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Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Self-Government and the Citizen-State

Shawn P. Wilbur

1963

[The State] is itself, if I may put it this way, a sort of citizen..."
—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon¹

For more than a hundred years, *anti-statism* has been a key principle of anarchism. But this was not always the case. A search of English- and French-language sources suggests that for much of the nineteenth century, the term “statism” (or “étatisme”) did not have its present meaning. In the political realm, it simply meant “statesmanship.” As late as the 1870s, the American anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews used the term to mean “a tendency to immobility,” without apparent fear of confusion, and the American Dental Association considering adopting Andrews’ coinage, apparently without fear of entering political territory.²

¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Théorie de l’impôt*, Paris: Dentu, 1861: 68.

² Bakunin was writing about “statism,” or its Russian equivalent, by 1870. Joseph Lane’s “An Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto” was published in 1887, and

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Anarchism emerged as a political philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century, when much of the modern political lexicon was still being established. “Individualism,” “socialism,” and “capitalism” all seem to date from the 1820s or 1830s, and their early histories are entangled with that of “anarchism,” a term we generally date from 1840, and which was initially defined in terms of its anti-*authoritarian* or anti-*governmental* critique. Of course, the relatively late appearance of the term *anti-statism* does not itself tell us much about the history of the associated critique. We know, however, that at least some of the participants in the anarchist movement considered the emergence of *anti-statism* as both a real departure from the existing *anti-governmental* critique—and as a misstep. In 1887, for example, more than twenty years after the death of anarchist pioneer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Frédéric Tufferd wrote:

The most incredible confusion is that between the government and the State. I am an anarchist, as Proudhon was, for like him I want to abolish government, the principle of authority in the State, in order to replace it by an responsible and controllable administration of the public interests; but I do not want, with Bakunin, to abolish the State. The word State comes from stare, to hold, to persist; the State is thus the organized collectivity. Just as the commune is the local collectivity, the State is the national collectivity which has lasted, lasts, and will last as long as the nation itself.³

For Tufferd, socialists faced a choice between dividing over speculations on the *nature* of the State, God, etc., or uniting around a science focused on social *relations*. As he understood the terms of the

in the previous year the American individualist anarchist Benjamin R. Tucker had published a partial translation of Proudhon’s “Resistance to the Revolution” under the title “The State.”

³ Frédéric Tufferd, “L’Union en socialisme,” *Société nouvelle* 2, No. 33 (septembre 1887): 224.

pants. In his correspondence, Proudhon includes this curious detail. “While Louis Blanc accuses me of *sellingsocialism*, his framed portrait serves as the companion to mine in my wife’s bedroom! Could I refuse that place to the man who, despite the weakness of his deductions and his incompetence, best represents the governmental principle?...” *Correspondance*, Vol. 5 (Paris: Lacroix, 1875): 107.

proximations,” positing a progress-without-end as an alternative to utopian blueprints, and he had on several occasions sketched out general “approximations” of his vision of an anarchist society, most notably perhaps in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. His final, deathbed work, *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*,⁴⁵ was of a similar character, but written, with the benefit of Proudhon’s entire *constructive* development, specifically for the radical workers who would be Proudhon’s immediate ideological heirs. It provided concrete examples of how the various elements of Proudhon’s project, including the re-imagined State, might fit together in a free society.

Looking back over Proudhon’s writings on the State, it is clear that some aspects of his theory remained unfinished or unwritten at the time of his death, but it is also striking how much of what was written by this pioneering anarchist and social scientist has essentially been ignored by both traditions for more than a hundred years. There are elements of Proudhon’s thought which are strikingly contemporary, including a sort of anti-foundationalism which many may be surprised to find in nineteenth works. There is also a novel approach to questions of the relationship between the individual and collective. Above all, perhaps, the importance of an adequate analysis of the institutions of property and the State, or the principles of liberty and authority, have not diminished in the time since Frédéric Tufferd confronted the socialist movement with a choice of paths. To acquaint ourselves with Proudhon is, if nothing else, to provide ourselves with long-forgotten options.

[14]Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1880): 235. The personal aspects of the debate occasionally allow us a glimpse of the intimate lives of the partici-

⁴⁵ Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868.)

“confusion,” *government* was any relation on the basis of the “principle of authority,” which could, indeed, shape particular *States*, but which was ultimately separable from the State as such. The State was merely a persistent manifestation of society.

This was quite different from the view which ultimately united much of the anarchist movement in opposition to the State as such. Almost from the beginning there had been those who felt that a decisive break had to be made with existing institutions. Not all were as extreme as, for example, Ernest Coeurderoy, who claimed that liberty could not come to European civilization unless it was first destroyed by the Cossacks, but many in the movement believed that very little of the present social organization could be allowed to persist. Certainly Bakunin—the representative figure, for Tufferd, of the *anti-statist* school—held government and the State to be entwined, and both to be impediments to anarchy.⁴

Despite their differences, however, both schools of thought could claim, with at least some justification, a descent from the work of Proudhon. Their specific inspirations were simply drawn from different periods of his career. Proudhon’s thoughts about the State appear, at least at first glance, to have run a wide gamut. At times, he had been its staunchest opponent, calling for its entire abolition. In 1848, during the Second Republic, he asked: “Why do we believe in Government? From whence comes, in human society, this idea of Authority, of Power; this fiction of a superior Person, called the State?”⁵ Yet, in 1861 he claimed that “the State, as the Revolution has conceived it, is not a purely abstract thing, as some, Rousseau among them, have supposed, a sort of legal fiction; it is a reality as positive as society itself, as the individual even.”⁶ He went so far as to describe the State as “a species of citizen.”

