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Anarchism: past, present and utopia

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Anarchism Past, Presentism and Utopia

'No philosophical proposition', Engels argued in 1886, 'has earned more gratitude from narrow-minded governments and wrath from equally narrow-minded liberals than Hegel's famous statement: "All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real."'¹ If what existed was rational, then the despotism, police government and State Chamber proceedings of the Prussian state were all legitimate and had a right to exist. But this, Engels' tells us, was not Hegel's view. On the contrary, what was in the process of becoming real – even if it contradicted existing reality – was rational. In other words, Hegelianism was about process not system. As Engels' put it: 'All that is real in the sphere of human history, becomes irrational in the process of time, is therefore irrational by its very destination, is tainted beforehand with irrationality, and everything which is rational in the minds of men is destined to become real, however much it may contradict existing apparent reality.'²

In the light of the anarchists' much vaunted hostility to Marxism, Engels' views of German philosophy might seem an odd starting point for a discussion of anarchism's futures. Yet if for 'rational' we substitute 'radical', the contrast between the two positions is illuminating. All that is real is radical, all that is radical is real. The first, which we dub the presentist view, is one that has increasingly come to dominate anarchist thought. The second, which points to the necessity of properly understanding the past, is one that we seek to resurrect, albeit on different philosophical grounds to those that Engels' proposed.

Our argument is quite simple. Anarchists have in the post-war period become very wary of their past both because they have tended to assess theory through the experience of the European movement and because they have accepted critiques of anarchism that are simply inaccurate. Today, when so many important contemporary anarchist theorists reject anarchism's past in order to assert the novel value of anarchism's present, anarchism's future becomes stunted. Anarchist praxis suffers, too, because in seeking to junk past anarchist *thought*, anarchists also jettison the *analysis of history* through which the construction of the present might be understood and from which the impulse to re-construct possible futures springs. The result of presentism is an endless celebration of a few de-historicised and de-contextualised principles which, easily identified in a range of disparate practises – and equally easily ignored by everyone else – provide solace about anarchism's revolutionary potential and our ability to bring about change through our individual choices and behaviours.

This essay is a plea for a return to anarchism's past derived from a survey of post-war anarchist theory. In the following section we will examine some of the ghosts of anarchism's past and attempt to explain the relationship between these phantoms and the tendency to presentism. In the second section we offer a corrective to this past with a view, in the final section, to speculate on two possible sets of anarchist futures: one which neglects the past and the other which embraces it and seeks to develop its insights.

The ghosts of anarchism's past

The end of the Spanish civil war is usually taken as the marker of anarchism's death. This marker, or the idea which it embodies, is important for two reasons. First, because it ties anarchist thought to a particular period of European history (roughly between 1871-1939) and second, because in establishing this tie, it draws anarchist thought (so called 'classical' anarchism) with a particular set of behaviours or organisational forms.³ However these forms are defined, the appropriateness of nineteenth and early twentieth-century anarchist strategies and practices have loomed large in post-war debates about anarchist theory. For George Woodcock, the issue was one of violent revolution versus non-violent direct action; Colin Ward made a similar distinction between cataclysmic and incremental action.⁴ Importantly, Kropotkin's thought – particularly the theory of mutual aid – served as a model for both. And Bakuninism was identified as the epitome of all that was wrong with anarchist thought – this was particularly true in Woodcock's work. Thus, in seeking to renew anarchism in the late 1960s and beyond, the aim was to resurrect a version of anarchist theory that was interpreted through the lens of acceptable or appropriate practise.

The tendency to think of anarchist theory in terms of historical practise has continued to flourish and, as it has become more habitual, analyses of the theory that is supposed to have supported these practises have become increasingly distorted. For example, it is now possible to talk about 'class-struggle' anarchism as an identifiable position which, leaning on Marxism, prioritises liberation from class domination as the principle goal of revolution and focuses attention on the urban, industrialised workers as the oppressed class. Today, anarchists of this stripe share twenty-first century anarchist

concerns with religion, ethnicity, sex and sexuality, art and the environment, but when it's applied as a descriptive category to historical movement, class-struggle anarchism has limited scope. In the Spanish context, the identification of class struggle anarchism elevates Barcelona to the movement's geographical and emotional centre, as if anarchism never extended to rural areas and as if anarchists showed no interest in questions of religion or land. Having once been dismissed as petty bourgeois and paysan by Marxist critics, nineteenth century anarchists emerge as fully-fledged proletarians differing from Marx – as Leninists always argued – only on questions of means not ends. Benjamin Franks writes:

