

The Poverty of Mick Armstrong's Polemic

Daniel Rashid

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For Alexandre Skirda

Published in the Summer 2022 edition of Socialist Alternative's *Marxist Left Review* is Mick Armstrong's incredible article "Property is sacred: How Proudhon moulded anarchism". Whilst Socialist Alternative has published fairly unconvincing attacks on anarchism before, this one is by far the most significant of them all, both in its specific charges, and in its serious, pseudo-academic tone.

I would like to begin this response with a challenge: if Mick Armstrong can prove to me that he's read a single book or pamphlet by Proudhon all the way through, I will willingly pay for a five year subscription to *Marxist Left Review*. You don't even have to send me the things, just take my cash. For the author of a 7500 word long critique of Proudhon, this should be easy! I'll take anything – some notes, a receipt for the purchase of a book, whatever.

Fortunately for me, Armstrong probably won't win. This is because he's managed to write his entire article without demonstrating *any direct knowledge of Proudhon whatsoever*. Neither can he demonstrate any direct knowledge of Bakunin, the secondary subject of his critique. Instead, Armstrong largely relies on secondary literature, most of which is outdated or generally deficient. One of the books he references most is a brief, ninety-six page biography of Proudhon by D.W. Brogan, which was written in 1934. Another is April Carter's *Political Theory of Anarchism*, which was published in 1971 as an introduction for political science undergraduates.

There's not really any excuse for this kind of laziness. It might have made more sense a few decades ago when very little of Proudhon's work had been in print and translated into English, but we now have hundreds of pages freely available to any English speaker who wishes to take the time to read them.

Sins of the father: following in Hal Draper's footsteps

The only book we can really be sure Armstrong's read in detail is Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*. Armstrong follows Draper at nearly every step. For Armstrong, mimicking Draper seems to be a valid form of research; it seems obvious that at least some of the crappy secondary literature he relies on was originally found in Draper's footnotes.

Take his occasional citation of A. Mendel's *Michael Bakunin: Roots of Apocalypse*. I don't particularly believe that anyone with a brain can take this work seriously: it is genuinely one of the weirdest political biographies I've flicked through. It would be an otherwise fairly standard biography of the man, were it not interwoven with bizarre speculative attempts at psychoanalysis. One of Mendel's theses is that Bakunin was, at root, feminine. Bakunin, woman that he was, sought sexual gratification *not* through "the pleasure of imagined aggression" like a man, but through "masochistic pleasure of passive suffering that Bakunin could experience, or imagine himself experiencing, by identifying himself with the people as victim, by making and being prepared to make enormous sacrifices on its/her behalf, and by imagining the vastly greater pains still to come in the anticipated apocalyptic catastrophe" (pg. 275-276).

Mendel believes that Bakunin's lust for violence was essentially a way of sexually gratifying himself and covering up his womanly essence, which he essentially adopted to avoid "the oedipal crime". Bakunin's "persistent flight from roles identified at the time with male authority and responsibility", childhood correspondence with his sisters, one-time reference to him weeping "like a woman" – all this and more, for Mendel, "are too glaringly present in Bakunin's person-

ality, ideas and actions to be ignored”. “He... was compelled to spend a lifetime trying to repress and disguise them under mountains of aggressively heroic declarations, programs, organisational plans, and absurdly quixotic forays”. Since, for Bakunin, all sexual experience was “incestual, evil, filthy, demonic”, Bakunin would punish himself with imagined violence – but since he found sexual gratification in masochism, this self-punishment just triggered a spiralling loop of masochism that drove his whole life (pg. 276).

A choice paragraph:

“Did the adoption of a feminine role extend beyond this sexual-revolutionary fantasy and into his relationships in real life? Was he homosexual? The helpmate role he played in relationships with strong men, his preference for being a dependant at home rather than a protective provider, his penchant for the innocent company of young ladies during his adolescence and the stimulating atmosphere of young male virile warriors in his later years, the strangely passive expressions he used in his sexual-revolutionary imagery – these and other similar hints we have seen along the way suggest, at least, the possibility. However, there is absolutely no concrete evidence whatsoever to indicate active homosexual involvements or events in his life.” (p. 483).

Amazing stuff! Why does Armstrong cite it, though? Most of the material he cites within it regarding Bakunin’s anti-Semitism and Nechaev can be found in other, saner and more recent texts, like Eckhardt’s history of the Marx-Bakunin fight in the First International. Alas, Draper relies on it; so must Armstrong.

Draper has a reputation in Marxist circles as being a fairly even-handed scholar, one focused on rebutting authoritarian interpretations of Marx and Lenin. This may well be true when it comes to his writing on Marx, but his writing on anarchism is so sectarian and polemical it is essentially worthless. This much is obvious in both his “mature” works – the relevant volume of *Marx’s Theory of Revolution* was published in 1990 – and his earlier ones, like *Two Souls of Socialism*, published in 1966.

Two Souls laid the groundwork that guided not only Draper but many other unorthodox Trotskyists like Armstrong: the fundamental divide in the history of socialism is that between *socialism from below* and *socialism from above*. Naturally, Draper sees himself as a proponent of the former – as would nearly all socialists. The problem comes when Draper is forced to acknowledge the existence of anarchism, which by most people’s understanding has a rightful claim to be the most “from below” kind of socialism there is, for better or worse.

Instead of admitting this – which would jeopardise his claims about his own Leninism being the most sincere expression of socialism from below – he makes a tortured argument that anarchism is in fact a kind of socialism from *above*! Since anarchism “rejects democracy” and instead puts forward “unlimited freedom for each uncontrolled individual”, anarchism translates to “unlimited despotism by such an individual, both in theory and practice”.¹ This is the line of thought that Armstrong follows; the rest of this essay will show exactly how mistaken he is for following it.

¹ From chapter four of *The Two Souls of Socialism*; it can be accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/4-anarch.htm>

The contested legacy of Stirner

The poor research continues: in the second paragraph of the article, Armstrong cites Carter as saying that Stirner's book "had an impact on Bakunin just when the latter was being radicalized for the first time in Young Hegelian circles". The reference for this is page 114 of volume IV of Draper's book. Carter has nothing to do with this though; her book is not even mentioned in Draper's bibliography. The footnote Draper gives for this passage instead references... Plekhanov. He criticises the pre-eminent historian of the labour movement, Jean Maitron, for "underestimating" the influence of Stirner, instead offering us Plekhanov's *Anarchism and Socialism* as a correction.

The problem is, Plekhanov's book doesn't even make the claim that Stirner influenced Bakunin! He says nothing like that at all. In fact, Plekhanov situates Bakunin as being part of the "left wing of the Proudhonian army" that "little by little" "left the domain of individualism to intrench itself upon 'collectivism'"² (Plekhanov uses the word collectivism in quotation marks to distinguish it from the philosophies of French Guesdist Marxists, who at the time were calling themselves collectivists).

Draper uses the abbreviation "Cf." to draw us to the attention of two other works on the matter: E.H. Carr's biography of Bakunin, and Eugene Pyziur's *Doctrine of Anarchism*. Carr does assert that Bakunin was influenced by Stirner, but provides no evidence for this being the case; he only speculates based on what is a bad misreading of Bakunin's philosophy, that his "conception of freedom was in its ultimate analysis extreme individualism" (p. 434).

Pyziur, on the other hand, disagrees with the notion that Stirner influenced Bakunin, correctly asserting that Stirner's "*Solipsismus*" was "substantially different from Bakunin's ideas", where "collective elements and factors clearly prevail over those of an individualistic nature" (p. 41). Pyziur mentions Engels believing that Bakunin was influenced by Stirner, but rebuts this by drawing our attention to a quote from *Statism and Anarchy*:

"...to this circle also belonged the brothers Bruno and Eduard Bauer and Max Stirner; at that time the leading circle of German nihilists in Berlin far surpassed in cynicism the most glaring nihilists of Russia."

