

Proudhon & Anarchism



**Proudhon's Libertarian Thought and the
Anarchist Movement**

L. Gambone

Red Lion Press
1996

INTRODUCTION

It took me twenty years to get around to reading the works of Pierre Joseph Proudhon. Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and Goldman were all familiar to me, so why was I reticent about the "Father of Anarchism"? Some of this may be attributed to the general influence of Marx's writings on public opinion. Marx did a hatchet job on Proudhon and Marxists such as Hal Draper took quotes out of context or dug up embarrassing statements that made Proudhon look authoritarian or proto-fascist. There are also anarchists who claim he is "inconsistent" or "not quite an anarchist".[1] Among English speaking libertarians, P.J. is renown for his statement "property is theft" and his condemnation of government and little else.

When I finally read his works, far from appearing "inconsistent" or "not quite an anarchist", the "Sage of Besancon" had created a practical and anti-utopian anarchism - An anarchism based upon a potential within actually existing society and not a doctrine or ideology to be imposed from outside. Since Proudhon's conception of anarchism was the original, and the others were derived from it, if the later varieties differed significantly from the original, perhaps there was a necessity to question whether these differences were of a positive or "progressive" nature. The history of anarchism is usually treated as a linear progression from the formative period of Proudhon to Bakunin's collectivism, then on to anarchist communism and syndicalism. But not everything which occurs at a later time in history is necessarily better or an improvement over what went before.

For the popular mind anarchism is an irrational doctrine of fanatics and terrorists. Yet, Proudhon's anarchism was rational, non-violent and anti-utopian. However, the "propaganda of the deed" period did provide grounds for the negative conception. Anarchism, as it was originally conceived, had been turned into its opposite. This is not unusual in history, think only of the original Christians and the Inquisition and of Nietzsche and the "Nietzscheans".

That anarchism changed into something very different from the

23. op cit 80
24. Ibid 83
25. Ibid 85
26. Ibid 87
27. Selected Writings... 62
28. op cit 216
29. Theory of Property in Lubac p. 177
30. General Idea... 210
31. Selected Writings... 57
32. op cit 222
33. Federal Principle... p. 45
34. Ibid 46
35. Ibid 74
36. Selected Writings... 195
37. Stafford, David, From Anarchism To Reformism p. 20
38. Ibid 39
39. Cahm, Caroline, Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, p. 39
40. Ibid 57
41. Ibid 63
42. Proudhonism, while more successful than Bakuninism, did not triumph either. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but have much to do with the dominance of statism during the 20th Century. No libertarian or populist movement was able to overcome this power.
43. More than 20 million French belong to mutual aid societies, mainly in health care. Mutuels are important in many other countries.

FOOTNOTES

1. The charge of inconsistency is a common fallacious means of attacking someone. What is ignored is the development of a persons thought. Who doesn't see things differently at age 50 compared to their youth? Hence, everyone is guilty of being "contradictory." Furthermore, life itself is complex and full of contradictions. If one wishes to mirror reality rather than invent an ideology, one's thought will at times appear contradictory. Consistency may be aesthetically appealing, but life isn't as simple.
2. Woodcock, George. P.J. Proudhon, p. 249
3. Selected Writings p. 105
4. Ibid 92
5. Ibid 103
6. The Federal Principle, p. 21
7. Ibid 21
8. op cit 56
9. General Idea of Revolution in the 19th Century, Freedom, 1927, p. 76
10. Ibid 95
11. Ritter, Alan, Political Thought of P.J. Proudhon, p 280
12. General Idea 173
13. George Woodcock, Anarchist Reader, p. 139
14. General Idea... 174
15. Ritter 280
16. DeLubac, Henri, The Unmarxian Socialist, p. 31
17. Federal Principle... 45
18. Ibid 38
19. P.J. Proudhon... 71
20. General Idea... 206
21. Ibid 135
22. Federal Principle... 9

original conception is not just of academic interest. We face greatest challenges in our history from the Leviathan State and the New World Order. Only a mass popular movement can save us. A people divided will never succeed in this endeavor. Proudhon's philosophy provides a foundation on which to build such a movement. He is one of those rare thinkers who provides a bridge between populism and libertarianism and between "left" and "right" libertarianism.

