

Going Beyond Picking Rulers

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The ConDem's are continuing the grand tradition of all governments in proving anarchists right. Our so-called representatives are able to ignore their manifestos, are free to break their solemn pre-election pledges and vote as they like – all in the interests of capital.

The Lib-Dems are just the latest of a long line of politicians who say one thing during elections and then turn round and do the exact opposite once in office. The Tories, as expected, are imposing another top-down reorganisation of the NHS in England in order to privatise it after proclaiming the NHS was safe in their hands in the election. In America, Republican governors are trying to strip unionised workers of their rights – after failing to mention any of this in their election.

Anarchists are not surprised. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the father of anarchism, was right – nothing resembles a monarchy more than centralised democracy for “the Representatives, once elected, are the masters; all the rest obey. They are *subjects*, to be *governed* and to be taxed.”¹ A nation as one unit picking its rulers every few years is no democracy. Every government confirms Proudhon's dismissal of laws: “Spider webs for the rich and powerful, steel chains for the weak and poor, fishing nets in the hands of the Government.”² The ConDem's innovation is to do this with cries of “fairness” (in order to level working class people down) and “we are all in it together” (while cutting corporation tax and planning to reduce the top-rate of tax for high earners).

Is there an alternative to a system which reduces liberty to the ability “to pick rulers”³ every four or five years?

The Nature of the State

First, we need to understand *what* the state is and *why* it is structured as it.

For Proudhon the state “is the EXTERNAL constitution of the social power” by which “the people does not govern itself.” It “rests then on this hypothesis: that a people, that the collective being which we call society, cannot govern itself, think, act, express itself, unaided.”⁴ “Any logical and straightforward theory of the State,” argued Michael Bakunin, “is essentially founded upon the principle of *authority*, that is the eminently theological, metaphysical, and political idea that the masses, *always* incapable of governing themselves, must at all times submit to the beneficent yoke of a wisdom and a justice imposed upon them, in some way or other, from above.”⁵

The reason why the state is structured hierarchically is not hard to understand given its role. “In a society based on the principle of inequality of conditions,” Proudhon argued, government is “a system of insurance for the class which exploits and owns against that which is exploited and owns nothing.” It is “inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat.”⁶ For if the people *did* govern themselves then it is unlikely they would tolerate economic rule by the capitalist class:

“To attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more.”⁷

Thus anarchists are against the state because it is an instrument of class rule, a social structure organised to ensure centralised, hierarchical top-down power and the exclusion of the people. We “deny the State” because we “affirm, on the contrary, that the people, that society, that the mass, can and

¹ *Property is Theft!* [AK Press: 2011], p. 573

² *Property is Theft!*, p. 571

³ Peter Kropotkin, *Words of a Rebel* [Black Rose: 1992], p. 122

⁴ *Property is Theft!*, p. 482

⁵ *Bakunin on Anarchism* [Black Rose: 1980], p. 142

⁶ *Property is Theft!*, p. 18, p. 226

⁷ Kropotkin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 143

ought to govern itself by itself” and “we affirm that which the founders of States have never believed in, the personality and autonomy of the masses.” So “no establishment of authority, no organisation of the collective force from without, is henceforth possible for us ... the only way to organise democratic government is to abolish government.”⁸

So if the state is external rule, then anarchism stands for self-government or self-management – every individual must make their own decisions. From this logically follows group self-management. When individuals form or join a group, community or workplace then they must have a say in how that association functions – otherwise it would just be voluntary servitude (as per wage-labour when workers sell their liberty/labour to a boss).

So anarchy implies self-managed associations. Yet we cannot live isolated lives nor can we all assemble to discuss large-scale issues and problems. Anarchist theory has long had an answer to how we coordinate joint activity – decentralisation requires federalism. Just as individuals federate to form groups, so groups federate together to manage joint interests and issues. We aim to replace representative democracy with self-managed associations federated by means of mandated and recallable delegates. Only in this way can we achieve anarchy by governing ourselves.

In short, anarchists recognise that social organisation does not equal the state. To be free, libertarians have always argued, we need to end the state *and* the capitalist system it protects. We argue that social and economic federalism is the means replace the state with a social system based on, and protective of, liberty.

Proudhon and the 1848 Revolution

The argument that genuine democracy (self-government) necessitates mandating and recalling delegates was first raised within the socialist movement by Proudhon. In March 1848, in his second pamphlet of the 1848 revolution he argued that mandating and recalling elected people was essential for genuine social self-government:

“In the end, we are all voters; we can choose the most worthy.

