

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

Constructing an Anarchism: Collective Force

In general, I've had pretty good luck keeping up with the demands of the project, despite all of the distractions of multiple crises. This weekend I'm running a bit low on steam. So the post connecting the discussion of governmentalism with that of collective force will follow this post—which is perhaps not a bad thing—and should then be followed by a post discussing the polity-form, before I get to next week's discussion of the aubaines and exploitation.



Collective force — If you haven't read the selections from Proudhon's "Principles of the Philosophy of Progress," go ahead and do that. It's a remarkable text, which has been sadly neglected—having only fairly recently been published in French, but not yet in book form. The basic idea is that the things that we do together with others do not simply add up, but that specialization and association bring about the formation of *unity-collectivities*, social beings with qualities, strengths and perhaps even ideas that arise from the combination and unification of the constituent beings.

Proudhon applied the analysis of collective force to a variety of problems, from explaining capitalist exploitation in his earliest works to discussing political geography (the formation of nations, etc.) in his final manuscripts. In his work on *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, he used it to discuss the problem of "free will," concluding:

What then is liberty or free will? The power of collectivity of the individual.

Someone asked me yesterday to try to clarify just how *collective force* and "liberty or free will" might be connected and what that connection could tell us about anarchy. This was my response, which, however off-the-cuff it may be, strikes me as perhaps useful for those first encountering Proudhon's theory.

Every *individual*, whether a human individual or a group united by active association, is also a *group*—a *unity-collectivity*. The unity of the individual is a matter of *internal organization*, which may be simple or complex. The internal relations may also involve greater or lesser degrees of *intensity*. Sometimes greater intensity just means greater *health*, or some other kind of increased capacity, particularly where the relations are simple. And where relations are all simple, we would expect the actions of the individual to reflect its various influences fairly directly. In the chain of causes and effects, there is comparatively little in a simple individual to redirect the forces acting on it. So, for example, we think of animals as responding to stimuli in ways much more narrowly channeled by hardwired instincts than humans. As the internal mechanism of the individual organism becomes more complex, we expect the responses to external stimuli to be at least subject to considerably more mediation or processing before producing a reaction in the individual. And at some point the complexities of the individual organism are such that it's hard for us to describe the reaction as produced by the stimulus. Cause and effect are no doubt still at work, but the complexity of the processing mechanism means that the individual is forced to *choose*. If, then, "free will" is the capacity (or perhaps we should call it a determined *tendency*) to make choices, then it is (according to this reading) increased by

changes in the internal organization of the individual organism which complicate and delay responses that might otherwise be strongly determined by the stimuli received.

And that's half of the model, since the human individual or association exists within larger forms of association, which are subject to a similar internal dynamic.

An authoritarian society is characterized by constraining the responses of individuals comparatively tightly. If licit and illicit options are clearly defined in advance, then presumably the citizen of such a society needs to exercise very little individual power to choose. Relations among individuals are largely mediated by the central authority (reducing certain basic kinds of complexity) and conflict is presumably reduced by the compliance of individuals. If the citizens of this society were water in a boiler, we wouldn't expect to see them bouncing off one another much or with much force—simply because their interactions are limited and mediated by authority. Within an authoritarian society, an individual may have to internal organization necessary to make choices, but is going to lack the opportunities and occasions we might expect to encounter in an anarchic society, where there is no central mediating authority and no legal code constraining choices artificially.

Looking at the anarchic society we can easily talk about about the freedom that this *social body* affords its *members* by not constraining their choices. That much seems easy, I think. But if those members have no internal capacity to choose, there isn't much sense in noting the lack of constraint. So presumably human freedom has two sides: one addressing organization internal to the human individual and one addressing organization internal to some larger social body. And both sides need to afford conditions for freedom if we are to recognize it as actually existing. But what Proudhon also suggests—by connecting the quantity of freedom associated with a unity-multiplicity and the quantity of collective force generated within it—is that the same conditions of organization that he associates with greater productive capacity, increasing complexity and intensity in internal relations, also produce greater freedom for the members.

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It feels sort of strange to share this kind of interaction in the context of this particular project, although similar on-the-spot responses are a regular part of most days on the internet. I'm probably getting a little spoiled, in this context, having so much leeway to choose the limbs I climb out on.

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Having “officially” introduced the concept of collective force here at about the midpoint of my construction, I'll dedicate much of the rest of my time to explaining a variety of ways in which it might inform « my own anarchism ». But perhaps the most important thing to emphasize at this point is just what a difference the possibility of talking about anarchist relations in these terms has made for me as my own thought has developed.

