A Few Thoughts on Anarchism

Anarcho

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This year, 2015, marks the 175th anniversary of the publication of Proudhon's seminal *What is Property?*. While opponents had hurled the label "anarchist" at those more radical than themselves during both the English and French revolutions, Proudhon was the first to embrace the name and proclaim themselves an anarchist. Anarchism, like any significant theory, has evolved as society has evolved and a great many since Proudhon have proclaimed themselves – or been proclaimed by their enemies – an anarchist. What, then, does anarchism mean at the start of the 21st century?

The first notion to dismiss is just because someone calls themselves an anarchist it makes them so. Just because the rulers of a state proclaims it socialist and a "People's Democratic Republic" does not make it so. So just because a self-contradictory charlatan like Murray Rothbard proclaim their system of private hierarchies "anarcho-capitalism" does *not* make it libertarian. Indeed, it is sad that so much nonsense has been written about anarchism that anarchists have to even mention people like Rothbard – even if it is to dismiss their claims of being anarchists of any sort.

Equally, just because someone does not use – or rejects – that label does not make them non-anarchists. Some Marxists have (eventually) come to conclusions that echo those Bakunin had raised against Marx in the First International. Does it really matter if – due to ignorance or misplaced loyalty – they do not call themselves anarchists if their politics are identical?

So we must reject trying to define anarchism in terms of the ideas of those who appropriate – or misappropriate – the word. That is the way to the lowest common denominator and, consequently, an "anarchism" which becomes meaningless and ultimately self-contradictory – something which proclaims rule by the wealthy as somehow consistent with *an-archos* (without *archy*, rulers).

What is the alternative? We need to understand where anarchism came from, its history and consequently the foundations upon which anarchism today is built. That means starting in 1840 and reconstructing what anarchy meant to those who were creating the first anarchist theories and movements.

This does not mean that there were no anarchistic movements or thinkers before 1840. Far from it – for as long as there were rulers and ruled, owners and dispossessed, there were those who were against both and in favour of liberty, equality and solidarity. In that sense Kropotkin was right to state "that from all times there have been Anarchists and Statists." However, we can

only recognise these thinkers and movements as *anarchist* because of how the idea of anarchism developed after it was first used in a positive sense. It makes sense, then, to call these movements and thinkers "anarchistic" rather than anarchist.

Thus William Godwin can be considered as an anarchistic thinker because he came to the same conclusions on the state and property as Proudhon did. He is not an anarchist thinker as such because he had no direct influence in the development of anarchism as a named theory and movement for he was discovered by anarchist historians in the 1890s and introduced to a movement which had become well-established without being aware he even existed. That he had come to many of the same conclusions as anarchists did long after he wrote means a certain kinship is obvious but in no sense could he be considered as an ancestor of the movement.

So those, like George Woodcock, who seek to provide a chronological account of anarchist thinkers before discussing the movement produced a two-fold disservice. First, by producing a flawed chronology which started with those – like Godwin – whose simply did not help define anarchism and, second, by downplaying the movement the actual key thinkers were part and parcel of. Anarchism cannot be understood as a set of unchanging ideals isolated from the society they were shaped by and which, in turn, wished to shape.

Anarchism, then, needs to be placed within the society in that its pioneers lived and, more importantly, *wished to change*. It cannot be understood, then, outside of the European labour and socialist movements of the 1830s and subsequent decades nor can it be understood outside of what provoked its adherents to proclaim "Je suis anarchiste". Once this context is understood and, consequently, what its founders were *against* and *for* then we can define what anarchism is, what counts as anarchist and who can be considered one.

To do this we need to draw upon the works of certain individuals. This is unavoidable. Not everyone writes books and articles and so leaves a legacy that can be accessed by future activists, thinkers, historians and commentators. Equally, some people do have more influence than others and so shape how an idea and movement develops. However, all thinkers exist in a social context and so Kropotkin was unfortunately exaggerating when he wrote:

> "In the European labour movement Bakunin became of soul of the left wing of the International Working-Men's Association, and he was the founder of modern Anarchism, or anti-State Socialism, of which he laid down the foundations upon wide considerations of the philosophy of history."