This is, in fact, the *only* mention of Stirner in Bakunin's entire known written corpus. Bakunin was not shy about mentioning those who influenced him, even when he fundamentally disagreed with them: you can find pages of Bakunin praising everyone from Fichte to Marx to Mazzini, even though he was strongly critical of all of them (and, in the case of Marx, the praises went side-by-side with awful personal attacks). However, only one mention of Stirner is found: an offhanded remark calling him a cynical nihilist – which was in no sense a compliment.³

² From chapter five of *Anarchism and Socialism*; it can be accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1895/anarch/ch05.htm>

³ As an aside, though Armstrong does not claim Stirner influenced Proudhon, it is also worth pointing out that the Frenchman had much the same opinion as Bakunin: Proudhon mentions Stirner in his Notebooks as representing "the religion of the individual self". I do not have a direct quote at hand, since I cannot access the Carnets – but it's on page 6 of one of the responses to *Black Flame* by the French anarcho-syndicalist René Berthier, found here: http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/concerning_black_flame-proudhon_-_part_1.pdf

Imperfect research

Armstrong's assessment of anarchism depends quite considerably on *The Anarchist FAQ*, an enormous collaborative document that is intended to address common questions, criticisms and myths about our doctrine. The *FAQ* project is spearheaded by Iain McKay, who regularly updates it. It's a fantastic document and an invaluable labour of passion by the volunteers, but it should not be taken as *the* catechism of anarchist orthodoxy – as if such a thing could ever exist. Armstrong describes it as “reflective of broad anarchist opinion”, but calling it “broad” is perhaps something of an understatement.

The *FAQ* deliberately attempts to avoid anarchist infighting by adopting a totally wide-ranging definition of anarchism, excluding only those who support the institution of private property or the retention of government. Accordingly, it includes everyone from Benjamin Tucker to Kropotkin to, yes, Stirner. The project is a kind of *synthesist* project, bringing together the disparate strands to form some kind of cohesive anarchist philosophy – albeit one delineated by different tendencies like the communist, individualist and collectivist ones.

You can admire parts of it on these grounds, but you can also reject other parts for the same reasons. The author of this article in particular would reject the integration of “Stirnerist” ideas into social-anarchism; I really don't think they are compatible with the doctrines of Bakunin or Kropotkin or even Proudhon in any real sense. McKay is influenced by the work of the older generation of Glaswegian anarchists, who were some of the only non-individualist anarchists who claimed significant influence from Stirner – in his *Anarchism*, Woodcock speaks of encountering in the 1940s “a group of anarchist working men in Glasgow for whom [*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*] was still a belated gospel” (p. 99). They, perhaps imaginatively, interpreted Stirner's “union of egoists” concept as justifying an otherwise straightforward anarcho-syndicalist anarcho-communism.

Woodcock's history begins to tell the actual story of Stirner's influence upon anarchism: “Stirner's success was as insubstantial as most of those that proceed from notoriety. His book faded quickly from the public attention, and it was only fifty years later, after the vogue for Nietzsche had prepared the readers for the cult of unlimited self-will, that a popular revival of *The Ego and His Own* took place”.⁴

Stirner was a totally unknown figure in the anarchist movement; for a time, it seemed like the only people intent on connecting him to anarchism were the Marxists, who made such an accusation for polemical purposes. In 1896, Wilhelm Liebknecht justified in print the exclusion of anarchists from the Second International on the grounds that including them would mean including other disciples of Stirner, like the German free-trade liberal Eugen Richter.⁵ In reply, the Georgian revolutionary Varlam Cherkhezishvili – one of the most prominent social anarchists

⁴ Of course, Woodcock should not be relied upon uncritically – his assertion, for instance, that “Nietzsche himself regarded Stirner as one of the unrecognised seminal minds of the nineteenth century” is baseless; there is no hard evidence that Nietzsche was influenced by Stirner at all, or had any particular regard for him. The closest thing we have to proper evidence is knowledge that Nietzsche was familiar with two books that mention Stirner: Eduard von Hartmann's *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* and Friedrich Lange's *History of Materialism and Critique of its Present Importance*. There is no written work where Nietzsche mentions Stirner at all; it's difficult to see where Woodcock got the idea that he recognised Stirner “as one of the unrecognised seminal minds of the nineteenth century”.

⁵ “Our Recent Congress”, published in *Justice*, the newspaper of the British Social Democratic Federation, on the 15th of August 1896; accessible here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebknecht-w/1896/08/our-congress.htm>

of his day, and a one-time comrade of Bakunin – replied in print that “Stirner and his pupil... Eugen Richter” were “strangers to our party”.⁶

The Stirner craze among anarchists only really emerged after he was rediscovered by the German individualist and pederast John Henry Mackay, who found his works during a stay in London in the late 1880s. From there, he spread Stirner’s thought in individualist circles like those of Benjamin Tucker, but it was relatively slow to penetrate fully – *Der Einzige* did not receive a full English translation until 1907. It was only translated into French, the main language of the anarchist movement, in 1899.

This is mentioned in Alexandre Skirda’s *Facing the Enemy*, which Armstrong appears to have read, or at least skimmed; he states that “Skirda champions Stirner’s individualism”. This is an overstatement. Skirda does not particularly champion Stirner; in his book *Facing the Enemy*, a history of anarchist organisation, he gives a brief, roughly page-long outline of Stirner’s philosophy and then contrasts it with the philosophy of Proudhon. Elsewhere in the book he makes his editorial judgement clearer: in the tenth chapter, he regards the “appearance of the first French translations of Stirner as validating and making more coherent “the old verbose, provocative and suspect individualism”. The effect was that “anarchy was no longer a social teaching but rather a philosophy and the art of a ‘lifestyle’”. Hardly effusive praise!

You’d be hard pressed to argue that Skirda, who was one of the foremost admirers of Nestor Makhno and a die-hard organisationalist, was in any sense a representative of any kind of individualism; in *Facing the Enemy*, he approvingly mentions Bakunin’s organisational aspiration to “substitute collective thinking and collective for all individual ventures... in the social revolution, there will be room only for collective thinking, resolution and action” (pg. 19).⁷

Armstrong does not investigate *why* some anarchists, even some social anarchists like Iain McKay or the other Glaswegian Stirnerists, admire Stirner. Instead, he details his own second-hand understanding of Stirner’s philosophy and then expects us to react with simple disgust that some nominal socialists would be influenced by such a bad, evil man.

Armstrong completely misunderstands the point made in the *FAQ*, that for anarchists, “the idea that individuals should sacrifice themselves for the ‘group’ or ‘greater good’ is nonsensical”. Armstrong attempts to rebut this notion by referring to the way people sacrifice themselves in the course of a revolution, but this doesn’t actually vindicate what he’s saying. The point is that the class interest of a worker *is* their self-interest. They revolt collectively with other proletarians *because* they themselves have an interest in this revolt; they don’t do it out of the goodness of their own heart or in the name of “the greater good”.