A NOTE TO NORTH AMERICAN READERS

Most people in North America are unaware of Proudhon, but he did have an influence here. The newspaper editors Charles Dana and Horace Greely were sympathetic to his ideas and he influenced the American individualists, most especially Benjamin Tucker, who translated and published some of his most important writings. Proudhon's criticisms of the credit and monetary systems were an influence upon the Greenback Party. His concept of mutual associations and the People's Bank were forerunners of the credit union and cooperative movements.

WHAT DID PROUDHON MEAN BY ANARCHY?

The public thinks anarchy means chaos or terrorism. But many people who claim to be anarchists are also confused as to its meaning. Some think anarchism is a doctrine espousing the right to do what ever you want. Others dream that one day a pure anarchist utopia, a kind of earthly Paradise of peace and freedom will come to be. Neither of these conceptions were Proudhon's. "Anarchy" did not mean a pure or absolute state of freedom, for pure anarchism was an ideal or myth.

[Anarchy] ... the ideal of human government... centuries will pass before that ideal is attained, but our law is to go in that direction, to grow unceasingly nearer to that end, and thus I would uphold the principle of federation.[2] ...it is unlikely that all traces of government or authority will disappear...[3]

Proudhon wanted people to minimize the role of authority, as part of a process, that may or may not lead to anarchy. The end was not so important as the process itself.

By the word [anarchy] I wanted to indicate the extreme limit of political progress. Anarchy is... a form of government or constitution in which public and private consciousness, formed through the development of science and law, is alone sufficient to maintain order and guarantee all liberties... The institutions of the police, preventative and repressive methods officialdom, taxation etc., are reduced to a minimum... monarchy and intensive centralization disappear, to be replaced by federal institutions and a pattern of life based upon the commune.[4] NB. "Commune" means municipality.

In the real world, all actual political constitutions, agreements and forms of government are a result of compromise and balance. Neither of the two terms, Authority and Liberty can be abolished, the goal of anarchy is merely to limit authority to the maximum.

Since the two principles, Authority and Liberty, which underlie all forms organized society, are on the one hand contrary to each other, in a perpetual state of conflict, and on the other can neither eliminate each other nor be resolved, some kind of compromise between the two is necessary. Whatever the system favored, whether it be monarchical, democratic, communist or anarchist, its length of life will depend to the extent to which it has taken the contrary principle into account.[5]

...that monarchy and democracy, communism and anarchy, all of them unable to realize

communists (no less for the Marxists) there was a major problem - there was no revolution.

Marx attacked Proudhon as a "petty bourgeois anarchist", yet France was to remain fundamentally a country of petite bourgeois well into the 1940's. Success for any movement meant incorporating this group. To ignore or condemn the petty bourgeoisie would only drive them into the hands of the monarchists or fascists. Proudhon's anarchism appealed to the peasant, artisan and professional as well as the industrial worker. And as workers incomes increased, they too began to purchase property. Having once done so, they were most unwilling to relinquish their hard-earned gains to the sticky hands of the Socialist State. Proudhon the peasant had a much better grasp on reality than the bourgeois Marxists with all their abstract thoughts and dreams.

The Bakuninists and anarcho-communists could not foresee this, nor should we expect them to have done so. Thus, 120 years later, by the great gift of hindsight, we realize society evolved in a direction more suitable to Proudhonism, than the doctrines of violence and communism.[42] One should also not ignore the fact that Proudhonism existed throughout this time period and is still around today. Mutualist and federalist movements thrive and have an influence upon French society.[43]

Anarchism took more than twenty years to get back on its feet after the disastrous "propaganda of the deed" period. (some might say it never fully recovered.) Recovery consisted in going back to Proudhon and moderate collectivists like Guillaume. A more moderate and realistic anarchism arose - known as anarcho-syndicalism. With syndicalism, anarchism became a popular movement for the first, and so far, the last time. The concept spread around the world and by the mid 1920's millions of workers were members of syndicalist unions. That syndicalism was destroyed by communism and fascism in the 1930's should not cause one to ignore its earlier successes. For three decades a mass libertarian movement of peasants and workers existed. Considering the overwhelmingly totalitarian direction of the Twentieth Century, this is not something to scoff at.

is the nature of the upper class radicals, so distant from the realities of working class life, to look at the world through abstractions and self-created ideologies. This is also the very group which tends to glorify and romanticize violence.

