

Constructing Anarchisms: A Workshop

WEEK ONE READINGS

Thoughts on Constructing Anarchisms

1.—Making Anarchism « Our Own »

Let's begin with a couple of questions that we are committed, at this point to answering to the best of our ability:

What is *anarchy*?

What is *anarchism*?

No pressure... But if you want to get up and take those questions out for a walk before continuing, I wouldn't consider it a bad opening strategy. After all, these are old questions, which have proven rather resistant to definitive answers. Of course, those committed to an engagement with *anarchy* may put a bit less stock in the *definitive* than others. Proudhon, whose philosophy was all about "progress"—by which he meant never-ending *change*—declared that "Humanity proceeds by approximations" and advocated an experimental practice, against all of the utopian blueprints that might be drawn up. And that means that, despite the importance of the questions, we probably have to be a bit gentle with ourselves. Proudhon, who was not famously relaxed about things, ended the first letter in his *Philosophy of Progress* with this charming bit:

The idea of progress is so universal, so flexible, so fecund, that he who has taken it for a compass almost no longer needs to know if his propositions form a body of doctrine or not: the agreement between them, the system, exists by the mere fact that they are in progress. Show me a philosophy where a similar security is to be found!... I never reread my works, and those that I wrote first I have forgotten. What does it matter, if I have *moved* for twelve years, and if today I still advance? What could a few lapses, or some false steps, detract from the rectitude of my faith, the goodness of my cause?... You will please me, sir, to learn for yourself what road I have traveled, and how many times I have fallen along the way. Far from blushing at so many spills, I would be tempted to boast of them and to measure my valor by the number of my contusions.

Expect contusions. It would be some combination of foolhardy and self-defeating to approach our task of "constructing anarchisms" with any other expectation. But *forewarned is forearmed* and, expecting to stumble from time to time, we don't have to treat it as a big deal. We are embarking on a voyage of exploration—through the parts of anarchist history and theory that I have described as « Our Lost Continent »—and ending with an experiment.

This is a work *on the margins* of what we generally think of as the anarchist milieu. So, in some important senses, *it doesn't have to matter*. For a variety of practical reasons, I try to treat our

shared anarchist inheritance with a great deal of care. But I also live with a growing understanding of just how disconnected the facts of the anarchist past *can be* from our present understanding of “the anarchist tradition” or “anarchist history,” without that being a particular problem for anarchism as we experience it generally.

Try to imagine the historical *cataclysm* that would be necessary to transform modern anarchist theory by itself. Was Bakunin perhaps actually an agent of the czar, as was claimed? *So much for Bakunin!* We are arguably better at walking away from *problematic* aspects of our shared heritage than we are at embracing the new problems it might pose.

The one thing you can probably be certain of, at the end of a year of exploring the margins of anarchist tradition, is that—at least as far as the *milieus* are concerned—you *can go home again*.

So *expect contusions*—but perhaps, depending on your own agendas and commitments, not of any very lasting sort.



To talk about making anarchism « our own » involves a kind of double allusion to anarchist thinkers who will be known by at least some of those involved in our joint exploration. On the one hand, it seems useful to raise—and from the outset—a set of questions about on what terms an individual might “construct an anarchism.” Is *anarchism* the sort of thing of which there might be multiple, varied instances? Is it the sort of thing that might be constructed by individuals? Are individuals equal to the task involved? Do individuals have the “right” to undertake it—assuming we can make any sense, as anarchists, of the notion of *right*?

☞ At this point, the answers to the questions are of considerably less importance than the task of grappling with *anarchism* effectively enough to frame them. What follows in the rest of this post is an attempt to propose at least some of the questions we can expect to deal with in the coming months.

But that reference to « our own »—*en guillemets*, a French form of scare-quoting—is also a tip of the hat to the anarchist individualist E. Armand, who had the habit of wrapping up possessive pronouns in this way in his writings, generally at moments where there was some question whether they might involve some kind of overreach for a conscious egoist and serious student of Stirner. In my *Rambles in the Fields of Anarchist Individualism* (linked in the sidebar, for those with too much time on their hands), I have appropriated the guillemets for instances where it seems important to underline questions of the *shareability* of concepts—a practice I will continue in this context.

To make *anarchism* « our own » in simple egoist sense might simply be to appropriate those elements of anarchist thought and tradition that are of use to us. In this task, we can perhaps take our cues from that conscious egoist Humpty Dumpty:

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

But even the egoist is likely to be troubled, eventually, by that question of shareability. And, despite considerable interest in Stirner and those who made wholesale appropriations of his thought, I’m not an egoist.

☞ Anyway, let’s say for the moment that the very existence of this collective endeavor, our proposed exploration of a shared anarchist heritage and our recognition of those existing anarchist milieus makes the question of sharing « our » anarchisms one that will be hard to avoid. So when you see a term bracketed *en guillemets* in one of *my* texts, treat it as a kind of *offering*—something I have constructed for my own personal use which might be of use in your own projects.

2.—The Anarchy in Anarchism(s)

There are arguably two constant concerns to address as we begin to ask our questions about anarchism. We should always hold ourselves to a relatively high standard when it comes to the matter of *asking the right questions*. A lot of wasted effort can be avoided by picking our battles and continuing to ask ourselves if the questions we have been asking in one phase of our exploration continue to be of use to us in those that follow. But we must also be concerned about something a bit more basic, trying our best to make sure that we really know *what question we are asking*—clarifying our concerns sufficiently that we can be fairly certain we are not just reacting to words or being guided by our preconceptions. And we may find that some of the more obvious questions actually break down into multiple questions before we are done with them.

For example, this might be the right time to backtrack just a bit and ask: *Is anarchism the kind of thing that we can construct or “make « our own »”?* But it is a hard question to answer at this stage, when defining *anarchism* is itself the the task to which we expect to dedicate the next year. So we might instead ask: *What sort of “anarchism” might we construct—individually, in the context of this collective investigation, by defining a set of related concepts, etc.?* And we might also ask: *Is there any alternative to constructing an anarchism?*

Our answers to all of these questions can and probably will vary considerably. And different ideas about the kind of thing that anarchism is will necessarily lead, in the end, to different kinds of *construction*. If you understand anarchism as fundamentally a *genre of thought* about social relations, then there is considerable latitude in constructing and reconstructing that thought, with potential projects bounded by little more than the need to make new constructions intelligible as instances of this particular genre. That requires some reference to the anarchist tradition, but perhaps only as a point of departure. If, on the other hand, you think of anarchism as fundamentally a historical movement, bought into being under particular conditions in the past and perpetuated through some kind of continuous action and development, your elaboration of concepts is going to be constrained by the particular history you want to describe.

Neither approach is “correct” or “incorrect,” at least for the purposes of our shared exploration. Nor is there any particular reason to approve or disapprove in advance of any of the varied philosophical perspectives that we are likely to bring to the project. The specific structure of the course and its final project should pose challenges for most approaches. With any luck, those structural challenges will be insuperable for any bad-faith actors or would-be entryists, while they serve as spurs for the rest of us to further clarify our positions. The aim is to present material that can be of use to the full range of even marginally consistent anarchists, communists and individualists, platformists and nihilists, etc.—but the actual use of the material is obviously up to individuals. In order to make the most of things, you might keep these two basic points in mind:

☞ My contributions will all come from an ongoing project to sketch out a “plain,” *shareable* anarchism, suitable for a kind of active, ongoing *anarchist synthesis*. If you’re having trouble making sense of what I’m saying or how to put it into use, the first step is probably to return to that premise and to see if perhaps that helps to clarify the sometimes idiosyncratic ways that I am defining and articulating concepts.

☞ But also recognize from the outset that an important part of the process we will be pursuing is an exposure of our existing anarchist thought to the kinds of uncertainty and conflict that the anarchist tradition can and usually does provide when we really allow ourselves to *explore*. If the particular materials with which we will be engaging don’t throw you a curve on a fairly regular basis, maybe you should consider with what degree of openness you are confronting them.

An experimental practice isn’t worth much if there is not a real question to be asked, a real uncertainty to be addressed. And that’s just as true when it comes to experiments regarding our identities and associations. The passage I’ve already quoted from Bonnano’s “The Anarchist Tension” is followed by this striking bit:

...the anarchist is someone who really puts themselves in doubt as such, as a person, and asks themselves: What is my life according to what I do and in relation to what I think? What connection do I manage to make each day in everything I do, a way of being an anarchist continually and not come to agreements, make little daily compromises, etc? Anarchism is not a concept that can be locked up in a word like a gravestone. It is not a political theory. It is a way of conceiving life, and life, young or old as we may be, whether we are old people or children, is not something final: it is a stake we must play day after day.

And I think we have to take that as one of the challenges to be accepted moving forward.



