The Federative Principle,* of which I just abruptly sketched the theory, or, if you will permit me this ambitious word, the philosophy, in 100 or 200 pages, leaving to others the chore of elaborating the whole system in minute details. That federalism, which boiled for thirty years in my veins, has finally exploded at the combined attacks of the Belgian and French press; the public judges now. What I would permit myself to say to you about it, to you, my master in matters of property, is that I regard that sketch as a fragment detached from the theory of Property itself, a theory that would have already seen the day, if for six months I had not been halted by the tribulations caused me by the Franco-Belgian and Italian Jacobinism, and by the necessity of responding to it. But nothing is lost; I regard even that improvised publication, like the *Majorats littéraires,* of which I will publish a second and better edition, as a fortunate prelude to my work on Property....

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Tuesday, April 22, 2014

PROUDHON'S "POLOGNE" AND THE FEDERATIVE PROJECT OF THE 1860S

"Ma Théorie fédérative est déjà un fragment enlevé à mon travail polonais; la Propriété sera le second..."

"My Federative Theory is already a fragment lifted from my Polish work; the [Theory of] Property will be the second..." (Letter to Grandclément, Nov. 17, 1863)

One of the nearly miraculous effects of the recent manuscript digitization projects at the International Institute of Social History and the Ville de Besançon has been a sudden and dramatic change in the kinds of questions we can wrestle with, with real hope of success, without international travel or

expensive duplication of materials. For me, it has really altered my research program and shifted my translation priorities. Honestly, what it has done is throw my routine into a very pleasant chaos. I might not make that million word mark after all, if only because working with manuscript material is much slower going, but several projects have already become much more interesting as a result of taking the time to wade into these newly accessible archives.

The most dramatic shift has probably taken place in my longstanding love-hate relationship with Proudhon's *The Theory of Property*. Wrestling with that work has probably been the single most important factor in my development as a Proudhon scholar, and as a scholar with something arguably a bit different, and potentially important, to say about both Proudhon and anarchism. But the marginal nature of the work in the informal anarchist canon—where it has largely been shunted off into the sections reserved for forgeries or betrayals of the cause—had naturally meant that everything built from an engagement with it has been at least a bit suspect. The individual antidote for that is always to know you are right, but that's hard, when the manuscripts are unavailable and the correspondence is still hard to search through. I've had to slowly build up a sense that published text was coherent, and then gradually dig out the contexts, without much help from the literature of the tradition, of course, or much encouragement from the movement, for which the very existence of the work mostly serves as just another strike against poor old Proudhon.

It turns out that many of the materials necessary to substantially adjust the reputation of *The Theory of Property* were available even before these recent digitization projects, but perhaps the context in which it was easiest to put them together wasn't. The heart of the matter seems to be the relationship of *The Theory of Property* to a lengthy, unfinished work by Proudhon, *Pologne*. The work on Poland apparently occupied Proudhon off and on through much of the last years of his life. The manuscript consists of 1448 pages, not including, as far as I have been able to tell, any of the 291 pages identified as "Chapitre VII. Garantisme.—Théorie de la propriété." If we take Proudhon's comments about the place of *The Federative Principle* seriously, then we have even more to add to the project. In the same letters, it appears that *The Literary Majorats* may also be a "long footnote" to the work as well.

We've had a hard time dealing with Proudhon's work in the 1860s, at last in the English-speaking world. Part of the problem, of course, is that we haven't done much justice to his work in the 1850s, but I think we have at least had a vague sense that *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, all six volumes of it, was lurking out there, waiting to be accounted for, and a few scholars have placed *Justice* in the more-or-less central place that it seems to deserve. (Jesse Cohn stands out for me in this regard.) For me, despite a lot of wrestling with *Justice*, *The Philosophy of Progress* has been the gateway into the "constructive" work of the 1850s, and it has gradually become the pivot around which I've built a couple of interpretive narratives. In the first, it marks the shift between primarily critical and primarily constructive periods (as I've

discussed in "Self-Government and the Citizen-State.) In the second, which I'm still working through, it is the occasion of Proudhon finally beginning answer the question about "the criterion of certainty" that he claims led him to his more familiar work. We might read the work on *Justice*, which begins with the identification of that criterion with the idea of *justice* itself, as a kind of resolution of Proudhon's early, philosophical and theological concerns. Despite its occasionally glaring inconsistencies, as in the study on "Love and Marriage," the work manages to be a pretty triumphant answer to the question that he was chiding himself for still pursuing in 1841.

The 1860s look, at the very least, less triumphant, and we don't seem to have any very coherent account of what Proudhon was up to in the last five years of his life. It is actually common, though I think incorrect, to treat the best-known of the late works, *The Federative Principle*, as marking a shift away from anarchism. And the rest of the works from that period have been hard to come to grips with:

War and Peace (1861) — Despite Alex Prichard's work, this two-volume work is still little known, and it simply remains very demanding. There is a lot of complicated treatment of the topic of war to be waded through in order to extract Proudhon's fundamentally peaceful message. The work has been treated as proto-fascist and, to complicate matters, we can find some selective influences in those currents.