Along with the cult of violence came the change in economics. Collectivism was replaced with communism. In opposition to this new development, James Gullaume stated that *"it is up to the community to determine the method... for the sharing of the product of labor."*[39] and did not lay down a hard line on mutualism, collectivism, or communism. By 1876 the Italian anarchists had abandoned collectivism in favor of communism, believing it the only way to prevent an accumulation of wealth and therefore inequality. For Cafiero, *"One cannot be... anarchist without being communist... For the least idea of limitation contains already... the germs of authoritarianism."*[40] The Anarchist Declaration of 1883 stated, *"We demand for every human being the right and means to do whatever pleases him."*[41]

So Anarchism was absolutized into a pure utopia - a far cry from Proudhon's realistic conception. Less than 15 years after his death, solid, practical mutualism had been replaced by communist utopianism, non-violence with a cult of violence, a horror of absolutist thinking with a new absolutism and moderation with intolerant rhetoric.

Given the brutal repression of the Commune, was Proudhon ultimately naive? Did his theory deserve supercession by Bakuninism and anarchist-communism? No one should blame Bakunin's followers for becoming violent in the aftermath of the Commune. Such brutal repression is traumatizing and the undermining of Proudhon's influence is understandable. That an event is understandable, is one thing, but the long-term judgment of history is another. Society did not become more brutal in the developed democratic nations. The repression of the Commune was so far (in the democracies) the first and last event of its type. During the following century, greater freedoms were won and people saw their incomes increase thirty-fold, the work-week cut by half and life-expectancy double. (Even though the tendency seems to be the reverse, of late) For the Revolutionary anarchist-

themselves in the purity of their concepts, are obliged to complement one another by mutual borrowings. There is surely something here to dampen the intolerance of fanatics who cannot listen to a contrary opinion... They should learn, then, poor wretches, that they are themselves necessarily disloyal to their principles, that their political creeds are tissues of inconsistencies... contradiction lies at the root of all programs.[6]

In rejecting absolute anarchy and favoring an open-ended process, Proudhon criticized all forms of absolutism and utopianism. He saw that utopianism is dangerous, and was a product of absolutism - the sort of thought which fails to distinguish between concrete reality and the abstract products of the mind. Anarchist theory should be open-ended, or "loose". No hard-edged determinism or "necessary stages of history" for Proudhon.

...writers have mistakenly introduced a political assumption as false as it is dangerous, in failing to distinguish practice from theory, the real, from the ideal... every real government is necessarily mixed...[7]

...few people defend the present state of affairs, but the distaste for utopias is no less widespread.[8]

Not only was utopia a dangerous myth, the working people were too practical and too intelligent to bother with such pipe dreams.

The people indeed are not at all utopian... they have no faith in the absolute and they reject every apriori system...[9]

There was no easy way out - no Terrestrial Paradise, things might improve, but we still have to work. Such was his hard-headed realism in contrast to all the fancy dreaming and system-

mongering of the intellectuals. Poverty, by which he meant lack of luxury, not destitution, was the foundation of the good life.

In rejecting absolutism, Proudhon never waffled on the question of freedom. As opposed to the modern left which pits equality against liberty, and demands the restriction of the latter for the sake of the former, Proudhon was a resolute libertarian:

Lois Blanc has gone so far as to reverse the republican motto. He no longer says Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, he says, Equality, Fraternity, Liberty!... Equality! I had thought that it was the natural fruit of Liberty, which has no need of theory nor constraint.[10] ...the abolition of taxes, of central authority, with great increase of local power. There lies the way of escape from Jacobinism and Communism.[11]

PROUDHON'S REVOLUTION

How would Proudhon introduce the anarchist society? Not through utopian schemes or a wipe-the-slate-clean revolution but,

to dissolve, submerge, and cause to disappear the political or governmental system in the economic system, by reducing, simplifying, decentralizing and suppressing, one after another, all the wheels of this giant machine... the State.[12]

We should not put forward revolutionary action as a means of social reform because that pretended means would simply be an appeal to force, or arbitrariness, in brief a contradiction. I myself put the problem this way; to bring about the return to society by an economic combination, of the wealth drawn from society...[13]

This was more of a fight to maintain the autonomy of the national federations against what was seen as a power-grab by Marx and his supporters. The "St. Imier International" of oppositionists organized by the Jura Federation included Bakuninists, Proudhonists and many non-anarchists. It was from this core group, (the St. Imierists) that anarchist communism was to evolve.