From Michael Bakunin's involvement in the First International in the late-1860s, through Rudolf Rocker's efforts to organise immigrant workers in East London into revolutionary unions at the turn of the twentieth century, to the revolutionary anti-State syndicalists of the current era, anarchism has been a part of workers' movements. As such, anarchism has developed critiques of capitalism that support class analyses. Rocker's book *Anarcho-syndicalism*, for instance, demonstrates a commitment to the primacy of the industrial worker, the product of the new technology of capitalism, as the agent capable of bringing about libertarian social change.⁵

Like Franks, critics of class-struggle anarchism also associate nineteenth-century anarchist thought with particular organisational forms and practises, but they lash onto them an undesirable set of philosophical commitments and positions. In postanarchist writing, the priority that nineteenth-century anarchists are assumed to have attached to the workers' struggle against capitalism is variously taken to imply a subscription to a teleological view of history, an outmoded idea of revolution as cataclysmic event and a conception of utopia as a definable post-revolutionary condition in which the naturally co-operative propensities of human beings will be regained and allowed full expression.⁶ On this view, nineteenth-century

anarchism is characterised by a naïve faith that the state (power and authority) can be eradicated (as Woodcock would have it, through a cataclysmic revolutionary event), and a ridiculous optimism in human nature, expressed in an idea that individuals can and should submerge their differences for the sake of living a conflict-free life. Popular anarchist literature suggests that a significant number of nineteenth and early twentieth-century activists believed something like this, if only subliminally, nevertheless, as a description of 'classical' anarchist theory, it is deeply flawed.

One of the concerns informing these readings of the past seems to be a nagging worry about anarchism's 'failure'. If the standard anarchist historiography is to be believed, anarchism not only failed – in the sense that anarchy was nowhere realised – more importantly, its failure can be understood as a function of the anarchists' ambitions rather than the social context in which they operated. A different reading of anarchism's history – one not based on the evaluation of failure or success – might be that in the repression of the Paris commune, the collapse of the First International and the brutal crushing of the Spanish revolution, Europeans witnessed the consolidation of the nation state which, fuelled by capital, industrialisation and war economy and driven by the forces of autocracy, then totalitarianism and finally fascism, was simply too strong to resist. The 'failure' of anarchism was not that it was unable to motivate people sufficiently, or that anarchists failed to find a solution to the problem of revolutionary dictatorship, still less that they could not adequately account for the nature of social reality. Quite the contrary: anarchists were some of the lone voices who understood this only

too well. And to argue that the 'failure' might be attributed to or explained by anarchism's internal flaws points to a view of history which assumes that the future can reveal something about the veracity of ideas held in the past.

The rejection of historically contingent forms and behaviours – and the theories believed to support them – seems to be based on precisely such an assessment. Indeed, the tendency to suppose that is possible both to diagnose the causes of anarchism's failure and to throw out as outmoded past theory and practice has been exacerbated by the tendency to treat the rise of the New Left and the new social movements of the 1960s and '70s as the dawning of a new age. Notwithstanding the interest anarchists took in a variety of early twentieth century avant garde movements and in promoting anti-state feminism and ecological thinking, the growth in the 1960s of the green movement, second-wave feminism, black power, counter-cultural protest and anti-colonialism has suggested a rupture with the past and the need for a new theoretical approach.⁷ What remains of anarchism is largely a set of themes: spontaneity, self-government, non-hierarchical organisation, networking, affinity groups, DIY, the TAZ, poetic terrorism, rhizomatic action and carnival.⁸ Accordingly, the future of anarchism is said to lie in a range of actions which exhibit one of more of these themes: anti-road campaigns, alter-globalisation, summit protests and Zapatismo are all examples. None of these actions or movements is necessarily *anarchist* and to think in these terms, we are told, is to miss the point. What's important about them is that they conform to a set of practises which are *anarchistic*.⁹ This conclusion marks the final turn of anarchist thought. Whereas nineteenth and early-twentieth century anarchists cast about for means of change to realise a set of

principles and ideas, derived from a critical analysis of capitalism and the state, twenty-first century anarchists look for and find evidence of the theoretical break with the past in a range of alternative practises and experiments. What is real is radical.

The past and anarchist theory

To make what is radical real, in the way we suggest, is first to acknowledge the enduringly radical nature of the past and second, to identify an analysis of the present that, informed by that awareness of the past, can help move us forward *strategically*. In this section, we suggest that Proudhon – often cast aside as a redundant classical thinker or, by those who read him, a misogynist and anti-Semite – can help us think more constructively about our future than contemporary theorists would have us believe.¹⁰ We begin with a short exegesis of his work before moving on to discuss its relationship to the question of anarchist futures.