⁴ See, for example, Mikhail Bakunin’s “La science et la question vitale de la révolution.”

⁵ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Confessions d’un Revolutionnaire*, new ed., (Paris: Lacroix, 1876): 5.

⁶ *Théorie de l’impôt*. 77.

Could the State be in some sense a fiction? And, if so, could the same State also be, in some sense, a reality, a being of sorts, as real as the human individual? Proudhon answered both questions in the affirmative, and in terms which only require some clarification to render consistent. During the period of the Second Republic, he argued that the real power attributed to the State was legitimated by a false account of relations within society, and he waged an unrelenting war against that fundamental political fiction—but also against all other *governmentalist* accounts, which posited the necessity of a ruling authority outside and above the equal associations of individuals. Then, during the Second Empire, having swept aside, at least to his own satisfaction, that false account of the composition and realization of society, he began to advance an alternate account, in which he found that government and the State were indeed separable, and that the non-governmental functions of the State, though modest in comparison to those attributed to its authoritarian forms, served vital roles in society—even when the political forms of society approached *anarchy*.

Between the two periods, Proudhon himself identified a watershed corresponding to his own “complete transformation:” “From 1839 to 1852, I have had what is called my *critical* period, taking this word in the lofty sense it is given in Germany. As a man must not repeat himself and I strive essentially not to outlive my usefulness, I am assembling the material for new studies and I ready myself to soon begin a new period I shall call, if you like, my *positive period* or period of construction.”⁷

Proudhon’s claim was perhaps hyperbolic, since transformation was for him something of a constant process. Elsewhere, in what is perhaps a more satisfactory account, he characterized himself as “the man whose thought always advances, whose program will never be accomplished.”⁸ But he was quite correct in pointing to

⁷ Proudhon, *Correspondance*, vol. 6, (Paris: Lacroix, 1875): 285–286.

⁸ Proudhon, *Philosophie du progrès: programme*, (Bruxelles: Lebegue,

of the text is devoted to exploring the details of that equilibration in various arenas.

Alongside reiterations of his warning to keep the power of the State in check, he clarified what he took to be the specific role of the state: “In a free society, the role of the State or government is *par excellence* a role of legislation, institution, creation, inauguration, installation; — it is, as little as possible, a role of execution.”⁴³ If collective beings were to have a special role in the division of political labor, it is natural that it would involve the identification of problems pertaining specifically to the collective aspects of society, but the non-governmental implementation of solutions to such problems could only fall back on the individuals that made up the collectivity. Perpetual social progress would guarantee a permanent role for entities like the State, but should they be allowed to fulfill beyond that to which they were especially suited, the balance of forces would be upset, and the hard-won stability of society sacrificed.

At the end of his life, Proudhon had come to think of federation as the practical key to achieving and maintaining justice—understood simply as balance—in all aspects of society:

All my economic ideas, developed for twenty-five years, can be summarized in these three words; *Agro-industrial Federation*.

All my political views come down to a similar formula: *Political Federation* or *Decentralization*.

And as I make of my ideas neither a party instrument nor a means of personal ambition, all my hopes for the present and the future are expressed by this third term, corollary of the other two: *Progressive Federation*.⁴⁴

Proudhon worked on his social science to the very end. In *The Theory of Property*, he had declared that “humanity proceeds by ap-

⁴³ Op cit., 54.

⁴⁴ Op cit., 83–84.

all by itself, if it is not given a counter-balance.”⁴⁰ One of the useful powers of property was, somewhat ironically, a power to divide society, a power required because “[t]he power of the state is a power of concentration; give it freedom to grow and all individuality will soon disappear, absorbed into the collectivity; society will fall into communism; property, on the other hand, is a power of decentralization; because it is itself absolute, it is anti-despotic, anti-unitary; it is because of this that it is the principle of all federation; and it is for this reason that property, autocratic in essence carried into political society, becomes straightway republican.”⁴¹

Beyond the transformation of the despotic, fictive State into the citizen-State, difficulties and responsibilities still remained. “We have understood finally that the opposition of two absolutes—one of which, alone, would be unpardonably reprehensive, and both of which, together, would be rejected, if they worked separately—is the very cornerstone of social economy and public right: but it falls to us to govern it and to make it act according to the laws of logic.”

