

**Proudhon's Ghost: petit-bourgeois anarchism,  
anarchist businesses, and the politics of  
effectiveness**

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When they're not busy murdering, ignoring, or desperately courting anarchists as comrades, Marxists frequently resort to dismissive and/or scurrilous accusations. One of the most enduring is the charge that anarchism in and of itself is a petit-bourgeois — they sometimes also add individualist here — ideology. Marx's correct analysis of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's economic Mutualism as petit-bourgeois is the source of this dismissal; a nearly total absence of Proudhon's economic ideas among anarchists for the last 150 years, however, has made the continual use by Marxists of this century-old analysis seem silly.

In the meantime, and quite unfortunately, the spectacles of post-Seattle summit-hopping seem to have altered the expectations of our (until recently) reinvigorated anarchist milieu. How much time, effort, and energy did the activism of international travel, puppet making, and grant writing take away from the more mundane tasks of writing, distributing, and discussing anarchist theory and analysis, and then putting them into some kind of practice? The palpable lull in anarchist projects and activities, and an accompanying dearth of theoretical engagement among anarchists and other radicals interested in promoting and fomenting an anti-state and anti-capitalist future (to say nothing of such an engagement with the rest of the world), appears to be the result of this activist-driven exhaustion.

Within the past decade, occurring at the same time as this critical malaise (although certainly beginning earlier), and in the absence of trends to object to it specifically, we have witnessed an increasing influence of anarchist-run businesses, which has regenerated a factual foundation to the allegation that anarchism is petit-bourgeois. The centralization of commercial projects purporting to be anarchist has meant that most anarchists engage in the circulation of the printed material produced and distributed by those enterprises; the political agendas of most English-speaking/reading anarchists is thereby set — by others. General anarchist acquiescence to the predominance of these businesses as the defining projects of 21<sup>st</sup> century American anarchism cannot continue, that is if anarchists are to stake out and maintain an authentically anti-capitalist position.

## **Proudhon and Property**

Proudhon, the father of modern anarchism, was a fan of private property, but not the sort that generates capital without labor. For Proudhon (as well as other socialists), real estate speculation, money lending at interest, and trading in stocks and bonds were considered unsavory because there was no actual physical work put into them. This is what he meant when he famously wrote "Property is Theft." Proudhon's People's Bank, along with the romanticized pastoralism of small-scale (cottage) industry and agriculture, were the hallmarks of his anti-statist social vision. Exchange of goods and services directly between the producers and consumers was to be the basis of a free and fair economy; prices or exchange values were to be negotiated and determined by the producers and consumers themselves without the interference of bankers, economic planners, or other experts and bureaucrats. That's what he meant when he less-famously wrote "Property is Liberty." Writing as Marx's contemporary in the mid-nineteenth century, Proudhon was reacting to the fitful implementation of industrialism and its accompanying process of proletarianization, finding fault with its centralizing and monopolizing tendencies. Marx and Engels (et al) found in that centralization the perfect mechanism for the creation of a self-conscious class, a revolutionary subject capable of expropriating the Means of Production once they (both the class and the

means of production) became fully developed. Proudhon believed that the proletarianization of former peasants and ruined shopkeepers would only create a mass of alienated and submissive workers.

What is a petit bourgeois? In economic terms it refers to a small businessperson, someone who is either self-employed, works only with members of her/his family, or has a handful of employees; a shopkeeper. The petit bourgeois may hold the title to her store, but the bank holds the mortgage; the petit bourgeois may or may not dislike neo-liberal globalization, and may grumble about the injustice of monopoly capitalism, but this is only a complaint about a particular organization of capitalism — the petit bourgeois is still a capitalist, relying on the exchange of commodities for a profit, however small. In Marxist slang (because of the Marxist assertion that economic status determines one's socio-cultural ideology) it's also used to describe a certain mentality that accompanies the precarious and self-centered economic status of the person whose relationship to the oft-cited Means of Production is not the same as that of the big bourgeois (large landowner, banker, boss). In class terms, the bourgeois is in constant conflict with the proletariat; the petit bourgeois can take either side, but more often than not comes down against the proletariat as well. If the historical mission of the proletariat is to expropriate the private property and social wealth of capitalists, then the petit bourgeois will ultimately remain loyal to the regime of capitalism, private property, and the state.