When the working-class subordinates its own goals to those of the standpoint of civil society, or “the greater good”, as occurred in Egypt, then the result is nothing but tragedy. As much was clearly understood by Engels, who wrote in a letter to Marx dating from the 19th of November 1844,⁸ that “we must first make a cause of our own, egoistic cause, before we can do anything to

⁶ “Let Us Be Just: Open Letter to Liebknecht”, published in the September-October 1896 issue of *Liberty*, accessible here: [https://libcom.org/files/Liberty%20UK%20\(Sept-Oct%201896\).pdf](https://libcom.org/files/Liberty%20UK%20(Sept-Oct%201896).pdf) (page 102)

⁷ To be honest, it feels rather strange to even elaborate on this point; it is self-evident to anyone even marginally familiar with Skirda’s works that it is an absurd claim. To call Skirda a champion of Stirnerist individualism is a bit like calling Tony Cliff a champion of Karl Kautsky.

⁸ Available in volume 38 of the Marx and Engels Collected Works, available here: http://www.hekmatist.com/Marx%20Engels/Marx%20&%20Engels%20Collected%20Works%20Volume%2038_%20Ka%20-%20Karl%20Marx.pdf

further it”, and that “we are communists out of egoism also, and it is out of egoism that we wish to be *human beings*, not mere individuals...”.

For one, the workers who die in the course of a revolution rarely go into it certain that they themselves will die; revolution isn't a suicide mission. Workers make financial sacrifices in the course of a strike because said financial sacrifices are essential to the strike's success. They refuse to scab and be a traitor to their class because scabbing kills strikes, which damages their own ability to secure their goals through strikes. This should not be taken as particular advocacy on my part for egoism: I would concur with Engels when he says in the same letter mentioned above, that “in its egoism the human heart is of itself, from the very outset, unselfish and self-sacrificing...”. If Armstrong wants to criticise egoism, I am certainly not going to protest; just be serious when you do.⁹

Proudhon, crude individualist?

One of the most egregious smears made by Hal Draper, mimicked by Armstrong, is the one that claims Proudhon (and Bakunin following him) were egoistic individualists, who would see “freedom in individual terms, not in working-class collective terms as a product of mass class struggle”. This could not be more wrong. To misunderstand this point is to misunderstand both Proudhon and Bakunin in their entirety; it's barely exaggerating to say that the philosophy of both men was centred around the social nature of humanity, not the atomised, individual form.

One of the most persistent elements of Proudhon's social science is that of the concept of *collective force*. Collective force was what Proudhon described as the emergent property of all social relations, where individuals combine to produce a force greater than the individual sum of its parts. It was this force that was monopolised and exploited by capital; for Proudhon it was the bedrock of wage slavery. What was needed instead was a form of social organisation that properly recognised the *collective* nature of the economy.

Far from advocating simple individual ownership of the means of production – “I have never penned nor uttered any such thing; and have argued the opposite a hundred times over” (*Letter to Pierre Leroux*) – he advocated increased worker association as the path to liberty and equality. He did not want simple nationalisation of things like mines, canals, and railways; he wanted instead for these to be handed over “to democratically organised workers' associations” which would be “models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social republic” (*Election Manifesto of Le Peuple*).

Neither was Proudhon's moral framework fixated on the individual ego. His work *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* (On Justice in the Revolution and in the Church), the clearest elaboration of his viewpoint on the matter, describes this at length.¹⁰ He thought justice was “the

⁹ At the very least, it should be conceded that sentimentalism doesn't aid the working-class movement; we can even see a good example of it in Armstrong's article, where he says that “in the current COVID crisis, health workers and many other groups of essential workers risk their lives on a daily basis out of a broader collective responsibility. This collective approach is central to what makes us human – not individual egoism”. This viewpoint is simply ridiculous. They risk their lives because they need the wages to survive – not out of “collective responsibility”.

¹⁰ This work is not yet available in English in full, but summaries have been given by Jesse Cohn in An Exchange With Proudhon. For whatever reason this document only exists in PowerPoint format: https://www.academia.edu/4059453/An_Exchange_With_Proudhon_extended_visual_

respect, spontaneously experienced and reciprocally guaranteed, for human dignity, in whatever person and in whatever circumstances it may be found to be compromised by, at whatever risk its defense may expose us to”.

Proudhon was concerned with establishing the basis of justice in the midst of a society decaying, riddled with religious and other bourgeois influence. In order to produce a stable society, what was needed was a “*juridical faith*” which would “[make people] happier to have respect for the rights of others than they are in their own fortune” by “elevating souls above egoistic appetites” (*De la justice*, 1.253)

Catholic doctrine projected man as being only the source of moral chaos, requiring divine intervention and guidance. Proudhon was fixated on rejecting this “transcendent” worldview in favour of “immanent” reality; in this sense, he was a proper materialist. One of his preoccupations was to push against “absolutism” in whatever form it took. He understood progress as being something inherently opposed to fixed, or absolute, ideas; his moral philosophy was predicated on a constantly shifting renegotiation of social norms, precisely because it would enhance the dynamics of human development instead of trying to fix it into place. “Justice alone, thus, can still be called progressive, since it presupposes a continuous amendment of rules, according to the experience of everyday relations...” (*De la justice* 3.181, 3.249).

This quest to “eliminate the ABSOLUTE from the consideration of things” would go so far as to entail “war even on God”, as well as on “God-Humanity”. Here, we can see a point of accord between Proudhon and Bakunin, who famously said that “if God truly existed, it would be necessary to abolish him” (*God and the State*). Religion and religion-like sentiment entailed man’s alienation from their own sense of reason and justice. Instead of finding justice in immanent humanity, man was encouraged to seek justice in transcendence – in something that would go beyond humanity. Since this was impossible, self-alienation ensued: “by an optical illusion of the intellect, man projects what is within himself outside of himself, and makes of his own Justice an idol that is no longer himself” (*De la justice* 1.489).

Proudhon was critical of moral skepticism, precisely because it entailed the raising of the individual subjective perspective above everything else. This was not destroying the absolute but simply raising a new one in its stead: “subjectivity [is] the absolute that the ego affirms and represents...” (*De la justice* 3.261). He would go so far as to say that “moral pyrrhonism... is the foundation of all theology” (*De la justice*, 3.651).

Proudhon, Nazi?

The major problem with Armstrong’s article, above all others, is that he simply does not demonstrate *how* Proudhon moulded anarchism: he doesn’t attempt to prove his own thesis. He points to some basic facts, like Kropotkin and Bakunin admiring Proudhon, or the influence of Proudhonian socialists in the Paris Commune, but then stops there. He doesn’t address the substance of this influence.

Armstrong is only content to mention that there was an influence, before immediately launching into a laundry list of “reactionary ideas that anarchists today would find highly embarrassing” but were nonetheless promoted by Proudhon, like his misogyny, opposition to strikes, and the anti-Semitism professed in his private notebooks. In other words – he zeroes in on the aspects

of Proudhon's thought that anarchists and other libertarian socialists have obviously *not* been influenced by.

Armstrong says that "right up to the present day the litany of Proudhon's backward positions has been covered up or apologised for or brushed aside by numerous anarchist writers". So numerous, in fact, he can't name more than one example. The only reference he provides for this statement is a single article by Hal Draper, attacking an article by George Woodcock on Proudhon's private notebooks. Once again, Armstrong reads an author by reading his critics.

Ignoring Draper's fixations and reading Woodcock's article directly, it's difficult to claim he "covered up or apologised for or brushed aside" Proudhon's anti-Semitism.¹¹ In a passage from what is a much larger and wide-ranging article, Woodcock describes the anti-Semitism Proudhon expressed in his notebooks as "the gravest thing [they] reveal to 20th century eyes" and that "it is impossible for us not to be troubled and angry when we read anything that suggests racial prejudice" (pg. 53).