With the failure of the communes of Paris, Lyon and Barcelona and Europe-wide repression of the International, prospects for revolution seemed truly hopeless. For Bakunin and his supporters, the only hope was to keep the idea alive through the actions of a "conscious elite". Thus was born the "propaganda of the deed" as *"the very hopelessness of the European situation demanded exaggerated deeds."*[38] Outside events were also influential. The Narodnik assassinations in Russia were an important factor in making the new anarchists sympathetic to violence.

The economic crisis in the watch making industry of 1874 had an impact as well. The Jura Federation was composed of moderate collectivists and proto-syndicalists such as James Guillaume. Its decline meant increasing influence of the militant Italian Internationalists who supported insurrectionism and propaganda of the deed. The Swiss movement finally dissolved in the 1880's. As a result, the emphasis of the movement shifted from the most advanced sector of continental Europe, (France and Switzerland) to the most backward areas, Italy and Russia. These changes could not help but influence the development of anarchist doctrine, most particularly in the direction of violence and conspiracy.

The democratic countries were, in spite of the massacre of the commune, fundamentally liberal. There existed a concept of citizenship and law and thus the possibility for relatively peaceful social change. In the backward countries, the lower classes were regarded as human cattle and few, if any, civil liberties existed. Conspiracy and violence were, with some justification, considered necessary. The problem arose when such ideas were transposed to countries like France, Britain, and the USA.

A shift in leadership from self-educated artisans to aristocrats and bourgeois also occurred. In many instances this led anarchism away from the concrete and practical to the abstract and utopian. It

done by force.

The dividing line which separates Proudhon from later forms of anarchism was the Paris Commune. Prior to 1871, relations between the classes, which had been so brutal at the beginning of the century, had become almost gentlemanly. Support for labor and even "socialism" was found among the upper classes. The British Prime Minister, Disraeli, expressed sympathy for the workers, Lincoln corresponded with the International and the editor and publisher of the world's largest newspaper, the New York Tribune, Charles Dana and Horace Greeley, were followers of Proudhon and Charles Fourier. The spectre of the armed seizure of power and the execution of hostages by the Parisian workers undermined this sentiment.

While Proudhonism was the dominant form of French working class radicalism in the decade prior to the Paris Commune, the failure of the Commune weakened faith in Proudhonist gradualism and peaceful change. The aftermath of the Commune was the major cause of this decline. Reprisals - 30,000 executed and an equal number sent to prison or deported to New Caledonia - gave rise, as one might expect, to a "*profound mistrust at any co-operation with the bourgeoisie... [and] a premium was placed on the expression of extreme revolutionary and even revengeful sentiments... [this]... rhetoric would become the indispensable tool of the socialist militant.*"[37]

Even though the Commune had failed, it was considered the example to follow. For both Bakunin and Marx, the armed seizure of power and a revolutionary communal government seemed the way to liberate the working classes. Bakuninists attempted new "Paris Communes" in Lyon and Barcelona, both of which failed miserably. Yet the idea of the revolutionary Commune persisted.

The failure of the Commune was a disaster for the International, which was wrongly blamed for the event. In an attempt to save the organization and to offset the growing influence of Bakunin (whom Marx thought was conspiring to take over the Int.) the Marxist faction sought greater powers for the London-based General Council. Many were opposed to this operation, but hostility toward the Council had little to do with anarchism per se.