The petit bourgeois is stereotypically small-minded, parochial, conformist, acquisitive, stingy, and easily swayed by demagoguery. Populism (characterized by anti-intellectualism; the scapegoating of easy/abstract targets; charismatic yet approachable leaders, and the promotion of small-scale capitalism) is often the typical expression of petit-bourgeois politics.

## **Anarchist Property, Press, and Business**

For centuries, those who have sought to change society from below have relied on the pamphlet and the small journal as the primary means for making their ideas known to others. Anarchists are no exception to this tradition, and it continues today. Educational efforts have been the most stable and long-lasting anti-authoritarian projects compared to communal living, modern schools, and labor unions. Whether it's the anarchist bookstore or infoshop, a one-time pamphlet, a poster, or a periodical, anarchist publishing and the distribution and discussion of printed material has been the primary effort of most anarchists for the past 150 years; indeed, most anarchist organizations have centered their activities around the production and distribution of periodicals.

No anarchist ever made a living at writing anarchist material; given the pervasiveness of capitalist social relations, that is to be expected. Journals are lucky to break even, while most incur substantial debt (the vibrant French anarchist publishing scene in the period leading up to WWI was funded largely through the armed robberies of the so-called Bonnot Gang and the pre-revolution Spanish anarchist press and their educational centers — ateneos, the infoshops of their day — were kept afloat through the expropriations carried out by CNT militants). With the rise of postmodernism and the explosion of niche marketing, a shift occurred; along with the encouragement of passively consuming — rather than actively participating in — dissidence, anarchist and other radical publishing, in North America at least, began to be looked upon as something that could become more than a financial black hole.

The relationship of many producers of anarchist commodities to their consumers has by now become (if it ever had a different potential) the same as that of the more honest (!) capitalist entrepreneur: supplier of identifiable accessories, from black and red messenger bags, to banners, bumperstickers, and hoodies. The entrepreneur/petit bourgeois isn't attached to the specific content of the crap being flogged, so long as it brings in a profit at the end of the fiscal period.

The fact that there might be anarchist content or an anarchist theme in printed material doesn't alter the relationship of author(s) to printer, or author(s) to readers, or printer to readers. Brand-name anarchist accoutrements are all commodities being offered for sale within the parameters of a market economy. The enterprises engaged in the production of these items as well as the venues (book fairs and others) are bound by the necessities of economic survival; unless the producers are financially solvent outside the project (and so are able to subsidize it), direct, non-monetary, exchange of goods with other producers can only occur on a limited basis — otherwise the project will certainly fail. The goal of being a self-sustaining (or profit-making) multi-title publisher in a competitive economy can only be realized with an increasing monopoly on a desirable line of recognizable commodities; this is the petit-bourgeois wet dream. The economic imperative of the small business operator, to reinvest a percentage of profits in the project in order to expand the number and diversity of the products, operates without being called into question; if the goal is to get the Word out, get the Idea to more and more people, then success can only be measured using capitalist terms and logic, and no amount of protesting about the use of that logic, or the watering down of the message, can lessen this reliance on the tools of our exploiters.

Another, related, problem of having a business elite set our political agendas is the implicit proposition that all relevant theorizing and discussing of anti-state and anti-capitalist ideas has been completed — as if the Last Word of Anarchism were coterminous with the first words of Bakunin or Kropotkin, and that therefore the only task that remains is simply to sell as many books and pamphlets written by them as possible. The move by many writers (in books and journals, as well as on the internet) to quote Bakunin, and/or whoever else in the anarchist pantheon they wish to invoke as their favorite authority, is a reflection of this reluctance of our contemporary anti-intellectual comrades to bring anarchist ideas into the current century. Citing a famous published writer, as a means of ending debate, is an old authoritarian trick, unbecoming of anyone who adheres to a philosophy that celebrates independent thought. And we anarchists poke fun at the Marxists...

