

CONSTRUCTING ANARCHISMS: A WORKSHOP
Organized by Shawn P. Wilbur
WEEK FIVE READINGS

Constructing an Anarchism: Synthesis

We have been presenting an understanding of anarchist practice centered around the repeated reconstruction of what it means to “be an anarchist” in each new context. Proudhon claimed that “humanity proceeds by approximations”—and perhaps that’s a useful way to think about anarchism as well, whether we are thinking about the development of shared ideologies and tendencies or about the more individual process of applying anarchistic ideas to the objects of daily practice.

☞ Let’s say that *synthesis* is the element of anarchist practice that involves relating the various approximations to one another and to the developing anarchist tradition. Looking backward toward the tradition, it is a matter of establishing some *continuity* between applications, which may involve radical rethinking in some contexts, but also, we would expect, some kind of development, both in our own ideas and in collective conceptions. Looking forward, it is a question of renewing the tradition, perpetuating it through novel applications. And then there is the question of relating concurrent approximations.

What I’m proposing is a kind of two-step dynamic that we might associate with instances of *anarchist practice*. The first step is exploratory, as the lessons of prior practice are applied to novel conditions. In this step, something new is perhaps added to the developing collection of anarchist analyses and anarchist practices. The second step is synthetic, as the new application is related back to the body of prior practice, as well as to practices taking place concurrently. The novel elements are made intelligible as extensions of the existing body of practices and rendered more or less shareable by other anarchists.



There are certainly other ways to conceptualize *anarchist practice*, just as *synthesis* has been conceptualized in a variety of different ways within the anarchist tradition. Perhaps some of you will explore some of the alternatives in the later stages of this project.



Synthesis is a term with a long history in anarchist theory, going back at least to 1840 and Proudhon’s description of anarchic *liberty* as a “synthesis of community and property.” It is, of course, most closely associated with the debate between anarchist synthesists and platformists in the late 1920s. I’ll admit that I was vaguely aware of the notion of anarchist synthesis for a long time before I did much looking into the matter, in large part because the choice between platformism and synthesis is so often treated solely as a matter of how to organize anarchist federations—and that has never been anywhere near the top of my list of anarchist concerns.

Even as I began to fairly seriously research anarchism without adjectives and some of the related currents, it took a while before even the most familiar texts on synthesis held much appeal—and then suddenly all roads seemed to lead there, as I began to assemble evidence of

what I've called an "anarchistic undercurrent" concerned with reconciling the various anarchist currents. In that context, it turns out that *synthesis* was a central concern in the sense that nearly all the proponents of related notions like *symbiosis*, *entente*, *mutual toleration*, *liaison*, etc. at least had to publish their objections to the term. (The anarchist capacity for quibbling seems to be something of a constant throughout the tradition.)

I don't always love the term myself. Looking at the history of that "undercurrent," I am inclined to think that what is perhaps really needed is something like a synthesis of the various proposals for near-synthesis, while perhaps *anarchy* already serves to describe the principle by which various anarchist currents might be brought into a mutually beneficial sort of relation. In collecting the various related tendencies, I have called them "[Varieties of Anarchist Entente](#)," giving pride of place to E. Armand's favored term. Still, I am inclined to think that Voline's 1924 essay "On Synthesis" is an unjustly neglected work on the perhaps equally neglected question of *anarchist development* and, for the moment, that seems reason enough to justify calling myself a *synthesist* at times and to choose synthesis as a keyword here in this construction.



I've already [talked](#) a bit about the objections to Voline's essay. If the opening discussions of truth and life seemed to be aimed at some kind of metaphysic certainty, I might share the concerns expressed. But Voline seems to posit the question of full knowledge in order to remind us that we're not likely to experience it—and that, even if we did, our triumph might be short-lived:

The synthesis itself is not immutable. It is only a resultant constantly in motion, which sometimes comes closer to one of the factors and sometimes to another, and never remains close to one or the other for long.

That seems clear enough. So let's try to turn the corner in our analysis here, acknowledge that there likely to be a good deal that is anarchic about the practice of a developing, living body of thought, and prepare for the introduction of a new set of concepts—starting with *governmentalism*, and the related ideas like *authority* and *hierarchy*—that are quite a bit more straightforward in their elaboration and application.



This is the last week of this "quarter" with really extensive suggested readings and I expect the material for this week to inform much of the rest of the discussion. "Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Self-Government and the Citizen-State" is the English version of a book chapter originally published in German, explaining Proudhon's theory of the state, but really giving a kind of general introduction to his project. It should provide useful context for much of the work to come. The glossary entries on "Legal Order" and "Authority and Authority-Effects" establish some terms I will have recourse to in next week's post. And "What About the Children?" and the new translation of Bakunin's discussion of authority in "God and the State" together constitute an entry into the debates about "justified hierarchy" and "legitimate authority."

**Pierre-Joseph Proudhon:
Self-Government and the Citizen-State [1]
Shawn P. Wilbur**

[The State] is itself, if I may put it this way, a sort of citizen...”—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon [2]

For more than a hundred years, *anti-statism* has been a key principle of anarchism. But this was not always the case. A search of English- and French-language sources suggests that for much of the nineteenth century, the term “statism” (or “étatisme”) did not have its present meaning. In the political realm, it simply meant “statesmanship.” As late as the 1870s, the American anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews used the term to mean “a tendency to immobility,” without apparent fear of confusion, and the American Dental Association considering adopting Andrews’ coinage, apparently without fear of entering political territory. [3]

Anarchism emerged as a political philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century, when much of the modern political lexicon was still being established. “Individualism,” “socialism,” and “capitalism” all seem to date from the 1820s or 1830s, and their early histories are entangled with that of “anarchism,” a term we generally date from 1840, and which was initially defined in terms of its *anti-authoritarian* or *anti-governmental* critique. Of course, the relatively late appearance of the term *anti-statism* does not itself tell us much about the history of the associated critique. We know, however, that at least some of the participants in the anarchist movement considered the emergence of *anti-statism* as both a real departure from the existing *anti-governmental* critique—and as a misstep. In 1887, for example, more than twenty years after the death of anarchist pioneer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Frédéric Tufferd wrote:

The most incredible confusion is that between the government and the State. I am an anarchist, as Proudhon was, for like him I want to abolish government, the principle of authority in the State, in order to replace it by an responsible and controllable administration of the public interests; but I do not want, with Bakunin, to abolish the State. The word State comes from stare, to hold, to persist; the State is thus the organized collectivity. Just as the commune is the local collectivity, the State is the national collectivity which has lasted, lasts, and will last as long as the nation itself. [4]

For Tufferd, socialists faced a choice between dividing over speculations on the *nature* of the State, God, etc., or uniting around a science focused on social *relations*. As he understood the terms of the “confusion,” *government* was any relation on the basis of the “principle of authority,” which could, indeed, shape particular *States*, but which was ultimately separable from the State as such. The State was merely a persistent manifestation of society.

This was quite different from the view which ultimately united much of the anarchist movement in opposition to the State as such. Almost from the beginning there had been those who felt that a decisive break had to be made with existing institutions. Not all were as extreme as, for example, Ernest Coeurderoy, who claimed that liberty could not come to European civilization unless it was first destroyed by the Cossacks, but many in the movement believed that very little of the present social organization could be allowed to persist. Certainly Bakunin—the representative figure, for Tufferd, of the *anti-statist* school—held government and the State to be entwined, and both to be impediments to anarchy. [5]

Despite their differences, however, both schools of thought could claim, with at least some justification, a descent from the work of Proudhon. Their specific inspirations were simply drawn from different periods of his career. Proudhon's thoughts about the State appear, at least at first glance, to have run a wide gamut. At times, he had been its staunchest opponent, calling for its entire abolition. In 1848, during the Second Republic, he asked: "Why do we believe in Government? From whence comes, in human society, this idea of Authority, of Power; this fiction of a superior Person, called the State?" [6] Yet, in 1861 he claimed that "the State, as the Revolution has conceived it, is not a purely abstract thing, as some, Rousseau among them, have supposed, a sort of legal fiction; it is a reality as positive as society itself, as the individual even." [7] He went so far as to describe the State as "a species of citizen."

Could the State be in some sense a fiction? And, if so, could the same State also be, in some sense, a reality, a being of sorts, as real as the human individual? Proudhon answered both questions in the affirmative, and in terms which only require some clarification to render consistent. During the period of the Second Republic, he argued that the real power attributed to the State was legitimated by a false account of relations within society, and he waged an unrelenting war against that fundamental political fiction—but also against all other *governmentalist* accounts, which posited the necessity of a ruling authority outside and above the equal associations of individuals. Then, during the Second Empire, having swept aside, at least to his own satisfaction, that false account of the composition and realization of society, he began to advance an alternate account, in which he found that government and the State were indeed separable, and that the non-governmental functions of the State, though modest in comparison to those attributed to its authoritarian forms, served vital roles in society—even when the political forms of society approached *anarchy*.