Rather than to cover up, apologise or brush aside the anti-Semitism, Woodcock's intention is to contextualise Proudhon's statements and differentiate them from the anti-Semitism "of the Nazis and the Black Hundreds". For Woodcock, they have more in common with "the anti-Jewish feelings that were endemic in early and in mid-19th century radical movements", which was present in English radicalism and nascent German social-democracy, and would persist as an undercurrent through American populism and Russian Bolshevism in the 20th century.

Draper agrees that anti-Semitism was common, but that "demand for their *extermination* as part of a political program was not common" – a true enough statement, but you'd be hard-pressed to argue that a delusional rant scrawled in a private diary constitutes a "political program". None of his public political statements advocate for anything close to the extermination of Jews. The same can be said in response to Draper's expose of Proudhon's alleged schemes for world domination, expressed in the same private diary.

One can disagree with Woodcock's assessment of Proudhon's anti-Semitism; certainly, it seems an exaggeration to say that Proudhon's viewpoint is essentially assimilationist. Disagreeing here would be reasonable. What is not reasonable is concluding that anarchists are engaged in some kind of a systematic cover-up of Proudhon's sexism and racism. It speaks volumes that the closest thing Armstrong can find to proof of this is an article from 1969 attacking another text that actually makes Proudhon's misogyny and anti-Semitism clear.

The truth is that most anarchist texts dealing substantiatively with Proudhon (and Bakunin, for that matter) addresses his bigotry. As a sample, we can look at the texts by anarchists that Armstrong himself references. In the Anarchist FAQ, Proudhon's anti-Semitism is made clear, though in the context of the author providing a defense against the idea that said anti-Semitism irreparably taints either Proudhon's philosophy specifically or anarchism generally (section H.0). In his article on Proudhon's *General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century*, Robert Graham describes the relevant passage in the *Notebooks* as "a truly horrific anti-semitic outburst [in which] he called for the expulsion of the Jews from Europe or their extermination" (footnote 23). *Black*

¹¹ The article can be read in full in the September 1969 issue of *Encounter* magazine. *Encounter* was a left-liberal magazine founded by Irving Kristol and Stephen Spender, one of a number of "anti-Stalinist left" publications clandestinely given money by the CIA. What seems to be the only online archive of it is hosted on the website of far-right publicist Ron Unz; in order to avoid having to give him extra pageviews, I have rehosted it here: <https://www.redblacknotes.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-Solitary-Revolutionary-George-Woodcock.pdf>

Flame makes clear that Proudhon's views were "infused with nationalist and racial prejudices", not to mention outspoken misogyny and anti-feminism (pg. 65).

Generally, I'd describe Armstrong's view of history as bizarrely moralistic, an iteration of "great man" history where an entire movement is expected to take some kind of collective responsibility for the misdeeds or insane beliefs of one of its long-dead adherents. Let me temper myself slightly: Armstrong's view of history would be bizarrely moralistic *if he were consistent about it*. Armstrong expects anarchists to "sharply disown Proudhon" on the grounds of his bigotries and (alleged) reactionary politics; I am doubtful he would "sharply disown" Marx on account of the same sorts of bigotries – whether directed towards Jews, Slavs, or anybody else.

Proudhon, moderate?

"If I ever find myself a proprietor, may God and men, the poor especially, forgive me for it!"
(Proudhon, *The Theory of Property*)

I will begin this section by requesting readers that interested in Proudhon's complicated stance on property read "Considerations on Proudhon's theory of Property", by René Berthier;¹² it is likely the best short work in English so far that begins to come to grips with Proudhon on property. I am indebted to it for the writing of this section.

Armstrong alleges that, in *The Political Capacity of the Working-Classes*, Proudhon argued for workers to "form an alliance with the bourgeoisie", criticising them for having "been too busy with their own wrongs to understand the sorrows of the middle classes". Though the wording of the paragraph implies that the latter quote is something Proudhon himself said, it references Brogan's 1934 biography of Proudhon. Investigating the reference, it becomes clear Armstrong is simply quoting Brogan's assessment of Proudhon. Brogan provides no direct reference for this assessment, other than to say it's in *Political Capacity*.

Brogan himself is inaccurate when assessing Proudhon's later works, and thus his judgement should not be relied upon; he describes Proudhon as advocating "a declaration of political independence by the working-classes... a claim for working-class representation... a denial of the representative character of the bourgeois liberals" – the *Manifesto of the Sixty*. The problem? Proudhon was *opposed* to the *Manifesto of the Sixty*! The *Manifesto* was written by a group of politically active French workers, declaring the necessity of the proletariat to chart its own course, whilst running for elections and forming an alliance with the liberal bourgeois opposition. This would enable them to secure both the political reforms they shared in common with the liberals, and some economic reforms they could secure for themselves.

Proudhon admired the document as an "awakening of socialism", sharing with it a commitment to the representation of the working class. But he was deeply critical of it, and wrote *Political Capacity* in response to it; the preface makes as much clear. He regarded the *Manifesto's* advocacy for electoral participation as something that would result in the proletariat signing away "its principles and its future" as well as its "democratic conscience". The balance sheet of the liberals in parliament was embarrassing: at the bottom, they had no "no other ideas, tendencies or policies to offer than the Government's policies, tendencies and ideas". If the French proletariat "sets its sights on winning yet another battle on behalf of its masters", then "its emancipation

¹² It can be accessed here: http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/proudhon_s_theory_of_property_19-11-2020-2.pdf

may be postponed by half a century”. Electoral abstention, on the other hand, was “nothing less than a heralding of a new order of things” and “a signalling to the old world of its imminent and inevitable downfall”.

Armstrong, following Draper, wishes to portray Proudhon as a utopian, who believed that society just needed the state to “simply disappear” and then freedom would reign.¹³ Proudhon never, ever suggested anything like this; his positive political programmes all had a “transitional” character, building on the facts of the present, not the fantasies of romantic dreamers. A number of them preserved a role for the state itself in supporting the nascent socialist order.

In fact, when Proudhon argues for reformist sorts of measures that seem to reconcile with property, he is driven by purely realistic concerns; as he writes in the *General Idea of the Revolution*:

“The people, even the people of socialism, want, whatever they say, to be property owners; and if I may quote my own testimony here, I will say that after ten years of inflexible criticism, I have found the opinion of the masses on this point harder, more resistant than on any other question. I have done violence to convictions; I have achieved nothing on consciences. And moreover... the more the democratic principle has gained ground, the more I have seen the working classes in the cities and the countryside interpret this principle in the sense most favourable to property.” (as quoted in page 6 of Berthier).

The pervasiveness of sentiments in favour of property, even among workers, led Proudhon to reckon seriously with this fact; his forceful criticisms against it failed, and he had to seek other paths. It should go without saying that one can disagree with the particular paths he chose – nearly all anarchists (and many “Proudhonians”) did and currently do. It’s just that you can only properly disagree once you actually understand what he was arguing for and why.

Proudhon can hardly be accused of simply saying that if the state disappeared, then everything would naturally fall into place; he was quite insistent about what had to follow the institution of government:

*“It is industrial organisation that we will put in place of government.
In place of laws, we will put contracts.—No more laws voted by a majority, nor even unanimously; each citizen, each commune or corporation, makes its own.
In place of the ancient classes of nobles, burghers, and peasants, or of bourgeoisie and proletariat, we will put the general titles and special departments of industry: Agriculture, Manufacture, Commerce, etc.
In place of public force, we will put collective force.
In place of standing armies, we will put industrial associations.
In place of police, we will put identity of interests.
In place of political centralisation, we will put economic centralisation [!]”* (from *General Idea*, as cited in McKay’s anthology)

Proudhon, opponent of the working-class?