To begin at the beginning. In *What is Property?* (1840) Proudhon argues for a sociological approach to understanding social order.¹¹ This approach asks that we acknowledge that the individual is set within a dense set of natural relations: both with other people and nature itself. In this, human beings are like other animals. What marks us out from other species is an ability to think through and then act on the dictates of conscience and reason. Is this the foundation for a positivist epistemology and totalizing universalism? No. From this starting point, Proudhon proceeds to discuss in all his major works how our conscience and our ideas of rationality are structured, shaped and directed by society and, in addition, by something

inherently human that underpins it: he calls this our conscience. Man (and he was a sexist) is subject to passions. Rather than being perfectible or naturally good, people (to correct Proudhon) are prone to conflict, greed and a range of typically human flaws. Knowing this is important, Proudhon argues, because if our flaws are human, then so too are our angelic qualities.

The same [human] conscience that produces religion and justice also produces war; the same fervour, the same spontaneity of enthusiasm that animates the profits and the jurists sweeps along the heroes: it is this which constitutes the divine character of war.¹²

Science – understood by Proudhon as a philosophically realist alternative to religion and rationalist philosophy (specifically Kantianism) – enables us to pierce or understand man's 'divinity'. And armed with this knowledge, we are not only better able to understand the actual, historical and social roots of violent conflict (as opposed to human nature or whatever else), but also better shape our strategies for avoiding it in the future without compromising the 'spontaneity of enthusiasm' that underpins all inter-action. The answer, if such a thing is possible, is in the order of anarchy.

Proudhon was clear that human nature changes but when it does, it changes into something equally discernable as human in its underlying qualities. Moreover, since this change occurs to individuals in societies, societies then also change. Thus,

The most important task for the philosopher of history, is to discern why the people become attached to certain ideas as opposed to others; how they generalise them, develop them in their own way, turn them into institutions and customs, which they follow out of tradition, until they fall into the hands of legislators and judges, who, in their turn, transform them into articles of law and rules for the tribunals.¹³

How is it, he asks, that we cling to ideas and use them to justify systems of right and law, designed to maintain and regulate or impose a fixed order?

What institutions and power balances sustain these systems of right? For our purposes, the answers Proudhon gave to these questions are not important. What is important is his suggestion that we can only find the answers if we look at the questions *historically*. This will lead us to examine how and why people hold beliefs in time. Proudhon's historical focus shifts the analysis away from ideas of an inherent or immutable nature.

His approach was of course political. Proudhon believed that historical analysis would help uncover systems of power and domination precisely because it de-naturalised them. Of course, given their embeddedness in broader social relations it was always possible that individuals would be unable to discern these systems in any particular time-period; Proudhon failed to see his own sexism or recognise nineteenth-century patriarchy, arguing both were idiosyncratically natural. Yet, where retrospect played a part in the process of recognition, his approach prompted him to respect the *historical nature of social customs*, the importance of enduring communal practices and their social function over time. This respect made him an unequivocal opponent of the type of bourgeois revolutionism espoused in France in the eighteenth century, dominating the socialist tradition thereafter, which had at its heart the conceit that the workers would sweep away the unenlightened provincialism of the sort that Proudhon cherished and which modernity has done so much to destroy.

Proudhon's analysis also made him suspicious of abstraction as a route to the destruction of autonomous social change through ossification into social classes. Not least because classes did not exist in France in the way Marx understood them, Proudhon saw social relations as complementary and

interdependent. If history was any guide, the triumph of the working class over all others, and in league with the state, would mean

[t]he in-division of power; an all-absorbing centralisation; the systematic destruction of all reputedly divisive individual personality, including the corporative and local; an inquisitorial police; the abolition or at least the restriction of the family through the abolition of hereditary; universal suffrage organised in such a way as to serve as a perpetual mandate for this anonymous tyranny, weighted by a preponderance of the mediocre subjects, or even idiots, now always in the majority over more capable citizens and independent characters, who would be declared suspects and naturally, therefore, few in number.¹⁴

This was the thinking behind Proudhon's rejection of Louis Blanc's bourgeois state communism. Difference and diversity are at the heart of his plea for common sense. The opening epigram to his prize-winning work on Swiss taxation systems, more elevating than the title of the work suggested, was: "Reform forever. Utopias never".¹⁵ Precisely because of his views on history and society, Proudhon rejected the idea that social reform could somehow take place *outside* society or *replace it*. He rejected, therefore, the communalist experiments of the Fourierists – protean examples of the Kibbutz movement – the Icarian communities launched by Etienne Cabet in America and, finally, Saint-Simonian scientific pantheism, the progenitor of Scientology.