We just looked at *governmentalism* — and if the term itself is not particularly *au courant* in modern anarchist circles, it's pretty hard to escape any of the related terms in our internal discussions—and it is fairly common to find many of them used in at least nominally anarchist discourse in ways that suggest that anarchism is doomed to have no language of its own. Terms like “justified hierarchy,” “legitimate authority,” “pure democracy” and the like are often used, I am sure, without any intention to confuse or mislead. And there is, after all, a fine old libertarian

tradition of stretching archaic language to indicate at least potentially anarchic ideas: *self-ownership*, *self-government*, “the authority of the bootmaker,” etc. But those sorts of potentially subversive borrowings seem prone to losing whatever edge they might have had, leading us back toward governmentalism at least as often as they lead us deeper into anarchic territory.

The problem, of course, is that the defenders of the *language* of democracy and the like can pose roughly the same challenge as those who defend democratic *practices* — *What is your alternative?* — and with roughly equal chances of nobody effectively calling their bluff. (*Anarchy?* we respond. — *But what does that really mean?* — And it’s not always so easy to make ourselves clear.) We really do seem to lack much language that even anarchists will recognize as designating truly non-governmental relations.

At various times in my own development as an anarchist, I’ve attempted to force a bit more clarity on my own thoughts by setting some limits on the language I would allow myself in the explanation and exploration of anarchist ideas. I made a months-long trial separation with the language of *mutualism* and have for some years now generally limited my use of the term anarchism to descriptions of anarchist thought in the period after the death of Bakunin — not, in either case, because there weren’t other vocabularies that might be used, but because a bit of discipline with regard to word choice helped to reinforce connections or the lack of connections between the various ideas and movements I was examining.

When I discovered Proudhon’s social science — hiding in plain sight, of course, in works that looked very different once I was able to understand them in the context of that developing project — I gained both a useful set of analytic tools and a vocabulary that didn’t rely on turning the language of government, hierarchy and authority back on itself. Having already begun to think of anarchy as fundamentally descriptive of structures, a descriptive language that could emphasize forces and their dynamics — owing as much to physics as political science — was welcome. And, as a tool for suggesting potential renovations of anarchist theory, it had the combination of qualities that I have come to think of as close to ideal: it was at once “new,” in the sense that it is unfamiliar to most anarchists, and as old and orthodox as just about anything in the tradition, being the glue that holds together “property is theft” and “je suis anarchiste” in one of the most influential (if not always the most clearly understood) of early anarchist texts.

The theory and the vocabulary let me talk about anarchy — about anarchic relations — in a much more direct way than I had experienced before. Whether or not I have made good use of that opportunity is, no doubt, something readers will have to judge for themselves as I continue to describe my construction of anarchism. It hasn’t been an easy toolkit to learn to use, but I feel like I am slowly but surely getting somewhere.

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This week’s readings are related to the analyses in Proudhon’s *What is Property?* Those unfamiliar with the work can take a look at my [notes on the text](#) for an overview. Much of the work is focused on Proudhon’s theory of exploitation — a more consistently anarchistic alternative to the marxian theory of surplus value. The extension of that discussion in the “Notes on Contribution and Disposition” — an ambitious and exploratory, so perhaps not always absolutely lucid attempt to apply Proudhonian terms — takes anarchist communist economics as a foil.

Frédéric Tufferd, "Unity in Socialism" (1887)

We begin to talk of union, to understand that the ridiculous disputes which have divided the socialists thus far, to the great joy of the bourgeois, should come to an end, if we want socialism to become something more than a powerless dream. But how will we bring about union among the different socialist schools? Obviously, by establishing socialism on a demonstrable basis, and no longer on a few unproven principles, about which we can dispute endlessly without ever agreeing. Ask the astronomers if the earth is round and if it orbits around the sun, and all will be in agreement; ask them if there are inhabitants in the moon, and their opinions will be divided. In the first case, the astronomers know; in the second, they can only rely on analogies of which nothing proves the reality.

If I say that a man who lets himself fall from the sixth floor will be killed when he hits the pavement, everyone, materialists or spiritualists, atheists or deists, anarchists or collectivists, will agree with me, for they all recognize that this is a necessary consequence of the law of gravity. But if I add that this man, after his death, will begin again a new existence here or elsewhere, some will say yes, others no, and those who have the largest dose of good sense will say to me: You know nothing of it, any more than I do.

When I say that as long as there are men who, without producing, take the lion's share for themselves, the workers will be reduced to the bare minimum, I do not have to debate about God and the state, socialism or anarchy; it is enough to prove that all wealth comes from labor, and that the sum of social wealth equals that of labor accomplished; because any deduction which is not represented by any labor diminishes proportionally the portion of the laborer.

If we only mean by the word "God" the angry, vengeful and jealous Jehovah of Moses, heaven's despot, symbol and support of the despots of the earth, every sensible man needs no reasoning to be convinced that such a God is impossible. But the word "God" also means the directing force of the universe, the principle of movement and life. What is this principle? We know nothing about it; it is the great unknown, and that is all. Will we then take the unknown for the basis of socialism?

