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ANARCHY & DEMOCRACY

Writings by Shawn P. Wilbur

The material collected here is primarily drawn from a recent "Mutual Exchange on Anarchy and Democracy" hosted by the Center for a Stateless Society.

Anarchy and Democracy:
Examining the Divide

Shawn P. Wilbur

Philosophical Considerations

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

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

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

Can we, for example, think of the transition from *authority* to *anarchy* as movement along some kind of spectrum—perhaps with increasingly libertarian forms of democracy as a kind of bridge—or is the situation more complicated? If we can identify some kind of continuous pattern of development, an evolutionary line that passes through both democracy and anarchy, then perhaps the problem of the divide is less serious, and the possibility of talking about one in terms of the other is opened.

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

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

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

The distinction between "big" and "small," or "more" and "less," government is, of course, a very common one. But perhaps one of the very clear lessons of the Trump era is just how slippery and uncertain those distinctions can be. We see things like the obviously inadequate attempt to quantify "government" by the number of regulations in place, without any more direct measure of the impact of the regulations. We are forced to weigh the "size" of one piece of preemptive legislation against all the various bits of local law that it governs in advance. And, ultimately, when we examine the range of legislative forms employed and attacked by the present regime, perhaps the clearest lesson is that within a *legal order* the influence of law is ubiquitous. Acts are finally either licit or illicit, permitted or prohibited, but in either case they are subject to some form of regulation. And what is true of the legal order seems to be true, in general, of most forms of social order under the regime of authority. Government seems to be a matter of *qualities*, rather than quantities—and perhaps the "quantity of government" never really changes. What seems necessary is to transform the quality of an enormous number of different relations, by reconstructing them on a new basis, according to a different principle.

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

> ...*archy* or *anarchy*, no middle ground.
> *Archy* can have one or several heads: monarchy, polyarchy, oligarchy, exarchy, *heptarchy*, etc.
> If the polyarchy is composed of the wealthiest, or of the nobles and magnates, it is called *aristocracy;* if the people *en masse* is the

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preponderant element there, it is a *democracy*.

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

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

Every idea is established or refuted by a series of terms that are, as it were, its organism, the last term of which demonstrates irrevocably its truth or error. If the development, instead of taking place simply in the mind and through theory, is carried out at the same time in institutions and acts, it constitutes history. This is the case with the principle of authority or government.

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

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

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

The key to understanding how Proudhon understood the relationship between democracy and anarchy here is that qualification: "understood in all its senses." For those who might have encountered it in the published English translation, that phrase is necessarily a bit puzzling, because John Beverley Robinson chose to

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

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

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

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

> Voilà tout le système social : une équation, et par suite une puissance de collectivité.
> (That is the whole social system: an equation, and consequently a power of collectivity.)

And the understanding is that the emergence of collective force does not itself threaten the basic relations of equality. Relations remain strictly horizontal. The development of collectivities only increases the variety of individuals, without in any way subordinating any of them. As an ideal and principle, at least, this seems clear enough, even if the

practical details demand a good deal of innovative thinking on our part. But those practical difficulties should also be apparent, and it is when confronted with those practical complications that anarchists most often turn back towards democracy (and sometimes hierarchy, authority, the absolute, etc.) as elements that must somehow be carried over into anarchistic societies.

Practical Constraints

If anti-state capitalists are constantly called to wrestle with the question of "who will build the roads," anarchists are faced with constant questions about decision-making practices: *Who will break the ties? How will you resolve the conflicts?* Even plenty of self-identified anarchists feel the need to leave some room for the "legitimate" or "justified" coercion of minorities. But these constructions just involve a sort of stuttering displacement of the same problem. "Legitimate authority" is just authority that has been authorized. "Justified hierarchy" is just hierarchy that is sanctioned by whatever it is that we imagine sanctions hierarchy. The reigning principle does not change, while the condition for anarchy seems to be precisely a change of principle.

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

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

Federation as a break with his anarchist thought probably says more about our own appreciation of the difficulties of our project than it does about his theoretical consistency.

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

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

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

In any event, it's not hard for me to suggest one place that democracy can quite consistently take within anarchist relations. Wherever democracy seems to suggest itself as *necessary* (in the strong sense of that term), where it seems that the best we can do is to take turns imposing on one another, then we should understand that either we have failed or that we have been backed into that corner by inescapable circumstances. Democracy, understood from this anarchistic point of view, would appear primarily as an indicator of poor planning or *force majeur*—and certainly as an indication that there are lesson still to learn.

I can understand the reluctance of some people to think of their project in terms that will necessarily confront them with *failure* on a

pretty regular basis, particularly in the long and difficult transition from a fundamentally authoritarian, governmentalist society to one that begins to resemble, in practical terms, our political ideals. But I'm not sure what the alternative is, if we acknowledge that our ideals are really revolutionary. The one truly untenable alternative seems to me to be modifying our ideals and retaining some "pure" form of democracy.

Progress and the Anarchic Series

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

One of the reasons that the anarchist struggle in so difficult is precisely because authority is ubiquitous, or very nearly so, in our social relations, in our education, and therefore it is at least never entirely divorced from the critical perspectives that we try to bring to bear against it. Hegemony does not mean entire domination, of course, and authority is far from the only principle at work in our societies or our thought processes. So we have a good deal of opportunity and power to resist, particularly if we focus our energies and go about our work with care.

I don't mention the present hegemony of authority as a discouragement, but in order to suggest a way around the temptation to cling to democracy. After all, if we have not conceived of anarchy simply as the absence of the principle of authority, and of the institutions explicitly based on it, but as the focus of a new series of experiments, through which we might progress towards a more complete fulfillment of our ideal, then we can perhaps imagine a different sort of society, within which it is anarchy that is the hegemonic principle. Long before we have eliminated all the authoritarian remnants from our thinking, and before we have fully reorganized our institutions along anarchistic lines, we ought to experience a general shift in incentives, as the radical changes we have been able to make facilitate more of the same. We can probably expect a very different sort of stability to emerge—no Weberian "iron

cage," certainly—but it seems likely that confronting our interdependence squarely, without allowing ourselves the tools of hierarchy and "legitimate" imposition," will indeed lead us beyond the heady early days of an anarchist revolution, when nearly everything we attempt will be fraught with previously unexamined difficulties, toward some new sort of status quo, however fluid in may seem in present terms.

But it's hard to imagine how we would even begin to shift those basic structures of incentives while clinging to any of the central concepts of the present order. And those for whom "democracy" still remains an essential anarchist keyword seem either to be clinging to those concepts or to be clinging to the language currently associated with them, engaging in rhetorical strategies that perhaps our tradition has demonstrated obscure more than they clarify.

Note: For those interested in the details of Proudhon's analysis of authority and the justification of the divide between authority and anarchy, my essay "Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Self-Government and the Citizen-State" may provide some clarification. [http://library.libertarian-labyrinth.org/items/show/2558]

Anarchism without Anarchy

[including a response to Wayne Price]

Shawn P. Wilbur

> The rampant dictatorial governments in Italy, Spain and Russia, which arouse such envy and longing among the more reactionary and timid parties across the world, are supplying dispossessed 'democracy' with a sort of new virginity. Thus we see the creatures of the old regimes, well-accustomed to the wicked art of politics, responsible for repression and massacres of working people, re-emerging – where they do not lack the courage – and presenting themselves as men of progress, seeking to capture the near future in the name of liberation. And, given the situation, they could even succeed.—Errico Malatesta, "Democracy and Anarchy" (March, 1924)

In my lead essay, I approached our topic as if it was a foregone conclusion that *anarchism* should be understood in terms of *the pursuit of anarchy*, however lengthy or perhaps even interminable that pursuit might be. But for those who champion a "pure," "true" or "direct" democracy as the political goal of anarchists, thorny problems are sometimes "solved" by simply setting the concept of *anarchy* aside and defining *anarchism* in terms of a certain number of practical reforms to be achieved and a certain range of existing institutions to be abolished.

Obviously, for an anarchism without anarchy, the considerations would be very different from those I addressed in my opening comments, but could such a construction of anarchism really be considered a revolutionary alternative? I want to consider some of what is at stake here.

There are, I suppose, precedents for considering anarchy and anarchism as fundamentally separable concepts. After all, anarchists went for something like thirty-five years without a widespread concept of anarch-*ism* or even much in the way of shared assumptions or terminology, beyond the affirmation of anarchy. The word "anarchism" may actually be first attributable to the lexicographers, who, perhaps assuming that every –*ist* needs an –*ism*, seem to have included the term in their dictionaries before any anarchist thought to coin it. Joseph Déjacque appears to have been the first anarchist to use the term anarchism, in 1859—six years after it appeared in the *Dictionnaire universel*—but it wasn't until the 1870s that the term caught on widely.

This means that pioneers like Proudhon and Bakunin really lived, as *anarchists*—active proponents of *anarchy*—in a *world without anarchism* (at least in any explicit sense.) That's a striking fact, in the context of a period where constructions of that sort were nearly as plentiful as social theorists—or more plentiful, if we count the mass of similar terms coined by figures like Charles Fourier or Stephen Pearl Andrews. And we probably shouldn't think of it as an accident or oversight.

