

About Katja Einsfeld's "Anarcho-Communist Planning" and other considerations

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"About Katja Einsfeld's 'Anarcho-Communist Planning' and other considerations" was originally intended as a response to a text by Katja Einsfeld, "Anarcho-Communist Planning"¹ but, one thing leading to another, I'm afraid I've gone way beyond Katja's text to address "other considerations"...

Here is a text by an anarchist activist from Berlin, Katja Einsfeld, on anarcho-communist planning, a subject which is essential if we want to think about how a libertarian¹ society could be organised. Read by a reader who was born just after WWII and became an anarchist in the mid-60s, Katja Einsfeld's text produces a twofold effect: *a)* The extreme satisfaction of seeing an important and complex question dealt with; *b)* The impression that there is no continuity of thought in the anarchist movement and that each new generation is obliged to reinvent everything, which produces a real sense of annoyance.

Without falling into the habit of most Marxists who quote their canonical authors every five sentences, the anarchist and syndicalist movement has no shortage of authors who have dealt with the organisation of a society free from exploitation and oppression: these authors could have served as a basis for the reflection proposed by Katja. Nathan Jun rightly says:

“... all political-theoretical discussions of anarchism going forward should begin with a fresh appraisal of the actual

¹ I use the term “libertarian” in the French sense of the word as a synonym for “anarchist”.

content of anarchist political thought, based on a rigorous analysis of its political, social, and cultural history.”²

There is an abundance of literature on this subject, both old and new.³

I think there were two ways of approaching the question raised by Katja:

a) The empirical way, which consists of taking stock of what has already been said on the subject, and above all of what has already been done, in order to determine what can be retained and possibly to update past data so as to make them relevant today. This would be in line with the experimental method advocated by the main anarchist thinkers;

b) The abstract method of limiting references to academic authors who deal with themes that may well be useful for thinking about planning but whose proximity to anarchism is not obvious, without there being any confrontation between these approaches, which may possibly provide innovative elements, and anarchist authors. Not to mention the academic authors who somehow make anarchism their daily bread.

Katja has obviously chosen the second approach. That said, her line of argument is extremely interesting and follows an undeniable logic, and the objections I might have are relatively minimal and have mainly led me to indulge in digressions on the subjects she deals with.

Einsfeld’s document raises the question of planning with new approaches, in particular computer science and cybernetics, not forgetting the ecological approach, but at the same time it is peppered with unconvincing subjective assertions whose source, in my opinion, must be sought in the new inclusive-woke-self-flagellating fashion, such as the idea that “racism and misogyny are not only part of the history of capitalism but are inherent to its system”, which is not absolutely wrong, but which could lead to the idea that racism and misogyny are not part of any other system

2 Nathan Jun, [Political theory and history: the case of anarchism: Journal of Political Ideologies: Vol 20 , No 3 - Get Access \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

3 See:

• Pierre Besnard, *Le Monde nouveau, organisation d'une société anarchiste*. Editions du Monde libertaire.

• [“Imaginer le post-capitalisme. Utopie, planification et pouvoir populaire”](#)

<https://www.contretemps.eu/imaginer-post-capitalisme-utopie-planification-pouvoir-populaire/>

• [“De la planification capitaliste à la planification socialiste ? L'enjeu d'une démocratisation des connaissances”](#) <https://www.infolibertaire.net/de-la-planification-capitaliste-a-la-planification-socialiste-lenjeu-dune-democratisation-des-connaissances/>

• [“Economie : _____ planification, _____ faux _____ et _____ vrais _____ enjeux”](#)
<https://www.infolibertaire.net/economie-planification-faux-et-vrais-enjeux/>

of exploitation and oppression. You'd have to have never travelled outside Europe or North America to be unaware that racism, misogyny and patriarchal systems are universally prevalent, including in “non-white” societies.

If racism and misogyny are characteristic not only of capitalist societies but also of societies whose essential determination is not capitalism, they cannot be qualified as *foundations* of the capitalist system but as one characteristic among others. That said, this obviously does not mean that capitalist societies are immune to racism and misogyny.

In the 13th century, the Mali Empire was founded and extended its sovereignty over part of West Africa. It was through war that the Luba, Lunda, Shona and Zulu kingdoms were created. In East Africa, Zanzibar's warlike and commercial imperialism preceded European expansion and extended westwards to the centre of the Congolese forest. Nor should we forget that the slave trade of which Europeans were guilty (11 million deported, 90% over 110 years) had been preceded centuries earlier by the Arab trade (17 million deported over 13 centuries), the intra-African trade (14 million deported, over several centuries, but mainly in the 19th century). The crimes perpetrated by Europeans (“Whites”) are just one chapter in a long series of crimes committed by the ruling classes throughout history.

Similarly, to say that “discrimination against minorities based, for example, on religion, sexual orientation, neurodivergence or body type is a common pattern in capitalism” is *perfectly* accurate, but to limit such discriminations to the capitalist system, or to suggest that it is limited to being productions of the capitalist system, is perfectly false: this attitude is part of a mania that consists of blaming all the oppressions suffered by “non-whites” on Western societies and encouraging “Whites” to do their *mea culpa*. Let's be clear: there is no way of exonerating “Whites” from their crimes, or more precisely of exonerating the capitalist system (of which the “white” working classes were the first victims, it should be noted) from the abuses committed in the name of the primitive accumulation of capital.

• [“De l'économie du socialisme à la planification écologique”](https://www.infolibertaire.net/de-leconomie-du-socialisme-a-la-planification-ecologique/)
<https://www.infolibertaire.net/de-leconomie-du-socialisme-a-la-planification-ecologique/>

• [Gaston Leval](https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article184) <https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article184>

• “Congrès de Cararre. — Ce que pensent les anarchistes sur la révolution et l'organisation de l'économie dans la société future”
<https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article1009>

• James Guillaume, “Idées sur l'organisation sociale”
<https://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article16>

Similarly, to assert that discrimination is one of the causes of social injustice and the unequal distribution of resources seems to me to take the problem the wrong way round. Social injustices are injustices linked to the nature of society: what produces social injustices is the monopolisation of property and of the social surplus product by a minority to the detriment of the immense majority. It's not "discrimination" *per se* that makes Bengali sweatshop workers live in miserable conditions while their bosses (local or foreign) live in luxury; it's the society that allows this system of exploitation that produces discrimination. Likewise, it is not discrimination that makes child labour a scourge in the United States, but the lobbies of industry and agriculture and the complicity of the political world.⁴

We cannot deny that there are injustices linked to capitalist society, the causes of which we can define, but historically speaking, social injustice is not limited to the capitalist society in which we live today. The history of mankind is unfortunately a long history of social injustice since the day when groups of men, "White" and "non White", monopolised power and property. Capitalism is just one of the avatars of these unjust systems. Social injustices existed long before capitalism.

That's why, if we want to remedy these injustices, we need to understand the nature of the dominant system based on the appropriation of resources and the means of production by a minority protected by the state – to put it simply. It is therefore not enough to say that "citizens should be involved in economic decisions, i.e. in the mode of production and distribution". We also need to change the system of ownership of the means of production and distribution. The day when citizens decide to be "involved in economic decisions", it is unlikely that those who control these decisions will let them do so willingly. So it's not just a question of being "involved in economic decisions", but of expropriating those who today control these economic decisions and own the tools of production.

However, Katja is right to attack the logic of the market, whose self-regulating nature she says is a myth: "The market has often had to be saved with taxpayers' money to prevent it from collapsing". French taxpayers, and taxpayers everywhere, have seen this happen regularly. According to liberal

4 See: "Child labor laws are under attack in states across the country", Report By Jennifer Sherer and Nina Mast • March 14, 2023, *Economic Policy Institute*:

"Both violations of child labor laws and proposals to roll back child labor protections are on the rise across the country. The number of minors employed in violation of child labor laws increased 37% in the last year and at least 10 states introduced or passed laws rolling back child labor protections in the past two years.

"Attempts to weaken state-level child labor standards are part of a coordinated campaign backed by industry groups intent on eventually diluting federal standards that cover the whole country."

theory, the market is the only way to ensure a decentralised distribution of resources: Katja argues that this is no longer true and proposes to present an alternative.

But Katja has a curious way of describing the market principle, saying that “those who contribute the most should receive the most”. Does “contributing to the market” mean “offering goods on the market”, or “buying goods”? In the first case, you're a capitalist, so you understand that “contributing” to the market is profitable; in the second case, you're a consumer, so “contributing” to the market can be dramatic if your purchasing power is on the verge of survival, but it can be pleasant if your purchasing power is substantial.

When Katja talks about “special regulations for those who cannot contribute at all or not enough to earn a living”, this is no doubt an allusion to the various “redistribution” measures put in place to support the most disadvantaged sections of the population: these measures, says Katja, make people feel like outsiders “dependent on the generosity of society”. Speaking of “generosity” is not relevant. Some people need support from the community because they have a job that their employer underpays: if they were better paid they would not need the help of the community. In this case, it could just as easily be said that it is the community that is helping employers to underpay their employees.

If it's the unemployed who are receiving unemployment benefit, it's a mistake to talk about public generosity. I don't know how things work in other countries, but in France all employees pay contributions into a special fund that pays out a contribution when they lose their job. These contributions are deducted from wages every month: it's called “Unemployment insurance”, an insurance to which both employee and employer contribute. So it's not the “generosity” of individuals or the “munificence” of the state that enables the unemployed to receive unemployment benefit, but a mutualisation of risks to which all employees contribute. But the fact that the most disadvantaged sections of the population, those who are most on the margins of society and who are not even in the work circuit, receive aid is not a matter of “generosity” but of *solidarity*.

The market

According to Katja, “the anarcho-communist perspective also rejects the idea of work remuneration, which often comes in combination with market-based economic proposals, no matter if it is based on money or tokens representing work hours”: there will never be, she says, a concept “fair to everyone”. In reality, it is not the notion of the market that is questionable: the market is merely a place, real or fictitious, on which *goods* are

exchanged: it is the *commodity* that should be the contentious element, i.e. an object or service produced under conditions of separation between capital and labour, and accessible to those who have the means to acquire it.

The market is that real or fictitious place through which we acquire objects or services of all kinds. Going even further, the market refers to the principle whereby goods are exchanged for payment, for *profit*.

That said, Katja's line of argument is extremely interesting and follows an undeniable logic although I don't quite agree with her. The market, she says, "always tends towards inequality". I wouldn't say that, because when a person arrives "on the market", *everything has already been decided*; the market is simply the expression of a state of affairs whose ins and outs are elsewhere. There are those who have little or no means of subsistence, and in this case they are content to barely look at shop windows: this is, I would say, the supreme inequality. Those who have a lot of means have a great deal, even a very great deal, of access to the products and services on offer on the market. The question is, what is the cause of this state of affairs, which is not actually *produced* by the market but is *revealed* by the market.

I don't understand why, according to Katja, "people with more resources will be able to take higher risks than those with just enough resources to survive". Having access to the market to buy *consumer* goods is not a "risk", it's simply an opportunity – provided you have the means. It becomes a risk when you buy *productive* goods, i.e. when you invest, but this is different. I suppose this is undoubtedly what Katja means when she writes that the market gives "risk-takers a higher chance to get even more resources": but in that case we must not confuse consumers and investors.

What is questionable about the principle of the market is not the fact that goods can be acquired on it, but the inequality of access to the market and the ability to purchase productive goods on it, i.e. to invest in it in order to obtain the means to exploit others. Let's imagine a "market", or if you like a place where the purchasing power is more or less equal for everyone and where no one can buy the means to exploit others, then the question of vouchers becomes perfectly secondary. This is no utopia, because this is what happened in Spanish communities during the Civil War.

Whatever the type of society, there will always be production of goods and services, which will necessarily be presented in a place called a "market", regardless of the form in which it appears⁵. However, a socialist

5 "The distribution is based on the needs of the people. This doesn't have to be overly complicated. For many goods like food or clothes, local distribution centers (*like supermarkets but without paying*) work well. Only for scarce goods, planning the distribution is important to improve social justice." Katja Einsfeld, FAQ, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anarchist-economics-faq>

society will be one in which the market is a place where people *can not buy means of production*, i.e. cannot accumulate capital.⁶ This obviously changes the nature of the market. Whether you call it a “market” or something else is completely irrelevant. And the fact that these consumer goods are acquired through vouchers is of no importance either.

In a way, capitalism provides an anticipation of what a cashless society might be like, since most purchases today are made immaterially via credit cards. The credit card represents the potential acquisition, via a computer medium, of goods that we need: there is no longer any question of money in the material sense, or of “vouchers”. *The question is: how this credit card is funded*: today it’s through wages, but we can imagine other ways of funding it. One could take into account the global value produced by society (the GNP), which would be divided by the number of people concerned, after deduction of the needs linked to fixed costs, depreciation, etc. This would imply precise national accounting, as advocated by Proudhon. It would also mean maintaining in some way the notion of “value”, which some people would like to do away with – I’ll get back to that later.

In any case, in an anarchist society, the principle of “to each according to his/her needs”, which is a *largely subjective principle*, does not mean that an individual can consider that his or her needs are unlimited: a limit will have to be established. On the assumption that we are leaving the utopian register to remain in the realm of pragmatism, let us emphasise the extreme difficulty that could result from any attempt to find a rational solution to a problem that remains essentially subjective.

This “consumption card”, which relegates money and vouchers to the dustbin of history, could set a limit⁷ that would be equal for everyone (but which could take into account a family quotient – a family of six does not consume as much and in the same way as a single person).

In any case, an accounting system will have to be set up to define the quantity and nature of the consumer goods to which people will have access.

On this point, let’s remember two things:

1. In the area of consumption, the volume devoted to individual consumption is minimal compared with consumption by public services – health, education, energy, transport, etc. At the time Bakunin and Kropotkin

6 Production goods are commodities such as machinery and raw materials that do not directly satisfy consumer needs but are used at an intermediate stage to produce consumer goods.

7 See FAQ: “Does ‘according to need’ mean that everyone will get whatever they wish for?”, Katja Einsfeld, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anarchist-economics-faq#toc15>

were writing, none of this existed, although the question was beginning to be addressed, first by Proudhon and then within the International.