The Theory of Taxation (1861) — Marx treated the work as the final sign that Proudhon was just a "bourgeois," and anarchists have naturally been slow to warm to a work on taxation. The fact that it contains Proudhon's clearest explanation of what I've called the "citizen-state" is, alas, a circumstance with limited attraction for those who see any discussion of any kind of "state" as a step backward. Like *War and Peace*, it is a work that looks a lot better if you know and understant the work of the 1850s.

Literary Majorats (1862) — Some sections of this work opposing intellectual property have actually be translated, but it remains largely unknown. The truth is that most of our positions on these questions are pretty well solidified.

The Political Capacity of the Working Classes (1865) — This is the work that anarchists have shown the most interest in, largely because it was addressed to the workers who would make up the core of the Parisian group in the First International, and because it was the work that Proudhon labored away at on his deathbed. It is a fascinating work, and one with a clear influence in the international working-class movement. Unfortunately, the tale we've told about the International paints the workers most closely associated with it as *losers*, when they aren't dismissed as *traitors*.

The Theory of Property (1865) — Finally, Proudhon's final work on property has been the subject of hot debate from before its publication right up to the present. For those who want to paint his outside of the mainstream of anarchist thought, or who want to draw strong distinctions between the

"property is theft" of 1840 and a "pro-property" position in his last years, the reputation of this work has been useful, however little that reputation corresponded to its contents. Despite years of translation and analysis, I still have people telling me the same unsubstantiated stories about the work: that it was a pieced-together work, abandoned by Proudhon and cobbled together by his followers; that it represented more evidence of Proudhon's abandonment of anarchism; or, alternately, that it really doesn't contain anything that challenges the position of 1840. I feel like my work to date has pretty well dealt with most of the usual responses to the work, demonstrating the continuity of Proudhon's work on property, his consistent pursuit of anarchism, etc. But I would be lying if I said that I was very comfortable with the work. After all, my own work on the "gift economy of property" has really been an attempt to push beyond what I've understood as an instructive, but not always appealing set of arguments in *The Theory of Property*.

What the work I've been doing lately has suggested to me is that, while establishing the connections between *The Theory of Property* and Proudhon's earlier works is obviously important and useful, Proudhon himself really saw the work as part of a larger, ongoing work, which occupied him in the 1860s. The unpublished work, *Pologne*, is obviously something we have to engage with in order to understand Proudhon's final large-scale project, but we can start by changing our strategy with regard to the late works that we know. Instead of picking and choosing which of the late works we engage, sometimes pitting one work against another, it seems likely that the only way to do justice to those works is to consider them as Proudhon seems to have understood them—as pieces of a larger whole.

Perhaps we need to consider splitting the "constructive" period of Proudhon's career at least one more time. We might characterized his progression something like this:

In an initial, largely *critical* period, Proudhon began by seeking the *criterion of certainty* and found himself waging a multi-front war against *absolutism*. The familiar critiques of *property* and *governmentalism* were among the results.

In a first phase of *constructive* labors, Proudhon found his solution to the question of the *criterion of certainty* in the idea of an *imminent justice*, and elaborated how the play of justice operates in contexts ranging from metaphysics to international politics. The *elimination of the absolute* and the opposition to *external constitution* of relations are central concerns. There is a lot of history and political economy in this period, but we might say that philosophical concerns are really driving the analysis. Even a work like *The General Idea of the Revolution*, with all its practical proposals, is still really largely about an *idea*.

In a second phase of constructive labors, Proudhon shifted his attention to the practical playing-out of the principle of justice. We have probably been right to see that the emphasis on the *federative principle* marked a transition, but incorrect in identifying it. Having eliminated external constitution

(governmentalism, *archy*) as a model for social organization, there remains the question of how *internal* constitution (self-government, *anarchy*) will work. But Proudhon points us to the principle that will unify his labors:

"...transported into the political sphere, what we have previously called mutualism or guarantism takes the name of *federalism.* In a simple synonymy the revolution, political and economic, is given to us whole..."

The principle has multiple names—the familiar *mutualism* and *federalism*, and the less familiar *guarantism.* The last term is, as I've mentioned elsewhere, a borrowing from Fourier, intended to designate the messy, very *approximate* stage prior to Harmony. Proudhon, of course, is too consistently progressive a thinker, to certain that "*humanity proceeds by approximation*," to have much hope for a period of realized Harmony. The quote with which I began the post, as well as some others I have recently noted, ought to inspire some corrections in our thinking about Proudhon's late works. First, the traditional elevation of *The Federative Principle* over *The Theory of Property* probably can't hold up. Proudhon's letters suggest that, with regard to their status as finished works, we've had things turned completely around. At the same time, the title from the manuscript suggests an equation between "Guarantism" and "The Theory of Property" that shouldn't surprise us at all, and which quite appropriately subordinates whatever Proudhon has to say about property in that work to a principle we know to think of as a synonym of mutualism or federation.