Indeed, there are details here that it might be helpful to pursue, if only to underline the qualities of that pursuit of anarchy before anarchism, but, without belaboring the point any more, let's just recognize that the separability of the two concepts is not just a theoretical possibility, but that it was the reality for an important period in the development of what we now think of as anarchism. But I think we also have to recognize that it is a very different matter for anarchism to go without anarchy, as sometimes seems to be the case in the present, than it was for anarchists to go without any form of anarchism in their pursuit of anarchy.

The question, then, is whether or not this notion of an anarchism without anarchy really describes the position of the "democratic anarchists." Certainly, in Wayne Price's three essays on the question of *anarchism* and democracy—and now his response to my initial essay—anarchy is strikingly absent. It is not just absent as a part of Price's own approach to the question, but it is almost entirely absent, appearing in quotations from me or from Malatesta. My impression is that this is also not simply an accident or oversight.

Price's initial contribution to the exchange, "Democracy, Anarchism, & Freedom," champions democracy as the "rule of the commoners" and defines anarchism as "democracy without the state." So we are left with an anarchism defined as "stateless rule." He correctly observes that some of us object to the notion of any form of "rule," *tout court*—and I will be happy to count myself among those who reject even the sort of "no rulers, but not no rules" formula that we sometimes encounter in anarchist circles. But perhaps the most striking bit of the essay is Price's claim that "the aim of anarchism is not to end absolutely all coercion, but to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible."

I suppose that this is an attempt on his part to avoid defining anarchism in terms of impossible, utopian goals. He follows this claim with the observation that "there will never be a perfect society." But it isn't clear how the question of a "perfect" society really relates to anarchist aspirations. Presumably, in context, this is a claim about the possibility of ending all coercion, but, if the goal of anarchism is "to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible," how would we

distinguish, in principle, between the overwhelming majority of coercions, which it is indeed within the aims of anarchism to eliminate, and that "barest minimum" of presumably "democratic" coercions which it is not the aim of anarchism to eliminate? The difference between a barest minimum and zero seems to be negligible, and it isn't clear why that tiny remainder is not simply attributable to the fact that the world doesn't always cooperate with even the best of our principles.

It would seem to me that there really is no way to make aiming for the "barest minimum" a consistent principle, and that imagining we would only have an aim—or *ideal*, a word that Price is happy to use in the context of democracy—that was always achievable in all regards seems at least a matter of setting our sights a bit low.

No—honestly—it seems like setting those sights inexplicably, impossibly low. I quite simply find the conception of anarchism as a form of rule impossible to wrap my head around. It seems to me that the (presumably practical) argument here has to be that a non-governmental society is impossible—that *anarchy is impossible*. But because the rationale for *aiming* short of anarchy—explicitly as an ideal—seems so uncertain to me, I can only wonder if the other half of the largely unstated argument is that anarchy is also *undesirable*.

It seems to be fairly consistently the case that the defense of democracy is tied to claims like the one Price makes that "[a]narchists are not against all social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people." It's not a particularly bold claim, in part because it's fairly vague. You could probably find staunch anarchist individualists who could find a sense in which they fully agree. But it seems likely that the interpretations of the phrase the individualist would find friendly to their beliefs might seem dangerously *un*-coordinated, anti-social—*anarchic*, in the negative sense of the term—to the defender of democracy.

There has always been a faction among the anarchists who wrestled with the terminology of anarchy, whether because it seems to indicate dangerous and undesirable things or because it seems to indicate too many things all at once. And there has probably also always been another that is just a little too comfortable with the simultaneously edgy and protean quality of that terminology. If I had to characterize what seem to me the most powerful sorts of anarchist *praxis* (not a term I'm fond of, but maybe one that is useful in this context), it seems to me that they have remained actively engaged in all that is really *anarchic* about anarchism. But I suspect that a construction like "anarchist democracy" comes from a different place entirely.

I'll admit that I find a position like Price's difficult to engage constructively. As I understand anarchism, it is an ambitious project, involving a revolutionary change in social principles. I believe that there is a meaningful distinction between relations based in *authority* and those grounded in *anarchy*, and that there is a vast range of relations possible within both regimes. I understand that Price's initial essay could not be expected to address those arguments, nor the rigorous approach I've attempted to take towards notions like "self-government," nor to the specific arguments I've drawn from Proudhon's works. But when the direct response comes in the form of a suggestion that we "leave aside" essentially all of that, followed by the question of whether or not I "really" just agree with the anarchist-democrats, well, I would be lying if I said it wasn't all a bit infuriating.

From my perspective, I am not the one who "seems to want to have his cake and eat it too." I have ideals *and* expectations, and a clear enough sense of the difficulties facing the anarchist project that I am not expecting the sudden and complete realization of my principles. As a result, I've quite explicitly said that the anarchist project will "necessarily confront [us] with *failure* on a pretty regular basis, particularly in the long and difficult transition from a fundamentally authoritarian, governmentalist society to one that begins to resemble, in practical terms, our political ideals." That seems more like commitment to the project, even if the cake is a lie, in part because the proposed alternative, "modifying our ideals and retaining some 'pure' form of democracy"—and retaining it precisely as a goal and as if it was not in contradiction with anarchist principles—seems "truly untenable."

I just can't find it in me to consider a system in which we take turns (hopefully) coercing one another as a means of "social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people" as the goal of anarchism. Of course, I know the anarchist literature well enough that I could easily pull some quotes to suggest that identification, or something even more authoritarian. Consider this, from Bakunin: "I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn." Anarchy *is* ubiquitous authority—or anarchy is *impossible.* Or, perhaps, "considerations of what Proudhon and Bakunin really meant," when addressed with care and consistency, are not easily separable from our discussions.

I think we all know that a discussion like this is necessarily going to be complicated by long histories of complex, sometimes contradictory or even nearly incoherent rhetorical choices. I would hope that most of us would be concerned with reducing the ambiguities as much as possible. But that's difficult, and I think there

is a lesson there for those who think of the *language* of democracy as a particularly precious commodity, since it has been the focus of popular aspirations in the past. When we look at works like *What is Property?* and "God and the State," we might be forgiven for thinking that they are powerful works of anarchist theory *despite* the confusing rhetorical flourishes. Of course, for those who do not envision a complete break with the principle of authority, the potential confusions involved with this definition of anarchism as stateless democracy are not so great. But for those of us who do envision such a break, they seem tremendous.

I should probably leave things there, at least for now, but I did want to circle back around to the two essays by Malatesta that Price has discussed in his essay "Anarchism as Extreme Democracy." This is the one place where he does cite Malatesta on anarchy. The context is "Neither Democrats, nor Dictators: Anarchists," an essay from 1926, in which Malatesta argues that "the so-called democratic system can only be a lie, and one which serves to deceive the mass of the people and keep them docile with an outward show of sovereignty...." He discusses various democratic scenarios, the "worst" of which seems to be the rise of the socialists and anarchists to power, and then ends with the two paragraphs that Price cites in part:

> This is why we are neither for a majority nor for a minority government; neither for democracy not for dictatorship.
> We are for the abolition of the gendarme. We are for the freedom of all and for free agreement, which will be there for all when no one has the means to force others, and all are involved in the good running of society. We are for anarchy.

In his essay, Price suggests that Malatesta "mixes up" a critique of "democratic ideology as a rationalization for capitalism and the state" with "a denunciation of the very concept of majority rule." But how much mix-up can there be, when the goal seems to be circumstances where it is not only true that "all are involved in the good running of society," but it is also true that "one has the means to force others"?

In the 1924 essay "Democracy and Anarchy," Malatesta perhaps throws a little additional light on the title of the later piece, arguing that democrats and dictators are locked, and lock the rest of us, in a vicious circle:

> We are not democrats for, among other reasons, democracy sooner or later leads to war and dictatorship. Just as we are not supporters of dictatorships, among other things, because dictatorship arouses a desire for democracy, provokes a return to

democracy, and thus tends to perpetuate a vicious circle in which human society oscillates between open and brutal tyranny and a the and lying freedom.

And it is in this context that one should probably read the quote, from this same essay, with which I chose to open this response. When we are attempting to ground these discussions in current events, the warning here seems like one that we should at least serious consider.