Through the 1860s, one of the dominant ideas in Proudhon’s thought was this notion of federation, which involved the decentralization of society and the organization of the parts in a mutual, horizontal manner, without relations of authority over one another. *The Federative Principle*, published in 1863, started with the premise that both the political and economic realms were doomed to content with irreducible antinomies: “It is a question of knowing if society can arrive at something settled, equitable and fixed, which satisfies reason and conscience, or if we are condemned for eternity to this Ixion’s wheel.”⁴² For Proudhon, of course, it was again a question of balancing opposing forces and tendencies, and much

⁴⁰ Proudhon, *Théorie de la propriété* (Paris: Lacroix, 1866): 137.

⁴¹ *Op cit.*, 144.

⁴² Proudhon, *Du Principe fédératif* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868): 40–41.

separate *critical* and *constructive* analyses, each predominating at different times in his work, which can serve us to distinguish—and ultimately to explore the relations—between two aspects of his theory of the State.

What follows is a roughly chronological examination of Proudhon’s developing understanding of the State, including accounts of the two analyses already noted. The first of these is an account of *critical* analysis of the *governmentalist* State, as Proudhon presented it in a series of published debates with Louis Blanc in 1849. The second is an exploration of some of the developments that he gave to his theory of the State in his later writings—in his 1858 masterwork, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, and in a number of other texts from the 1860s, including *War and Peace*, *The Theory of Property*, and *The Federative Principle*. Between these two studies it will be necessary to pause, as Proudhon did in his own career, for an examination of his early studies, in order to clarify the extent to which his later conception of the State grew directly from the earlier work. We’ll end by revisiting the “confusion” that concerned Tufferd, and consider the potential lessons of the largely neglected conclusions of Proudhon’s second analysis of the State.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon emerged as a public figure—and launched the modern anarchist movement—in 1840, when he published *What is Property?* To the question posed in the title, he proposed the infamous response: “Property is theft!” The work was hardly a political manifesto, and it would, in any event, be some years before the anarchist movement consisted of more than a small, heterodox collection of Proudhon’s fellow-travelers. Instead, it was a collection of critiques of existing property conventions, and the “Psychological Exposition of the Idea of Justice and Injustice, and a Determination of the Principle of Government and of Right,” in which Proudhon declared “I am an anar-

1853}: 22.

chist,” was not exactly an afterthought, but it was certainly written for non-anarchist contemporaries, rather than those who would eventually be his ideological heirs. Still, Proudhon defined anarchy in fairly clear and simple terms, as the “absence of master, of sovereign,” and declared that it was “the form of government which we approach every day.” Anarchy would come by means of a shift from rule by authority, or will, to a condition in which “the legislative power belongs to reason alone, methodically recognized and demonstrated.” Under these circumstances, “as the opinion of no one is of any value until its truth has been proven, no one can substitute his will for reason,—nobody is king.”⁹ Proudhon distinguished this political order—sometimes designated by the English term *self-government*—from even those sorts of democracy for which it is claimed that “everyone is king,” as he believed that the multiplication of sovereign wills still differed from the dethroning of will in politics altogether.

Proudhon followed his book on property with others on the same subject, and soon found himself the object of both considerable notoriety and government prosecution. He was only saved from imprisonment because it was argued that he was merely a philosopher. For much of the 1840s, he did indeed concentrate on philosophy and social science, establishing himself as something of a rival to the “utopian” socialists Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Pierre Leroux and Etienne Cabet. But events in France would eventually lead him to an active political life.

During the Second Republic, Proudhon had direct incentives to think about the nature of the State itself. In the debates surrounding the form and direction of the French republic many revolutionary options no doubt seemed possible,¹⁰ as well as any number of catastrophic failures, and Proudhon was not only drawn into

⁹ Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* (Paris: Prevo, 1841): 301–302.

¹⁰ See, for example, Pierre Leroux, *Projet d'une constitution démocratique et sociale* (Paris: G. Sandré, 1848.)

the present and the future, and extends to future generations: thus the State has rights proportional to its obligations; without which, what use would its foresight serve?”³⁷ The State was now as Tufferd described it, the thing that persisted and mediated the balancing of interests even between generations.

A third work, *The Theory of Property*, was substantially completed in 1861, although it was not published until after Proudhon's death. It was controversial at the time of its publication, because the editors did not clearly mark their contributions to two summary sections left unfinished by the author.³⁸ It has been controversial for more recent readers, because it represented the final stage of Proudhon's theory of property—a theory which evolved in some of the same surprising ways as his theory of the State. Indeed, those who knew his many writings on property should probably have been prepared for the development of this State-theory. He had hardly made his first, triumphant pronouncements about property's defeat in 1840 when he began to make what we would probably recognize as a very early shift from *critical* to *constructive* concerns, raising the possibility that the same property that was “theft” was also “liberty,” if properly balanced by other forces,” by 1846. By 1848, Proudhon believed that “All that it is possible to do against the abuses or drawbacks of property is to merge, synthesize, organize or balance it with a contrary element...”³⁹ In *The Theory of Property* he was finally able to move beyond that impasse, by proposing the State as the counterbalancing power to individual property.

The work shows that he was far from having overcome all his misgivings about the State. “The state, constituted in the most rational and liberal manner, animated by the most just intentions, is none the less an enormous power, capable of crushing everything,

³⁷ *Op cit.*, 76–82.