That opens a new set of messy questions, including how property can be understood as an instance of federations, but perhaps we've tackled enough for now.

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Thursday, April 24, 2014

THE FUNDAMENTAL LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE(!) AND THE ANARCHISM OF APPROXIMATION

What would it take to flesh out the *federative* theory of property hinted at in the last post? What exactly does it mean to say that "property can be understood as an instance of federation"? We're starting from a provocative reading of bits and pieces from Proudhon's later works, and leaning hard, *for the moment*, on a portion of the title of *The Theory of Property* that didn't make it out of the manuscript, and we're going to have to go beyond anything explicitly laid out in Proudhon's work. Still, I don't think the extrapolation I'm about to make should strike anyone who has been following the work here as particularly extreme—particularly given the extremities to which we'll see Proudhon go along the way.

So let's start with the idea of federation. Proudhon's *The Federative Principle* may have been, as he claimed, a rapid sketch, but it was obviously an

important one. In it, we find one of those professions of principle of which Proudhon was so fond:

All my economic ideas, developed over the last twenty-five years, can be defined in three words: *agro-industrial federation*; all my political views may be reduced to a parallel formula: *political federation* or *decentralization*; and since I do not make my ideas the instruments of a party or of personal ambition, all my hopes for the present and future are contained in a third term, a corollary of the first two: *progressive federation*.

There's not a lot of room left for ambiguity there. The central place of federation in his thought is clear, and if we recall his other claim:

"...transported into the political sphere, what we have previously called mutualism or guarantism takes the name of *federalism.* In a simple synonymy the revolution, political and economic, is given to us whole..."

we know that mutualism and guarantism essentially occupy the same place.

As a concept, this *mutualism-guarantism-federation* is perhaps a little tough to grasp. The synonymy doesn't really seem all that *simple*. But that not-so-simple synonymy turns out to be a problem with several layers, as we start to look again at the individual synonyms. If we look at the explanation of "the mutualist system" in *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* we find a fairly representative example of Proudhon's treatment of mutuality:

The French word *mutuel, mutualité, mutuation*, which has for synonyms *réciproque, réciprocité*, comes from the Latin *mutuum*, which means [a consumer] loan, and in a broader sense, exchange. We know that in the consumer loan the object loaned is consumed by the borrower, who gives the equivalent, either of the same nature or in any other form. Suppose that the lender becomes a borrower on his side, you would have a mutual service, and consequently an exchange: such is the logical link has given the same name to two different operations. Nothing is more elementary than this notion

Mutualism is thus a system of credit, *in some sense*, but as we look around a bit more it appears that we can't just leap from this family of *mutual ideas* to, say, the Bank of the People or some understanding of credit that we've brought along with us. In fact, when we go back to the 1848 article on the "Organization of Credit and Circulation," where it quite literally *is* a question of introducing the first version of the Bank of the People, we find Proudhon grounding his practical proposal in an exploration of the "fundamental laws of the universe," one of which is *reciprocity*, mutuality's synonym:

We need, however, no great effort of reflection in order to understand that justice, union, accord, harmony, and even fraternity, necessarily suppose two terms and that unless we are to fall in to the absurd system of absolute identity,

which is to say absolute nothingness, contradiction is the fundamental law, not only of society, but of the universe!

Such is also the first law that I proclaim, in agreement with religion and philosophy: it is Contradiction. Universal Antagonism.

But, just as life supposes contradiction, contradiction in its turn calls for justice: from this the second of creation and humanity, the mutual penetration of antagonistic elements, RECIPROCITY.

RECIPROCITY, in all creation, is the principle of existence. In the social order, Reciprocity is the principle of social reality, the formula of justice. Its basis is the eternal antagonism of ideas, opinions, passions, capacities, temperaments, and interests. It is even the condition of love.

RECIPROCITY is expressed in the precept: *Do unto others what you would have others do unto you;* a precept that political economy has translated in its famous formula: *Products exchange for products.*

Now the evil that devours us comes from the fact that the law of reciprocity is unknown, or violated. The remedy is entirely in the promulgation of that law. The organization of our mutual and reciprocal relations is the entirety of social science.

This is really pure Proudhon, writing like the best socialist philosophers of his era, swooping from one scale of concerns to another, and back again, so quickly and nimbly that you might miss it if you're not expecting the maneuver. And these are the moments that, from my perspective at least, give us our clearest glimpses of just how much is going on in Proudhon's thought. So, on the way to a practical proposal about credit, we get the first two "fundamental laws of the universe:" universal antagonism and mutual penetration of the antagonistic elements.

