

# CONSTRUCTING ANARCHISMS: A WORKSHOP

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## WEEK TWO READINGS

### Constructing an Anarchism: Approaching An-Archy

*What is anarchy?* This is a question that I have returned to repeatedly, a bit obsessively, with different results each time. I have come to the conclusion that *anarchy* is what we might call a *still-emerging concept*. At times it strikes me as almost shockingly *self-evident*, bold and bare like the lovers in some one of a thousand anarcho-naturist poems—or sometimes maybe just bold:

“What are you rebelling against, Johnny?”  
“Whaddaya got?”

At others, the *anarchy of available anarchies* makes me wonder if I’ll ever really get more than glimpses of this *beautiful idea*.

Think of these two responses as poles in what may, at least for now, be a kind of necessary oscillation in our encounter with *anarchy*. We’re at the stage of confronting ourselves with the fact—what seems to be a fact, at least—that some of our most important concepts continue to elude us, both individually and collectively. And we’re faced with the sheer volume of anarchist history and tradition that cannot help but complicate matters for us. But the basic premise of this whole experiment is that, while the complications are real, they are very far from insurmountable and, with a bit of care, we can probably position ourselves in relation to all that complexity in a way that is not just surmountable, but perhaps is even advantageous.

We’ve already assembled some of what we need to engage with *anarchy* in all of its, y’know, *anarchy*. Paying attention to questions of sphere and scope of application—just not trying to use anarchy to answer questions or solve problems that don’t relate—will help us a lot. Being clear with ourselves and with one another about the specific realms to which we think anarchy most pertains will help as well. As someone already long accustomed to wrestling with these questions, it feels quite natural for me to be constantly shifting focus, talking about history at one moment and etymology at the next, shifting from the concerns of the very first conscious anarchists to those of my friends in various modern milieus—trying to balance the need for clarity and the fact that, in the end, *I’m really in it for the anarchy*. In this context, I am really trying to strike a useful balance, but there are going to be times when perhaps we should have a scrolling banner of the “PLEASE DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME” variety somewhere on the site.

*But you should almost certainly try this at home*—or something like it—but just do it in your own way with the tools you can bring to the task in the present.

The fact that *anarchy* is just *anarchy*, just right there, out there, taunting us with that “whaddaya got?” is probably the reason that we continue to talk about it, why people who pretty obviously want rather *archic* things want to talk about it, instead of falling back on some other language, some other rhetorical strategy. Whenever people talk about “rebranding” anarchism, I can’t help but laugh—because, whatever else anarchists may have got wrong over the years, the “brand” has served us well in a variety of ways. But there is no escaping the fact that the language of *anarchy* has been and remains a *provocation*, perhaps because it couldn’t be anything else in the circumstances, and that building with a provocation as foundation is likely to produce complicated results.

So let’s not try to escape those facts—and see if there are some other difficulties that we *can* escape.

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We’re stretching out the opening a bit at this point, for a variety of reasons. I haven’t been quite sure if enough of us were on one page to move forward. I’ve been doing what I can in various forums to fix that. I decided I wanted to share a French essay from the 70s—next week—and then realized how much of it was still untranslated. And the good folks at the [Anews Podcast](#) spent some time this week responding to the project—which, frankly, just put me in the mood to chat back a bit in the general direction of distant friends.

But it’s time to start my own work of construction, starting with some conception of anarchy that doesn’t consist of more-or-less erudite free association.

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It’s time to *build*.

But we never really get to build *from scratch*.

To make these concepts « our own » is inevitably to enter into some kind of relationship with existing bodies of thought and those who share an interest in them. And perhaps that relationship is ultimately one of *sharing*—but it is very difficult to start there.

There’s a work that almost certainly comes first, which arguably calls on us to channel our Inner Stirner, look at the available material in “the anarchist tradition” and see, at least for a time, « my food ». There’s no real harm done if we just tear off whatever chunks seems useful. Ideas are rivalrous in other ways. But there’s something to be said for being quite conscious about our *appropriations*, looking at anarchism from the outside, extricating first ourselves and then perhaps too-familiar ideas from familiar frameworks.

The problem of establishing a useful perspective will be different for each of us. Some of us will struggle to find a space outside of our anarchist beliefs from which we can still maintain a useful perspective. Some of us will perhaps have to begin by clarifying what we think *anarchism* is before we can meaningfully confront the tradition as a resource. That’s one of the reasons for the long wind-up. For the moment, it’s mostly just us and a couple of questions:

What is *anarchy*?  
What is *anarchism*?

But now I'm going to start coming at you with *answers*, of a sort, which it will be necessary to treat as a kind of creative work—examples of answers, being precisely *exemplary* (in a modest sense), rather than *definitive*. That distinction is obviously easiest to maintain if it is indeed a question of multiple examples, which is why we will regularly pair a new conceptualization with some of my past writings on the same topic.