Armstrong argues that Proudhon’s “abstract anti-statism” and penchant for decentralisation led him to take reactionary stands against the demands of the working-class and progressive

¹³ I feel it apt to note here that Armstrong reproaches Proudhon for being both a reformist, and someone who thinks the disappearance of the state is the only thing needed for goodness to reign across the earth.

politics generally. He gives the example of Proudhon's opposition to the demand for the National Workshops, the make-work schemes created by the French government to employ jobless Parisians.

It's true Proudhon opposed this demand, but it was hardly out of some callous hatred of the working-man. He regarded it as foolish for the working-class to demand that "power fulfil a promise it could not keep" (Chapter X, *Confessions of a Revolutionary*); the workshops were a temporary, ameliorative measure that was implemented by the bourgeois state to stave off the angry unemployed, "a caricature of socialism" (*Address to the Constituent National Assembly*).

Predictably, when they "got out of hand", the bourgeois state moved to shut them down, with brutal force – provoking the failed June revolts. For Proudhon, the only people among the revolutionaries who deserved to feel shame over the whole affair were "those who seduced [the workers] with disastrous utopias" – i.e., the state-socialists who argued that the National Workshops guaranteed the right to work.

When Proudhon later reflected on his experience as a parliamentary representative in this period, he was deeply self-critical; he regarded himself entering into a state, along with all the other representatives, of "mental perplexity and ignorance of daily reality". In his words, he was like "the dog that does not bark in the presence of the enemy" (Chapter X, *Confessions of a Revolutionary*). Proudhon was maybe being a little too harsh on himself; he was able to fraternise with the rebellious workers and stood alongside them on the barricades. With his publications, he won their support, whilst further and further drawing the hatred of all the bourgeois political factions.

Proudhon's career as political representative of the workers would culminate in his introduction of a bill in the Constituent National Assembly, demanding a one-third reduction on rents and leases for the next three years; only one other member voted for it, an old mutualist friend of his from Lyon. In hindsight, it would mark the point where his political career entered a downward slide, ending in censure from the parliament and a spot in a gaol cell.

The speech Proudhon gave to a hostile audience after the failure of his resolution, in defense of the working-class, is one of the early high points of early socialism; the text of it can be found in McKay's Proudhon anthology. In it he makes clear that the lauded "right to work", guaranteed employment, "cannot be reconciled with the royalty of cash or the aristocracy of capital". Proudhon responded to the laughter of the bourgeois politicians with taunting of his own, regretting that they're laughing at what he regards to be their death sentence.

Any political revolution would be simply illusory if it did not deal with the problem at the root of it all – the social revolution. He regards himself as a simple carrier, spelling out "the import and purpose of the February Revolution to property and to the bourgeois class" – the purpose, of course, being the abolition of private property. Proudhon holds before the representatives of the bourgeoisie the gun and the olive-branch – the repeal of "property income" may take place in a way that is "abrupt and violent", but it might also be peaceably phased in. He cordially invites the bourgeoisie to voluntarily take part in this process, whilst stating that they will be "held answerable for the consequences of their refusal".

Prodded to explain himself, Proudhon makes clear that "in the event of a refusal, we would ourselves proceed with the liquidation without you". When asked by his opponents who the "we" is, and if he means the guillotine, Proudhon simply responds that "when I used those pronouns you and we, it was self-evident that at that point I was identifying myself with the proletariat and identifying you with the bourgeois class."

What was it that Armstrong said again, about classless anti-authoritarianism? It's one thing to criticise Proudhon on certain points; it's another altogether to call him a "reactionary utopian" lacking class consciousness.

Armstrong gives another example of Proudhon's alleged reactionary politics, "driven by abstract anti-statism" – opposition to universal suffrage. Here, again, Armstrong misses the point entirely. Proudhon's opposition to universal suffrage did not arise from support of any kind for political dictatorship. He wrote against universal suffrage in the context of parliamentarianism precisely because he regarded it as illusory, something that would nominally involve "representation" but actually disenfranchised the citizenry; the way that parliamentary democracy worked was that non-voters would effectively become non-entities, regarded "as if they did not exist" (from *The Mystification of Universal Suffrage*).

Far from Proudhon being some rogue egoist, he opposed universal suffrage in this context precisely on the grounds that it meant denying the citizenry's right to speak collectively, instead only being surveyed for their opinions as isolated individuals, "just the same way as Epicurean philosophy explains thought, will, and intelligence away in terms of combinations of atoms" (*Mystification*).¹⁴ Again, one can disagree with Proudhon's assessment, but you have to understand it first. In any case, after the results of decades and decades of universal suffrage in the most advanced centres of capitalism, is it really so important to leave voting rights – a necessary component of bourgeois parliamentary democracy – as a sacred cow that must not be criticised?

Elsewhere, Proudhon argued for universal suffrage as a core component of socialism, albeit a component enhanced by the adoption of even more "democratic" measures – in *The Election Manifesto of Le Peuple* he states that "besides universal suffrage, and as consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the imperative mandate. Politicians balk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, does not appoint mandatories but rather abjures their sovereignty! That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy...".

In case we need one more example of Armstrong burying Proudhon's valid points,¹⁵ we can also address his alleged opposition to taxation of the rich. Proudhon, it bears repeating, was implacably opposed to gestures from the state that would only function as palliatives, raising living conditions in meagre ways while preserving the capitalist system that was responsible for the misery in the first place. His stance on taxation was no different. In his July 31 speech to the assembly, he makes as much clear: "tax... has been a burden entirely borne by labour", since even the taxed wealth of the rich is wealth exploited from the labour of the working-class. By what right should the bourgeois state feed itself on the wealth produced by the working-class? The aim was not to secure a fairer basis for the state, but to move to supplanting it altogether.

Proudhon, above all: relevant

Part of the reason Armstrong's polemic is so mediocre is that its primary aim is to dismiss Proudhon, not simply to critique him. Armstrong brings up one of the famous quotes from *Poverty of Philosophy* – the book that he childishly describes as "the classic demolition of Proudhon's economic theories":

¹⁴ In other words – Proudhon opposed universal suffrage because it was *too* individualist!

¹⁵ Iain McKay has dealt with others like his alleged support for slavery, and his actual complicated thoughts on the matter, here: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anarcho-proudhon-neither-washington-nor-richmond>

“From head to foot M. Proudhon is the philosopher and economist of the petty-bourgeoisie...he is dazzled by the magnificence of the big bourgeoisie and has sympathy for the sufferings of the people. He is at once both bourgeois and man of the people. Deep down in his heart he flatters himself that he is impartial and has found the right equilibrium... A petty-bourgeois of this type glorifies contradiction [in his theorising] because contradiction is the basis of his existence. He is himself nothing but social contradiction in action. He must justify in theory what he is in practice.”

The quote is interesting, because it involves Marx going back on his own previous assessments: in chapter four of *The Holy Family*, Marx writes that “not only does Proudhon write in the interest of the proletarians, he himself is a proletarian, an *ouvrier*”. He goes so far as to call *What is Property?* “a scientific manifesto of the French proletariat”, favourably contrasting it with the alleged hackwork of the Young Hegelians.

A study of Proudhon’s life brings up results that agree with Marx’s earlier assessment, not his later one. Proudhon was the child of a peasant, who later progressed to owning a pub. His childhood was marked by poverty, receiving no formal education until the age of eleven, when he secured a bursary that funded a place at a local college. He could not afford books or school shoes, and left at the age of eighteen to start an apprenticeship in the printing industry. It was in the work-process, not in the bourgeois academies, that Proudhon developed intellectually; his job required ample reading and he was exposed to a number of different authors, from unorthodox Christians to the pioneering socialist Charles Fourier. One can contrast this origin story with that of Marx or Engels.