Between the two periods, Proudhon himself identified a watershed corresponding to his own "complete transformation:" "From 1839 to 1852, I have had what is called my *critical* period, taking this word in the lofty sense it is given in Germany. As a man must not repeat himself and I strive essentially not to outlive my usefulness, I am assembling the material for new studies and I ready myself to soon begin a new period I shall call, if you like, my *positive period* or period of construction." [8]

Proudhon's claim was perhaps hyperbolic, since transformation was for him something of a constant process. Elsewhere, in what is perhaps a more satisfactory account, he characterized himself as "the man whose thought always advances, whose program will never be accomplished." [9] But he was quite correct in pointing to separate *critical* and *constructive* analyses, each predominating at different times in his work, which can serve us to distinguish—and ultimately to explore the relations—between two aspects of his theory of the State.

What follows is a roughly chronological examination of Proudhon's developing understanding of the State, including accounts of the two analyses already noted. The first of these is an account of *critical* analysis of the *governmentalist* State, as Proudhon presented it in a series of published debates with Louis Blanc in 1849. The second is an exploration of some of the developments that he gave to his theory of the State in his later writings—in his 1858 masterwork, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, and in a number of other texts from the 1860s, including *War and Peace*, *The Theory of Property*, and *The Federative Principle*. Between these two studies it will be necessary to pause, as Proudhon did in his own career, for an examination of his early studies, in order to clarify the extent to which his later conception of the State grew directly from the earlier work. We'll end by revisiting the "confusion" that

concerned Tufferd, and consider the potential lessons of the largely neglected conclusions of Proudhon's second analysis of the State.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon emerged as a public figure—and launched the modern anarchist movement—in 1840, when he published *What is Property?* To the question posed in the title, he proposed the infamous response: “Property is theft!” The work was hardly a political manifesto, and it would, in any event, be some years before the anarchist movement consisted of more than a small, heterodox collection of Proudhon's fellow-travelers. Instead, it was a collection of critiques of existing property conventions, and the “Psychological Exposition of the Idea of Justice and Injustice, and a Determination of the Principle of Government and of Right,” in which Proudhon declared “I am an anarchist,” was not exactly an afterthought, but it was certainly written for non-anarchist contemporaries, rather than those who would eventually be his ideological heirs. Still, Proudhon defined anarchy in fairly clear and simple terms, as the “absence of master, of sovereign,” and declared that it was “the form of government which we approach every day.” Anarchy would come by means of a shift from rule by authority, or will, to a condition in which “the legislative power belongs to reason alone, methodically recognized and demonstrated.” Under these circumstances, “as the opinion of no one is of any value until its truth has been proven, no one can substitute his will for reason,—nobody is king.” [10] Proudhon distinguished this political order—sometimes designated by the English term *self-government*—from even those sorts of democracy for which it is claimed that “everyone is king,” as he believed that the multiplication of sovereign wills still differed from the dethroning of will in politics altogether.

Proudhon followed his book on property with others on the same subject, and soon found himself the object of both considerable notoriety and government prosecution. He was only saved from imprisonment because it was argued that he was merely a philosopher. For much of the 1840s, he did indeed concentrate on philosophy and social science, establishing himself as something of a rival to the “utopian” socialists Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Pierre Leroux and Etienne Cabet. But events in France would eventually lead him to an active political life.

During the Second Republic, Proudhon had direct incentives to think about the nature of the State itself. In the debates surrounding the form and direction of the French republic many revolutionary options no doubt seemed possible, [11] as well as any number of catastrophic failures, and Proudhon was not only drawn into the political conversation but into the government itself, serving in the constituent assembly from June 1849 until March 1849. He proposed programs and legislation. His work on property languished somewhat, while he established the theoretical basis and eventually the institutional apparatus for his Bank of the People, a currency reform project based on “free credit.” [12] He enjoyed a wide notoriety, but faced consistent opposition on most fronts. His career as a statesman ended when his immunity from prosecution was lifted and he was imprisoned for insults to president Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. In prison, he continued to be intensely involved in the political discussion, writing books and articles analyzing the failure of the 1848 revolution, and it was during this period that he engaged in the very public debate with fellow socialists Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux on the “nature, object and destiny” of the State.

The 1849 debate on the State was a surprisingly public affair, a debate between socialist philosophers so well publicized that early in 1850 *La Mode*, a popular magazine, could publish a one-act play, “The Feuding Brothers,” which was little more than a parodic report of the debate, cobbled together from quotes in the popular. The anonymous author of the farce could assume a

fairly high degree of familiarity with the details, in large part because the French Revolution of 1848 had transformed socialist philosophers into men of state. The whole world was watching the developments within the Provisional Government of the Second French Republic, where the most important sorts of questions were being discussed among representatives whose preferred systems ranged from anarchy to the restoration of the constitutional monarchy.

Between Proudhon and Leroux, there seems to have been almost complete agreement on most of the substantive issues, although this didn't prevent them from making outrageous accusations and calling one other the most bizarre names. Between Blanc and Proudhon, however, the lines were clearly drawn. For modern readers, the most striking aspect of the exchange might be the obvious animosity between the two men. Proudhon referred to the "the avowed, cordial hatred of Louis Blanc," [13] while Louis Blanc, reprinting his contributions some years later, felt the need to suppress some passages that "was marked by too much vehemence and does not deserve to figure in a discussion de principes." [14] But there were also a clear clash of principles.

Blanc's account of the State was a progressive one, assuming an evolution through forms of "tyranny," followed by a democratic transformation to the "reign of liberty."

"What is the State?" asks Louis Blanc. And he replies:—

"The State, under monarchical rule, is the power of one man, the tyranny of a single individual.

"The State, under oligarchic rule, is the power of a small number of men, the tyranny of a few.

"The State, under aristocratic rule, is the power of a class, the tyranny of many.

"The State, under anarchical rule is the power of the first comer who happens to be the most intelligent and the strongest; it is the tyranny of chaos.

"The State, under democratic rule, is the power of all the people, served by their elect, it is the reign of liberty." [15]

At the end of its evolution, Blanc claimed, the State would be "nothing other than society itself, acting *as society*, to prevent... what? Oppression; to maintain... what? Liberty." [16] There had been master-States, he said, but in the democratic regime the State would be a servant.

Proudhon naturally challenged the characterization of the anarchic regime, but he also questioned the apparent sleight of hand by which the tyranny of the State in all its other forms became liberty when in the hands of democratically elected officials. He claimed that Blanc, and the other proponents of the State, did not really believe in a society that could act *as society*, insisting instead on the necessity of the State, which he characterized as "the external constitution of the social power." His opponents believed "that the collective being, that society, being only a being of reason, cannot be rendered sensible except by means on a monarchic incarnation, aristocratic usurpation, or democratic mandate." [17] Proudhon, on the contrary, believed that this "collective being" had a real existence, strongly analogous to that of the human individual: "in both cases, the will, action, soul, mind, and life, unknown in their principle, elusive in their essence, result from the animating and vital fact of organization." [18] This was not simply an analogy for Proudhon, but an enduring part of his social science, which he was prepared to state in no uncertain terms: "We affirm, on the contrary, that the people, that society, that the mass, can and ought to govern itself by itself; to think, act, rise, and halt, like a man; to manifest itself, in fine, in its physical, intellectual, and moral individuality, without the aid of all

these spokesmen, who formerly were despots, who now are aristocrats, who from time to time have been pretended delegates, fawners on or servants of the crowd, and whom we call plainly and simply popular agitators, *demagogues*.” [19]

In his response, Blanc did not challenge Proudhon’s account of society as a collective being, but he objected that it was incomplete: “If this collective being of which the citizen Proudhon declares the existence is anything but a collection of senseless syllable, it must be realized. But the collective being realized is precisely the State.” Altering the argument slightly, Blanc said that society might form an organized, unified body, but that it would lack unity if it lacked the State, which he likened to the human head.

The analogy was not particularly apt. We probably wouldn’t say that the human body is “realized” by the head, or that the head was the site of its unity, even if we were convinced that the State was a real “organ” of society—unless, of course, we believed that the body was unorganized without the direction of something like a soul. Proudhon seized on this element of the argument, referencing Descartes’ attempts to find a site for the soul in pineal gland.