Approaching the concept of *An-Archy*, we've already introduced the texts from the "Defining Anarchy" series. This week, I want to present two more attempts to define or conceptualize *anarchy* for your consideration. They both deal with the complicated question of what Proudhon meant when we wrote about *anarchy*. The first, "[Anarchy, Understood in All its Senses](#)," deals with a bizarre set of interpretive problems introduced into the English translation of *Idée générale de la révolution au XIXe siècle*, when the translator attempted to clarify the text by translating many of the appearances of the word *anarchie* with English words that were not *anarchy*. This might not have been a problem, except that Proudhon had himself suggested twice in the text that the various senses of the term were in some sense interchangeable. For example:

The first term of the series being thus Absolutism, the final, fateful term is *Anarchy*, understood in all the senses.

The problem posed by the diversity of those senses is one that I want to return to in next week's post, but you can read a partial exploration in the second reading, "[Anarchy: Historical, Abstract and Resultant](#)." This attempt to distinguish three types of *anarchy* that seem to appear in Proudhon's work really aimed to address a different problem in Proudhon scholarship, concerning his alleged shift away from anarchist ideas in his later works, but should be read here primarily as an example of the clarifying process.

Returning to the warring visions of anarchy with which I began this post, we might think of the first of these readings as dealing with an *anarchy* that at least Proudhon thought shown through in some relatively uniform way despite significant differences in the uses of the term, while the second demonstrates some of the real diversity in the possible definitions of *anarchy*. And we'll see if the two sets of insights can be combined in next's weeks conceptualization of the concept.

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That just leaves one reading for the week: Ricardo Mella's "The Bankruptcy of Beliefs" and its sequel, "The Rising Anarchism." Mella was a Spanish collectivist anarchist and one of the thinkers associated with the idea of *anarquismo sin adjetivos*. He was a talented and prolific writer whose works are marked by a fairly constant concern that the anarchic heart of anarchist thought should be maintained. He was hard on all *isms*, tracing an apparently inevitable trajectory from enthusiasm to dogma to "dreadful questioning:"

The enthusiasm of the neophyte, the healthy and crazy enthusiasm, forges new doctrines and the doctrines forge new beliefs. It desires something better, pursues the ideal, seeks noble and lofty employment of its activities, and barely makes a slight examination, if it finds the note that

resonates harmoniously in our understanding and in our heart. It believes. Belief then pulls us along completely, directs and governs our entire existence, and absorbs all our faculties. In no other way could sects and schools of thought, like churches, small or large, rise powerfully everywhere. Belief has its altars, its worship and its faithful, as faith had.

But there is a fateful, inevitable hour of dreadful questioning. And this luminous hour is one in which mature reflection asks itself the reason for its beliefs and its ideological loves.

And, as the first essay draws to a close we find that *anarchism* is apparently not immune to this tendency to bankruptcy. But the sequel, if less poetic and moving, is useful in its measured thoughts about what might keep an anarchism *in the black*. It is also an early example of an argument for *anarchist synthesis*, but one perhaps more radical, or at least more compellingly presented, than that of Voline.

If individuals or groups are looking for a text to read closely or to discuss, I think it would be hard to find one that draws together so many of the concerns we have begun to address. And, as it is a particular favorite of mine, it seems likely that I will return to it again.

## Anarchy, Understood in All its Senses

[From *Contr'un*, June 30, 2013]

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

In order to start to address the question posed in [the last post](#), about what Proudhon meant when he said “*I am an anarchist*,” we need to grapple a bit with the thorny question of how consistently he used his various keywords. One of the traditional methods of dealing with the complexities of Proudhon’s arguments, including those terminological issues, has been to wave our hands and recall that he was a “man of contradictions,” as if *contradiction* wasn’t very explicitly a part of his theoretical apparatus, about which he had a lot of fairly specific things to say. I think we can come to considerably clearer terms with Proudhon’s method. He left us quite a few explicit guides. In “[Self-Government and the Citizen-State](#),” I made extensive use a distinction Proudhon made in his correspondence between *critical* and *constructive* periods. Let’s explicitly add that distinction to the “toolkit” here, and explore some of the ways that it relates to some other concerns regarding the interpretation of Proudhon’s work.

I have long emphasized the importance of the shift in Proudhon’s use of keywords, marked explicitly in *The Philosophy of Progress*, when he opts to “preserve for new institutions their patronymic names.” Early on, Proudhon had mocked Pierre Leroux for believing that “there is property and property,—the one good, the other bad” and insisted that “it is proper to call different things by different names.” Hence the “property” vs. “possession” distinction. But he was, at the same time, already beginning to insist on a progressive account of some of his most important keywords—*justice* chief among them—which showed them progressing through radically different stages. Justice, for example, started its journey to more humane forms from beginnings in *force* and *fraud*. Harmonizing his choice and use of terms with his emphasis on *progress* was a critical moment in Proudhon’s development, and also, of course, a real stumbling block in understanding that development if we do not take careful account of it. It doesn’t explain *everything*, as sometimes it seems Proudhon was simply inconsistent in his choice of words, or tailored his expression to particular audiences, but it does give us another tool to attempt to resolve what may seem like real contradictions in his work (as opposed to productive or provocative *antinomies*.) The explicit change in approach to keywords occurs roughly at the watershed between *critical* and *constructive* periods. And it is probably simplest to think of that period in the early 1850s precisely as a kind of *watershed*, where the predominance of approaches shifted from criticism to construction. Prior to it, we are *more likely* to see Proudhon’s critical project at center stage, and afterwards, we are *more likely* to see some of his experimental constructions. The work has a tendency, if you will, to *flow* in one direction or the other, despite a mixture of emphases at most points in Proudhon’s career.