It should be clear, at this point, that one of the assumptions driving the project is that there is a sort of *anarchy within anarchism*, an *anarchy of anarchisms*, which prevents us from simply simply adopting a coherent and useful anarchism passed down to us from any particular set of pioneers. I have looked—and looked—for the fabled *anarchism as such*—in the historical record, in the secondary literatures and in daily interactions with anarchists of various tendencies

—and come away convinced that it simply does not exist, except as a certain kind of avoidance of the problems we’re going to go out of our way to confront.

So, when we are asking ourselves a fairly basic question like “What is the relationship between *anarchy* and *anarchism*?” we might well break that question down into a question about *principles and manifestations* and another question about *the organization of relations within anarchism* (however we have defined that term.) And we, judging from conversations within the milieu about “unity,” respond very differently to *anarchy* in the different contexts.

Our search is for clarity, so that we can take up whatever practical projects *anarchism* suggests to us more effectively. But the material for our experiments is overwhelming and, in its way, *anarchic*—so one of the ways that we’ll achieve clarity is likely to be in our preparation for each new encounter and experiment.



The remainder of what follows addresses a few more key issues that have shaped the course:

3.—The Distinctiveness of Anarchist Thought

☞ Another premise: Our use of the language of *anarchy* and *anarchism* should matter in some substantive way. If some less extreme, contentious and unruly concept better describes the core of our projects, then perhaps we should run with that.

In exploring the anarchist tradition, we’ll certainly encounter a wide range of related concepts, aspects of *an-archy* and *archy*, constituent struggles, etc., which will perhaps provide us with some of the elements we use to construct our own anarchisms. Some of those elements will have been treated as synonyms for anarchy or anarchism in some expressions of anarchist thought, with some degree of sense and justice, perhaps, but without, I think, really illuminating what is distinct about the idea of *anarchy* or an *-ism* organized around it.

I would like to encourage participants to focus on what is really distinct about anarchy—what separates it from “good government” in the form of *pure democracy*, from *voluntary association* (with no consideration of the structures for which one volunteers), from *anti-statism* or *anti-monopolism*, from *socialism*, *individualism* and *communism* in their various forms, etc., etc. It seems clear that such distinction is possible. And, honestly, if this work of distinction and clarification convinces a few would-be anarchists that perhaps their particular interests and investments are elsewhere, that doesn’t seem like the worst of outcomes.

4.—The Scope of Application

While we are emphasizing the importance of *anarchy* in the construction of *anarchism*, paying close attention to both what anarchy is and what it is not, we’ll also have to learn in what circumstances the body of thought we are constructing is specifically relevant. Anarchy is not the answer to every question, even if, for anarchists, it may never be far from our thoughts. Anarchy doesn’t build bridges or bind books, although it may be a related concern. We tend to joke in

social media circles about the constant questions about “anarchist methods” or “anarchist opinions” regarding subjects that seem very far removed from the subject of anarchy, but maybe there’s room for us to be clearer about the connections of anarchist thought to the details of “everyday life.”

We probably also need to be aware that different constructions of anarchism, drawing elements from different spheres of social relations, will almost certain apply more or less easily to relations in other spheres. When we struggle over whether the etymology of *anarchy* is *an-arche* or *an-archos*, part of what is at stake is a question regarding the scope of application appropriate to the term. A commitment to opposing *rulers* (*an-archos*) is potentially quite different, in both theory and practice, from the broad form of opposition that might be implied by *an-arche*. In “The Pantarchy Defined—The Word and the Thing,” Stephen Pearl Andrews captured the potential scope of *arche* quite nicely:

Arche is a Greek word (occurring in *mon-archy*, *olig-archy*, *hier-archy*, etc.), which curiously combines, in a subtle unity of meaning, the idea of *origin* or *beginning*, and hence of *elementary principle*, with that of *government* or *rule*.

Without some clarification about the scope of anarchism’s application—without a clear designation of its targets—we’re left without any very clear way to choose between the anarchism of those who champion the “no rulers, but not no rules” formula and that of those, like myself, who are inclined to think of anarchism as “lawless and unprincipled” (at least in some important senses.)

5.—Relations with the Non-Anarchist World

Related to the question of anarchism’s possible scope of application, there are questions regarding its practical scope in a world that remains surprisingly full of people who have resisted all the charms of *anarchy*. With debates about various kinds of political “unity” a constant feature of so many anarchist milieus, it probably makes sense, as we are working to distinguish anarchism from other tendencies, to also pay at least some attention to the ways in which clarifying anarchism might also clarify its possible relations with other tendencies, whether radical or not.

6.—Conceptualizing and Constructing an Anarchism

When it finally comes time to try to “construct an anarchism,” all of these preliminary concerns ought to help guide us in the choice of building materials. And different general concerns may suggest a mix of different kinds of concepts, with the definitions doing different kinds of work. For example, in my own preliminary exposition:

Anarchy, together with the related notion of *archy*, provides a focus around which both my conception of anarchism and my critique of the anarchist tradition can be organized. *Tradition* is an occasion to address longstanding conflicts among anarchists, explore the power of “origin stories” and make a distinction between the stories we tell and the raw events of the anarchist past. *Synthesis*, with a nod to Voline’s 1924 essay, is an opportunity to talk about individual

method and theories of anarchist development. *Governmentalism*, the political target of anarchists prior to the emergence of anti-statism as an ideology, is one of those historical keywords that requires reintroduction for modern readers—and that reintroduction provides an opportunity to discuss a range of more familiar concepts (*authority*, *hierarchy*, etc.) as well as some specifically Proudhonian notions (“external constitution,” etc.) *Collective Force* was the concept at the heart of Proudhon’s sociology and it is perhaps one of the keys to working through an analysis of anarchy as a positive concept. *Contr’un*, *Encounter* and *Entente* are the heart of a three-part analysis including a theory of the anarchist subject, a theory of relations among anarchists and a theory of relations between anarchists and non-anarchists. And so, on to *Anarchism...*

I’m still working some of the ways in which all of those interconnecting elements really come together as a kind of theoretical *edifice*, but I don’t think that it’s hard to see that, as they do come together, the resulting *anarchism* will be something we can view from a variety of different sides and easily place within a variety of different contexts. The goal is ultimately not just the construction of “an anarchism,” but of at least the beginnings of a worldview in the context of which that anarchism might be fairly directly put to the work for which it is well suited.

7.—Moving Forward

We’re opening with a period of twelve days, set aside for settling into our studies, discussing whatever seems to call for discussion in Voline’s essay on “Synthesis” and beginning to engage with the notion of *anarchy*, which will be the first of the building-blocks I introduce as I begin to summarize *my own anarchism*. For that last task, I’m going to recommend a series of writings originally produced as part of *Our Lost Continent: Episodes from an Alternate History of the Anarchist Idea*, a work-in-progress covering roughly the same period as our joint exploration, although eventually in considerably greater detail. The title I originally gave them, “Defining Anarchy,” may be a bit of a false promise, but I think folks will find enough questions in the series to tide them over until I can try again to make good on the promise in a little over a week.

Defining Anarchy

I.—ANARCHY: INTO THE MAELSTROM

First, we scuttle the ship of state, with all hands, if need be—ourselves included—if, for the moment, only in the realm of the imagination...

After all the preliminaries, all the hesitations, it is time to *take the plunge*, to do our best to *define anarchy* in such a way that it can serve us as a guide and instrument in the exploration we have undertaken. And we have told ourselves that the anarchist conception of anarchy became more radical as time went on, as *anarchism* emerged as a more coherent project, so we should expect that the earliest figures have *set the bar low* in various ways—and we should prepare ourselves to outdo them.

In “[Proudhon’s Barbaric Yawp](#),” I tried to indicate what was truly radical in Proudhon’s anarchist declaration—“je suis, dans toute la force du terme, anarchiste”—concluding that:

We have still not even come close to exhausting the radical possibilities of that inaugural moment. “Je suis anarchiste” remains, despite all of our efforts, nearly as untamed and untranslatable as it did in 1840.

There, the emphasis was largely on all that was possible as a *next step* from that first one, including possibilities that the anarchist tradition has never explored. The case for a viable anarchist synthesis begins with a demonstration that *anarchiste* was, from the beginning, capable of embracing a range of expressions without losing its most basic sense. But that argument almost certainly depends on an account of *anarchie* that displays a similar unity-in-diversity. Ultimately, this will require a return to the problem of “l’Anarchie, entendue dans tous les sens” (“[Anarchy, understood in all its senses](#)”), but perhaps we could start by simply attempting to bridge the first great anarchist schism that we generally recognize. If we are to talk about an *anarchy* simple and clear enough for the full range of anarchists and anarchist tendencies in our diverse history, finding some common ground between Proudhon and Joseph Déjacque is almost certainly a useful and necessary first step.

And there is no need to be coy about where I think we are headed. As I argued in “[Anarchy and Democracy: Examining the Divide](#)” and the responses that followed it, it seems both possible and ultimately necessary to make a clear distinction between the various forms of governmentalism and the anarchist alternative.