For Proudhon, there could be no equivocation between beings capable of *self-government* and those animated by some external force or principle. Every attempt to combine the two accounts would involve a fatal contradiction, and this was inevitable in any defense of States organized according to the principle of authority. No doubt, Proudhon admitted, those contradictory States were inevitable in the evolution of society, but in the end the fiction of authority would be overcome. “*Anarchy*,” he said, “is the condition of existence of adult societies, as *hierarchy* is the condition of primitive societies: there is an incessant progress, in human societies, from hierarchy to anarchy.” [20]

The debate over the aim or object of the State simply clarified the arguments concerning its nature. According to Proudhon, the governmentalists believed that in the absence of a State society would be in a constant state of internal warfare. For Proudhon, a collection of individuals in constant warfare would simply not constitute a society. In this instance it would indeed be society which was fictive, and we might ask ourselves how this warfare might give rise to the peaceful impulses which presumably would inform the rule or “realization” accomplished by the State. The divide between Proudhon and Blanc revolved around a choice between “internal” and “external constitution” of the society. Without the “realizing” element of the State, Blanc argued, society would just be a group of elements. In response, Proudhon argued that every individual is essentially a group of elements—but that in every individual worthy of the name the principle of association or realization, the only law the anarchist Proudhon was prepared to recognize, is inherent in and demonstrated by the association itself. There is *self-government* or there external imposition, and it matters little, in the long run, whether the imposing force is vested in one individual or many, or what we call those who wield the force. It is still tyranny.

On the question of the destiny of the State and the possibilities for its reform, Proudhon had very little room for optimism. What he objected to in the State was not, according to his present understanding of the terms, an inessential part of it, but its very essence, its external position with regard to society. Some States might be more or less objectionable in their impositions on society, but the point, for Proudhon, was to cease imposing any order on society which was not its own order, derived from its own internal law. Proudhon wanted neither master-States nor servant-States, just as he wanted neither masters nor servants. As he had not yet found the grounds on which to deal separately with government and the State, that left him with no option by to reject the State entirely.

Imprisoned until after the coup d'état, Proudhon was poorly positioned to effect the course of the republic, but, like many political prisoners, he made the most of his incarceration. His debate with Leroux and Blanc had been preceded by the *Confessions of a Revolutionary*, a critical history and personal indictment of the French Revolution of 1848, and it was followed by *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, in which he sought to argue for the possibility, even the necessity of a new revolution. His anti-governmentalist critique—and perhaps his entire “critical” phase—reached its crescendo in the “Epilogue” of the latter work, in what has become one of his most famous passages:

To be governed is to be kept in sight, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right, nor the wisdom, nor the virtue to do so.... To be governed is to be at every operation, at every transaction, noted, registered, enrolled, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under the pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, trained, ransomed, exploited, monopolized, extorted, squeezed, mystified, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, despised, harassed, tracked, abused, clubbed, disarmed, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and, to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, outraged, dishonored. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality. And to think that there are democrats among us who pretend that there is any good in government; Socialists who support this ignominy, in the name of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; proletarians who proclaim their candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic! Hypocrisy! [21]

This is the *anti-governmentalist* faith that he never abandoned, and the aspect of Proudhon's thought which has been consistently honored by the anarchist tradition. But the Republic was nearing its final crises in 1851, and the context for Proudhon's critique would change dramatically with the emergence of the Second Empire.

With the *coup d'état*, the legislative conversation was abruptly closed, and Louis Napoleon's regime was not accommodating to dissenting voices, rewarding them not just with censorship, but sometimes with imprisonment or exile. Like many others, Proudhon gradually adapted, or, as he put it, he “transformed.”

He had said that “a man should not repeat himself,” but the truth is that by 1852 he had probably repeated his critique to just about every audience available to him: the people and his fellow socialists, in a series of publications; his fellow legislators; the bourgeoisie, in *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*; and even the emperor Louis Napoleon, in *The Social Revolution, Demonstrated by the Coup d'État of December 2*. But Proudhon found himself increasingly limited in what he could publish in France, and fairly quickly found himself in exile in Belgium.

It would not be hard to imagine, given the events surrounding Proudhon's development, how someone who identified as an anarchist in 1840 might have come to terms with the State in the context of the Second Republic, and then come to reject it again as a result of political disappointment and persecution. We could also, no doubt, understand if imprisonment and exile had dampened the ardor of a political activist. Proudhon's evolution is perhaps a little more difficult to understand.

By 1858, he had defined the terms of his *constructive* project:

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. [22]

But this apparently mild-mannered program appeared in the midst of his *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, a massive frontal assault on the Church and continued critique of *governmentalism*, for which he once again faced prosecution—a work in which he declared, defiantly and a bit dramatically, “I am a sans-culotte”!

Without speculating unnecessarily on the factors which drove the “complete transformation” of the early 1850s, we can point to circumstances which undoubtedly played a role. Just as he was being forced into Belgian exile, Proudhon undertook a review of his philosophy, and in the course of that work quietly corrected some problems from the *critical* period.

In 1853, Proudhon published *The Philosophy of Progress*. The work took the form of two long letters to a French journalist who had asked him for a summary of his ideas, and they afforded an opportunity for Proudhon to bring together the various aspects of his previous work in a way which he had not done before. Much of the work was devoted to a consideration of “the criterion of certainty” in science and philosophy, and, to no doubt over-simplify a long and very interesting study, his conclusion was that little, if anything, was certain but *change*.

Indeed, finally pressed to explain himself, he condensed his project down to a single opposition and a single affirmation: “All that I have ever written, all that I have denied, affirmed, attacked, and combated, I have written, I have denied or affirmed in the name of one single idea: Progress. My adversaries, on the contrary—and you will soon see if they are numerous—are all partisans of the absolute...” [23]

This opposition, he believed, was a sort of skeleton key, not only to the works he had written, but to any work he might pursue:

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. [24]

This distillation of his project gave him a clear set of principles with which to set out on the next phase of his careers, and *The Philosophy of Progress* highlighted elements of his early works which might have otherwise gone unremarked. But as Proudhon consolidated his project around the notions of progress and the opposition to the absolute, some shortcomings of his early works may have presented themselves.

Arguably, some of the apparent single-mindedness of his opposition to concepts like property and the State, so admired by the anarchist tradition, was achieved by questionable terminological gymnastics. In the introduction to *What is Property?*, he contrasted his view with that of one of property’s defenders: “Mr. Blanqui recognizes that there are a mass of abuses, odious abuses, in

property; for myself, I call *property* exclusively the sum of those abuses.” [25] While this made for a bold statement, it also threatened to reduce the impact of his claim that property is theft. Even while arguing for the historical development of the notion of justice, he drew firm lines between himself and those who would construct similar accounts about property. In 1841 he distinguished his terminological approach from that of Pierre Leroux: “Thus, according to Mr. Leroux, there is property and property: the one good, the other bad. Now, as it is proper to call different things by different names, if we keep the name “property” for the former, we must call the latter robbery, rapine, brigandage. If, on the contrary, we reserve the name “property” for the latter, we must designate the former by the term *possession*, or some other equivalent; otherwise we should be troubled with an odious synonymy.” [26] However, he was unable to escape that “odious synonymy” in a number of his works, and as his analysis became more complex, he even began to exploit it, emphasizing the internal contradictions in many key concepts.

By the beginning of his *constructive* phase he had reached a point in his battle with the reigning concepts like “religion, government, and property” where he could allow them to retain their “patronymic names,” even when they assumed new forms, in order to highlight the action of progress. As a result, familiar terms may have meaning with only a family resemblance to those we know. Whether or not Proudhon himself underwent a “complete transformation” in the early 1850s, we are likely to lead ourselves astray if we do not acknowledge that at least his vocabulary was fairly substantially transformed.

In 1858, Proudhon published his *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, a work in four volumes, later expanded to six. In a series of studies within it, he contrasted the conception of justice advanced by the Catholic Church with an anarchic vision in which a vast array of interests would be balanced, without political hierarchy or governmental authority, in relations consistent with reason and science. The studies combined *critical* and *constructive* elements, with the theory of collective beings receiving a considerable amount of development.

In his early writings, Proudhon had adopted a sort of second-hand Hegelian dialectic, without having direct access to Hegel’s writings. He believed that human progress was achieved by the playing out of contradictions—which he called theses and antitheses, without otherwise conforming to the details of Hegel’s system—and he believed that when these terms were synthesized, the tensions between them was resolved. However, he had also incorporated elements of the serial analysis of Charles Fourier, and attempted to synthesize those influences in what he called a “serial dialectic.” It is safe to say that some tensions remained in his own construction, until he finally abandoned it in 1858, asserting that “The antinomy does not resolve itself... The two terms of which it is composed BALANCE, either between themselves, or with other antinomic terms.” [27] With this theory of antinomies as his guide, there was no longer any question of dramatic victories or defeats for ideas or forces. Instead, the only form of resolution was balance, and while Proudhon liked to talk about the *scales*[*bascule*] of justice, as he began to build a “true” social system by bringing more and more ideas into relation, the varieties of balance multiplied. In the work on *Justice*, the study on “Goods” ended with an incomplete catalog of more than a dozen sorts of economic antinomies to be balanced.

With no recourse to external governmental control, all of this balancing was necessarily to be achieved by individuals situated in the midst of this complex, evolving web of relationships. The interested beings would not, of course, be limited to individual human beings. In the study on the State, Proudhon reaffirmed his belief in “social beings,” on a range of scales from families and small workshops to nations and States.