Abandoning all of this, Proudhon instead advocated self-government (and he used the English phrase too – perhaps the only English he knew). In keeping with what he suggested about the place of individuals in social relations, he also argued that self-government was only possible in groups and thus that groups had to persist for individuals to be able to realise their ambitions within them. For him, social groups are the *sine qua non* for realising individuality, a strange but inevitable paradox, given our social

natures and the restrictions society places upon us. Yet while groups, no less than the individuals who create them, ought to be cherished and protected, no single group – for example, the state – could make a legitimate claim for our special allegiance; nor ought we to countenance the expropriation of collective products to private hands, and the amassing of power there, as liberal political economy demanded. Proudhon's vision was politically pluralist and socially egalitarian. Above all, it was based on an idea of bounded mutability, of hybridization and individual and social spontaneity.

To conclude: Proudhon was as intolerant as an anarchist can be of appeals to the transcendent nature of any group and/or its supposed right to exist; yet he believed that all individuals and groups had the right to self-affirmation and he understood justice to consist of a reciprocal duty to respect this right: this was the basis of his theory of mutualism. However, recognising the right of self-affirmation did not abrogate the right to question those who asserted their naturalness, nor did it require that we abstain from unpacking and examining the historical origins of groups or bodies – like the state and capital (capitalism as Marx understood it barely existed in France at Proudhon's time) – which claimed particular duties of obedience. The opposite was true. History and sociology were central to the mutualist project – not rationalist deontological idealism, nor the materialist consequentialism of the type common at this time.¹⁶

Presentism and anarchist futures

So far, we have argued that the tendency of post-war anarchist theory has been to interpret past anarchist thought through the assessment of

organisational practices, measured against an understanding of anarchism's historic failure. Second, we have suggested, through a review of Proudhon's thought, that anarchist theory should be informed by a historical and sociological analysis of mutability. Our suggestion is that anarchist theory is largely trapped in teleological thinking leading to presentism.

Presentism can take different forms. Proudhon's main concern was with the Kantian variety. This type is rationalist and takes the logical deducibility of ideas as the touchstone for rightness. In other words logic makes right, not society, might or anything else. This way of thinking has clear theological roots, manifest in the idea that if you have the solution worked out in your head and you act according to your precepts/dogmas/orders, then things will be okay. The second brand of presentism denies the possibility of deduction or induction, and throws out notions of rightness. Rather than seek to analyse the historical and sociological context in which anarchists operate, this type of anarchist theory turns in on itself, characteristically focussing on the psychological effects of domination and complex manifestations of power. Yet both forms point to a view that we can move forward without looking up, around or back at anything, as if ideas are not shaped by society, that society does not have historical and thus changed impacts on our conscience and ideas about reason. This kind of approach might work for gardeners, but not for anarchists. When we plant daffodils, for example, we pretty much know what we're going to get – or the range of possibilities - before the bulb blooms. The same does not apply to ideas. The fit between ideas and reality is always mediated by countless other things, and so we can never assume, as Kant

did, that ideas are pure enough to guide in the transcendental way. Yet nor can we assume – in rejecting Kant - that stepping outside of the door in the morning with the right attitude, crib notes from the latest theorist, or news bulletin about the world, is tantamount to resistance.

If this is hyperbole, the point we are trying to make needs stating clearly. Modern anarchism, particularly in its postmodern form, reads into the past ideas that are derived from present concerns, filtering them through two overlaid critique of so-called classical anarchism that in the vast majority of cases simply does not apply. The first is conception of failure, drawn from internal or external critiques of the movement and supported by evidence which suggests its decline as a function of anarchism's internal veracity. The second is the result of a selective and de-contextualised reading of past thinkers which has led many to the conclusion that contemporary anarchist theory supersedes past thinking and is a better guide to action. This fails because the readings provided veer so sharply from the historical record and the simple techniques of contextualised reading.

Both versions of presentism are teleological; the first a version of Whig history – the view that suggests that existence is evidence of success rather than of accident, design and/or force. Neither can hold unless anarchists are to abandon everything anarchism in the past stood for – namely anarchy. Anarchy is not only a theory of behaviour, or order, but also a philosophy of society's underlying nature. The point of historical analysis is to find the principles and practices which constituted order in time and the processes of power and oppression they come to sustain.

