

Review of “Property is Theft!”

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During his lifetime Pierre-Joseph Proudhon published two dozen works, ranging from pamphlets to the six-volume *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*. Another fifteen were published posthumously. His published notebooks and correspondence add another seventeen volumes, and his unpublished manuscripts (many of which are now being digitized by the Ville de Besançon) contain several thousand pages of important material. Yet, until recently, all that has been available of Proudhon’s work in English has been four complete volumes (*What is Property?*, *Letter to M. Blanqui*, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, and the debate with French free market economist Frédéric Bastiat, although the last was published serially and has been largely inaccessible), partial translations of four others (*The Principle of Federation*, *System of Economic Contradictions*, *The Social Revolution Demonstrated by the Coup d’Etat*, and *Literary Majorats*), a few essays, and a collection of short excerpts, drawn rather haphazardly from across Proudhon’s works. No comprehensive anthology has existed. As a result, first-hand knowledge of Proudhon’s thought among English readers has generally been limited to a few early works.

Iain McKay’s *Property is Theft!* is an attempt to fill that particular void, and one that is in many ways quite successful. The task was obviously daunting. While the new anthology contains nearly 700 pages of texts, that’s still a very small sample of the existing works. The decision to include complete texts, or at least extensive excerpts, was a substantial improvement over the previous anthology (*Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, edited by Stewart Edwards and published in 1969), where the twists and turns of Proudhon’s often complex arguments were almost inevitably lost, but it also seems to have contributed to an imbalance in the coverage of Proudhon’s career.

Proudhon himself pointed to a kind of watershed in that career, with the *critical* work of the 1840s giving way to a *constructive* work in the years following the coup d’état of 1851. It is that early period that gave us “property is theft!” and the early expressions of Proudhon’s anarchism. It includes the revolutionary period following the February Revolution in 1848, when Proudhon honed his anti-governmental critique in the context of the short-lived Second French Republic. This period is well covered in *Property is Theft!* Missing are any of Proudhon’s writings from before *What is Property?* or any excerpts from the 1843 *Creation of Order in Humanity*, where Proudhon adapted the ideas of Charles Fourier, but there are ample selections from the early works on property and well chosen selections from Proudhon’s controversies during the Second Republic, including his promotion of free credit and his debate on interest with Bastiat. The major

works of the late Republic, *Confessions of a Revolutionary* and *General Idea of the Revolution*, are also represented. This is the Proudhon with which English readers are most familiar, presented with a depth that is unfamiliar, refreshing and enlightening. This material, which accounts for most of the collection, has to be considered a triumph.

Unfortunately, the *constructive* Proudhon is much less well represented. Two sections from *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, probably the most important of Proudhon's published works, provide important insights into Proudhon's philosophical and sociological ideas. A close reading of these texts is recommended as a means of digging deeper into the other writings. Excerpts from *The Federative Principle* and *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* likewise present glimpses of Proudhon's vision for an anti-authoritarian society, with the latter outlining some of the details of the "mutualist system" that he promoted to the Parisian workers at the end of his life. The concluding chapter of the posthumous *Theory of Property* is included as an appendix, but extensive editing and a rather dismissive introduction limit its usefulness. Most notably absent is any material from *War and Peace*, Proudhon's two-volume study of international relations and the role of conflict in society.

The weakness of the anthology's portrayal of the later, mature, *constructive* Proudhon arises in part from the sheer difficulty of excerpting representative sections from the complex, lengthy works of the late 1850s and 1860s. But it is also the case that this later Proudhon remains much less familiar to English readers, and perhaps to most readers, and that there is a well-established pattern of neglect and mistrust of this later material among anarchists. Here, McKay's treatment breaks new ground, but less enthusiastically, with the exploratory zeal diminishing noticeably in the context of the later works.

Whether McKay's emphasis on the early, critical works constitutes a virtue or a shortcoming will probably depend on whether you are more sympathetic to Proudhon's mutualism or to McKay's communism. As the introduction and notes make clear, this is a work designed to introduce Proudhon to an anarchist mainstream that has largely written off his particular form of anarchism as a kind of infantile disorder. It is a powerful corrective to the second-hand Proudhon we have inherited from Marx, or even Kropotkin. As a sort of long footnote to the work that McKay has been doing in *An Anarchist FAQ*, it is an important contribution. As a comprehensive introduction to Proudhon, it is less successful, but it will unquestionably be remembered as an absolutely critical early step in any successful reclamation of Proudhon's mature work.

A final note: In the time since the release of *Property is Theft!* quite a number of Proudhon's manuscripts have become available online, and the general course of Proudhon's career has become much easier to chart. We can now say with real certainty that *The Theory of Property* conforms almost exactly to Proudhon's manuscript, and that the manuscript was itself a key part of a major, unpublished work on Poland, political geography and the question of nationalities, of which works as diverse as *The Federative Principle* and *Literary Majorats* should also be considered parts. Alex Prichard's work on *War and Peace* has introduced more of that work to English readers. Translators who contributed to *Property is Theft!* have continued to provide new translations from Proudhon's work. As one of those involved in this continuing work, I encourage readers to begin their exploration of Proudhon with McKay's anthology, but I also encourage them not to stop there.

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