

The Regime of Liberty

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The relationship between democracy and anarchism is undoubtedly a contentious one.

In his work *The Principle of Federation*,¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon makes it clear that democracy has an important legacy to respect. Because Proudhon declared that Universal Suffrage was above The Republic, he had to evaluate the character of democracy in ideal terms. Proudhon categorized democracy as a “regime of liberty” related to its evolutionary successor — anarchism:

“We know the two fundamental and antithetical principles of all governments: authority and liberty.

Regime of Authority:

- A. *Government of all by one — monarchy or patriarchy;*
- B. *Government of all by all — panarchy or communism.*

The essential feature of this regime, in both its varieties, is the non-division of power.

Regime of Liberty:

- A. *Government of all by each — democracy;*
- B. *Government of each by each — an-archy or self-government.*

*The essential feature of this regime, in both its varieties, is the division of power.”*²

Oppression comes in all forms. Any exercise of liberty can, in certain conditions, succumb to tyranny. Even if we, as anarchists, stand in opposition to democracy, it would be a mistake to consider it tyrannical in its own right. Compared to monarchy and communism, democracy stands firmly on the side of liberty. Proudhon was keen to emphasize this point. Far from advocating democracy, however, he held his ground and asserted the principles of anarchism. While anarchism and democracy share important characteristics, Proudhon was careful not to reduce anarchism to democracy.

For Proudhon, democracy was a tool “...to dissolve, submerge, and cause to disappear the political or governmental system in the economic system, by reducing, simplifying, decentralizing, and suppressing, one after another, all the wheels of this great machine, which is called the Government or the State.”³

This was the basis upon which Proudhon justified his entry into government. In his time, the democratic republic was a new, untested system. He saw untapped potential in the constitutional division of powers, and sought to extend its logic to anarchism.

Two hundred years later, we have a different perspective on democracy. To modern anarchists, Proudhon’s attempts at reform may seem obviously absurd and doomed to fail. But that is a lesson we have learned over the centuries. What cannot be denied is that although democracy is not anarchism, democracy *spawned the very idea of anarchism*.

If there is any relationship between democracy and anarchism, it is a causal relationship. We owe our entire tradition to democracy: an important history that should not be ignored.

Some of our fellow travellers have taken this principle in a different direction. Communists, for instance, would like to institute a direct democracy: a system where people get to participate

¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation*.

² *Ibid.*, Chapter Two.

³ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *A General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century: Fifth Study*

in a consolidated decisionmaking process. They grasp Proudhon's criticism of representative democracy, but ultimately confuse the stars reflected in the pond for the night's sky. Proudhon made his definition of democracy clear: government of all by each. Clearly, he considered direct democracy to be its purest form.

Proudhon's critique of democracy requires effort to unravel. It is woven within his theory of property, and it is through understanding this theory that we can understand his opposition to democracy.

When Property Is Theft, and When Property Is Liberty

In the spirit of Proudhon, anarchists are confronted with the problem of property, and we have to ask ourselves some fundamental questions. To what degree should society be divided into parcels of private property, and how much of it should be put into the hands of the community? Should private property exist at all? What about public property? These are central questions with which Proudhon spent his life wrestling. He sought to balance the interests of community and property such that their spheres of influence overlapped, but neither took precedence over the other.

Democracy disrupts this balance and places society under the unaccountable domain of community. An individual's means of survival thus came to depend entirely on one's reputation with one's neighbours. It is, as Proudhon said, the rule of all by all, which includes every individual involved in that sum.

It is under this condition that Proudhon proclaimed that community, too, is theft. Yet never, in any of his works, did he declare that community is liberty. This is despite the fact that, just as he famously declared that property is theft, he also declared property to be liberty. Community was just as much of a problem—an enigma—as property itself.

"Property is theft" when it is privileged. When we divvy up all the returns on the factors of production, we essentially make a calculation error. The joint-operation of production (or what Proudhon called "the unity-collectivity" of workers) is not accounted for when workers are paid an individual wage. This is similar to Marx's theory of surplus value, and the interplay between the two ideas is striking. One principle unites the two: if property is allowed to be dominant, the regime of liberty suffers.

"Property is liberty" when labour controls its own product and individuals are sovereign over their means of survival. This is a counterbalance to the absolutist domain of community. If this dimension of property becomes a totalizing force, the regime of liberty suffers again.

We can say that pure democracy threatens to make the domain of community universal, while capitalism likewise threatens to make the domain of property universal. Under both regimes, liberty suffers. Anarchy is neither capitalism nor communism. It is self-government; the absolute sovereignty of the individual.

We should not desire a society where every good is bought and sold under the cash nexus. Neither should we desire a society where one's access to resources is determined by one's neighbour's good will.

This dichotomy needs a resolution, and that resolution is Proudhonian mutualism.

An Antidote to the Problem of Democracy

The traditional enemy of anarchists is the governmental state: an all-encompassing monolith holding a privileged monopoly on power and violence over its subjects. As anarchists, it is therefore only natural to see its demise as our absolute goal and objective.

While this is admirable, it ignores the underlying social dynamics that create institutions like the state. We should instead focus our attention towards the deeper issue: that of authority in general. This means that we have to address the problem of social capital: the power that an individual or group commands by means of charisma, reputation, manipulation, and overall excellency at maneuvering within social games of power. This means that anarchists are just as concerned about the high school bully as we are about the State, and abolishing the State is not the definition of our politics but its incidental conclusion.

We can scale this analysis to the problem of democracy. When we ignore the underlying power dynamics that create monoliths like the State, we place anarchy at risk. If power is a projection—a shadow on the wall—then it is a distinctly social one. It's a kind of posture, and it requires the right know-how, the ability to pull the right strings to manipulate the right people. We might call those who excel at these activities “sociopaths.” If that is true, then we have to ask a hard question: who excels in democracy? The rough-around-the-edges entrepreneur with creative ideas or the charismatic sociopath who works around the clock to bend his peers to his will?

When we reduce anarchism to democracy—when we settle for direct democracy as something just *good enough*—we ferment the conditions for higher-level structures of authority. Acquire enough social capital, and you can make a populace do anything; you can reinstate slavery, feudalism, capitalism, or whatever flavour of oppression you desire.

Every anarchist society has unlimited democratic power in reserve, but it only remains anarchist based on its *refusal* to use this democratic power. Anarchy leads to democracy, but democracy does not lead to anarchy. This presents a peculiar problem: what social force could minimize the democratic power of an anarchist society? Isn't consensus-based decisionmaking the inevitable outcome of people coming together to solve problems?

We have other tools at our disposal, and they are important to consider. We hold in our arsenal the mechanisms of markets.

The market carries with it a liberatory potential that remains largely untapped by any society to date. If democracy is unity-in-collectivity, then the market is a unity-in-difference. A person can build a reputation and refine their craft on merits above and beyond their pre-existing holdings of social capital.

It is admittedly true that markets can fall into a similar crisis: having the wrong kind of reputation will ruin your enterprise. However, markets provide mechanisms beyond social posturing for people to forge their own lives; they offer opportunities for people to prove themselves to society based on the quality of their work. Markets give people the right of economic exit from the absolutist domain of community, just as the community gives people the right of exit from the cash nexus.

Critical to the survival of anarchy is mutualism: the balance of property and community. The market cannot be free without the commons, and the commons cannot be free without the market.

Let anarchy, not democracy, be the principle of society lest our revolutionary joy turn to ashes in our mouths.

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