He retraced the arguments of 1849, armed with a vast new body of historical data and contemporary political analysis. One brand new element was, however, featured prominently: a constructive notion of the State as another collective being. The “Small Political Catechism” which summarized the study began with the question: “Every expression conceals a reality; of what does the reality of the social power consist?” The answer was: “It is collective force.” Furthermore, “collective force being a fact as positive as individual force, the first perfectly distinct from the second, collective beings are as much realities as individual ones.” [28] This notion of collective force had been part of Proudhon’s theoretical apparatus since the work on property in 1840, where he used it to demonstrate that individual property could not emerge simply from social labor. In *The General Idea of the Revolution* he had invoked it to suggest limits on individual ownership of capital, based on whether the means of production in question would be employed individually or by some organized association of laborers. By 1849, the family and society had joined the list of collective beings manifesting one or more varieties of synergetic “force.” As Proudhon’s thought developed, the range of beings and manifestations of force to be reckoned with continued to multiply. It was perhaps inevitable that Proudhon would find *something* in all the manifestations associated with government and the State that he had to consider a reality.

The theory of the State that emerged in 1858 was still rather vague: “The State results from the gathering of several groups, different in nature and object, each formed for to exercise a special function and for the creation of a particular product, then assembled under a common law, and in an identical interest.” [29] If this State was to be understood as an individual, a “species of citizen,” there was still some elaboration to be made. Proudhon, however, was most concerned with showing that the role of the state would be “primarily commutative,” but “no less real” for that. All of the usual activities associated with states, the “works of public utility,” seemed to him to be “effects of the ordinary collective force,” with no natural or necessary connection to any structure of external authority. As examples of appropriate projects for his anti-authoritarian State, he discussed questions like general security and the provision of a circulating medium.

The work on *Justice* also presented an important evolution in Proudhon’s discussion of *reason*, the sole source of legislation in his anarchist vision. *Collective reason* emerged alongside collective force as a manifestation of collective being, and in the study on “Ideas” Proudhon described the special role that it had to play in safeguarding individual reason against the corrupting influence of the absolute. To simplify what is both a wide-ranging and occasionally puzzling discussion, we might simply observe, in this context, that as the force exerted by individuals in industry finds expression both in industrial organizations and in more strictly individual forms, the individual reason which is supposed to inform our *self-government* is expressed, if we may put it this way, by individuals as individuals, by collectives as individuals, and by individuals as parts of collectives. The anarchic *self-government* of a given society will have to be grounded in the balancing of those manifestations of reason, and the overlaps between individual and collective give us some clues to the mechanisms likely to be involved.

Proudhon himself, in talking about the “organ” of the collective reason, situated it everywhere that collective force might be found. This proliferation of *reasons* to be reckoned with perhaps served to combat the one real danger he foresaw need to protect against: “There is only one precaution to take: to insure that the collectivity consulted does not vote, *as one man*, by virtue of an individual sentiment that has become common...” [30] That danger was apparently real enough in Proudhon’s mind that, in a puzzling paragraph, he proposed a “special

magistracy” to operate as “police of conversations and guardian of opinion.” The proposal was, however, without details, and in context it is hard to imagine how this “magistracy,” whether formal or figurative, could have been tasked to do anything but stave off premature agreement. [31] In any event, if Proudhon’s most ambiguous statements raise momentary questions about his entire opposition to government, there is no lack of unambiguous declarations affirming it. “Justice alone commands and governs,” he insisted, “Justice, which creates the power, by making the balance of forces an obligation for all. Between the power and the individual, there is thus only right: all sovereignty is rejected; if it denied by Justice, it is religion.” Beyond this *self-government*, guided by justice, society was “ungovernable.” [32]

There are a number of other details relevant to the theory of the State, scattered through the sprawling work on *Justice*. In a sort of delayed response to Blanc, Proudhon poked fun at the “monstrous idea” that others had possessed of “social being:” “it is like an animal of a mysterious species, but which, in the manner of all the known animals, must have a head, a heart, nerves, teeth, feet, etc. from that chimerical organism, which everyone strives to discover, they then deduce Justice, that is to say that we derive morality from physiology, or, as we say today, right from duty, so that Justice always finds itself placed outside of consciousness, liberty subjected to fatalism, and humanity fallen.” [33]

Another study provided a positive account of liberty, suggesting that freedom is not simply the absence of prohibition or restraint, but a quality inherent to the organization of beings, which is greater or lesser to the extent that the relations between them are complex and energetic—a notion that would form part of the rationale for Proudhon’s federalism. Long sections devoted to gender roles, and the proper role and constitution of the family have earned Proudhon a reputation for anti-feminism, but even beneath the genuinely reactionary social roles proposed there is a curiously radical notion that the “organ of justice” is located in a human relationship, rather than a human individual.

Proudhon developed his theory of the state in three works during 1861. *War and Peace*, probably the most interesting of the three, was a two-volume examination of the role of conflict in human history, demonstrating the means by which a proper understanding of war might lead to a just peace. It is a difficult, sometimes perplexing work, which has led some to treat Proudhon as a militarist, despite the fact that the book ended with the declaration that “humanity wants no more war.” [34] In it we find Proudhon working out the play of the antinomies on a large political stage, dealing with the interactions of States and peoples, mixing lessons drawn from history with more observations applicable to the theory that he was in the process of constructing. [35]

The work contained important statements about justice in general: “Justice is not a commandment made known by a higher authority to an inferior being, as is taught by the majority of writers who have written on the rights of the people; justice is immanent in the human soul; it is its deepest part, it constitutes its highest power and its supreme dignity.” [36] Where individual rights are concerned “Right, in general, is the recognition of human dignity is all its faculties, attributes and prerogatives. There are thus as many special rights as humans can raise different claims, owing to the diversity of their faculties and of their exercise.” [37] These various claims, however, are limited to the specific spheres in which the faculties are expressed, and must still be harmonized through a process of balancing. It’s clear that by this period in his career Proudhon had given the conventional language of political philosophy some fairly individual interpretations. If, as Proudhon claimed, all manifestations of individual or collective force bear their “rights” within them, then what we find in the theory of rights, and the notion of

immanent justice, is really just a restatement of basic anti-authoritarian principles: equality is the basis of society and interests must be balanced.

It was in *The Theory of Taxation*, also published in 1861, that the citizen-State finally emerged. While primarily concerned with methods of public finance, the book contained a very brief section on the Relation of the State and Liberty, according to modern rights.” Despite its brevity, however, it is perhaps the most concise summary of Proudhon’s later theory of the State. The modern theory of rights, he claimed, “has done one new thing: it has put in the presence of one another, on the same line, two powers until now had been in a relation of subordination. These two powers are the State and the Individual, in other words the Government and Liberty.” He reaffirmed that the State had a “positive reality,” manifesting itself as a “power of collectivity,” issuing from the organized collective, rather than imposed on it from outside, and thus possessing rights—of the sort introduced in *War an Peace*—but no authority. He asserted that in a regime of liberty it too must be ruled, like the citizens, only by reason and by justice—because, as he put it, “it is itself, if I may put it this way, a sort of citizen.” [38] This image of the citizen-State, neither master nor servant, and located “on the same line” as the other citizens, may be the simplest characterization possible of Proudhon’s complex and elusive ideal for the State. Finally, Proudhon declared the State “the protector of the liberty and property of the citizens, not only of those who have been born, but of those who are to be born. Its tutelage embraces the present and the future, and extends to future generations: thus the State has rights proportional to its obligations; without which, what use would its foresight serve?” [39] The State was now as Tufferd described it, the thing that persisted and mediated the balancing of interests even between generations.

A third work, *The Theory of Property*, was substantially completed in 1861, although it was not published until after Proudhon’s death. It was controversial at the time of its publication, because the editors did not clearly mark their contributions to two summary sections left unfinished by the author. [40] It has been controversial for more recent readers, because it represented the final stage of Proudhon’s theory of property—a theory which evolved in some of the same surprising ways as his theory of the State. Indeed, those who knew his many writings on property should probably have been prepared for the development of this State-theory. He had hardly made his first, triumphant pronouncements about property’s defeat in 1840 when he began to make what we would probably recognize as a very early shift from *critical* to *constructive* concerns, raising the possibility that the same property that was “theft” was also “liberty,” if properly balanced by other forces,” by 1846. By 1848, Proudhon believed that “All that it is possible to do against the abuses or drawbacks of property is to merge, synthesize, organize or balance it with a contrary element...” [41] In *The Theory of Property* he was finally able to move beyond that impasse, by proposing the State as the counterbalancing power to individual property.