³⁸ See Auguste Beauchery, *Economie Sociale de P.-J. Proudhon* (Lille: Imprimerie Wilmot-Courtecuisse, 1867.)

³⁹ *Confessions*, 228.

faculties are expressed, and must still be harmonized through a process of balancing. It's clear that by this period in his career Proudhon had given the conventional language of political philosophy some fairly individual interpretations. If, as Proudhon claimed, all manifestations of individual or collective force bear their "rights" within them, then what we find in the theory of rights, and the notion of immanent justice, is really just a restatement of basic anti-authoritarian principles: equality is the basis of society and interests must be balanced.

It was in *The Theory of Taxation*, also published in 1861, that the citizen-State finally emerged. While primarily concerned with methods of public finance, the book contained a very brief section on the Relation of the State and Liberty, according to modern rights." Despite its brevity, however, it is perhaps the most concise summary of Proudhon's later theory of the State. The modern theory of rights, he claimed, "has done one new thing: it has put in the presence of one another, on the same line, two powers until now had been in a relation of subordination. These two powers are the State and the Individual, in other words the Government and Liberty." He reaffirmed that the State had a "positive reality," manifesting itself as a "power of collectivity," issuing from the organized collective, rather than imposed on it from outside, and thus possessing rights—of the sort introduced in *War an Peace*—but no authority. He asserted that in a regime of liberty it too must be ruled, like the citizens, only by reason and by justice—because, as he put it, "it is itself, if I may put it this way, a sort of citizen."³⁶ This image of the citizen-State, neither master nor servant, and located "on the same line" as the other citizens, may be the simplest characterization possible of Proudhon's complex and elusive ideal for the State. Finally, Proudhon declared the State "the protector of the liberty and property of the citizens, not only of those who have been born, but of those who are to be born. Its tutelage embraces

³⁶ *Théorie de l'impôt*, 68.

the political conversation but into the government itself, serving in the constituent assembly from June 1849 until March 1849. He proposed programs and legislation. His work on property languished somewhat, while he established the theoretical basis and eventually the institutional apparatus for his Bank of the People, a currency reform project based on "free credit."¹¹ He enjoyed a wide notoriety, but faced consistent opposition on most fronts. His career as a statesman ended when his immunity from prosecution was lifted and he was imprisoned for insults to president Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. In prison, he continued to be intensely involved in the political discussion, writing books and articles analyzing the failure of the 1848 revolution, and it was during this period that he engaged in the very public debate with fellow socialists Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux on the "nature, object and destiny" of the State.

The 1849 debate on the State was a surprisingly public affair, a debate between socialist philosophers so well publicized that early in 1850 *La Mode*, a popular magazine, could publish a one-act play, "The Feuding Brothers," which was little more than a parodic report of the debate, cobbled together from quotes in the popular. The anonymous author of the farce could assume a fairly high degree of familiarity with the details, in large part because the French Revolution of 1848 had transformed socialist philosophers into men of state. The whole world was watching the developments within the Provisional Government of the Second French Republic, where the most important sorts of questions were being discussed among representatives whose preferred systems ranged from anarchy to the restoration of the constitutional monarchy.

Between Proudhon and Leroux, there seems to have been almost complete agreement on most of the substantive issues, although this didn't prevent them from making outrageous accusa-

¹¹ Proudhon's key writings on credit are assembled in *Solution du problème sociale* (Paris: Lacroix, 1868.)

tions and calling one other the most bizarre names. Between Blanc and Proudhon, however, the lines were clearly drawn. For modern readers, the most striking aspect of the exchange might be the obvious animosity between the two men. Proudhon referred to the “the avowed, cordial hatred of Louis Blanc,”¹² while Louis Blanc, reprinting his contributions some years later, felt the need to suppress some passages that “was marked by too much vehemence and does not deserve to figure in a discussion de principes.”^[14] But there were also a clear clash of principles.

Blanc’s account of the State was a progressive one, assuming an evolution through forms of “tyranny,” followed by a democratic transformation to the “reign of liberty.”

“What is the State?” asks Louis Blanc. And he replies:—

“The State, under monarchical rule, is the power of one man, the tyranny of a single individual.

“The State, under oligarchic rule, is the power of a small number of men, the tyranny of a few.

“The State, under aristocratic rule, is the power of a class, the tyranny of many.

“The State, under anarchical rule is the power of the first comer who happens to be the most intelligent and the strongest; it is the tyranny of chaos.

“The State, under democratic rule, is the power of all the people, served by their elect, it is the reign of liberty”¹³

At the end of its evolution, Blanc claimed, the State would be “nothing other than society itself, acting *as society*, to prevent... what? Oppression; to maintain... what? Liberty.”¹⁴ There had been

¹² Mélanges, tome iii, 30.

¹³ Mélanges, tome iii, 9–10.

¹⁴ Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1880): 236.

earned Proudhon a reputation for anti-feminism, but even beneath the genuinely reactionary social roles proposed there is a curiously radical notion that the “organ of justice” is located in a human relationship, rather than a human individual.