The first few San Francisco Bay Area Anarchist Book Fairs were places where commerce, trade (in the sense of direct non-monetary exchange), and socializing took place; a swap meet or flea market atmosphere made this annual event qualitatively different from just going into a store to shop. Most people offering merchandise more recently identify as vendors, looking at book fairs (and other events where printed material, t-shirts, tote bags, stickers, and other paraphernalia can be displayed) as purely mercantile events, where products and crafts are sold — not to comrades and friends in the course of conversation and unmediated interaction, but to anonymous consumers. These events have now become frenzies of niche market buying and selling, with consumers looking for the best deals while vendors look to entice more cash out of customers. Packaging has become more important than content; quasi- or non-anarchist pamphlets and books are published and distributed (and more often than not the same items appear on more than one vendor table) that are geared not to a specifically anarchist (or anarchist-curious) readership, but to a generically left-liberal (and therefore more affluent) consumer base. Production and distribution decisions are made in purely economic terms; whatever items are offered that

are not explicitly within the bounds of the business mission statement are explained as profit-generating items that allow for the production of those items that are supposed to fit, or at least fit better. So at the display tables of anarchist vendors we are treated to the unabashed offerings of t-shirts with images of Che and books written by Leninists and other anti-anarchists. Contemporary anarchism apparently doesn't sell well to those interested in something more than product recognition, but the popular icons of statist rebellion apparently do just fine, which begs the question of who is actually buying this stuff. There are very few voices calling into question these unilateral, agenda-setting, business decisions; fewer still willing to insist that such decisions have real (mostly negative) consequences for the spread of anarchist ideas and practice — as opposed to Maoism hiding behind a circle-A, or red-and-black liberalism.

This combination of such questionable production decisions and the maintenance of the typical relationship of deliberate producer to passive consumer is what makes anarchist business practices particularly hard to swallow. After all, what difference does it make if the producer/proprietor offers goods that promote an anarchist theme if the context of its production and distribution is fully capitalist?

How have the business priorities, agendas, and decisions of the economic elite influenced the practices of the rest of us? How much has written and graphic agitation been left to those who've literally cornered the market, leaving the actual actors relying, for the vital task of evaluation and analysis, on the published accounts of others?

## **Anarchist Effectiveness, Capitalist Logic**

There is an uncomfortable correlation between the desire to make anarchism (or anarchist ideas/projects/methods) more effective, and the pursuits of anarchist businesses. Part of the logic is circular: spreading the ideas is often what prompts the anarchist entrepreneur to start a business in the first place. What effectiveness means in the case of anarchist projects remains unclear; that of anarchist businesses can only mean more income and/or profit. The point is not that only a cash-poor or in-debt project can be truly anarchist, but that there's something fishy about a supposedly anti-capitalist project being successful (or effective) in capitalist terms. Are those who invoke effectiveness saying that they want anarchist ideas to be more popular? That they want more anarchists? That they want more groups to use anarchist organizational models and/or decision-making processes? In business terms, effectiveness means bigger or more influential — a larger market share. How are we to understand this push for anarchists to be more effective or influential? More importantly, how are we to judge whether or not anarchists are being effective at all — let alone more effective? What criteria should be used to (attempt to) make such a determination?

According to many commentators, in times and places (revolutionary or not) where anarchists and anarchist ideas have had some kind of noticeable presence, our influence has extended beyond our numbers. While I would prefer this to be true, it is difficult — at best — to support such a statement with actual evidence. Does that extended influence become noticeable when non-anarchists use non-hierarchical organizational models? When non-anarchists organize themselves into affinity groups and/or networks? When non-anarchists use some kind of directly democratic or consensus-type decision-making process? When non-anarchists use black and red on their logos? When dead anarchists are made into non-anarchist martyrs?

A related concern is that anarchists break out of our subcultural ghettos. The language used in this argument centers on effectiveness as well. In an article published two years ago in *North-eastern Anarchist*, a NEFACker commented that a time of the growth of infoshops and other small-scale anarchist projects was a depressing time “for anarchists.” After I questioned why the expansion of infoshops and related projects would be depressing for him, one of his supporters responded by asking about what “lasting contributions” such projects have made? This is a fair question, but only if one is looking for a direct causal relationship between one’s anarchist activities and the influence of those activities on a wider, non-anarchist, public. Even their influence on other anarchists and other anarchist projects would be an interesting piece of information.

