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The Gift Economy of Property

Shawn P. Wilbur

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This may well be the best known of my anarchist writings, thanks to its inclusion in Markets Not Capitalism, where, I'm afraid, it is a bit of an anomaly. It is, I suppose, a fine enough example of the content here, rich in suggestive bits, if a little short on elaboration. At the same time, however, it is probably not a surprise that almost ten years after I first came up with the notion, the gift economy of property remains little more than a phrase. We've made some headway over the years in bringing various discourses into some kind of common play, but around the question of property I'm inclined to think that the lines are even more starkly drawn than a decade ago. It's hard to imagine what market anarchists make of this sort of construction these days, while it's far too easy to guess the response of the communists who have adopted anthropology as a main line of defense against anything market related.

Still, however unfashionable the provocation here may be, it seems to me that a consistently anarchist theory of property might emerge from an examination of what we have to give, rather than from the search for a theory of just appropriation.

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And almost a decade of work on questions of collective force, the theory of unity-collectivities, etc. has provided me with some tools that I didn't have when I first began to explore this possibility. So I am happy to present this material again, not just as part of the general review of the blog, but in anticipation of taking up the question again in the near future.

I think most anarchists and libertarians share a faith that it is possible for needs to be met, goods to be distributed and some level of general prosperity achieved, in a way that is voluntary and at least approximately just. But we couldn't differ more, it seems, when we start to ask how to get the work done. Probably most of us aim, in the long run, for a society where there is sufficient prosperity that we could be much less concerned about such things, where generosity would be a logical response to plenty. But we live in the midst of a society and economic system that is very far from that ideal, and dream our dreams of the future and freedom while we deal with a very un-free present. On a day when we've just witnessed the largest US bank failure in history, in the context of a government-brokered market-move by JPMorgan, who also benefited from the Bear Stearns maneuver, talk about "genuinely free markets" seems a bit pipe-dreamy. But if it's going to be a long struggle to whatever freedom we manage to wrest from the corrupt bastards who are currently monkeying with our lives, we can probably take the time to get on something like the same page.

Recently, I've been presenting some of Proudhon's ideas about individuality and free will, as well as reviewing his work on property. I have begun to suggest some of the ways in which the early critique of property as a despotic, absolutist principle, became the basis for Proudhon's later reluctant propertarianism, which he based on his analysis of the human self, the *moi*,

which he found was itself naturally absolutist, and despotic when given a chance.

Like Fourier, Proudhon could do any with any notion of original sin, in part because, like Fourier, he associated present errors with a progressive process that led ultimately to closer and closer approximations to justice (the “pact of liberty”), through the equilibration of forces, faculties, projects, parties, federations, etc. Having had done with the divine Absolute, he could only depend on human ethical actors themselves to accomplish the march towards justice, the justification of their institutions, the perfection of their concepts, etc. But it was obvious to him that they would never do it alone. Absolutism and despotism, if allowed entirely free play, are unlikely to lead to any pact, let alone a just one. No social atomist, however, and a thinker prone to expect every force to evoke a counterforce, he wasn’t content to turn that absolutist character into a secular version of innate depravity. What he did do is a bit peculiar, involving a hijacking of Leibniz in directions that anticipate folks like Gilles Deleuze. The psychological and social physics that is at the center of his mature work on liberty and justice reads like poststructuralism in places, and I will have some recourse to the vocabulary of more contemporary continental philosophy as I talk about it.

If the self is not innately depraved, neither is it simple, centered, clean and “proper.” Any body or being, Proudhon says, possesses a quantity of collective force, derived from the organization of its component parts. Though these component parts may be subject to rigid determination, the resultant force exceeds the power of the parts and, to the extent that the collective force is great and the organization that it rises from is complex, it escapes any particular constituent destiny. The collective force is the “quantity of liberty” possessed by the being. Freedom is thus a product of necessity, and expresses itself, at the next level, as a new sort of necessity. And perhaps at most levels of Proudhon’s analysis (and we can move up and down

the scale of “beings” from the simplest levels of organization up to complex societal groupings and perhaps to organization on even larger scales) the quantity of liberty introduced wouldn’t look much like the “individual freedom” that we value. But the human “free absolute,” distinguished by the ability to say “moi” and to reflect on her position in this scheme, has her absolutism tempered by encounters with her fellows, also “free absolutes,” also pursuing a line drawn by the play of liberty and necessity. Out of their encounters, out of mutual recognition, the “pact of liberty” arises (or fails to arise, where lack or recognition or misrecognition take place), and a “collective reason,” possessed (in social organs and institutions, in “common sense,” etc) by a higher-order being, which is to say a higher-order (but latent, rather than free, because it lacks that ability to say “moi”) absolute.