2. In practice, the Spanish libertarians had developed effective and perfectly egalitarian systems to solve the problem of access to everyday consumption, based on vouchers, described in detail by Gaston Leval⁸ and which I won't go into again: *Perhaps it would be more appropriate, when considering how work should be remunerated, to start from what has already been attempted rather than referring to preconceived theoretical developments.*

When we refer to the market, we immediately think of a place where we buy everyday consumer goods. This place is symbolised by the supermarket (as Einsfeld points out), where we can find just about anything we need for everyday life. But the capitalist system is not limited to this, and the abolition of the market economy will not limit itself in abolishing the places where we buy butter, vegetables and tee-shirts:

- The market in the capitalist system is also the market in production goods. In a communist society means of production will continue to be produced, but there will be no market for them. It will be impossible to purchase means of production on an individual basis and to employ salaried workers.

Proudhon envisaged two sectors of productive activity: *a)* The sector we would call “industrial” today, characterised by a large amount of capital and a strong division of labour. This sector would be socialised and entrusted to what he called “workers’ companies” [*compagnies ouvrières*], which could be identified with workers’ councils. *b)* The craft and small industry sector, which would be maintained, but which he thought would gradually disappear. Although he did not express this explicitly, it was a sort of transition to a totally socialised economy. In Spain, when the anarcho-syndicalists collectivised the land, many small farmers joined the collectivities, but they were not forced to do so. Most of them ended up doing so because they realised that their working conditions were much better.

One comment, however: most of the socialists of the nineteenth century thought that the concentration of capital would lead to the disappearance of small businesses, which would be absorbed by the big ones. Engels was convinced that the concentration of capital would make it easy to establish socialism: all that was needed was to expropriate a small number of owners.

⁸ Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish revolution: Detailed account of worker-controlled agriculture, industry and public services in revolutionary Spain during the civil war*: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gaston-leval-collectives-in-the-spanish-revolution#toc22>

In reality, today's large industrial companies are perfectly satisfied with the many small companies that provide maintenance, subcontracting, etc., a number of activities that they do not consider profitable to provide themselves.⁹

- The capitalist system is also characterized by the market in labour power, as Paul Mattick explains:

“The whole of the capitalist market – except the market-relations between capital and labour – may disappear without affecting the capitalist form of production at all. The market-relation between capital and labour is the only capitalist relation per se. Short of its abolition the historically developed form of production for human exploitation that has been called capitalism cannot disappear.”¹⁰

The existence of a market for labour power simply means the perpetuation of wage-labour as a means of remunerating workers.

It should be remembered that wage-labour means competition between workers for jobs, exclusion of the wage-earner from the product of his work, exclusion from the tools of his trade. Finally, the wage system is a system in which the working class does not determine the object of its work, nor the conditions of its work, and in which it has no control over the allocation of social resources.

- The capitalist system is inseparable from the property market, which will be abolished in a libertarian society. Proudhon raised this issue during the 1848 revolution, when he envisaged the municipalization of housing.

- Finally, what is perhaps the most important commodity sector in capitalism today is the financial market, an immaterial and global place where colossal sums of fictitious values linked to financial speculation are exchanged on a daily basis. The relative decline in the share of productive labour in the realisation of capitalist profits is linked, at a general level, to the fact that the dominant form of capitalism today is no longer industrial but financial capitalism or, to be more precise, speculative capitalism. Today, when a capitalist has money available, he no longer invests it in production but in speculation. A large proportion of corporate profits come

9 Article 9 of the Soviet Constitution stated: “Alongside the socialist system of economy, the law allows small private enterprises of individual peasants and craftsmen, based on personal labour and excluding the exploitation of the labour of others.” We know that there is a great distance between what the constitution of a state says and what happens in practice, but on paper it is very Proudhonian.

10 P. Mattick, “How New Is the ‘New Order’ of Fascism?”, *Partisan Review*, 1942.

from financial transactions, with no link to the productive sphere as such. The fastest-growing form of speculation today is on international markets. *Any libertarian approach to the market must take this into account.*

Huge profits are made by transferring goods or raw materials using a simple telephone. The value of capital is therefore increasingly being realised outside productive labour. The very concept of commodity now needs to be re-examined. Increasingly, it appears as a *relationship*, and its exclusive definition as a manufactured object is tending to disappear. The capitalist system is extending commodity relations to every sphere of human activity: leisure, health, information, decision-making systems, the environment. Most often involving complex skills and technologies, they can also be described as complex goods, made up of a combination of the tangible and the intangible. They require very high levels of investment, and therefore large amounts of capital.

The relative decline in productive activity and the profit rates derived from this activity has increasingly encouraged banks to take an interest in the financial markets – exchange rates, derivatives, asset management – which are accompanied by juicy commissions. Two thirds of Société Générale's¹¹ net profit in 1994 came from these activities. A New York bank, Bankers Trust, derives 75% of its income from derivatives. While the derivatives market was almost non-existent in 1990¹², between 1992 and 1994 it grew from USD 4,000 billion to USD 14,000 billion. In 2006, it stood at 370,000 billion, and in 2011 it had risen to 708,000 billion.¹³

Derivatives¹⁴ are products derived from securities (shares, bonds, writs, etc.). Originally, there were real assets, such as buildings, factories, commercial enterprises, mines – in short, anything that could be sold and produce a profit. These assets are used to issue securities whose value can fluctuate, and on which there is speculation. The value of certain securities can reach heights totally unrelated to the real value of the assets to which they correspond. The speculator simply observes that a particular security is rising, and buys it, but it has risen because others have previously observed that it was rising. We know that at some unforeseeable point it will collapse, and the trick is to sell it before that happens.

11 A big French bank. My statistics are drawn from a study I made years ago but the general idea is still valid.

12 Castree N. et al. (eds) *The International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment, and Technology*, Oxford, Wiley.

13 Bank for International Settlements, 16 November 2011, "OTC derivatives market activity in the first half of 2011".

14 See: Ibrahim Warde, "Dérive spéculative", dans *Manière de voir* n° 28, édité par *Le Monde diplomatique*, p. 39 sq.

These sums had to be withdrawn from other allocations... It is clear, however, that at the root of all this there is industrial production.

Originally created to reduce risk, derivatives actually increase it, by weakening the economic system, disrupting markets and destroying the real economy. A few “malfunctions” are revealing: the German group Metallgesellschaft lost 1.3 billion dollars in 1993 because a broker at its American subsidiary made a valuation error and sought to hedge against fluctuations in oil prices. A Japanese executive caused the Nippon Steel Company to lose 128 million dollars (he committed suicide). A derivatives broker in Chile lost \$207 million by speculating with public money on copper (he did not commit suicide). Then there’s the Barings Bank affair. Countless companies have lost huge sums on derivatives: Procter and Gamble, Cargill, Mead, Gibson Greetings.

Speculation does not produce any value in itself; it only generates huge profits through the consensus of the countless operators who, out of conviction or cynicism, play the game. In the final analysis, speculation is an enormous suction pump for funds.

The example of the non-ferrous metals market is typical. Until the 1980s, this market was reserved for large trading, industrial and mining companies. At the end of the 80s, the big international banks arrived in force and with them the exclusive reign of speculation. A Japanese trader, who allegedly carried out unauthorised copper brokerage operations over a ten-year period, is said to have caused Sumitomo to lose 1.8 billion dollars officially and, according to more likely estimates, 4 billion dollars.

This little detour into the question of the international market, and the financial speculation that in a way drives it, is intended to show that this is a matter of colossal dimension and extreme complexity, and that if one day the anarchist movement sets out to “abolish the market”, it will have to realise what all this is really about: the market isn’t just the corner shop where I buy my blue jeans; and abolishing the market won’t just mean replacing the grocer’s shop with the cooperative that buys its supplies from the nearest farm: even if we commit ourselves to “de growth”, we will still have to cope with the international transit of millions of tonnes of raw materials, manufactured goods, energy products, etc. necessary for the survival of a population which, in the best of cases, will be able to accept a little sacrifice, but not too much, and not for too long.

Central planning

Katja rightly tells us that decentralised organisations are more effective in dealing with complex situations. In this she joins the great anarchist writers who insist that decision-making must be bottom-up. Needless to say,

this question was at the heart of the debate between Bakunin and Marx within the First International. Katja is therefore right to say that the top-down method leads to the domination of a leader. Beer, whom she quotes, suggests “decentralising as much as possible”, but it was not necessary to resort to cybernetics, as this author does, to reach this conclusion. Katja shows us that contemporary authors – “Shin, Price, Wolpert, Shima, Tracey, and Kohler 2020” – reach the same conclusions as Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin on certain points, and that “larger societies that don’t scale their informational complexity tend towards statist authoritarian forms”. Thus, she tells us that “central planning should not only be rejected because it does not handle informational complexity well, but also because it is prone to technocracy, bureaucracy, and takeover by authoritarian forces.”

She rightly raises the question of technology that could solve “the information problem of central planning” by using “complex algorithms running on huge central computer clusters”. This is not desirable, she says, because it would not prevent authoritarianism and, we might add, centralisation. Above all, it would not solve “the complexity of human interactions”. Indeed, in the case of the distribution of scarce resources, “central distribution requires surveillance of the planned distribution” but also “the state sanctioning individuals or companies trying to game the system.”

“The non-Statist system does not allow these deviations [*power grab by a minority*] because the controlling and coordinating Comites, clearly indispensable, do not go outside the organisation that has chosen them, they remain in their midst, always controllable by and accessible to the members. If any individuals contradict by their actions their mandates, it is possible to call them to order, to reprimand them, to replace them. It is only by and in such a system that the ‘majority lays down the law’.”¹⁵

Acceptance of decisions linked to distribution in a situation of scarcity of certain products would be easier thanks to transparency, which would make it easier to accept the decisions, says Katja:

“Also, decentralized organization allows for the possibility of finding creative local solutions specific to the local problems

15 Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish revolution*, op. Cit.: *Detailed account of worker-controlled agriculture, industry and public services in revolutionary Spain during the civil war*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gaston-leval-collectives-in-the-spanish-revolution#toc22>

which will reduce the usage of the scarce resource and could not be thought of when planning centrally.”

It is regrettable that Katja limits herself to theoretical reasoning and neglects the historical aspect, which would have given her concrete examples to illustrate her point. I’m thinking in particular of the collectivisations in Spain during the Civil War, as described by Gaston Leval in his book.

The concept of federalism was actually born out of the debate on direct democracy following the 1848 revolution. It was felt that the failure of the 1848 revolution was due to the betrayal of the people by their elected representatives. In future, the people would have to make their own laws and monitor their implementation. In short, the intermediaries between decision and execution would be eliminated.

Proudhon always said that the people should run their own affairs themselves, without the intervention of intermediaries or agents, but the scope of this direct action was then limited to the economy, production and exchange. But direct democracy applied to politics means endless discussions, during which no work gets done. That’s why permanent universal suffrage doesn’t seem to him to be a good means of government: “The universal vote is the piecemeal expression of citizens, a sum, not a collective thought, the synthetic result of popular elements. The ballot gives only a dead echo”¹⁶.

In other words, direct and permanent democracy generalised to the whole of society would only be a deception. Proudhon therefore proposed a system that would allow the people to live “without government and without votes. The only means is the creation of economic guarantees [and the] complete administrative independence of communes, cantons, departments. In a word, *centralisation of all economic forces; decentralisation of all political functions*” [my emphasis]. The idea of economic centralisation and political decentralisation is also found in Bakunin’s work: when he examines the Swiss federal system – and he devotes many pages to this subject – he notes that the progress made since 1848 in the federal sphere is above all economic progress: unification of currencies, weights and measures, major public works, trade treaties, etc. And he comments: “The progress made since 1848 in the federal sphere is above all economic progress: unification of currencies, weights and measures, major public works, trade treaties, etc.’. And he comments:

“It will be said that economic centralisation can only be achieved by political centralisation, that one implies the other,

16 Carnet 8, Vol. 4, Marcel Rivière 1960, p. 21.

that they are both necessary and beneficial to the same degree. Not at all... Economic centralisation, the essential condition of civilisation, creates freedom; but political centralisation kills it, by destroying for the benefit of the rulers and the governing classes the life proper and the spontaneous action of the people.’¹⁷

Proudhon’s and Bakunin’s reflections suggest that they are in favour of a system which combines centralisation of the economy with decentralisation of the political. Two comments:

1. This contrasts with everything the public might have thought about anarchism;

2. It contrasts with everything the anarchist movement might say after Bakunin’s death: Kropotkin, for example, would not share this point of view at all.

In other words, Proudhon and Bakunin advocated a model based on the decentralisation of political decision-making and planning of the economy. These two notions fit perfectly into the system of libertarian federalism. This means that the general orientations of production and economic organisation are the subject of broad debate at all levels of society *from bottom to top*; and that once the orientations have been decided, they are implemented in a centralised or, if the word displeases, coordinated manner.

To express this principle, there’s a word that isn’t used much in the anarchist movement: subsidiarity. It’s a principle according to which each level of an organisation is autonomous with regard to the decisions that fall within its competence and sphere of activity – this principle applies to each level of the organisation chart.

Self-Sustained Communities

Katja’s critique of Low-Tech Self-Sustained Communities is all too brief, because these bodies are part of the projects of certain groups who think they can “bypass” the capitalist system by setting up such communities.¹⁸

A distinction could be made between “self-sustained communities” and “*low-tech* self-sustained communities”. The former have already been criticised by Proudhon and Bakunin, who in their time were obviously

17 Bakounine, “Au sujet de la poursuite de Necaev”, Œuvres, éd. Champ libre, V, 61.

18 See: “Living at the edges of capitalism: adventures in exile and mutual aid”, by Grubačić, Andrej and Denis O’Hearn, University of California Press, 2016.

unable to envisage the concept of “low-tech”. The fact that these bodies are “low-tech” or not doesn’t change much in their criticism, anyway.

We can also distinguish between work communities and living communities. In the vocabulary of the first anarchists, work communities were simply called “co-operatives”, of production or consumption. Living communities were also an important part of anarchist experimentation. In addition, many communities were formed after 1968, which functioned in a convivial way for a while, and many of those that didn’t dissolve quickly ended up under the thumb of a charismatic leader, if not a guru.

On the subject of cooperatives, Proudhon and Bakunin¹⁹ said that they were a means of expressing the working class’s desire for autonomy and that as such they were a positive development, but that they were inserted in a capitalist logic and that in *no way* could they compete with the capitalist system, which had infinitely more funds at its disposal than small people could gather. However, the cooperative form of organisation, extended on a large scale thanks to federalism, is recognised as the form by which future society could be organised – a point we can even find in Marx, surprisingly.

Finally, those who believe that the capitalist system can be “circumvented” by organizing outside it and the state are overlooking an important point: If the establishment of an organisation claiming to “circumvent” the capitalist system were to seriously threaten it, state repression, whether insidious or overt, would quickly put an end to it.

