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Review: Proudhon's General Idea of the Revolution

Anarcho

June 23, 2009

General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Pluto Press, 1989 (Translated by John Beverly Robinson (1923))

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Proudhon's birth, the person who first used the word "*anarchist*" in a positive light. This was in his 1840 book **What is Property?** so making anarchism as a named socio-economic theory and movement 170 years old next year.

While not as famous as he once was, Proudhon was during his lifetime and for sometime after one of the world's leading socialist thinkers. Kropotkin became a socialist after reading Proudhon, while Bakunin was a friend and proclaimed his anarchism as simply "*Proudhonism widely developed and pushed right to these, its final consequences.*" The **General Idea** was one of Bakunin's favourite Proudhon works (along with the sadly untranslated account of the 1848 revolution in France, "**Les Confessions D'un Révolutionnaire**"). Reading this classic of anarchism, it is easy to see why: it is the first constructive anarchist manifesto and raises

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such key libertarian ideas such as self-management, federalism, anti-statism and anti-capitalism.

Written in prison, in seven studies Proudhon sketches out the lessons of the events of 1848 and presents an alternative to save it and emancipate labour (*“Capitalistic and proprietary exploitation, stopped everywhere, the wage system abolished”*). Needless to say, Proudhon spends some time addressing issues specific to 1851 France. However, there is much material within this work which is directly relevant to our situation in the 21st century and for libertarian alternatives to our capitalistic and statist oppression. Its *Epilogue* contains his justly famous and widely quoted rant against government:

*“To be **governed** is to be kept in sight, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right, nor the wisdom, nor the virtue to do so... To be **governed** is to be at every operation, at every transaction, noted, registered, enrolled, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under the pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, trained, ransomed, exploited, monopolized, extorted, squeezed, mystified, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, despised, harassed, tracked, abused, clubbed, disarmed, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and, to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, outraged, dishonoured. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality.”*

This is one of the many joys in the book. All, though, need to be read to fully understand Proudhon’s thought. For example, while **“The Principle of Association”** sees him oppose *“Association”* it becomes clear from reading **“The Organization of Economic Forces”** that he was against the kind of centralised and compul-

sory “Association” of state socialist Louis Blanc and **not** against workers’ associations running industry:

*“Thus we need not hesitate, for we have no choice. In cases in which production requires great division of labour, and a considerable collective force, it is necessary to form an **association** among the workers in this industry; because without that, they would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.”*

So when workers form co-operatives *“the importance of their work lies, not in their petty union interests, but in their denial of the rule of capitalists, money lenders and governments.”* There would be free access to the means of life, with land, workplaces and housing becoming communal property and possessed and run by those who use them, either individually (for agriculture and artisans) or collectively (for industry).

Proudhon also critiques the state and its centralisation, refuting attempts to reform rather than abolish the state (*“No authority, no government, not even popular, that is the Revolution”*). He advocates a radically decentralised and self-governing society of associations (*“In place of laws, we will put contracts — No more laws voted by a majority, nor even unanimously; each citizen, each town, each industrial union, makes its own laws”*). He was well aware that the state was **not** neutral, that it existed to defend capitalism (*“Laws! We know what they are, and what they are worth! Spider webs for the rich and powerful, steel chains for the weak and poor, fishing nets in the hands of the Government.”*). He calls for the masses to transform society from the bottom-up, by their own efforts and organisations.

While Proudhon is sometimes accused of racism (thanks to a few anti-Semitic rants in his private notebooks), this is absent from his published works and so we find him proclaiming that there *“will no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland, in the political sense of the words: they will mean only places of birth. Man, of whatever*

race or colour he may be, is an inhabitant of the universe; citizenship is everywhere an acquired right." In this area, as in many others, this book will make enlightening reading for anyone who **thinks** they know Proudhon from the stereotyping inflicted upon him by Marxists (starting with Marx's incredibly spiteful and usually inaccurate attack on him in "**The Poverty of Philosophy**") and those who read the secondary material influenced by such distortions.

While the reader will, rightly, question Proudhon's reformism and his free credit panacea it becomes obvious why the likes of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Rocker thought so highly of the Frenchman and what modern anarchism owes him for many of its defining ideas and concepts.

Robert Graham's introduction is excellent, giving a good summary of the Frenchman's life and ideas. As far as the translation goes, Robinson systematically translates "*commune*" as "*town*" and "*salariat*" as "*wage system*." Both are flawed, as "*commune*" can represent any habitation from hamlet to cities while "*salariat*" is better translated as "*wage-labour*" as Proudhon was in favour of distribution according to deed rather than need. Salariat specifically refers to a class of workers hired by a boss in return for a wage, i.e., wage-workers or wage-slaves.

So, all in all a classic book which I think all anarchists will find of interest. I know that I was pleasantly surprised by his arguments against wage-labour and for workers' self-management, his arguments against the state and for decentralisation and free federation and a host of other ideas which are nowadays usually associated with the revolutionary anarchism inspired by Bakunin and Kropotkin. Like his author, this work is not without flaws but it is a key text in anarchist thought and in the evolution of anarchism. It still has lessons for us seeking revolution in the 21st century.

Iain McKay

PS: I am currently working on a Proudhon anthology (to be entitled "**Property is Theft!**") to be republished next to mark the 170th anniversary of the use of anarchist in a positive light. If you wish

to contribute to the translation of material from French to English, please contact me at: anarchistfaq[at]yahoo.co.uk