I do not know what God is, and consequently neither affirm nor deny its existence. Nor do I know what is matter and what is spirit. Is matter a reality or a simple illusion of the senses? I don't know. Bakunin thought of matter, not as inert, but as endowed with movement and life; but where is the proof of that assertion? All that I know is that there are in nature some sensible manifestations produced by forces that the senses cannot perceive, but that the intelligence conceives. What are these forces, and where do they come from? What is movement, and what is life? I do not know. Thus I can be neither materialist, nor spiritualist, nor atheist, nor deist. On these questions I doubt and I seek; and if I express an opinion, I am careful not to make it the basis of social reform. It is long since Proudhon said: "We know nothing of substances and causes; we only know relations."

But if our science of substances and causes is null and void, there is one thing that we know: it is that the laws of nature are immutable. An astronomer can predict the eclipses which will take place in the future and calculate those that have taken place in the past. The magnet attracts, and will always attract, iron. Hydrogen will always combine with oxygen to form water. On the laws of nature that we know, our science is complete, absolute. For every phenomenon of which we understand the laws, we can infer the past and predict the future; and when we know the economic laws of society, we can calculate the social phenomena with the same certainty as the astronomer who calculates the course of the stars. Thus, let us study the economic laws which

direct social evolution, if we want to put an end to disputes and divergences of opinion. Do we see the astronomers argue about the movement of the planets or chemists argue about the formation of salts. Would we dream of putting the theorems of geometry or the proportions of the logarithms in doubt? Let us cease then taking the unknown for our basis, and start from the facts to discover the laws, and from the laws determine the future organization of society.

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. Even if society ever succeeds in realizing the ideal of the universal Republic, that Republic will still be composed of distinct States, in solidarity with one another, but each living its own life.

As long as the socialists quarrel over God, nature and the State, there will be no more harmony among them that there could be between the zealot who believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ and the free-thinker who denies it. The astronomer, the physicist, and the chemist do not have to quarrel about God and matter; they only concern themselves with determining the laws of the phenomena that they study. It is time that the socialists imitate them and concern themselves with determining the laws of social phenomena.

I do not propose to determine these laws here; that would be impossible in a journal article. My aim is less to answer the questions than to indicate the way. Thus I will content myself with sketching the social problem from the point of view of wages and *aubaine*.

All wealth comes from labor. Natural goods are useful only after labor has collected, modified, and prepared them. Even wild fruits rot on the vine without any utility, if labor does not gather them. To labor is to modify the natural materials in order to render them proper for the satisfaction of our needs. Labor creates nothing, it only accomplishes a change of form (art), or a change of place (transportation), or a distribution (commerce). The one who measures fabric works as much as those who transport or make it; for the production does not stop when the product is finished, it is only finished when it is delivered to the consumer. Doubtless commerce hardly knows how to do anything today but defraud and deceive; but it is not for that any less a necessary part of social labor. We do more work with a harvesting machine with a sickle, but when we do not have the machine, we must use the sickle. Similarly, as long as we have not reorganized commerce, we must make it serve us such as it is.

If all wealth comes from labor, there can only be two means of living: either at the expense of one's own labor, by *wages*; or at the expense of the labor of others, by *aubaine*.

I designate as wages every remuneration for a useful labor delivered in the marketplace, however it is collected. To receive a wage, it is not necessary for the worker to have a boss. Those who work on their own behalf receive their wages by selling their products; and the merchants receive their own by a profit on sales. I do not have to concern myself here with badly distributed wages; I have only to indicate the fact that everyone who delivers a useful labor in the marketplace has a right to a wage which allows them to take from the market an equivalent labor of their choice.

I designate as *aubaine* every collection of income which takes some value from the market without replacing it by a useful labor of equal value; for then it can only be made on the labor of others.

There are three sorts of *aubaines*: rent, interest, and profit. The rent is made up of the income (*rente*) from the soil and the interest from buildings and other immovable properties.

The more fertile a plot of land is, the higher the *rente* from it is. It is, however, not the labor of the proprietor which has created the fertility of the soil.

The better situated a plot of land is, the higher the *rente* from it is. The high rents in Paris do not come from the price of the houses, for a house costs no more to build in Paris than in Pontoise; they come from the location. It is their situation which makes it so that for each square meter of land, one can do more business and employ more labor than one could on as many acres in the country. It is not, however, the labor of the proprietor which has made the roads, canals, railways and towns.

Thus, the income is only an *aubaine*, and in the majority of cases the rent of immovable property is nothing else. It costs to construct, repair, and maintain a house; thus it is fair to pay a rent sufficient to reimburse these costs; but to whom? To the proprietor? Are there many proprietors who have themselves built the houses that they rent to us, or who have paid for the construction by their own labor? Isn't it almost always money from the *aubaines* which has paid for the building? Each has a right to demand payment for all the increase in values that they labor has added to the soil; but no one has the right to appropriate the labor of others.