Katja’s reservations about “self-sustained societies” are perfectly justified, as are her comments on the fact that such a project can only be implemented for the benefit of a minority of the population.

Previously Proposed Concepts

In the chapter “Previously Proposed Concepts”, Katja evokes the points of view of a multitude of authors²⁰ whose solutions are in my opinion anecdotal, either simplistic, too cumbersome or fanciful, due to the fact that they do not take a global view of the organisation of society and ignore the notion of anarchist federalism and the anarcho-syndicalist point of view as it was implemented on a too short, but nonetheless significant scale in Spain between 1936 and 1939 over roughly half the country.

19 “You know that there are two kinds of cooperation: bourgeois cooperation, which tends to create a privileged class, a sort of collective bourgeoisie, organised as a new limited partnership; and truly socialist cooperation, the cooperation of the future, which for this very reason is almost impossible to achieve in the present.” (Bakunin, *Protestation de l'Alliance*, 1871.)

20 Cockshot, Cottrell, Parecon, Albert, Hahnel, Devine, Laibman, Vettese, Pendergrass, Neurath, Sutterlütti, Meretz.

However, in this chapter, she raises two absolutely essential problems for which no solution has yet been found: the remuneration of labour and the distribution of products: The absence of a solution to these questions could cast serious doubt on the possibility of building a socialist society. In my opinion, there are two ways of approaching the question: the empirical way and the theoretical (I would be tempted to say “dogmatic”) way.

Unfortunately, the anarchists who speak out on this question often take a subjective and theoretical viewpoint and put forward solutions that correspond to their desires rather than to what is materially possible.

The theoretical approach consists of examining the vast amount of literature that has been produced on the subject in order to form an opinion – an opinion that will most often be based on presuppositions and received ideas rather than scientific conclusions. The empirical approach consists of analysing attempts to achieve an alternative economy to liberalism and statism, and to see how they worked and can lead to a society free from exploitation and oppression.

There is a third essential point which needs to be addressed and which is not touched on by Katja, that of the mysterious “abolition of the law of value”, which I will deal with elsewhere.

Two models

Katja mentions in her text the question of remuneration according to work and according to needs, and the opposition between these two forms, but it is a pity that she does not refer to the debate which took place towards the end of the IWA and which pitted the proponents of these two approaches against each other, and which led to the formation of a so-called “collectivist” current and an “anarcho-communist” current. It’s a fairly complex question, but I’ll try to sum it up. But first it is necessary to set the context. Indeed, if we look at it with a bit of hindsight, we realise that it was largely a false debate, tinged in my view with a hint of bad faith and theoretical maximalism, but also undoubtedly a misunderstanding linked to the fact that Kropotkin wrote a pamphlet against “collectivism”,²¹ but it was no longer Bakunin’s collectivism but Marx’s, the word having in the meantime been appropriated by the latter. This obviously led to some misunderstandings...

Within the “anti-authoritarian” International Workers’ Association, a rift gradually developed between a current represented by Bakunin’s followers, that could be described as “pre-revolutionary syndicalist” and a current represented by the Italian militants and by Kropotkin, that called itself anarchist or anarchist-communist. This rift would later manifest itself in

21 Kropotkin, *Will the Revolution be Collectivist?* 1913.

practice, in the debates between the collectivists and the anarchist communists, and in theory, between the defenders of the “to each according to his labour” and the defenders of the “to each according to his needs” thesis. The entire history of the anarchist movement is marked by this opposition, which in certain circumstances has taken violent and sometimes tragic forms.

The Bakuninist model

From the point of view of Bakunin and the militants close to him, the organisation of tomorrow’s society will be built on the model of workers’ class organisation, that is, the International Workingmen’s Association (original title) or International Workers’ Association (inclusive title). The IWA is, in a way, the foreshadowing of tomorrow’s society. We could draw a parallel with Marx’s point of view. He said that the capitalist system was formed in an embryonic way within feudal society, thanks to a social class that was still dominated – the bourgeoisie – but which owned the means of production and, when the time came, was able to break the shackles that imprisoned it. By analogy, within the capitalist system, the proletariat obviously doesn’t own the means of production, but what it does own (at least potentially) is its *organisation* and its *insertion into the productive system*.

Bakunin gives a precise description of this organisational model.²² He notes that within the IWA there is a double structure: one vertical, one horizontal. The vertical structure is made up of trade unions, which he calls “craft sections”, set up within the work places. By extension, we could say that it is an industrial-type structure that encompasses, from the bottom up, the whole of a sector of activity (for example: Metallurgy, Textiles, etc.).

The horizontal structure is a geographical structure: it is made up of what Bakunin calls “central sections”. The “central sections” are not set up within the companies, but within the localities and are therefore able to bring together representatives of all the “trade sections” in the locality and to coordinate information and organise struggles. For Bakunin, it is a totally *political* body, in that its field of intervention goes beyond simple everyday demands. The “central section” is also the place where political reflection takes place in general. A vision that is not limited to the company. Furthermore, Bakunin firmly insists on the fact that it will never be necessary to extinguish the “central sections”, because it is they that give the IWA its *political* dimension.

²² Bakounine : une théorie de l’organisation, https://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/2-bakounine_-_classe_ouvriere_et_organisation.pdf

What Bakunin describes is not a fantasy, because it has already existed in France with the CGT, in Spain with the CNT and in Portugal with the Portuguese CGT. The “craft sections” are simply called “syndicats” (unions), and the “central sections” are called “bourses du travail” (labour exchanges) in France, Camere del Lavoro in Italy, etc. We are in the revolutionary syndicalist period of the labour movement. The “labour exchanges”, played an essential role, and it can be said that revolutionary syndicalism began its decline the moment the independence and role of the labour exchanges were reduced.

The Bakuninist model of mass organisation, of the revolutionary syndicalist type, is completed in another way, that of *political* organisation. I am of course referring to the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, known simply as the “Alliance”, made up of a small number of militants, but whose role was important in spreading the ideas and practices of the International in the countries of southern Europe.

The Kropotkinian model

If Bakunin’s field of action was the mass organisation of workers, if the bulk of his activity was oriented around questions of organisation and strategy, Kropotkin did not intervene in the mass movement as a decisive element. The bulk of Kropotkin’s intervention was in the anarchist movement itself, when what survived of the IWA ceased to be a mass movement and became affinity groups. It can be said that Kropotkin was a “generalist” theoretician, while Bakunin was a man of action and an organiser.

Kropotkin’s starting point was the idea that economists make the mistake of starting from the point of view of production. In his view, the starting point should be consumption: needs should determine production. Economics from an anarchist point of view should not consist of studying how the capitalist economy works, but of studying “the needs of mankind, and the means of satisfying them with the least possible waste of human energy”. In his view, “production, having lost sight of the needs of man, has strayed in an absolutely wrong direction...”.

Basically he’s right, but he’s starting from a subjective point of view. Refusing to study how the capitalist economy works is not the best way to understand it, and if you don’t understand it, it’s hard to fight it. It’s the opposite of what Proudhon did. And then, from a certain point of view, the capitalist economy also starts from needs: if it didn’t, capitalists wouldn’t sell anything and wouldn’t make any profits. They simply base themselves on the needs of people who are *bankable*, and they don’t shy away from *artificially creating needs* either. The needs of people who are not bankable,

on the other hand, and collective and social needs, on the other, are not taken into account.

The question is whether we can envisage the creation of a political economy based on the needs of the population without also taking into account the ways in which the goods that the population needs are *produced*. The question is also whether the laws of economics are the same: does the notion of “cost” apply in both cases?

In *Memories of a Rebel*, Kropotkin proposes an anticipation of what a society freed from authority and exploitation would look like in an anarchist communist point of view.

“This society will be made up of a multiplicity of associations united among themselves by everything that requires a common effort: federations of producers for all kinds of production, agricultural, industrial, intellectual, artistic, communes for consumption, taking care of everything that concerns housing, lighting, heating, food, sanitary institutions, etc. ; federations of communes among themselves and federations of communes with production groups; in short, even larger groups, encompassing an entire country or even several countries, and made up of people who will work together to satisfy these economic, intellectual and artistic needs, which are not limited to a particular territory.

“All these groups will freely combine their efforts by reciprocal agreement, as railway companies or post offices already do today, even if the former seek nothing more than their own selfish interest and the latter belong to different and enemy states; or, better still, like meteorologists, Alpine clubs, British rescue stations, cyclists, teachers, etc., who unite their efforts for the realisation of works of all kinds, of an intellectual nature, or for their simple pleasure. Complete freedom will govern the development of new forms of production, invention and organisation; individual initiative will be encouraged and any tendency towards uniformity and centralisation will be combated.

“Moreover, this society will not remain petrified in determined and immutable forms, but will change incessantly, because it will be a living organism, always evolving. We will not feel the need for a government, because freely consented agreement and association will take the place of all the functions that governments currently consider to be theirs and that, as the causes of these conflicts become rarer, these

conflicts themselves, if they can still occur, will be regulated by arbitration.”

We find in this passage, in a very diluted way we could say, the dual structure, vertical and horizontal, of Bakuninian organisation: indeed, Kropotkin speaks of “federations of producers” and “federations of communes”, but these “federations” are envisaged in a very vague and evasive way, they are set up according to need, they “freely” combine their efforts by means of a “reciprocal agreement”. But what does it mean to “freely” combine their efforts when it comes to organising all public services for hundreds of millions of people, for example? The promotion of individual initiative appears frequently in the texts of anarchist communist militants of the time. It’s a legitimate concern, but it’s hard to imagine implementing individual initiative when it comes to solving macroeconomic problems.

Will employees of railway stations or airports be invited to “freely” establish “reciprocal agreements” with other stations in the region or airports to organise passenger traffic? Will workers in the electricity production and distribution sector “freely” draw up “reciprocal agreements” to distribute electricity across a country or continent?

In the Bakuninian collectivist scheme, the problem is solved by the existence of industry federations that would take charge of the management of the sectors within their competence – which implies an inevitable form of technical centralisation – after the population has been consulted on rail or electricity policy.

Of course, at Bakunin’s time the question of industrial federations was not yet on the agenda, but this form of organisation logically follows from his descriptions of the trade union movement of his time. It was revolutionary syndicalists who defended the formation of industrial federations in France and Spain, against the opinion of many anarchists who thought this was “authoritarian”. *This is another form of opposition between collectivists and anarchist communists.*

When Bakunin writes: “I want the organisation of society and collective or social property from the bottom up, through free association, and not from the top down, through any authority. This is the sense in which I am a collectivist and not a communist”²³, it must be understood as a departure from Marxist communism, which he describes as “authoritarian”, in other words, statist. Just as for Proudhon, “authority” for Bakunin is what falls under the sphere of the state: the word is not taken in the behavioural sense.

23 Bakunin, *Statism and anarchy*.

Free association is therefore association that takes place *outside the control of the state*.

Putting the problem in terms of “free association” – found in both Bakunin and Kropotkin – might have made sense at the beginning of the labour movement, at a time when the right of association was non-existent or limited, but imagining society as a whole under the regime of “free association” doesn’t make much sense in a developed industrial society. The various departments of a hospital do not operate according to the principle of “free association” in the strict sense of the term, if by that we mean that a department cannot decide to separate itself from the system at the risk of endangering patients.

I don’t think we should interpret today the idea of “free association” as the organising principle of a society made up of hundreds of millions of people, whose needs would have to be met, and which would be managed by a myriad of associations that would come in and out of contact according to need. In fact, this system would come very close to a free enterprise system where each company would be autonomous: whether it is run by a private owner or by an elected committee makes no difference.

The idea of “free association” today means that the organisation of an emancipated society will take place: a) outside the structures of the state; b) in a decentralised way; c) through a bottom-up decision-making process in federative bodies; d) with the implementation of decisions under the responsibility of elected, controlled and revocable committees.

This idea of “free association”, taken literally in the Kropotkinian sense, suggests that the power station in one part of the country will be “freely” associated with another power station in another part of the country by means of a “reciprocity agreement”. In the Bakunin scheme, all the power stations in a country or an extended area will be managed on the basis of decisions relating to overall energy policy defined by bottom-up consultation as part of a federative process. Besides, decisions on energy policy are not the sole responsibility of workers in this sector, but of the population as a whole.

In fact, Kropotkin is describing less a federative system than a kind of union of associations with no permanent link between them, making and unmaking according to circumstances. In a highly industrialised country it makes no sense. He is, to a large extent, the inventor of the “horizontalism” that has become fashionable today, and which has nothing to do with federalism. I confess that, if the Kropotkinian vision were to prevail, I would seriously hesitate to get on a plane if airport control towers were to “freely combine their efforts by mutual agreement”.

Kropotkin is extremely naïve to imagine that we could organise an effective railway network, or the large scale production and distribution of

electricity, gas, water, etc. without a certain centralisation (or “coordination” if you prefer) of organisation. Kropotkin was in line with the anarchism of his time, which equated organisation with authority. He is, in my opinion, far below the level of reflection of Proudhon and Bakunin, for whom the society of tomorrow will be founded on political decentralisation and centralisation of the economy²⁴. By this they meant that *political decision-making* concerning the global direction of society will have to be made in a decentralised way, starting with the federated grassroots organisations and upwards, but that once these decisions have been made, their *implementation* will depend on the responsibility of the federal body that will be in charge of putting them into practice.

Decisions taken in a decentralised way will have to be implemented, and this implementation will inevitably involve a certain degree of requirements and centralisation. The problem simply lies in setting up the bodies responsible for checking that decisions are actually implemented.

Kropotkin: what collectivism he is talking about?

When the First International and Bakunin disappeared, there were intense debates within the anarchist movement on the question of collectivism, debates founded in my opinion on a lack of knowledge of the facts and on a touch of bad faith. Added to this is the fact that, when it comes to Kropotkin, it is not always clear what “collectivism” he is talking about. In “Will the revolution be collectivist?”, published in 1913, he writes:

“Very often we hear it said, by anarchists themselves, that Anarchy is a very distant ideal; that it has no chance of being achieved any time soon; that very probably the next revolution will be collectivist, and that we shall have to pass through a Workers’ State, before arriving at a communist society, without government.”²⁵

24 “Economic centralisation, an essential condition of civilisation, creates freedom; but political centralisation kills it, destroying for the benefit of the rulers and the dominant classes the very life and spontaneous action of populations.” (Bakunin, “Au sujet de la poursuite de Necaev”, *Oeuvres*, Champ libre, V, 61.) This is a little-known aspect of Bakunin’s political thought. By economic centralisation, we mean the tendency of modern industrial society to organise productive activities on a larger and more complex scale. The Russian anarchist is thus at the antipodes of a conception based on small-scale, decentralised artisanal production, “petit-bourgeois” as the Marxists say.