“We can do more; we can follow them step-by-step in their legislative acts and their votes; we will make them transmit our arguments and our documents; we will suggest our will to them, and when we are discontented, we will recall and dismiss them.

“The choice of talents, the imperative mandate, and permanent revocability are the most immediate and incontestable consequences of the electoral principle. It is the inevitable program of all democracy.”⁹

Proudhon noted that few democrats actually embraced this position, something which has not changed. In November 1848 he returned to this theme in an election manifesto: “Besides universal suffrage and as a consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the imperative mandate. Politicians balk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, do not appoint mandatories but rather abjure their sovereignty!... That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy.”¹⁰ With tens of thousands of working class people reading his articles, Proudhon popularised the necessity of mandates and recall within the popular movement.

Proudhon was, for a time,¹¹ an elected representative and this confirmed his critique of the state:

⁸ *Property is Theft!*, pp. 483–5

⁹ *Property is Theft!*, p. 273

¹⁰ *Property is Theft!*, p. 379

¹¹ Proudhon’s life as a politician was ended when the National Assembly changed the law to strip him of his Parliamentary immunity. Arrested for (correctly, as it turned out) slandering President Louis-Napoleon as seeking tyranny, he was sent to prison in 1849. This did not stop him contributing to newspapers, writing books, getting married or fathering a child!

“Since I first set foot on this parliamentary Sinai, I ceased to be in contact with the masses: by absorbing myself in my legislative work, I had completely lost view of current affairs. I knew nothing about the national workshop situation, government policy or the intrigues going on within the assembly. One has to experience this isolation called a national assembly to understand how the men who are the most completely ignorant of the state of a country are nearly always those who represent it ... Most of my colleagues on the left and the extreme left were in the same state of mental perplexity and ignorance of daily reality. We only talked about the national workshops with a kind of dread: because the fear of the people is the evil of all those who belong to authority: for power, the people are the enemy.”¹²

Proudhon’s collaborator Charles-François Chev  summarised the ideas in this circle in his “Socialist Catechism.”¹³ It is a remarkably succinct discussion of the issue. Following Proudhon, Chev  argued that “the imperative mandate” was “the fundamental condition of all elective representation” and it by necessity meant the “permanent right of revocation of the elected by the electors.” Without these sovereignty could not exist for “it is the sovereign who obeys his delegates, the leader his agents, the electors their representatives, the master his employees; and sovereignty is no more than the puerile and derisory faculty of writing, every three or four years, some names on a bit of paper, and cast it in a box.”

The state, then, was “the negation of the sovereignty of the People, of Liberty and of democracy” as “it places the sovereign People under the authority of its delegates, because it imposes on all the will of a few and renders the delegates of the nation masters of those who delegate to them.” Society must “govern itself” via voluntary association:

“The coming of popular Sovereignty and Democracy, which has thus far existed in name only. Indeed, to overthrow the state is to overthrow the monarchy, not only in its form, but in that which forms its source and essence, in the presidential, ministerial, bureaucratic and functionary power that is only a royalty in disguise; to overthrow the state is to render to each of the citizens all the attributions of sovereignty, it is to establish the Republic and the Democracy, not just nominally, but in practical reality, in fact and in customs.”

For Proudhon and Chev , like all libertarians, this would apply economically as well as politically. Associated-labour would replace wage-labour as self-management of production by workers would complement self-management of society by the people.

Bakunin and the Paris Commune

The revolutionary anarchist Michael Bakunin continued in the path Proudhon forged. Like the French anarchist he argued for a decentralised, federated communal socialism based on delegate rather than representative democracy:

“the Alliance of all labour associations ... will constitute the Commune ... there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council ... [made up of] delegates ... invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times. Thus organised, the Communal Council will be able to choose separate executive committees from among its membership for each branch of the Commune’s revolutionary administration

¹² *Property is Theft!*, pp. 425–6. He added that the experiences in 1848 proved his comments from 1846: “The problem before the labouring classes, then, consists, not in capturing, but in subduing both power and monopoly, — that is, in generating from the bowels of the people, from the depths of labour, a greater authority, a more potent fact, which shall envelop capital and the State and subjugate them.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 226)

¹³ “Socialist Catechism.”, *La Voix du Peuple* (October 29, 1849). This was the successor to *Le Peuple* which, like all Proudhon’s papers, had been suppressed.