If the *rente* does not belong to the proprietor, does it belong to the tenant or leaseholder? No, for it is not the fruit of the labor of either. And yet, whatever social order we suppose, the *rente* will exist, for there will always be parcels of land which, with equal labor, will yield more than others.

To whom, then, does the *rente* belong? To society, obviously, for the advantages of fertility come from the free gifts of nature, and those of situation result from social development. Let the *rente* cease to be paid to the proprietor, and be paid to the state, in the place of taxes, and justice will be realized. Conditions will be equal, for each will pay in proportion to the advantages of the land that they occupy, and the *rente* will profit everyone, since it will remunerate all the works of public utility. As for the rent of immovable property, it will be reduced to the rate necessary to reimburse costs, plus an insurance premium in anticipation of accidents. When each pays rent only to the commune and the state, a fifth of the present rents will amply suffice for all public expenses.

Interest, whether it is taken as interest on loans, dividends on stocks or government bonds, is only an *aubaine*. How will we make it disappear? Obviously, by replacing private credit, which is expensive, by public credit, which will be free. Instead of granting the Bank of France to a company which will pocket the profits, we could make it a national bank which discounts and credits without interest, with its notes, on good security. Then its notes will no longer be a promise of reimbursement on gold on demand, guaranteed by bullion; they would be bills or exchange guaranteed by public fortune.

As for profit, to abolish it, it would be necessary to make industry and commerce no longer individual speculations, but social agencies for production and distribution. When the bank credits its interests, it could credit the workers organizations in order to open workshops and stores, on the condition that they produce and sell at cost-price, without profits other than those necessary to cover wages, general costs and insurance premiums. It is claimed that only individual are prosperous, — the monopolies of the companies are certainly not the proof of it, — but if they can do better than the workers' organizations, they will persist; if they cannot, they will become bankrupt, and industry will gradually pass into the hands of the workers.

But if we can leave time and competition to reorganize commerce and industry on social bases, this is not the case with the large monopolies, which it is urgent to make disappear as soon as possible. There is no doubt that the post carries our letters more cheaply than it would if it was the monopoly of one company, and for good reason that the state does not seek to make a fortune and has no dividends to pay to anyone. Now that the telegraphs belong to the state in England, telegrams cost much less, and for the same reason. Let us give notice to all the stockholders, and it will be the same with the other monopolies.

This is social reform sketched in broad strokes and deduced, no longer from vague and indeterminate notions, but from social phenomena that everyone can easily verify. Let the socialists go down this road, and they will soon cease to argue.

Another cause of disputes is the means of action. But they depend on times, places, and circumstances, and what is impossible today may perhaps be possible tomorrow. It is not up to us whether the revolution is accomplished violently or peacefully; that will depend on events that we can neither predict nor control, and on the will of our legislators and rulers. Let those legislators and ruler consent to the most urgent reforms and we will bear with the rest. The people do not revolt for the pleasure of smashing streetlights; when the rebel it is because their condition has become intolerable and because they feel the need of escaping it at any price. It is up to our masters to decide if the revolution will be violent or peaceful; as for us socialists, let us first study which reforms will resolve the problem of misery and bring about liberty, equality, solidarity, and justice for all. The circumstances will suggest the means of action. If some socialists want to employ means that we think must fail, we are free to not assist them; but must we impede them, and thus do ourselves the work of the masters?

The *aubaine* is the cause of poverty, and yet our rulers constantly strive to increase the *aubaines*. Companies issue more shares than they have real capital; governments contract new loans each year, always swelling in this way the ranks of the parasitic army of *state-rentiers*; government positions and sinecures are multiplied everywhere; the leprosy of parasitism invades everything, and as a necessary, inevitable result, poverty becomes misery, and misery become famine. The terrible cry of 1789—*For bread! For bread!*—still resounds on all sides. Perhaps there is still time to avoid the cataclysm, but we must make haste! It is no longer only bankruptcy, *hideous bankruptcy* which threatens us, it is famine and despair.

To decrease the *aubaines* will be to increase wages by that much; to suppress them would be to render wages equal to product, while leaving to the state a vast revenue, the *rente*. Every reform which diminishes the *aubaines* is useful. War to the *aubaines!*

Frédéric Tufferd

Source: *La Société Nouvelle*, 3 no. 2 (1887) 223-228.

[Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur; revised February 26, 2013.]

Collective force: notes on contribution and disposition

A force of one thousand men working twenty days has been paid the same wages that one would be paid for working fifty-five years; but this force of one thousand has done in twenty days what a single man could not have accomplished, though he had labored for a million centuries. Is the exchange an equitable one? Once more, no; when you have paid all the individual forces, the collective force still remains to be paid. — P.-J. Proudhon, *What is Property?*

I think that the concept of *collective force* and the theory of *exploitation* that Proudhon developed from it are at least increasingly well known among anarchists. But, even in mutualist circles, when we talk about non-capitalist economies, we still tend to focus on “the worker’s right to the full product of their labor,” without much attention to the difficulties of knowing what “their labor” means for any given worker. So how do we make sense of the various contributions to production, incorporating the Proudhonian analysis, so that we can make practical proposals regarding the distribution of its fruits?