Proudhon developed his theory of the state in three works during 1861. *War and Peace*, probably the most interesting of the three, was a two-volume examination of the role of conflict in human history, demonstrating the means by which a proper understanding of war might lead to a just peace. It is a difficult, sometimes perplexing work, which has led some to treat Proudhon as a militarist, despite the fact that the book ended with the declaration that “humanity wants no more war.”³² In it we find Proudhon working out the play of the antinomies on a large political stage, dealing with the interactions of States and peoples, mixing lessons drawn from history with more observations applicable to the theory that he was in the process of constructing.³³

The work contained important statements about justice in general: “Justice is not a commandment made known by a higher authority to an inferior being, as is taught by the majority of writers who have written on the rights of the people; justice is immanent in the human soul; it is its deepest part, it constitutes its highest power and its supreme dignity.”³⁴ Where individual rights are concerned “Right, in general, is the recognition of human dignity is all its faculties, attributes and prerogatives. There are thus as many special rights as humans can raise different claims, owing to the diversity of their faculties and of their exercise.”³⁵ These various claims, however, are limited to the specific spheres in which the

³² Proudhon, *La guerre et la paix*, tome ii (Bruxelles: Hertz, 1861): 420.

³³ Lack of space prevents me from addressing some interesting material on relations between States. Readers are encouraged to consult Alex Prichard, *Justice, Order and Anarchy* (New York: Routledge, 2103) for an analysis of *La Guerre et la Paix* from the perspective of international relations.

³⁴ Proudhon, *La guerre et la paix*, tome i (Bruxelles: Hertz, 1861): 199.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 288.

questions about his entire opposition to government, there is no lack of unambiguous declarations affirming it. “Justice alone commands and governs,” he insisted, “Justice, which creates the power, by making the balance of forces an obligation for all. Between the power and the individual, there is thus only right: all sovereignty is rejected; if it denied by Justice, it is religion.” Beyond this *self-government*, guided by justice, society was “ungovernable.”³⁰

There are a number of other details relevant to the theory of the State, scattered through the sprawling work on *Justice*. In a sort of delayed response to Blanc, Proudhon poked fun at the “monstrous idea” that others had possessed of “social being:” “it is like an animal of a mysterious species, but which, in the manner of all the known animals, must have a head, a heart, nerves, teeth, feet, etc. from that chimerical organism, which everyone strives to discover, they then deduce Justice, that is to say that we derive morality from physiology, or, as we say today, right from duty, so that Justice always finds itself placed outside of consciousness, liberty subjected to fatalism, and humanity fallen.”³¹

Another study provided a positive account of liberty, suggesting that freedom is not simply the absence of prohibition or restraint, but a quality inherent to the organization of beings, which is greater or lesser to the extent that the relations between them are complex and energetic—a notion that would form part of the rationale for Proudhon’s federalism. Long sections devoted to gender roles, and the proper role and constitution of the family have

tics,” presumably with authority to regulate on the basis of science, although that seems clearly at odds with the anarchistic self-government Proudhon was in the process of proposing. While the most authoritarian readings of these two passages are almost certainly incorrect, there is certainly something puzzling about them, and we know that Proudhon was not immune to proposing mechanisms arguably at odds with his goals. It was, after all, in the context of a very similar discussion of the “organ of justice” that he elevated the patriarchal family to a special place in his social theory.

³⁰ De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Église, tome I, 495.

³¹ De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Église, tome III, 113.

master-States, he said, but in the democratic regime the State would be a servant.

Proudhon naturally challenged the characterization of the anarchic regime, but he also questioned the apparent sleight of hand by which the tyranny of the State in all its other forms became liberty when in the hands of democratically elected officials. He claimed that Blanc, and the other proponents of the State, did not really believe in a society that could act *as society*, insisting instead on the necessity of the State, which he characterized as “the external constitution of the social power.” His opponents believed “that the collective being, that society, being only a being of reason, cannot be rendered sensible except by means on a monarchic incarnation, aristocratic usurpation, or democratic mandate.”¹⁵ Proudhon, on the contrary, believed that this “collective being” had a real existence, strongly analogous to that of the human individual: “in both cases, the will, action, soul, mind, and life, unknown in their principle, elusive in their essence, result from the animating and vital fact of organization.”¹⁶ This was not simply an analogy for Proudhon, but an enduring part of his social science, which he was prepared to state in no uncertain terms: “We affirm, on the contrary, that the people, that society, that the mass, can and ought to govern itself by itself; to think, act, rise, and halt, like a man; to manifest itself, in fine, in its physical, intellectual, and moral individuality, without the aid of all these spokesmen, who formerly were despots, who now are aristocrats, who from time to time have been pretended delegates, fawners on or servants of the crowd, and whom we call plainly and simply popular agitators, *demagogues*.”¹⁷

In his response, Blanc did not challenge Proudhon’s account of society as a collective being, but he objected that it was incomplete: “If this collective being of which the citizen Proudhon declares the

¹⁵ *Mélanges*, tome iii, 11.

¹⁶ *Mélanges*, tome iii, 13.