Yet Bakunin would never have gained his influence nor would his ideas have been the same without being immersed within the labour movement. If he became influential it was because his ideas reflected – while influencing – the debates and ideas already occurring within the International's left-wing. As Kropotkin acknowledged elsewhere, anarchism "originated in every-day struggles" and all anarchist writers did was to "work out a general expression" of anarchism's "principles, and the theoretical and scientific basis of its teachings." As such, the notion of there being "the founder" of anarchism is very much at odds with both our libertarian principles and our movement's history. This does not mean that specific individuals did not play a key role – Proudhon helped shape the ideas he championed (and named them Anarchism!) as Bakunin did – just that they are part of a wider movement which cannot be ignored.

Anarchism, then, cannot be understood outside the context within it was born – the European labour movement. Proudhon was not the isolated, paradoxical thinker so many writers suggest.

He was deeply involved in the popular movements of his time, influenced by them and their critique of capitalism while seeking to influence workers already questioning the status quo away from Louis Blanc's Jacobin socialism and the fantastical visions of the utopian socialists towards a federal, decentralised socialism rooted in workers' associations.

Bakunin, like many others, took Proudhon's core ideas of anti-state socialism and applied them in the militant labour movement. This involved rejecting Proudhon's opposition to strikes and unions and replacing his reformism with social revolution in the usual sense of the word – strikes, revolts, general strikes, occupations, expropriation and popular insurrection. He also replaced Proudhon's pathetic defence of patriarchy with a consistent anarchist position – if liberty and equality was required in the workplace (and so wage-labour ended by workers' control) and in the community (and so government ended by collective decision making) then why was the family excluded?

Anarchism is libertarian socialism, a decentralised, federal system based on worker and community control. Private property is replaced by possession, property rights by use rights. This means that the means of production are socially owned and anyone who joins a workplace or community automatically takes part in its management – no more bosses, no more governors. It is based on the ideas of *association* which was raised by those workers who first experienced wage-labour – the selling your labour and so liberty to a capitalist who then, in return for ordering you about, gets to keep the product of your labour.

It was these ideas which inspired Proudhon and which explains why the first book whose author proclaimed themselves an anarchist is first and foremost a critique of capitalism: it is *What is Property?* rather than *What is Government?* for a reason. An "anarchism" which is not socialist is not anarchism in any meaningful way.

This historical approach also suggests that the common attempt to define anarchism as a fusion of liberalism and socialism is mistaken. Kropotkin in the introductory text he wrote for the middle-class journal *The Nineteenth Century* in the late 1880s (subsequently published as *Anarchist-Communism: Its Basis and Principles*) suggested that anarchism was "an outgrowth of two great movements of thought in the economic fields and the political fields" of the time, namely socialism and "political radicalism" (i.e., liberalism). This was later taken up and transformed by Rudolf Rocker in his *Anarcho-Syndicalism* into a "confluence" and "synthesis" of socialism and liberalism. This was taken up by others (including Noam Chomsky and Nicholas Walter) and perhaps needless to say by those seeking to discredit anarchism (particularly Marxists such as Paul Thomas in *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*).

Kropotkin, however, also added that this was simply what they had "in common" with the two tendencies and defined anarchism in the very first sentence as "the no-government system of socialism." Given that the audience he was writing for was undoubtedly familiar (as now, sadly) with socialism as an ideology aiming for state ownership and control, his comparison with liberalism was unfortunate. While this may help outsiders understand anarchism, it is misleading for anarchism *is* a "system of socialism" even if it shared some (superficial) similarities with liberalism.