This is a set of questions that might take us in a variety of directions, but what I would like to do is to try to simply propose a general *formula*—on the model of the communist “from each according to ability, to each according to need”—that could guide further exploration. These formulas are not blueprints, but they are concise visions. In the communist instance, while we can imagine all sorts of conflicts and confusions regarding specific instances of “ability” or “need,” we can also pretty easily understand why the formula describes a system that would almost certainly work, provided that those uncertainties could be addressed.

We might even take the familiar communist formula as a more general formula for non-capitalist economies. What the theory of collective force suggests is that, in a well-organized economy of any complexity, we might expect modest contributions by individuals to result, thanks to the multiplying power of association, in subsistence for all—even in cases where the individual contributions might not, if isolated from one another, be sufficient to meet individual needs. And it isn’t likely to change things much if the distribution of the fruits of labor takes the form of the communistic *prise au tas* (free consumption), some form of non-capitalist market or some combination of those approaches. Communistic distribution simply adds the wages of individuals to the fruits of collective labor and *puts it on the pile*. If you want instead to divvy up the fruits of association among the contributing individuals, any division that is not wildly out of proportion with the contributions made should enrich those individuals and expand the capacity of the economy to support those who cannot contribute directly. Of course, outside of a capitalist economy—where contribution essentially means *capacity to create a profit for a capitalist*—there will be considerably less concern about ability to contribute. But the key issue, when it comes to addressing the needs of those who might need particular social assistance, will arguably not be the mode of division of the fruits of collective force, but instead the organization of productive association itself and increases in the multiplying capacities of collective force.

The question becomes whether or not we can produce a general formula with the elegance of the familiar communist example—one about which we might at least say that “it works when it works,” as, of course, there are all the unanswered questions about capacities and needs to be addressed. If we are not assuming the simplicity of the communistic “pile”—if, for example, we retain a lively interest in avoiding the individual experience of exploitation, even in less systemic forms—then perhaps we might begin by suggesting something like this:

- From each: a share of the socially necessary labor commensurate with their capacities—performed with an awareness of larger contexts.
- To each: a subsistence—and a share of whatever social wealth is produced through association of labor.

But, again, that just gestures at the real complexities involved, including the issue of collective force. In order to grapple more directly with all of that, let's move from a largely individualized account to one that recognizes three classes of contribution:

1. *Ambient contribution*: all of the contributions of collective force from sources outside a given association of producers;
2. *Collective contribution*: the collective force generated by a particular association;
3. *Individual contribution*: the productive power of isolated individuals or of each associated producer's efforts if exerted individually at a task similar to that performed within the association.

We know that the various kinds of contribution are connected. Assuming the best case, where the elements are in relative harmony, increases in ambient force should decrease the contributions at other scales necessary to provide for subsistence, increase general prosperity, accommodate more individuals unable or unwilling to contribute, etc. The key concern is that the ambient force remains free, unmonopolized by any class or faction, so that it can do this sort of general work. But we've essentially defined the *ambient* force as the contributions that can't be attributed to any particular individual contribution, or even to any particular association of individuals, so, while each individual has an interest in maintaining and enhancing this general multiplying force, they can only do so by associating their labor more locally with an eye to larger dynamics.

In the best case, that probably means simply making an effort not to gum up the works, while being vigilant about the possibilities of the ambient force being monopolized. And, because the production of collective force is as much a matter of controlled conflict as it is simple cooperation, there seems to be plenty of room for self-interested behavior in the mix. Perhaps very little is called for, in this case, other than a particularly robust sort of *anti-monopolism*, informed by anarchistic sociology, extending beyond Tucker's "four monopolies" to address monopolization of collective force as a systemic element in *archic* social structures.

We are not likely, however, to have the luxury of working with a best case scenario any time soon after the defeat of those *archic* systems. The material base of society is likely to require a significant transformation, which will take some time. But we might think of that necessary transition as a blessing in disguise, as what will be required of us under those less-than-ideal circumstances is just a steady advance toward anarchic relations.

That process will demand careful analysis of the institutions we are transforming and new consultative networks to provide feedback on the systemic effects of our efforts. I imagine a "complete" transformation, assuming such a thing is possible, would involve a fairly complete abandonment of the *polity-form* and the replacement of the governmental apparatus with this new consultative apparatus. Priorities will be driven by real needs, as we are likely to find that the institutions established by capitalism and governmentalism really aren't all that well suited to providing generally for human subsistence—let alone a more general prosperity. Potential enterprises will be constrained by the state of the transformation. And the more abstract sorts of

calculation problems probably won't materialize, as our choices will be limited in a variety of ways.