25 *Les Temps nouveaux*, 1913.

https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Les_Temps_nouveaux

In the same text, he spoke of “the Workers’ State of the collectivists”. It is clear that this is not collectivism as elaborated by the International.

Bakunin could in no way be concerned when Kropotkin wrote that “collectivism, as we know, does not abolish wages”. Bakunin was clearly against wage-labour: in a letter to the Internationals of the Jura, he wrote that serfdom had succeeded slavery, that wage-labour had succeeded serfdom, and that “*later, much later*”, would come “the era of fraternity”: “These are the phases through which the animal struggle for life is gradually transformed, in history, into the human organisation of life”.²⁶ Undoubtedly more realistic than the anarchists who came after him, Bakunin envisaged the abolition of wage-labour only at the end of a long historical evolution.

When Bakunin draws the analogy between slavery and wage-labour, there can be no doubt:

“Slavery may change its form or its name—its essence remains the same. Its essence may be expressed in these words: to be a slave is to be forced to work for someone else, just as to be a master is to live on someone else’s work. In antiquity, just as in Asia and in Africa today, as well as even in a part of America, slaves were, in all honesty, called slaves. In the Middle Ages, they took the name of serfs: nowadays they are called wage earners. The position of this latter group has a great deal more dignity attached to it, and it is less hard than that of slaves, but they are nonetheless forced, by hunger as well as by political and social institutions, to maintain other people in complete or relative idleness, through their own exceedingly hard labour. Consequently they are slaves. And in general, no state, ancient or modern, has ever managed or will ever manage to get along without the forced labour of the masses, either wage earners or slaves, as a principal and absolutely necessary foundation for the leisure, the liberty, and the civilization of the political class – the citizens.”²⁷

Strangely enough, the concept of wage slavery seems to have been invented by conservatives who opposed the rise of the industrial workforce, condemning factory work as a form of slavery. They used this argument to justify slavery in the West Indies and the southern United States. Conservative critics of industrialization invented terms like “wage slavery,”

26 Bakounine, *Lettre aux Internationaux du Jura*, Oeuvres, Stock I, p. 263.

27 Mikhail Bakunin, “Rousseau’s Theory of the State”, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1972.

“factory slaves,” and “white slavery.” Slave-owning conservatives tempted to portray slavery as a system that was more moral than free labour. They were obviously aware of the appalling working conditions in factories and mines. Advocates for slavery often fancied themselves the defenders of civilization against “socialists, communists, red republicans, [and] Jacobins”, as James Henry Thornwell wrote.²⁸

The meaning of the word “collectivism” has evolved since the time of Bakunin and the International, and has been taken up by Marxists as we can see in *The Conquest of Bread*. Kropotkin writes:

“Collectivism, as we know, does not abolish wages, though it introduces considerable modifications into the existing order of things. It only substitutes the State, that is to say, Representative Government, national or local, for the individual employer of labour. Under Collectivism it is the representatives of the nation, or of the district, and their deputies and officials who are to have the control of industry.

Obviously this has nothing to do with the collectivism of the IWA.

As part of his critique of the statist (Marxist) version of collectivism, Kropotkin makes an interesting observation: a political revolution can take place without shaking the foundations of industry, but a revolution in which the people get their hands on property will paralyse exchange and production. “Millions of public money would not suffice for wages to the millions of out-of-works.” Millions of people would have to be fed: Kropotkin adds that “the reorganization of industry on a new basis (and we shall presently show how tremendous this problem is) cannot be accomplished in a few days”. The people will not accept to be “half starved for years in order to oblige the theorists who uphold the wage system”: they will demand “communization of supplies”, “the giving of rations.” But the supplies and rations will not last long if production is not restarted very quickly...

Kropotkin’s fears were legitimate, but it is worth comparing his observations with what actually happened during the three years following

28 James Henry Thornwell (1812-1862) was an American preacher and slave owner who held the view that slavery was morally right and justified under the Christian religion. He accused those who viewed slavery as being morally wrong as being opposed to Christianity: “The parties in the conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders. They are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground – Christianity and Atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake.”

the only historical experience in which the problem of the day after the revolution arose. I often recall what Gaston Leval used to say: “The revolution? It is having delivered thirty thousand litres of milk every morning to Madrid”. After the massive workers’ response that broke up Franco’s attempted coup d’état on 19 July 1936, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists immediately put in place the bodies that would allow economic activity to resume. There was virtually no break: industry, agriculture and transport continued to function. The collectivisation of agriculture meant that the towns could be supplied, unlike what had happened in Russia twenty years earlier. But if this resumption of global activity was possible, it was not because the communes and companies had been organised in the form of “free associations” but because the workers’ and peasants’ movement was organised in the form of industrial federations.

Abundance and rationing

In *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin starts from the idea that humanity possesses immense wealth and a prodigious array of machines, acquired through collective labour:

“The products obtained each year would be more than enough to provide bread for all men, if the enormous capital of cities, factories, transport routes and schools became common property instead of private property, the facility would be easy to conquer: the forces at our disposal would be applied, not to useless or contradictory labour, but to the production of everything man needs for food, housing, clothing, comfort, the study of the sciences and the cultivation of the arts.”²⁹

We are not in the more or less distant future; it is *now* that we must rationalise production to reduce waste and parasitism and ensure abundance. It was on this line of reasoning that Kropotkin based his “take from the heap” thesis, which was generally very misunderstood, for the real quotations says that goods available in abundance should be available without limit; *those in short supply should be rationed*.

The idea of “taking from the heap” (*prise au tas*) appears in the French versions of *The Conquest of Bread*. This image was often understood as the possibility of having unlimited and unrestricted access to consumer goods, but activists tended to forget the second part of the sentence, which in its entirety reads as follows: “Take from the heap what you have in abundance! Rationing of what must be measured, shared!” And the example of what

29 Elisée Reclus' preface to *The Conquest of Bread*.

Kropotkin considers to be significant of the “taking from the heap” is the delivery of water to homes. The English version is more measured: “no stint or limit to what the community possesses in abundance, but equal sharing and dividing of those commodities which are scarce or apt to run short.”

Kropotkin writes that “the pretence of giving an individualistic origin to products is absolutely unsustainable”. It is not possible to measure what is owed to each person from the total wealth that is produced. This probably explains the term “mitigated individualism” to designate collectivism: In a society that considers “the instruments of production as a common patrimony”, the collectivist ideal of “each according to his labour” is unattainable because “the common possession of the instruments of labour will necessarily lead to the common enjoyment of the fruits of common labour”, says Kropotkin in *The Conquest of Bread*. But Bakunin never said the opposite and, once again, the “collectivism” Kropotkin is referring to is not that of the International. The idea of “to each according to his work” is a simple formulation meaning that every worker should receive a fair wage.

To dispute the principle of remuneration according to work, communist anarchists base themselves on the idea that in the capitalist regime goods are distributed on the basis of the consumer’s ability to pay, and that if the consumer cannot pay, he does not consume. This is true. If we put aside those who in the capitalist system have no income because they don’t work, those who do have an income but consume little are in this situation because their income is insufficient. It is the function of workers’ and trade union struggles to rectify this. For the collectivists or the IWA (whom I distinguish from Marxist collectivists) those who, for one reason or another, have no income will be taken care of by society. Social parasites, those who *deliberately* and without reason refuse to work, are simply excluded from this system: there is something in Bakuninian collectivism that involves the principle of responsibility: you have to take responsibility for your choices.

About remuneration

Proudhon’s “error of account”

It all starts with Proudhon’s “error of account”.

In developing the idea of the “error of account” as soon as 1846, Proudhon is undoubtedly the one who best explained what exploitation of the worker consists of. In the capitalist system, production is no longer individual, but the collective and combined work of a given number of workers. The boss pays each worker the equivalent of a day’s work, or more precisely what the state of the relationship of forces between bosses and workers establishes at a given moment as the value of a day’s work. The

combined labour of 100 workers, for example, produces a value far greater than what each worker would produce individually. It is this surplus value that the boss appropriates. This is what defines exploitation. So we see that the basis of the idea consisting in giving to each worker “according to his work” was already called into question by Proudhon: in an anarchist society too there will be a “surplus value”, but it will not be appropriated by the boss, nor will it be handed over to each worker individually, it will be allocated to the benefit of society.

Kropotkin tried to highlight the differences between the two sensibilities of the movement by insisting on the question of remuneration for labour. “To each according to his labour” is interpreted, on the one hand, as an exclusion of those who don’t work – which was not at all in the spirit of the collectivists – and, on the other hand, as a bonus given to those who work more and thus become privileged:

“We cannot agree with the collectivists that a remuneration proportional to the hours worked by each person in the production of wealth could be an ideal, or even a step towards that ideal.”³⁰

This is an extremely simplistic view of the collectivists’ positions. It should be remembered that the slogan of reducing working time to 8 hours was adopted in 1866 at the IWA Congress in Geneva; and that in his programmatic text “Politics of the International” Bakunin recommended a reduction in working hours on the one hand, and an increase in wages on the other, which does not speak particularly in favour of the principle of “working more to earn more”. But most of all, the actual working time in factories was then 14 hours, seven days a week... which left little room for work-addicts to get rich...

When Kropotkin wrote *The Conquest of Bread* in 1892, the cultural environment of the anarchist movement had changed considerably: we were no longer dealing with organised worker militants fighting in a mass organisation against capital, but at anarchist militants, whose demands were all the more maximalist because they were more disorganised, dispersed and powerless.

“To each according to his needs” is a principle whose validity is not questionable, theoretically, but it designates an end, issued by militants who don’t have, and don’t propose, the means to achieve it. Furthermore, this slogan can also reflect the mentality of people who are not salaried and whose perspectives are those of consumers rather than producers, claiming rights rather than affirming duties.

30 Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*.

Remuneration for labour

It seems that the first reference to “communism”, as opposed to Bakuninian collectivism, was made by Costa, Malatesta, Cafiero and Covelli at the Florence congress of the Italian federation of the IWA in 1876. Kropotkin took up the idea and, at the congress of the Jura Federation in La Chaux-de-Fonds on 12 October 1879, proposed the adoption of communism as a goal, with collectivism as a transitional form. Proudhonian mutualism and Bakuninian collectivism were questioned and were soon replaced by communism, which was added to anarchism to give “anarchist-communism”. Kropotkin was not the creator of “anarchist-communism”, but he was undoubtedly its best propagandist.

The supporters of the two currents which emerged after the fall of the Anti-Authoritarian International, who sometimes clashed tragically, particularly in Argentina and Spain, developed two approaches to the question of remuneration for labour. The “collectivists” (Bakuninian) defended the idea of payment according to work, while the communist anarchists advocated payment to each according to need. In my opinion, the theoretical arguments on which this division is based are unfounded and this opposition is anyway *completely outdated*. The tragedy of the anarchist movement today, and probably one of the reasons for its confidential character, undoubtedly lies in the difficulty of finding an effective form of complementarity and collaboration between these two currents.

From a collectivist perspective, labour is not compulsory, it is “morally and socially, but not legally compulsory for everyone”, says Bakunin in his *Catechism*³¹. The idea is that each member of a community participates of their own free will in the functioning of the community: those who choose not to work assume the consequences; they don’t benefit from any of the advantages of the community and lose their political rights.³²

In his *Revolutionary Catechism* (1864), Bakunin had affirmed the superior status of labour as “the only legitimate title of possession for all, the only basis of the political and social rights of all, honoured and

31 Bakunin’s “Revolutionary Catechism” must not be mistaken with Netchaev’s “Catechism of the Revolutionary”. The first is a programmatic text, the second is a very cynical display of the behaviour a revolutionary should have according to the author.

32 See Einsfled’s FAQ:

“Why will people work if there is neither compulsion to work nor wage?

“After some time of relaxation, most people feel the need to get involved, to contribute, to create something, or to help others. It provides them with fulfillment and a meaning of life. It’s also a means of socializing with others and meeting friends and lovers.”

respected as the principal source of human dignity and freedom”. This ethic will be found in revolutionary syndicalism. The collectivists’ approach was certainly based on a “work ethic” that did not exist among the “anarcho-communists”. Work, Bakunin also says, is “the only producer of wealth; any man in society who lives without work is an exploiter of other people’s labour, a thief”. It is clear that the collectivists of the IWA, and later the revolutionary syndicalists, were anxious to link the enjoyment of goods produced in common to *common labour*.

The principle “To each according to his labour” was not intended to exclude, in the literal sense, those who didn’t work: it was originally designed to exclude from the benefits of society those who – exploiters, social parasites – deliberately did not work³³. But anarchist-communists after Kropotkin will pretend that this formula was intended to exclude all proletarians who did not work, that is, who were not in production – children, wives, the elderly, the sick, etc. – which was *obviously not the intention* of the collectivists, as Bakunin says:

“The old, the invalid, the sick, surrounded by care, respect and enjoying all their rights, both political and social, will be treated and maintained profusely at the expense of society.”³⁴

This settles *once and for all* the accusation made by communist anarchists against collectivists according to whom the former exclude those who do not work from the benefits of society. The principle “to each according to his labour” was just a general formula based on the idea that the capitalist has appropriated the value produced by the collective labourer: the worker must therefore receive his or her fair share of the value produced. Yet this apparently fair principle makes no sense in today’s society: individual consumption represents a very small proportion of the goods and services produced and consumed overall. My toothbrush, my TV, my washing machine represent proportionally little compared to the enormous investments made in health, transport, schools, energy and many other things. In Kropotkin’s time, what we now call “public services”, i.e. all the infrastructures intended to ensure the general interest, did not exist, or practically not at all. It should be noted that there were interesting

33 Katja writes that “if some people don’t respect the agreements, it might not be a big deal”, but she adds: “Communities might also decide to separate from individuals who repeatedly cause harm and refuse to participate in processes to transform their behavior.”

34 Bakounine. “Principes et organisation de la société internationale révolutionnaire. I. Objet. II. Catéchisme révolutionnaire”, mars 1866.

debates on the question of public services within the Anti-Authoritarian International.³⁵

Remuneration according to work or according to need is a misleading problem: it is not so much an *individual* question as a *collective* one, i.e. the restitution of this value to society as a whole. Anarchist-communists will see in remuneration according to work an obstacle where there is only a divergence of approach. From 1876 onwards, under the influence of Kropotkin and on the initiative of Italian groups, the Jura Federation developed the idea of collective ownership of the *products of labour* as a necessary complement to the collectivist programme. It seemed obvious, however, that if collective ownership of the *means of production* was considered, this would inevitably result in collective ownership of the *products of labour*, or more precisely in a collective and egalitarian organisation of the distribution of the products of labour. This was self-evident. The question is not who *owns* the products of labour, but *how they are distributed*.