“...archy or *anarchy*, no middle ground.”

The problem, as I’ve suggested in the glossary entry on “[legal order](#),” is that government tends to be pervasive. The existence of a single law tends to divide the social world up into the *prohibited* and the *permitted*, so that there is not really a question of “small” or “big” government, but instead only various differences in the manner in which we are ruled.

In order to be a real alternative to the regime of authority, anarchy would then have to involve a very complete break with legal and governmental order.

And there are certainly times when Proudhon seems to be pointing us in that direction. Consider this famous passage from the essay on “Democracy” in *Solution du problème social*:

The ideal republic is an organization that leaves all opinions and all activities free. In this republic, every citizen, by doing what he wishes and only what he wishes, participates directly in legislation and in government, as he participates in the production and the circulation of wealth. Here, every citizen is king; for he has plenitude of power, he reigns and governs. The ideal republic is a positive anarchy. It is neither liberty subordinated to order, as in a constitutional monarchy, nor liberty imprisoned in order. It is liberty free from all its shackles, superstitions, prejudices, sophistries, usury, authority; it is reciprocal liberty and not limited liberty; liberty not the daughter but the mother of order.

An organization in which individuals *do what they wish and only what they wish* certainly sounds *anarchic* in a rather strong sense. If we’re looking for ways to improve and radicalize this particular account of anarchy, then it is almost certainly a matter of making the break with government and authority as explicit in the rhetoric as it seems to be in Proudhon’s mind—so, no more talk of “kings,” or “citizens” for that matter, and no more recourse to the language of *self-government* in order to describe “an organization that leaves all opinions and all activities free.” Unless we are to believe that Mother Liberty engenders Order once and only once—that *anarchy* is a precondition, but *not an ideal* for a free society—then we are probably better off with the much stronger, clearer rhetoric of the Napoléon III manuscripts. Again:

“...archy or anarchy, no middle ground.”

But have we doomed our project from the outset? Is this strong sense of anarchy too strong to unite even the earliest anarchists? Perhaps not. In a variety of tones and vocabularies, the early advocates of anarchy seem to have fairly consistently seen it as a radical break with the governmental status quo. For example:

Anselme Bellegarrigue: “Anarchy is the annihilation of governments.”

Ernest Cœurderoy: “No master, or nothing but a master.”

Félix Pignal: “Down with governments, down with tyranny, and long live independence! Long live love and friendship.”

Elisée Reclus: “Our destiny is to arrive at that state of ideal perfection where the nations will no longer need to be under the tutelage of a government or of another nation; it is the absence of government, it is anarchy, the highest expression of order.”

But what about Déjacque, who is so often held up as an early alternative to Proudhon and who seems to have been the first anarchist to attach himself to the notion of [*anarchisme*](#)? He seems to have been, if anything, even more extreme than Proudhon.

So—men of great liberties or small, the lukewarm and the hot—rally, all of you, to Liberty, to complete, unlimited liberty, for apart from it there is no salvation: Liberty or death!... Rally to the only true principle. Together let us oppose radicalism to radicalism,

anarchism to jesuitism, so that what the cross-bearers and sword-bearers, the bravos of the autocratic and theocratic Authority provoke as a Riot (which they strive to drown in blood and drag around in irons) responds to them by growing to the level of the circumstances, by declaring Revolution!!!

We must always, of course, ask ourselves to what extent the extremism in these expressions is also rhetorical. Déjacque was explicit in embracing [Scandal](#) as at least one of his muses and Proudhon, if less open about the matter, certainly didn't shy away from provocation. But I think our interpretive choices are fairly simple. To the extent that the more extreme invocations of anarchy are simply rhetorical, the project that they presumably serve seems reducible to some form of "good government"—but without any very clear standard by which to judge the *goodness*. This is the problem faced by all those who are presently attempting to embrace "legitimate authority" or "justified hierarchy," but without, it seems, any means of knowing how authority could be deemed legitimate or hierarchy justified—and certainly without any clearly *anarchistic* means. If, on the other hand, we take the strong distinctions seriously—"...*archy* or *anarchy*, no middle ground"—we may find our project thwarted by various difficulties, but we can at least say that we clearly have a project distinct from the project of government and legislation, from the organization of society into hierarchies governed by various presumed authorities.



So what does that project look like? What are the most basic organizational consequences of embracing anarchy—since questions of organization are bound to dominate debates about anarchist synthesis—?

In "[Archy vs. Anarchy](#)," I tried to sketch out some of those consequences, starting with the abandonment of the polity-form in favor of more thoroughly federative forms of social organization. *Decentralization* is perhaps an inadequate term for that transformation, but the abandonment of schemes that privilege any particular center was certainly a key move in early anarchist strategy. So, for example, we find Proudhon invoking a perennial *decentering* notion early on, in *The Celebration of Sunday*:

In the sphere of pure ideas, everything is connected, supported and demonstrated, not according to the order of filiation, or the principle of consequences, but according to the order of coexistence or coordination of relations. Here, as in the universe, the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere; that is, everything is at once principle and consequence, axis and radius.

And then returning to it in *The General Idea of the Revolution*, this time specifically as it relates to social relations:

Let us recall the principle. The reason for the institution of government, as we have said, is the economic chaos. When the Revolution has regulated this chaos, and organized the industrial forces, there is no further pretext for political centralization; it is absorbed in industrial solidarity, a solidarity which is based upon general reason, and of which we

may say, as Pascal said of the universe, that *its centre is everywhere, its circumference nowhere*.

And what Proudhon found in Pascal—and we might be familiar with in Nietzsche—Déjacque pulled from the works of Pierre Leroux, as in *The Humanisphere* he connected the *circulus* and anarchy:

Since the ages of antiquity, the sciences have constantly gained ground. The Earth is no longer a solid and immobile surface, as we formerly believed in the days of a creator-God, ante- or ultra-diluvian monster. No: the earth is a globe always in motion. The heavens are no longer a ceiling, the floor of a paradise or an Olympus, a sort of vault painted in blue and festooned with golden corbels; it is an ocean of fluid of which neither the eyes nor the thoughts can plumb the depths. The stars, like the suns roll in that azure wave, and are worlds gravitating, like our own, in their vast orbits, and with an animated pupil under their luminous lashes. This definition of the *Circulus*: “Life is a circle in which we can find neither beginning nor end, for, in a circle, all the points of the circumference are the beginning or end;” that definition, taking some more universal proportions, will receive an application closer to the truth, and thus become more understandable to the common. All these globes circulating freely in the ether, attracted tenderly by these, repulsed gently by those, all obeying only their passion, and finding in their passion the law of their mobile and perpetual harmony; all these globes turning first by themselves, then grouping together with other globes, and forming what is called, I believe, a planetary system, a colossal circumference of globes voyaging in concert with more gigantic planetary systems, from circumference to circumference, always extending, and always finding new worlds to increase their volume and always unlimited spaces in which to execute their progressive evolutions; in the end, all these globes of globes and their continuous movement can only give a spherical idea of the infinite, and demonstrate by irrefutable arguments, — arguments that one can touch with the eye and the thought, — that anarchic order is universal order. For a sphere that always turns, and in every sense, a sphere which has neither beginning nor end, can have neither high nor low, and consequently neither a god at the summit nor a devil at the base. The *Circulus* in universality dethrones divine authority and proves its negation by proving the movement, as the *circulus* in humanity dethrones the governmental authority of man over man and proves it absurd by proving movement. Just as the globes circulate anarchically in universality, so men should circulate anarchically in humanity, under the sole impetus of sympathies and antipathies, reciprocal attractions and repulsions. Harmony can only exist through anarchy. That is the whole solution of the social problem. To desire to resolve it otherwise, is to want deny Galileo eternally, to say that the earth is not a sphere, and that this sphere does not revolve. And yet it turns, I will repeat with that poor old man who was condemned to perjure himself, and accepted the humiliation of life in order, no doubt, to save his idea. With this great authoricide, I forgive his apparent cowardice in favor of his science: it is not only the Jesuits who believe that the end justifies the means. The idea of the *Circulus* in universality is in my eyes a subject of too great scope to devote to it only these few lines; I will return to it. While awaiting more complete developments, I call on revolutionaries to meditate on this passage.

And this invocation of the *circulus* ought to recall Proudhon's emphasis on *progress*—understood as constant movement, circulation. Indeed, in *Justice in the Revolution and the Church*, Proudhon encouraged his readers to “admire this *circulus*, which antiquity represented by the symbol of the snake which eats its tail”—relating it there to the “universal conflict” and “balancing of forces” that he considered “[the fundamental laws of the universe](#).”

And from here we might dive straight into the various attempts at a science of society—by Déjacque and Proudhon, by Leroux and Charles Fourier, etc.—by means of which the complex dynamics of a decentered, endlessly circulating universe might be adequately described. After all, this sociology based on the analysis of collective force, which occupied so much of Proudhon's career, is the basis for the [neo-Proudhonian anarchism](#) that I have proposed as a *plain*, potentially shareable framework for anarchist synthesis.