Individuals who want to be relatively self-sufficient will have to work for the social conditions under which that is a possibility, often by working with others to establish sustainable patterns of resource use. But certainly they can be afforded all of the autonomy that they can create without engaging in harmful or monopolistic behavior towards others. If they benefit from the effects of ambient force, no one is the poorer for it—and, ultimately, there ought to be plenty of opportunities for even loners to contribute their share to flows of information, expertise, etc. in the public domain.

Those inclined to association will have plenty of opportunities to explore, although there may be some heavy lifting involved ridding our associations of *archic* elements that we presently take for granted. Abandonment of the *firm*, which is really just the polity-for transported into the economic sphere will mean that the unity of given associations will be complex. What Proudhon suggested about social collectivities was that they are indeed a kind of real social actor, with their own interests and a particular form of agency, but that, in an anarchic society, they must not be elevated in any way above the human individuals who are also parts of their complex whole.

Accounting for the equality of human individuals and social *individualities* across a range of scales—with only the first being what Proudhon called *free absolutes*, capable of self-consciousness and reflection—is bound to make demands on our understanding of social relations that are novel—or very nearly so.

But there is also a kind of simplification that comes with this theoretical shift, as, when we turn back to the question of the disposition of collective force, we can treat all of the various contributors we have to account for as individuals of one variety or another. So, for example, we can begin with the assumption that in an anarchistic society choices about the disposition of the fruits of labor ought to be in the hands of the laborer—even if that laborer is an association, recognized as a kind of collective person. But we can recognize that each individual, at whatever scale, is likely to have complex investments and interests — (and here the recent posts on anarchist individualism ought to provide useful insights) — while, at the same time, each instance of more-or-less individual labor also has to be understood in terms of a collaboration of sorts with what we have been calling the ambient contributions.

In order to understand the general dynamic of a society or economy understood in these terms, we might return to the rudimentary “social system,” proposed by Proudhon in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, which I have often discussed in terms of an *anarchic encounter*:

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

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

In this account, we already have indication of a general equality of actors. Elsewhere, as in his discussion of what I've called the citizen-state, Proudhon clarifies that the equation applies to circumstances like the encounter of an individual and an anarchistic “state.” And then the addition of ambient force to our analysis suggests that something very similar occurs even when individuals act in relative isolation, so that we might say that every attempt to act according to

this model demands the recognition of the interests of others, if only, in the most isolated cases, in a very general way. “Don’t gum up the works.”

Constructing Anarchisms: The Anarchist and « Their Own »

The level of difficulty in this work varies considerably from post to post—or from paragraph to paragraph—and from moment to moment. Thoroughly stuck in the middle of this post, for example, I turned to the material on collective force and worked through it in record time. Then I pattered at translation and went to bed. Or tried to go to bed. Got up and re-outlined the opening for this post. Went back to bed. Got up again and scribbled a bit more in a notebook. Made a bit of headway the next day. Ran errands. Took the afternoon ramble—and came back with the outline for a short, but potentially book on individualism and anarchist practice...

So now it's a matter of pulling what is immediately related to our joint project, while perhaps gesturing at the range of other pieces that fairly suddenly seem to have fallen into place.



I've started to talk about the shift from *governmentalism* to *collective force* in terms of a shift in vocabulary. *What would we talk about and how would we talk about it, if we could manage to stop talking about governmental norms and institutions?* And that's not a simple question. A certain kind of subversive use of governmentalist language is traditional and has, with some mixture of positive and negative effects, provided the traditional with some of its most durable phrases: *property is theft, the authority of the bootmaker, I am an anarchist...* In that last case, there has certainly been some progress in giving the language of *anarchy* a distinctly non-governmental sense, but it seems hard to deny that some of anarchists' struggles with the concept of anarchy reflect a failure to let go of old notions. Stirner's critique of "property is theft" as a moralizing affirmation of sacred property is arguably a very bad reading of Proudhon, but perhaps applies to a lot of the subsequent success of the phrase, divorced, as it has been in most instances, from the specific critiques with which it was originally associated. And how do we explain the way that Bakunin's aside about expertise has overshadowed most of the rest of the discussion of authority in "God and the State"—including the remarkable passages on the anarchistic "revolt of life against science"—if they are not a reflection of a failure or unwillingness to let go? The strictly rhetorical defenses of the language of democracy, which lean on its familiarity—as if not even another rhetoric was possible—seem like more of the same.

We have to ask ourselves, I think, if these issues haunt our encounters with the idea of "making anarchism our own." There is, after all, nothing particularly simple about the notion of *property* in an anarchist context. So it is comparatively easy to talk (and talk and talk) about the potential and potential hazards of *anarchy* and *anarchism*, but, when we try to come to grips with the notion of « our own », the difficulties seem much greater.