Remuneration for needs or allocation?

Classical anarcho-communism, says Katja Einsfeld, is in favour of distribution according to need and against payment for work.

Between the heirs of Bakunin and Kropotkin, there was a polemic whose stakes were greatly amplified and whose terms were distorted, the former being in favour of remuneration according to work, the latter being in favour of remuneration according to needs. The opposition between these two approaches makes no sense and has, in my view, been misunderstood. No one is opposed to remuneration according to need: the question is: *a)* at what point can this principle be applied in practice; *b)* can we then still talk about *remuneration*?

To begin with, “remuneration” according to needs was clearly considered by Kropotkin as an objective to be attained, and he was well aware that *it was not immediately achievable*: this is why the 1879 Chaux de Fonds congress adopted the principle of communism as an *objective* and collectivism as a *means*, as a form of transition. So this should settle the question, since the two principles stem from the same basic idea, except that one follows the other chronologically: in other words, collectivism and anarcho-communism are not opposable. So where does Kropotkin’s very firm opposition to collectivism come from, an opposition that can be found

35 See: Septième congrès général de l’Internationale (7-13 septembre 1874). – James Guillaume. — A propos du rapport bruxellois sur les services publics. https://monde-nouveau.net/ecrire/?exec=article&id_article=597

in the arguments of communist anarchists today and in those of Katja Einsfeld? The explanation undoubtedly comes from the fact that the word “collectivism” has changed in content over time, the collectivism of the 1860s and 1870s and of Bakunin not being the same as that which Kropotkin criticised in 1913 in his pamphlet *Le Collectivisme*.

Next, the idea of “remunerating” people according to their needs cannot be considered as remuneration: remuneration is the price of work done, of a service rendered. Rather, it should be called an allocation. In the Kropotkinian and anarchist communist imagination, everyone will benefit from an allocation. We assume, if we follow the logic of the communist anarchists, that the nature and quantity of the needs required by each particular individual will be determined by the individual himself or herself. But what form will this allocation take, given that each individual has different needs depending on whether they are single or not, young or old, etc.? *And will it be necessary to fix a limit?*

In the capitalist system a person who needs a pair of shoes, for example, goes to one or more shops to try to find the desired model, and if it is not available, another model will be chosen. In the anarchist communist system, since there will be no market, that person will have to express this need *somewhere*. (But can't the place where we express our needs be considered as a market?) On a dedicated website, for example. And then what? Wait until there are enough requests for the wanted shoes to start production? Or do we put the production machinery into action to make one pair of shoes in the model requested? Naturally, these thoughts apply just as much to the anarchist communist model as to the collectivist model.

The allocation can be envisaged in two ways:

1. The needs of each individual are listed, their production planned, and the consumer collects these consumer goods from a “a local distribution centre”³⁶ as Katja says or has them delivered to him at regular intervals;
2. Each individual receives a magnetic card on which is recorded the value of the goods he or she has been allocated – a bit like what is happening at the moment with Visa cards, in fact. And in this case the problem arises of establishing the value.

And since there will be no monetary equivalent, even in the form of vouchers that cannot be used to purchase production goods but that are reserved for the acquisition of usage goods, we will have to imagine the creation of a warehouse storing a host of goods that consumers will come

36 “For many goods like food or clothes, local distribution centers (like supermarkets but without paying) work well” says Einsfeld in her FAQ “<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anarchist-economics-faq.a4.pdf>”

and pick up after ordering them, or that will be delivered to them. I find this system unsatisfactory, as Katja confirms when she says that “Saros’ idea of registering needs at the level of individuals seems too cumbersome and isolating and has the potential for surveillance”.

The idea of distributing according to need doesn’t make much sense today, given that a large proportion of needs are collective rather than individual. What the “according to needs” is concerned with is mainly products for everyday use, whereas in Kropotkin’s time what was envisaged were vital products.

Alexandre Marc, constatant l’hétérogénéité de l’espace économique, qu’il oppose aux conceptions homogènes de cet espace telles qu’on les trouve dans les idéologie libérale et marxiste, propose de distinguer deux zones, l’une soumise à une planification impérative correspondant à la satisfaction des besoins, et une zone soumise à une planification indicative dédiée à la satisfaction des désirs – sachant qu’il n’y a pas de frontière rigide entre les deux.³⁷ Cette distinction entre besoins et désirs me paraît particulièrement pertinente. Les besoins – sous la forme de besoins essentiellement sociaux, collectifs – sont relativement constants et peuvent être estimés de manière assez précise. Les désirs, quant à eux, sont fluctuants et largement subjectifs

If we look at the statistics on household consumption in France (for 2018)³⁸, we see that out of a total expenditure of 1,628 billion euros, the share corresponding to public services and collective needs (health, education, housing, heating, transport, communications, public administration) is 1,046 billion euros, much higher than the share corresponding to individual consumption (food, clothing, alcoholic beverages (*sic*), leisure and culture, home furnishings, hotels and restaurants, insurance), which is 582 billion euros (35,7%). If we consider that this observation can be more or less applied to all industrial countries, it makes the debate between supporters of collectivism and supporters of anarchist communism completely obsolete³⁹.

37 Alexandre Marc, *Fondements du fédéralisme*, L’Harmattan, 2000

Alexandre Marc, né Alexandre Markovitch Lipiansky à Odessa le 19 janvier 1904, mort le 22 février 2000 à Vence (France), est un écrivain et un philosophe français, chef de file et théoricien du fédéralisme européen.

38 file:///C:/Users/berth/Downloads/TEF2020.pdf

39 If I focus my presentation mainly on industrialised countries, it's not out of neglect for developing (or non-developing) countries, but because it's in these

In a society organised on a libertarian basis, two-thirds of society's resources will be devoted to satisfying collective needs that do not fall into the "to each according to his needs" category: these are not individual needs in the sense that the needs to be satisfied will be globally the same for everyone.

When the anarchist communists wanted to replace – or rather supplement – the collectivist principle with distribution according to need, they were living in a society of extreme scarcity for the most destitute, where the slightest accident in life quickly became a catastrophe, where working hours were interminable and working conditions in factories unbearable, where the troops were still firing on strikers in many countries and particularly in France, where there was no support in the form of financial aid. There was no free medical aid as there is today, nor a whole range of benefits designed to provide families with partial compensation for the expenses incurred in supporting and educating their children.

The fact is that in 2021, 9.1 million people in mainland France were still living below the monetary poverty level. The poverty rate is therefore 14.5%. The poverty line is set by convention at 60% of the median standard of living of the population. It corresponds to a disposable income of 1,158 euros per month for a person living alone and 2,432 euros for a couple with two children aged under 14. Without intending to be cynical, we have to recognise that the concept of poverty remains relative when we consider that the GDP per capita in Burundi is 292 euros.

A number of measures have been put in place to support the most vulnerable people. Benefits are paid at birth for young children, and for the upkeep of children: they include *a*) family allowances (monthly allowance granted to all families, from the second child up to the age of 20, from 200 to 500 euros depending on the family quotient); *b*) the family supplement (benefit paid on a means-tested basis to people with at least three dependent children aged at least three, *c*) the back-to-school allowance.⁴⁰

countries that the bulk of anarchist movements are to be found, and because activists in emerging countries need to formulate their own positions on the issues developed here.

40 List of various forms of assistance available to disadvantaged individuals and families:

1 Financial assistance for families

- 1.1 Family allowances
- 1.2 Family support allowance
- 1.3 Early childhood benefit
- 1.4 Back-to-school allowance
- 1.5 Personalised autonomy allowance

2 Transport-related assistance

- 2.1 SNCF (train company) assistance

To this can be added the benefits received by the unemployed, which is an insurance scheme that helps to maintain the purchasing power of people at the end of their contract or who have been made redundant. This insurance pays a replacement income until the person finds another job. It provides better compensation for the loss of a low salary than for a high income.

Then there is health protection, which among other things allows people with serious illnesses – cancer, diabetes, hypertension, etc. – to be treated free of charge. And the pensions system, etc. And the five weeks paid holidays.

I'm not mentioning all these benefits to praise the French social protection system, because there may be countries where the situation is better. I want to show that the principle of “to each according to his needs” is already being partially applied, *even if in a very imperfect way*, and it should therefore not be difficult to imagine a far better system.

These provisions are not the fruit of the generosity of the capitalist system and the ruling class, but of the workers' struggles through their unions, that began a century and a half ago, during which many activists gave their lives, either to obtain improvements or to preserve them.

But there is also no doubt that these improvements in favour of the most disadvantaged are also a way of guaranteeing “social peace”: let's be realistic, the ruling class is willing to give up a little in order to keep the essentials. This was particularly visible during the Yellow Vests movement in France, during which there were extremely violent clashes with the police, and where the powers that be clearly panicked.

Generally speaking, all measures in favour of the working class or the underprivileged are the result of a balance that is established between the strength of a demand and the force of reaction of the state in the service of

2.2 Assistance specific to the Île-de-France (Paris) region

2.3 Driving licence assistance

3 Housing assistance

3.1 Personalised housing assistance (APL)

3.2 Local Pass guarantee (taking over responsibility for unpaid rent from the tenant)

3.3 Visale guarantee (young tenants wanting to cover unpaid rent)

4 Assistance for young people in work-linked training or apprenticeships

4.1 “Mobili-jeune” assistance (Aid for young people under the age of 30 on an apprenticeship (or professionalisation) contract working for a private-sector company)

4.2 Regional assistance

5 Assistance for young jobseekers

5.1 Youth guarantee

5.2 RSA (“active solidarity income”) for young people.

5.3 The activity allowance

capitalism. This balance is always fragile and we must constantly be on our guard to ensure that it does not tip the wrong way. The period we are experiencing today is clearly one of regression in social progress, which is constantly under attack from the bosses and the state.

Perhaps we should consider the social advantages obtained through the struggles of the working class as a prefiguration, albeit precarious and very partial, of what can potentially be achieved when the day comes. On that day, it will be enough to extend what has already been achieved. The road ahead will then be shorter than that travelled by workers living in a society where the very idea of social protection is equated with “communism” and where the statutory holiday period is two weeks a year, whereas in France it is five weeks.

In Kropotkin’s vision, food is the predominant need, along with clothing and housing. The people will have to “seize the food reserves and learn the meaning of abundance”. “It is up to us to ensure, from the first to the last day of the Revolution, in all the provinces fighting for freedom, that there is not a single man lacking bread, not a single woman obliged to stand with the exhausted crowd in front of the bakery door, to have a coarse loaf thrown to her out of charity, not a single child languishing for lack of food”. “The Revolution can and must provide everyone with a roof over their heads, food and clothing”. Kropotkin paints a picture of a starving population ready to loot bakeries: “It will be in vain to preach patience. The people will be patient no longer, and if food is not put in common they will plunder the bakeries.” (*The Conquest of Bread*) However, the problem is not pooling food, but ensuring that food is produced and distributed in a socialised way from the start.

While it is undeniable that there is unacceptable poverty in industrial (“civilised”, as Kropotkin puts it) countries today, bakeries are rarely stormed when riots break out: it is mainly hi-fi, clothing and footwear shops that are looted, which, cynically expressed, even places poverty within the framework of a consumer society.

6 Assistance for the elderly

6.1 Social assistance for accommodation (ASH)

6.2 Personalised autonomy allowance (APA)

6.3 Personalised housing benefit (APL) and social housing benefit.

7 Emergency assistance

7.1 Food aid

7.2 Personalised support vouchers (CAP)

Nothing is “free”

The notion of “free of charge” should be contextualised. John Brekken writes that Kropotkin noted that “many goods were provided based on need. Bridges no longer require tolls for passage; parks and gardens are open to all; many railroads offer monthly or annual passes; schools and roads are free; water is supplied to every house; libraries provide information to all without considering ability to pay, and offer assistance to those who do not know how to manage the catalogue.”⁴¹

In reality, despite appearances, none of this is free: in order to build bridges and roads, develop parks, create libraries, schools, etc., money had to be invested at some point, and someone – usually the taxpayer – had to put their hand in their pocket. In an anarchist society, all these things will require, in one form or another, the mobilisation of productive forces, in other words *they will have a cost* and decisions will be taken according to urgencies.

The principle of “to each according to his needs” makes me think of a millenarian vision of Paradise on Earth: tomorrow we’ll shave for free⁴². The idea is that every individual has the opportunity to benefit from the fruits of social production. However, it should be pointed out that, strictly speaking, nothing is free. In France, schooling has been free since 1882, but in reality it is the effort of the community as a whole that enables parents to send their children to school free of charge, and teachers are not volunteers, they need to be fed and housed. In a libertarian society, even if the method of remunerating work is different from the one we know today, it will be necessary to mobilise a workforce, materials, a form of administration, etc. to build or maintain schools and make education “free”: and one way or another, this will have a *cost*, i.e. a set of operations that will have to be accounted for. The same applies to all “free” services.

For Proudhon, society cannot spend more than it has, it cannot have more raw materials than it possesses. It must therefore determine the allocation of these raw materials and define what is most urgent. He advocated the application of mathematics to political economy. His ambition was to turn political economy into “an exact and mathematical science”: economic accounting would “give political economy, considered in terms of its mechanisms of production and distribution, the scientific apparatus for expressing the balance of resources and uses, the economic circuits, and the production, distribution and financing operations carried

41 “Peter Kropotkin’s anarchist Communism”,
<http://www.spunk.org/texts/writers/kropotki/sp000065.html>

42 In France, this expression is used for people, particularly politicians, who make promises they don't keep.

out between the various economic agents”.⁴³ What Proudhon calls “double-entry accounting” is an accounting system that distinguishes between agent accounts and transaction accounts, which will become the basic principle of all economic accounting. Proudhon proposed nothing less than the creation of a national accounting system with a prospective function. He poses the problem clearly in terms of planning. Faced with the reality of the organisation of production, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists quite naturally set up planning structures in the form of “Consejos Generales de Industria” designed to plan the branches of industry: according to Miguel G. Gómez, this was an “experiment in economic planning of the utmost importance.”⁴⁴

Proudhon had understood that the establishment of a socialist system would have required the introduction of rigorous accounting. In Marxist literature it is common to denigrate his economic skills, but in reality he was an excellent accountant who had worked in a large river shipping company and was appreciated for his ability to sort out complex legal matters.