It is thus something of a splendid but necessary irony that historians of ideas should speculate on the future of a movement. We argue that a return to the theoretical and historical insights offered by the early anarchists is vital to any anarchist future. Not simply because of the material we are likely to find, but also because it opens up our historical awareness, allows us to develop a closer relationship with our ideological past and helps us to think through the origins of the present in subtle ways. As a result it arms us with the only tools we have to fashion any future – the past.

Misunderstandings about the nature of the past will mean either that our principled stands leave us without tools to strategise, or, in unclipping history from strategy that we lurch directionless, haphazardly into the future armed with nothing more than motifs and attitudes – neither of which have ever won anyone anything.

Utopia

We opened this discussion with Engels's reflections on Hegel. It should be clear that the kind of future we're interested in is not speculative, as Hegel's was. It should also be clear that it is not architectural, either. Proudhon refused the utopian blueprinting of his contemporaries (and because of Marxism's speculative nature, he identified Marx as a utopian, too) and it would certainly be a mistake to pretend that we can define an ideal order and find the key to its eternal regulation. The future will be a natural outgrowth of the present, Proudhon suggests that we can only see as far as the horizon of the present will allow, but we must understand how we arrived here before we

can understand the limits of social change and the possibilities hiding elsewhere.

In thinking about the past, we are also reminded of the ways in which anarchists reflected upon the reality of their social existence and how they attempted to articulate the ways in which this reality *should* be changed. We can compare historical periods and think through strategies for change in more detail. This kind of utopianism involves making judgments about actions, moral as well as strategic, and it raises hard questions about mediating disputes and working within the parameters of a set of institutions we often find abhorrent. But a turn to the past also helps us face up squarely to the possibility that what otherwise exists might not be very radical at all.

¹ F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/index.htm> (12 January 2008)

² F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/index.htm> (12 January 2008)

³ Syndicalism and individualism feature most prominently in the explanatory literature of anarchism's failure and the history of the movement is now sometimes written as confrontation between these two tendencies. See Alexander Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organisation from Proudhon to May 1968* trans. by Paul Sharkey, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2002. Murray Bookchin, *The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism*, http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/ghost2.html (30 January 2008) and, for a rather different view of the confrontation, 'The Left That Was', in *Social Anarchism of Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995, pp. 66-86.

⁴ Woodcock, George. *Anarchism and Anarchists: Essays by George Woodcock*. Kingston: Quarry Press, 1992, chapter 6; Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, London: Freedom Press, 1982, pp. 4-5.

⁵ Benjamin Franks, *British Anarchisms and the Miners Strike*, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3780/is_200510/ai_n15716325/pg_2 (12 January 2008). Franks provides an abstract four-point definition of class-struggle anarchism but this conception is nevertheless drawn from an idea that nineteenth-century anarchist theory was narrowly concerned with an idea of collective, industrial struggle. See Franks, Benjamin. *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms*. Edinburgh: AK, 2006.

⁶ For a discussion see, for example, Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism*, New York: Lexington Books, 2002; Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993; Todd May, *The Political Theory of Poststructuralist Anarchism*; Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, Oxford: Lexington, 2001.

⁷ Jon Purkis and James Bowen. *Twenty-First Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for a New Millennium*. London: Cassell, 1997.

⁸ See Barbara Epstein, 'Anarchism and the Anti-Globalization Movement', *Monthly Review*, 53 (4), <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0901epstein.htm> (15 January 2008)

⁹ David Graeber, 'The New Anarchists'. *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 61-73.

¹⁰ One of the most recent examples of this attitude is N. J. Jun who argues that Deluzian anarchism *is* anarchism despite not being "the utopian anarchism of the nineteenth century [...] but the provisional and preconditional anarchism which is, and will continue to be, the foundation of postmodern politics." N. J. Jun 'Deluze, Derrida and anarchism' *Anarchist Studies* 15/2 2007 132

¹¹ Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *What Is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. Translated by Donald. R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, part 5.

¹² Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *La Guerre Et La Paix, Recherches Sur La Principe Et La Constitution Du Droit Des Gens*. Nouvelle ed. 2 vols. Paris: Editions Tops, 1998, 40.

¹³ Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *De La Capacité Politique Des Classes Oeuvrières*. Paris: Slatkine, 1982, 119

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 115

¹⁵ Proudhon, P. J. *Theorie De L'impot*. Paris: E. Dentu, 1861, i, 5.

¹⁶ A good analysis of Proudhon's theory of history can be found in Noland, Aaron. "History and Humanity: The Proudhonian Vision." In *The Uses of History: Essays in Intellectual and Social History*, edited by Hayden White, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968. 59-105. The location of this piece, in a volume edited by Hayden White, the arch-postmodern historian is somewhat ironic.