The irony of the dispute between Marx and Proudhon was that it obscures the fact that the work of these two men is in fact very similar: in their endeavour to establish a scientific, critical basis for socialism, away from and against the utopians who then dominated the movement, they are perhaps the most similar thinkers of the 19th century.¹⁶ Proudhon, for his part, realised it; in his marginal notes to Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy*, he states that “the true meaning of the work of Marx is that he regrets that on every point I thought like him, and that I have said it before him. It is up to the reader to believe that it was Marx who, after having read me, is sorry he thinks like me...”.¹⁷

The revolutionary collectivist James Guillaume, who was one of Bakunin’s closest associates, and then became a participant in the turn of the century revolutionary syndicalist movement, wrote an interesting article called “Proudhon: communist”, where he outlines some of the theoretical points of agreement between the men.¹⁸

I’m not pretending that Proudhon was a flawless figure, far from it. I would like to simply say that above all, he is worth reading, and he should be taken seriously. He is a complicated figure who delighted in being self-contradictory; he loved being provocative, even to the point where

¹⁶ To call Proudhon utopian, as most Marxists seem to do, is a major insult to him; works like *System of Economic Contradictions* make this obvious – “If I am not mistaken, the reader ought to be convinced at least of one thing, that social truth cannot be found either in utopia or in routine: that political economy is not the science of society, but contains, in itself, the materials of that science, in the same way that chaos before the creation contained the elements of the universe. The fact is that, to arrive at a definite organisation, which appears to be the destiny of the race on this planet, there is nothing left but to make a general equation of our contradictions...” (From chapter XIV of the second volume of *Economic Contradictions*).

¹⁷ As cited in Berthier’s “Proudhon and German Philosophy”, available here: http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Proudhon_and_German_philosophy.pdf

¹⁸ A translation by Shawn Wilbur can be found here: <https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/bakunin-library/james-guillaume-proudhon-communist-1911/>

it obscured his actual messages. In order to understand him, we have to make a conscious effort to avoid polemic.

Proudhon certainly had an influence over anarchists, particularly in the earlier years of the movement; said anarchists had no qualms whatsoever about being open about his influence, even when the movement began, in a way, by breaking from his legacy: think about Bakunin and the other Alliancists opposing the orthodox “Proudhonian” delegates like Henri Tolain at the Brussels and Basel congresses of the International, supporting instead the full collectivisation of land and industry. The Belgian collectivist César de Paepe was not alone in justifying his position on mutualist grounds, explicitly citing the work of Proudhon to argue against Proudhon’s erstwhile followers.¹⁹

Despite Proudhon’s opposition to strikes, he still deeply influenced the revolutionary syndicalist movement, whether that means the proto-syndicalists like Hins and Varlin, or the “mature” syndicalists like Fernand Pelloutier. There are of course contradictions here – but they need to be properly explored, as someone like Daniel Colson does, in his article “Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire”.²⁰

Armstrong implies that Proudhon casts some kind of dark shadow over all anarchism, but the truth of the matter is that modern anarchists – at least in the Anglophone world, it’s a bit different among French and Spanish speaking anarchists – more often than not dismiss Proudhon altogether. Part of the reason I’ve written such a long response and had it published in an anarchist journal is so that it might trigger anarchists to avoid the baiting of Armstrong and other Marxists to “sharply disown” Proudhon in the manner of Schmidt and van der Walt. He should be taken seriously by *everyone!*

A black shadow

When Armstrong tries to find examples of Proudhon’s influence among contemporary anarchists, he finds himself in trouble: the claim that present-day anarchists oppose strikes or divorce would be too ridiculous, so instead he claims that Proudhon’s “reformist orientation” is “embodied” in lifestylism. Anyone who has dealt with the kinds of clowns that think digging through the rubbish is revolutionary would know that these people don’t read *anyone*, let alone Proudhon; it’s pretty nebulous to try and draw a line between the man who repeatedly agitated for working-class organisation that would destroy private property, and some young people who think “running soup kitchens” will “lay the basis for freedom”.

Armstrong claims that Proudhon’s alleged renunciation of the importance of the working-class has an echo among all branches of anarchism, not just individualist or lifestylist ones. Thus, he alleges that even people like Bakunin “viewed the Russian peasant commune as a basis for socialism” and looked to “non-proletarian social layers” like “peasants, criminal elements, students, petty-bourgeois intellectuals” to tear down bourgeois society. Firstly, anyone who has ever encountered Socialist Alternative would find it strange that one of its main theorists seems to be

¹⁹ For more on this, read William Whitlam’s “César de Paepe and the Ideas of the First International”, published in volume 16, issue 13 of the journal *Modern Intellectual History*, and “The origins of ‘collectivism’” by Edward Castleton, in volume 2, issue 2 of *Global Intellectual History*. They can be found on sci-hub. For an example of de Paepe chastising the Proudhonians for making “the defects of Proudhon their own by sacrificing... his scientific side”, read “To the Anti-Collectivists” here: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/cesar-de-paepe-to-the-anti-collectivists>

²⁰ Accessible here: <http://1libertaire.free.fr/DColson20.html>

writing off the potential of the third category; I find it similarly strange that someone proudly situated in the tradition of Lenin would write off the fourth.

Let's get some facts right: Bakunin was in fact quite critical of the Russian peasant community, the mir. He believed that the mir was essentially backward, retarding the development of the peasant population by tying it to conformity, a natural hotbed of misogyny – “the commune is [the peasant's] world... it is nothing but a natural extension of his family... the same patriarchal principle, the same vile despotism, and the same base obedience prevail within it, and therefore the same innate justice and radical denial of any personal rights, as in the family itself... the decisions of the mir, whatever they may be, are law”. In fact, one of the reasons Bakunin values Russian outlaws is because they are some of the few who “have the courage to defy the mir”! (Appendix A of *Statism and Anarchy*)

He thought the persistence of the free commune in Russia may give a Russian revolution some advantages over revolutions in Western Europe, where such communes did not exist, but it's not quite accurate to say he thought the commune would be *the* basis for social revolution; certainly not everywhere. There *was* a socialist who thought the commune might be “the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia”... but it was not Bakunin!

In the 1860s and 1870s, when Bakunin was at his peak in the workers' movement, it was clear that the working-class in Western Europe was pregnant with revolutionary potential. This gave the framework to the interventions of himself and his comrades in the International. Despite the workers being in some sense the leading revolutionary force – “the workers, of whom the vast majority do not own anything, have infinitely more propensity to communism than the peasants” – he nevertheless thought it was necessary for the proletariat to form some kind of stable alliance with the rebellious peasantry, so that they would mutually reinforce each others' aspirations in the course of a revolution. This is detailed in one of his key works, *Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis*, from where I take the above quote.

In the case of France, for instance, where the peasantry constituted a huge part of the population, “it is therefore not a question of blaming the peasants, nor of denigrating them [for their selfishness and ignorance], it is a question of establishing a line of revolutionary conduct that turns the difficulty that not only prevents the individualism of the peasants from driving them into the camp of the reaction, but that, on the contrary, will be used to ensure the triumph of revolution” (*Letters to a Frenchman...*).

If such an accord is not reached, and the peasantry and working-class run at loggerheads, then what will inevitably occur is “the terrorism of the cities against the countryside” – forced requisitioning, grain quotas, repression of peasant protests, and so on. Such a thing would “kill the revolution, instead of making it triumph” (*Letters to a Frenchman...*).