This is because classical liberalism is not particularly liberal (in the modern popular sense of the word). Its major theorists, such as John Locke, were seeking to justify the social position of the bourgeoisie and its privileges and so were primarily interesting in property and not liberty. Thus Locke's theory of property is not a defence of labours right to its product but rather a defence of the appropriation of that product by the owning class. The logic is simple: a worker's

labour is his property and, like any property, can be sold and if it is sold then he had no claim on his product, just his wages. The state is formed when property owners join together into a civil society to better secure their rights and property, creating a political power above themselves which decrees the law and acts as a neutral umpire in disputes. This would create a state like a joint-stock company in which those who own are *of* civil society (and so, like employers, make the decisions) while those without property are merely *in* civil society (and so, like employees, do what they are told). As long as the latter do not leave the state, they give their tacit to be governed by the wealthy few.

Thus there is no paradox in neo-liberalism centralising state power, strengthening regulations on organised labour and increasing what is termed the democratic deficit. It also explains why the modern descendants of classical liberalism can happily embrace fascism (like von Mises in the 1920s and von Hayek with Pinochet) while others produce learned discourses on how voluntary slavery is not only compatible but in fact the essence of "libertarianism". They are called ***propertarians*** by us genuine libertarians for a reason and so their rampant authoritarianism – particularly when it comes to the workplace – is completely understandable and not the paradox so many fooled by their false label proclaim it to be.

Classical liberalism is not a theory of freedom, of finding social associations that protect and nourish individuality, but rather attempts to justify hierarchies by giving them a veneer of consent. It sees freedom as isolation, not a product of social interaction as anarchists do. It feigns to believe that freedom and equality are *not* interrelated and interdependent. If it aims to reduce state intervention then it does so for the property owner while denying that these have any power over wage-slaves and tenants. The very obvious hierarchies associated with wealth are not an issue for it, it is the natural order and we should know our place (and hence the need for a state or private police force if we do not).

Classical liberalism simply does not understand Proudhon's argument that property "violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism", that it has "perfect identity with robbery" and the worker "has sold and surrendered his liberty" to the proprietor. Anarchy was "the absence of a master, of a sovereign" while proprietor was "synonymous" with "sovereign" for he "imposes his will as law, and suffers neither contradiction nor control." Thus "property is despotism" as "each proprietor is sovereign lord within the sphere of his property".

Liberalism did not shape anarchism for the main non-labour influences on anarchism in its formative years were the French Revolution and the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is Rousseau and his influence on the French left that Proudhon was most engaged with and the classical liberals appear only very indirectly in his polemics with bourgeois economists. Bakunin, likewise, critiqued Rousseau and his social contract theory. Both were seeking to explain why the French Revolution had not achieved its goal of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" and based on their analysis sought to make the left re-evaluate their Jacobin influences and ultimately the influence of Rousseau.

Rousseau recognised that while man "was born free", he "is everywhere in chains" and sought to "find a form of association which defends and protects, with the whole power of the community, the person and goods of each associate; and by which each one, uniting himself to all, obeys only himself and remains as free as before." Proudhon quotes this passage from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* approvingly and attacks Rousseau because his solution to the real problem he raises is, at best, inadequate or, at worst, contradicts it.

Proudhon argued that Rousseau's answer did not ensure that everyone remains as free as before. This was for many reasons, not least Rousseau's arguments that the General Will was indivisible which lead to a pronounced support for centralisation in the French left. This resulted in the empowerment of the few – the government and state bureaucracy – at the expense of the many – the people.

Thus, for Proudhon, "the Government is not within a society, but *outside* of it" and "the citizen has nothing left but the power of choosing his rulers by a plurality vote". The state was "the EXTERNAL constitution of the social power" by which the people delegate "its power and sovereignty" and so "does not govern itself". Anarchists "deny government and the State, because we affirm that which the founders of States have never believed in, the personality and autonomy of the masses." Ultimately, "the only way to organise democratic government is to abolish government." This meant decentralisation was essential:

> "Unless democracy is a fraud, and the sovereignty of the People a joke, it must be admitted that each citizen in the sphere of his industry, each municipal, district or provincial council within its own territory, is the only natural and legitimate representative of the Sovereign, and that therefore each locality should act directly and by itself in administering the interests which it includes, and should exercise full sovereignty in relation to them. The People is nothing but the organic union of wills that are individually free, that can and should voluntarily work together, but abdicate never. Such a union must be sought in the harmony of their interests, not in an artificial centralisation, which, far from expressing the collective will, expresses only the antagonisms of individual wills."