... all provinces, communes and associations ... [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all of these deputies invested with binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the universality of the Revolution ... will emerge triumphant ... Since it is the people which must make the revolution everywhere, and since the ultimate direction of it must at all times be vested in the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial organisations ... organised from the bottom up through revolutionary delegation.”¹⁴

These ideas were not for some future revolution. They had to be applied now, in the labour movement. The construction workers’ union, argued Bakunin, “simply left all decision-making to their committees” and in “this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership.” To combat this bureaucracy, the union “sections could only defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings.” In “these popular assemblies” the issues were “amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed.” Elected delegates would report “regularly to the membership” and be subject to “instant recall.”¹⁵

Bakunin’s vision of a federation of workers’ councils based on mandated and recallable delegates dates from 1868. It makes a mockery of Lenin’s claims, trotted out to this day by his followers, that while Marxists see the need for an “organisation of the armed workers, after the type of the Commune” anarchists “have a very vague idea of *what* the proletariat will put in its place”¹⁶ In reality, *anarchists* had a very firm idea of how a free socialist system would be organised – decades before Lenin saw the importance soviets in 1917 and years before the Paris Commune of 1871.

The Paris Commune’s “Declaration to the French People” proclaimed that one of the “inherent rights of the Commune” was election of officials under “the permanent right of control and revocation” and the “permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs.” Unity would be achieved by “the voluntary association of all local initiatives” in a “delegation of federated Communes” based on “the realisation and the practice of the same principles” applied locally.¹⁷

Marx, for his part, wrote one of his best works on the revolt: *The Civil War in France*. The Commune “was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms” and the “rough sketch of national organisation” produced by the Communards specified a federation of communes based on delegates “at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents.”¹⁸ These ideas obviously reflect the ideas Proudhon and his colleagues had raised over 20 years previously. This is unsurprising, given that his followers (the Mutualists) played a key part in the 1871 revolt (indeed, the “rough sketch” was written by a Mutualist).

Yet even if we ignore, as Marx did, the Mutualists, the Commune’s libertarian ideas can be seen if we compare Proudhon’s arguments from 1848 and Marx’s reporting 23 years later. Thus we find Marx proclaiming the Commune “was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.” For Proudhon it was “not enough to say that one is opposed to the presidency unless one also does away with ministries, the eternal focus of political ambition. It is up to the National Assembly, through organisation of its committees, to exercise executive power, just the way it exercises legislative power through its joint deliberations and votes.”¹⁹

¹⁴ *No Gods, No Masters* [AK Press: 2005], pp. 181–2

¹⁵ *Bakunin on Anarchism*, pp. 246–7

¹⁶ *The Lenin Anthology* [W.W. Norton & Company: 1975], p. 392

¹⁷ *Property is Theft!*, p. 790

¹⁸ *The Marx-Engels Reader* [W.W. Norton & Co: 1978], pp. 632–3

¹⁹ *Property is Theft!*, p. 378. This applies economically as well. Marx: “the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few ... by transforming the means of production, land, and capital,

So it is important when reading Marx's *The Civil War in France* that much of it is simply reporting. He may have been agreeing with the actions of the Communards, but that does not change the awkward fact that he is not presenting his notions of social organisation but rather summarising the actions of people heavily influenced by his arch rival Proudhon. This means that when Marxists point to that work as evidence for Marxism's "democratic essence" it misses the point – it is a libertarian-infused work because it is describing a libertarian-infused revolt! Bakunin quite rightly proclaimed that the Paris Commune was, in part, a "practical demonstration" of libertarian socialist ideas, "a bold, clearly formulated negation of the State."²⁰ As one anarchist summarised:

"comparison will show that the programme set out [by the Commune] is ... the system of Federalism, which Bakunin had been advocating for years, and which had first been enunciated by Proudhon. The Proudhonists ... exercised considerable influence in the Commune. This 'political form' was therefore not 'at last' discovered; it had been discovered years ago; and now it was proven to be correct by the very fact that in the crisis the Paris workers adopted it almost automatically, under the pressure of circumstance, rather than as the result of theory, as being the form most suitable to express working class aspirations."²¹

A Marxist aside

The Paris Commune, it must be noted, brought the contradictions of the Marxist attacks on anarchism to the surface. Thus we find Engels attacking anarchists for holding certain position yet praising the 1871 revolution when it implement *exactly the same ideas*. For example, in his deeply inaccurate diatribe "The Bakuninists at Work", he was keen to distort the federalist ideas of anarchism, dismissing "the so-called principles of anarchy, free federation of independent groups."²² Compare this to his praise for the Paris Commune which, he gushed, refuted Blanquist notions when it "appealed to [the provinces] to form a free federation of all French Communes ... a national organisation which for the first time was really created by the nation itself."²³