Stirner arguably provides us with one of the most direct approaches to a theory of anarchistic *individuality* or *personality*, but the *einzig*e can be slippery, elusive, particularly when we try to put it to use in a shared context. That shouldn't surprise us, particularly as one version of Stirner-inspired egoism—as we find it in John Beverley Robinson's essay "Egoism," for example—starts with the premise that "each one of us stands alone in the midst of a universe." Egoism seldom stops there. We soon find ourselves back in the realm of egoistic unions, camaraderie, even encountering the egoism of collectives in the work of James L. Walker, but we are seldom far from the *solitaires* and *only ones*, vagabonds and hermits.

The obvious question is whether or not a theory of anarchistic individuality influenced by Stirner is going to be any use to us, when the alternative to governmentalism already proposed is one rooted in an analysis of collective force—an analysis that takes as its basic premise that individuals are always already *associated*—so very clearly not “alone in the midst of a universe.” Those who accompanied me on the “Rambles in the Fields of Anarchist Individualism” won’t be surprised to hear me say that, yes, I believe that Stirner and Proudhon can work together well in this context. But I want to make the argument in a considerably less meandering form here.

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For those who haven’t read the “Rambles...,” there are links to both the original posts and a pdf collection in the sidebar—and much that will be addressed rapidly here is dealt with there in more detail.

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We want to “make anarchism our own” and we want to conceptualize *ownness*—a matter of individuality and of property—in as non-governmental a manner as we can. Having pointed out some of the ways in which we tend to fall short of non-governmental conceptions, we should be prepared to perhaps be a bit extreme in our attempts to strip away all of the archaic trappings. And, of course, Stirner is a fine guide in that sort of project.

Consider this passage from “Stirner’s Critics:”

Only when *nothing* is said about you and you are merely *named*, are you recognized as you. As soon as *something* is said about you, you are only recognized as that thing (human, spirit, christian, etc.). But the unique doesn’t say anything because it is merely a name: it says only that you are you and nothing but you, that you are a *unique* you, or rather your self. Therefore, you have no attribute, but with this you are at the same time without determination, vocation, laws, etc.

So what if we were to at least begin with this goal of saying nothing about the individual—or of unsaying, rejecting the full range of things that tend to subordinate the individual as a being in constant evolution to any number of types, models and standards—“human, spirit, christian, etc.”? (“As long as even one institution exists which the individual may not dismantle, my ownness and self-possession are still very far away.”) As an exercise in anarchistic analysis, peeling back all the various layers by which the *unique* is reduced to *types* seems likely to be both satisfying and useful. It’s also likely, at times, to be awkward and perhaps painful, as we can hardly help but have attachments to at least some of the things that are said about us and that connect us with others about whom similar things are said. Some of those things will, in fact, be of vital importance to us under present circumstances. While we may dream of a kind of radical anarchistic *self-creation*, in the context of which we would no longer have any use for attributes and expression (to pick up some of the details of Stirner’s exposition), that doesn’t seem to be a space in which even Stirner can remain for long.

That shouldn’t bother us, I think—and it certainly shouldn’t bother us here, where we are quite explicitly treating Stirner’s thought as “our food,” consuming the bits that seem useful in an analysis that will at least flirt with the project of a type of anarchist individuality. This paring

away of the layers of potentially archaic associations—constraints on anarchistic thought—is just the first step of a process and we are almost immediately led to the second.

Indeed, Stirner is one of those who suggests the next move, as we turn from the question of the individual's proper name to that of their shape and extent. Having done our best to rid ourselves of phantasms, fixed ideas about our own being—a process much like Proudhon's "elimination of the absolute"—we still want to know something about the "you and nothing but you," with its "thoughtless content," which "cannot exist a second time and so also cannot be *expressed*," but does presumably exist *once*. We can accept that this constantly evolving individuality cannot be expressed in its fullness, but we might still find some uses for a rough sketch or approximation, a snapshot of sorts of its interactions with the world.

We haven't really strayed that far from Proudhon in all this. He had already made his case against fixed ideas before *The Unique and Its Property* was published. Where Stirner was thinking about the inexpressible content of the unique, Proudhon was concerning himself with the approximate nature of representation in the face of a *progress* understood in terms of constant change. Proudhon provoked Stirner with his declaration that "property is theft," but the account that Stirner gave of property hardly seems incompatible with an analysis—if we are to concern ourselves with analysis, recognizing that it is not the same as *expression of the unique*—based in the theory of collective force. And I feel fairly confident that a more extended comparison would demonstrate that the ideas of both Stirner and Proudhon are largely assimilable to an anarchistic and at least minimally typifying account of individuality.