Regardless of Marxist myths, decentralisation does not mean isolation. There would be federations of these associations run from the bottom-up by means of councils of delegates who "are recallable at will" for "the imperative mandate, and permanent revocability are the most immediate and incontestable consequences of the electoral principle. It is the inevitable program of all democracy."

As well as his centralised vision, Rousseau was also attacked for the narrow nature of his system. While Rousseau was not silent on property and the evils of inequality, for Proudhon he did not go far enough and so "there is not a word about labour, nor property, nor industrial forces; all of which it is the very object of a Social Contract to organise. Rousseau does not know what economics means. His programme speaks of political rights only; it does not mention economic rights." This meant that, in practice, the social contract "is nothing but the offensive and defensive alliance of those who possess, against those who do not possess; and the only part played by the citizen is to pay the police".

The social contract for Rousseau, no less than Locke, inevitably becomes the class state because it takes property as its base. Property itself had to be abolished by democratic principles being applied within the company by association.

So in stark contrast to the liberal tradition, Proudhon attacks the state because it defends property, because it is an instrument of (minority) class rule. His anti-statism has a *socialist* base, it is a critique of the state and property based on the same principles. The similarities between state and property were clear to Proudhon:

> *"Capital*, whose mirror-image in the political sphere is *Government* [...] The economic notion of capital, the political notion of government or authority, the theological notion of the Church, these three notions are identical and completely interchangeable: an attack upon one is an attack upon the others [...] What capital does to labour and the State to freedom, the Church in turn does to understanding. [...] In order to oppress the people effectively, they must be clapped in irons in their bodies, their will and their reason."

Proudhon argued that to achieve their goal of liberty, equality and fraternity, socialists had to embrace federalism and decentralisation. Rousseau's goal of a centralised and unitary republic empowered a few at the top at the expense of mass of the people. This would only become worse if you replaced property with state ownership – it replaces bosses with one big boss, the state bureaucracy, and so universalises wage-labour. Sadly, many socialists then and since *did* think turning workers into employees of the state *was* socialism – with the unsurprising result of discrediting socialism for many.

So what is anarchism? Anarchism, to use Proudhon's words of 1851, is fundamentally "the denial of Government and of Property." It has a theory of organisation and to count as libertarian an organisation has to be internally free and based on collective decision making – self-management – from below – federalism in all spheres of life, including the community and the workplace. It is anti-state socialism. It is a socialist – egalitarian – critique of both capitalism and state. It recognises that liberty is a social relationship between people and so advocates federalist association for freedom and equality are interdependent as freedom cannot meaningfully exist if inequality of wealth results in the many selling their labour and liberty to the few. Anarchism's goal is to replace a centralised social system – the state – with a decentralised, federalist, communal one and to replace the theft and despotism of capitalism (wage-labour) with a free workers co-operating together as equals (association).

These were Proudhon's conclusions when he studied the France of his time, its inequities and injustices and those movements that were stirring amongst those experiencing it. Anarchism, then, is bound up by the rise of industrialisation and capitalism – *and resistance to it.* It is no coincidence that Proudhon followed the workers of Lyon in calling his system "mutualism". These ideas were what inspired the French mutualists to help found the International Working-Men's Association in 1864. It was these ideas which Bakunin embraced and championed after he joined it and, as a consequence, grow in influence and helped shape them in the direction of revolutionary anarchism rooted in the militant labour movement. It was these ideas which subsequent anarchists have built upon.

Today we continue that work, building on the firm foundations that were started in 1840 and added to by many – known and unknown – others. Knowing the past is as part of this process as understanding current events and struggling to change what we can now. Anarchism is not, then, a fusion (confusion!) of liberalism and socialism but rather a tradition in itself which has a coherent analysis of what is wrong with society, what can replace it and how we get from one to the other. It was born in the labour movement and can only flourish when we take part in popular movements – not only as a *theory* and *movement* but also as a *possibility.*

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