*The Philosophy of Progress* also provides us with two accounts of truth, which we might distinguish as *critical* and *constructive*. In the first, “the truth in all things, the real, the positive, the practicable, is what changes, or at least is susceptible to progression, conciliation, transformation; while the false, the fictive, the impossible, the abstract, is everything that presents itself as fixed, entire, complete, unalterable, unailing, not susceptible to modification,

conversion, augmentation or diminution, resistant as a consequence to all superior combination, to all synthesis.” In the second, “All ideas are false, that is to say contradictory and irrational, if one takes them in an exclusive and absolute sense, or if one allows oneself to be carried away by that sense; all are true, susceptible to realization and use, if one takes them together with others, or in evolution.” Together, they correspond to the two phases of the program that Proudhon presented in the “Study on Ideas” in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*:

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

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

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

I want to approach these questions by first giving Proudhon the benefit of the doubt. He was the guy we credit with first claiming the term, so let’s be fairly careful before we decide we can

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

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

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

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

There are, it seems to me, a lot of ways for ideas to fall short of *truth* in Proudhon's terms, and only approximate means, in combination with other aspiring *true ideas*, to approach it. Can

*anarchy, anarchism, anarchist, etc.*, be exempt from this general rule? If not, then the treatment of anarchy as a perpetual desideratum is probably no objection to treating the later Proudhon as an *anarchist* after all, at least by the terms he established in the period where we are focusing our attention. That would leave open the question of whether the early notion of anarchy as self-government could be understood in some other terms, consistent with the work of an early-period Proudhon who had a different idea of how ideas and ideologies might work.

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

If we can make sense of the various senses of “anarchy” with the help of Proudhon’s statements about philosophy and method, then we need to sort them out in those terms. It’s not, I think, too hard to accept that “self-government” might involve a series of progressive approximations, or to understand Proudhon’s “perpetual desideratum” in much the same sense as William Batchelder Greene’s “blazing star” or my own “ungovernable ideal.” It’s a little harder to know quite what to do with *ideals* in Proudhon’s thought. In the context of his treatment of *metaphysics* (in the opening sections of *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*), we probably have to treat any “anarchist ideal” as an unavoidable but unscientific speculation about the *in-itself* of anarchy or a reflection of our sense that we are *not there yet*, but not ultimately the sort of engagement with *relations* that Proudhon was concerned with. We probably don’t have to take on all of Proudhon’s quasi-comtean positivism to see some value in emphasizing anarchy in the context of specific, individual interactions.

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



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

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

Given everything else he has said about the various forms of *anarchy*, it’s pretty hard to imagine this means Proudhon was indifferent to the differences between them. But it does appear that he considered *anarchy* as an appropriate label for a variety of tendencies associated with the decline of government. One of those tendencies was obviously “the system of ’89 and ’93; the system of Quesnay, of Turgot, of J.-B. Say; the system that is always professed, with more or less intelligence and good faith, by the various organs of the political parties,” which he invoked in the 1848 “Revolutionary Program,” and characterized as:

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

But is *that* “the last word of civilization, and of right as well”? Was Proudhon really saying that there was no difference between himself and the economists with whom he had certainly expressed no shortage of differences? The continuation of the argument, in which he first seems to describe market anarchy and then explains how it will result in something that sounds more than a bit like anarchist communism, is a little hard to parse, but it appears that, however anarchic market forces may be and however non-governmental the resulting economic centralization may be, something else is required to maintain what I think most of us mean when we think of the outcomes of *anarchism*, and that missing element seems to be justice, a balancing of the forces of property and community—and suddenly we find ourselves facing what seems to be just one more of a series of formulas involving the balancing or synthesis of very similar elements, spanning Proudhon’s entire career. So what are we to make of this *economic anarchy*, which seems to be an anti-governmental force, but does not seem to be quite what Proudhon is aiming for? It seems to me that we have located a prime candidate for the category of *absolutist anarchies*. A range of more provocative questions are then raised, including, just as a start:

- Is there then a sort of *anarchism* that we might associate with this market anarchy, and, if so, is it perhaps a sort of *absolutist anarchism*? The answer, I think, from the Proudhonian perspective, will depend *on the extent* to which we think an aura of *authority* stills clings to notions like *property* and market.
- Assuming that *anarchy*, in this more general sense, can be rid of its absolutism, and that it makes sense to call oneself an *anarchist* as a means of signaling a commitment to both non-governmentalism and anti-absolutism, how would we construct the larger system within which that form of anarchism would steadily increase in *truth*?
- What role can we expect all the complicated and complicating collective individuals that people the Proudhonian landscape to play in all of this? I began to speculate, for example, on how “the market” might take its place alongside the citizen-state, in the “Notes on

Proudhon's changing notion of the State," and the "Notes on the Notes" that followed. I'll undoubtedly have to come back to some of those speculations.