The work shows that he was far from having overcome all his misgivings about the State. “The state, constituted in the most rational and liberal manner, animated by the most just intentions, is none the less an enormous power, capable of crushing everything, all by itself, if it is not given a counter-balance.” [42] One of the useful powers of property was, somewhat ironically, a power to divide society, a power required because “[t]he power of the state is a power of concentration; give it freedom to grow and all individuality will soon disappear, absorbed into the collectivity; society will fall into communism; property, on the other hand, is a power of decentralization; because it is itself absolute, it is anti-despotic, anti-unitary; it is

because of this that it is the principle of all federation; and it is for this reason that property, autocratic in essence carried into political society, becomes straightway republican.” [43]

Beyond the transformation of the despotic, fictive State into the citizen-State, difficulties and responsibilities still remained. “We have understood finally that the opposition of two absolutes — one of which, alone, would be unpardonably reprehensive, and both of which, together, would be rejected, if they worked separately—is the very cornerstone of social economy and public right: but it falls to us to govern it and to make it act according to the laws of logic.”

Through the 1860s, one of the dominant ideas in Proudhon’s thought was this notion of federation, which involved the decentralization of society and the organization of the parts in a mutual, horizontal manner, without relations of authority over one another. *The Federative Principle*, published in 1863, started with the premise that both the political and economic realms were doomed to content with irreducible antinomies: “It is a question of knowing if society can arrive at something settled, equitable and fixed, which satisfies reason and conscience, or if we are condemned for eternity to this Ixion’s wheel.” [44] For Proudhon, of course, it was again a question of balancing opposing forces and tendencies, and much of the text is devoted to exploring the details of that equilibration in various arenas.

Alongside reiterations of his warning to keep the power of the State in check, he clarified what he took to be the specific role of the state: “In a free society, the role of the State or government is *par excellence* a role of legislation, institution, creation, inauguration, installation; — it is, as little as possible, a role of execution.” [45] If collective beings were to have a special role in the division of political labor, it is natural that it would involve the identification of problems pertaining specifically to the collective aspects of society, but the non-governmental implementation of solutions to such problems could only fall back on the individuals that made up the collectivity. Perpetual social progress would guarantee a permanent role for entities like the State, but should they be allowed to fulfill beyond that to which they were especially suited, the balance of forces would be upset, and the hard-won stability of society sacrificed.

At the end of his life, Proudhon had come to think of federation as the practical key to achieving and maintaining justice—understood simply as balance—in all aspects of society:

All my economic ideas, developed for twenty-five years, can be summarized in these three words; *Agro-industrial Federation*.

All my political views come down to a similar formula: *Political Federation* or *Decentralization*.

And as I make of my ideas neither a party instrument nor a means of personal ambition, all my hopes for the present and the future are expressed by this third term, corollary of the other two: *Progressive Federation*. [46]

Proudhon worked on his social science to the very end. In *The Theory of Property*, he had declared that “humanity proceeds by approximations,” positing a progress-without-end as an alternative to utopian blueprints, and he had on several occasions sketched out general “approximations” of his vision of an anarchist society, most notably perhaps in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. His final, deathbed work, *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, [47] was of a similar character, but written, with the benefit of Proudhon’s entire *constructive* development, specifically for the radical workers who would be Proudhon’s immediate ideological heirs. It provided concrete examples of how the various elements of Proudhon’s project, including the re-imagined State, might fit together in a free society.

Looking back over Proudhon's writings on the State, it is clear that some aspects of his theory remained unfinished or unwritten at the time of his death, but it is also striking how much of what was written by this pioneering anarchist and social scientist has essentially been ignored by both traditions for more than a hundred years. There are elements of Proudhon's thought which are strikingly contemporary, including a sort of anti-foundationalism which many may be surprised to find in nineteenth works. There is also a novel approach to questions of the relationship between the individual and collective. Above all, perhaps, the importance of an adequate analysis of the institutions of property and the State, or the principles of liberty and authority, have not diminished in the time since Frédéric Tufferd confronted the socialist movement with a choice of paths. To acquaint ourselves with Proudhon is, if nothing else, to provide ourselves with long-forgotten options.

[1] Completed June, 2013. A German-language version of this essay will appear in the *Staatsverständnisse* series, published by Nomos, who hold the rights to the translation.

[2] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Théorie de l'impôt*, Paris: Dentu, 1861: 68.

[3] Bakunin was writing about "statism," or its Russian equivalent, by 1870. Joseph Lane's "An Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto" was published in 1887, and in the previous year the American individualist anarchist Benjamin R. Tucker had published a partial translation of Proudhon's "Resistance to the Revolution" under the title "The State."

[4] Frédéric Tufferd, "L'Union en socialisme," *Société nouvelle* 2, No. 33 (septembre 1887): 224.

[5] See, for example, Mikhail Bakunin's "La science et la question vitale de la révolution."

[6] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire*, new ed., (Paris: Lacroix, 1876): 5.

[7] *Théorie de l'impôt*. 77.

[8] Proudhon, *Correspondance*, vol. 6, (Paris: Lacroix, 1875): 285–286.

[9] Proudhon, *Philosophie du progrès: programme*, (Bruxelles: Lebegue, 1853): 22.

[10] Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* (Paris: Prevot, 1841): 301–302.

[11] See, for example, Pierre Leroux, *Projet d'une constitution démocratique et sociale* (Paris: G. Sandré, 1848.)

[12] Proudhon's key writings on credit are assembled in *Solution du problème sociale* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868.)

[13] *Mélanges*, tome iii, 30.

[14] Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1880): 235. The personal aspects of the debate occasionally allow us a glimpse of the intimate lives of the participants. In his correspondence, Proudhon includes this curious detail. "While Louis Blanc accuses me of *selling* socialism, his framed portrait serves as the companion to mine in my wife's bedroom! Could I refuse that place to the man who, despite the weakness of his deductions and his incompetence, best represents the governmental principle?..." *Correspondance*, Vol. 5 (Paris: Lacroix, 1875): 107.

[15] *Mélanges*, tome iii, 9–10.

[16] Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1880): 236.

[17] *Mélanges*, tome iii, 11.

[18] *Mélanges*, tome iii, 13.

[19] *Mélanges*, tome iii, 12.

[20] *Mélanges*, tome iii, 9.

[21] Proudhon, *Idée générale de la révolution au XIXème siècle*, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1851): 341–342.

[22] Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Tome III (Paris: Lacroix, 1868): 113.

[23] *Philosophie du progrès*, 19.

[24] *Philosophie du progrès*, 20–22.

[25] *Qu'est-ce que la propriété*, xviii.

[26] Proudhon, *Lettre à Mr Blanqui sur la propriété: deuxième mémoire*, (Paris: Prevot, 1841): 130.

[27] Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, tome I (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1858): 353.

[28] *Op cit.*, 480–481.

[29] *Op. cit.*, tome I, 481.

[30] *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, tome III, 119.

[31] The suggestion recalls Proudhon's statement from 1840, where he proposed that questions of policy might be decided by the Academy of Sciences, to whom all citizens could appeal, on the basis of "departmental statistics." The proposal has sometimes been mistaken for the creation of a "Department of Statistics," presumably with authority to regulate on the basis of science, although that seems clearly at odds with the anarchistic self-government Proudhon was in the process of proposing. While the most authoritarian readings of these two passages are almost certainly incorrect, there is certainly something puzzling about them, and we know that Proudhon was not immune to proposing mechanisms arguably at odds with his goals. It was, after all, in the context of a very similar discussion of the "organ of justice" that he elevated the patriarchal family to a special place in his social theory.

[32] *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, tome I, 495.

[33] *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, tome III, 113.

[34] Proudhon, *La guerre et la paix*, tome II (Bruxelles: Hertz, 1861): 420.

[35] Lack of space prevents me from addressing some interesting material on relations between States. Readers are encouraged to consult Alex Prichard, *Justice, Order and Anarchy* (New York: Routledge, 2103) for an analysis of *La Guerre et la Paix* from the perspective of international relations.

[36] Proudhon, *La guerre et la paix*, tome I (Bruxelles: Hertz, 1861): 199.

[37] *Op. cit.*, 288.

[38] *Théorie de l'impôt*, 68.

[39] *Op cit.*, 76–82.

[40] See Auguste Beauchery, *Economie Sociale de P.-J. Proudhon* (Lille: Imprimerie Wilmot-Courteuse, 1867.)

[41] *Confessions*, 228.

[42] Proudhon, *Théorie de la propriété* (Paris: Lacroix, 1866): 137.

[43] *Op cit.*, 144.

[44] Proudhon, *Du Principe fédératif* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868): 40–41.

[45] *Op cit.*, 54.

[46] *Op cit.*, 83–84.

[47] Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868.)

Legal Order

In the anarchist context, it is common to approach the question of *legal order* by asking whether anarchists truly desire a society in which *nothing is prohibited*. This is, it seems to me, only half of the question that needs to be asked, as an anarchic society would also be one in which *nothing is permitted*. And it is probably this second aspect that is most helpful in evaluating the *antinomian* character of anarchy.