And, ultimately, it is serious consideration that emerges as the lesson of Malatesta's essay. He urges "greater precision of language, in the conviction that once the phrases are dissected"—specifically the phrases of the democratic politicians—the comrades "themselves will see how vacuous they are." Then he ends, as I will, with an interesting passage suggesting a rather different relationship, I think, between society and democracy then we usually see in the works of the anarchist democrats:

> Therefore, those who really want 'government of the people' in the sense that each can assert his or her own will, ideas and needs, must ensure that no-one, majority or minority, can rule over others; in other words, they must abolish government, meaning any coercive organisation, and replace it with the free organisation of those with common interests and aims.
>
> This would be very simple if every group and individual could live in isolation and on their own, in their own way, supporting themselves independently of the rest, supplying their own material and moral needs.
>
> But this is not possible, and if it were, it would not be desirable because it would mean the decline of humanity into barbarism and savagery.
>
> If they are determined to defend their own autonomy, their own liberty, every individual or group must therefore understand the ties of solidarity that bind them to the rest of humanity, and possess a fairly developed sense of sympathy and love for their fellows, so as to know how voluntarily to make those sacrifices essential to life in a society that brings the greatest possible benefits on every given occasion.
>
> But above all it must be made impossible for some to impose themselves on, and sponge off, the vast majority by material force.
>
> Let us abolish the gendarme, the man armed in the service of the despot, and in one way or another we shall reach free agreement, because without such agreement, free or forced, it is not possible to live.
>
> But even free agreement will always benefit most those who are intellectually and technically prepared. We therefore recommend to our friends and those who truly wish the good of all, to study the

most urgent problems, those that will require a practical solution the very day that the people shake off the yoke that oppresses them.

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Embracing the Antinomies
[including a response to Gabriel Amadej]

Shawn P. Wilbur

It should be clear that one of the key conflicts in these debates about anarchy and democracy is a struggle over the nature of *anarchism*. And it is probably safe to say that nearly all anarchists wrestle with the difficulties of defining that term. Part of the difficulty is that anarchism is simultaneously a kind of *system* and a matter of *tradition*. It is at once a political—or anti-political—ideology, a social-scientific approach, and a body of practices that have emerged within—and sometimes against—a particular set of social movements. It is no surprise, then, when our discussions of anarchist theory and practice oscillate between, on the one hand, attempts to show logical consistency between given practices and established principles and, on the other, appeals to the practices of certain pioneers.

When anarchist thought is vital, we should expect the two aspects to work together, since ideally anarchism should never become either simply a theoretical construction or a matter of merely copying past practices. At its best, anarchist thought uses elements of tradition to increase freedom in the present, while new contexts in the present cast new light on the insights of the past. But we should probably be honest and admit that we do not always know quite how to achieve that mix.

Looking back over this exchange, it seems to me Gabriel Amadej's short contribution "The Regime of Liberty" is a good example of how to at least begin to achieve that balance—and one that works with a particularly difficult body of thought. The attempt to propose a market anarchism "in the spirit of Proudhon" is provocative—I assume intentionally so, given familiar arguments about the place of "the market" in Proudhon's thought—and the claim that he "held his ground and asserted the principles of anarchy" in late works such as *The Principle of Federation* simply ups the ante, given the tendency to treat those works as some kind of departure from the spirit of works like *What is Property?*

As one of those who has pretty consistently advised caution in linking Proudhon and market anarchism, I want to explain a few of the reasons for my reticence in that regard, and also talk a bit about the difficulties involved with attaching Proudhon, and especially his mature works, to any of our projects, but then I would like to briefly explore how we might move at least a few more steps down a path at least similar to the one Amadej has indicated. "*Sancta sanctis*," wrote

Proudhon in *The Theory of Property*. "Everything becomes just for the just man; everything can be justified between the just." And let's take that as a challenge that it is up to us to determine whether "the market" can find its place among the key institutions of an anarchist society.

First, however, we have to confront the fact that, as Amadej puts it, "Oppression comes in all forms. Any exercise of liberty can, in certain conditions, succumb to tyranny." Lets underline the possibility that "all forms" really means *ALL forms*, including some that we might consider anarchic. There's nothing very unorthodox in this possibility. After all, we have figures like Bakunin claiming that even *science*—a true understanding of the world—would have to be rejected should it be coupled with the ability to command. And we have the fact, which so many people have found so perplexing, that Proudhon and Bakunin never stopped describing disorder and even tyranny with that same word, *anarchy*, that they used to describe non-governmental society. And we know (although it is obscured in the translation of *The General Idea of the Revolution*) that one of the other senses of *anarchy* was the capitalistic "anarchy of the market." So we are forced, even in these early works, to distinguish between senses and forms of anarchy, and perhaps, as I have already suggested, to imagine a series of anarchies much like the series that Proudhon described as running from absolutism to "anarchy in all its senses."

Obviously, as soon as we attempt to address this possible *series of anarchies* things get complicated. But it seems to me that the major objection to the principle-driven position of the anti-democratic anarchists is precisely that *things are complicated*, so presumably no one should object to attempts to clarify the nature of the complication. And maybe we don't have to go too far down this particular rabbit hole to get a sense of the difficulties likely to be faced in the attempt to elaborate a market anarchism "in the spirit of Proudhon." Let's start by examining the possibility of what we might call *absolutist anarchy* or *exploitative anarchy*.

In the first case, we might successfully navigate all of the theoretical difficulties involved in positing anarchy as a principle, but then treat the resulting concept as the basis for a *rule*, to be applied much like any other sort of law or deontological principle. There are a couple of potential problems here. First, of course, there is the obviously break with the spirit of anarchy involved in imposing the practice of anarchic relations as a duty. But there is also potentially a misunderstanding about the path to anarchy. If, for example, we simply take the four-quadrant model from *The Principle of Federation* as a kind of guide, then we might think of the path from

any of the other quadrants to anarchy as a relatively simple one: increase the division of power within society while individualizing or simply eliminating authority. But we know that the model was not intended as a map of the real world, but as an *a priori* construction, a *simplism* appealing to "logic and good faith," and that, as Proudhon put it, "therein, precisely, lies the trap."

The thing that we learn from the rest of the discussion in *The Principle of Federation* is that none of these *a priori* forms appear in reality in fully realized form. They remain "perpetual *desiderata*." This is one of the reasons that some have claimed that Proudhon distanced himself from anarchy in his later works. But I think that Amadej is correct in saying that Proudhon "held his ground and asserted the principles of anarchy." It is just not the *simplist* form of anarchy that he ultimately asserts. Rather than an *a priori* principle, anarchy becomes something like an *active principle*, achieved, as Amadej rightly observes, though various kinds of balance.

If we skip ahead to Chapter VI of *The Principle of Federation*, we find Proudhon in fine form, taking obvious pleasure in the twists and turns of his argument: "If the reader has followed the above account with some care, human society should appear to him as a fantastic creation, full of surprises and mysteries." But his claims are fairly straightforward, beginning with the assertion that "Political order rests upon two complementary, opposed, and irreducible principles: authority and liberty." There should be absolutely no surprises here for anyone who has encountered the argument that "property is theft," that the first forms of justice were force and fraud, that the key to abolishing property-theft was in universalizing it, etc, or who has worked through any of the exposition of the "economic contradictions."

There is really a good deal of consistency in Proudhon's treatment of irreducible oppositions in his work, but certainly in any of the works written after 1858 we can say with certainty that we are dealing with a worldview in which the *antinomy* is the dominant form. As a result, there are no neat syntheses to wipe old problems off the table and resolutions generally come in the form of some balancing of forces.

That means, for example—and for better or worse—that property is never *just* "theft" or *just* "liberty." We should probably be very cautious, in any event, in attempting to map the concept of property onto real-world institutions, but the key to understanding Proudhon's conceptual analysis of property (and this might be true as early as 1842 and the *Explanations Presented to the Public Prosecutor concerning the Right of Property*) is that he never relented in his critique of "the idea in itself" or backed down on the question of its

"incompatibility with all the known systems." Property always remained "theft," at least when considered in simple isolation, and always would, at least until human beings intervened with the intention of striking a balance and making the essentially unjust just among themselves. In *The Theory of Property*, he argues that:

> There is only one point of view from which property can be accepted: it is the one that, recognizing that man possesses *Justice*, within himself, making him *sovereign* and *upholder of justice* [*justicier*], consequently awards him property, and knows no possible political order but *federation*. (Ms. 2847, p. 36.)

And again:

> Thus, on this great question, our critique remains at base the same, and our conclusions are always the same: we want equality, more and more fully approximated, of conditions and fortunes, as we want, more and more, the equalization of responsibilities. We reject, along with governmentalism, communism in all its forms; we want the definition of official functions and individual functions; of public services and of free services. There is only one thing new for us in our thesis: it is that that same property, the contradictory and abusive principle of which has raised our disapproval, we today accept entirely, along with its equally contradictory qualification: *Dominium est just utendi et abutendi re suâ, quatenus juris ratio patur*. We have understood finally that the opposition of two absolutes—one of which, alone, would be unpardonably reprehensive, and both of which, together, would be rejected, if they worked separately—is the very cornerstone of social economy and public right: but it falls to us to govern it and to make it act according to the laws of logic.

So here we have an "opposition" that is at the same time a "cornerstone" of society. Whatever might remain uncertain about the approach described here—and I certainly still have plenty of questions about its practical application—I think we can say that the method of moving from one general political form to another is not necessarily going to follow any very straight and narrow course, and that it is likely to involve a lot of experimental limiting and balancing of a wide variety of social forces, with nothing more than our growing understanding of social dynamics to guide us.