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

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

## **Anarchy: Historical, Abstract and Resultant**

What follows is a look at three possible senses of *anarchy* related to Proudhon's work, together with a sketch of their possible relations as developments from one another. The intention here is to simply present some basic definitions as a kind of hypothetical framework, which can then be tested against close readings of the relevant texts.

**Historical anarchy:** In a society organized around the principle of *authority*, resistance appears as *anarchy*, whether it is the active resistance of those oppressed or simply the friction generated by the contradictions of an authority-based society. This is the sense that Proudhon most frequently gave to the term, drawing on existing usage, to describe various tendencies within existing societies: the violence emerging from political conflict, the "anarchy of the market," etc.

**Abstract anarchy:** The various manifestations of historical anarchy then suggest, however dimly at times, a general *principle* or social form, which unites them. In *The Federative Principle*, Proudhon gives us *anarchy* conceived as one of four *a priori* forms of government. These forms emerge "necessarily" and "mathematically" from the logical consideration of government and can be characterized through the consideration of two factors: the opposition of the principles of authority and liberty (understood in part as the opposition between division and non-division of power), and the symmetry or asymmetry of the rulers and the ruled. *Anarchy*, or *self-government*, is characterized by division of power and symmetry between the rulers and the ruled. It is the "government of each by each."

In that text, however, we are presented with this abstract *anarchy*, only to have it rejected as "an empirical creation, a preliminary sketch, more or less useful, under which society finds shelter for a moment, and which, like the Arab's tent, is folded up the morning after it has been erected." The obviousness of the forms is a "snare," as none of those that first present themselves through logical analysis are ultimately practicable.

Just as monarchy and communism, founded in nature and reason, have their legitimacy and morality, though they can never be realized as absolutely pure types, so too democracy and anarchy, founded in liberty and justice, pursuing an ideal in accordance with their principle, have their legitimacy and morality. But we shall see that in their case too, despite their rational and juridical origin, they cannot remain strictly congruent with their pure concepts as their population and territory develop and grow, and that they are fated to remain perpetual *desiderata*. Despite the powerful appeal of liberty, neither democracy nor anarchy has arisen anywhere, in a complete and uncompromised form.

This appears, then, to be a decisive rejection of *anarchy* as a guiding notion. In its place Proudhon presents *federation*, the only system that he believes can truly fulfill the role of "all political constitutions, all systems of government," which is "*the balancing of authority by liberty*, and vice versa."

The question is whether this appearance is deceiving. There are quite a number of additional questions raised, but perhaps we can start here:

- *Did Proudhon stop being an anarchist, did he discover he had never been an anarchist or is there some sense in which his rejection of this abstract notion of anarchy still leaves open the possibility of another anarchy, and thus another way of being an anarchist?*

If we choose the first interpretation, then presumably we believe that the abstract anarchy of *The Federative Principle* was the same anarchy that Proudhon embraced as a positive goal, but that developments in his thought—perhaps the discovery in the 1850s that “the antinomy does not resolve itself”—led him to abandon that position.

The second interpretation seems a natural choice if we once again identify the abstract anarchy of the later works with the anarchy of the early works, but then recognize that this form of *self-government* could not remain “strictly congruent” with its “pure concept” in any analysis involving *collective force* and *unity-collectivities*, making it inadequate even in the earliest works, where at least the basic analysis of collective force was already at work.

The third interpretation requires that we recognize multiple senses of anarchy in Proudhon’s work—which we can certainly do given his explicit recognition of multiple senses in *The General Idea of the Revolution*—but also that we find a way of thinking about *federation* as not simply a replacement for an impracticable sort of anarchy, but as the key to some other form.

Each approach has consequences.

The first presumably preserves Proudhon within the anarchist tradition as a kind of early adopter or precursor, but then draws some kind of line between his mature work and *anarchism*. That then leaves us to ask what sort of *anarchy* was adopted by the anarchist movement as it emerged after Proudhon’s death—a question complicated by the fact that some of Proudhon’s late works, such as *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, were particularly influential in the period of the International and works like *The Federative Principle* seem influential in the present. If we think of Proudhon as an *early adopter* of an abstract anarchy later embraced by the explicit proponents of anarchism, then we are faced with the question of how we respond to Proudhon’s claim that such a notion is at best only approximately applicable to practice. The problem of collective force seems difficult to overcome, so we presumably forced to choose between the concept behind Proudhon’s declaration that “I am an anarchist” and the theory behind his claim that “property is theft.” If, instead, we think of him as a mere *precursor*, then we are left to determine just how the anarchy that emerged in later years differed from Proudhon’s conception and how it escapes his critique.

