Taking Proudhon seriously

Anarcho

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Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), the first person to proclaim himself an anarchist, is rarely treated with respect. Thanks to various hatchet-jobs (Marx, Schapiro, Draper), if he is mentioned it is often with contempt but usually with incomprehension. The notion that he was contradictory is so well engrained in the secondary literature (itself usually based on repeating previous secondary sources) that what Proudhon actually argued is lost. It is so bad that many people think he advocated ideas he publically refuted holding.

Given this, Alex Prichard's *Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Routledge, 2013) is a breath of fresh air. It ranks with K. Steven Vincent's *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* as an accurate exploration of Proudhon's ideas within the context in which he wrote. In eight chapters Prichard summarises Proudhon's ideas as well as the history and current state of International Relations (IR) Theory. He shows how Proudhon's much misunderstood (and misrepresented) *War and Peace* (1861) can be used to show that the ordered "anarchy" between states on an internal level can be used to expand anarchy downwards rather than expand hierarchy upwards (into regional and global governments).

Prichard argues that "international anarchy" could be "a template for theorising republican freedom more generally" (91) and so IR can enrich anarchism just as anarchism can enrich it. It is an interesting position which Prichard explains persuasively by looking at Proudhon's *War and Peace*. A much misrepresented work (deliberately so, by the likes of Schapiro and Draper), Prichard shows its aim clearly: to understand war in order to transcend it. War was the product of an unequal society and could only be ended by economic and social reform – by giving "democratic control" to the workers. (132) As Proudhon argued, "the organisation of peace" was only possible by working people "creating economic equilibrium" and so putting "an end to war." (quoted 132)

Those who view *War and Peace* as a quasi-fascist celebration of war would be well served reading this book. Indeed, it was Proudhon who first coined the term militarism and used it to describe a development he opposed. (58) Sadly, Prichard's otherwise excellent discussion of *War and Peace* also includes a slightly misleading discussion of Proudhon's alleged racism. He suggests its discussion of slavery was "racist" as it was based on "inequality between races" with its talk of superior and inferior races. (120) Yet Proudhon's language here reflects the assumptions of many nineteenth century thinkers (including Marx) and Prichard ignores his comment that "a

superior race" has to "raise" the so-called "inferior" races "up to our level" (not to mention that Proudhon used the word "race" very loosely, talking, for example, of "the English race").[1]

This inequality of races reflects what Proudhon considered as marking his world but this does not mean that he was happy with it nor thought it intrinsic for if it were then this levelling up of races would be impossible. Rather it was a product of history and just as economic inequalities could be ended, so could the racial ones. While patronising and wrong, Proudhon's comments in *War and Peace* reflect the cultural assumptions of his time rather than a racist position – as shown in works like *General Idea of the Revolution* in which he proclaimed racial equality.[2] It is best seen in the chapter "Slavery and the Proletariat" in Proudhon's *The Federative Principle*[3] which argues for full civil rights for all, black and white, as well as the abolition of chattel slavery and wage-slavery as blacks should be "as free as the whites by nature and human dignity." The "federative principle" is "closely related to that of the social equality of races and the equilibrium of fortunes." Economic, political and racial inequality "are one and the same problem" which "the same theory… can resolve".[4] It is unfortunate that this important chapter is not discussed.[5]

Prichard recounts the essentials of Proudhon's ideas and so shows the reader why they should read more. His alternative to capitalism, as indicated in *The Federative Principle*, is to replace both slavery and wage-slavery with co-operative socialism.[6] Prichard sketches this vision of "direct democracy in the workplace and federating according to trade, function and need" (136) in which "all groups and individuals are self-governing" (146) including the municipality, city and above.[7] Even the military "ought to be democratically run and accountable to society." (146)

Which raises the issue of the one area of life where Proudhon excluded liberty, the family. Prichard does not avoid the issue and points to his sexism as "the most egregious example of the absence of consistency in Proudhon's theory" and subjects it to an immanent critique, "using Proudhon's own concepts against his theory". (106) Prichard is right to do this for, while repulsive, his anti-feminism should not be used for a blanket rejection of all his ideas given the otherwise appealing nature of his vision of a federated self-managed society. So if you conclude that "each locale should be run by the people" and "autonomy of groups ought to stretch to the factories and workshops" for "democracy to be meaningful it had to be the expression of our existence in natural groups that we are part of" (55) then why exclude the family? Subsequent anarchists corrected this inconsistency and embraced full equality and justice for all.

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[1] *Oeuvres Complètes* [Lacroix edition] 13: 223

[2] "There will no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland, in the political sense of the words: they will mean only places of birth. Whatever a man's race or colour, he is really a native of the universe; he has citizen's rights everywhere." (*Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* [Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2011], Iain McKay (ed.), 597)

[3] "L'esclavage et le prolétariat.", Third Part, Chapter IX, *Oeuvres Complètes* [Lacroix edition] 8: 227–34. Translated by Ian Harvey at: anarchism.pageabode.com

[4] *Oeuvres Complètes* 8: 232

[5] See my "Neither Washington nor Richmond: Proudhon on Racism and the Civil War", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, Number 60, Summer 2013.

[6] This raises a trivial issue, namely Prichard quoting Proudhon using the term "corporation". (146) He unfortunately does not note that the Frenchman did not mean the capitalist company but rather a federation of workers' co-operatives. He presents, as noted, Proudhon's ideas well so the reader should be able to work that out for themselves but explicitly noting this would have been wise.