Those who are concerned with such questions are as unable as the rest of us to determine how much actual effectiveness their projects and activities have. Perhaps they are judging by the number of new members of their particular groups. Perhaps they are judging by the number of periodicals printed and/or distributed. The late Murray Bookchin averred that the approximate circulation of a flyer and a journal he co-wrote in the late 1960s was an accurate determinant for his and his group’s influence. The print run of this magazine has fluctuated between five and a little over six thousand for the past six years, but does this mean it actually reaches 5000 people? That’s highly doubtful; using corporate distributors means that we accept corporate distributor returns (a depressingly large number). Clearly there are people we don’t know who are often picking up, sometimes buying, rarely subscribing, but definitely reading *AJODA*. Plus this periodical has been around for a quarter of a century — long enough to have some kind of influence. But again, how are we supposed to determine what it is and how much comes directly from us?

There’s a certain capitalist logic involved in trying to determine quantitatively this cause and effect relationship between anarchist projects and anarchist effectiveness. At the end of the day (or year, or decade — sorry for those without the patience to wait that long), they seem to say, how many units of social transformation have we accumulated in the revolutionary accounts? To paraphrase a long-time non-anarchist comrade, do (or can) these projects contain anything relevant to advancing the possibility of a large-scale movement for irreversible radical social change, or of relevance to anyone outside of a tiny subculture of people who like to call themselves anarchists?

Another fair question, but again, the actual data to help us make such a determination is sorely lacking; historically speaking, influences are most often decided upon after the fact. It is after a revolution occurs that the causes are picked out. Fifty years of tireless and dangerous education and agitation by anarchists is put forward as one of the causes of the early successes of Spanish Revolution in 1936; military defeat is touted as a primary cause of the overthrow of Tsarism. But the vast array of influences are often murkier, more difficult to decipher, and — more topically for this discussion — impossible to predict. Who knows if the addition of ten (or twenty or a hundred) infoshops and micropower radio stations will hasten an irreversible movement of radical social transformation in the United States? Who knows whether or not two (or ten or twenty) annual anarchist conferences will help spread the ideas and practical projects of destroying the state and all other institutional hierarchies? The problem with such criticisms is that some critics have already determined that these projects are irrelevant and offer no lasting contributions — to their particular organizations and visions. But based on what criteria? No immediate causal results, no increased market share, no coverage outside marginal media?

## Anarchist Anti-Business, Anarchist Future

No matter how hard some may try to insist otherwise, anarchist practice does not start with, and cannot be based on, the purchasing of the proper brand of commodities. Radical practice begins with a refusal of hierarchy and the embrace of individual and group responsibility: in this case, rejecting unilateral business decisions that affect more people aside from those getting a piece of the action, and by refusing to reduce the determinants of a potentially positive interaction to the petit-bourgeois watchword “what’s in it for me?”

There have been, and continue to be, substantial achievements in getting anarchist ideas, theories, and practices to those curious about them. Independent and small presses have been an important source for much of the continued debate and refinement of anarchist, anti-state, and anti-capitalist theory and the various projects attached to those discussions. The creation of infoshops and other gathering spots as places where anarchists and other interested people can meet and read, discuss, and devise plans — and where commodity exchange doesn’t necessarily take place, and indeed is often actively discouraged — has been a largely positive example of (revived) anarchist practice. Internet discussion forums, conferences, study groups, the letters sections of periodicals, micropower radio, even the expansion of Food Not Bombs groups...for all their problems, these examples of expanding our day to day influence — if only on a limited scale — have also provided important commodity-free spaces, where the economic considerations of making a buck are completely ignored. The discovery, embrace, and celebration of egalitarianism, real affinity, friendships, solidarity, support networks, and empathic intimacy occur more easily where commodity exchange is absent, where relationships are not mediated by money or the creation and use of economic value, where commerce is absent and/or deliberately shunned. The basis of meaningful anarchist activity begins in these spaces. The maintenance and expansion of some kind of authentic revolutionary community and culture cannot be far behind.

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