¹⁷ *Mélanges*, tome iii, 12.

existence is anything but a collection of senseless syllable, it must be realized. But the collective being realized is precisely the State.” Altering the argument slightly, Blanc said that society might form an organized, unified body, but that it would lack unity if it lacked the State, which he likened to the human head.

The analogy was not particularly apt. We probably wouldn’t say that the human body is “realized” by the head, or that the head was the site of its unity, even if we were convinced that the State was a real “organ” of society—unless, of course, we believed that the body was unorganized without the direction of something like a soul. Proudhon seized on this element of the argument, referencing Descartes’ attempts to find a site for the soul in pineal gland.

For Proudhon, there could be no equivocation between beings capable of *self-government* and those animated by some external force or principle. Every attempt to combine the two accounts would involve a fatal contradiction, and this was inevitable in any defense of States organized according to the principle of authority. No doubt, Proudhon admitted, those contradictory States were inevitable in the evolution of society, but in the end the fiction of authority would be overcome. “*Anarchy*,” he said, “is the condition of existence of adult societies, as *hierarchy* is the condition of primitive societies: there is an incessant progress, in human societies, from hierarchy to anarchy.”¹⁸

The debate over the aim or object of the State simply clarified the arguments concerning its nature. According to Proudhon, the governmentalists believed that in the absence of a State society would be in a constant state of internal warfare. For Proudhon, a collection of individuals in constant warfare would simply not constitute a society. In this instance it would indeed be society which was fictive, and we might ask ourselves how this warfare might give rise to the peaceful impulses which presumably would inform the rule or “realization” accomplished by the State. The divide between

¹⁸ *Mélanges*, tome iii, 9.

his anarchist vision. *Collective reason* emerged alongside collective force as a manifestation of collective being, and in the study on “Ideas” Proudhon described the special role that it had to play in safeguarding individual reason against the corrupting influence of the absolute. To simplify what is both a wide-ranging and occasionally puzzling discussion, we might simply observe, in this context, that as the force exerted by individuals in industry finds expression both in industrial organizations and in more strictly individual forms, the individual reason which is supposed to inform our *self-government* is expressed, if we may put it this way, by individuals as individuals, by collectives as individuals, and by individuals as parts of collectives. The anarchic *self-government* of a given society will have to be grounded in the balancing of those manifestations of reason, and the overlaps between individual and collective give us some clues to the mechanisms likely to be involved.

Proudhon himself, in talking about the “organ” of the collective reason, situated it everywhere that collective force might be found. This proliferation of *reasons* to be reckoned with perhaps served to combat the one real danger he foresaw need to protect against: “There is only one precaution to take: to insure that the collectivity consulted does not vote, *as one man*, by virtue of an individual sentiment that has become common...”²⁸ That danger was apparently real enough in Proudhon’s mind that, in a puzzling paragraph, he proposed a “special magistracy” to operate as “police of conversations and guardian of opinion.” The proposal was, however, without details, and in context it is hard to imagine how this “magistracy,” whether formal or figurative, could have been tasked to do anything but stave off premature agreement.²⁹ In any event, if Proudhon’s most ambiguous statements raise momentary

²⁸ *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Église*, tome III, 119.

²⁹ The suggestion recalls Proudhon’s statement from 1840, where he proposed that questions of policy might be decided by the Academy of Sciences, to whom all citizens could appeal, on the basis of “departmental statistics.” The proposal has sometimes been mistaken for the creation of a “Department of Statis-

are as much realities as individual ones.”²⁶ This notion of collective force had been part of Proudhon’s theoretical apparatus since the work on property in 1840, where he used it to demonstrate that individual property could not emerge simply from social labor. In *The General Idea of the Revolution* he had invoked it to suggest limits on individual ownership of capital, based on whether the means of production in question would be employed individually or by some organized association of laborers. By 1849, the family and society had joined the list of collective beings manifesting one or more varieties of synergetic “force.” As Proudhon’s thought developed, the range of beings and manifestations of force to be reckoned with continued to multiply. It was perhaps inevitable that Proudhon would find *something* in all the manifestations associated with government and the State that he had to consider a reality.

The theory of the State that emerged in 1858 was still rather vague: “The State results from the gathering of several groups, different in nature and object, each formed for to exercise a special function and for the creation of a particular product, then assembled under a common law, and in an identical interest.”²⁷ If this State was to be understood as an individual, a “species of citizen,” there was still some elaboration to be made. Proudhon, however, was most concerned with showing that the role of the state would be “primarily commutative,” but “no less real” for that. All of the usual activities associated with states, the “works of public utility,” seemed to him to be “effects of the ordinary collective force,” with no natural or necessary connection to any structure of external authority. As examples of appropriate projects for his anti-authoritarian State, he discussed questions like general security and the provision of a circulating medium.

The work on *Justice* also presented an important evolution in Proudhon’s discussion of *reason*, the sole source of legislation in

²⁶ Op cit., 480–481.

²⁷ Op. cit., tome I, 481.