“I eventually discovered that accounting, or more modestly bookkeeping, being the whole of political economy, it was impossible for the authors of so-called economic junk, which in reality are no better than more or less reasonable commentaries on bookkeeping, to have realised this. So my surprise, at first extreme, ceased altogether when I was able to convince myself that a good many economists were very bad accountants, who understood nothing at all about *must and have*, in a word about bookkeeping.”⁴⁵

For Proudhon, the problem is not to abolish value: he constantly insisted on the need to determine value, to “constitute” it. At the level of microeconomics, nothing can indicate, in a particular operation taken at random, “whether it is supply, useful value, which has prevailed, or whether it is exchangeable value, that is to say demand”, he says. Since any excess in the price of a commodity is followed by a proportional fall, “we can rightly regard the average of prices, over a complete period, as indicating the real and legitimate value of products’. Proudhon points out that this average, established at the macro-economic level, comes too late! : in the

43 Jean Bancal, *Proudhon, pluralisme et autogestion*, Aubier-Montaigne.

44 Miguel G. Gómez, “Du communisme libertaire au socialisme corporatif (Déambulation au sein de la CNT pendant la Guerre Civile...)”. file:///C:/Users/berth/Downloads/CNT%20du%20communisme%20au%20corporatif%20(5).pdf

45 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Philosophie de la misère* (1846), édité par le groupe FresnesAntony, coll. «Anarchistes», 1983, tome 2, p. 176

proprietary regime, the constitution of value takes place a posteriori. But who can say, asks Proudhon, whether this average, which is at the macro-economic level, might not one day be established?

“Who knows whether it might not be discovered in advance? Is there an economist who dares to say no? So, whether we like it or not, we have to look for a measure of value: logic dictates it.”⁴⁶

It will be up to the disalienated society, the associated society, to achieve the constitution of value. “The opinion that denies the existence of this measure is irrational and unreasonable.” In short, on this question, Proudhon recognises that all the work remains to be done. He spoke out against both the economists who claimed that “political economy is a science of facts, and that the facts are contrary to the hypothesis of a determination of value”, and the socialists who asserted that the question of value was scabrous and no longer had any place “in a universal association, which would absorb all antagonism”. He opposes both the supporters of the status quo and those who refuse to tackle the problem head on. If the law of exchange is not found, he says, “the fault lies not with facts but with scientists”; and as long as man works to subsist, justice will be the condition of association: “without a determination of value, justice is lame, is impossible”.⁴⁷

Bakunin and the collectivists of the International were undoubtedly the last to legitimise the income privileges associated with education. Bakunin is probably one of those who most clearly explained that the collective achievement of continuous creation within society must no longer be misappropriated by a minority, and that the acquisition of knowledge in no way justifies a hierarchy of income. The example of the “foolish scholar” (“sot savant”) given in the letter to *La Liberté* of 31 July 1869 illustrates the point perfectly:

“It very often happens that a highly intelligent workman is forced to keep quiet in the face of a learned fool who beats him, not by wit, which he does not have, but by instruction, of which the workman is deprived, and which he himself was unable to receive, because, while his foolishness was developing scientifically in the schools, the workman’s labour

46 Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques*, Éditions Fresnes-Antony, I, p. 72.

47 For Proudhon, the concept of “justice” should not be understood in the narrow legal sense but in its broadest sense of a society founded on justice.

clothed him, housed him, fed him and provided him with all the things, teachers and books necessary for his instruction.”⁴⁸

In the capitalist system, production is not production for needs but for profit and capitalist accumulation. But the slogan “to each according to his needs”, seductive as it is, is vague: how can we determine each person’s needs without creating an enormous bureaucracy? How can we avoid scarcity and restrictions on the one hand, and wasteful abundance on the other? Apart from social goods, which are the responsibility of the public services, whose needs can be precisely calculated using statistics and computers, the problem essentially concerns durable goods, for which the capitalist system has gone to great lengths to multiply supply and artificially create demand in the form of the production of gadgets that mobilise huge quantities of resources and raw materials, or that offer consumers an incredible number of products with the same use but which duplicate each other? How many brands of washing powder are produced by three multinational corporations?⁴⁹

In a libertarian society, individuals will have to succeed in freeing themselves from capitalist alienation and commodity fetishism; they will have to abandon the false pleasures of consumption for consumption’s sake in favour of the pleasures of conviviality and creation. The question is how many generations it will take for behaviour to change?

Unless the entire population converts to a Zen philosophy advocating contempt for material goods, which is unlikely, the practical alternative is as follows:

1. Centralised determination of needs along the lines of Soviet planning;
2. Creation of abundance such that there are no restrictions on consumption.

The first case corresponds to a society in which many restrictions are placed on consumption because of shortages, as we have seen in practice.

The second case corresponds to a considerable development of the productive forces allowing such abundance: the risk is that it leads to a waste of resources and social work equivalent to what the “consumer society” produced in its worst moments.

Finally, for the sake of completeness, Marx’s formula (taken from Saint-Simon) stipulates that everyone will contribute to the common wealth

48 Bakounine, “L’instruction intégrale” in *Le Socialisme libertaire*, éd. Denoël, p. 118.

49 Three multinational companies produce 80% of the detergents on the market: Procter & Gamble, Henkel and Unilever.

“according to their capacities”. In other words, everyone receives what they need as long as they contribute what they are capable of... This is not the land of milk and honey: there is a necessary organisation of work in which everyone must take their place. The idyllic vision is that everyone, perfectly aware of the necessities, will spontaneously occupy the ideal place in the distribution of tasks. However, there is every reason to fear that not everyone who is capable of doing so will be rushing to take on the unrewarding or tiring tasks. So the only thing left to do is to reintroduce either compulsory work or “material incentives”, as we used to say in the days of real socialism, or, in the same vein, “communist Saturdays” and other gimmicks.⁵⁰

Transitional period

When Kropotkin defines the principle of “to each according to his needs” as an objective and “to each according to his work” as a means, he clearly raises the question of the transition period. Likewise when he spoke out against terrorist attacks, he explained that a bomb could not overthrow a system that had taken centuries to establish. He was thus introducing the idea that history was a slow evolution: the wage system is a social relationship built up over centuries which cannot be expected to be brought down in one fell swoop. Wage-labour has developed over centuries: it expanded with the industrial revolution but existed long before that. It seems unrealistic to envisage its abolition overnight, although the anarchist movement is said to be radically opposed to the idea of transition. In reality, the idea of a transitional period is very much present among the main anarchist theorists.

Confronted with the reality of the Russian Revolution, Sébastien Faure commented: “It was not, it must be admitted, the immediate and complete realisation of the anarchist ideal, but was it possible to cross in a single leap the abyss which separates bourgeois society from libertarian communist society?”⁵¹

There is also Christiaan Cornelissen, who in 1933 wrote “El comunismo libertario y el régimen de transición” [Libertarian communism and the

50 See Einsfeld’s FAQ:

“How will necessary work be distributed?

“if there is important but unpopular work left to do, a suggestion could be to find enough people who are willing to do this work on rotation. Or, if it’s some kind of cleanup, that needs to be done from time to time, to introduce a community day, in which everyone joins together, getting the work done while making it a fun experience.”

51 Quoted by Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, Gallimard, I, p. 44.

transition regime], which was part of the debates taking place in Spain on the subject at the time. In the preface he writes:

“...a communist civilisation is an organism which evolves as everything in Nature evolves, and it cannot therefore be forgotten that, born of the preceding form of capitalist civilisation, it will bear everywhere, for centuries to come, the traces of its origins. We could not, therefore, describe the fundamental principles of a libertarian communist civilisation without admitting the necessity of the existence of a transitional period, during which the usages and customs of the old capitalist civilisation would still exert a strong influence on all communist institutions.”⁵²

Proudhon’s reflections on the French Revolution are nothing more than a reflection on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which was to influence Bakunin. Similarly, in his *Handbook for Stock market Speculators*, he describes the formation of what he calls “industrial feudalism”, which is to be succeeded by “industrial democracy”: “Between the old feudalism and the revolution, there was, as a transitional regime, despotism. Between the new feudalism and the definitive liquidation we would therefore have an economic concentration, let us put it bluntly, an Industrial Empire.”⁵³

Proudhon and Bakunin knew perfectly well that the transition from monarchy to republic, from a social system still tainted by feudalism to an industrial society, did not happen overnight. Bakunin had given a great deal of thought to the transition, particularly in Germany, from the society of the Middle Ages to that of the modern age. In his view, the French revolution, which began in 1789, did not end until 1830: the intervening period is an undeniable transition.

The examples of transition from one political and social regime to another have so far all been transitions from one regime of exploitation to another. The main objection with Marxism is not based on the idea of transition, but on the “mode of passage” from an exploitative society to a non-exploitative society – an unprecedented phenomenon – which cannot follow the model of transition from one alienated society to another. In 1789, the former ruling class gradually merged with the bourgeoisie, using the institutions put in place by the latter. The slow process of merging

52 <https://mirror.anarhija.net/es.theanarchistlibrary.org/mirror/c/cc/christiaan-cornelissen-comunismo-libertario-y-regimen-de-transicion.c109.pdf>

53 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Manuel du Spéculateur à la Bourse*, Garnier frères, p. 461.

the aristocracy into the bourgeoisie fascinated Bakunin and gave him material to reflect on the process of transition from capitalism to a collectivist society. And precisely, he considers that the social revolution can in no way be achieved following the same model.

There can be no question of using the political institutions of the bourgeoisie to achieve this transition – which Bakunin criticised Marx for doing. It should be borne in mind that Marxism as it appeared at the time, through German social democracy, was nothing other than parliamentary socialism; what worried Bakunin was the institutional framework within which the “Marxians” intended to achieve socialism; he tried to show the practical, even technical, impossibility of parliamentary politics. He advocated organising the proletariat “completely outside the bourgeoisie”, i.e. outside bourgeois political institutions: the state, parliament

The state is not a neutral institution whose bourgeois or proletarian character depends on the party at its head; it is an inherently bourgeois institution or, more generally, an oppressive body. The working class can therefore only succeed in its revolution by creating new institutions, adapted to its nature, such that they guarantee its political and above all social hegemony. Bakunin did not imagine that this could happen overnight:

“The abolition of the State is therefore the political aim of the International, the achievement of which is the precondition or necessary accompaniment of the economic emancipation of the proletariat. But this goal cannot be achieved all at once, for in history, as in the physical world, nothing happens all at once. Even the most sudden, unexpected and radical revolutions have always been prepared by a long process of decomposition and new formation, a process which may be underground or visible, but which is never interrupted and always growing. So for the International, too, it is not a question of destroying all states overnight. To do so, or to dream of it, would be madness.”⁵⁴

“The time when we believed in miracles” is over, adds the Russian revolutionary, meaning “the arbitrary interruption of the natural and fatal course of things, whether in the physical world or in human society, by an occult and absolutely spontaneous power”. In Bakunin’s mind, the transitional period in no way implies an indefinite period during which the masses would have to wait for mythical conditions to be fulfilled, during which they would be excluded from any decision-making power.

54 Bakunin, “Aux compagnons de la fédération jurassienne”, *Champ libre*, III, 75-76.

There are, however, numerous texts by Bakunin in which he vigorously opposes the idea of transition, as for example in a letter to the Brussels newspaper *La Liberté* dated October 1872:

“We do not admit, even as a revolutionary transition, either National Conventions, or Constituent Assemblies, or Provisional Governments, or so-called revolutionary Dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is sincere, honest and real only in the masses, and that when it is concentrated in the hands of a few governing individuals, it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.”

So, paradox? Contradiction? In truth, it is not so much the transition that he opposes as the transition *implemented by state institutions*, be they “national conventions” or “revolutionary dictatorships”. He took a vigorous stance against the principle of transition when it was placed under the “beneficent tutelage exercised, in whatever form, by intelligent and naturally disinterested minorities over the masses”.⁵⁵ To this he opposes “the abolition of all governments, of everything called domination, tutelage and power, including of course the so-called revolutionary and provisional one, which the Jacobins of the International, disciples or non-disciples of Marx, recommend to us as a means of transition absolutely necessary, they claim, to consolidate and organise the victory of the proletariat”.⁵⁶

Bakunin affirms the necessity of refusing all participation in the institutions of bourgeois society, and advocates replacing the class organisation of the bourgeoisie by the class organisation of the proletariat, “the universalisation of the organisation which the International will have given itself”. The class organisation of the bourgeoisie is the state; that of the working class is the International.

A “sudden revolution, unprepared by all the necessary development of the past, and produced solely either by the free will of a few individuals, or even by the collective but arbitrary will of an immense association, would be a real miracle, and therefore an impossibility”.⁵⁷ In the real world, including the human world, “there has never been any creation, there is only necessary transformation”. The International is not, therefore, the “primary cause of the great revolution which is in preparation, which is already taking place in the world; it is its manifestation, the instrument which both produces and is produced. It is the last word in history: arising from the very depths of present social necessities, it is the unailing sign of the

55 Bakunin, Letter to Anselmo Lorenzo, 10 May 1872.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

decomposition of the old world, and the powerful but not arbitrary promoter, and powerful precisely because it is not arbitrary, of a new organisation which has become, by the very force of things and as a result of the fatal development of human society, generally necessary”.⁵⁸

The dissolution of the old world and the formation of the new, says Bakunin, “follow one another”: “The second is a fatal consequence of the first. *The transition between them is called revolution.*”⁵⁹ (Emphasis added.)

Plurality of ideas?

There is both a paradox and an implausibility in Katja’s speech. She tells us that libertarian communism implies the application of the principle of each according to his needs and cannot accept the idea of remuneration for work, but she also tells us that several options are possible, and she affirms the freedom to experiment. But if a substantial part of the population decided to experiment with options that didn’t fit in with anarchist communism as she understands it, what would happen?

Katja writes that “anarchism has always been about the plurality of ideas, a world of many worlds, the possibility of multiple (economic) models and ways of living co-existing next to each other (Nettlau 1909)”. She either says too much or not enough. It’s obvious that freedom of thought and speech is one of the foundations of an anarchist society, and that people should have the freedom to live as they please as long as they don’t piss other people off. But the possibility of establishing “multiple (economic) models” puzzles me. It may be a distortion on my part, but it reminds me of the Zaragoza Congress of the CNT in 1936. Let me explain.