And every reservation we might have about attempt to apply anarchy as a *rule* should probably apply to attempts to embody it in a *system*. Building on a "cornerstone" of irreducible opposition obviously imposes a particular character on the edifice, so when we think of federation as a "political order"—or as the principle of a form

of political order—we have to keep that character in mind. What seems to be true of anarchy and federation as principles is that they authorize nothing. Because they are fundamentally *principles of relation*, they address the elements and institutions of society only indirectly, focusing instead on their interactions and what Proudhon called their "resultant forces."

All of this undoubtedly sounds a bit vague and perhaps alien to conventional anarchist discourse. In large part, that is because works like *The Principle of Federation* and *The Theory of Property* are just the tip of a rather formidable iceberg. What is becoming clear about Proudhon's work, now that the Besançon manuscripts have been available online for a few years, is that pretty much everything he wrote from 1859 on is part of one large, sprawling, unfinished study, in course of which he developed some of his most interesting social-scientific theory, with the later works that are available to us in English (partial translations of *The Principle of Federation* and *Literary Majorats*, plus my draft translation of *The Theory of Property* and a few other odds and ends) giving only the most fragmentary glimpses of the larger work. *The Theory of Property*, for example, was intended to be the final chapter of a work on "the birth and death of nations," where it was titled "Guarantism—Theory of Property," and there are some indications that *The Principle of Federation* grew out of material intended to serve as its final section. So, in each of the published versions, we seem to have the conclusions of other studies, but with nearly all traces of those other studies erased. Among the earlier works, The General Idea of the Revolution has a similar relationship to the manuscripts on "Economy." So it is perhaps unsurprising if we've struggled to make good sense of the works at hand.

This is the context in which my personal reluctance to talk about mutualism as a "market anarchism" has to be understood and, I think, the context within which any attempt at a market anarchism "in the spirit of Proudhon" has to succeed or fail. Every time we attempt to start this conversation—and I can only applaud the attempt by Amadej—we find ourselves in remarkably deep waters. And it shouldn't be lost on us that many of the most elusive aspects of Proudhon's theory remain those most necessary to an adequate account of "the market." It's not just that there are untranslated works (like the *Manuel du spéculateur à la Bourse*) and works lacking important contexts (like *The Theory of Property*), but that key works remain available only in the forms of scans of handwritten manuscripts (*Economie*, *La propriété vaincue*, the other *Solution du problème social*, the unused chapters of *Système des Contradictions économiques*, plus various scattered fragments) or perhaps no longer

exist at all (*Suite du Spéculateur à la Bourse, nouveau Manuel.*) I'm finally deep enough into these studies to begin to see some of the possibilities, but the difficulties are really considerable—and I think the texts that we have ready access to testify to those difficulties. Indeed, if we've really understood why "property is theft" in the early works and explored the consequences of the theory of *collective force*, particularly as it might apply to our more socially complex and technologically advanced context, none of the emerging complications should surprise us too much.

I'm happy to encourage anyone willing to wade into those deep waters with a relatively open mind, but I'm also happy to encourage anyone who is not prepared to have a lot of their basic ideas challenged to save themselves the time and stress and find another point of reference. I'm just not sure that there is much room for anything in between immersion and rejection—or at least anything that will stand up to much scrutiny. But if one chooses immersion, then the arc of the analysis is likely to be very similar to that involved in the critique of democracy, and my educated guess on the matter is that we might well find ourselves in a similar position with regard to the tension between principles and practices.

Social, but Still Not Democratic

Shawn P. Wilbur

As long as there has been something called "anarchism," anarchists have been struggling to define it—and, as often as not, they have been in struggle against other self-identified anarchists. At this point in our history, this seems both hard to deny and pointless to regret. These are not battles that can be won "once and for all," since the struggle over meaning is just essentially the process by which meaning is made. That means that there is an element of futility to this sort of debate, but not the sort that would ever let us withdraw from the fight.

It's extremely easy for these debates to simply become focused on words, or even just parts of words, whether it is a matter of the etymological quibbling so familiar in online debate or the rhetorical wars of position that tend to follow every more significant engagement in the struggle. In order to really come to grips with either the concepts behind the words or with our antagonists in debate requires some combination of clarity in our expression and consciousness of the vagaries of various contexts. So, in our case, effectiveness seems to call for being clear about our own conceptions of "anarchy" and "democracy," but also being sensitive to the way these terms are being used elsewhere in the broad conversation about the defining characteristics of anarchism.

There have undoubtedly been moments in the history of anarchism when recourse to the language of "democracy" created more or less potential confusion than it does at present, just as there have been times when "anarchy" was more or less valued as an ideal among self-proclaimed anarchists. Our assessment of those contexts, together with the details of our own theories of anarchism, will determine how important we consider the debate. For some of us, this is not the hill we'll pick to die on, while for others of us something vital to the anarchist project is at stake.

I don't think there is anything I've said here that can't be illustrated with examples from our present exchange, but I'll leave it to others to apply the analysis.

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In my lead essay of "Anarchy and Democracy," I tried to be fairly careful not to take too much for granted, starting with the question of whether it was possible to draw a clear line between the two concepts in question. Having convinced myself that this was indeed possible, using a familiar concept (absence or presence of *rule*) to mark the

divide, but also using "classical" sources to suggest the possibility of a potentially wide range of *anarchies* (the *anarchic series*.) I examined a couple of different possible relationships between democracy and anarchy, and, I think, state fairly clearly the sort of account that would be required to convince me that the most important distinction in all of this was the one that appears to fall between the purest of democracies and the most rudimentary of anarchies.

None of this seems to have made much an impression on Wayne Price, who thinks none of that matters if sometimes someone has no choice but to take a vote. He characterizes my argument in this way:

> Shawn Wilbur postulates an ideal vision of anarchy where no one coerces anyone else in even the most indirect way. No one tells anyone else what to do. This he counterposes to even the most radically democratic decentralized socialism. On the other hand, he apparently recognizes that such a completely individualized society would not work in some (many? most?) cases, at least not for a lengthy "transitional" period of increasing freedom. Therefore, he seems to say, in practice it will be necessary to use democratic methods, including voting. I do not agree with this sort of sharp division between the ideal and practice. But *in practice,* what would he do that is different from what I would do? A difference which makes no difference *is no* difference.

And there is a lot here that is, willfully or not, simply misrepresentation. The attempt to couple my "ideal vision of anarchy" and "a completely individualized society" is mind-boggling, except for the fact that Price seems to equate the rejection of democracy with a particularly atomic sort of "individualism." (More on that later.) It's clear that Price fundamentally misunderstands my "ideal vision of anarchy," and I think that he does so *because* he simply refuses not just any "sharp division between the ideal and practice," but also the distinction that I underlined in my first essay between *actions* and *the authority to act*. If you paint a picture of that "ideal vision" in terms of a society in which "no one coerces anyone else in even the most indirect way," then I suppose that sound unlikely, if not downright silly. But I'm pretty sure I've never suggested such a society, and the key to the vision I've expressed here is that nobody has a *right* to coerce anyone else—to which I will happily add "in even the most indirect way." In the context of such a society, as I've said, recourse to certain "democratic" practices might be forced on anarchists by material constraints, but such recourse would have to be treated as a *failure*, to be avoided, if possible, in the future.

It's hard to know what Price really rejects in my account. Does he believe that we will have a decisive revolution, after which the most

glowing promises of anarchist thought will suddenly become fully realizable? If not, then there is a necessary place for the distinction between principles and practices. Does he believe that *practice*—or the *praxis* that he has invoked elsewhere—cannot be subjected to judgments about success and failure with regard to predetermined goals or principles? Does he imagine that the fact of a practice taking place, no matter the circumstances or the assessment of those engaged in it, can act as a sort of substitute for principles? None of these possibilities seem likely.

It seems to me that Price has made his own position clear. He envisions a democracy in which minorities will, in fact, be subject to the decisions of majorities. The silver lining he offers is that the minorities will not be static, so we will not see the same sort of oppression we see in more conventionally hierarchical societies. He seems to see this relationship as just and legitimate, although it is not clear whether he believes there is a political duty to assent to some "will of the people" or whether he believes that there is some more utilitarian justification. What seems clear enough, however, is that this majority rule is *not* a failure in his mind. Given that apparent fact, it does not seem out of line to attribute to Price some sort of (still not precisely clarified) *democratic principle*—and one that occupies a place on the political map awfully close to the one I assigned it in my own account.

This ought to mean that Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language. That we obviously have not had a useful conversation requires some explaining, and the key is almost certainly related to this accusation of "individualism."

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In his reply to Grayson English, Price makes a bold claim:

> The basic issue, I believe, is not what we mean by "democracy" but what we mean by "anarchism." It is the commitment to an "individualist" interpretation of anarchism which lead to a rejection of radical democracy. I believe that this leads, contrary to anyone's intentions, in an authoritarian direction.

This, perhaps, is progress, in the sense that it acknowledges that we are not, in fact, disagreeing about what Price intends, but that a wide variety of different kinds of anarchist thinkers simply do not accept the rational because we are, despite our differences, all in some sense too "individualist" to accept the "social anarchist" rationale for democratic rule. And, Price believes, this threatens to lead us, willy-

nilly, "in an authoritarian direction," although it appears that the "individualist" positions differ from his own precisely by *rejecting democratic authority*.