So our search for a theory of the anarchistic subject might begin with an elimination of the *absolute*, a paring away of governmentalist and quasi-governmentalist elements and lenses, before turning to a sort of mapping of the individual in terms of the extent of its reach and its (no doubt complex) internal dynamics. The insistence on laying bare the solitary individual—the *einzig* as "only one"—would, of course, seem unlikely to result in a diminishing of that unique, which, to borrow a couple of phrases from Whitman, almost certainly "contains multitudes" and is "not contain'd between its hat and boots." Sticking close to Stirner's analysis, for example, we'll have to account for the ways in which « our relations »—« our intercourse »—is not external to the solitary self. Even the "union of egoists" remains, in important ways, a part of the inexpressible content of the *einzig*.

That points us in a new direction, back away from the potential vanishing point of the solitary "only one," but hopefully down some path that does not simply lead back to archaic, governmentalist or sacred conceptions of the self. And, honestly, I'm still not quite sure where that road leads, either in terms of the new ways we might develop to speak about more fully anarchistic individuals and forms of association or in terms of the practices we might find ourselves elaborating in some new language. Being honest and a bit insistent about that is probably the best thing at this point, even if we have clues and glimpses of the language and practice to come.



I've said on various occasions recently—and will no doubt continue to insist—that I am neither an individualist nor an egoist, despite my rather obsessive engagement with the thought of figures like E. Armand. That doesn't mean that a certain, and rather extreme, conception of the individual—one that hovers at the edge of various abysses and might, in a pinch, answer to the name of "creative nothing"—is not absolutely central to a recurring moment my understanding

of anarchist theory. But, ultimately, my inspiration is more Whitman than Stirner—and there is another equally extreme moment in which the path from the individual through the various forms of its intercourse seems to lead to unity-collectivities on the largest of scales, without any very clear way to determine when or if we left a given individual behind.

The oscillation between those extreme moments, and through endless complexities at a full range of intermediate scales, squares with my understanding of ecological realities and echoes what seems to me most usefully provocative about analyses like Charles Fourier's treatment of the *passions*. (And my attachment to the *papillon* will perhaps not have gone unnoticed.) There seem to me to be purely practical reasons why an attempt to radically rethink our relationships to one another and to the world around us simply cannot afford to balk at confronting the extremes.

It's not like anarchists really shy away from extremity anyway. Instead, we seem most likely to have directions in which we will go to almost any length and others in which we'll balk at the first sign of an unwelcome notion ("individualism," "collectivism," etc.) It just isn't clear that the theories and theorists that we tend to attach ourselves to really back us up in our exclusive preferences.

Anyway, as I said at the outset, once this material started to fall into place, it was clear that there was more like a book than a blog's worth of exposition to tackle. We can only sketch an outline here. But I do want to return once more to the questions of anarchism as movement and tradition in this partially transformed context.

The thing that Proudhon's analysis confronts us with—something also perhaps implied by the suggestions about collective egoism in Walker's work—is the possibility that it is not just human individuals that we have to account for, even when we are focused fairly close to the individualist end of the spectrum. Once we strip away all of the false claims to authority and all the legal fictions, there are still arrangements of forces on a scale that we would recognize as social that seem to have and pursue interests of their own. And not all of them are likely to be phantasms given flesh, so to speak, by our acceptance of them. Some will almost certainly emerge from the combination of more or less self-interested actions on the part of human individuals—and some of those will have the often laudable effect of amplifying the reach of those individuals. Without confining human relations to some rather simple, narrow range, the emergence of unity-collectivities of a rather persistent character seems hard to avoid.

And one way of thinking about anarchism as such, rather than as the individual ideas of specific human beings or groups of human beings, is as one of these persistent presences, emerging and developing its vague and often changeable character as a result of a long and complicated history of more or less anarchistic thoughts and deeds. The relationship of individual anarchists to that kind of anarchism would necessarily be complicated, involving the transformation of individual acts by their connection to the emergent complex and transformations, probably much harder to achieve to any significant degree, of the complex by the more or less willing association of individuals with it.

A few weeks down the road, I'll be adding the notion of *encounter* to my list of concepts, drawing on an old claim of mine that within anarchy "every meaningfully social relation will have the form of an anarchic encounter between equally unique individuals—free absolutes—no matter what layers of convention we pile on it." This was my first serious attempt to posit a basic model for non-governmental social relations, drawing on a passage from Proudhon's *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, and I think that it still has a lot of power as a way to begin talking about how anarchists might interact among themselves, as well as how an anarchistic approach to the rest of the world might start to take shape. It is obviously much more difficult to

apply to these unity-collectivities of more-than-human scale, but perhaps the start to that comes from taking the possibility of these entities seriously, applying all the tools in our Stirnerian toolkit to determine if they are a figment to be dismissed or an institution that should be dismantled, and then, if we find we can't make one of those moves, perhaps the next step is to try to figure out how we can *deal with them* (in some one or more of the possible senses of that phrase.)