However, Russia was quite different to France. At the time, the proletariat in Russia was tiny, representing only a very small fraction of the population. It was under the strict domination of the brutal Russian monarchy. Opportunities to express political dissent were incredibly difficult, hence the regular resort to clandestine organisations. Strategy, in this context, was limited; was the answer to wait for the development of a more advanced capitalism before serious action could be contemplated? Could socialism only occur once the peasantry had been violently ripped up and thrown into the lower ranks of the working-classes? The history of Russia in the 20th century provides us with answers that are hardly conclusive.

In the absence of mass working-class struggle, Bakunin needed to develop other revolutionary strategies for Russia. The letter from Bakunin to Nechaev from which the quote about the “world

of tramps, thieves and brigands” originates represents one of his attempts.²¹ In previous revolts, like those of Stenka Razin or Pugachev, Bakunin sees “Cossacks, thieves, brigands and tramps” as playing a role in the triggering of a popular uprising. Bakunin himself admits that “he cannot tolerate either brigandage or thieving, nor any other anti-human violence”, but that if forced to choose between the brigandage of the monarchy or the brigandage of the every-day criminal, he would, “without hesitation, choose the latter”.

Still, Bakunin does not believe agitation among the brigands to mean humouring or tolerating their destructive tendencies; substantially, it means changing their character, “giving them new souls and arousing them with a new, truly popular aim”. To reiterate a similar point made elsewhere: one can disagree with such an assessment. Certainly, the plan would have likely been a disaster had it ever been put into practice. We just have to be clear about what Bakunin was actually arguing for before we judge him.

Anarchist organisation: not a side issue

On organisation, Armstrong becomes deliberately slippery: he talks of the hostility of anarchists to the idea of “workers having their own political party”, and our “historical fudge” in being against the party whilst Bakunin formed his own “political organisation/party”. Notice the slash: organisation and party are equated, as if a political organisation and the kind of party Marxists advocate are the same thing.

You’d think Armstrong would understand that anarchists are broadly *in favour* of organisation, whether on the political or economic level; Armstrong is obviously familiar with the work of Alexandre Skirda, as well as the general politics of Schmidt and van der Walt – people who firmly advocated anarchist organisation. True, anarchists have frequently neglected organisation; as a member of an anarchist organisation, I know this all too well. But Armstrong himself is committing a major “fudge” by portraying us as opponents of *all* political organisation.

He also talks of Bakunin’s Alliance, describing it as secretive, authoritarian and conspiratorial, implying it to be worse than the “disciplined, democratic revolutionary socialist party” he advocates. The question of Bakunin’s Alliances (and there were multiple) is complicated, since much of the material relating to them is lost, and some of the Alliances do not seem to have any existence outside of Bakunin’s fantasies. Nevertheless, it’s productive to look at the details of one of Bakunin’s organisational proposals; the one put to Nechaev as an ultimatum in his June 1870 letter.

The letter was secret, so we can presume Bakunin is being more transparent than he would in a public statement or article. The organisation Bakunin advocates would simply be “an organiser of the people’s power, not its own” – “a middle-man between popular instinct and revolutionary thought”. If the organisation strives to “foist on the people [its] own thoughts... [then it] implies a wish to make [the people] subservient to a new state”. In other words, the organisation would be “a servant and a helper... never a commander of the people, never under any pretext its manager, not even under the pretext of the people’s welfare”. It would not work from the top-down, foisting “upon the people any new regulations, orders, styles of life”; it would merely “unleash its will and give wide scope to its self-determination and its economic and social organisation”.

²¹ It is available to read in full here: <https://sovversiva.wordpress.com/2011/12/30/bakunin-letter-to-sergey-nechayev/>

Much ink has been spilled over Bakunin's "invisible dictatorship", but the letter to Nechaev gives Bakunin a chance to explain what he means. In the midst of "general anarchy" – i.e. the chaos of a revolution – a secret organisation acts "inspired by a common ideal and a common aim... everywhere according to a common plan"; this plan would be "sufficiently wide and human to embrace and take in all the inescapable changes which arise from differing circumstances, all varied movements arising from the variety of national life". The organisation's groups "have no officially recognised power but are strong in their ideal", which expresses nothing more than the elaboration of the desires of the people.

Through their ability to lead by example and unite the people across disparate towns and cities, the organisation would amass an influence. It would not be an official influence, since it would adopt no privileges for itself and would remain simply as a vehicle prodding along the development of a popular revolution. It would not be "placed above the people like state power", because "its whole aim... consists of the fullest realisation of the liberty of the people".

Bakunin elaborates in detail the principles of the proposed organisation. There would be "equality among all members and their unconditional and absolute solidarity"; all members would be equal and have an equal say in the direction of the organisation. Members would keep each other accountable not through gossip or white-anting, but through calmly raising issues at general meetings, avoiding "Jesuitical" control of members. "The strength of the whole society, as well as the morality, loyalty, energy and dedication of each member", wrote Bakunin, "is based exclusively on shared truth, sincerity and trust, and on the open fraternal control over all of each one".

The organisation, by virtue of carrying out its activities in Russia, where open political opposition was impossible, necessarily had to adopt structures to help keep itself effective under clandestinity. Decisions made at general meetings would be iron-tight, subject to modification only at another general meeting. There would be an executive committee decided by the organisation at general meetings; it would have to be obeyed, "except for such cases where the orders of the committee contradict either the general programme of its principle rules, or the general revolutionary plan of action, which are known to everybody as all the brothers have participated equally in the discussion of them". In any case, if a general meeting is discontented with the committee, "it can always substitute another one for it". The organisation would have multiple tiers, encompassing the local, regional and national level.

I would like to ask Armstrong – what about such an organisational plan terrifies him? The parts which libertarians may justify as being necessary for clandestine activity, like the subordination to the elected executive committee, appear to presage "democratic centralism" – which Leninists practice as a matter of principle, even in open political settings.

Letter to an Australian on the present crisis

Armstrong's charge that anarchism is unable to politically challenge reformism is perhaps one of his most ridiculous. Armstrong appears to malign anarchism's weakness against reformism... by moving closer to reformism himself! Because anarchists allegedly "suggest at all times and in all places it is the state which is 'the main enemy of the free individual'", they are unable to fight "immediate day-to-day struggles and to combat the influence of reformism".

In other words, anarchists are unable to fight reformists, because they're unable to coherently demand reforms themselves. To Armstrong, fighting the battle against reformism means, at times, making appeals to the bourgeois state. Anarchists, to their discredit, do not do this – at least not without being hypocrites. What are his examples? For brevity, we'll pick a representative sample.

Firstly, we are reproached for either being “opposed to” or “extremely skeptical about” state-granted worker reforms, like “the eight-hour working day, the nationalisation of core public services, a government-run health service” and so on. But what are all these things, if not the panacea of the reformists? All of these things were and are advocated by reformists of all stripes, from the ALP for decades, to more modern reformists like Jeremy Corbyn. Anarchists were, and are skeptical of all these things – justifiably! It would be abandoning socialism to *not* be skeptical of “bourgeoisies bearing gifts”.

At various times, like in Depression-era America, these things were implemented precisely to stave off deeper worker revolt. In places like post-war Britain, they were part and parcel of the attempt by capital to reconstruct itself after a devastating war, the state – and the working-class, through both taxation and labour – bearing the burden of keeping alive marginally profitable but nevertheless important industries.

Secondly, we have the way “the left” (he means his own organisation, here) placed demands on governments “to provide better state health services; to roll out an effective vaccination program, to safely quarantine infected people, to use control measures to help prevent the spread of the disease, and so on”. Armstrong's demands here resemble a traditional Marxist “minimum-maximum” programme – just without the maximal demands of abolishing capitalism.

