Proudhon, Slavery, and the American Civil War

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In a passing remark made by the renowned historian of anarchism, Paul Avrich, in his 1988 book, *Anarchist Portraits* (pg.20), we are told that the infamous French anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, did not support the side of the North (otherwise known as the Union) in the American Civil War.

Avrich, uncharacteristically, provided no source for this, as if it was already common knowledge, neglecting to clarify whether Proudhon opposed both sides of the war, or perhaps worse, supported the South. He also left us hanging as to whether he'd gleaned this information from Proudhon's own words in French, from secondary sources in English, or from both. Not much of Proudhon's work had been translated into English at the time, but perhaps Avrich accessed the French documentation. The subject in the chapter in question was not Proudhon but instead a passionate supporter of the North, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and Proudhon was only mentioned as a point of contrast, so perhaps this is the simplest explanation for Avrich's failure to provide a citation.

Whether Avrich knew it or not, the subject of Proudhon's position on the war had already been addressed by the presumably non-anarchist musician and writer, Thomas A. Sancton, in his 1979 academic journal article, *The Myth of French Worker Support for the North in the American Civil War*. Decades later, in 2021, Sancton greatly expanded that article with his book, *Sweet Land of Liberty: America in the Mind of the French Left, 1848-1871*.

In the 1979 article, Sancton referenced both published works and private letters of Proudhon's in order to show that if the French anarchist had opposed both sides of the war, for different reasons, he still more strongly opposed the North than the South. Sancton, unfortunately quoted Proudhon out of chronological order and without translation, so I have rearranged and translated those quotes for the purposes of this article.

Proudhon, in a September 1862 letter to Gustave Chaudey asked, "we have no faith in the North's philanthropy; we do not accept that the Federal Constitution prevents secession; …. what's more, the forces of the North are suffering one setback after another; England, Belgium, and France — consumed by poverty — call for cotton; and if the imperial [French] government, by a stroke of good luck links the two issues of Mexico and the Confederates, restoring relations between Europe and New Orleans, will you still attack it on that front?"

Proudhon refers here to the Second Franco-Mexican War. Imperialist France had invaded Mexico in early 1862, a few months after the American Civil War began.

Sancton doesn't provide his own analysis of this particular quote beyond noting that it proves that Proudhon's anti-Yankee sentiment was not isolated to his published works. But, for our part, we can note that Proudhon, for an anarchist, sounds oddly defensive about both the government of the American secessionists and that of his own French Empire, particularly given that the defense of slavery was very much the South's reason for seccession.

Proudhon, in a letter to (Lucien?) Jottrand in October of 1864, wrote, "I am not, I admit, a friend of the Anglo-Saxons, and I believe that few people are fond of them. Also, I deplored the policy of our emperor, who could have, if he had wanted… obtained from the South the promise of emancipation for the blacks, and intervening then as an interested party in the present war, would have, at the time I am writing to you, brought those in the North to their senses."

Again, Sancton does not comment on the specifics of Proudhon's words here, only elaborating to the extent of pointing out that Proudhon had some influence on the French labour movement, even if he was not its official spokesman. We, on the other hand, can note that Proudhon's opposition to the North is clearly stronger than his opposition to the South, and that he was strangely naive about the South's willingness to part with slavery.

In his 1865 book, *On the Political Capacity of the Working Classes,* Proudhon even commented publicly on the war. Sancton uses an extended quotation from that book, the translation here being taken from the one done by Shawn P. Wilbur, while the truncations are Sancton's.

"As I write," Proudhon explained, "[…] the United States of the North also claims to retain in the Union, by force, the United States of the South, calling them traitors and rebels, neither more nor less than if the old Union were a monarchy and Mr. Lincoln an emperor. It is clear, however […] leaving aside the question of slavery, the war waged against the South by the North is unjust […] in which case the Americans will do well to erase from their platforms in the future the words of political liberty, republic, democracy, confederation and even Union. Already they are beginning to deny on the other side of the Atlantic the rights of States, which means the federative principle […]"

Once more, Sancton provides no commentary, but we can see that Proudhon's naivety reached truly astonishing heights as he preposterously abstracted away from the question of slavery and even accused the North of having started the war, despite the South having both seceded and fired first, and the North not making moves to abolish slavery until the war was well underway. Incredibly, in Proudhon's formulation, states' rights and the abstract federative principle take precedence over the rights of enslaved people. Naturally, he does not even bother trying to explain how a people can properly exercise their right to federation while still being enslaved by others.