I'll leave it to English to make a full response to Price's characterization of his position, but I don't find it much more faithful than his characterization of mine. I do, however, have to address the question of collective actors. Invoking "the famous example of a group of men moving a piano," he asks:

> *Who is moving the piano?* If each one acts completely autonomously, will the piano be moved? This is a model for any sort of productive activity from hunter-gathering on to today, no matter how decentralized or crafts-like an anarchist technology would be.

But he doesn't quite answer the question. Presumably he believes that it is "the group" that moves the piano, but isn't this a really wonderful example of how associated action and individual autonomy are not necessarily at odds? We can imagine "the group" functioning in a disciplined, self-managed workgroup or we can imagine it as a *union of egoists*, and it seems likely that the piano gets moved in any event. We can also imagine it in authoritarian scenarios, complete with whip-wielding overseers, leaving us with no illusions that collective action is, by itself, anything particularly laudable. In this last instance, it's all too easy to imagine a boss claiming that, despite all appearances, *they moved the piano*, because how else would those things have got organized…?

If we are concerning ourselves about views of the piano-moving collective that might lead us in "authoritarian directions," I guess I am uncertain what seeds of authority there are in an explanation that simply says: *We moved the piano together, as a result of voluntary association and without the sacrifice of any individual sovereignty.* Price's objection is presumably contained in this objection, which he attempts to attribute to English: "If no one can tell me what to do, not even the most radically-democratic socialist people, then I must be the king." English has clarified quite nicely, I think, what he meant by "being a king," but if Price is so opposed to this sort of kingship, does it follow that someone can tell us what to do in his "democratic anarchist" society? That someone must be "the group," but if I had to make the judgment, I would say that *that* is the approach that leads places anarchists should be loathe to go.

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I've probably lingered on Price's response to English a bit more than I might have, except that, finding myself apparently lumped in

with those who reject democracy because of "individualism," I'm at a bit of a loss. After all, as someone inspired by Proudhon and an active proponent of the theory of *collective force*, I could hardly be accused of envisioning, let alone promoting "a completely individualized society." But that is precisely Price's accusation.

I've already scattered quite a bit of Proudhonian social science through my contributions here, perhaps most prominently in my response to Gabriel Amadej, and I'll try to spare everyone too much more of that specialized discourse. I think it is useful to show how the distinction I've made can be logically defended, and that my references to the anarchist tradition will stand up to critical scrutiny. But at this stage of the game all that is really important is that my position, far from being "individualist," assumes that all presumably individual action also has a social component and that, at least in a certain sense, groups do indeed act and even think. Those who have read the entries in the early Mutual Exchange on occupancy-and-use will know that one of my concerns there was that, in the context of complex societies with developed technological bases, the very notion of "the individual" (and thus individual property) is increasingly hard to put to use, despite its real utility in various contexts. But in a follow-up essay, "Property, Individuality and Collective Force," written early in 2016, I actually went quite a bit further.

> Let's linger for a moment and consider the implications of this twist on the notion that *property is impossible*. For Proudhon, the "impossibility" of property arose primarily from the *droit d'aubaine* ("right of increase") attached to capitalist property rights. That did not necessarily preclude some kind of return to strong, exclusive, individual property rights, provided those rights could be constrained either by principles like those found in Locke's provisos or in a strong egalitarian ethic, such as we find in the "personal property" speculations of even communistic anarchists. After all, between the early works advocating "possession" and the "New Theory" of the 1860s, Proudhon explored both possibilities to at least some degree. But if it is indeed the case that our "individual" interventions and appropriations are no longer in balance with the regenerative capacities of our natural environment, then there are arguably some very interesting, and certainly troubling consequences. First, it raises the possibility that exclusive, individual property rights—even in a radically reimagined form like my "gift economy of property"—may be impossible. But it also raises the possibility that it is not just property *rights* that are threatened by our current social and technological organization. It may be that property, even in the descriptive sense, is no longer sufficiently *individual* to support the kind of discussion regarding property that we are accustomed to. That notion may be a bit difficult to come to

terms with, but let's at least attempt to give it a try, particularly as a situation in which we could meaningfully say that *individuality is impossible* would create problems for our presumably non-propertarian options nearly as great as those confronting any new theory of property rights.

Ultimately, I'm not sure how anyone who understood, even in the most basic terms, the argument behind Proudhon claim that "property is theft" could be an "individualist" in the broad terms Price's argument demands, but I'm pretty sure there is no way to make the social atomism implied compatible with my own long-stated views. (And old friends and associates may remember that the Whitmanesque questioning of this sort goes back well over a decade.)

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It appears that one can espouse a very social anarchism and still reject democracy. The question remains whether democracy is itself particularly conducive to a social anarchism. Consider Price's account of democratic process:

> … during a discussion (let us say, on whether to build a road or whether the workers in a shop will produce a new type of shoe) *everyone gets to participate*. At the start, there is no set "majority" or "minority." Everyone participates. Every opinion is heard. People are able to argue for their positions, to write papers, and to organize a caucus (or "party") for their opinion. Over time (long or short), opinions crystallize. A majority (most people) forms in favor of one decision. A minority (a few people) may remain unhappy with the decision. But they are not persecuted or lose any rights. On the next discussion, they may be in the majority!
>   Under anarchist direct democracy, this whole notion of a majority ruling over and oppressing a minority is a meaningless abstraction. Sure, those in the minority on this issue may feel coerced—on this one issue. But they fully participated in the democratic process. *They are not oppressed as a minority,* as are African-Americans under white supremacy.

If I'm following the argument here, the claim that "this whole notion of a majority ruling over and oppressing a minority is a meaningless abstraction" is based on the presumption that individuals will not always be in the majority or the minority, so the dynamics of this majoritarian democracy will not be like the dynamics of, for example, white supremacy. But the dynamics of this majoritarian democracy will still be exactly those of a majoritarian democracy. Even when we are talking about identity-based systems of oppression, potentially "set" minorities and majorities are always

altered in practice by intersecting systems of oppression, by the various mechanisms by which members of subaltern groups are pitted against one another, and by a variety of other factors. In "actual politics," African-Americans differ in gender, sexual orientation, skin tone, income and social status, position within capitalism or the state, etc. We naturally don't pretend that any of these variations make their specific oppression as African-Americans "a meaningless abstraction." Instead we recognize that the basic patterns of oppression and exploitation remain quite real across a variety of contexts. Why we would alter our view for democratic minorities isn't entirely clear.

Price's answer is, at least in part, that these minorities "are not persecuted or lose any rights." As far as "rights" go, yes, the minorities retain the same abstract entitlements that they started with, but the question is whether they started out in a situation that anarchists should reject. And Price has himself provided us, or at least nearly provided us, with some reasons to question whether we can count on their real situation not eroding as a result of their democratic losses.

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There are two points that I think need to be made about the position of majorities and minorities in a majoritarian democracy. The first relates to the experience of participation. Price has emphasized that the losers in any given context don't have anything to complain about. They should presumably feel that their position in society remains the same and that their duties to society have been fulfilled through a graceful retreat before the will of the majority.

But how should the majority feel about "winning"?

Let's recall that one of the strong points of Proudhon's anarchist theory is that it unites the critiques of capitalism and governmentalism in a single critique, which addresses the role of authority in setting the conditions for exploitation. In a society informed by the principle of authority, production is social, and yet the fruits of social production are not just unevenly divided, but are routinely turned back against the subaltern groups. If it is the case, as we would expect, that cultural and technological shifts have dramatically increased the amount of production that we might attribute to collective force, and if we expect this sort of social organization to persist "after the revolution," then individuals in such a society might be said to receive "their share" of the products of social production when they have received a fairly bare subsistence, and that their individual claims on control of the remainder might be considered quite weak.

I think there's a fairly perverse set of incentives likely to emerge here, however, if individuals simply accept that they are entitled to a

minimum, but everything above that level is subject, and rightfully so, to the intervention of a majoritarian mechanism. I'm not sure that an anarchist society could survive the sort of general indifference that might emerge among those who find themselves in the minorities. But I'm much more concerned about the effects on the majorities, who find themselves sanctioned in the control of the fruits of collective force, with no clear mandate to safeguard minorities. Endowed with this sort of political privilege, and with perhaps very considerable quantities of wealth and power at their command, could we expect majorities to maintain anarchist principles? Price's vague disdain for "philosophical" questions may not be representative, but I don't think it's hard to imagine quite a variety of reasons why the very material inequalities that might be introduced in such a society might not be so readily acknowledged by those who find themselves beneficiaries.

I suppose one could simply reject all or part of the Proudhonian analysis and, for example, fall back on the Marxian account of exploitation, joined with anarchism imagined as simple anti-statism. This is probably not too far from Price's position, based on his contributions here and his published work. But I'm not sure that there is any easy escape from some version of the same problem.