At this point, it is tempting to simply note that there is a great deal of discontinuity in the early anarchist tradition and a certain amount of opportunism when it comes to the use of Proudhon’s work in later anarchist thought. But the theoretical questions still remain, if we want to attempt to establish continuity in the tradition. I am not entirely opposed to the project of attempting to understand Proudhon’s mature work as something other than *anarchism* in the received sense—if *that is the only way to move forward with a serious discussion of Proudhon’s mature work*—but I think other options still remain.

The second choice forces us to confront the possibility that adopting the language of anarchy was something of a wrong turn for those who took up Proudhon's project, with whatever degree of fidelity. That opens a lot of potentially interesting paths of inquiry, from an examination of "libertarian socialism" as an already existing alternative (in the works of writers like Gaston Leval) to the exploration of possible alternate histories (such as my still largely nascent musing about *atercracy*, *art-liberty*, etc.) But while I am attracted to these research possibilities as ways of illuminating aspects of the anarchist tradition, I'm still basically convinced that:

1. Anarchy is a fundamentally useful concept, which nothing else can really replace.
2. Proudhon's social science is a powerful set of tools, which we have barely begun to understand and use.
3. We don't have to sacrifice one to the other.

That forces us to return to the analysis in *The Federative Principle* and ask ourselves if the movement from abstract anarchy to federation is perhaps not a break, but yet another development? The "pure concept" of *self-government* seems to fail when it encounters the effects of collective force. If we attempt to envision that "government of each by each" in practice, with even the most basic elements of Proudhon's social science intact, we must account for the reality and even the "rights" of social "unity-collectivities." And it becomes nearly impossible to address the question of just who or what will take the role of "each" without noticing that some of the possibilities might also answer to "all," at least in some contexts. But if we are committed to the analysis that began with "property is theft," then this is precisely what we should expect and, as complicated as the next steps promise to be, confronting them is no setback.

It's important, I think, to treat the analysis in *The Federative Principle* as both *advanced*, in terms of Proudhon's theoretical development, and a bit *compressed*. What seems to have stuck with us is the *a priori* principles, when the lesson of the texts seems to be precisely that *we cannot simply stop there*, given the potential disconnections between their "mathematical" and "necessary" nature and the "infinitely flexible" nature of politics as an "applied art." Rigorous logical analysis is essential, but it appears that it also has its perilous side, if we do not follow through. As Proudhon said:

Logic and ingenuousness are primordial in politics: and that is exactly where the trap lies.

The third choice seems to be to follow Proudhon from *abstract anarchy*, through the difficulties and antinomies associated with its application, to *federation*—and then to ask ourselves if there is another kind of positive, practical anarchy that emerges in this new context, not simply as a kind of political *autarky* or as a *negative ideal*, but as the result—or *resultant*—of "*the balancing of authority by liberty*, and vice versa."

**Resultant anarchy:** Let us simply propose a third general variety of *anarchy*, which does not arise directly from the application of a simple principle to a simple society full of simple, individual subjects, but emerges from the balancing of social forces, norms and institutions. And let's borrow from Proudhon a word that he was fond of using in his later works: *resultant* (*résultante*). According to the *OED*, a resultant is "the vector which is the sum of two or more given vectors" or "the force that is equivalent to two or more forces acting at the same point," as well as simply "the product or outcome of something." So let us then say that we approach this

other sort of *anarchy* as the sum of the various social forces in play (understood as vectors) approaches zero. And let us raise the possibility that we might speak of *quantities* or *degrees* of anarchy based on the intensity of the forces held in balance.

This third definition is presented here merely as a sort of hypothesis, a direction that subsequent research might pursue, as well as a potential escape from at least some of the difficulties that have emerged as we examined the first two. For those who might want to pursue the line of inquiry on their own, I can suggest that the most promising line of research seems to run from the 1840 discussion of “liberty” as a “third social form” and “synthesis of community and property,” through the study on liberty in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* and then on into the works of the 1860s.

## THE BANKRUPTCY OF BELIEFS

To my brother J. Prat:

Faith has had its moment; it has also had its noisy bankruptcy. There is nothing left standing at this hour but the lonely ruins of its altars.

Ask the learned people—or those who still wear the intellectual loincloth—and if they wish to answer you conscientiously, they will tell you that faith has died forever: political faith and religious faith, and the scientific faith that has defrauded so many hopes.

When all the past was dead, gazes turned longingly toward the rising sun. Then the sciences had their triumphal hymns. And it came to pass that the multitude was given new idols, and now the eminent representatives of the new beliefs preach right and left the sublime virtues of the dogmatic scientist. The dangerous logorrhea of flattering adjectives, and the never-ending chatter of the sham sages put us on the path to what is rightly proclaimed the bankruptcy of science.