Sancton, in his 2021 book, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, reuses some parts of his previous article while also providing a few additional quotes from other letters of Proudhon's.

Proudhon, in an 1861 letter to Félix Delhasse, wrote, "in America, the puritans of the North are beaten by the slave-traders of the South, which does not displease me," adding, "although I do not like the commerce of human flesh, the men of the North needed a lesson."

Sancton characterizes this as gloating on the part of Proudhon over the South's victory at the First Battle of Bull Run. Again, we see that if Proudhon considered both sides of the war to be evil, he considered the South to be the lesser of the two. He did not allow his personal distaste for chattel slavery to get in the way of such an assessment.

Proudhon, in letters to (?) Gouvernet in 1861 and 1862, at last expressed some hesitancy toward an alliance between the French Empire and the American South, writing, "after proclaiming the freedom of the slaves in Saint-Domingue, we defend slavery in Virginia, Louisiana, etc.; and, desiring the destruction of England, we remain her ally and work for her benefit."

Sancton doesn't bring Proudhon's 1861 book, *War and Peace*, into the equation, but given the discussion of slavery that we find in it, we would be remiss to neglect it.

Proudhon, fairly early on in the book (which was written just before the American Civil War broke out), refers to slavery as a form of warfare, reminding us of the line from his first book, *What is Property*, where he referred to slavery as murder.

However, such abstract opposition to slavery, in itself, tells us nothing about Proudhon's reformist and frankly racist approach to question, which unfolds as *War and Peace* goes on.

Soon we discover that, according to Proudhon, "slavery cannot be transformed" in America, "any more than it can be abolished; the coloured man, no matter how hard he may try to 'pass' for white, is as much outcast by the North's hypocrisy as by the South's avarice."

The latter argument here is as true as the former is false, unless we consider the fact that slavery persists to this day within the American prison system. However, the chattel slavery system that persisted until the Civil War was certainly abolished by force, even if other forms of white supremacy continued to reign in the wake and reconstruction was never properly accomplished. Proudhon again appears naively pessimistic to people such as us with the privilege of hindsight, with knowledge that the Civil War would take place and chattel slavery would be formally abolished. Slavery, in Proudhon's time, had already been formally abolished in both of America's border countries, Mexico and British North America (now Canada), so it's not precisely clear why Proudhon was so pessimistic about the United States.

Later in the book, Proudhon does not appear to be overly concerned that the South has seceded, and he even speculates that perhaps war will not follow. But are there grounds for war? Proudhon answers, foolishly in hindsight, that "combat, no matter what form it may take, will prove absolutely nothing for or against the phenomenon of slavery per se."

"I, as a man of the world, repudiate slavery in principle," Proudhon explains, clarifying that he does not "hold the exploiters of the Southern States as entirely to blame, as they are wont to be held in Europe."

"Humanity is due respect in all its races, that I know; in my view, justice has no basis other than such respect," he writes, "but who wishes the end wishes the means; to everything there is a season, tempus laborandi et tempus liberandi, as Ecclesiastes has it."

Proudhon's reformism, if not yet the full extent of his racism, reveals itself here. Equality is a principle, or at least a matter of "justice", but in practice, "the inequality that obtains between human races" makes the problem of "social and political balance" difficult to resolve, or so we're told. (Proudhon's reformism was not limited to the question of slavery, he was also, at one point, elected to the National Assembly and agreed to take his seat.)

Proudhon's racism then barges in, as he declares that it's not simply a matter of social relations, but rather a "superiority of nature" possessed by the "Caucasian," a superiority that is subsequently "increased tenfold by the social state, so that no race can stand in our way."

He immediately goes on to point to the European conquest of India and (parts of) China as proof of this superiority. He then tosses an insult at the Indigenous peoples of both the Americas and Africa, asking, "what comparison can there be between the Anglo-Saxon and the Redskin who would prefer death to civilization, or the negro imported from the Sudan?"