In May 1936 a congress of the Spanish CNT was held in Zaragoza, at a time when the FAI, a communist anarchist organisation, was running the organisation. The programme that triumphed at this congress, with its strong communalist tone, revealed a vision that was not very much in tune with the social reality of the time. This political programme was inspired by the concepts of communal autonomy directly inspired by Kropotkin, and in particular by the *Conquest of Bread*. The resolutions of the Zaragoza Congress expressed ignorance of the economic mechanisms of society and contempt for economic and social reality. In its final report, the congress developed the “confederal concept of libertarian communism”,⁶⁰ based on the model of the plans for the organisation of future society that abounded

58 *Ibid.*

59 Bakunin, Éditions Champ libre, III, p. 76.

60 Concepto Confederal del Comunismo Libertario, <https://www.cnt.es/noticias/concepto-confederal-del-comunismo-libertario/>

in nineteenth-century socialist literature and in the texts of the Kropotkin-inspired theorists of the anarcho-communist current. It is a text in the same vein as Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread*, which its author himself described as a "communist utopia".

The foundation of the future society was to be the free commune. Each commune was autonomous. Those that refused to integrate into industrial society outside the "convivencia colectiva" (collective coexistence) agreements could "choose other forms of communal life, such as those of naturists and nudists, or will have the right to have an autonomous administration outside the general compromise agreements". The report of the Zaragoza Congress could have been written at any time. It was absolutely timeless.

Posing the problem of implementing the revolutionary project in terms of free experimentation inevitably introduces the question of their competition.

If Katja understands the "possibility of multiple (economic) models" in the sense that, people in a neighbourhood organise themselves to grow vegetables and do exchanges, or even trade with other localities or regions, this is simply the application of the principle of freedom of association. But when I read "economic model", I realise that this is macro-economics, and I ask myself: what could be the implementation of "another model" within a libertarian society? At local level, we can imagine people wanting to experiment with particular ways of working or living, but can we really imagine a plurality of approaches to macro-economic issues such as the distribution of electricity, gas, water, etc.?

Katja is right to say that "some people might prefer to be ruled or to live in competitive economies", but there are two problems here, because preferring to be led, or to live in a competitive environment, is not the same thing. It is true that many people have no desire to get involved in a community or to play any role in it; they do the minimum that is required of them and let others take the decisions. Forty years of union experience have shown me that many union members have no desire to get involved in union life and let the activists they elect do the work. It's the same thing in politics. There is no reason to believe that it will be any different in a libertarian society, at least in the beginning. But we can assume that they will gradually become interested in taking part in decisions that affect them directly: it's a process of learning.

As for those who dream of a competitive environment, there is no reason why they should not find one in a libertarian society, provided that competition is transformed into emulation and that it does not apply to the recreation of a capitalist system. It's no longer a question of fighting to get

the promotion the neighbour dreams of, but of getting involved in associative activities that allow people to fulfil their potential.

Will there have to be “competition zones” within the libertarian society for these people to feel comfortable, at the risk of these “competition zones” eventually overflowing and invading everything else? I think there are limits to tolerance...

Comments on Cara Nguyen’s text “The Relationship Between White Supremacy and Capitalism”⁶¹

there is a “racial contract” in the United States that defines capitalism as a system that normalises and encourages racial discrimination, “the exploitation and abuse of Non-white people, especially Black and Indigenous folks.” The market is constructed and operates within a white supremacist society. Nguyen intends to show that capitalism and white supremacy are intimately linked: the domination and exploitation of non-White people is an integral part of the capitalist system because it is built into the structures of the market. “The project of challenging white supremacy, then, is directly tied up in the project of dismantling the capitalist market.”

This is yet another illustration of the current tendency in academic research to mistake the effect for the cause. Nguyen is in line with the “decolonials” who want to “deconstruct European knowledge, which is supposed to be intrinsically the bearer of racist and colonialist logics”.⁶² According to Claudia Bourguignon-Rougier, there is “a European rationality that condemns and destroys other forms of knowledge” and a consensus on the “racist and ethnocentric nature of the West”.⁶³ Capitalism is said to be “intrinsically linked to racism of a colonial nature and to the domination of the West over the global South”: the analysis of capitalism developed by the “decolonialists” is understood above all through the prism of racism or the domination of the countries of the North over the global South, relegating the fundamental opposition between rich and poor to the background and obscuring an empirically observable fact: the existence of dominated classes among “Whites” and dominant classes among “non-Whites”. The refusal to take this fact into account removes any normative value from the “decolonial” approach.

61 https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol4/iss1/6/?utm_source=scholarworks.seattleu.edu%2Fsuurj%2Fvol4%2Fiss1%2F6&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages

62 Collectif, *Critique de la raison décoloniale*, éd. L’Echappée, p. 8.

63 « colonialité du pouvoir » in *Un dictionnaire décolonial*, édition sciences et bien commun, 2021.

Nguyen must probably consider that the world is limited to the United States (and perhaps a little to England), both representing the “White” constellation and racist and colonial capitalism. The problem is that we are no longer in the 19th century and things have moved on a bit: capitalism has spread widely and can no longer be described as specifically “White”. If we take the GDP (2018) of the first ten countries that can be described as “white” and the first ten countries that belong to the “coloured” sphere, the “whites” total 41,297.60 billion dollars while the “coloureds” total 56,081.29 billion dollars.⁶⁴

USA	19 390,60	China	23 300,78
Germany	4 187,58	India	9 453,71
Russia	3 817,20	Japan	5 487,16
France	2 876,06	Brazil	4 659,52
UK	2 856,70	Indonesia	3 242,77
Italy	2 387,36	Mexico	2 360,26
Spain	1 769,64	Turkey	2 141,27
Canada	1 714,45	S. Korea.	1 972,97
Australia	1 192,07	Saud. Arabia	1 771,38
Poland	1 105,94	Iran	1 691,47
Total:	41 297,60	Total:	56 081,29

If we adopt Nguyen's line of reasoning – which I don't – the “non Whites” obviously seem to be much more involved in the capitalist system than the “Whites”: the exploitation and abuse of non White people is no longer the monopoly of the “Whites”. In reality, capitalism as a mode of production and domination has no colour, and the bosses and the shareholders, whatever their colour, get on perfectly well together to exploit the working people, whatever their colour.

By reading Locke, Cara Nguyen concludes that land belongs to the person who cultivates it – a principle which underpins the liberal doctrine, but which could be turned against it if applied rigorously to the owner who does not cultivate his land. It is a question of understanding the root of the “free market” regime.

This principle, which is simply a working hypothesis, in the same way that Rousseau's myth of the “social contract” is a working hypothesis (no one has ever sat down around a table to draw up a “social contract”), could apply to hypothetical “first occupants”, but what about the heirs of these first occupants, the heirs of the heirs, and so on? What legitimacy do the

⁶⁴ Source: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_des_pays_par_PIB_\(PPA\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_des_pays_par_PIB_(PPA))

latter have to “plant, plough, cultivate” etc. land that they have acquired by transmission and that they don’t cultivate themselves?

Private property is said to be based on “racialised” foundations that are linked “to a commercial culture organised around the values of productivity and control of land”. But this principle (Locke, Chapter 5, “Of Property”), according to which every man has a right to private ownership of the land he works, ignores two important facts:

1. How was the first piece of land acquired, legitimising its ownership by its occupant, and how can the hereditary transmission of this land be legitimised if the successor did not acquire it himself?

2. How can a man acquire land when all the land is already occupied otherwise than by theft?

3. And how does Locke justify the fact that in his time in England a small minority of the population was able to monopolise almost all the land, which was “enclosed” and fenced off by large landowners who already owned areas of land that they did not plough, plant or improve themselves?

The massive appropriation of communal land, which belonged to no-one and was made available to villagers, was not done on “racialised” grounds but at the expense of *white* English *proletarians* in the countryside who were not of a different “race” from their exploiters and oppressors. Contrary to some Netflix series that show an 18th-century English high society half made up of people of colour, it is doubtful that Locke wanted to found private property on “racialised” grounds, even if it is true that his theories were *later* used to legitimise the colonisation of North America⁶⁵: But it was not so much because the natives were “coloured people” that they were driven out and exterminated as because they had no concept of private property and no state or army to defend it. The natives could just as well have been “white”, it would not have made any difference – like the “white” British against the “white” Irish for example.

Generally speaking, the history of the status of land ownership in Western Europe from ancient Rome to the present day (on which Proudhon has written extensively) has no “racial” basis, since it all happened between “whites”.

Locke died 68 years before the independence of the United States, at a time when the English colonists occupied only a strip of land to the east of North America and the French a *huge* territory called “New France” stretching from Canada to the Gulf of Louisiana (see map).

As long as “New France” existed, the English colonists, who had already exterminated the Indians in the thirteen colonies, were limited in

65 See: RENAULT, Matthieu, *L’Amérique de John Locke. L’expansion coloniale de la philosophie européenne*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2014



their territorial and exterminatory greed by an agreement with France that forbade them to settle on French territory (there is a very quick scene in the film *The Patriot* where this situation is evoked⁶⁶). What's more, the English colonists were scandalised by the good relations the French had with the Indians and by the sight of Indian tipis inside French forts. It was inconceivable.

The land grab and mass extermination of the indigenous populations only began when France ceded these territories to the English colonists.

But back to Nguyen: she identifies Locke's thoughts and attitude to land with "the sentiments of settler colonizers and capitalists, who believe that land is only seen as valuable as a means of production". There is no doubt that the English settlers who later became Americans considered that land was a means of production and that, as such, it had value, but I do not feel that such an attitude is limited to the settlers of North America or to the capitalist mode of production: I think that the Egyptian peasants under Ramses II also thought that land was a means of production, whatever the status of ownership, which I confess to knowing nothing about.

Nguyen therefore seems to be desperate to transpose Locke's point of view to the context of European settlers in Northern America.

The idea that God could, according to Locke, have given the world to mankind in order to "subdue the earth", to improve and work it, is not precisely the basis of the market: working the land has existed for a very long time in societies characterised by local self-consumption or barter, and it was not until the eleventh century in Western Europe, with the (initially timid) emergence of a monetary economy, that the market finally took hold and capitalism was able to emerge. This phenomenon appeared in Western Europe as a result of an exceptional combination of circumstances, which can be summed up by the fact that the development of the productive forces proceeded more rapidly than the concentration of state power.

There is no doubt that the market existed long before capitalism. And it was certainly not God who ordered man to work the land, but the instinct to survive, when the hunter-gatherer way of life was no longer sufficient to

66 In the passage where they take shelter in a swamp.

ensure the existence of homo sapiens. So it's not just capitalism that considers that without labour, land would "scarcely be worth anything" (Locke 27); it's not just the "free market" that "thrives on the production and consumption of resources", all of these things were established long before capitalism appeared.

Nguyen's vision of the Lakota Sioux is seductive: "to the native American, [land] is the mother of all that lives, the Ur-source of life itself, a living, breathing entity – a person", and seeing the earth as "a provider and a being to be cared for, rather than something to be exploited for production" sounds very much like what a naive-anarchist-agrarian-utopian view of things might be, but at the same time it takes us back to a society whose population remains small, made up of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, as was the case with the populations of the Great Plains that the settlers encountered when they were able to advance westwards.

In fact, we are dealing with the clash of two modes of production, which reproduces what must have happened in Western Europe when sedentary agriculture replaced nomadism. But in the United States it was not just a clash between two modes of production, one industrial and the other non-industrial, but also a conflict between a state society on the one hand, and countless stateless societies in permanent conflict with each other on the other.

Nguyen takes as the starting point for her argument Locke's assumption that land must be cultivated and dominated rather than being something that has "inherent value". But what does it mean that land is something that has "inherent value?" Land that shouldn't be farmed?

From Nguyen's point of view, we have in the United States the stereotype of "Whites" who cultivate the land (who "dominate" it), a land that they appropriated to the detriment of the natives who did not cultivate it and who moved over a territory on which they found their means of subsistence without cultivating it. But this vision is completely mythical. Whether we deal with hunter-gatherers or nomads raising livestock, the land remains a production tool like any other used by humans to ensure their subsistence.

The Amerindians were far from being just nomadic tribes who lived off buffalo hunting, according to the popular image: there were sedentary Amerindian peoples who lived off agriculture, as well as semi-sedentary peoples who lived off occasional farming. Not to mention the pre-Columbian peoples of Central America and the Andes, who lived in highly complex societies and founded extremely centralised states. The problem does not lie in the opposition between whites and "Nonwhites": if the English colonists had found themselves faced with perfectly white natives

but with the same social structures as the natives of North America, it would have made no difference.

Nguyen criticises the capitalist system for not seeing the “inherent value” of land (whatever that means) but for seeing it as something to be used: she’s perfectly right, but when she asks: “Where does this leave the person of colour?” one would get the impression that capitalism was created solely to oppress people of colour, whereas it oppresses and exploits anyone, of any colour, who is not on the right side of the property regime: the absolutely appalling descriptions of the working class condition given by 19th century European writers, Marx and Proudhon in particular, apply to a white population; and the colonists (English to begin with) who occupied North America were undoubtedly for many of them oppressed populations in England who brought this model with them and who first of all exploited the less well-off “Whites” who came with them, before they tried to enslave the Amerindians without succeeding, and it was only afterwards that their need for labour led them to resort to enslaving Africans.

Reason, according to Locke, is the idea around which membership of society is centred: those who are capable of reason are capable of creating a society, a body politic; those who are not are stuck in a state of chaos in which government is “the product only of force and violence”, where “men live together by no other rules but that of beasts” (Locke 7), which is absolutely false: Simple logic, and incidentally the work of anthropologists, has amply demonstrated that so-called “primitive” societies are highly organised societies in which “reason” undeniably reigns, a reason that is certainly not the same as in Europe.

A society according to Reason is a community in which rational men agree to create a “community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not a part of it” (Locke 52) Nguyen says that by transposing these words into the context of the white settlement state, “we can see the distinction that is made between civil society and indigenous societies”. But what Locke says also perfectly applies to the English society of his time, where not everyone, far from it, lived “comfortably, securely and peaceably”, where not everyone enjoyed in security and peace goods that they did not possess. English society according to Reason, from Locke’s viewpoint is a *class society* in which the majority of the population has more or less the same status as the “natives” who lived in “violence, force and absence of rules”.

Let's take a look at Proudhon's description of the conditions of the working masses of his time, referring to a report written by an economist of his time, Eugène Buret.