But I think it is appropriate to pause here once more to examine just how anarchists like Proudhon and Déjacque—who were, as we have noted, no strangers to the muse Scandal—took that particular plunge. Proudhon had his “je suis anarchiste” and “propriété, c'est le vol.” Bellegarrigue insisted that “Anarchy is order, for government is civil war.” Cœurderoy invited the Cossacks to invade. And Déjacque, insisting that “Harmony can only exist through anarchy,” started *The Humanisphere*—his anarchistic reimagining of Fourier's *phalanstère* by declaring:

This book is not a literary work, it is an infernal labor, the cry of a rebel slave.

And then again:

This is a book of hatred, a book of love!....

But perhaps it is what comes between those two statements that is most interesting.

In the context of the present, there's no avoiding the fact that talk of *decentering*, invocations of Proudhonian *anti-absolutism* and the more extreme presentations of *anarchy* all tend to provoke certain kinds of moral panics, whether it is a matter of the campaign against “lifestylism” (bolstered in part by a reading of anarchist history that placed Proudhon among the “individualists”), the wild talk about “postmodernism” or “cultural marxism” (which seems to unite traditionalist entryists and the proponents of various kinds of scientism in truly bizarre ways) or just the widely-expressed concern (both within and outside the anarchist milieus) that anarchists won't be able to “make decisions” and “get things done” if they don't rein in their more radical impulses. No one will be surprised when I say that I am equally unperturbed by all of those concerns. The premise driving this work—and really all of my work—remains this:

☞ A distinct, anarchy-centered anarchism is not just *possible*, but *necessary*, if we are to confront the systemic challenges facing us, and that anarchism seems likely, if seriously pursued, to be *adequate* to the task.

But, if I am unperturbed, it is because I have already embraced the difficulties of an anarchy-centered anarchism and recognized the real difficulties posed by the threats of “[uncertainty and profusion](#)” that seem inextricable from the approach. And I don't have the slightest interest in downplaying those threats. As I said in the post “[On the Anarchist Culture Wars](#).”

When it comes right down to it, the only people I have much faith in when it comes to a lasting commitment to anarchist thought and practice are those who are both serious about ideas (although I recognize a lot of ways this seriousness might manifest itself) — and specifically serious about *anarchist* ideas and anarchistic ways of thinking — and ready to acknowledge that the particular ideas that separate anarchism from the rest of the political or social philosophies out there, *anarchy* chief among them, are not “safe.”

I don't think I am wrong to imagine that most of the early anarchist pioneers I have been studying were in that category of individuals who both valued ideas and understood their dangers. And when the course I've chosen feels more than a bit like folly, one somewhat ironic touchstone has been the opening sections of *The Humanisphere*. There, between the two declarations about the character and spirit of the work, is one of the more peculiar opening sequences I can think of:

Being, like the cabin boy of the Salamander, unable, in my individual weakness, to strike down all those who, on the ship of the legal order, dominate and mistreat me, when my day is done at the workshop, when my watch is finished on the bridge, I descend by night to the bottom of the hold, I take possession of my solitary corner and, there, with teeth and claws, like a rat in the shadows, I scratch and gnaw at the worm-eaten walls of the old society. By day, as well, I use my hours of unemployment, I arm myself with a pen like a borer, I dip it in bile for grease, and, little by little, I open a way, each day larger, to the flood of the new; I relentlessly perforate the hull of Civilization. I, a puny proletarian, on whom the crew, the horde of exploiters, daily inflict the torment of the aggravated misery of the brutalities of exile or prison, I open up the abyss beneath the feet of my murderers, and I spread the balm of vengeance on my always-bloody scars. I have my eye on my Masters. I know that each day brings me closer to the goal; that a formidable cry—the sinister every man for himself!—will soon resound at the height of their joyous intoxication. A bilge-rat, I prepare their shipwreck; that shipwreck alone can put an end to my troubles and to those of my fellows. Come the revolution, will not the suffering have, for biscuit, ideas in reserve, and, for a life-line, socialism!

This section ends with a call to insurrection, at which point the work turns to a rather conventional preface, followed by the various descriptions of the Humanisphere and its underlying rationales. It is a bit like a section from another work, prepended so we don't forget that this is the same Déjacque condemned for participation in the June days, for publication of incendiary verse and for possession of unlawful munitions—who was then condemned by his fellow exiles for promoting “antisocial thought, criminal means.” But even if we take it separately, on its own terms, I think it is remarkable. Stuck in the hold of the ship of state, a “bilge-rat,” Déjacque sees the way forward toward freedom in terms of *scuttling the ship*.

I relentlessly perforate the hull of Civilization.

And we have to wonder, if this is not indeed a strategy of self-destruction, what bit of magic or science, what sort of *sea-change*, is likely to transform this desperate attempt into some kind of victory. Talking about the rationale for publishing *The Humanisphere* together with the much more obviously insurrectionary pamphlet, *The Revolutionary Question*, I suggested a few years back that perhaps we needed to address a number of utopias in Déjacque's work:

I've been thinking about Déjacque's "Humanisphere" in terms of a tension between two kinds of "utopia:" a space of harmony, the Humanisphere, and a space of resistance, occupied by the servants who loot or poison their masters, etc. But I suspect what many of us actually find most compelling about some of Déjacque's writing is the thing we find in Coeurderoy, a sort of apocalyptic openness to whatever floods in when (to pick up the metaphor early in the book) he manages to drill a hole in the hull of the ship of civilization. Fourier arguably manages to mix up these three utopias fairly successfully, with his half-mad illustrations, but in the early anarchists we get them carved up in various ways.

And perhaps I have just been waiting for that final reference back to the works of Fourier to sink in.

I don't think that it is hard, particularly given all that has already been said about anarchy, to understand that part of what has to change in order for the scuttling of the ship of state—or of "civilization"—to lead to anarchistic victory is a refusal of the framing narrative, which makes the ship a place of safety, despite all the horrors of life within it, and the waters that might rush in, the vortex created by the sinking vessel, conditions of certain doom. If the ship is indeed the *ship of state*, then what it keeps out is probably anarchy—so perhaps the metaphor fairly quickly loses its utility for anarchists. Perhaps there is little to be lost in abandoning this particular line of thinking provided we can maintain our sense of the stakes and dangers involved.

But things keep circling back, cycling by, whirling around...

We have already identified anarchy with the circulus, the circulus with the Humanisphere, which is the anarchistic version of the phalanstery, otherwise known—and here that half-remembered bit of Fourier finally sinks in—as the *tourbillon*, which is, in turn, the whirlwind or whirlpool.

Everything seems to conspire to bring us back to the maelstrom. And we know what the maelstrom can do. We think of Poe's mountain guide: "...the six hours of deadly terror which I then endured have broken me up body and soul. And, still lingering in the middle of the nineteenth century, we can hardly help but think of Ahab:

"The ship? Great God, where is the ship?" Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana; only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooneers still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea. And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight.

But there are, perhaps, reasons to cling to this particular metaphor for just a bit longer, provided we can maintain our distance from the foundering ship of state. So let's take one last look at the wreck of the Pequod, not just to consider the kinder fate of Ishmael, but to wonder just a moment longer about how "everything is connected, supported and demonstrated," in the presence of "unharming sharks" that might have been lifted straight from *The Theory of Universal Unity*.

The drama's done. Why then here does any one step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck.

It so chanced, that after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman, when that bowsman assumed the vacant post; the same, who, when on the last day the three men were tossed from out of the rocking boat, was dropped astern. So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the halfspent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirgelike main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.

II.—POSITIVE ANARCHY AND COLLECTIVE FORCE

A distinct, anarchy-centered anarchism is not just *possible*, but *necessary*, if we are to confront the systemic challenges facing us, and that anarchism seems likely, if seriously pursued, to be *adequate* to the task.

We're off to a good start, having defined *anarchy* in terms of a complete break with legal and governmental order. Any *anarchism* taking this concept of anarchy as a focus or ideal is certainly likely to be distinct from the full range of governmentalisms.

This is clearly not the only lesson that could have been drawn from the writings of the anarchist pioneers. The complexities of those early works and their largely non-ideological nature—their existence in a context without any concept of *anarchism* or with emerging conceptions significantly different from our own—have left them available for all kinds of piecemeal appropriation by subsequent ideological tendencies. I feel confident that the approach I have taken is at least as representative of the general tendencies of those early anarchist theories as any of the alternatives—and probably more so—but there's no point in downplaying the extent to which the present project will necessarily strike out into un- or under-explored territory.