Proudhon and Blanc revolved around a choice between “internal” and “external constitution” of the society. Without the “realizing” element of the State, Blanc argued, society would just be a group of elements. In response, Proudhon argued that every individual is essentially a group of elements—but that in every individual worthy of the name the principle of association or realization, the only law the anarchist Proudhon was prepared to recognize, is inherent in and demonstrated by the association itself. There is *self-government* or there external imposition, and it matters little, in the long run, whether the imposing force is vested in one individual or many, or what we call those who wield the force. It is still tyranny.

On the question of the destiny of the State and the possibilities for its reform, Proudhon had very little room for optimism. What he objected to in the State was not, according to his present understanding of the terms, an inessential part of it, but its very essence, its external position with regard to society. Some States might be more or less objectionable in their impositions on society, but the point, for Proudhon, was to cease imposing any order on society which was not its own order, derived from its own internal law. Proudhon wanted neither master-States nor servant-States, just as he wanted neither masters nor servants. As he had not yet found the grounds on which to deal separately with government and the State, that left him with no option by to reject the State entirely.

Imprisoned until after the coup d’état, Proudhon was poorly positioned to effect the course of the republic, but, like many political prisoners, he made the most of his incarceration. His debate with Leroux and Blanc had been preceded by the *Confessions of a Revolutionary*, a critical history and personal indictment of the French Revolution of 1848, and it was followed by *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, in which he sought to argue for the possibility, even the necessity of a new revolution. His anti-governmentalist critique—and perhaps his entire “critical” phase—reached its crescendo in the “Epilogue” of the latter work, in what has become one of his most famous passages:

To be governed is to be kept in sight, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right, nor the wisdom, nor the virtue to do so... To be governed is to be at every operation, at every transaction, noted, registered, enrolled, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under the pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, trained, ransomed, exploited, monopolized, extorted, squeezed, mystified, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, despised, harassed, tracked, abused, clubbed, disarmed, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and, to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, outraged, dishonored. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality. And to think that there are democrats among us who pretend that there is any good in government; Socialists who support this ignominy, in the name of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; proletarians who proclaim their candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic! Hypocrisy!¹⁹

This is the *anti-governmentalist* faith that he never abandoned, and the aspect of Proudhon's thought which has been consistently honored by the anarchist tradition. But the Republic was nearing its final crises in 1851, and the context for Proudhon's critique would change dramatically with the emergence of the Second Empire.

With the *coup d'état*, the legislative conversation was abruptly closed, and Louis Napoleon's regime was not accommodating to dissenting voices, rewarding them not just with censorship, but sometimes with imprisonment or exile. Like many others, Proudhon gradually adapted, or, as he put it, he "transformed."

¹⁹ Proudhon, *Idée générale de la révolution au XIXème siècle*, (Paris: Garnier

attempted to synthesize those influences in what he called a "serial dialectic." It is safe to say that some tensions remained in his own construction, until he finally abandoned it in 1858, asserting that "The antinomy does not resolve itself... The two terms of which it is composed BALANCE, either between themselves, or with other antinomic terms."²⁵ With this theory of antinomies as his guide, there was no longer any question of dramatic victories or defeats for ideas or forces. Instead, the only form of resolution was balance, and while Proudhon liked to talk about the *scales*[*bascule*] of justice, as he began to build a "true" social system by bringing more and more ideas into relation, the varieties of balance multiplied. In the work on *Justice*, the study on "Goods" ended with an incomplete catalog of more than a dozen sorts of economic antinomies to be balanced.

With no recourse to external governmental control, all of this balancing was necessarily to be achieved by individuals situated in the midst of this complex, evolving web of relationships. The interested beings would not, of course, be limited to individual human beings. In the study on the State, Proudhon reaffirmed his belief in "social beings," on a range of scales from families and small workshops to nations and States.

He retraced the arguments of 1849, armed with a vast new body of historical data and contemporary political analysis. One brand new element was, however, featured prominently: a constructive notion of the State as another collective being. The "Small Political Catechism" which summarized the study began with the question: "Every expression conceals a reality; of what does the reality of the social power consist?" The answer was: "It is collective force." Furthermore, "collective force being a fact as positive as individual force, the first perfectly distinct from the second, collective beings

Prevot, 1841): 130.

²⁵ Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, tome I (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1858): 353.

be troubled with an odious synonymy.”²⁴ However, he was unable to escape that “odious synonymy” in a number of his works, and as his analysis became more complex, he even began to exploit it, emphasizing the internal contradictions in many key concepts.

By the beginning of his *constructive* phase he had reached a point in his battle with the reigning concepts like “religion, government, and property” where he could allow them to retain their “patronymic names,” even when they assumed new forms, in order to highlight the action of progress. As a result, familiar terms may have meaning with only a family resemblance to those we know. Whether or not Proudhon himself underwent a “complete transformation” in the early 1850s, we are likely to lead ourselves astray if we do not acknowledge that at least his vocabulary was fairly substantially transformed.

In 1858, Proudhon published his *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, a work in four volumes, later expanded to six. In a series of studies within it, he contrasted the conception of justice advanced by the Catholic Church with an anarchic vision in which a vast array of interests would be balanced, without political hierarchy or governmental authority, in relations consistent with reason and science. The studies combined *critical* and *constructive* elements, with the theory of collective beings receiving a considerable amount of development.