We desire a peaceful revolution... you should make use of the very institutions which we charge you to abolish... in such a way that the new society may appear as the spontaneous, natural and necessary development of the old and that the revolution, while abrogating the old order, should nevertheless be derived from it...[14]

Proudhon was a revolutionary, but his revolution did not mean violent upheaval or civil war, but rather the transformation of society. This transformation was essentially moral in nature and demanded the highest ethics from those who sought change. Nor did his desire for revolution make him sneer at reforms:

There are no such things as minor reforms, or minor economies or minor wrongs. The life of man is a battle, that of society a perpetual reformation; let us therefore reform and go on reforming unceasingly.[15]

His self-image was that of a moderate. He saw no need to engage in holier-than-thou, more militant-than-thee attitudes.

I am one of the greatest artificers of order, one of the most moderate progressionists, one of the least Utopian and one of the most practical reformers that exist.[16]

FEDERALISM

The way to achieve self-government or anarchism on a large scale was through federation. Proudhon wished to dissolve authority and the State with the aid of the federal system. Note in the following quotations how the State is still assumed to exist, yet is being set on the path of abolition.

The contract of federation, whose essence is always to reserve more powers for the citizen

than the state, and for municipal and provincial authorities than for the central power, is the only thing that can set us of the right path.[17] ...the citizen who enters the association must 1. have as much to gain from the state as he sacrifices to it. 2. retain all his liberty... except that he must abandon in order to attain the special object for which the contract is made... the political contract is called federation.[18] Free association... the only true form of society. [19] The system of contracts, substituted for the system of laws, would constitute the true government, true sovereignty of the people, the REPUBLIC.[20]

NO BLACK AND WHITE

Since all systems of government, including anarchy, are of mixed nature, Proudhon was able to visualize the types of government along a continuum. Not all governments were necessarily as authoritarian as others.

...the constitutional monarchy is preferable to the qualified monarchy: in the same way that representative democracy is preferable to [monarchical] constitutionalism.[21]

Nonetheless, he did divide governments into two types, the Regime of Liberty and the Regime of Authority. Note that anarchy and democracy are placed under the same libertarian roof. No doubt he had the USA and Switzerland in mind. It would be unlikely that present-day elite democracy would still deserve to be placed there.

Regime of Authority

1. Government of all by one - monarchy
2. Government of all by all - communism

Regime of Liberty

1. Government of all by each - democracy

sentiments which combined liberty and *patrie*. For the syndicalists the *patrie* was represented by the working people and not the ruling elite whom they regarded as parasites and traitors.

WHY DID ANARCHISM CHANGE?

Even though Proudhon wrote about "anarchy", he did not lead an anarchist movement. Libertarians saw themselves as socialists or even social democrats. (The individualist, Benjamin Tucker even went so far as to call himself a "scientific socialist") The term "socialist" had a much different meaning then - at that time it meant co-operative production. Socialism as collectivism or statism was a later development, largely a result of the hegemony of the German Social Democratic Party. The name "anarchist" was not adopted until 1876, some eleven years after Proudhon's death. This new anti-authoritarianism was quite different from its predecessor by espousing violence, conspiracy and communism. There are identifiable stages in the process by which Proudhon's anarchism changed. The first of these was the rejection of mutualism in favor of collectivism.

Proudhonists were instrumental in forming the International Working Men's Association (First International) which was not collectivist. However, the rising working class militance in 1868-9 radicalized many members. During the Brussels Congress of the International in 1868, a resolution endorsing collectivism (including that of land) was passed. The Proudhonists objected and many left the International. Bakunin, soon to be the major leader of the "anti-authoritarians", favored the resolution. Collectivism was not communism, but it was a step along the way - a mid point between mutualism and the communist utopia. Proudhon, had he been alive, may well have considered collectivism and anarchist-communism as a reversion to what he had condemned as a "cult of association."

Mutualism and collectivism have little in common. Mutualism seeks to maintain individual ownership of farm land and small scale production. Large scale industry is composed of voluntary organizations (workers' co-ops). Collectivism seeks to collectivize all property and industry, and for revolutionary collectivists this is

state withdraws, leaving the execution of the task to local authorities and citizens.[33]

[Coinage] ...it is an industry left to the towns. That there should be an inspector to supervise its manufacture I admit, but the role of the state extends no farther than that.[34]

The following quote is a good summary of Proudhon's economic and political ideas:

All my economic ideas, developed over the last 25 years, can be defined in three words, agro-industrial federation; all my political views... political federation or decentralization, all my hopes for the present and future... progressive federation.[35]

PROUDHON THE PATRIOT

Unlike the anarchists and socialists who espoused an abstract Internationalism, (workers have no country) Proudhon was a patrot. People share a common geography, history, culture and language. Normally, they have positive feelings for these aspects of their lives and wish to preserve them. This is something the abstract internationalists did not understand.