It is a *choice* to seek synthesis and it is a choice to emphasize those elements of the tradition that are likely to ground that synthesis in a distinct, anarchy-centered anarchism. Perhaps some other anarchist synthesis is possible. But the choice made here is certainly not a random or whimsical one. The difficult task of proposing a *shareable* anarchism probably has to stick fairly close to issues with more-or-less self-evident relevance, even if it then addresses those issues in unexpected ways. There needs to be some intelligible connection between the proposed synthesis and a range of anarchisms, from the simplest sorts of Wikipedia knowledge to the more complex adaptations of established anarchist schools. So focusing on anarchy as the focus or ideal of

anarchism and anarchists, and further focusing on what is genuinely distinct about anarchy, seems among the most obviously practical approaches—particularly as a first, foundational step in an exploration that is certain to move quickly in directions that can make few claims to self-evidence.

The fact that not every self-proclaimed anarchist has any real interest in sharing anarchism, in focusing their anarchism on anarchy or in making the anarchist project distinct from that of various kinds of “good government” simply can’t figure too much in what follows—even if, as may be the case, this rather “obvious” approach seems bizarre, heretical, even anti-anarchist to some large percentage of those to whom it might be addressed. That too is a matter of choice, supported by certain obviously traditional contexts—even if it seems like it might qualify as bizarre, heretical, even anti-anarchist...

In any event, having committed to this path forward and having proposed an anarchy that is at least conceptually distinct from all forms of authority and hierarchy, the next step is to see what remains to be done to render our concept useful in practical terms.

One obvious difficulty facing an anarchy-centered anarchism is the fact—or the perception—that anarchy is a fundamentally *negative* conception. There is no escaping the fact that modern anarchism frequently amounts to *anti-statism* + various other oppositions, or that even the broad anti-absolutism of someone like Proudhon still requires that we keep returning to the thing we oppose in order to define our position. To embrace this problem, to embrace that sort of “apocalyptic openness to whatever floods in when we manage to drill a hole in the hull of the ship of civilization,” is perhaps a necessary part of being an anarchist in the sense that I’m sketching out here.

“I am an individualist because I am an anarchist; and I am an anarchist because I am a nihilist. But I also understand nihilism in my own way...” — Renzo Novatore

But it is almost certainly not the only part. Most of us, I think, whatever our feelings about “revolution” and “the future society,” look forward to circumstances under which our activities are not simply defensive.

So we need some kind of *positive* conception of anarchy.

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We’ve opposed *anarchy* and *authority*, *anarchy* and *hierarchy*, *anarchism* and *governmentalism*. And if we sometimes have trouble giving [authority](#) a clear definition, we know that in authoritarian systems someone sooner or later *lays down the law*—and we can describe in considerable detail the various norms and institutions that go with the establishment of legal and governmental order. If we don’t naturalize legal order, then presumably the fact that, in anarchy, nobody ever lays down the law is not really “positive” or “negative,” any more than that single observation tells us much about the desirability or undesirability of the non-governmental arrangements that might emerge. So the first step is obviously to resist the naturalization, to consider the possibility that the water rushing into the ship of state is not disaster and certain death, but instead some manifestation of *positive anarchy*, “liberty free from all its shackles,

superstitions, prejudices, sophistries, usury, authority; ... reciprocal liberty and not limited liberty; liberty not the daughter but the mother of order.”

If we can do that—if we can recognize that authority and governmentalism are indeed absent from relations based in anarchy, but that this single absence is perhaps much less interesting than the wide range of (uncertain and profuse) possibilities that might exist in its stead—then our problem is a bit different. We have the first element of a more obviously positive description of anarchy. The question then becomes: What’s next? What will help to complete our picture? And are the elements, or at least some of the elements, already close at hand?

As we move forward toward an anarchist synthesis, we obviously understand that the additional elements of our description will have to pertain very directly to the qualities of anarchy itself. In [“Anarchy as a Beacon and as a Focus for Synthesis,”](#) I suggested that anarchy is likely to be a demanding ideal, not simply a state to be instituted once and for all, and in the work on [“Theories of Anarchist Development”](#) I’ve appealed to Voline’s notion that anarchist practice will probably involve a kind of division of labor among anarchist tendencies. But, as useful as these observations are, they are still mostly peripheral observations and still largely tied to expectations we bring from contexts in which authority is naturalized.

We can say with some confidence, I think, that the broad anarchist tradition has prepared us to think fairly clearly about the contexts in which anarchy remains *contextually negative*, but in what context would it be *contextually positive*? We know the general qualities of authoritarian systems, so, even if authority itself is a bit slippery as a concept, we have no trouble pointing to its effects. But in what mechanisms would we as readily recognize the effects of anarchy?

The “small-a” emphasis on anarchy in everyday life, the attempt to create *milieux libres* in the midst of authoritarian society and similar approaches take us some of the way toward identifying social mechanisms and relations with a distinctly anarchistic character, but it is still probably the case that we recognize them primarily by the absence of other mechanisms and relations. Again, however, this is clearly a step in the right direction.

The post on [“Archy vs. Anarchy”](#) was an attempt, having laid out some of a “general theory of archy” (most fully, so far, in “Escheat and Anarchy”), simply to pose alternatives to various prominent elements of authoritarian society, in the hope of bringing them together in some kind of preliminary sketch of anarchic society. We could certainly do with other anarchist proposals what I did with elements drawn largely from the Proudhonian sociology—and, indeed, that will be one of the tasks in *Our Lost Continent and the Journey Back*—but as I have already proposed the [neo-Proudhonian anarchism](#) as a candidate for a shareable, *plain* anarchism, I want to try to complete that thought here, at the beginning of the “journey back,” and then test it out as part of that other labor of surveying alternatives.

What I want to suggest here—and what I cannot perhaps quite demonstrate until I’ve done more of the work of situating readers within the world as Proudhon described it—is that the sociology of *collective force* is a lens through which the workings even of our present, authoritarian relations seem to exhibit at least some of the qualities of *anarchy*. Taking up that lens in that context is, once again, just one more step toward the account we arguably need, but perhaps it is a fairly significant one.

III.—ANARCHY: LAWLESS AND UNPRINCIPLED

The ideal republic is an organization that leaves all opinions and all activities free. In this republic, every citizen, by doing what he wishes and only what he wishes, participates directly in legislation and in government, as he participates in the production and the circulation of wealth. Here, every citizen is king; for he has plenitude of power, he reigns and governs. The ideal republic is a positive anarchy. It is neither liberty subordinated to order, as in a constitutional monarchy, nor liberty imprisoned in order. It is liberty free from all its shackles, superstitions, prejudices, sophistries, usury, authority; it is reciprocal liberty and not limited liberty; liberty not the daughter but the mother of order. — Proudhon, “Democracy” (1848)

This is the description of positive anarchy that we are trying to come to terms with—and, as promised, that means we’ll be taking a look at the role of *desire* in anarchy, addressing the debts of the early anarchists to figures like Charles Fourier. But there’s a lot here to unpack and before we can really concentrate on the possibility of anarchic *Harmony*, perhaps we have to spend just a bit more time with Déjacque’s bilge-rat.

He’s stuck, you will recall, in the hold of the *ship of state* and he wants to get out, so he’s surreptitiously drilling a hole in the hull. And we have every reason to think that what threatens to come rushing in, should he manage to breach the hull, is some variety of *anarchy*—but there is a lot about this method of “escape” that is less than comforting.

We know that part of the problem is that we’re not just stuck in that “ship of state,” but also in the metaphor, the belief system that grants it legitimacy. And because we are indeed stuck within governmental institutions and mindsets—and, if you doubt it, go check out any of the ongoing debates about anarchy and democracy, “justified hierarchy,” “legitimate authority,” etc.—a concern that *escaping* will be hard to distinguish, in practical terms, from *going down with the ship* seems as much a product of foresight as, say, false consciousness.

There always seems to be some thorny *problem of the transition* to be solved.

But I would be lying if I said I didn’t relish the opportunity to “say the worst” about anarchy. After all, how else are we going to determine which of the new conditions that seem dangerous to us really are new dangers and which are simply opportunities that authoritarian, absolutist ways of thinking tend to distort?



We’ve set ourselves the task of coming up with an anarchism more consistent, radical and shareable than that which we have previously recognized in the “classical” anarchist pioneers. We are exploring the extent to which that increased consistency and more radical character can arise from the focus on a more consistent and radical account of *anarchy*. And we are very specifically looking to what is most radical in the work of Proudhon for inspiration, which means our *anarchism* is likely to be an *anti-absolutism*, as our *anarchy* is likely to be an *an-arche* of a potentially very radical character.