Consider the material from Bakunin's *Knouto-Germanic Empire* that Price has quoted as a contrast to the position he attributes to English. (The heavily edited quotation is drawn from the "continuation" of "God and the State," as translated by Max Nettlau.) The key paragraphs read, in full:

> ...man becomes man and becomes conscious of and realizes his humanity only in society and only by the collective action of the whole of society. He emancipates himself from the yoke of outside nature, only by collective or social labor, which alone is able to transform the surface of the globe into an abode propitious to human developments. And without this material emancipation there can be no intellectual or moral emancipation for anybody. Man can only emancipate himself from the yoke of his own nature—that is, he can only subordinate the instincts and movements of his own body to the direction of his mind, which becomes more and more developed, by education and instruction, both of which are eminently exclusively social matter; for apart from society man would have remained always a wild beast or a saint, both of which expressions mean nearly the same. Finally, the isolated man cannot be conscious of his liberty. To be free for a man, means other men around him. Liberty, then, is not a matter of isolation, but of reciprocity; not of exclusion, but on the contrary, of combination, since the liberty of each individual is nothing other than the reflection of his humanity or of his human right in the consciousness of all free men, of his brother, his compeers.

It is only in the presence of other men, and with regard to other men, that I can call and feel myself free. In presence of any inferior animal, I am neither free nor human, since such an animal is unable to conceive of and hence to recognize my humanity. I am myself human and free in so far as I recognize the freedom and humanity of all men around me. Only in respecting their human character do I respect my own. A cannibal who devours his prisoner, treating him as a wild beast might, is not a man, but a beast. Ignoring the humanity of his slaves he also ignores his own humanity. The whole of ancient society furnishes proof of this: the Greeks, the Romans, did not feel themselves to be free as men; they did not consider themselves to be free by any human right. They believed themselves privileged as Greeks, as Romans, only within their own country, and so long as it remained independent, not subjugated; and they subjugated other countries under the special protection of their national gods. They were not astonished, nor did they feel they had a right and a duty to revolt, when being in their turn also vanquished they became slaves.

This is a powerful statement of the importance of society as a necessary support for the freedom of the individual. It is eminently *social*, but it is also quite clearly reciprocal, in the sense that no human being can be excluded from or subordinated within the relations described without compromising their development out of the animal state and towards full human freedom. Nowhere does there seem to be any rationale for moving from the clearly social state of human beings to the democratic division of society into majorities and minorities.

And there might even be a rather cautionary account right there at the end.

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In the end, I don't suppose I have much hope of convincing anyone wedded to the notion of democracy to strike out into the wilds of the anarchic series. However, given what seem to be real and substantive differences in the conception of anarchism among the participants here, and given the fact that the "democratic anarchism" seems to mingle anarchy and government in ways that seem likely to be detrimental to the progress of anarchism, I hope I have at least provided reasons for those who might be hovering between the two main positions that have been presented to at the very least consider the question very carefully.

Antinomies of Democracy

[Including responses to Nathan Goodman, Kevin Carson and Wayne Price, with thoughts on a neo-Proudhonian recuperation of "democratic practices"]

Shawn P. Wilbur

I thought I had pretty well had my say on the subject of *democracy and anarchy*, but comparing the material I've written to the contributions I've submitted, I see a couple of responses languishing among the drafts. I also find that the real impasse in my exchanges with Wayne Price leaves me considerably less than satisfied. So I want to take a final opportunity to respond to what seems most and least promising in the arguments for "anarchist democracy" and then, in the hopes of making my original position a bit clearer, I want to attempt a Proudhonian defense of what seems defensible in "democratic practices."

I.—Principles and Rhetoric in Defense of "Democracy"

Several contributors to the exchange have made a point of talking about the dangers of overreacting to the *language* of "democracy" or leaning too heavily on etymology. Those are obviously useful cautions. Most of us are familiar with the quibbles by which authoritarians of various sorts attempt to use etymology against anarchism and expand the envelope of "anarchy" to include their pet *archisms.* Precisely because those rhetorical maneuvers are so familiar, it doesn't seem unreasonable to expect a bit of precision and theoretical substance from the advocates of "anarchist democracy." And those of us who see "democracy," as we understand it, across a very important divide from *anarchy* may perhaps be forgiven for a certain degree of caution and skepticism.

Clarity in the exchange requires dealing with both matters of principle and matters of rhetoric. If "democracy" and "anarchy" are to represent compatible projects, then it has to be clear how that works—and then it seems necessary to explain why retaining the language of "democracy" to describe anarchic relations is useful. I think that the exchange has demonstrated that it is not particularly easy to do both.

In "Anarchism as Radical Liberalism," Nathan Goodman makes a very interesting appeal for political and economic systems characterized by "openness." Using the work of Don Lavoie, he makes a brief but intriguing case for *glasnost* as the defining quality of a "radicalized democracy." As I understand what is proposed, it seems this is a path to anarchy of the sort I have rejected in my initial essay,

but it seems to be a good-faith proposal and the path from "openness" to anarchy seems to have fewer clear obstacles than other nominally "democratic" options. This seems to be a principled position with possibilities worth exploring, but its "democratic" character seems in large part to be an accident of the Cold War context. Goodman evens quotes Lavoie as saying: "The Russian word translates better into 'openness' than it does into 'democracy.'"

I think Kevin Carson ends up in a similar place, though by a somewhat different path. In his lead essay, "On Democracy as a Necessary Anarchist Value," he quickly dispatches the question of opposing principles by simply equating "democracy" and "anarchy," going on to emphasize the goal of maximizing human agency. I can certainly agree that at least one of the goals of anarchists should be to maximize individual agency (although, given my emphasis on Proudhon's theory of collective force, it's not hard to anticipate the complications I might expect), but, even with Carson's lengthy explanation, I have a hard time making any sense of the impulse to call anarchy "democracy."

With his references to David Graeber's work, I think that Carson provides various pieces of an inclusive narrative according to which "democracy" stands for *something* that is "as old as history, as human intelligence itself"—and perhaps that something is even somewhat anarchistic in its character. And I understand the impulse behind Graeber's defense of a "democracy" that is not narrowly defined by a western philosophical canon. But, honestly, Graeber's rhetoric is not reassuring. When he claims that that "democratic assemblies can be attested in all times and places," or that "all social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism," I can't help but think that the keywords have been stretched close to the point of meaninglessness. And it's not because I think any particular political tradition has a monopoly on useful political concepts and principles, but because my experience is that there are very few well-defined concepts or well-wrought principles that are unchanging over time, let alone stable through translation, clear without substantial contextualization and unitary in application. The *socialism* of 1834 and the *socialism* of 1848, to take one example, were worlds apart. The *mutualism* of 1865 and the *mutualism* of 1881 were perhaps just as distinct. But *la démocratie* in France in 1848 and *la Démocratie* in the same time and place were also distinct, the various organizations and institutions that invoked the name of one or both were diverse in their values, and the norms of a new chapter of political discourse were being worked out on the fly, often in very close connection with the rapidly changing fortunes of the Second Republic. I don't know

many political terms that have not represented substantially different practices over relatively short periods of time, and it seems to me that the twists and turns of Graeber's argument testify to the difficulties of claiming "democracy" for this perennial (and possibly anarchistic) *something*.

Perhaps because it has not, in general, been thought of something that one practiced, anarchy seems bright, shiny and clearly defined in contrast with virtually all of these other potential keywords. If there is as much confusion about anarchy in many circles as there is about democracy (or any number of other political concepts), the source of the uncertainty seems different. After all, even the theoretically sophisticated treatments of anarchy tend to differentiate the concept from its popular connotations of chaos and uncertainty by attempting to show what has been considered chaotic and uncertain in a different light. Anarchist thinkers as diverse as Proudhon, Bellegarrigue, Kropotkin and Labadie have all played with the relationships between "anarchy" and "order," most often suggesting that existing conceptions might be flipped. But a reversal is different from an uncoupling of the two notions and when we say that "anarchy is order" it is *order*, and not *anarchy*, that we are asking people to redefine. So it is likely that when we talk about anarchy, most people really know what we're talking about, but lack our positive feelings about the notion—and our critique of the alternatives—and our optimistic sense of where it all might lead. That poses a particular set of problems for those of us who want to promote anarchy as a political ideal, which I am happy to take on, but I'm not sure what advantage is gained by adding the different set of problems posed by this vague, ubiquitous reconstruction of "democracy."

In both of these cases, however, while I disagree with the rhetorical framing, I am at least sympathetic to the stated goals. I expect that the societies envisioned are, in both cases, rather distant from my own ideal, but both involve healthy progress in a decidedly libertarian direction. If "democracy" is the best we can do—and even the sorts of democracy proposed here seem pretty far removed at the moment—then these are proposals that seem to glean what is best from democratic tradition (broadly defined.)