[7] Which raises the question, why Prichard talks of Rousseau's state of nature "based on a-social individualism, or an anarchy as we now know it"? (73)

Thus, ironically, Proudhon helped others in "the extension of republican freedom" to "the everyday practices of gender inequality, the regimes of domination structured by the state and private property" and so on. He can also help us today to reclaim "the emancipatory potential of anarchy." (159) Prichard's book will ensure that Proudhon is taken seriously not only in academia but also in activist circles precisely because he takes his ideas seriously and shows their relevance when they were written and now.

This is another joy of Prichard's book: it places Proudhon's works into their political and social context. Much of his output was polemics with other French thinkers, most of whom are now forgotten. While this dates his work it does show that while he is often portrayed as an isolated intellectual in fact Proudhon was very much part of the wider political debate – both within and outwith the socialist movement. So Prichard is right to stress that "[r]ecounting Proudhon's intellectual context and his engagement with it will help us better situate anarchism in the history of political thought." (68) This can be seen from his account of Rousseau, Kant and Comte and their relation with Proudhon. As well as refuting "the standard Anglophone, neo-Kantian interpretations of Proudhon's thought" (95) he also shows how Proudhon's work can only be understood in terms of "a direct engagement with what he saw as Rousseau's broken promises" (70) over political and economic freedom and equality.

This engagement is particularly relevant given the current (recurring!) talk of the population feeling alienated by a political system that does not reflect their views. While Proudhon would have agreed with much of this critique he would have noted that this is not a "failure" of the system but rather what it was designed to do. As Prichard summarises, "the system of universal suffrage asks groups to relinquish this collective capacity in favour of individual political subjectivity and alienate their political force to representatives who may or may not reflect their interests." (132)

For Proudhon, the state was an instrument of class power and could never be reformed by the people. This analysis is reflected in his writings on nationalism, as Prichard's account clearly shows. Proudhon's opposition to national liberation movements was informed by a simply question – who benefits from the centralisation promised by nationalism? "The people? No. The upper classes." It was "simply a form of bourgeois exploitation under the protection of bayonets." (quoted 56) As Prichard notes, an "understanding of the class basis of politics was central to [Proudhon's] understanding the possibilities and problems inherent in the unification" demanded by nationalist movements. (144) The notion of some that we are solely indebted to Marx for class analysis does a disservice to earlier socialists like the French anarchist.

Talking of Marx, Prichard's discussion of Proudhon's critique of nationalism provokes the reader to consider the paradox of Marx's position, namely that the centralised bourgeois state was creating the preconditions of socialism – why would the weapons forged by the bourgeoisie to secure its rule "become champions of the socialist cause"? (57) It has not turned out that way and bourgeois rule seems more secure than ever in our era of centralised nation states. As Proudhon concluded, the Jacobin vision of a centralised republic rendered "liberty impossible and the Revolution illusionary." (quoted 149) Nationalism, however, allowed the ruling classes "to avoid the question of economic disenfranchisement and exploitation, uniting a people in heritage while eliding material inequality or explaining it away in terms of a necessary evil in the interests of the good of the nation as a whole. In practice this meant the poor being dominated by the rich." Nationalism is, ironically, "the executioner of nationalities" (54) as, for Proudhon, centralisation would "erase any kind of indigenous character in the various localities of a country." (quoted 54)

Prichard's book reminds us how important Proudhon's grasp of class and its impact is on his analysis, something that is often overlooked. He "opposed to any project of unification that did not place socialism at its heart." (54) Regardless of the claims of some, Proudhon was well aware that capitalism was an exploitative system marked by class inequalities which had to be ended to achieve real, meaningful, freedom for all. Prichard deserves to be thanked for bringing to the fore this aspect of his ideas, given how many secondary sources paint a radically different picture.

In addition Prichard also gives a useful summary of Proudhon's ideas on justice, noting that he argued that "our conscience, while socially formed, is our nonetheless." It is "historically and socially formed" but "our moral feeling comes from within us." (99) Thus there is an interplay between our natures and external conditions, a position which reflects the current work on the evolution of ethics popularised in Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. Kropotkin in *Ethics* discussed these aspects of Proudhon's legacy and, as Prichard notes, these "have been taken up again in contemporary primatology" in its discussions on "what in human action is innate and what nurtured through social life." (100) That the human race does seem have an (evolved) intrinsic sense of justice would not come as a surprise of the Frenchman and given his recognition that societies evolve (for example, *System of Economic Contradictions*) we can be sure that, like Kropotkin, he would have embraced Darwinian theory. This is an area of research which should be pursued further.

In contrast, developments in science have not treated Marx's comment that Proudhon "does not know that the whole of history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature" well.[8] While Proudhon acknowledged that different circumstances and systems bring forth different aspects of human nature, he did not share Marx's belief that we were a blank slate waiting to be shaped by the forces of history (whether economic or more prosaic). The more sophisticated Marxists undoubtedly recognise the pre-Darwinian nature of Marx's glib comment but that rarely makes them take Proudhon any more seriously than the others.

To conclude: barring a few minor issues, this is an excellent book which will benefit all those who read it, whether seeking an introduction to IR or the ideas of Proudhon. Proudhon may be flawed both as a person and politically, but he defined anarchism both negatively (opposition to state and capitalism) and positively (vision of a bottom-up, federated, self-managed society and economy created by working class people themselves). Prichard's book will help us remember why Proudhon was Europe's leading socialist thinker in his lifetime and why the likes of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Rocker were so influenced by him.

[8] *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1920), 160

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