Legal order exists when society is guided by *laws, rules or principles* that are considered *binding* and *enforceable*. Legal order inevitably depends on some assertion of [authority](#) and is part of the apparatus of a legal hierarchy. The range of presumed authorities is, of course, great, but whether the basis is divinity, democracy, sanctified might or nature, the basic quality of legal order changes very little. If we understand the anarchist critique as at least in part a rejection of the hierarchical pretense of elevating some elements of society above others (either directly or as proxies for some reigning abstraction) and endowing those elements with a “right” to command, then the specific pretext for that elevation is a matter of only secondary concern.

It is also important to recognize that legal order is *pervasive*. Where *law* is in force, it tends to divide all actions into the categories of *legal* and *illegal*, *licit* and *illicit*, *permitted* and *prohibited*. So, while there are lots of obvious differences between *Leviticus*, the penal code of a given government, papal bulls, the non-aggression principle, “natural law,” etc., the systems that represent presume to pass judgment on essentially the whole of future human activity, with necessarily limited attention to contexts.

In anarchist circles, the defense of some form of *law* usually depends on the recognition that some small number of acts seem unjustifiable to almost anyone under any circumstances, but this is hardly a compelling argument for imposing a necessarily pervasive legal order, with all the recourse to authority and hierarchy that seems inseparable from it. But, to return to my first point, this insistence on the necessity of law seems to involve a confusion of the lawlessness of anarchy with some form of license, as if anarchy would remove the prohibitions, but not the permissions also imposed by legal order.

Authority: The *OED* presents a wide range of definitions, of which the one most pertinent to anarchist concerns is (II.2) “Power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience; moral, legal, or political supremacy.” The general heading (II.) is “Power to enforce obedience or compliance, or a party possessing it” and this is distinguished from the following set of definitions (III), which pertain to “Power to influence action, opinion, or belief, or a party possessing it.” Fundamental to the anarchist understanding of authority is this *power to command and enforce compliance and obedience*, since this power necessarily occupies a position “above” those subject to the authority, required and possibly compelled to obey. This is a hierarchical relationship.

A few clarifications:

Regardless of its origins, this sort of authority involves a *non-voluntary* relation between a ruling power and ruled subjects. An individual may choose to conform to the demands of authority, either through fear of punishment, shared interests, general indifference, etc., but non-compliance is not among the options open to the subject of authority.

Some custodial relations or relations of tutelage may appear to be relations of authority. The parental relation is an example where one party is presumed to have a right to command another, but the appearance of authority is arguably deceptive in these cases, as the parental right to command is generally bundled with a duty to place the interests of the child above those of the parent in many instances. Where we have a conventional right to command and a social hierarchy, but the interests of the subject of command are placed above those of the “authority” figure, we have something more complicated than authority, which is probably better understood as analogous to some form of *hospitality*.

The “power” behind authority is fundamentally one of *right*. Outside of some context where “might is right” is recognized as the basis of social order, the mere capacity to compel another does not constitute authority. At the same time, authority need not be competent to rule wisely, nor actually capable of compelling obedience. Rights and capacities may coincide, but that is arguably a different concern than whether or not authority exists. Nor is authority ultimately dependent on the importance of the rights assigned. It is, for example, quite possible to be authorized to exert powers that would never be called for.

As a matter of right, authority is specifically vested in or assigned to an individual, group, role or institution. As the right is not dependent on the capacity of the authority, neither is it dependent on the capacities or needs of the subject or on any of the various material conditions that might give a greater or lesser practical significance to the authority. The *appearance of authority* or an *unauthorized power to compel* may emerge from a variety of instances, but we must account for those *authority-effects* separately.

Authority-effect: The infamous “authority of the bootmaker,” from Bakunin’s “God and the State,” is probably the most familiar example of an instance where the uneven distribution of expertise, together with the staple nature of the object of expertise, combine to create a condition of quasi-authority, where an expert may be capable of “commanding” a situation, not because they have any right to do so, but because they occupy an advantageous position in society, thanks to the division of labor. We may be forced to take the advice of a specialist, but the source of their power to influence our decision is as much our lack of expertise and whatever exigencies we face as it is their own knowledge and skill. In a medical crisis, a doctor may be able to wield considerable power over patients without medical expertise, while in a time of good health or under circumstances where the patient has medical expertise, that power melts away. Certainly,

we don't bow to bootmakers when we don't need boots, even if sufficient need on our part may create real power that they can wield. Credentialing systems may create a slightly different sort of authority effect, particularly where they are faulty or corrupt, by increasing the possibility of the false appearance of expertise or by limiting the ability of capable practitioners to meet the needs of others.

Authority-effects are very *real*, in the sense that the combination of factors can compel obedience to just as great an extent as more formal authority, and they may continue to be a problem even under circumstances where the *principle of authority* has been rejected. But their ill effects will almost certainly be reduced as we move beyond a social model that treats authority as a foundational principle and learn to engage in anarchistic relations.

But What about the Children? (A Note on Tutelage)

It's a question again of "legitimate authority" and "justified hierarchy," and specifically of the favorite example used by those who want to leave a space within anarchist theory for those things: the care of very young children. The argument I have encountered repeatedly is that parenting is, at least in the case of those very young children, a necessarily authoritarian relation: children must be ordered about in order to protect them from hazards; parents have a duty and presumably also a right to dictate to their children; and children have an obligation to obey.

It's one of those debates that all too often comes down to: "WHY WON'T SOMEONE PLEASE THINK OF THE CHILDREN!!!" And we know all too well all the dodgy uses to which that appeal has been put. But it should also be clear that the underlying questions, regarding our relations with those individuals with substantially different capacities for self-determination, are important on their own and probably have some connection to how we organize our relations with non-human nature. So we have to try to get to the bottom of what's really at stake, despite the difficulties. Unfortunately, the terms that seem most useful to make the kinds of distinctions we would need are the very terms that seem to have been extended to encompass all sorts of potentially conflicting ideas, so we have to be try to find other vocabularies.

The general distinction that critics of all authority arguably need to make is between *the capacity to act* and *various sorts of social permission or sanction for action that include some right to command others*. It's a distinction that we make regularly: the capacity to kill another individual does not generally carry with it any right to do so, nor does the capacity to understand complex social relations itself grant any right to arrange them for others. The expert has to possess something more than mere expertise in order for there to be authority (in the strong sense) vested in them. That *something more* is social in character, and indeed structures the sort of society that can exist between individuals.

The question becomes where, in relations presumably guided by anarchist principles, that extra, social something could come from. The case of the parental relation is at least useful as a place to examine the possibilities. In order to be particularly careful, it may be useful to first address it in terms of the question of "legitimate authority" and then again in terms of "justifiable hierarchy."

There are some possible source of authority, such as *ownership* of the child by the parents, that we can probably set aside without much comment. Similarly, there seems to be little sympathy for the notion that the parental relation might be one in which might makes right. In general, even those who consider the parental relation necessarily authoritarian seem inclined to also treat it as a relation of care. Indeed, they often characterize parental guardianship as a duty, although it is often unclear to whom the duty is, or could be, owed. We'll return to the dynamic of duty and obligation. First, we should see if perhaps parental authority could just be a matter of superior capacity and expertise, and perhaps one that could make us think differently about "the authority of the bootmaker."

Certainly, one of the elements of the parent-child relation is that adults have a significantly greater experience of the world and the business of making our way through it relatively unscathed. They have capacities that are more developed in a variety of ways. If we were to assent to the notion that the difference between knowing how to make boots and not having those skills could be a source of authority, then certainly the difference between the skills and capacities of parent and child could be a similar source. The question becomes how a difference

in capacities is transformed into a right to command on the part of the more capable and a duty to obey on the part of the less capable.

Let's imagine a society of talented generalists, where skills and capacities are widely distributed and each individual is relatively self-sufficient. It is hard to imagine the rationale by which we would say that interference by certain individuals in the lives of others could be considered justified or legitimate. Perhaps the case of plucking someone out of harm's way would be the sort of exception we might note, but, in the case of individuals of equal capacities, it seems hard to characterize the act as one of authority. Under these circumstances, the intervention has to be considered one that we make on our own responsibility and if we find it was unwelcome, it isn't clear that we could justify our interference in any way that the recipient/victim should feel obliged to accept. Certainly, in a society of competent bootmakers, no particular bootmaker could be said to have much in the way of authority.

Let's consider then what happens if, in this society of competent bootmakers, one individual becomes expert. It still isn't clear that the additional capacity translates into any sort of authority. There are certainly likely to be economic effects as we begin to see specialization in a society, but there's no obvious way in which any power or right to command emerges from the scenario.

But let's consider the other end of a certain spectrum, in a society where we have a great deal of specialization—so much, in fact, that individuals are constantly confronted with the need to consult others to complete the most basic of tasks. The dynamics of the society will obviously be more complex, but it isn't clear that this extreme divvying-up of expertise provides much greater footholds for the establishment of authority, at least in the realm of principle. Here, every individual is, in theory, a potential authority when it comes to their particular specialization and a dependent in most other contexts, but in fact the complex interdependence means that all of that authority remains largely potential, since the social leverage available to each narrow specialization is minuscule in comparison to the combined importance of all the other forms of specialized expertise.