My only faith, love, and hope lie in Liberty and my country. I am systematically opposed to anything that is hostile to Liberty... to this sacred land of Gaul.[36]

But France was not an abstract entity or nation state as nationalists believed. France was the land, the people and their language, history and culture. Proudhon despised nationalism, well aware his country was composed of many different regions and cultures. Only decentralization of political power and a federal union would allow these different groups and localities to thrive. Later generations of anarcho-syndicalist workers would share these

2. *Government of each by each - anarchy or self-government.[22]*

PROUDHON'S ECONOMICS

Proudhon's interests were not limited to the political organization of society. In his earliest works, such as What is Property? he analyzed the nature and problems of the capitalist economy. While deeply critical of capitalism, he also objected to contemporary socialists who idolized association. There were some things better left independent or private. There was also the important question of what kind of association one should organize. He was suspicious of all systems, whether Fourierist colonies or communist utopias. Note how he pins the socialists to the wall as believers in a secular religion.

Association is a dogma... a utopia... a SYSTEM... with their fixed idea they were bound to end... by reconstructing society upon an imaginary plan... Socialism under such interpreters, becomes a religion...[23]

Association is a bond which is naturally opposed to liberty, and which nobody consents to submit, unless it furnishes sufficient indemnification... Let us make a distinction between the principle of association, and the infinitely variable methods, of which a society makes us...[24] ...association applicable only under special conditions...[25]

Association formed without any outside economic consideration, or any leading interest, association for its own sake is... without real value, a myth.[26]

MUTUALISM

Proudhon proposed mutualism as an alternative both to capitalism and socialism. Mutualism was not a scheme, but was based upon

his observation of existing mutual aid societies and co-operatives as formed by the workers of Lyon. But the co-operative association in industry was applicable only under certain conditions - large scale production.

...mutualism intends men to associate only insofar as this is required by the demands of production, the cheapness of goods, the needs of consumption and security of the producers themselves, i.e., in those cases where it is not possible for the public to rely upon private industry... Thus no systematized outlook... party spirit or vain sentimentality unites the persons concerned.[27]

In cases in which production requires great division of labour, it is necessary to form an ASSOCIATION among the workers... because without that they would remain isolated as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage workers, which is repugnant in a free and democratic society. But where the product can be obtained by the action of an individual or a family... there is no opportunity for association. [28]

Proudhon was in favor of private ownership of small-scale property. He opposed individual ownership of large industries because workers would lose their rights and ownership. Property was essential to building a strong democracy and the only way to do this on the large-scale was through co-operative associations.

Where shall we find a power capable of counter-balancing the... State? There is none other than property... The absolute right of the State is in conflict with the absolute right of the

property owner. Property is the greatest revolutionary force which exists.[29]

...the more ground the principles of democracy have gained, the more I have seen the working classes interpret these principles favorably to individual ownership.[30]

[Mutualism] ...will make capital and the State subordinate to labor.[31]

Alienation and exploitation in large-scale industry was to be overcome by the introduction of workers' co-operative associations. These associations were to be run on a democratic basis, otherwise workers would find themselves subordinated just as with capitalist industry. A pragmatist, Proudhon thought all positions should be filled according to suitability and pay was to be graduated according to talent and responsibility.

That every individual in the association... has an undivided share in the company... a right to fill any position according to suitability... all positions are elective, and the by-laws subject to approval of the members. That pay is to be proportional to the nature of the position, the importance of the talents, and the extent of responsibility.[32]

Proudhon was an enemy of state capitalism and state socialism. At the very most, government could institute or aid the development of a new enterprise, but never own or control it.

In a free society, the role of the government is essentially that of legislating, instituting, creating, beginning, establishing, as little as possible should it be executive... The state is not an entrepreneur... Once a beginning has been made, the machinery established, the