We've tended to see and remember that Proudhon thought reciprocity resembled the Golden Rule, and I've spent some time working out the most robust version of that principle that I can, but it's been harder to incorporate all the other things that Proudhon said about reciprocity into our account of *mutualism*. What we have generally treated as an ethical principle is also, and perhaps primarily, an observation about how the world works, an observation about ontology. I think some reluctance to tackle the fundamental laws of the universe may be considered simply prudent. But those who have been reading along can perhaps see that I've been trying to pull these various threads together for quite some time, and that for roughly a year now I've had a sort of "Note to self" stuck up at the top of the page here.

The first law of the universe is Contradiction, Universal Antagonism, and we know it because everything important to us about being in the world seems to rely on something other than, and opposed to, "the absurd system of absolute identity." So now we need to talk about *identity* (which will, necessarily, carry us back into the vicinity of *property*.) And, again, we have to recognize that we are not just, and perhaps not even primarily, talking about ethical precepts now.

Identity leads us to antagonism because all of the ways that we identify identity seems to depend on something other than *simple* internal uniformity. *Absolute* identity is an illusion of authority, and the alternative is a sort of *contr'un*, which is always to some degree at war with itself (as a simple unity.) We can recall some of the ways that we have marked this non-simple character, in relation to human selves:

Proudhon: "Every individual is a group."

Whitman: "I am large, I contain multitudes."

The second law is Reciprocity, Mutuality, which we understand is related to credit and exchange, and answers somehow to the provocative formula of "the mutual penetration of antagonistic elements," all without ceasing to also resemble or invoke the Golden Rule. Identity exists between Universal Antagonism and Imminent Justice. (We might say: between *War and Peace* and *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*.) If things are, on the one hand, always coming apart more than our sense of them as unique things easily accounts for, it appears that they are, on the other hand, always more mixed up together than we tend to think. There are comments in *The Philosophy of Progress* about the impossibility of separating the *self* and the non-self that undoubtedly speak to this general insight, but there is also the the whole theory of the collective force and collective beings.

The more you chase the references around in Proudhon's work, the more the metaphors of love and war, science and commerce seem to all get mixed up together. But that's often a good sign in his work, suggesting you're closing in on something central. A full explication of all the textual concerns would be demanding, but the general idea isn't terribly difficult. As Whitman said, we are "not contain'd between [our] hat and boots." The business of possessing an individual identity involves us in a sort of constant borrowing and lending, which involves some overlapping, some *interpenetrating* which is at least *antagonistic* to the simpler ideas of identity. That naturally means it will have some consequences for any simple notions of property as well.

And this is really a point in the elaboration of Proudhon's thought that we've reached quite a number of times. When we bring in Proudhon theory of collective individuals, with his judgment that we must always encounter other individuals as at least potentially our equals, and then add in his theory of rights:

> RIGHT, in general, is the recognition of human dignity in all its faculties, attributes and prerogatives. There are thus as many special rights as humans can raise different claims, owing to the diversity of their faculties and of their exercise. As a consequence, the genealogy of human rights will follow that of the human faculties and their manifestations.

we end up with a cast of political characters that would be complicated under any circumstances, but which we must account for in ways that acknowledge all

sorts of overlap and interpenetration—but without, in the process, retaining or introducing any sort of hierarchy.

In the next post, I want to retrace some of the same ground, while talking about the disposition of the products of labor, and we'll be able to explore some specific applications of Proudhon's theory, but for now I want to make sure we spend enough time with this notion of *mutualism-guarantism-federation* to be sure we're really applying the right principle.

The two laws respecting identity give us a subject always in the midst of an antinomic play between various sorts of contradiction and various sorts of justice. And we should probably understand justice as a temporary reconciliation, taking the form of a balancing between interests between which we have no more defensible criterion of choice. With anarchy generalized, external constitution rejected, we have to work things out without recourse to any outside referee, whether that's a state or a notion of what is "natural." We naturally bring lots of experience—and we each bring unique portions of experience—to the encounter, and we equally naturally will not disregard the lessons of that experience, but there is always at least some degree of sheer incommensurability when we're dealing with experience. That means, of course, that our balances will have no externally constituted scales, no predetermined standards of weights and measures. It is, after all, *anarchy* that we're talking about. Presumably we knew what we might be getting into when we started down this road. But let's let it all sink in. No external criteria means that it is all on us to work things out when there is conflict, and, if Proudhon is to be believed, conflict is the first of the fundamental laws of the universe. So there isn't much room for passivity, at the same time there isn't much chance of absolute certainty.

Being a subject already seems hard, and rising to the occasion of being an *anarchist actor,* worthy of the under such uncertain circumstances, that much harder. There is a reason that I started all of this exploration with the notion that a Proudhonian anarchism would necessarily be an "anarchism of approximation." Things get harder when we add in the fact that we apparently have to negotiate approximations of justice with all sorts of actors that are radically different from us: other species, states, ecosystems, etc., etc., etc. And it isn't going to be lost on us that many of those other actors are not what Proudhon called "free absolutes," beings capable of reflection, or that, whatever their capabilities, most of them do not seem to be capable of negotiation.