In the system that emerges around these notions, individual human beings hold a very special place, as the chief architects and artisans of justice. Again, like Fourier, Proudhon makes a point of not stigmatizing the impulses of individuals, and, far more than Fourier, he actually makes a virtue of individual egoism and absolutism, as long as we are not so self-absorbed that we can’t recognize our fellow egoists and absolutists as such. Even the “higher wisdom” that is possessed by the higher-order collective beings, like “society” and “the state” (which, in his later works, takes on a very different meaning than anarchists generally give it), is really in large part in the hands of human individuals.

Necessity gives rise to liberty, which tends to a kind of necessity. “Individualism”, even “complete insolidarity,” tends (as we have seen elsewhere in Proudhon’s work) to centralization, to the *dangerous* “socialism” that Leroux warned against in 1834, but also, if equilibrium can be maintained, to an expanded space of social freedom (“the liberty of the social being”) for the individual. It’s all a little dizzying; and in the middle of it, star of the show, sits the individual self, the *moi*, which, while off

gift economy might be strangely (given all we have said, and some of the names we have invoked) foundational.

My social anarchist friends may object to this yoking of absolutism and gratuity in, of all things, property. My libertarian friends will doubtless wince a bit at the notion that self-ownership is a gift (as opposed to a given.) But I think there is at least food for thought here, and that there will be more as I’m able to provide the Proudhon translations and some additional commentary.

What if it was? What, much too quickly (as I've gone on much too long), if the gift was indeed the mark of our other half. As our absolutism is necessity expressing itself in us, gratuity might well be the expression of liberty, of freedom. Perhaps "property," understood, as Proudhon understood it, as a bulwark around the individual, in the face of centralizing, collectivizing forces (which, lest we forget, have their role to play in the march to justice and the expansion of liberty), starting with "self-ownership," is the right implied by our basic human predicament, our in-progress nature, our need for space in which to experiment, err, advance.

Would such a property be compatible with a gift economy? Or does Proudhon finally leave us in a place where neither property, strictly speaking, nor the gift, *ditto*, can arise?

My intuition, based in part on some language various places in Proudhon's work and in part on the connections I've been making to other continental thought, is that a "gift economy," in the sense of a system in which something, which can be rightfully given, is given, with no specific expectations of return, could only arise in fairly limited circumstances, and perhaps can only have one application within Proudhon's thought—but that one application may be a bit of a doozy. We know that there is, for Proudhon, some opening for society to emerge as a "pact of liberty" leading towards approximations of equality and finally of justice. We know that freedom rises from the interplay of necessity and liberty, and that property too has its internal contradictions. Proudhon's *moi* has very little that he can rightfully give, if even his own "property" is theft. But he can, perhaps, give property to the other, through recognition, which steals nothing, robs no one, and is perfectly gratuitous, even if—and this is the character of the gift economy—he cannot be sure of reciprocation. To the extent, however, that commerce is based in equal recognition, if not *necessarily* any other sort of equality, then this particular

the hook for original sin, still has to deal with something we might think of as "original impropriety."

What can the man who never backed down about property being theft say about this self which is, whatever else it is, a kind of by-product of the forces of necessity, that tends, according to him, to see itself as an absolute? What can that self say about its own position? Proudhon suggests that we have put off a certain amount of soul-searching by projecting our own absolutism outwards, onto gods and onto governments, but that this has kept us from dealing with some important stuff—and we're not fooling ourselves much anymore. If progress, as Proudhon believed, is "the justification of humanity by itself," one of the spurs for that progress has to be, for us "free absolutes," an internal tension, maybe even a suspicion that the absolutism of the individual is not so different from that of the proprietor, and for many of the same reasons. Property might be as "impossible" in the psychological realm as Proudhon believed it was in the economic.