To reframe the description of “positive anarchy,” which will be the focus of the next post, more consistently in these terms undoubtedly requires a number of steps. First, we can dispense with the rhetorical confusions. It doesn’t help us to know that “every citizen is king” if we are imagining a context in which the polity-form itself has been rejected, as citizens and kings alike are simply part of the narrative we wish to move beyond. Second, there are some lingering attachments to real instances of the polity-form to discard as well. That includes a rejection of the worn-out remnants of patriarchal government that persist, in however contested a form, in Proudhon’s writings on gender and marriage, as well as at least a temporary step back from the proposals in works like *Theory of Property* that attempt to achieve a kind of *resultant anarchy* from the counterbalancing of fundamentally political forms. The state conceived as “a kind of citizen” and the citizen reimagined on the model of the state are almost certainly salvageable in some more thoroughly mutualist form, but that project has to occupy some more advanced stage of our analysis. And, although the question has not really been raised yet, we should probably be on the lookout for other instances where the polity-form persists in modified forms. If “the commune,” “the people” or even “the individual” ends up functioning as a divided or naturalized polity, then our work is clearly not done.

Those preliminaries accomplished, we can turn to Proudhon’s *Philosophy of Progress*, where he lays out his anti-absolutist program:

That which dominates all my studies, its principle and aim, its summit and base, in a word, its reason; that which gives the key to all my controversies, all my disquisitions, all my lapses; that which constitutes, finally, my originality as a thinker, if I may claim such, is that I affirm, resolutely and irrevocably, in all and everywhere, Progress, and that I deny, no less resolutely, the Absolute.

and then explains what he means by *progress*:

Progress, in the *purest* sense of the word, which is the least empirical, is the movement of the idea, *processus*; it is innate, spontaneous and essential movement, uncontrollable and indestructible, which is to the mind what gravity is to matter, (and I suppose with the vulgar that mind and matter, leaving aside movement, are something), and which manifests itself principally in the march of societies, in history.

From this it follows that, the essence of mind being movement, truth,—which is to say *reality*, as much in nature as in civilization,—is essentially *historical*, subject to progressions, conversions, evolutions and metamorphoses. There is nothing fixed and eternal but the very laws of movement, the study of which forms the object of logic and mathematics.

The *absolute*, then, is everything that makes a claim to being fixed and unchanging.

Everything.

It’s not just a question of rejecting attempts to lay down statute laws on the basis of some presumed authority, whether divine or earthly, but also—and in some ways more particularly—a

matter of rejecting the attempts to assert that a law has always already been laid down *in the nature of things*.

Regarding *arche*, Stephen Pearl Andrews observed that:

Arche is a Greek word (occurring in mon-*archy*, olig-*archy*, hier-*archy*, etc.), which curiously combines, in a subtle unity of meaning, the idea of *origin* or *beginning*, and hence of *elementary principle*, with that of *government* or *rule*. *En arche en ho logos*, “in the beginning was the word” (John i: 1), means the *logical* beginning in *elementary principles*, as a language begins in its alphabet, which then governs the development of speech or the word.

And it may indeed seem a “curious combination,” at least while we are still partially in the grip of the authoritarian narrative that has played a shell-game with statute law and naturalized quasi-legal principle in order to suggest that there is no alternative. But it is hardly any more curious than a range of combinations that we take quite seriously: conflations of *authority* and *expertise*, conflations of *authority* and various kinds of *power* (or even mere *capacity*), confusions of *hierarchy* and *interdependence*, real association and political grouping in abstract polities, etc.

We’re still drilling away at the hull of the ship of state, trying to figure out if we’ll drown when the work is done. But there is pretty clearly no answer until we figure out which unities of meaning are subtle and which are ideologically imposed nonsense. So let’s attempt one more clarification regarding anti-absolutism and hopefully set up our previously scheduled discussion of desire.



Most of the confusions and conflations I have noted, as well as the reluctance to clearly distinguish *anarchy* from *democracy*, are defended on the grounds that there are indeed instances where the order of things imposes practices on us that seem to have a hierarchical or authoritarian character. If we reject those practices, along with the authoritarian premises that still cling to them, we presumably cannot “get things done.” Anarchists seldom resort to calling each other idealists, but there are a lot of less formal (and often more colorful) ways that we suggest others are perhaps a little too fond of “theory.” So the pertinent question here becomes, I suppose, precisely what sorts of practical problems we might be prevented from addressing if we reject the *absolute* tout court. And part of the answer is in one last clarification of Proudhon’s vocabulary.

Allow me one long quotation from *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, where, in the study on ideas, Proudhon introduces the notion of the free absolute:

Man is a free absolute. I use the word *free* here in same manner as the physician distinguishing the free from the latent caloric. It is thus that I have already said free spirit and latent spirit, in order to distinguish the intelligence that knows itself and that moves in man, from that of which we recognize the imprint, but which seems asleep in nature.

In short, the free absolute is that which says “I;” the non-free absolute is that which cannot say “I”

As a free absolute, man tends to subordinate all that surrounds him, things and persons, beings and their laws, theoretical truth and empirical truth, though as inertia, conscience and love as stupidity and egoism.

Hence the character of individual reason, in which the absolute, the very law of individuality, comes to occupy an ever greater place, unlike that of the collective reason, in which the absolute tends to occupy an ever-smaller space. It is in the collective reason, indeed, that relations, sustained by one another, according to the expression which M. Lenoir attributes to me, are at once the law and the social reality.

That difference of character between the particular reason and the collective reason will become sensible at once by the facts; but it is necessary to explain first how the second rises from the contradictions of the first.

From the side of nature, the tendency of particular reason to absolutism meets neither resistance nor control; and one could doubt that science existed, that it was even possible, if the truth and reason of things, as the sole object of philosophy, had only that individual reason for an interpreter.

Before his fellow, an absolute like himself, the absolutism of man stops short; or, to put it better, these two absolutisms destroy one another, allowing to remain of their respective reasons only the relations of things, about which they struggle.

As only a diamond can cut a diamond, only a free absolute is capable of balancing a free absolute, to neutralize it, eliminate it, such that, by the fact of their reciprocal cancellation, there remains of the debate only the objective reality that each tended to denature for his profit, or to make disappear.

It is the sparks from clashing ideas that cast light, says the proverb. Let us correct this slightly metaphysical proverb: it is by mutual contradiction that minds purify themselves of all ultra-phenomenal elements; it is the negation that the free absolute makes of his antagonist which produces, in the moral sciences, adequate ideas, pure of all egoist and transcendental dross, in conformity, in short, with reality and social reason.

If we go to work on this passage in the way we have the other, distinguishing between the real appeals to governmentalist institutions and the rhetorical uses of a governmentalist vocabulary, we have an odd commentary on social psychology, wrapped up in a metaphor drawn from outdated theories of thermodynamics, with *absolutism* being essentially the tendency of forces to progress in an orderly manner until stopped or deflected. The “laws” in question are “laws of nature.” And if we recall Proudhon’s remarks on *liberty*, *anarchy* and *law* from *What is Property?* —

Liberty is anarchy, because it does not admit the government of the will, but only the authority of the law; that is, of necessity.

— we might be tempted to reduce all the natural “laws”—and human absolutism as well—to that single law of necessity, by which he seems to mean simply material determination, in the context of complex, ongoing relations of cause and effect. And “law” here really only designates an observation about the general tendencies of forces and relations.

Behind all of the metaphors and borrowings from the language of governmentalism—and perhaps more than a little lost behind all of that—we have an analysis of forces and their interactions. And that seems to be what is necessary to “get things done.” Perhaps it is a little bit confusing for us, in the midst of trying to clarify the nature of anti-absolutism, to find one focus of a non-governmental, anti-absolutist analysis of relations described in terms of “human absolutism” and our anarchic social actor dubbed a “free absolute,” but we can probably get over it. Once we pick our way through the rhetorical distractions, we’re once again confronted with that *sociology of collective force* I talked about at the end of the last post.

There, I suggested, a bit cryptically, that “the sociology of *collective force* is a lens through which the workings even of our present, authoritarian relations seem to exhibit at least some of the qualities of *anarchy*.” What I want to suggest here is that it is in the absence of the narratives that dominate our current, authoritarian, absolutist societies that the sociology of collective force really comes into its own. When, instead of always attempting to find “the law” and figure out who had or claimed the right to lay it down, we turn our attention directly to the play of forces, the dynamics of progressive change, etc., then, at a certain scale, all anarchy is really likely to mean is something like *the evolving dynamics of collective force in the absence of authority and hierarchy*. That definition and that scale of analysis are not all that we will need to ground our *plain anarchism*, but they are certainly one of the things that we are likely to need.

What we perhaps do not need—at least at the scale where we usually talk about *arche*—is an understanding of things based in laws or fixed principles. And if we can learn to think of ourselves as *lawless* and *unprincipled* in this respect, then it almost certainly becomes easier to dispense with governmentalist norms and institutions at other levels of analysis.



Anyway, where were we...?

Ah, yes, thinking about desire and contemplating the maelstrom...

IV.—ANARCHY, HARMONY AND THE MAELSTROM OF DESIRE

What a difference a few days can make. A gentle, playful provocation regarding “lawless, unprincipled” anarchy certainly looks different when “professional anarchists” are one of the potential scapegoats for widespread civil unrest. Certainly, nothing about the present moment suggests a need to temper language or moderate projects. But the long, deep breath afforded by pandemic-related measures seems to have given way to something else—and it may be necessary to adjust the exposition of this stage of the project accordingly. Anyway, back to work...