Now, in a more complex society there are more opportunities for equal interdependence to break down. That means that some of our specialists might find themselves gaining relative advantages as circumstances gave their skills particular importance. The various weapon-producers or food-producers might collude, under favorable circumstances, to transform their expertise into the power to command, but we would be hard put, I think, to find an anarchist principle to justify their actions. And I think we would have to say that the source of that possibility was more in the general incapacity of the population with regard to specific skills and the specific environmental circumstances than it was in the expertise of the individuals able to capitalize on the situation.

Obviously, we live in societies where the distribution of expertise lies between these extremes and where the existing conditions already structure which sorts of expertise have access to the power to command, whether it is a matter of commanding wealth in the market or obedience in a wide range of authoritarian institutions. But it isn't clear how our own societies differ from these extreme examples, where the question of "legitimate authority" arising from expertise is concerned. The power to command seems to emerge from just about every element in society *except* individual expertise: already existing political authority, economic monopoly, the comparative incapacity of others, accidents and "acts of God," etc. We can't seem to make the leap from "I can..." to "I may and others must..." but that is precisely the leap we have to make in order to establish some principle by which expertise itself really establishes some authority vested in the expert.

Add to these considerations Bakunin's comments on the corrosive effects of authority on expertise, and perhaps we can acknowledge we have to look elsewhere. The ultimate sanction of expertise is presumably truth, but practical truth in a developing context is not the sort of thing that stands still, so that sanction has to be renewed and tested by new study and experiment. So even if we could establish the present legitimacy of an authority based on the most rigorous sort of scientific truth, in some way that the non-expert could verify (and this is not at all clear), we have no guarantee that the legitimacy would remain as circumstances changed, while the exercise of the authority as such is itself at least potentially a break from the exercise of the practices of the field of expertise on which it is presumably based. Once crowned an expert, it is easy to stop renewing one's expertise.

When we apply these considerations to the parental relation, it doesn't seem any easier to explain why the greater capacities of the parent would alone establish a power to command or an obligation to obey in this instance than it is in the relations between adults. At the same time, there seem to be other explanations for why we might act in their defense that don't depend on either authority or even on the relative differences in capacity between adults and children. We might, after all, act to save another adult, without any attempt to establish authority or permission. We might do so out of specific relations of care or simply on the basis of our experience of what constitutes intentional and accidental behavior in our own societies. The major difference with children is that we can be fairly certain that nobody, except the child, is likely to make much fuss if our exercise of real or imagined authority seems to be "for the good of the child." And the reasons for that may have more to do with our tendency to think of children and their actions as existing within a "justifiable hierarchy" beneath adults and the ordinary workings of adult society.

The parent-child hierarchy is often cited as one of a class of educational or tutelary hierarchies. Tutelage is guardianship and in tutelary relations the assumption is that the subordinate (child, pupil, apprentice, etc.) is at least temporarily incapable of protecting themselves and their interests, so the right to exercise the power of command is based on the assumption that it is exercised for the subordinate—or at least "for their own good." Bakunin left open the possibility of exercising authority over very young children, because he understood human development as in part characterized by a progressive increase in humanity, at the very beginning of which children are effectively not yet human and need to be given the tools to take on their own development before they can start that progressive development on their own terms.

Even this may not be entirely defensible as a matter of principle. The familiar example of pulling a child back from traffic already assumes a particular sort of "adult world" in which the spaces for free exploration are dramatically limited by the business as usual of the institutions we have created. It isn't clear what could justify the busy street, in principled terms, so it is at least a little bit hard to know how that busy street contributes to the principled legitimization of the parental act.

But if we assume that, specifics aside, there will always be some set of coping skills that need to be acquired before children can assume responsibility for their own safety and development, we still have to work out just what form the tutelary hierarchy really takes—and then whether it amounts to evidence in favor of retaining some space for "legitimate authority" and "justified hierarchy" within anarchist thought.

Early in our examination, it was suggested that parental care might be a *duty*. Now, if this was the case, the parent would presumably be superior to the child because they were inferior to some other power that imposed the duty. We might certainly think of familiar circumstances,

under which the care of children is indeed dictated by law and by specific social norms, but I suspect we can also think of reasons why most of those factors which presume to dictate to the individual might not be consistent with anarchist principles or present in an anarchist society. We could also think of the duty as a duty to the child, but that puts us in the strange position of imagining a hierarchy in which the superior interest is that of a being elevated to that status by their incapacity. If there is a hierarchy here, it is an odd one, disconnected from our usual understanding of authority, since the child who cannot manage their own interests is hardly in a position to exercise a right to command.

Instead of a hierarchy, we seem to be left with one of those complicated relationships, like the guest-host relation of hospitality, where the roles are fluid and the usual rules are suspended. In this case, we have some of the forms of command and rule, but without any of the usual authoritarian or hierarchical rationales. Rather than being an exception to anarchist principles, perhaps we should understand the parental relation as a most accessible example of how anarchists principles ought to be applied in our struggle towards a more genuinely free society, characterized by more thoroughly anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical relations.

After all, the parental relation, with all of its negotiations between the rights and needs of children and those of parents, is not the sort of thing that we intend to maintain forever, assuming that we value our children as developing human beings. Confronted with the limited capacities of the child, our action is directed toward increasing those capacities. We teach and, in those instances where our teaching has not caught up with the needs of the day, we intervene more directly. But the hope, assuming that desire to see children grow up to be independent, is that the tutelage is a very temporary thing. And child-rearing is, like every other kind of expertise, itself a matter of practice and developing expertise. The specific difficulties of negotiating rights and interests mean that it is necessarily a work of trial-and-error. There's nothing easy or comfortable about the relation, particularly for those who concern themselves with the principled critique of authority, so there's even some strong incentives to move things along and reduce the quasi-hierarchical elements of the relation.

That doesn't sound like a set of reasons to make space in anarchist theory for any more extensive acceptance of hierarchy—and perhaps quite the contrary. It would seem to me that each time we are confronted with an imbalance of expertise and the opening to authoritarian relations, the logical anarchist response would be to work, on our own responsibility, to cultivate greater, more widespread knowledge and skill, rather than accommodating ourselves to the imbalance. There will, of course, be times when we have to move forward with the limitations imposed on us by hard necessity. That was, after all, the one law that anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin would acknowledge. But the point of necessity-as-law was not to grant authority to any particular response to the inevitable, but to emphasize that we must respond. How we respond will seldom be entirely dictated by our circumstances, which is precisely the reason that our principles need to be clear, so that we can advance most effectively, given our real limitations, toward the beautiful ideal of anarchy.

Mikhail Bakunin, “What is Authority” (1870)

NOTE: This passage is generally known as part of “God and the State” (*Dieu et l’État*, first published in 1882), but it appears in Bakunin’s manuscript as part of “Sophismes historiques de l’école doctrinaire des communistes allemands,” the second section of the unfinished book *L’Empire Knouto-Germanique et la Révolution Sociale* (*The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*.)

This new translation seeks to clarify some passages that may appear contradictory in existing translations. In particular the verb *repousser*, which previous translators have tended to simply render as “reject,” has been brought closer to its literal sense of “push back” and some attention has been given to distinguishing where Bakunin uses the word *autorité* to designate abstract authority and where he refers to particular experts or authority figures.

In the preceding section, Bakunin has been discussing, among other things, the idea of God, and the section ends with his reply to Voltaire’s comment that *if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him*:

If God really did exist, it would be necessary to get rid of him.

The severe logic that dictates these words is far too obvious to require a further development of this argument. And it seems to me impossible that the illustrious men, whose names (so celebrated and so justly respected) I have cited, should not have been struck by it themselves, and should not have perceived the contradiction into which they fell in speaking of God and human liberty at once. To have disregarded it, they must have considered this inconsistency or logical license practically necessary to humanity’s well-being.

Perhaps, too, while speaking of liberty as something very respectable and very dear, they understood the term quite differently than we do, as materialists and revolutionary socialists. Indeed, they never speak of it without immediately adding another word, authority—a word and a thing which we detest with all our heart.

What is authority? Is it the inevitable power of the natural laws which manifest themselves in the necessary concatenation and succession of phenomena in the physical and social worlds? Indeed, against these laws revolt is not only forbidden, but is even impossible. We may misunderstand them or still not know them at all, but we cannot disobey them, because they constitute the basis and very conditions of our existence; they envelop us, penetrate us, regulate all our movements, thoughts, and acts, so that even when we believe that we disobey them, we do nothing but demonstrate their omnipotence.

Yes, we are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But there is nothing humiliating in that slavery, or, rather, it is not slavery at all. For slavery supposes an external master, a legislator outside of the one whom he commands, while these laws are not outside of us; they are inherent in us; they constitute our being, our whole being, as much physically as intellectually and morally. We live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws. Without them we are nothing—we are not. From where, then, could we derive the power and the wish to rebel against them?