From the perspective of the individual human actor, it might begin to look like there was an imbalance developing between rights and responsibilities—an emerging injustice. In federation, human individuals will have to find balance with collectivities of various scales, some of which they will also be "part of" (in the sense of contributing to their collective force) and some of which they will not. Guarantism will involve the development, not just of institutions, but of balances between individuals and institutions, again at a variety of scales. Identity and property theory will always have to deal with an open balance of

debits and credits in all the places where we overlap, and the multiplication of individualities means a multiplication of potentially overlapping property claims, always at a variety of scales. I have yet to find anywhere in Proudhon's work where he elaborates how his sense that something like "contract" and "negotiation" applies to our interactions will all sorts of things that can't seem to negotiate and enter into contracts gets put into action. Given the puzzle we're working through at the moment, however, I think we might suspect that had he explicitly expanded his analysis into, say, *ecological* matters, we probably would have found yet another "synonym" or analogous set of metaphors. But maybe the strongest argument for not simply balking at the difficulties is that the bulk of Proudhon's work—the critiques of absolutism and governmentalism, and then the elaboration of the theories of justice and conflict—don't leave us an awful lot of obvious alternatives to at least exploring a bit farther. Having complicated the question of identity, and thus pushing us towards notions of property that may be *individual*, but will have a hard time being anything but approximately *exclusive*, there isn't any very stable ground left to retreat to, without simply chucking an awful lot of what makes up our rationale for anarchism.

There are, I think, lots of ways to expand the scope of human liberty beyond the status quo that do not involve quite so great a leap into the unknown.

The question (which we will no doubt return to again and again) is whether any of them are really worth calling *anarchism*...

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Thursday, April 24, 2014

NOTE ON THE DISPOSITION OF PRODUCTS AND THE ROLE OF PRINCIPLES

"[I]f property is a truth, this can only be on one condition: that the principles of Immanent Justice, Individual Sovereignty and Federation are accepted." (*Theory of Property*)

I get very little feedback on the theoretical posts here, so it's hard to know to what extent the implications of Proudhon's *federalist-mutualist-guarantist* theory are obvious or, alternately, still pretty uncertain. I know that I frequently get to a point in my own thinking where, having laid out the demands on the application of the theory, I can't get much past *"THAT WOULD BE ANARCHY!"* But in my calmer moments, it often strikes me that the difficulty is not so much that we couldn't figure out ways to construct our approximations of justice, but that there are a whole heck of a lot of different ways to go about it, and it is most difficult to know how to begin to choose, without very specific needs and interests on the table.

Because I would like to stick fairly close to the question of *property* at the moment, perhaps the easiest place to start to wrestle with these difficulties is in the context of Proudhon's argument against capitalism and the *droit d'aubaine* (in *What is Property?*) If "property is theft," is it largely because the rights of property have naturalized a right to profit (*aubaines* or "windfalls") based in exploitation. "Property is a man's right to dispose at will of social property." The key concern here is a slide between *individual* and *social*, or, as I have suggested before, between *individualities* of different scales.

Let's start with a familiar analysis of exploitation. In 1881, Benjamin R. Tucker attempted to answer a related question, posed in the pages of the newspaper *Truth:*

"Somebody gets the surplus wealth that labor produces and does not consume. Who is the Somebody?"

Tucker's answer is "the usurer," who derives the power to exploit from "monopoly." While this is a fairly common argument, it is, in some ways, is a fairly substantial step back from Proudhon's position, which sees the source of exploitation as built into the notion of property, rather than emerging from interference with free exchange. The differing analyses have significantly different consequences, when we turn to what and how we combat capitalist exploitation.

Let me suggest three conclusions that seem integral to Proudhon's analysis:

There are only individual products, and there is only individual property.

Every individual is a group.

In every well-ordered association, there is a portion of the products most logically attributed to the collective force of the associated individuals, rather than to the labor of the individuals themselves.

The first of the three is probably the most controversial, involving, as it does, a reversal of the explicit claim that "every individual is a group." But we can find numerous examples of Proudhon claiming the reality of social or collective individuals, and his general sense does indeed seem to be that any well-ordered association can be understood as an individual. That brings the notion of *property* back to its connections to the *proper*, one's *own*, etc., and it seems consistent with Proudhon's explicit claims in 1840:

That the laborer acquires at the expense of the idle proprietor;

That all production being necessarily collective, the laborer is entitled to a share of the products and profits commensurate with his labor;

That all accumulated capital being social property, no one can be its exclusive proprietor.

Of course, looking at things this way doesn't dismiss all our potential questions about the relationships between specific *collectivities* and either property or products. But it does demonstrate one of the ways in which the

individual/collective distinction becomes largely a matter of *perspective* in Proudhon's sociology.