In his early writings, Proudhon had adopted a sort of second-hand Hegelian dialectic, without having direct access to Hegel’s writings. He believed that human progress was achieved by the playing out of contradictions—which he called theses and antitheses, without otherwise conforming to the details of Hegel’s system—and he believed that when these terms were synthesized, the tensions between them was resolved. However, he had also incorporated elements of the serial analysis of Charles Fourier, and

²⁴ Proudhon, *Lettre à Mr Blanqui sur la propriété: deuxième mémoire*, (Paris:

He had said that “a man should not repeat himself,” but the truth is that by 1852 he had probably repeated his critique to just about every audience available to him: the people and his fellow socialists, in a series of publications; his fellow legislators; the bourgeoisie, in *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*; and even the emperor Louis Napoleon, in *The Social Revolution, Demonstrated by the Coup d’État of December 2*. But Proudhon found himself increasingly limited in what he could publish in France, and fairly quickly found himself in exile in Belgium.

It would not be hard to imagine, given the events surrounding Proudhon’s development, how someone who identified as an anarchist in 1840 might have come to terms with the State in the context of the Second Republic, and then come to reject it again as a result of political disappointment and persecution. We could also, no doubt, understand if imprisonment and exile had dampened the ardor of a political activist. Proudhon’s evolution is perhaps a little more difficult to understand.

By 1858, he had defined the terms of his *constructive* project:

I intend to suppress none of the things of which I have made such a resolute critique. I flatter myself that I do only two things: that is, first, to teach you put each thing in its place, after having purged it of the absolute and balanced it with other things; then, to show you that the things that you know, and that you have such fear of losing, are not the only ones that exist, and that there are considerably more of which you still must take account.²⁰

But this apparently mild-mannered program appeared in the midst of his *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, a massive frontal assault on the Church and continued critique of *governmen-*

Frères, 1851): 341–342.

²⁰ Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Église*, Tome III (Paris: Lacroix, 1868): 113.

talism, for which he once again faced prosecution—a work in which he declared, defiantly and a bit dramatically, “I am a sans-culotte”!

Without speculating unnecessarily on the factors which drove the “complete transformation” of the early 1850s, we can point to circumstances which undoubtedly played a role. Just as he was being forced into Belgian exile, Proudhon undertook a review of his philosophy, and in the course of that work quietly corrected some problems from the *critical* period.

In 1853, Proudhon published *The Philosophy of Progress*. The work took the form of two long letters to a French journalist who had asked him for a summary of his ideas, and they afforded an opportunity for Proudhon to bring together the various aspects of his previous work in a way which he had not done before. Much of the work was devoted to a consideration of “the criterion of certainty” in science and philosophy, and, to no doubt over-simplify a long and very interesting study, his conclusion was that little, if anything, was certain but *change*.

Indeed, finally pressed to explain himself, he condensed his project down to a single opposition and a single affirmation: “All that I have ever written, all that I have denied, affirmed, attacked, and combated, I have written, I have denied or affirmed in the name of one single idea: Progress. My adversaries, on the contrary—and you will soon see if they are numerous—are all partisans of the absolute...”²¹

This opposition, he believed, was a sort of skeleton key, not only to the works he had written, but to any work he might pursue:

If, then, I could once put my finger on the opposition that I make between these two ideas, and explain what I mean by Progress and what I consider Absolute, I would have given you the principle, secret and key to all my polemics. You would possess the logical link between all of my ideas, and you could, with that notion alone,

²¹ Philosophie du progrès, 19.

serving for you as an infallible criterion with regard to me, not only estimate the ensemble of my publications, but forecast and signal in advance the propositions that sooner or later I must affirm or deny, the doctrines of which I will have to make myself the defender or adversary.²²

This distillation of his project gave him a clear set of principles with which to set out on the next phase of his careers, and *The Philosophy of Progress* highlighted elements of his early works which might have otherwise gone unremarked. But as Proudhon consolidated his project around the notions of progress and the opposition to the absolute, some shortcomings of his early works may have presented themselves.

Arguably, some of the apparent single-mindedness of his opposition to concepts like property and the State, so admired by the anarchist tradition, was achieved by questionable terminological gymnastics. In the introduction to *What is Property?*, he contrasted his view with that of one of property’s defenders: “Mr. Blanqui recognizes that there are a mass of abuses, odious abuses, in property; for myself, I call *property* exclusively the sum of those abuses.”²³ While this made for a bold statement, it also threatened to reduce the impact of his claim that property is theft. Even while arguing for the historical development of the notion of justice, he drew firm lines between himself and those who would construct similar accounts about property. In 1841 he distinguished his terminological approach from that of Pierre Leroux: “Thus, according to Mr. Leroux, there is property and property: the one good, the other bad. Now, as it is proper to call different things by different names, if we keep the name “property” for the former, we must call the latter robbery, rapine, brigandage. If, on the contrary, we reserve the name “property” for the latter, we must designate the former by the term *possession*, or some other equivalent; otherwise we should

²² Philosophie du progrès, 20–22.

²³ Qu’est-ce que la propriété, xviii.