With regard to natural laws, only one single liberty is possible to man—that of recognizing and applying them more and more all the time, in conformity with the goal of collective and individual emancipation or humanization which he pursues. These laws, once recognized,

exercise an authority which is never disputed by the mass of men. One must, for instance, be at base either a fool or a theologian or at least a metaphysician, jurist, or bourgeois economist to rebel against the law by which 2×2 makes 4. One must have faith to imagine that fire will not burn nor water drown, unless one has recourse to some subterfuge that is still based on some other natural law. But these rebellions, or, rather, these attempts at or foolish fancies of an impossible revolt, only form a rare exception; for, in general, it may be said that the mass of men, in their daily lives, let themselves be governed by good sense—that is, by the sum of the natural laws generally recognized—in an almost absolute fashion.

The great misfortune is that a large number of natural laws, already established as such by science, remain unknown to the popular masses, thanks to the care of these tutelary governments that exist, as we know, only for the good of the people. There is another difficulty—namely, that the major portion of the natural laws that are inherent in the development of human society and that are every bit as necessary, invariable, and fatal as the laws that govern the physical world, have not been duly established and recognized by science itself.

Once they shall have been recognized by science, and then shall have passed, by means of an extensive system of popular education and instruction, from science into the consciousness of all, the question of liberty will be perfectly resolved. The most stubborn authoritarians must admit that then there will be no more need of political organization, direction or legislation, three things which, whether they emanate from the will of the sovereign or from the vote of a parliament elected by universal suffrage, and even should they conform to the system of natural laws—which has never been the case and could never be the case—are always equally deadly and hostile to the liberty of the masses, because they impose upon them a system of external and therefore despotic laws.

The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any foreign will, whether divine or human, collective or individual.

Suppose an academy of learned individuals, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose that this academy is charged with the legislation and organization of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love of truth, it only dictates to society laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science. Well, I maintain, for my part, that that legislation and organization would be a monstrosity, and that for two reasons: first, that human science is always necessarily imperfect, and that, comparing what it has discovered with what remains to be discovered, we we might say that it is always in its cradle. So that if we wanted to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a bed of Procrustes, which would soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life always remaining infinitely greater than science.

The second reason is this: a society that would obey legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood itself the rational character of this legislation (in which case the existence of the academy would become useless), but because this legislation, emanating from the academy, was imposed in the name of a science that it venerated without comprehending—such a society would be a society, not of men, but of brutes. It would be a second edition of that poor Republic of Paraguay, which let itself be governed for so long by the Society of Jesus. Such a society could not fail to descend soon to the lowest stage of idiocy.

But there is still a third reason that would render such a government impossible. It is that a scientific academy invested with a sovereignty that is, so to speak, absolute, even if it were

composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end by corrupting itself morally and intellectually. Already today, with the few privileges allowed them, this is the history of all the academies. The greatest scientific genius, from the moment that he becomes an academician, an officially licensed savant, inevitably declines and lapses into sleep. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary hardihood, and that troublesome and savage energy that characterizes the nature of the grandest geniuses, ever called to destroy obsolete worlds and lay the foundations of new ones. He undoubtedly gains in politeness, in utilitarian and practical wisdom, what he loses in power of thought. In a word, he becomes corrupted.

It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man deprived intellectually and morally. That is a social law that admits no exception, and is as applicable to entire nations as to classes, companies, and individuals. It is the law of equality, the supreme condition of liberty and humanity. The principal aim of this treatise is precisely to elaborate on it, to demonstrate its truth in all the manifestations of human life.

A scientific body to which had been confided the government of society would soon end by no longer occupying itself with science at all, but with quite another business; and that business, the business of all established powers, would be to perpetuate itself by rendering the society confided to its care ever more stupid and consequently more in need of its government and direction.

But that which is true of scientific academies is also true of all constituent and legislative assemblies, even when they are the result of universal suffrage. Universal suffrage may renew their composition, it is true, but this does not prevent the formation in a few years' time of a body of politicians, privileged in fact though not by right, who, by devoting themselves exclusively to the direction of the public affairs of a country, finally form a sort of political aristocracy or oligarchy. Witness the United States of America and Switzerland.

Consequently, no external legislation and no authority—one, for that matter, being inseparable from the other, and both tending to the enslavement of society and the degradation of the legislators themselves.

Does it follow that I drive back every authority? The thought would never occur to me. When it is a question of boots, I refer the matter to the authority of the cobbler; when it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For each special area of knowledge I speak to the appropriate expert. But I allow neither the cobbler nor the architect nor the scientist to impose upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and verification. I do not content myself with consulting a single specific authority, but consult several. I compare their opinions and choose that which seems to me most accurate. But I recognize no infallible authority, even in quite exceptional questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and the sincerity of such or such an individual, I have absolute faith in no one. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and even to the success of my undertakings; it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave and an instrument of the will and interests of another.

If I bow before the authority of the specialists and declare myself ready to follow, to a certain extent and as long as may seem to me necessary, their indications and even their directions, it is because that authority is imposed upon me by no one, neither by men nor by God. Otherwise I would drive them back in horror, and let the devil take their counsels, their direction, and their

science, certain that they would make me pay, by the loss of my liberty and human dignity, for the scraps of truth, wrapped in a multitude of lies, that they might give me.

I bow before the authority of exceptional men because it is imposed upon me by my own reason. I am conscious of my ability to grasp, in all its details and positive developments, only a very small portion of human science. The greatest intelligence would not be sufficient to grasp the entirety. From this results, for science as well as for industry, the necessity of the division and association of labor. I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn. So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination.

This same reason prohibits me, then, from recognizing a fixed, constant, and universal authority-figure, because there is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences, all the branches of social life. And if such a universality was ever realized in a single man, and if he wished to take advantage of it in order to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive that man out of society, because his authority would inevitably reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility. I do not think that society ought to maltreat men of genius as it has done hitherto; but neither do I think it should enrich them too much, nor, and this above all, grant them any privileges or exclusive rights; and that for three reasons: first, because it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; then, because, through such a system of privileges, it could transform even a true man of genius into a charlatan, demoralize and stupefy him; and, finally, because it would give itself a despot.

in summary, then, we recognize the absolute authority of science, because science has no other object than the mental reproduction, well thought out and as systematic as possible, of the natural laws inherent in the material, intellectual, and moral life of both the physical and the social worlds, these two worlds constituting, in fact, only one single natural world. apart from this legitimate authority, uniquely legitimate because it is rational and in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary, despotic and deadly.

We recognize the absolute authority of science, but we reject [*repoussons*] the infallibility and universality of the representatives of science. In our church—if I may be permitted to use for a moment an expression which I so detest: Church and State are my two *bêtes noires*—in our church, as in the Protestant church, we have a head, an invisible Christ, science; and, like the Protestants, more consistent even than the Protestants, we do not wish to suffer a pope, nor council, nor conclaves of infallible cardinals, nor bishops, nor even priests. Our Christ is distinguished from the Protestant and Christian Christ in this—that the latter is a personal being, while ours is impersonal; the Christian Christ, already fully realized in an eternal past, presents himself as a perfect being, while the fulfillment and perfection of our Christ, science, are always in the future: which is equivalent to saying that they will never be realized. Therefore, in recognizing no absolute authority but that of *absolute science*, we in no way compromise our liberty.

I mean by this phrase, “absolute science,” the truly universal science that would reproduce ideally, to its fullest extent and in all its infinite detail, the universe, the system or coordination of all the natural laws manifested in the incessant development of the world. It is obvious that such a science, the sublime object of all the efforts of the human mind, will never be realized in its absolute fullness. Our Christ, then, will remain eternally unfinished, which must considerably moderate the pride of his licensed representatives among us. Against that God the Son, in whose name they claim to impose their insolent and pedantic authority on us, we appeal to God the

Father, who is the real world, real life, of which their God is only the too-imperfect expression, and of which we, real beings, living, working, struggling, loving, aspiring, enjoying, and suffering, are the immediate representatives.

But, while rejecting [*repoussant*] the absolute, universal, and infallible authority of the men of science, we willingly bow before the respectable, but relative, very temporary, and very restricted authority of the representatives of special sciences, asking nothing better than to consult them by turns, and very grateful for the precious information that they should want give to us, on the condition that to receive such information from us on occasions when, and concerning matters about which, we are more learned than they; and, in general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exert over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever, celestial or terrestrial. We accept all natural authorities and all influences of fact, but none of right; for every authority or every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming straight away an oppression and a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us, as I believe I have sufficiently shown, slavery and absurdity.

In short, we reject all legislation, all authority, and every privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even that arising from universal suffrage, convinced that it can only ever turn to the advantage of a dominant, exploiting minority and against the interests of the immense, subjugated majority.

It is in this sense that we are really Anarchists.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur]