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Proudhon, Bakunin and Anarcho-socialism

Working Paper No. 5

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Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin advanced ideas supporting what can be identified as anarcho-socialism, and the distinctness in their approaches can also be associated with splits that emerged with the First International Workingmen’s Association. For Proudhon, the institution of property entrenches inequality. In Proudhon’s judgement, society must orient towards advancing independence, proportionality, equality, and individual autonomy without limitations from legal structures. In Bakunin’s anarcho-socialist view, society must reject all forms of authority. In Bakunin’s conception of society, economic and political structures must be constructed from base to summit, founded upon the rights of free federation and free association.

***Journal of Economic Literature* Classification Codes:** B14, B31, P40

Key Words: Anarchism, Anarcho-socialism, First International Workingmen’s Association, Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

This inquiry seeks to establish that Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin advanced ideas on anarcho-socialism that can be associated with the major split that took place in the First International Workman's Association. Exploring the writings of Proudhon and Bakunin assists in clarifying their views and proposals for new anarcho-social societies. Proudhon founds his conception of property in *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* [1840], which also includes his notion for a new society. In Bakunin's judgement, society must be founded upon complete freedom and total equality. Bakunin makes a clear outline of the foundations of a new anarcho-social society in his "Revolutionary Catechism" [1866]. In addition, this inquiry will trace the formation of the first International Workingmen's Association, recounting the philosophies of its founders and leading members. By tracing the history of the first International, the sources of the internal split will be revealed and the causes of its dissolution discovered.

Proudhon on "Mutualism"

In *What is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* [1840], Pierre-Joseph Proudhon equates property to robbery. Proudhon (1890, 14, 15) claims that humanity has never truly understood the meaning of *justice, equity, and liberty*. Moreover, this failure to clearly grasp the meanings of justice, liberty,

and equity remains the singular cause of all poverty and strife inflicted on humanity. Proudhon (1890, 20) attributes the misunderstandings of these topics to the strong force of habits that shape opinions and inspire prejudices. If the moral laws established through habits of thought remain false, social progress will continue down a calamitous path. Proudhon (1890, 26, 27) stresses that justice exists as the guiding light that governs societies. Justice remains the regulator and founder of all transactions and the establisher of right. In Proudhon's judgment, justice is not the labor of the law. Rather, the law exists as an application and declaration of justice. Thus, if the conception of right and justice is incorrect, institutions, politics, and application of law would be incorrect, causing social chaos and disorder.

Proudhon then ponders the meanings of law and sovereignty. Proudhon (1890, 34) explains that sovereignty was attained by the interpretation of the law. Under rule of an absolute monarchy, the law remains the will of the king and, under a republic, the law exists as the will of the people. Proudhon finds that the law as an expression of will proves problematic, he believes law should remain the expression of facts. A person's will proves influenced by habit, and habits may produce prejudice and bias. Furthermore, Proudhon (1890, 35-37) believes that reformers, legislators, and sovereign people who seek office only do so for opportunities of pecuniary gain. Once in office, these representatives and agents

facilitate the will of head of state in order to maintain their position in office, with public service existing as a chore. In light of this, Proudhon sees justice as a primitive law invoked for the protection of proprietors, nobles, and rulers. Thus, the examination of justice in its various forms and its relationship to government, conditions of society, and ownership remains of utmost importance.

Proudhon considers the verity of property as a natural right. Proudhon (1890, 42, 43) explains that the Roman definition of law still remains employed in contemporary times. Roman law designated property as “the right to use and abuse one’s own within the limits of the law”. This interpretation does not limit property, but it exists to prevent the domain of one proprietor from interfering with the domain of another. Two types of property exist: the domination over a thing and then simply a physical possession. The first exists as a right and the second a fact. In other words, Proudhon describes these two classifications as “the right *in* a thing” and “the right *to* a thing”. Although the Declaration of Rights places equality, security, liberty, and property as natural and inalienable rights, Proudhon (1890, 45) proposes that property exhibits no resemblance to the others.

Property only exists as a potentiality for most of society and, to the few that possess it, it remains susceptible to modifications and disrespect from governments, laws, and practices. In Proudhon’s judgement (1890, 52, 53), liberty, equality, and security are absolute rights that exist and remain necessary within

society, whereas property exists as a right outside of society. If property was an absolute right, the whole of society would have access to it. Hence, property exists as an anti-social right, infringing upon the absolute rights of society. Therefore, the institutions of society and property cannot coexist. Proudhon proposes that inequality proves inherent in the institution of property. In discussing the different types of property, Proudhon (1890, 63) notes that property can be innate or acquired. For instance, innate properties include strength, imagination, and beauty, and acquired properties include land and natural resources. Those with strong innate properties possess an advantage in achieving acquired property, thus revealing inequity among society and injustice within the laws that govern property.

Proudhon proposes a new form of society. Proudhon (1890, 280, 281) maintains that an administration, government, or public economy based upon property remains impossible. In Proudhon's judgement, society must be founded upon independence, equality, proportionality, and law. Equality is created when equality of conditions exists, meaning equality of means and equality of comfort. The laws of society must result from knowledge of facts and necessity, under no condition clashing with independence. Individual autonomy must exist without limitation from the law. In addition, proportionality must be noticed without violating social equality or justice. By taking these four conditions into account,

true liberty will exist within a society and society cannot exist without liberty.

Liberty does not allow the government to impose its will, it is anarchy, and the law remains the only authority. Proudhon (1890, 282) trusts that liberty is infinite and proportional, respecting the will of each individual within the law.

In Proudhon's proposed society, the social nature of society, through reflection, becomes justice. Justice, equality, and liberty exist as the true origin of morality. In Proudhon's reasoning, *right* and *duty* are produced by *need*. Food and shelter remain necessary for human survival, and therefore it remains a human right to procure them. When nature creates the need for these things, our duty exists in their use. Thus, humans need labor in order to survive. Proudhon (1890, 283, 284) emphasizes that the lives of each individual in society should be dictated by their own reason. Society must maintain the right of freedom and respect the freedom of all individuals. Furthermore, liberty allows for the rights of inheritance and succession, while preventing the violation of equality. In this society, justice will preserve the social equilibrium and liberty will exist as an organizing force within the society. Proudhon (1890, 285, 286) advances that the end of property as a right will result in the authority of reason, ending servitude, privilege, prejudice, and despotism. By abolishing property and allowing the right of possession, all property becomes unitary and collective. Inequality in wealth and wages will exist as robbery and injustice. All exchanges must be made equal in value, measured in

labor time and expenditure. Thus, products will be exchanged for products, making profit unjust and impossible. Lastly, politics will remain the science of freedom and “find its highest perfection in the union of order and anarchy”.

Bakunin on Anarcho-Socialism

In the “Revolutionary Catechism” [1866], Mikhail Bakunin establishes the fundamental principles for the formation of a new anarcho-social society. Bakunin (1971, 76) calls for the replacement of the cult of religion with love and respect for humanity. In such a society, human reason remains the basis for truth, human conscience the scale for justice, and collective and individual freedom as the architects of societal order. Every woman and man possess the undeniable right to freedom, with only their own conscience and reason to sanction their acts, first holding responsibility to themselves and then to their *voluntarily* accepted society. Bakunin believes that a person’s freedom, fully reflected and acknowledged by the free consent of their peers, finds its extent in the freedom of others in the society. Freedom can only be realized by the complete equality of all, and this is true justice. To Bakunin, the essence of human morality exists in its freedom, respecting the freedom of each member of society is duty, and loving, helping, and serving others is a virtue. All members of society must absolutely reject all authority, including such authorities that sacrifice freedom for benefit of the state.

Bakunin (1971, 77) emphasizes that the order of the new society will result from the highest level of individual liberty, in addition to the total liberty of every level of social organization.

The economic and political organization of society will necessarily be constructed on the basis of liberty. Bakunin (1971, 77) reveals that political and economic structures must be organized “from the base to the summit”, the antithesis of centralization which organizes from summit to base. This organization will exist upon the premises of free federation and free association. Bakunin considers obligatory, concrete, and universal norms impossible and indeterminable in regards to the political organization and development of a nation. The establishment of a single standard proves impossible due to a cornucopia of differing economic, historical, and geographic conditions. Thus, any such attempt remains impractical and contradictory to the principles of freedom. However, the practical realization of liberty proves impossible without certain essential conditions. Bakunin (1971, 77, 78) explains that these critical conditions include the abolition of all advantaged churches and state religions. Churches cannot hold the same rights as productive associations, be charged with the education of children, or profit from their practice. The absolute equity of political rights of women and men and universal suffrage requires the abolition of all privileges, classes, and ranks. The political organization of an anarcho-social society requires

the dissolution of monarchy and the institution of a commonwealth, dissolving all state-owned entities and bureaucratic elements. The complete freedom of each individual remains integral to internal reorganization of each nation.

The anarcho-social society conceived by Bakunin wholly depends on the absolute freedom of individuals, productive associations, and communes – referring to towns or cities. The right to succession remains paramount within the society. Every nation, region, commune, association, and individual has the right of self-determination, choosing to associate and ally with whomever they wish. Historic rights and precedents have no command. Bakunin (1971, 79) declares that every individual, from birth to death, has the right of food, clothing, shelter, guidance, care, and education at the expense of society. To Bakunin, the provision of public school remains paramount, extending from primary school to higher education. With the utmost support and assistance from society, children may freely choose their careers and society has no right to exert authority over them. Adults possess the freedom to live as they choose, provided by their own labor. Society maintains absolute freedom of speech and assembly in private or in public, restrained solely by public opinion. In Bakunin's judgement, "freedom can and must be defended only by freedom". Bakunin (1971, 80) maintains that the reorganization of society and enlightened education will exist as a guardian of freedom. In the case of "vicious and parasitic individuals", each unit of society, in

its own jurisdiction, can deprive such individuals of political rights. A person who violates another's freedom, inflicts harm, steals, or breaches voluntary agreements are subject to the laws of that society. However, such a person possesses the right to disassociate from that society.

In Bakunin's conception of a new anarcho-social society, countries will be divided into regions, provinces, districts, and finally communes. Bakunin (1971, 82, 83) notes that these divisions will likely result from the particular circumstances, traditions, and characteristics of countries, but two fundamental principles must exist. First, organization must be founded upon a base to summit arrangement. Secondly, one autonomous body must exist between each social entity in the least, defending against the formation of an absolutist, centralized, or despotic state. The absolute right of each individual within an autonomous commune to vote exists as the sole unit of political organization. Bakunin (1971, 84-86) stresses that each autonomously organized social body composes the next larger body, starting from communes and ending with an international federation. The measure of success for each social body relies upon the development and strength of its humanity and freedom.

Bakunin (1971, 87) trusts that economic and social equality pave the way for political equality, and political equality remains foundational to political freedom. For the establishment of social and economic equity, Bakunin (1971, 88) calls for

the equalization of individual wealth. Equality in education will result in the equality of natural aptitudes and capacities. Furthermore, the elimination of rights to inheritance will prevent inequality from birth. With a socially egalitarian organization as such, Bakunin (1971, 89) maintains that labor exists as the singular source of wealth. Therefore, to remain in the society, an individual must earn their livelihood through their own labor. To Bakunin (1971, 92, 93), all labor, be it manual or intellectual, remains equal and the source of rights. And any such productive labor that wishes to associate will be done collectively and cooperatively. In addition, all land and natural resources remain common property to everyone, requiring individual labor for its use and cultivation. The anarcho-socialism conceived by Bakunin relies upon the absolute freedom of each individual and total economic, social, and political equity.

The Split at the First International Workingmen's Association

The rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution created a decidedly exploitative, abusive, oppressive, and intolerable set of working conditions for the mass of society around the world. G.M. Stekloff (1968, 3) explains that the idea of international fellowship was embraced the proletariat, who sought to rebuild a society upon socialist values in the face of daily struggle and abuse. The hope for a socialist society existed internationally, finding solidarity in the interests of the

proletariat whose conditions remained the same, no matter the capitalist country. The working class sought a reduction in daily work hours, the security of higher wages, and further improvements and protections to labor. The writings of Marx, Bakunin, Proudhon, and others shed light upon their grim situation and offered hope for a more humane society.