Both Marx praised the Commune for implementing binding mandates yet this did not stop Engels attacking anarchist support for them as being part of Bakunin's plans to control the IWMA. For "a secret society," he argued, "there is nothing more convenient than the imperative mandate" as all its members vote one way, while the others will "contradict one another." Without these mandates, "the common sense of the independent delegates will swiftly unite them in a common party against the party of the secret society." Obviously the notion that delegates from a group should reflect the wishes of that group was lost on Engels. He even questioned the utility of this system for "if all electors gave their delegates imperative mandates concerning all points in the agenda, meetings and debates of the delegates would be superfluous."²⁴

Clearly a "free federation" of Communes and binding mandates are bad when anarchists advocate them but excellent when workers in revolt implement them! Why this was the case Engels failed to explain.

now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour." Proudhon: "the capitalist profits by his capital without working ... poverty and proletariat are the inevitable consequence of property ... under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership ... We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers' associations ... want these associations to be models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic." (*Property is Theft!*, pp. 373–8)

²⁰ *Bakunin on Anarchism*, pp. 263–4

²¹ K.J. Kenafick, *Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx* [A. Maller: 1948], pp. 212–3

²² *Collected Works*, vol. 23, p. 297

²³ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 627

²⁴ *Collected Works*, vol. 22, p. 281, p. 277. It should be noted that Trotsky shared Engels dislike of "representatives" being forced to actually represent the views of their constituents within the party. (*In Defense of Marxism* [Pathfinder: 1995], pp. 80–1)

Trotskyists regularly pay lip-service to the Commune and the imperative mandate. SWP's Chris Harman argued that the "whole experience of the workers' movement internationally teaches that only by regular elections, combined with the right of recall by shop-floor meetings can rank-and-file delegates be made really responsible to those who elect them." (*Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe*, pp. 238–9)

Needless to say, Harman fails to note that it was Proudhon and Bakunin, not Marx, who first recognised the importance of recall and argued for it in the workers' movement. He also does not square his words with Bolshevik practice (such as packing, gerrymandering and disbanding soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities) which rejected this experience once they were in power.²⁵ Or, for that matter, Trotsky's 1936 summary that the "revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party" is "an objective necessity" and that the "revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution."²⁶

It is easy to work out why...

Conclusions

Lenin argued that what the proletariat will put in that state's place "is suggested by the highly instructive material furnished by the Paris Commune."²⁷ Anarchists would agree – adding that we had been advocating these ideas *before* 1871 *and* our ideas had *directly* influenced the revolt.²⁸ So it is fair to say that it was *Marx*, not the world, who had "at last discovered" the political form "under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour"²⁹ in 1871. The French working class, however, had been aware of the necessity for a decentralised federation of communes based on mandated and recallable delegates since at least 1848.

It could be argued that while anarchists were the first to integrate imperative mandates and recall into socialist theory and systematically advocate it, it the likes of Proudhon and Bakunin were just repeating ideas already current in radical working class circles. Perhaps but this should not be used to diminish their contributions nor their early recognition of the importance of these concepts. Particularly as everyday statism confirms our critique and life confirms our alternative:

"As to parliamentary rule and representative government ... It is becoming evident that it is merely stupid to elect a few men and to entrust them with the task of making laws on all possible subjects, of which subjects most of them are utterly ignorant ... humanity searches and finds new channels for resolving the pending questions ... They proceeded by means of agreement. To agree together they resorted to congresses; but, while sending *delegates* to their congresses they did not say to them, 'Vote about everything you like – we shall obey.' They put forward questions and discussed them first themselves; then they sent delegates acquainted with the special question to be discussed at the congress, and they sent *delegates* – not rulers. Their delegates returned from the congress with no *laws* in their pockets, but with *proposals of agreements*."³⁰

There *is* an alternative to the ritualistic picking of masters every few years. We can organise ourselves to govern our own affairs and, by means of mandating and recalling delegates, ensure that we create a social organisation based on liberty. Until we do, we will be ruled by the few in the interests of the few – that we get to pick the person who will misrepresent us just adds insult to injury!

²⁵ Section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*

²⁶ *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936–37* [Pathfinder Press: 1978], pp. 513–4

²⁷ *The Lenin Anthology*, p. 333

²⁸ Suffice to say, space precludes a detailed discussion of the Paris Commune. For those interested, see my review-article "The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism" (*Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 50)

²⁹ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 635

³⁰ *Anarchism and Anarchist-Communism* [Freedom Press: 1987] p. 51

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A critique of his ideas & actions



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