Proletarianization is actually worse than slavery, Proudhon tells us, soft-peddaling the racist remarks he'd just made. To make use of war as a means to end slavery would be "unintelligent" and "odious," or so we're supposed to believe.

Peoples have the right to abolish slavery, he says, but that is to be distinguished from the "right of force," which is only "strictly enforceable where States alone are concerned…"

Proudhon declares, in what's by now a well-worn trope, that "as a superior race, all that we can do with regard to the inferior one, is to raise them up to our level and try to improve them, strengthen them, instruct them and ennoble them."

"Who are the real enemies of the blacks," he asks, only to answer, "those who, knowingly or not, it does not matter, are contemplating making them perish in the desolation of the proletariat."

"Who, on the contrary, are the real negrophiles," he asks, only to answer, "those who, whilst holding them in slavery, and, to be sure, exploiting them, guarantee them subsistence, improving them imperceptibly through labour and increase their numbers through marriage."

The racism here is so thick and so vile as to make your stomach turn, whether you're an anarchist or not. The only difference perhaps, is that the non-anarchist is more likely to admit just how racist it is.

"What needs doing", Proudhon tells us, "is not a pure-and-simple emancipation of the slave; that would be tantamount to displaying him at the Gemonian Stairs," that being a place of execution in Roman history.

"Rather the State must intervene adroitly and impose a serious responsibility upon the master, to make him an educator, a tutor, a patron for the slave, not the consumer of the slave, the property which the right of force made him," he explains.

The reformism is on full display, despicably so, given the subject matter. Proudhon here stands in sharp contrast to American abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, who called for immediate abolition, or even contemporary French anarchists like Joseph Déjacque and Élisée Reclus, who supported militant action against American slavery.

In his notes to the book, Proudhon even specifically mentions that "since the rift between the American North and the South over slavery, there have been unrelenting incitements to revolt and to murder the masters coming from the Northern states and from England herself."

"Such provocations run counter to the rights of people," he claims, reminding us that Déjacque, on the other hand, called for fire to the plantations, without compromise!

"Sooner or later, Europeans will settle in the heart of the Sudan just as they have settled in the heart of the two Americas; then there will be a sore need for the blacks to labour," Proudhon goes on to inform us, clarifying that "they must work now; it is our right to force them to do so."

Here we go from a gradualist phasing-out of slavery in America, by means of the State and the slave-masters' tutelage, to the notion that forced labour, under Europeans, will be and should be introduced even where it doesn't yet exist. If Proudhon was opposed to chattel slavery in abstract principle and in a reformist sense, he evidently did not oppose the expansion of labour slavery in African colonies.

"I confess," writes Proudhon, "I would prefer it if, rather than the slave trade being abolished, it were placed under the supervision of governments." Whatever the exact opposite of ambiguity is, Proudhon had staked his claim. The "real solution to the issue of slavery," for him, was to "let the law that protects the weak and the strong alike, watch over the inferior race employed in agriculture and industry, as it does over its own proletarians."

Here we are perhaps as far as we can get from the anarchist principle that would develop in Proudhon's wake, the unity of means and ends, the idea and principle that liberatory ends cannot be achieved through oppressive means. We also find ourselves unable to avoid the fact that anarchist universalism, as necessary as it is, provides no ready-made solution, in itself, to particularity. We need principles and practices that address both the concrete and the abstract. It is not enough to just say that we oppose power, everywhere and always. We also need to specify that we are against slavery and colonialism in their specifics and in their locales, as well as exactly how we're against them. Affinity demands real knowledge not empty expressions of opinion.

Proudhon's book, *The Federative Principle*, was released in 1863, once the war was well underway. Indigenous peoples now disappear completely, as we're told that "for half a century, the republic of the United States passed for the model society and type of government," and that only three categories make up American society, those being Black workers, white workers and capitalists.

The Union could have been saved, we're told, if the two sides had only agreed to "free the blacks and give them civil rights, of which the northern states only granted half and which the southern states did not want to grant at all," and if they had made an accord to "energetically resist the growing proletariat, which entered into no one's plans," by which we assume he means the growth of the proletariat in number rather than the growth of the struggle of the proletariat.