Now, there are a lot of complicated questions to address when it comes time to estimate how we recognized "a share of the products and profits commensurate with his labor," but, for the moment, let's continue to address things at a slightly different scale. If we accept that the product of unassociated labor is *X*, and that there is a collective component that emerges from the division and associated labor, so that the product becomes *X* + some *Y* derived from collective force, we can talk a bit about the various "someones" who do and might lay claim to *Y* under various systems or understandings of the situation. (Proudhon's later understanding of value is such that we're really spared calculations of anything like, say, SNLT, so we're probably safe setting that part of the question to the side for the moment anyway.)

The critique of capitalism, in these terms, runs something like this: Our understanding of property being fundamentally individual at only the human scale, we allow the collective portion of our products to be appropriated by capitalists, who then gain an ever-increasing advantage in terms of bargaining power. The most common rationales for this treatment of the capitalist as claimant of all social products are 1) that the capitalist is actually responsible for the organization and deserves the surplus, or 2) that the market acts to make sure that nobody gets more than they are due. Both look like appeals to some for of external constitution, about which we should naturally be skeptical, but both also simply look sketchy on the logical front. Elevating organizational skills (assuming they actually exist in the capitalist, which is often not the case) above other elements in a divided, associated labor-process, would have to be justified. The notion that a market could maintain equal bargaining power, when one party is siphoning off everything but a subsistence wage, is probably just indefensible. When we look more closely at the way that Proudhon understood collective force, things look even worse. Collective force is increased by the complexity of the association, so as the obvious identifications between a given worker's labor and their product become more tenuous, the quantify of collective product being struggled over increases. As the stakes are raised, the necessity of a different way of thinking about the struggle seems increasingly necessary.

Presumably, any consistent anarchist society ought to be at odds with exploitative property norms, but it isn't entirely clear if that is the case. So we have to ask again, with regard to the various anarchist analyses of property, products, production, and such, "Who is the somebody?"

I'm going to use familiar terms (*individualism, collectivism, communism*, and *mutualism*) to lay out a range of possibilities, but what I'm really trying to establish is that range of options, not the specific adherence of any of the people claiming those terms to a particular scheme. The way that we are addressing the problem is specifically rooted in Proudhon's work, and these characterizations are just an attempt to bridge the various analyses.

Let's start with *collectivism*, which was historically presented, and no doubt with some justification, as an elaboration of Proudhon's thinking about property. That historical collectivism was essentially communist with regard to property and production, but individualist with regard to consumption. It is an appealing position in many ways, corresponding in a fairly uncomplicated way to the economic realities of modern societies, which is probably why we see that a lot of anarchists who consider themselves communists still talk about "personal property" with regard to objects of consumption. I think most of the other positions have to get pretty *theoretical* in one way or another to dismiss the collectivist position as thoroughly as most of them do. We'll have to see how useful those theoretical differences really are.

Anyway, we see the early Proudhon apparently granting the collectivist positions on property and production ("all production being necessarily collective," "all accumulated capital being social property, no one can be its exclusive proprietor") and then opting for a similar position on consumption ("the laborer is entitled to a share of the products and profits commensurate with his labor.") At this point, he has a theory of the existence of collective beings, but all we can say about the disposition of the collective products, over and above the commensurate share, is that it doesn't involve exclusive property. But, at this stage of Proudhon's development, we know that the rejection of exclusive proprietorship excludes all potential exclusive proprietors, including those we would think of as collective. At this stage, we have collective *possession* of the land, *associated* production and presumably some sort of collective disposition of that quantity *Y* of the products of association, but we don't have collective or common *property*, what Proudhon thought of as *communism,* and dismissed as a just option. As an explicitly collectivist position developed, in the hands of Bakunin and his circle, the collective was emphasized over the individual, despite a lot of attempts at balancing the factors.

So let's loosely define our *collectivist* position: Collective *possession* of real property, arising from associated production, with individual *possession* of objects of individual consumption, and presumably a rather large *Y*-share, destined to maintain the public sphere, the shared means of production and all those goods that we consume in common. Remuneration for labor is individual, while everything else is at least not *exclusively* so.

Individualist positions generally just don't acknowledge the collective aspect (although there are exceptions, such as James L. Walker's attempts to shoehorn collectivities into his egoism), so wherever property exists we know it will be individual, and the disposition of the products of collective force has to be fundamentally individual as well, although any number of mechanisms might be developed to divvy things up. Individualist positions might approach some forms of communism by simply refusing to make the distinctions of mine and thine where they are not strongly supported, considering all resources potentially available to all, or they might rely on respect for possession. For the most part, the question of exploitation has to come down to some argument about faulty

systems of distribution, as we see in Tucker and in some of the more individualist currents of modern "mutualism."