Actually, it is not science that is bankrupt in our day. There is no science; there are sciences. There are no finished things; there are things in perpetual formation. And what does not exist cannot break. If it were still claimed that that which is in constant elaboration, that which constitutes or will constitute the flow of knowledge goes bankrupt in our time, it would only demonstrate that those who said it sought something in the sciences what they cannot give us. It is not the human task of investigating and knowing that fails; what fails, as faith failed in the past, is the sciences.

The ease of creating without examination or mature deliberation, coupled with the general poverty of culture, has resulted in theological faith being succeeded by philosophical faith and later scientific faith. Thus, religious and political fanatics are followed by the believers in a multitude of “isms,” which, if fertilized by the greatest wealth of our understanding, only confirm the atavistic tendencies of the human spirit.

But what is the meaning of the clamoring that arises at every step in the bosom of parties, schools and doctrines? What is this unceasing battle between the catechumens of the same church? It means, simply, that beliefs fail.

The enthusiasm of the neophyte, the healthy and crazy enthusiasm, forges new doctrines and the doctrines forge new beliefs. It desires something better, pursues the ideal, seeks noble and lofty employment of its activities, and barely makes a slight examination, if it finds the note that resonates harmoniously in our understanding and in our heart. It believes. Belief then pulls us along completely, directs and governs our entire existence, and absorbs all our faculties. In no other way could sects and schools of thought, like churches, small or large, rise powerfully everywhere. Belief has its altars, its worship and its faithful, as faith had.

But there is a fateful, inevitable, hour of dreadful questioning. And this luminous hour is one in which mature reflection asks itself the reason for its beliefs and its ideological loves.

Then the ideal word, which was something like the nebula of a God on whose altar we burned the incense of our enthusiasm, totters. Many things crumble within us. We vacillate as a building whose foundations are weakening. We are upset about party and opinion commitments, just as if our own beliefs were to become unbearable. We believed in man, and we no longer believe. We roundly affirmed the magical virtue of certain ideas, and we do not dare to affirm it. We enjoyed the ardor of an immediate positive regeneration, and we no longer enjoy it. We are afraid of ourselves. What prodigious effort of will is required not to fall into the most appalling emptiness of ideas and feelings!

There goes the crowd, drawn by the verbosity of those who carry nothing inside and by the blindness of those who are full of great and incontestable truths. There goes the multitude, lending with its unconscious action, the appearance life to a corpse whose burial only awaits the strong will of a genius intelligence, who will strip off the blindfold of the new faith.

But the man who thinks, the man who meditates on his opinions and actions in the silent solitude that leads him to the insufficiency of beliefs, sketches the beginning of the great catastrophe, feels the bankruptcy of everything that keeps humanity on a war footing and is aware of the rebuilding of his spirit.

The noisy polemic of parties, the daily battles of selfishness, bitterness, hatred and envy, of vanity and ambition, of the small and great miseries that grip the social body from top to bottom, mean nothing but that beliefs go bankrupt everywhere.

Soon, and perhaps even now, if we delved into the consciences of believers, of all believers, we would find nothing but doubts and questions. All men of good will soon confess their uncertainties. Only the closed-minded belief will be affirmed by those who hope to gain some profit, just as the priests of religions and the augurs of politics continue to sing the praises of the faith that feeds them even after its death.

So, then, is humanity is going to rush into the abyss of ultimate negation, the negation of itself?

Let us not think like the old believers, who cry before the idol that collapses. Humanity will do nothing but break one more link of the chain that imprisons it. The noise matters little. Anyone who does not feel the courage to calmly witness the collapse, will do well to retire. There is always charity for the invalids.

We believed that ideas had the sovereign virtue of regenerating us, and now we find ourselves with ideas that do not carry within themselves elements of purity, justification and truthfulness, and cannot borrow them from any ideal. Under the passing influence of a virgin enthusiasm, we seem renewed, but at last the environment regains its empire. Humanity is not made up of heroes and geniuses, and so even the purest sink, at last, into the filth of all the petty passions. The time when beliefs are broken is also the time when all the fraudsters are known.

Are we in an iron ring? Beyond all the hecatombs life springs anew. If things do not change according to our particular theses, if they do not occur as we expect them to occur, this does not give in to the negation of the reality of realities. Outside of our pretensions as believers, the modification persists, the continuous change is accomplished and everything evolves: means,



men and things. How? In what direction? Ah! That is precisely what is left at the mercy of the unconsciousness of the multitudes; that is what, in the end, is decided by an element alien to the work of the understanding and the sciences: force.

After all the propaganda, all the lessons, all the progress, humanity does not have, it does not wish to have any creed but violence. Right? Is this wrong?