Now we learn that "in a federative republic, the proletariat and slavery seem equally inadmissible; the trend must be towards their abolition," whereas in years past, as we have seen, immediate abolition was off the table and enslaved Black people didn't figure into Proudhon's federative principle. The turning tide of the war seems to have affected his rhetorical strategy if not all of his analysis.

Proudhon once again denounces the call for a slave revolt, asking how his French countrymen could possibly applaud it, since it's "a call that is obviously on the part of the beleaguered North only a means of destruction, which is also condemned by the law of war and the rights of people?"

The federative principle, now that the North looks to have a chance of winning, "is intimately linked to those of the social equality of races and the balance of fortunes," we're told, and "the political problem, economic problem and problem of races are but one and the same problem, which must be solved by the same theory and the same jurisprudence," if not by the revolt of the slaves and civil war.

It's been proven, Proudhon says, "by everyday experience, that with education and, if necessary, cross-breeding, the black race can give products as remarkable for talent, morality and industry as the white one, and that more than once already it has been of invaluable help in rekindling and rejuvenating it."

Even in an argument ostensibly for equality, some racial ideology sneaks back in by way of miscegenation and assimilation.

Proudhon rightly opposes plans for deportation as a solution to slavery, but at the same time he asserts the Lockean theory of labour and property, that people acquire the right to use and inhabit "American soil" by working it, rather than by the simple virtue of being part of the human family (notwithstanding the fact that reparations for forced labour, and for slavery as a whole, are by now far past due).

It's not as if Proudhon didn't have a partial point, a point better made by Black radicals to this day, that wage labour under capitalism (or slavery restricted to prison labour) would not amount

to complete emancipation. But his reduction of chattel and wage slavery to equivalents is beyond absurd, if not uncommon to his time.

In his notes to the book, Proudhon asks, "isn't it also a wonderful thing that this continent has fallen into the hands of the race that is most federalist by temperament, genius and aspirations, the Anglo-Saxon race?"

A Black and/or Native person in America just might beg to differ.

"If Mr. Lincoln teaches his compatriots to overcome their repugnances, if he allows blacks the right of citizenship and at the same time declares war on the proletariat, the Union will be saved," Proudhon proclaims, though we know well enough by now that he doesn't mean war in the revolutionary sense.

Proudhon appears as something of a waffler when we compare *War and Peace* (1861) to the subsequent *Federative Principle* (1863). However, if we recall what he went on to say in his following book, *On the Political Capacity of the Working Classes* (1865), he appears even more spineless.

There he wrote, as we have already quoted, that, "leaving aside the question of slavery, the war waged against the South by the North is unjust," adding that "already they are beginning to deny on the other side of the Atlantic the rights of States, which means the federative principle…"

Incoherence may seem a virtue to some but it remains an annoyance to others.

In one of my previous articles, *Anarchism, May Day and Colonialism*, I attempted to place Proudhon within his wider context of anti-Indigenous racism (and alternatively, support for anti-colonial resistance) among historic anarchists, for example, Mikhail Bakunin and William Godwin.

In his 1849 work, *Resistance to the Revolution*, Proudhon wrote that "primitive men" had such "savage minds" that the only sanctions they could understand were those of "religion by its promises and its threats" and "the State by its tribunals and its armies."

"Anarchy is the condition of existence of adult society, as hierarchy is the condition of primitive society," Proudhon asserted, adding that "there is a continual progress in human society from hierarchy to anarchy."

As I put it in my old article, "Indigenous peoples were backwards and were bound to be left behind, according to the notably determinist Proudhon, who also happened to be a misogynist as well as a racist." I did not even get into Proudhon's vile antisemitism, as important as it is to acknowledge and oppose it, because it's commonly brought up cheaply, as a gotcha, without mentioning his corresponding anti-Native and anti-Black racism.

In the present document I have tried to outline the wider context with specific regard to Proudhon's own racist and colonialist views. It's incumbent upon all of us to deal with those views rather than simply run from them. This is not to say that Proudhon never had any kind of insight about anything, but there's no contradiction in acknowledging both his foibles and his gems. Not only that, we'd all be better off for it.

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