We've taken some time to talk about *anarchy* in its most general and perhaps abstract form, where it appears as what happens in the world when we don't fall back on the dominant apparatus of authority, hierarchy, exploitation, etc. We've started to look at the role of *collective force* in the creation of anarchic freedom. And we have suggested some of the ways in which the description of *positive anarchy* that we have inherited from Proudhon might be clarified. But we're still trying to come to grips with the fundamental dynamic. How is it possible that everyone does what they please and only what they please?

For Proudhon and Déjacque, writing in mid-19th-century France, the obvious place to look for descriptions of this sort of society would have been in the *harmonian* writings of Charles Fourier. Fourier made a sort of end-run around moralist objections to the free play of desire, claiming that it would be an affront to the creator if, in a perfected creation, there was not a natural outlet for every basic impulse. And some of that approach arguably remains in Déjacque's work, where there is still a good deal of emphasis on a kind of natural *circulus*, by means of which *harmony* and *anarchy* are brought together as one. It is obviously important to ask ourselves how much of our failure to reach real harmony is simply a matter of poor social organization and to explore the relation between harmony, anarchy and desire. But speculation about "the nature of things" or judgments about what is or is not fair to a creator probably aren't the most fruitful avenues to pursue.

Let's instead focus for a moment on what it would mean for everyone to "do what they wish and only what they wish." Lifting that formula from a more-or-less "utopian" context means placing all that *wishing* back into ordinary social contexts, which inevitably involve constraints on desire. To "do what we wish" is not, in a practical context, to *do by wishing*, with no considerations of material limitations, but to choose from among the things that it is possible to do, given our own limitations and the constraints presented by our various contexts. Even the *onliest* egoist operates within a zone of influence determined by some mix of *milieu* and *might*. And when we consider things in those terms, we are, I think, forced to acknowledge that we might achieve a kind of *voluntary* society that was still very, very far from the harmonian and utopian visions of a Fourier or a Déjacque. But that hardly seems to be the only possibility, provided we do not settle on some approach that excludes *association* and the harnessing of *collective force*.

There is, after all, another vision, very different from that of the associationists and communists, emphasizing the voluntary association of autonomous individuals, which has some currency in anarchist circles and which, in its more extreme forms, really does resemble a kind of social *atomism*. I want to tackle the question of *individualism*, including those more atomistic extremes, in another set of posts. I'm inclined to think of some kind of anarchist individualism as fundamentally necessary to the synthetic approach that I'm pursuing, but much more as a *practice* imposed by our individual organization than as an ideology. There is no downplaying the importance of the self—the *unique* self—as a site of agency and responsibility, but also no avoiding the recognition that this *site* is elusive and unstable in a variety of ways.

My own conception of individuality, already a sort of synthesis of anarchistic influences, begins with the figure I've have described as the [Contr'un](#):

...the Whitmanesque subject who contains multitudes and is not contained between hat and boots, who spills out over all the property lines we might draw, at the same time drawing the world in without attempting to claim exclusive domain. It is the subject understood in its general economy. It is an individual characterized by an *antinomic* relationship with its own individuality, a counter-self, the one against the (absolutist) One. It is frustrating, messy (at least in the context of our attempts to draw clean boundaries, *improper* (in senses that draw out all the various connotations of the *proper*), and perhaps rather more *feminine* (in familiar, probably important, but also rightly contested terms) than we are accustomed to assume—and where the conventionally *masculine* elements don't seem in harmony with a *phallic* sort of identity. It is the form of the actors in a world where *solidarity means attack* (if I may be forgiven for that appropriation) at a more or less metaphysical level, where Universal Antagonism is the first fundamental law of the universe, but where the second is a kind of reciprocity that justifies that antagonism without seeking to destroy it.

But, for now, perhaps we can simply skip past any very precise description of the individual and focus on the most basic forms of *society*, as Proudhon understood and described them. Consider this summary of the “social system,” from *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*:

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

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

And then let's remember that, for Proudhon, all of these parties are contracting at their various levels, that each of them is at once an *individual* and a *group*, and that *reciprocity*—“the mutual penetration of antagonistic elements”—always involves some degree of interconnection among the contracting parties. All of that means that the individual human subject has a variety of interests, has some claim to a variety of capacities and is always already involved in associations that themselves either limit or expand the range of possibilities when it comes time to “do what they please and only what they please.”

Collective force is inescapably a part of any approach based on Proudhon's works. We simply never meet the isolated individual who then *makes connections* in the hope of extending their power to satisfy desire. Instead, even the simplest transaction, if undertaken with a consciousness of the complex interconnections Proudhon's account identifies, involves a *remaking* of connections. More than that, what makes connections powerful in Proudhon's view is not simple agreement, but a recognition that the “fundamental laws of the universe” begin with *universal antagonism* and that what increases the quantities of collective force *and the quantities of freedom* in a given association is increases in the complexity and intensity of *balanced* conflict.

The specific dynamics of collective force is another of those questions that I want to come back to, in the context of careful readings of the relevant texts. Here, it is once again largely a matter

of exploring the extent to which the “profusion and uncertainty” that I’ve associated with “positive anarchy” really is likely to be a *defining* aspect of the anarchy around which our “distinct, anarchy-centered anarchism” is likely to be constructed. It’s a question of deciding whether all of the talk about “lawless and unprincipled” anarchy and all of the play with the figure of Déjacque’s “bilge-rat” leads us to any practical conclusions. And, while I’ve undoubtedly made hard work of sifting through the various issues involved, I do feel like a phrase like “the maelstrom of desire” is not just edgy hyperbole, that the peculiar association of the *tourbillon* and *harmony* in Fourier’s writings remains more or less intact when we connect Proudhon’s account of the simplest sort of “social contract” with his theories of *collective force* and his definition of *reciprocity*.

We are not wrong to think of what comes rushing in when we scuttle the ship of state as *anarchy*, but neither are we wrong to identify that anarchy with the *maelstrom* and the *tourbillon*, or perhaps even to think of “the coming storm” as a constant part of the anarchy to come. And it would not be inconsistent with these other thoughts to think of the work required to expand our capacity for “doing what we want and only what we want” as a matter of organizing new and potentially more powerful kinds of whirlwinds and maelstroms.

That last thought might, at the very least, provoke some very different conversations about “anarchist organization.”

V.—ANARCHY: ACTION IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

These preliminary, exploratory writings are always half pleasure, half drudgery for me. You can have the right elements in hand and still require a lot of experimenting before they are anything like an elegant ensemble. With this series on “Defining Anarchy,” I’m conscious, not for the first time, that between the simplest and most abstract sorts of definitions and those that we might really apply in practical terms there are a variety of clarifications regarding present contexts and future possibilities that need to be made. And the more we expand the scope of our definition of anarchy beyond mere antistatism, the more of these clarifications are necessary, as it becomes necessary to shift from simply negative senses of the term to positive conceptions—and to think of some potentially difficult concepts (profusion and uncertainty, “lawlessness” and “lack of principles,” etc.) in their positive senses. Profusion is, of course, obviously positive in a material sense—involving great, perhaps overwhelmingly great quantities of something—even while it appears to us negative from the point of view of organizing and controlling things—but perhaps only because we cling to particular notions of organization. The practical task for anarchists is—returning to the metaphor we’ve borrowed from Joseph Déjacque—to both scuttle the existing mode of organization and learn to recognize the anarchy that pours in to replace it as a medium for radically forms of organization—all without kidding ourselves about the difficulties or the stakes involved. And maybe that is a little easier if we take hold of the kinds of analysis provided to us by figures like Fourier and Proudhon, which lead us to expect that increases in real freedom may involve more tempestuous forms of organization.

Coming to terms with uncertainty may be a bit more difficult, even if it is very much one of the things we most need to do in the context of our present crises.



Uncertainty is not a concept that is particularly prominent in anarchist theory—and certainly does not generally figure as a positive value or indicator. But when we suggest that what is *tempestuous* about anarchy is a lasting feature, then it is not a stretch to further suggest that one of the ways we will know that we are acting as anarchists is that our actions will be taken in the face of fundamental sort of uncertainty.

As soon as we abandon *legal and governmental order*—general prohibition *and* equivalent sorts of permission—uncertainty necessarily becomes a constant factor in our practices. So there is a new set of skills to be mastered, at which we might expect anarchists to eventually excel.

And perhaps we are occupying a historical moment in which the real value of mastering those skills is particularly apparent.