And it is force that we accept the things as they are and that, accepting them, our spirit does not weaken. At a critical moment, when everything collapses in us and around us; when we grasp that we are neither better nor worse than others; when we are convinced that the future is not contained in any formulas that are still dear to us, that the species will never conform to the mold of a given form of association, whether it may be called; when we finally assure ourselves that we have done nothing more than forge new chains, gilded with beloved names,—in that decisive moment we must break up all the rubbish of belief, that we cut all the fastenings and we revive personal independence more confidently than ever.

If a vigorous individuality is stirred within us, we will not morally die at the hands of the intellectual vacuum. For man, there is always a categorical affirmation, the “becoming,” the beyond that is constantly reflected and after which it is, however, necessary to run. Let’s run faster when the bankruptcy of beliefs is done.

What does it matter that the goal will eternally move away from us? Men who fight, even in this belief, are those who are needed; not those who find elements of personal enrichment in everything; not those who make of the interests of the party pennant connections for the satisfaction of their ambitions; not those who, positioned to monopolize for their own advantage, monopolize even feelings and ideas.

Even among men of healthier aspirations, selfishness, vanity, foolish petulance, and low ambition take center stage. Even in the parties of more generous ideas there is the leaven of slavery and exploitation. Even in the circle of the noblest ideals, charlatanism and vanity teem; fanaticism, soon intransigence toward the friend, sooner cowardice toward the enemy; fatuity that rises up swaggering, shielded by the general ignorance. Everywhere, weeds sprout and grow. Let’s not live delusions.

Shall we allow ourselves to be crushed by the grief of all the atavisms that revive, with sonorous names, in us and around us?

Standing firm, firmer than ever, looking beyond any formula whatsoever, will reveal the true fighter, the revolutionary yesterday, today and tomorrow. Without a hero’s daring, it is necessary to pass undaunted through the flames that consume the bulk of time, to take a risk among the creaking timbers, the roofs that sink, the walls that collapse. And when there is nothing left but ashes, rubble, shapeless debris that will have crushed the weeds, nothing will not be left for those who come after but one simple work: to sweep the floor of the lifeless obstacles.

If the collapse of faith has allowed the growth of belief in the fertile field of the human being, and if belief, in turn, falters and bows withered to the earth, we sing the bankruptcy of belief, because it is a new step on the path of individual freedom.

If there are ideas, however advanced, that have bound us in the stocks of doctrinarism, let us smash them. A supreme ideality for the mind, a welcome satisfaction for the spirit disdainful of human pettiness, a powerful force for creative activity, putting thought into the future and the heart into the common welfare, will always remain standing, even after the bankruptcy of all beliefs.

At the moment, even if the mind is frightened, even if all the pigeonholes rebel, in many minds something stirs that is incomprehensible to the dying world: beyond ANARCHY there is also a sun that is born, as in the succession of time there is no sunset without sunrise.

### **THE RISING ANARCHISM**

Sequels are never good. But dear friends who, judging the first installment good, decided to publish it as a pamphlet, ask me to expand the material a few more pages, and I cannot and do not wish to refuse.

I wrote "The Bankruptcy of Beliefs" in a painful moment, impressed by the collapse of something that lives in illusion, but not in reality, which sometimes plays with ideas and with affections, to torment us with our own impotence and our avowed errors.

The truth does not give way before ideological conventions, and those of us who profess to worship it, must not, even through feelings of solidarity, much less through party spirit, sacrifice even the smallest portion of what we understand to be above all doctrines.

Whoever has followed the gradual development of revolutionary ideas, and of anarchism above all, will have seen that in the course of time certain principles began to crystallize in minds as infallible conditions of absolute truth. They will have seen how small dogmas have been elaborated and how, through the influence of a strange mysticism, narrow creeds were finally asserted, claiming nothing less than the possession of the whole truth, truth for today and tomorrow, truth for always. And they will have seen how, after our metaphysical drifts, we have been left with words and names, but completely bereft of ideas. To the worship of truth was succeeded by the idolization of sonorous nomenclature, the magic of sensationalism, almost a faith in the fortuitous combination of letters.

It is the evolutionary process of all beliefs. Anarchism, which was born as a critique, is transformed into an affirmation that borders on dogma and sect. Believers, fanatics and followers of men arise. And there are also the theorists who make of ANARCHY an individualistic or socialist, collectivist or communist, atheistic or materialistic creed, of this or that philosophical school. Finally, in the heart of Anarchism, particularisms are born regarding life, art, beauty, the superman or irreducible egoistic personal independence. The ideal synthesis is thus parceled out, and little by little there are as many sects as propagandists, as many doctrines as writers. The result is inevitable: we fall into all the vulgarities of party spirit, into all the passions of personalism, into all the baseness of ambition and vanity.

How do we uncover the sore without touching the people, without turning the subject into a source of scandal, into the material of new accusations and insults?

For many, Anarchism has become a belief or a faith. Who would deny it? Because this has become so, passionate quarrels, unjustified divisions and dogmatic exclusivisms have been provoked. That is why, when the evolution has been completed, the bankruptcy of beliefs, a reality in fact, must be proclaimed frankly by all who love the truth.