I wish I could say the same about my other democratic interlocutor, Wayne Price, but his "Last Response" is not the sort of thing that inspires confidence. I might seem ungrateful to take exception to its agreeable tone. Price begins with what seems to be a mix of conciliation and praise:

> Shawn Wilbur is correct, I think, when he writes, "*Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about*

anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language." Since I have a great deal of respect for Shawn as an interpreter of Proudhon, let me try to state what may be common in our views:

Unfortunately, what I actually said was this:

> This ought to mean that Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language. That we obviously have not had a useful conversation requires some explaining...

And that paragraph was immediately preceded by this one, which explains the "shared political language" in rather different terms than Price's attempt:

> It seems to me that Price has made his own position clear. He envisions a democracy in which minorities will, in fact, be subject to the decisions of majorities. The silver lining he offers is that the minorities will not be static, so we will not see the same sort of oppression we see in more conventionally hierarchical societies. He seems to see this relationship as just and legitimate, although it is not clear whether he believes there is a political duty to assent to some "will of the people" or whether he believes that there is some more utilitarian justification. What seems clear enough, however, is that this majority rule is *not* a failure in his mind. Given that apparent fact, it does not seem out of line to attribute to Price some sort of (still not precisely clarified) *democratic principle*—and one that occupies a place on the political map awfully close to the one I assigned it in my own account.

It's hard to know what to make of the rest of Price's response. He spends a third of it speculating on paper about "whether Shawn is saying that this means that I am not a real anarchist," lumping himself together with a group of people for whom "radical democracy" does not seem to have a uniform meaning, but not actually responding to my characterization of his position.

Looking back over his contributions, however, it seems to me that my characterization is fair enough and that, rather than shifting the language of "democracy" onto relations governed by other relations (openness, glasnost, maximizing agency, etc.), Price seems intent on applying the language of "anarchy" to relations that are hierarchical and governmentalist in principle. He is correct, of course, that we both believe that "[a]t times it will be necessary to make collective decisions using democratic procedures," at least in the short run. But the nature of his response—the mangled quotation, the failure to

clarify, etc.—make that "democratic" eventuality seem even more dire to me. This is not, to be just a bit blunt, the sort of interaction you want to have with someone whose pitch is basically "we'll take turns oppressing each other a little."

But let's not leave things there.

II.—"Self-Government" and the Principle of Federation

Let's acknowledge that the points of agreement and disagreement among the contributors here are complicated. For example, the "democratic practices" that Price seems to approve and I anticipate with some dread do not seem to be the characteristic practices of Graeber's perennial and ubiquitous "democracy," and it might not be too great a stretch to associate them, in that context, with "failure" in the sense that I have done in my contributions. As the market advocates among us are almost certainly aware, it is a common trope among Graeber-inspired anarchists that people only turn to counting and calculation as a means of organizing themselves when society (characterized in this view by a basis in communism and informal democracy) begins to break down. And that reading seems generally faithful to Graeber's variety of *social anarchism*, at the core of which is a faith that people can work things out without recourse to mechanisms like market valuation or vote-taking.

When we shift our focus away from the questions of vocabulary and rhetoric, our divisions look different. So what I would like to do to, in order to wrap up my contributions to this exchange, is to redraw the lines between us in a way that accepts—within clearly defined limits—Wayne Price's contention that we are in agreement about the practical side of things. Having proposed this new divide, I then want to undertake a limited defense of *democratic practices*, including voting, in a way that draws on Proudhon's later works and, in a sense, completes the argument against the *democratic principle* that I have been making right along. This move is not just consistent with the Proudhonian analysis I've been making, but is probably required by any very serious application.

I want to avoid getting too bogged down in the details of Proudhon's final works, where we can find his own unfinished attempts to reimagine institutions like universal suffrage and constitutionalism in anarchistic terms. Those who are familiar with the approach in *Theory of Property* will recognize that the recuperation of democracy is the logical complement to the recuperation of property. For those unfamiliar with that work, here is a key passage:

We have finally understood that the opposition of two absolutes [property, the governmental State]—one of which, alone, would be unpardonably reprehensible and both of which, together, would be rejected, if they worked separately—is the very cornerstone of social economy and public right: but it falls to us to govern it and to make it act according to the laws of logic.

The "New Theory" of property depends on the recognition "that the reasons [*motifs*, motives, impetus, justification] for property, and thus its legitimacy, must be sought, not in its principle or its origin, but in its aims." On the basis of principle, property remains "theft," absolutist and "unpardonably reprehensible." But as early as 1842, in the *Arguments Presented to the Public Prosecutor Regarding the Right of Property*, Proudhon had been exploring the possibility that the equalization of property and the limitation of its scope might allow its effects to be generally neutralized. As he embraced the notion of *antinomy* and it became clear that this sort of counterbalancing was perhaps the most promising means of at least neutralizing authority, the doors were thrown wide open for the consideration of what other institutions might serve as social counterweights. And it should be no surprise that *universal suffrage*, *constitutionalism* and other existing democratic practices were subject to similar attempts at recuperation in Proudhon's final works.

But in what sense could such a theory be *anarchic* or *anarchistic?* Obviously, this is not the simple anarchy that we find, identified as a *perpetual desideratum*, in *The Principle of Federation*, but if the effect is indeed to balance and thus *neutralize* the authoritarian or absolutist elements in various institutions—all of them still considered suspect *in principle*—then perhaps we have anarchy as a *resultant*. It may not be immediately obvious how a "governed" opposition becomes the "very cornerstone of social economy and public right," but it should be very easy for us to identify anarchy with the combined effects of various opposing forces or tendencies. The *principle of anarchy* is not compromised by the fact that anarchy is inseparable from conflict. Like the *principle of authority*, it is a response to that fact.

If any of this seems unfamiliar or outlandish, consider that what Proudhon proposed for "property" was not significantly different from Bakunin's treatment of "authority" in "God and the State." In the context of his quite thorough rejection of the principle of authority, the way to avoiding "spurning every [individual] authority" is to treat expertise as a matter of difference between individuals and not of social hierarchy, and then to neutralize the potentially authoritarian effects of that difference by balancing expertise against expertise.

It would be easy, at this point, to expand the analysis of

Proudhon's final works and trace his own work towards the recuperation of at least certain democratic practices, which we should probably understand as complementary to the recuperation of property. But that would be a long and convoluted tale. Instead, I would simply like to pick out one aspect of Proudhon's theory—his frequent use of the English term *self-government* among the synonyms for anarchy—and propose the bare outline how anarchic self-government might function in practice.

Let's figure out how we might build a road, or undertake similar projects, using the principle of federation and the sociology of collective force. Readers can then determine whether the distinctions that I have been proposing do or do not actually make a difference. I'll structure the sketch around four basic observations about social organization:

1. *The importance of specific decision-making mechanisms or organizational structures to the organization of a free society is almost certainly overestimated.* If we are considering building a road, then there are all sorts of technical questions to be answered. We need to know about potential users, about potential routes, about potential construction methods, about potential ecological impacts, etc.—and the answers to all of these questions will significantly narrow the range of possible proposals. We need to make sure that the plans which seem to serve specific local needs can be met with local resources, which will further narrow the possibilities. And in a non-governmental society, there can be no *right* to coerce individuals in the name of "the People," nor can there be any obligation for individuals to give way to the will of the majority—and this absence of democratic rights and duties must, I think, be recognized, if the society is to be considered even vaguely anarchistic—so new limitations are likely to appear when individuals feel that their interests are not represented by proposals.

The simplest sort of self-government, where individuals simply pursue a combination of their own interests—including, of course, their interests as members of various social collectivities—and the knowledge necessary to serve them, will either lead to proposals that are acceptable to all the interested parties or they will encounter some obstacle that this sort of simple self-government appears unable to overcome. This second case is presumably the point at which a vote and the imposition of the will of the majority might seem useful. But what is obvious is that such a resolution does not solve the problem facing this particular polity. This sort of democracy is what happens when the simplest sort of self-government—which is probably not worth calling *government* at all—breaks down, and it involves

relations that seem difficult to reconcile with the notion of *self-government*.

But perhaps this very simple self-government revolves around the wrong sort of *self*.

2. *The "self" in anarchic self-government is neither simply the human individual nor "the People," understood abstractly, but some real social collectivity*. The vast majority of Proudhon's sociological writings actually relate to the analysis of how *unity-collectivities*, organized social groups with a unified character, emerge and dissolve in society, but what is key for us to note here is that we are not talking about abstract notions like "the People." Instead, if we are talking about a sort of *social self-government*, it would seem that the avoidance of exploitation and oppression is going to depend on carefully identifying real collectivities to which various interested parties belong. While "the People" may find their mutual dependence a rather abstract matter, the more precisely we can identify and clarify the workings of specific collectivities, the less chance there should be that purely individual interests undercut negotiations among the members of those collectivities.