Specific economic and political conditions remain necessary in galvanizing an international proletarian movement, conditions which were not present until the middle of the nineteenth century. Stekloff (1968, 35, 43) stresses that culmination of the political crisis created by Franco-Prussian War and the economic crisis of 1857 prompted the awakening of the proletariat. As capitalist society developed in Europe, the bourgeois society further developed and consolidated, spreading class-consciousness and a defiant spirit among the proletariat. These conditions precipitated a receptive attitude towards new ideas and the expansion of workers' movements across Europe. Stekloff (1968, 44-47) expresses that the struggle for improved economic and political conditions for the proletariat within capitalist realm warranted the need for an international workers' organization. On September 28th, 1864 at St. Martin's Hall in London, British workers held a monumental international meeting with French delegates advocating for the union of the international proletariat. At the closing of speeches, a resolution to establish an international proletariat organization was unanimously adopted. On October 5th, a

committee elected a temporary executive branch, the General Council, and adopted *The Addresses and Provisional Rules of the International Workingmen's Association* [1864], drafted by Marx, marking the birth of the first International.

At the time of its conception, the International Workingmen's Association possessed a simple objective. Stekloff (1968, 50) underlines that the International existed to provide a central medium for cooperation and communication between proletarian societies of different countries seeking the same objectives – the advancement, protection, and total emancipation of the working classes. The General Council, composed of workers from different countries, would sit in London and work as a vehicle to unify all working-class societies in solidarity. This proved a difficult task, as Stekloff (1968, 56) explains that the working-class movement remained in an immature state in all member countries, with the exception of Britain. Most proletarian organizations lacked strength, unity, and clear conceptions of the class struggle and ideologies among groups differed. For instance, in France, the mutualist teachings of Proudhon dominated the minds of workers, bolstering the petty-bourgeois and the liberalism from which they benefited. These ideologies created obstacles and conflicts in attaining a powerful political party for the advancement of the proletariat.

Although the *ends* remained identical for all proletariat societies, the *means* to the ends remained a subject of dispute. Stekloff (1968, 66, 67) highlights that the

Marxist camp possessed an acute understanding of the stages of development and the laws of capitalism, carefully formulating their tactics for social revolution from these understandings. Marxists fully grasped the necessity and practicality behind a politically-involved proletarian movement. In contrast, Proudhonists, and later the Bakuninists, did not possess astute political understandings and completely overlooked the historical stages of evolution. Proudhonists remained pacifist and apathetic towards politics, articulating the aspirations of the highest working-class strata. Stekloff (1968, 68-78) explains that many discussions amongst Proudhonists would disintegrate into petty arguments around trivial topics, and such trivialities proved exclusionary and reactionary. In one case, French Proudhonists argued against the admittance of women into the International, and in another, they argued against the admittance of intellectuals. Furthermore, Proudhonists rejected all forms of political involvement. With the General Council seeking to unify all workers on practical grounds, the Proudhonist approach appeared impractical, utopian, non-revolutionary, and ideologically narrow.

In September of 1866, the International Workingmen's Association held their first general conference in Geneva. Stekloff (1968, 79) notes that the general disorganization of international workers' movements necessitated democratic centralism and thusly the General Council was charged with wide-reaching powers. Following this conference, Stekloff (1968, 88-92, 98, 99) explains that the

economic crisis of 1866 ensued, economically plaguing the working class and calling for a large-scale strike movement. The development of the strike movements horrified the Proudhonists and angered the bourgeoisie. During this period, British Marxism dominated sessions of the International, causing Proudhonist workers to begrudgingly join in the strike movement. With the successes of the strike movement encompassing Europe, the second general congress of the International convened in Lausanne in September of 1867.