But, before we turn to the practical questions—like living in a social world reshaped by asymptomatic contagion—let’s spend a bit of time in that part of anarchist theory where the question of certainty does indeed play a prominent role. In his early works, Proudhon returned a number of times to the philosophical question of the *criterion of certainty* and made a critique of the notion the centerpiece of the second letter in *The Philosophy of Progress*. In the *Second Memoir on Property*, he introduced the concept in a biographical account of the origin of the *First Memoir*:

By taste as well as by discretion and lack of confidence in my powers, I was slowly pursuing some commonplace studies in philology, mingled with a little metaphysics, when I suddenly fell upon the greatest problem that ever has occupied philosophical minds: I mean the *criterion* of certainty.

Those of my readers who are unacquainted with the philosophical terminology will be glad to be told in a few words what this *criterion* is, which plays so great a part in my work.

The *criterion* of certainty, according to the philosophers, will be, when discovered, an infallible method of establishing the truth of an opinion, a judgment, a theory, or a system, in nearly the same way as gold is recognized by the touchstone, as iron approaches the magnet, or, better still, as we verify a mathematical operation by applying the *proof*.

He then goes on to explain how the question of the criterion of certainty drove the research that led to *What is Property?* But, in the end, he did not find the criterion. And the sense we get is that his use of the concept was ultimately negative, critiquing various proposed criteria used to prop up unjust social relations.

He then returned to the question a couple of years later, in *The Creation of Order in Humanity*. There, he included a section on the “Solution of the problem of certainty.” There, it was a

question of adapting Charles Fourier's theory of the *series*—and those not already initiated into the mysteries of that system may find the argument more than a bit obscure. But what is clear enough, without descending all the way down that particular rabbit hole, is that, looking for a *criterion*, Proudhon seems to be finding a *process* or *practice* by which he will account for elements that perhaps necessarily remain *uncertain* in at least some senses.

In *The Philosophy of Progress*, Proudhon assures us that:

the truth in all things, the real, the positive, the practicable, is what changes, or at least is susceptible to progression, conciliation, transformation; while the false, the fictive, the impossible, the abstract, is everything that presents itself as fixed, entire, complete, unalterable, unfailing, not susceptible to modification, conversion, augmentation or diminution, resistant as a consequence to all superior combination, to all synthesis.

There is a good deal to unpack in this claim. Proudhon, finally turning to elaborate his *constructive* program, has declared himself a partisan of *progress* and a relentless opponent of the *absolute*, with these two terms corresponding, on the one hand, to the fluid and at least potentially “true” and, on the other, to the (allegedly) fixed and false. So that:

the notion of Progress is provided to us immediately and before all experience, not what one calls a criterion, but, as Bossuet says, a favorable prejudice, by means of which it is possible to distinguish, in practice, that which it may be useful to undertake and pursue, from that which may become dangerous and deadly,—an important thing for the government of the State and of commerce.

And, to be clear, it is the shifting, progressive, that is “useful to undertake and pursue,” while all that makes a claim to an absolute, fixed character can be expected to “become dangerous and deadly.” So here we have the affirmation of a “favorable prejudice” in favor of all that we must consider, at least in an authoritarian context, *uncertain*. It is no surprise, then, to find Proudhon further claiming that “the criterion of certainty is an anti-philosophical idea borrowed from theology, the assumption of which is destructive of certainty itself” and proposing what is essentially a different kind of certainty: a *certainty without criterion*.

If you feel like we're back in the hold of the ship of state, drilling away at the hull and hoping for the *sea change* that will transform *going down with the ship* into something more liberating, I'm right there with you...

This *new certainty* and *uncertainty* seem, at least at present, rather hard to completely distinguish. But that's a “problem” that we can probably embrace, at least for now.

In *The Philosophy of Progress*, Proudhon sets up the project that he will pursue in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, where *justice* provides “a principle of guarantee for our ideas” and “a rule for our actions.” But justice is immanent and emerges from an ongoing process of balancing, a justification that is unlikely to ever be complete. Insisting that abandoning the absolutist conceptions of a criterion of certainty does not leave us unable to make useful general observations about the world, to elaborate “laws” speak usefully about tendencies—even to recognize what is *absolute* about the unfolding of material processes—he wants to distinguish

between the “certainty” of those mobile, developing truths he has affirmed and the impossibility of using them as a rule for conduct in the moment. “There is a certainty for the theory, but there is no criterion for practice”—which means, among other things, that the certainty of the theory is not necessarily accessible to us in the moment.

So, for example, when Proudhon talks about the opposition between progress and the absolute as “an infallible criterion” with regard to himself, perhaps it is not incidental to the passage that he chooses a thousand-year life as the life that readers might know on the basis of that criterion—or that, even then, this “infallible criterion” largely identifies him as “the man whose thought always advances, whose program will never be finished.”

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

There is indeed a truth here, but it is very different, I think, from a criterion by which actions might be judged and shaped in the moment.

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Let’s take a step back from Proudhon’s project, which at least allows us to connect this concern with uncertainty, even an embrace of the uncertain, with “classical” anarchist theory, and talk about more mundane things, like guiding our daily actions in the context of a global pandemic.

Particularly in the US, there are lots of aspects of the governmental and capitalistic responses to the threat of widespread contagion that have limited our options. Failed “relief” attempts—which have arguably just been successful capitalist wealth redistribution—have imposed all sorts of costs on cautious action that might easily have been avoided had the same resources been applied where they were needed most. But the corruption and ineptitude simply amplified what is arguably the single greatest difficulty associated with Covid-19: our uncertainty about so many aspects of its spread.

It is really astonishing how many questions still remain about very basic issues like the persistence of contamination on surfaces and within the last week we’ve seen the WHO appear entirely uncertain about the threat of asymptomatic and presymptomatic transmission. We remain uncertain about even precisely what kind of illness it is, with reported symptoms now covering a

really remarkable gamut. Media coverage of all of these questions has been occasionally deep, generally unfocused and often unhelpful, so that, for example, we know enough to know that viral load and viral shedding in the early stages of infection are issues that we should be have answers about, but very little idea if the answers are out there or what they might be.

Still, even if the reporting was clearer and the urgency of things not amplified by governmental mismanagement, we would almost certainly be facing a situation largely defined by what we do not and cannot know. And that, it appears, is a situation we really, really do not want to be in.

The various responses to the snowballing crisis are all, in their way, quite interesting, as are the responses that we might have expected, but haven't yet seen. The other day, after spending some time trying to get very basic suggestions about handling face coverings, I observed that:

if ours wasn't a fundamentally failed society we would already have whole genre of articles on how often the dapper man-about-town washes his designer face masks, how many he packs for a weekend business trip, what clever luggage accessories he uses to keep his supply both clean and at the ready, etc.

Instead, we seem to have a lot of indications that US political culture has, in general, nearly exhausted its capacity to respond to crisis in anything but the most cartoonish ways. Think, for example, about the "right to reopen" protests, which look like nothing more or less than "open carry" demonstrations for possible contagion. *Privilege* is a word that has perhaps suffered from too widespread application at times, but I have trouble thinking of the claimed "right" to simply ignore the possible consequences of inadvertent disease transmission in any other terms (with or without the martial posturing.) Having seen rote protests of "government overreach" turn almost immediately into protests of government restraint as soon as the new round of BLM protests erupted couldn't have been any less surprising. And nothing about the old politicians somehow imagining the problem at the moment was lack of police funding was surprising, except perhaps the fact that they didn't have the sense to keep that thought to themselves, at least for a little while.

There are certainly hopeful flashes of energy and light from various quarters, particularly where the protests and occupations have passed through their own fairly rote phases and participants are learning to occupy and make use of the comparatively novel social spaces that have emerged. And I'm in no hurry to see those spaces closed or to witness the postmortems that will inevitably follow. I hope the impulse to drag things out and drag things into the open will continue to prevail for a good long time, with or without help and encouragement from the anarchist milieus.

But I can't help feeling that, alongside all the other things that are happening in this particular moment, there is a particularly anarchistic opening, of a sort that perhaps we are not well prepared to grasp as our own. The mixture of urgency and uncertainty we feel as pandemic precautions have become the factor organizing so much of our social existence, in a context where conventional political responses are so plainly inadequate, is a real taste, not just of the anarchic, but of a rather profound sort of anarchy, which we might associate with conditions a few steps "after the revolution" (with all due reservations about the *r-word*.) It is an experience of anarchy without liberation, as the whole stupid apparatus of authority continues to do its best to grind us down, but still...

Action in the face of a critical sort of uncertainty, under conditions where the whole apparatus of laws and rights struggles to find a purchase on acts with no very clear consequences, at a moment when the regime of authority is clearly showing strain at the seams — this is almost certainly no one’s idea of “the revolution,” but it may be as close as we are likely to come, for now, to being in the shoes of Déjacque’s *bilge-rat*, finally drilling through that hull and being fairly certain that the *anarchy* pouring in is not actually drowning us.

And perhaps that is all still rather vague, but one explanation would be that a genuinely anarchy-centered anarchism is not something we have had a lot of practice recognizing “in the wild.”



<https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/workshops/workshop-constructing-anarchisms/>