Among the potential *communist* positions, we might distinguish those that rely on a notion of common property and those that refuse to acknowledge property at all. In a consistent communist scheme individuals either do or don't have rights to a "commons," but those rights never become exclusively individual. The individual rights exist, if they exist, because of the participation of the individuals in the collectivity. So, we either have a case where we know where the *Y* goes (to the community), but we have a hard time talking about the *X*, or we simply have a hard time talking about any of it (and we talk about why we mustn't, and won't have to. make these kinds of distinctions instead.) There are good reasons why mutualism has traditionally had difficulties finding common ground with communism, even when the theoretical concerns weren't so clearly elaborated, but when it is a question of Proudhon's specific sociological concerns, I think alarm bells quite naturally go off, as the community ends up looking more than a bit like a sort of collective capitalist, and the communities concerns look like a form of external constitution. Proudhon's insistence that collectivities were real and had their own interests and rights was, let us recall, accompanied by an acknowledgment that those interests would not always be in harmony with those of human individuals, and could not be substituted for those individual interests without violating the relation of justice.

Now, I'm happy to assume that the real anarchists who embrace any of these positions do so in good faith, even if I find the positions insufficient in a variety of ways. I've drawn inspiration from all of them, in one sense or another, and continue to do so. And to argue for the superiority of an analysis based in Proudhon's thought, two steps are probably necessary: 1) an elaboration of the *mutualist* position, and 2) a return to the analysis of collective force, in order to argue for the *practical* advantages of adopting it. There is always still the option of rejecting the analysis of collective force, and approaching the choice of systems with another set of criteria, but I think the Proudhonian position is not so easy to just shrug off.

We have to account for both stages of Proudhon's thought on property, if only because we simply cannot separate them. For Proudhon:

> Property can be "liberty" *only* because it remains "theft"!

We start with the 1840 analysis, in which Proudhon champions *possession* (as a form of property, if only in the realm of facts), and we're left with something like the options we've associated with communism. Possession *as a norm* creates a world in which we are something like tenants without a landlord, and that scenario doesn't seem to have been compelling enough for Proudhon to stick with it very long at all. As a representation of the oppressed tenants, it was powerful, but as a model for land distribution it seems to have been much

less so. That's probably why, later in his career, Proudhon argued against possession on historical grounds, since there always seem to be landlords of one sort or another. I think that there are ways of pursuing that possessory vision from 1840, but most of them involve fundamentally non-propertarian analyses. We can, for example, simply shift the discussion to the character of interpersonal relations, rather than their material basis. But that pesky question of who gets to do what with this particular bit of stuff is ultimately hard to answer very clearly without some sort of property theory. If we stick to the discourse of property, the 1840 vision doesn't help us much with the question of how to dispose of the *Y*.

Of course, the "New Theory" of the 1860s doesn't exactly lay things out for us either. There is a great deal about the practical application of *The Theory of Property* that is left to our imaginations. But we have some strong hints in Proudhon's mature work, and maybe none is stronger than that notion of a "citizen-state" that I've discussed in the context of his critique of *governmentalism*. (I'll be bold enough to recommend my book-chapter on "Self-Government and the Citizen-State," if you are not familiar with that aspect of Proudhon's thought.) Positing a "State" that is a collectivity created by human individuals, but only has the same standing within society as those individuals, is a bit mind-bending. Examining the notion, we begin to see just what a complex thing Proudhon's federations might be, but when we want to propose something similar for property, our first step towards a better understanding is probably fairly simple: we affirm property as *individual*, while acknowledging that it will only be in rare cases that it is truly *exclusive*. This *non-exclusive, individual property* has been one of my concerns for a long time, of course. The running joke about the "Walt Whitman Theory of Political Economy" has always been a way of gesturing at this problem, which has been looming steadily larger. Whitman's "Song of Myself" is essentially the workbook for thinking through non-exclusive individuality, and I've consistently pulled two phrases from the work to illustrate two key problems we face:

I am large, I contain multitudes.

[I] am not contain'd between my hat and boots

We're face to face with the "I" as *contr'un* (counter-one, antinomic one, etc.) and there are some very practical concerns at stake for the *mutualist* approach to the questions we're pursuing. So, how do we deal with the disposition of the *Y?*

Maybe we don't, at least as a separate quantity.

Maybe we just sidestep that problem, in order to confront a different one.

What our more-or-less Proudhonian analysis suggests is that there are all the various individual acts of production, and their attendant claims to be recognized in the disposition of products and profits (all the component parts of *X*) and then there is the the full production of the association and its products (*X* + *Y*). No matter how we look at the process (from the perspective of labor, products, profits, property, etc.) we seem likely to find non-exclusive,

overlapping portions. So where does that leave us? Is there any sort of *practically* useful theory of property that can be drawn from this approach?

Let's recall the familiar claim of the propertarians that property rights resolve conflicts. Now, that's only really true in a couple of senses. Obviously, if people agree to a given set of property conventions, or they are forced to agree by some enforcement agency, or they are presumably implied in the the nature of things as natural rights, then conflicts are "resolved" by some existing authority or they don't arise. Beyond certain well-defined limits, legitimate conflict is simply abolished. (Anarchists of the Proudhonian tendency might start to ask questions about "external constitution" about now...) The other common approach seems to acknowledge that conflict will indeed occur, but that shared property conventions will serve to channel conflict towards swift resolutions by establishing fairly uniform costs and incentives. Those aren't really terribly strong arguments for the conflict-reducing power of property rights, but if that's where the bar is set, the mutualist approach can probably at least compete.