When Anarchism has gained more ground, the crisis must necessarily arise. Iniquity manifests itself everywhere. Books, magazines, newspapers, meetings reflect the effects of the rare contrast produced by the clash of so many opinions that have sneaked into the anarchist camp. In open competition, doctrinal particularisms fall one by one in the battle of beliefs. None are firm, and they cannot be, without denying themselves.

The illusion of a closed, compact, uniform, pure and fixed Anarchism, like the immaculate faith in the absolute, could live within the enthusiasms of the moment, in febrile imaginations, anxious for goodness and justice, but it is exhausted by truth and reason. It dies fatally when the understanding is clarified and analysis breaks down the heart of the ideality. And the supreme moment comes to shatter our beliefs, to break up the ideological clutter acquired from this or that author, in love with one or another social or philosophical thesis. Why hide it? Why continue to fight in the name of pseudo-scientific and semiological puerilities? Truth is not enclosed in an exclusive point of view. It is not guarded in an ark of fragile planks. It is not there at hand or at the reach of the first daring soul who decides to discover it. As the sciences, as everything human is in formation, it will be perpetually in formation. We are and will always be forced to follow after it through successive trials; in that no other way is the flow of knowledge formed and certainty established.

This is how Anarchism will be surpassed. And when I speak of Anarchism and I say that in minds something stirs that is incomprehensible to the dying world, and that we sense beyond the ANARCHY a sun, which is born because in the succession of time there is no sunset without orthography, I speak of Doctrinal Anarchism, which forms schools, raises chapels and builds altars. Yes; beyond this necessary moment of the bankruptcy of beliefs, is the broad anarchist synthesis that gathers from all the particularisms that are maintained, from all philosophical theses, and from all the formidable advances of the common intellectual work, the established and well-checked truths, whose demonstration every struggle is already impossible. This vast synthesis, a complete expression of Anarchism that opens its doors to everything that comes from tomorrow and everything that remains firm and strong from yesterday and is reaffirmed in today's clash that scrutinizes the unknown,—this synthesis is the complete denial of all belief.

There is no need to shout: Down with the beliefs! They perish by their own hands. Belief, like faith, is an obstacle to knowledge. And in the restless stirring of so many anarchists speaking, beliefs fail. We will not hide it. Let every one of us throw away the old dogmatism of their opinions, the loves of their philosophical predilections, and launching the mind on the broad paths of unrestricted inquiry, reach as far as the conception of a conscious, virile, generous Anarchism, that has no quarrel except with conventionalism and error, and has tolerance for all ideas, but does not accept, even on a provisional basis, anything except what is well proven.

This Anarchism is the one that is quietly forming. It is the one that is elaborated slowly in the beliefs able to feel the pressure of the atavisms that appear everywhere. It is the one that made me write "The Bankruptcy of Beliefs:" a cry of protest against the reality of the anarchist herd; a

cry of encouragement for personal independence; a call for the expansion of the ideal that every day lives stronger in me and encourages me to fight for a future that I will not enjoy, but which will be an era of justice, well-being and love for the men of tomorrow. This Anarchism is the rising Anarchism, capable of collecting within its breast all libertarian tendencies, capable of encouraging all noble rebellions and of impressing on generous spirits the impulse of freedom in all directions, without hindrance and without prejudice, with the sole condition that exclusivism does not raise Chinese walls and that the understanding is delivered entirely and unreservedly to the truth that beats vigorously in the most diverse modalities of the new ideal.

It will no longer be said in the name of Anarchism: No further! Absolute justice, revived in the dogma that now dies, will be but the indeterminate goal that changes as human mentality unfolds. And we will not fall into the strange and singular error of setting a limit, however distant, to the progress of ideas and forms of social benefit.

The rising Anarchism proclaims the beyond endless, after having knocked down all the barriers raised by the age-old intellectual absolutism of men.

Don't you believe that all the particularisms, all the theories, are now failing, that all the factories of rubble, awkwardly raised for the glory of new dogmas, are collapsing? Don't you believe that the bankruptcy of beliefs is the last link in the human chain that breaks down and offers us the full breadth the anarchist ideal, pure and without blemish?

Faith will have blinded you. And you would do well to renounce the word freedom; that can be a herd even in the midst of the most radical ideas.

For our part we limit ourselves to record a fact: anarchists of all tendencies resolutely walk towards the affirmation of a great social synthesis that encompasses all the various manifestations of the ideal. The walking is silent; soon will come the noisy break, if there is anyone who insists on remaining bound to the spirit of clique and sect.

Whoever has not emancipated himself will be left behind with the current movement and will seek redemption in vain. He will die a slave.

Ricardo Mella

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*El Anarquismo naciente* was published as a continuation of *La bancarrota de las creencias*, in a pamphlet published in Valencia, in 1903, by Ediciones El Corsario.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]