We're talking about a "decentered" subject that claims more "identity" than might be precisely justified. (I have often joked that Derrida's claims about identity might be reduced to "property is theft.") But we're not talking about "lack." Instead, we're talking about the self as a kind of excess, a force or pressure. (It would be very easy to move here from Proudhon to, say, Georges Bataille, and certainly easy to compare either or both to the anarchistic ethics of Guyau.) We are not committing ourselves to some social organism theory; Proudhon is explicit about this. (And, again, we might reach without much straining for points of contact with the thoughts of Deleuze on organization, etc.)

If we switch to the language of libertarianism, we're likely to find that Proudhon's vision of overlapping beings, and of human "free absolutes" as the foam at the top of the boiling pot of necessity, at least complicates the question of "self-ownership." Some of my friends and ALLies will naturally object to this

claim, and I'm sympathetic to the basic assumptions associated with a presumed right of self-ownership—indeed, as Proudhon said, “My principle, which will appear astonishing to you, citizens, my principle is yours; it is property itself”—but it does seem to me that if the self is characterized by a radical, unresolvable antinomy, then “property” cannot, by itself, express the “natural right” implied by the nature of the individual.

Like Proudhon, I suspect that “property is theft,” and following his thread, I suspect that “self-ownership” is an expression of our absolutism. Still, like Proudhon, in the end, I am for property, or at least the right to it. Which leaves the questions *How?* and *Why?* Aren't there alternatives?

It seems to me that the search for alternatives to property, the right to control the fruits of one's labor, is, like the general resistance to the notion of markets in anarchism, based in our quite natural frustration and disgust with so much of what passes for commerce under current conditions. We're in the middle of far-too-fine an example of how despotic property can be, when married to governmental power and shielded from any countervailing force, to have many illusions about the risks involved in embracing it. Mutualists, in particular, never quite get off this hook; our “greatest hit,” Proudhon's *What is Property?* (or its most famous slogan, anyway,) is a constant reminder. It is a commonplace in social anarchist circles, and mutualists are not immune, to want to distance ourselves from the details of “getting and spending” as much as possible, and we have constructed a variety of means of putting off the hard discussions of property relations that will eventually, inevitably come.

One of those means, it seems to me, has been reference to the notion of “gift economies.” Like the proponents of “the right of self-ownership,” the advocates of gift economies have meant quite a variety of things by the term. In general, gift economies are differentiated from exchange economies precisely by the lack of exchanges, expectation of any remuneration or quid pro quo.

Some institutionalized forms of gift exchange, like the “really, really free markets,” forbid even barter. While it's clear enough to me what present desires are addressed by this alternative to capitalist commerce, this seems to be one of those practices that could always only operate on the edges of another, more organized and efficient kind of economy. That economy might well be freer in some senses than the enforced “gift economy,” and it is not entirely clear to me that what is involved in that economy is “gifting” anyway.

In order to give, it is necessary to be free to give. One needs to be, in some sense at least, an owner of the gift, and the recipient cannot have an equal claim to appropriating the item. Collective property cannot be gifted within the collective, at least without changing rather substantially the meaning of “giving.” Philosophical and anthropological accounts of the gift set all sorts of other conditions. The recipient of a gift may be required by custom, or by the “spirit of the gift,” to some giving of his own. Gifts are notorious for the “poison” elements that they often contain. Some of the “gift economies” we know from anthropology did indeed operate without recompense in goods, but transformed material capital into prestige or cultural capital, sometimes in an extremely competitive manner. The philosophical accounts of the gift suggest that the “pure gift” is almost impossibly tied up in conflicting requirements; if one acknowledges a gift, accepts thanks in exchange for a gift, perhaps even if one knows one is giving and feels some internal compensation, then the pure gift is impossible. Gifts seem, in any event, to matter. Something other than indifference is required from us, and gaining “punk points” may not be it. Disposing of our excess stuff may just not reach the bar.

The gift economy seems to presuppose individual property, as much as it would like to subvert its absolutism, its covetous, tit-for-tat mentality. Is the gift, perhaps, related to the other half of our human antinomy?