One of the important elements of Proudhon's sociology is his recognition that collectivities may have different interests than the strictly individual interests of the persons of which they are composed. That means that individuals may find themselves forced to recognize their own interests as complex and perhaps in conflicts, depending on the scale and focus of analysis. This may mean, for example, that there will be hard choices between the direct satisfaction of individual desires and various indirect, social satisfactions. But it should also mean that the more strictly individual sorts of satisfaction cannot be neglected when members are thinking about the health and success of the group. To the extent that real collectivities can be identified, and decisions regarding them limited to the members of those collectivities, negotiations can be structured quite explicitly around the likely trade-offs. To the extent that the health and success of the collectivity depends on lively forms of conflict among the members (and Proudhon made complexity and intensity of internal relations one of the markers of the health—and the *freedom*—of these entities), then the more conscious all members must be of the need to maintain balance without resorting to some winner-take-all scenario.

It will, of course, not always be possible to resolve conflict by bringing together a single collectivity. There will be issues that can be resolved through additional fact-finding or compromises within the group, but there will be others that call for the identification of other groups of interested parties, whether in parallel with the existing

groups, addressing different sorts of shared interests, at a smaller scale, addressing interests that can be addressed separately from the present context, or on a larger scale, addressing issues shared by the given group and other groups as well. We can already see how this analysis leads to federalism as an organizing principle, but perhaps it is not quite clear how and why these various groups might be constituted.

3. *The "nucleus" of every unity-collectivity is likely to be a conflict, problem or convergence of interests*. One of the consequences of breaking with the governmental principle ought to be the abandonment of the worldview that sees society always present as "the People," a fundamentally governmental collectivity always present to intervene in the affairs of individual persons. While there might be a few institutions of self-government that enjoy a perpetual existence, anarchists should almost certainly break with the notion that that each individual is obliged to stand as a citizen of some general polity whenever called to account for themselves.

Instead, the principle of voluntary association and careful attention to real relations of interdependence ought to be our guides. And the rich sort of self-interest we've been exploring here ought to serve us well in that regard. To abandon the assumptions of governmentalism and take on the task of self-government is going to be extremely demanding in some cases, so we might expect that individuals will desire to keep their relations simple where they can, coming together to form explicit associations only when circumstances demand it—and then dissolving those association when circumstances allow.

Where existing relations seem inadequate to meet our needs and desires, then some new form of association is always an option—and with practice hopefully we will learn to take on the complex responsibilities involved. Where existing relations seem to bind us in ways that stand in the way of our needs and desires, we'll learn to distinguish between those existing associations which simply do not serve and those of a more fundamental, inescapable sort—and hopefully we will grow into those large-scale responsibilities from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Conventions for the use of property, the distribution of revenue and products, the mechanics of exchange, etc. can probably be approached in much the same way we would approach the formation of a new workgroup, the extension of a roadway, the establishment of sustainable waste or stormwater disposal, etc.

4. *Organization according to the* federative principle *is a process by which we identify—or extricate—specific social "selves," on the one hand, or establish their involvement in larger-scale collectivities,*

on the other, and establish the narrow confines within which various "democratic" practices might come into play. If we are organized in anarchistic federations, then we can expect that organization to be not just bottom-up, but very specifically up from the problems, up from the local needs and desires, up from the material constraints, with the larger-scale collectivities only emerging on the basis of converging interests. Beyond the comparatively temporary nature of the federated collectivities, we should probably specify that we are talking about a largely *consultative* federalism, within which individuals strive to avoid circumstances in which decision among options is likely to become a clear loss for any of the interested parties. If we are forced by circumstances to resort to mechanisms like a majority vote, then we will want to contain the damage as much as possible. But I suspect we will often find that the local decisions that are both sufficiently collective and divisive to require something worth calling "democratic practices," but also sufficiently serious to push us to confrontations within local groups may find solutions through consultation with other, similar groups. Alternately, if the urgency is not simply local—if, for example, ecological concerns are a factor—they may find themselves "solved," not by local desires at all, but by consideration of the effects elsewhere.

Taking these various observations together, it should be clear that I do indeed believe that sometimes we will be required to fall back on familiar sorts of democratic practices, but I hope it is also clear why, in very practical terms, I believe that this will constitute a failure within an anarchist society.

III.—A Note on Guarantism

Although this is already too long, I would be remiss if I did not very briefly return to Proudhon's *Theory of Property* and the proposal there, according to which "the opposition of two absolutes," each objectionable on principle, becomes "the very cornerstone of social economy and public right." In the previous section I have obviously been attempting to sketch out a federated society in which the balances struck would be between less objectionable and absolute elements, suggesting a fairly well developed sort of anarchy, in the context of which a complex sort of consensus is the ideal. But, as I've suggested, this is a demanding standard and other sorts of balances might be struck. The clues in Proudhon's late work suggest that perhaps his recuperation of *universal suffrage* would have functioned in a similar way to his recuperation of *domain*, and perhaps that it is not simply the anarchistic "citizen-state" that would have functioned as a counterweight to property. My reservations about Proudhon's

late theory of property arise from the fact that domain is potentially a very formidable power within society, but it is at least presented in those works as a largely defensive element. My reservations about democratic practices is that they are much more likely to be invasive and that, in the presence of that potentially invasive power, various defensive counterweights would likely have to be strengthened, if a real balance was to be struck.

Note on Anarchism and the Rhetoric of Democracy

The battle over the relationship between anarchism and democracy rages on, without necessarily gaining much in clarity. It shouldn't surprise us, really. The earliest explicit proponents of anarchy had to find a way to place *anarchy* among a range of otherwise governmentalist possibilities, so we have inherited constructions like "the best form of government is that which does not govern," leaving us to figure out whether anarchy is the last form of government ("pure democracy") or the first form of something else– or whether perhaps the choice is largely rhetorical.

To be clear, I think the choice is more than rhetorical, but what if it really was just a question of what language we choose to make our appeal for truly and fully anarchic relations? What evidence do we have that the sort of move contemplated by those who want to present *anarchy* as (or at least as involving) a particularly pure form of *democracy* would work?

Here are a few thoughts from a recent Reddit exchange:

We certainly have choices about the way we use the language available to us and the tradition gives us a variety of examples of how those choices might play out. Proudhon's claim that "property is theft" is an example of making the received language work against received ideas, and one that has been fairly durable and successful. It raises a paradox, which the curious can then explore in the set of arguments Proudhon provided. Taken out of context, it at least doesn't lead anyone too far astray. Bakunin's remarks about "the authority of the bootmaker," on the other hand, has had the effect, as often as not, of making even anarchists forget the rest of what Bakunin said about authority, even just a sentence or two away from the original statement. Elsewhere in "God and the State" we have the powerful, scandalous statement that he preaches "the revolt of life against science" (the "property is theft" of the piece), which ought to send us back into the text to try to understand how this opposition plays out. But that's not the phrase that has persisted in our memory, at least in the English-speaking world, and the one that has, when taken out of context, gives no clues as to the complexities of the argument from which it is lifted.

Proudhon wrestled with the way to deal with the words he used for new forms of familiar institutions. He initially called his preferred form of property "possession," on the principle that new relations should have new names, but eventually doubled back, wanting to emphasize the evolutionary nature of the process he was describing, and so, for example, his description of the anarchic institutions of the future society retains the "patronymic name" of "State," even thought

the *citizen-state* he described is perhaps even farther removed from the governmentalist State than simple possession was from simple property. There are good reasons for the latter strategy, but the fact is that almost everyone who encounters the word "State" in the later works comes away thinking he had stopped being an anarchist.

Given all that, we might wonder why many of those same anarchists think talking in terms of "democracy" will prepare people for a new social form, rather than simply confusing everyone about what we really want.

The question seems simple enough: if anarchist have themselves often had trouble recognizing anarchic ideas presented in more conventional terms, what is the evidence that non-anarchists will be more attentive to the concepts behind the language?

There are, of course, deeper issues to consider. One of the reasons that we are having this conversation is that we have convinced ourselves that there is a pro-democracy current that goes back to the beginnings of the anarchist tradition. But it seems likely that this perception is itself in part an effect of our failure to really address the concepts behind the words and place the discussions of democracy in their proper contexts. Those of us who want to draw clear lines between anarchy and democracy are not arguing, for the most part, that democracy has not been an advance over more despotic forms of government or that anarchists will be able at all times to resolve conflict in ways that reflect "pure anarchy." But when, for example, we look at Proudhon's work, it seems obvious that there are critical differences between what he approves of in principle and those practices that he believes will find a place in the balancing of interests within a free society. We absolutely must, in this context, be able to distinguish between various democratic practices and the principle of democracy. When we turn to Déjacque's later writings, we find him assigning an necessary and inevitable role to a certain kind of democracy, but as the chrysalis from which the anarchist *papillon* will eventually emerge, as a transitional institution and not as an anarchic one. These distinctions seem simple enough that if we were to take democracy itself as seriously as I would hope anarchists take anarchy, they would still probably be expected to emerge in our pursuit of its "pure" or "true" forms.

So why does this debate seem destined to go nowhere? From my admittedly partisan position, I would at least have to ask whether part of the problem is that we have already burdened ourselves with too much ambivalent rhetoric, which we have then treated with an indifference unbecoming among radicals. The search for that democratic current in the tradition is one more aspect of anarchist

theory that ought to bring us face to face with the central concerns of the tradition. Let's try not to waste the moment.