Armstrong seems to be an inadequate Trotskyist too, since these aren't particularly “transitional” demands either. Their realisation doesn't imply going beyond capitalism at all: the political class in Australia has willingly deployed, at various times, all of the demands Armstrong mentions. They did so in order to stabilise Australian capitalism, to keep the profit-making ball rolling; there was nothing inherently progressive about it.

Here, we feel it necessary to reiterate what are some fundamentals of revolutionary socialism: the bourgeois state does not implement reforms out of gratitude, or simply because workers “force” it to; it implements them in order to save itself and restructure capital for its own benefit. Rather than perpetuating or even encouraging illusions about the ability of the bourgeois state to “benefit the masses”, the task of socialists in the midst of a crisis is to figure out how best to take advantage of it, so that the working-class may come out of it stronger than it went into it.

Can one imagine if Lenin went to Zimmerwald and argued that European communists should simply demand that their state make peace? The aim of revolutionaries is not to agitate for a less harmful capitalism, but to insist on the link between workers' misery and the present economic system, making clear in deeds and words that the only way liberation can occur is if the system is *destroyed* and a truly free one constructed in its place.

At times Armstrong, with other Trotskyists, seems to think that workers must first develop a reformism, before they can then supersede it with revolutionary politics. We don't think that's how it works, and we don't think the job of socialists is to lead workers along a string, but to engage with their resistance as it develops in the here and now, generalising it and prodding it forward, outlining the connection between said resistance and a future free of capitalism.

Discounting the value of even small reforms would be silly,²² but the more pertinent question is about *how* the reforms came about, and what can come next; the mere making of demands is rather trivial in this context. In the words of Malatesta – “we shall carry out all possible reforms in the spirit in which an army advances ever forwards by snatching the enemy-occupied territory in its path, and we shall always remain hostile to any government – whether monarchist like today’s or republican or Bolshevik, like tomorrow’s” (*Anarchism and Reforms*).

Far from opposing the eight-hour day, anarchists took the lead in a number of union federations to push for that goal and secure it with strikes and sabotage; they weren’t critical of the eight-hour day itself – one can find even Bakunin arguing for the centrality of reduced working hours as part of worker demands – but of the social-democrats who thought such a goal was best secured through voting for it in parliament.²³ This is precisely the point: the goal of reduced work hours is obviously important, but the consciousness of the working-class is developed far further if the goal is fought for through their own means of struggle, rather than through electing politicians and having it implemented by a government regulator.

He bemoans our general hostility to parliamentary elections, despite its nature as a “vital arena for a mass socialist party to engage in political agitation, recruit to its ranks, gauge the level of support it has among workers and pose an alternative to reformists”. A full response to this very non-specific critique is outside the scope of this essay, so I will stoop to Armstrong’s level and give a response as flippant as his own charge.

I recommend readers view the manifesto of Socialist Alternative’s electoral project, Victorian Socialists: try and find anything that seems revolutionary in it, or anything that could not also be found somewhere in a program of the Greens, or in a program of the Labor Party fifty or a hundred years ago. I’ll also ask the reader to assess “the level of support it has among workers” by checking what percentage of the vote it won. In short: not much practical evidence that would persuade an anarchist to abandon our anti-electoral positions.

An opportunity we are destined to miss

A proper critical inquiry into anarchism – into any doctrine, really – requires going beyond generalisations about what most of its adherents think. Instead, it should deal concretely with the doctrine itself. Armstrong does not do this, and instead searches for proof that the subjects of his critique are important, influential and properly representative of anarchism. His way of doing this makes the reader think he’s preempting any potential defence from anarchists, who would instinctively respond by disassociating themselves with whatever he’s critiquing. The mark of a good critic is a willingness to engage with the strongest arguments of the target; Armstrong instead attacks the worst, makes up the rest, then dusts off his hands and considers it a job well done.

Armstrong’s approach is particularly silly, because if the same approach was applied to his own political viewpoint then it too would be treated as marginal, irrelevant to what Marxism is.

²² It should also go without saying here that it would be equally inane to fight indiscriminately against *everything* governments do; I am not advocating for socialists to demand the lifting of all COVID restrictions, even if they’ve been put in place for reasons that are far from humanitarian.

²³ Armstrong also alleges that “some anarchist unions went as far as organising strikes against the introduction of welfare measures”, but, predictably, gives no reference.

Armstrong – like Draper – would describe himself as a Trotskyist in the “International Socialist tradition”. This tradition was developed by people like Tony Cliff *against* the orthodoxy of the Trotskyist movement, *against* even Trotsky’s own positions – like, for instance, against the categorisation of the Soviet Union as “state capitalist” instead of a degenerated workers’ state, against the defence of the Soviet invasion of Finland, and so on.²⁴

How would Armstrong respond if I wrote seven thousand words on how Marxism is tyrannical, and as proof cited the fact that the majority of the world’s self-described Marxists are one or another variety of Stalinist? Simple: Marxism has nothing to do with this, Stalinism is in contradiction with Marx’s own writings, Stalinism is a corruption of the revolutionary communist tradition, etc. In other words, the exact same sort of thing we’d say in response to a claim that anarchism is deficient because of Proudhon’s misogyny or because of lifestyle lists in 2022. And, to be sure, we know of no contemporary anarchist that defends – let alone endorses – Proudhon’s attitudes to women, or Bakunin’s towards Jews.

In May of 1846, Marx wrote a letter to Proudhon, inviting him to collaborate and join him in a revolutionary organisation. Proudhon’s response is, I believe, worth quoting at length:²⁵

“First, although my ideas in the matter of organization and realization are at this moment more or less settled, at least as regards principles, I believe it is my duty, as it is the duty of all socialists, to maintain for some time yet the critical or dubitative form; in short, I make profession in public of an almost absolute economic anti-dogmatism.

Let us seek together, if you wish, the laws of society, the manner in which these laws are realized, the process by which we shall succeed in discovering them; but, for God’s sake, after having demolished all the a priori dogmatisms, do not let us in our turn dream of indoctrinating the people; do not let us fall into the contradiction of your compatriot Martin Luther, who, having overthrown Catholic theology, at once set about, with excommunication and anathema, the foundation of a Protestant theology. For the last three centuries Germany has been mainly occupied in undoing Luther’s shoddy work; do not let us leave humanity with a similar mess to clear up as a result of our efforts. I applaud with all my heart your thought of bringing all opinions to light; let us carry on a good and loyal polemic; let us give the world an example of learned and far-sighted tolerance, but let us not, merely because we are at the head of a movement, make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance, let us not pose as the apostles of a new religion, even if it be the religion of logic, the religion of reason. Let us gather together and encourage all protests, let us brand all exclusiveness, all mysticism; let us never regard a question as exhausted, and when we have used our last argument, let us begin again, if need be, with eloquence and irony. On that condition, I will gladly enter your association. Otherwise — no!”

I am not one of the anti-sectarians who think all differences between socialists should be minimised; I don’t care one iota for “left unity”. But I do think socialists should be engaging with each other, and that the engagement shouldn’t take the form of false polemics.

The world has enough bullshit; it doesn’t need more. If this is the present state of the left, then any real working-class revolution will wash us away with the tide. That, I’d argue, would be a good thing.

²⁴ Draper himself holds a slightly different position, descended instead from Max Schachtman; in the preface to his book on Marx, he speaks of “the Stalinist world of bureaucratic-collectivism and the decaying world of capitalism” – as if this “bureaucratic-collectivism” and “capitalism” were conceptually separate things!

²⁵ It can be accessed here: https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/proudhon/letters/46_05_17.htm

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Daniel Rashid
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