

Reading “What is Property?” Pt. I — On the Character of Proudhon

Blazing Truth

May 17th, 2012

This is part of a series of posts I’ve been writing as I’ve read the works of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. I’ve found him to be a very energetic character whose methodology and spirit roughly parallels that of my own — although his style reflects 19th century France.

As a mutualist, I don’t intend here to write a rigorous critique or analysis as of yet, but as for now I’d just like to share my own insights and impressions from Proudhon’s works in particular as I read his “*What is Property?*”

Here is a link to chapter 1.

CHAPTER I. METHOD PURSUED IN THIS WORK. — THE IDEA OF A REVOLUTION.

Proudhon here identifies his perspective, and bluntly states his aims. Like almost all philosophical thinkers, he believes what he’s about to present is an account of the Truth. Proudhon writes:

My mission is written in these words of the law: *Speak without hatred and without fear; tell that which thou knowest!* [...] Disregard then, reader, my title and my character, and attend only to my arguments. It is in accordance with universal consent that I undertake to correct universal error; from the *opinion* of the human race I appeal to its *faith*.

It is precisely Proudhon’s character which I wish to attend to, as I feel it is this which makes the greatest contribution to both his great influence and his Achilles heel. Before opening *What Is Property?*, I skimmed through his autobiography. In most accounts, Proudhon comes across as a man who is very humble, devoutly Christian, hard-working, passionate, and to me he possesses a certain *je ne sais quoi* that motivates him throughout his studies. Having worked in a library, he comes across as very, very well-read.

It is in this incessant intellectual curiosity that I believe one finds the courage to speak out, to write, to paint, and to create great works of art and literature. There is a certain sense of *urgency* that arises in response to the way things are. It is very clear that Proudhon had this trait which I find difficult to describe, and it is most evident in the powerful way he uses his language —

as if to leave a strong impact. It is perhaps for this reason that Proudhon was the biggest name alongside Marx during his era.

This sentiment was pointed out to me most clearly through Proudhon's correspondences with his friend Gustave Fallot, who writes:

This is my prediction: you will be, Proudhon, in spite of yourself, inevitably, by the fact of your destiny, a writer, an author; you will be a philosopher; you will be one of the lights of the century, and your name will occupy a place in the annals of the nineteenth century, like those of Gassendi, Descartes, Malebranche, and Bacon in the seventeenth, and those of Diderot, Montesquieu, Helvetius. Locke, Hume, and Holbach in the eighteenth. Such will be your lot!

The preceding conversation has a paragraph about J.J. Rousseau, who died 31 years after Proudhon was born. I find in Rousseau an important influence on Proudhon in many respects — as it concerns not only property, equality, but also regarding women. I will return to this point at a later date, and until then note that Fallot's prediction most-definitely came true.

I find interesting Proudhon's remarks on God. In the following remarks, he's attempting to devise a principle to follow through his analysis.

All men believe in God: this dogma belongs at once to their conscience and their mind. To humanity God is a fact as primitive, an idea as inevitable, a principle as necessary as are the categorical ideas of cause, substance, time, and space to our understanding. God is proven to us by the conscience prior to any inference of the mind; just as the sun is proven to us by the testimony of the senses prior to all the arguments of physics. We discover phenomena and laws by observation and experience; only this deeper sense reveals to us existence. Humanity believes that God is; but, in believing in God, what does it believe? In a word, what is God?

I very much enjoyed this fresh approach. What we note is that Proudhon does not use religion to justify his rebuke of property. He carries past the anthropomorphism which he rightly denotes as something which turns God into a monstrous figure created in the human image instead of being divine and incomprehensible.

Finally, he proposes equality as his standard. Thus concludes Chapter I:

A defender of equality, I shall speak without bitterness and without anger; with the independence becoming a philosopher, with the courage and firmness of a free man. May I, in this momentous struggle, carry into all hearts the light with which I am filled; and show, by the success of my argument, that equality failed to conquer by the sword only that it might conquer by the pen!

Here we see Proudhon's optimism showing through. It's important to note that the mutualist is not a revolutionary *per se*, and the mutualist tradition (starting with Proudhon) favored gradualism towards a stateless society.

All in all, while the read is lengthy and at times seems off-topic, Proudhon manages to keep my attention through the first chapter through the way he addresses the reader.

Stay tuned for Chapter 2.

Pax,

Dave

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