If we're not talking about exclusive property, then we are opening the door to a lot of potential conflict. The question is whether lack of conflict is something that anarchists are necessarily in search of. If we're following Proudhon's lead, of course, a very basic sort of conflict is, in his word, a "fundamental law of the universe," as is our tendency to attempt to resolve things. If we want a practical theory of property, it probably has to be able to accommodate the action of both these "laws." Let's look at the opening quote again, with an eye to how Proudhon is attempting to relate property to his other key concepts:

"[I]f property is a truth, this can only be on one condition: that the principles of Immanent Justice, Individual Sovereignty and Federation are accepted."

The principles that we have to account for seem to cover the various aspects of the antinomy internal to property: Sovereignty, which tends to put individuals into conflict with others, with whom they are naturally entangled; Justice, which calls for reconciliation through the balancing of sovereignty-claims; Federation, understood as an approximation or contract formalizing a particular balance. In the most truly anarchist society, perhaps all Federation formulates is the principle of balance, the absolute minimum. But the strength and specificity of any given institution or contract will or will not contribute to anarchy in a practical sense only when it assumes its places in the larger picture, balancing its forces and tendencies against institutions and contracts.

There is a play of principles and consequences here that is necessarily a bit more *pragmatic* than a lot of anarchist positions. It is hard to imagine an *anarchism* which is not in large part driven by *anarchistic principle*. Our reasons for commitment to anarchism are, in general, probably some mix of

principled ethical concern and a belief that adhering to the principle brings good results. But whatever drives us to a commitment to anarchism, anarchism drives us to find some specifically applicable criteria for what does and does not fit within the worldview we have adopted. We draw our lines in the sand, against *governmentalism*, against *external constitution* of human relations, against *authority*, etc. and we test them out in practice on the basis of whether or not they guide us well in the world of actual institutions and real consequences. If we're consistent in our application of Proudhon's philosophical approach, however, these principles never become *rules* in the sense that they could take precedence over our subsequent experimental experience in applying them. They are useful approximations when they work and tools to be reshaped when the don't. Anarchism itself isn't really any of these principles, but is perhaps best understood as the commitment we make to pursue some set of principle generally conducive to anarchy and the good consequences we associate with it.

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Saturday, April 26, 2014

ADVICE FOR TRAVELERS ON THE TRAIL OF THE ANARCHIC ENCOUNTER

Sometimes I have to remind myself that I too have made a sort of transition from critical to constructive concerns, and when one of these half-mad, exploratory jaunts off into the wide-flung realms of intellectual history and theory gets to be a little overwhelming there is a sort of home port to return to. For a long time, the logical working conclusion after pretty much every step in my research was something like: "Okay, but I think there's a bit more to it than that." And it was on with the steady unraveling of received wisdom. Questions multiplied, existing explanations showed a strong tendency to come up short of facts, logic or both, and I didn't have a lot to cling to besides a handful of provocative catch-phrases and general intuitions. Now, I think time and subsequent research has been surprisingly kind to my catch-phrases and intuitions, and over the last year or so I've been able to really begin to build an account of Proudhon's work, of anarchy and of anarchism around the notion of an *anarchic encounter between equal uniques*. So now when it's time to stop and assess the progress of the work, the logical question is almost always some variation on "Okay, but what happens in the encounter?"

And I recommend that as a strategy to readers, for whom I have no doubt my dashing back and forth across Proudhon's works and a range of contexts may come across as baroque or simply prolix. There's always a short-cut back to relative sanity and clarity. Just ask yourself: "How does this relate to the anarchic encounter?"

The truth is that I'm trying to make the work as lean and straightforward as possible, given the complexities of the material in question. But it seems like I often have to come at the same questions from a number of different directions before I can make the connections necessary to both untangle them from the received narrative about Proudhon and anarchism and pick out the key elements of Proudhon's philosophy and sociology, despite their shifting names, and finally grasp how they might be applied in a contemporary context. When I sat down yesterday to reread the last three posts, I had a sort of sinking feeling that perhaps I hadn't said much that hadn't already been said in the post "How does property become capitalist?" But I suppose if anarchists stopped talking when they thought they were saying something that had already been said, our propaganda would become considerably less voluminous. And, really, I think that in my case the growing clarity about Proudhon's project, particularly in the 1860s, means that each time we look at the central problems from a slightly different angle, we move one step closer to being able to apply Proudhon's anarchism without constant reference to the enormous body of works we've been exploring. So...

If we focus for the moment on Proudhon's *federalist-mutualist-guarantist* theory of the practical application of reciprocity, with the understanding that reciprocity is itself more than just an ethical norm, *what happens in the encounter?*

Let me just leave that there for the moment...

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