At the Lausanne congress, few British delegates were present. Stekloff (1968, 101, 107-109) describes that this distorted the voting results, leading to a number of Proudhonist-leaning resolutions. Following the Lausanne congress, the International took a decidedly politically active line, to the dismay of Proudhonists. Stekloff (1968, 112-114) explains that new, more radically-minded groups emerged in French-speaking Europe. This fractured the Proudhonists, placing left-wing Bakuninism closer to the helm. From the Brussels Congress in 1868 to the Basle Congress of 1869, Stekloff (1968, 131-142) highlights that Proudhon loses influence to Bakunin, eventually ceasing the existence of Proudhonism in the International. Bakunin, a delegate for France at the Basle Congress, gained strong support from French-speaking workers, which contributed to fissures of thought within the workers' movement.

As Stekloff (1968, 67, 68) illustrates, Bakunin believed that the proletariat could achieve complete deliverance from a singular political insurrection. As Proudhon spoke for the highest echelons of the working class, Bakunin expressed the destructive and insurrectionally minded desires of the “Lumpenproletariat” – the most backwards and lowest strata of the proletariat. Lacking historical perspective, Stekloff (1968, 152-179) stresses that Bakunin surmised the end of capitalist society remained near. Bakuninists thought that the liquidation of the state and annihilation of authority could be achieved through a singular insurrection. Completely opposed to political involvement and reformation, Bakunin saw a proletarian political struggle as pointless and unattainable within the constructs of the old order. Moreover, Bakunin utterly opposed Marx’s notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, as any form of authority remained unacceptable. Once again, the International proved at odds in the question of how the old order would be annihilated. Stekloff (1968, 198-201) explains that, with the onset of the Franco-Prussian War and the failure of the Paris Commune, the necessity of a working-class party existed at the forefront of the International’s debate.

The London Conference in September of 1871 displayed the ideological friction between Marxists and Bakuninists. Although anarchism was rapidly spreading throughout Europe, Stekloff (1968, 206-213) underlines that Marxist

branches of the International remained strong and the congress resolved to work towards constructing a powerful workers' party. With this development, Bakuninists met the General Council with opposition, stirring up agitation around Europe and disavowing the London Congress all together. The conference in Hague the following year would determine the fate of the working-class movement. Stekloff (1968, 228-239) describes this congress as the "most influential gathering of first International". At the Hague Conference, Marxist delegates held the majority – although Bakunin may have held the majority in Europe. Bakuninists proved hostile to a dependence on the General Council and supported the implementation of autonomous branches in the International. As the social democrats held the majority, resolutions passed in favor of General Council centralization. In the end, the resolutions passed to expel Bakunin and move the General Council to New York permanently fractured the organization, marking the end of the First International Workingmen's association.

Stekloff (1968, 242-246) expresses that, once the General Council moved to New York, the Marxists of the International held one more session and the anarchists held several more congresses. Although the unity of the organization did not persist, the first International successfully introduced socialism to the masses and awoke the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat, leading workers to organize as their own class. The end of the first International did not mark the end of the fight

against capitalism. In 1889, the second International met in Paris for their first congress, ready to step back onto the battlefield.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Proudhon and Bakunin advanced ideas on anarcho-socialism that led to the split in the First International Workingmen's Association. Proudhon held that inequality proves inherent in the institution of property. Society must be established upon equality, proportionality, independence, and law. The laws of society must result from knowledge of facts and necessity and individual autonomy must exist without limitation from the law. To Proudhon, two types of property exist, "the right *in* a thing" and "the right *to* a thing", and through examination, Proudhon finds the latter to be founded and just. Bakunin finds human reason the basis for truth, human conscience the scale for justice, and collective and individual freedom as the architects of societal order. In Bakunin's judgement, a person's freedom finds its extent in the freedom of others in the society. Freedom can only be realized by the complete equality of all and members of society must absolutely reject all authority. To Bakunin, political and economic structures must be organized "from the base to the summit", the antithesis of centralization, and organization must exist upon the premises of free federation and free association. These ideas, advanced by Proudhon and Bakunin,

led to the anarchist-communist split of the first International. Social anarchists opposed the notion of a proletariat dictatorship, as they opposed any form of authority. Although Marx, Bakunin, and Proudhon sought the same end, the disaccord over the means to achieve that end ultimately precipitated the demise of the of the first International Workingmen's Association.

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