“These are scenes that the imagination refuses to believe, despite the certificates and reports. Naked husbands and wives, hidden at the back of a bare alcove, with their naked children; whole populations who no longer go to church on Sundays because they are naked; corpses kept for eight days without burial, because there is neither a shroud left to bury the deceased in, nor enough money to pay for the coffin and the undertaker (and the bishop enjoys an income of 4 to 500,000 pounds); families crammed together on sewers, living in rooms with pigs, and seized alive by rot, or living in holes, like albinos; octogenarians lying naked on bare boards; and virgins and prostitutes dying in the same nakedness: everywhere despair, consumption, hunger, hunger! ... and these people, expiating the crimes of their masters, do not revolt! No, by the flames of Nemesis! When the people have no more vengeance, there is no more providence. The mass exterminations of the monopoly have not yet found poets. Our rhymers, strangers to the affairs of this world, without entrails for the proletariat, continue to sigh their melancholy voluptuousness to the moon.”⁶⁷

The English proletariat suffered appalling working conditions in the factories and mines, to the point where state-appointed factory inspectors finally warned the government that the mortality rate among workers, particularly children, was so high that the proletariat would eventually disappear because it was unable to reproduce itself. It would be interesting to compare the degree of oppression suffered by English or French (“white”) proletarians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with that of North American slaves. Anyone who dared to do so would undoubtedly find the Woke galaxy accusing that person of “racism”. Yet profit-hungry capitalists don't look at the colour of the people they exploit: this is simply called *class struggle, or class warfare*, a notion that Nguyen doesn't seem to know anything about.

The “dangerous classes” of Locke's time were the proletarians in the factories in England; and the natives in America, who were “not only incapable of joining civil society”, but who were “by nature directly opposed to it”. What Nguyen sees as pernicious in the American native, she

67 Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques* I, 237.

does not see in the underprivileged strata of English society. She sees the struggle between whites and natives in America but not the class struggle in England. Capitalist society was not created specifically to exploit the natives, it exploits all the dispossessed whatever their colour because it is capitalist. Moreover, in America there was a category of people who could not be said to be “incapable of joining civil society”: they were deliberately and violently *excluded* from it, I mean the slaves.

If we were to look for the ideological references of the first settlers in North America, we would certainly not find them in Locke, but in the Bible. The first English colonists who arrived in North America were fundamentalist Protestants fleeing the Europe of the Enlightenment. In a way, the first arrivals left their mark on the country, which later immigrants (Irish, Italians, etc.) have not completely altered. The heirs of those who accused the Catholic Church of wanting to reintroduce the “Middle Ages” into the American colonies are those who today develop the most obscurantist discourse, that of the first arrivals. Men like televangelist Pat Robertson and his kind think they are prophets in direct line with the good Lord and have nothing to envy to witch-hunters. It’s a global takeover of politics by religion. The problem with American Protestant fundamentalism is that these people are convinced that they have entered into a new ‘Covenant’ with God, similar to that of the ancient Jews with Yaveh.

America was the new Promised Land that God had given to the settlers, and it wasn’t a few natives who were going to stop them from grabbing their land. The English Protestants dealt with the Amerindians in the same way as the Hebrews had dealt with the Amalekites.

God asked Samuel to exterminate the Amalekites, “men and women, children and infants” (Samuel, I, 15, verse 3). In Deuteronomy (20, 13), only the male population was to be put to the sword. In Joshua (6, 21), the population of Jericho was exterminated at the express request of the good Lord, once again: “And they put to the sword all that was in the city, both men and women, young and old, and oxen and sheep and asses”. Again in Joshua (8:24-25), the Israelites killed the male population of the city of Ai (verse 21). But in verse 24, it is the men and women (12,000 in all) who were exterminated. This time, they didn’t kill the animals, they took them away.

Much more than the Catholics, the Protestants referred to a sort of typology based on imitation of the Bible. This typology was taken up by the Americans in their fight for independence. George Washington was the new Moses and the English were the Canaanites. The settlers were the “chosen people” as the Hebrews once were. The American Revolution, which led to that country’s independence, was based on political demands, but these were backed up by religious arguments. The discourse of the American

rebels presented England as a tyranny from which it was necessary to free oneself. But the “tyranny” was not necessarily where you might think. In 1772, a slave who had run away from Virginia and was found in British territorial waters was claimed by his master. Judgment was given in favour of the slave, on the grounds that the possession of one man by another was not recognised by British law. The name of the judge is worth remembering: Lord Chief Justice Mansfield.⁶⁸

Even today, many Americans consider themselves to be the Chosen People. The Bible is not just a religious text that founds a religion, it is a document in which we look for recipes to solve the problems of life today. Whereas most Catholics read the Bible from a rather metaphorical point of view, American evangelicals and most Protestants see it as a reality: the Bible tells the story of life today, and it is in the Bible that we look for solutions to the problems we face. When a Protestant fundamentalist like Pat Robertson declares that feminism “encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practise magic, destroy capitalism and become lesbians”, it’s hardly surprising that, after George Bush’s re-election in 2004, he proclaimed that Bush “has the favour of heaven”. The entire argument used to justify American policy, and in particular its international policy, is based on religious references.

It was the same ideology that animated the first American settlers, much more than Locke’s theses.

Having made these observations, European capitalist society needed, as Bakunin showed, to find a “moral sanction” to justify its policy of domination: “This sanction must be so obvious and simple that it can convince the masses who, after having been reduced by the force of the State, must now be brought to the moral recognition of its right.”⁶⁹ This is how colonial power needs to infantilize the natives, who are considered incapable of thinking for themselves, in order to justify its economic domination. But it cannot be denied that it is the nature of all powers to infantilize their subjects, *whatever their colour*, in order to perpetuate their

68 Although slavery was not officially abolished by Great Britain until 1833-1840, the trend towards abolition had already been evident long before, under the influence of figures such as William Murray (1706-1793), 1st earl of Mansfield. Murray did not “abolish” slavery on his own; however, his judgement in the case of James Somerset, who was bought in Virginia but managed to escape to London, established that a fugitive slave who arrived on English soil could not be returned to his owner: “as soon as any slave sets foot upon English territory, he becomes free”. (This decision did not include the colonies, however.) One wonders whether the participants in the Tea Party, which took place a year after the Somerset judgment, were only protesting against the taxes imposed by the British...

69 Bakunin, *L’Empire knouto-germanique*, Oeuvres, Champ libre, VIII 142.

domination. Nguyen sticks to a teleological vision: free market capitalism and white supremacy have “simultaneous and connected structures”; she attributes to capitalism the objective of oppressing “non-white” people who have “no stake in the market as it exists in its white supremacist global context”.

A statement that seems to me to be perfectly fanciful insofar as it suggests that the market does not oppress or exploit those white people who also have no stake in it because they do not have the purchasing power to “participate” in it. So we’re not dealing with poor people, white or otherwise, who don’t have access to the market; there are white people who do have access and “non-whites” who don’t. This is absurd.

The shared structures of “free market capitalism” and white supremacy would not only have “dehumanised non-White people”, they would have led to them being cheated and exploited in the marketplace. It would be interesting to know how a poor “non-white” would be more affected by his difficulties in accessing the market than a poor white person. Here again we have the implicit idea that all whites are privileged, if not exploiters.

Nguyen then refers to Brown’s theory, according to which economic value is the main indicator of human value in capitalism, which would agree with Bunge, who states that “everyone is deemed as worthless if they are not actively working towards creating value, whether that be through external production or internal transformation”. Referring again to Bunge, Nguyen adds that once land has lost its meaning, so have humans. Here again we have total confusion: it can be said that from the earliest times, in all economic societies where there is a minimum division of labour, where people have to work to live, “everyone is considered useless if they do not work actively to create value”.

There is no denying that the white man has the “tools to debilitate the non White person”, but this is an outrageous generalisation. *Which* “white man” are we talking about? Are all white men destined to “devalue non White communities”? Is there a group representing all the “white men” on the planet (or in the United States, since that’s what Nguyen is interested in) who would devote themselves to devaluing non-white communities? Do *all* white men have “the ability to produce, sell, market, and invest”? And if not, who are these “white men”? Are nonwhites the only ones who are “untouched and undeveloped by European values” and who “cannot properly contribute to society”? Are there not, on the fringes of market society, on the margins of capitalist society, in the United States itself, countless people whom Nguyen describes as “white” and who live in such a state of decay that they contribute nothing to society?

In truth, Nguyen's caricatural essentialisation of "whites" and "non-whites" deprives her article of any normative value. What's more, by remaining in a situation of extreme generality, *without ever providing the slightest demonstration*, she delivers an exercise in preconceived ideas that is not at all convincing.

There is obviously no doubt that while the history of capitalism has been marked by the exploitation and oppression of innumerable masses of "white" proletarians and peasants, it has also been marked by the exploitation and oppression of innumerable masses of people of colour, whether through plunder, slavery or colonialism, which constituted one of the bases of the primitive accumulation of capital:

It is the duty of Europeans and Euro-descendants to develop an uncompromising critique of these tragic periods of history and to denounce the system that provoked these tragedies; however, it seems perfectly absurd to essentialise "whites" by putting them absolutely all on the side of the oppressors, in the same way as it is absurd to deny that there are also exploiters and oppressors among "non-whites".

The incredible mistake of Nguyen's argument lies in the fact that, reading her, you get the impression that capitalism was created by "Whites" only to oppress "non Whites". Capitalism can only be overthrown and replaced by an emancipated society through the joint struggle of all the exploited and oppressed, whatever their colour, against all exploiters and oppressors, whatever their colour.

The "decolonial" vision considers European knowledge to be intrinsically the bearer of racist and colonial logics. European rationality would destroy other forms of knowledge, relegating non-Western forms of life to non-existence. Modernity and capitalism are thus intrinsically linked to colonial racism and Western domination of the global South. The West is seen as the source of all evil. The "decolonials" see Europe and the West as monolithic entities, endowed with a permanent identity throughout the centuries, and which at all times and in all places reproduce the same racist and colonial logic. From the opposition between the West and the rest of the world stems "a simplistic reading of history and socio-political power relations in the contemporary world, which the decolonials ultimately reduce to a struggle between the good guys and the bad guys".⁷⁰ The "decolonials" thus proceed to an "inversion of ethnocentrism of European origin", in reaction against the economicism of orthodox Marxism; they "attribute to imaginary discourses, to representations, the role of driving

70 *Critique de la raison décoloniale, Sur une contre-révolution intellectuelle*, Collectif, éd. L'Echappée, p.14.

forces in history.” They essentialize and idealize indigenous cultures and non-white peoples, and place the opposition between rich and poor in the background. In truth, decolonial ideas “are far from unanimous in Latin America: a whole section of the left and extreme left feel that they produce pernicious effects that disarm and weaken emancipation struggles”.⁷¹

For Franz Fanon,⁷² “the oppression experienced by the ‘Blacks’ as links in a global chain of accumulation – legitimized but not caused by racism – can only be fought within the framework of the struggle against the social injustice that flows from the bodily and concrete experience of the exploited subject.”⁷³

Nguyen's argument, designed to demonstrate the evil nature of white people, is not very conclusive. Megan Tinsley, from the University of Manchester, is far more convincing. She shows that “whiteness”, first referred to in a playwright by Thomas Middleton in 1613, was clearly intended not only to dominate but also to *divide the oppressed*, regardless of their colour – an approach that Nguyen evades.

“Ever since the 17th century, people across the world – from the Dominican Republic and Morocco to India and New Zealand – have been variously granted or denied rights on the basis of being deemed white or non-white. Whiteness thus has consistently entailed opposition, power and subjugation.”⁷⁴

In 17th-century Barbados, labour codes referred to indentured Europeans as “whites” and gave them more rights than African slaves, so that “the two groups would not unite in rebellion against wealthy planters”. The same was true of Jamaica and South Carolina.

“Crucially, it hinged on the fact that enslaved Black people had no legally recognised rights, whereas European-born

71 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

72 Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was a French Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, political philosopher, and Marxist from the French colony of Martinique (today a French department). His works have become influential in the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory, and Marxism. As well as being an intellectual, Fanon was a political radical, Pan-Africanist, and Marxist humanist concerned with the psychopathology of colonization and the human, social, and cultural consequences of decolonization. [Wikipedia]

73 *Ibid.*, p.21.

74 Meghan Tinsley, “Whiteness is an invented concept that has been used as a tool of oppression”,

<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/clippings/the-conversation-whiteness-is-an-invented-concept-that-has-been-u>

white servants did. Slave status was for life, without recourse, and heritable.”⁷⁵

The division between slaves and indentured servants was echoed in the 20th century when “whiteness” was used to pit the working classes against each other. Megan Tinsley quotes a US historian, Noel Ignatiev, who studied Irish immigration in the 19th century. In *How the Irish became White*⁷⁶, he shows “how these working-class newcomers emphasised their distance from Black labourers, thereby laying claim to whiteness.”

“As a radical socialist, he questions why they effectively sided with the oppressor (white Americans), rather than with the oppressed (Black enslaved people). ‘Imagine how history might have been different had the Irish, the unskilled labour force of the north, and the slaves, the unskilled labour force of the South, been unified. I hoped that understanding why that didn’t happen in the past might open up new possibilities next time’, he later explained.”⁷⁷

While Cara Nguyen is obviously right to denounce the role played by Europe in colonial expansion and the horrors that were its result, the mistake she makes, which reduces the value of her discourse, is to essentialize “whites”, as if they were a homogeneous whole, as if they were all responsible. It is true that the populations of the colonising countries have partly benefited from the effects of colonisation, one might say by “trickling down”; it is also true that elements of the dominated strata of the colonising countries have played the role of agents carrying out the dirty work of the colonisers. But it is a simplistic view to hold “whites” as a whole responsible – a view that ignores the fact that the claim to “whiteness” has been a tool used by the dominant classes to divide the exploited.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ New York, Routledge, 1995.

⁷⁷ In “Noel Ignatiev’s Long Fight Against Whiteness” by Joy Caspian Kong (November 15, 2019). Quoted by Megan Tinsley, *loc. Cit.* Ignatiev’s point of view, although politically and morally correct, is in my view the result of an extreme sociological candour which denies the importance of the representations that social strata make of themselves and who reject the idea of identifying with other strata deemed “inferior”. It is this attitude that makes many office workers refuse to see themselves as “proletarians”. According to Ignatiev, whiteness is not a biological fact but rather a social construction with boundaries that shifted over time.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my text I wrote that I often had the impression that “there is no continuity of thought in the anarchist movement and that each new generation is obliged to reinvent everything”. This impression is particularly true with chapter 5.3. Structural Requirements and the Proposed Mode of Organization and 5.4 Localized and Functional Decentralization of Planning.

The problems Katja raises have already been raised in theory by Pierre Besnard and in practice by Gaston Leval, for the most part.

Besnard’s book, *Les syndicats ouvriers et la révolution sociale* (The workers’ unions and the social revolution), published in 1931, had a great influence on the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists and played a decisive role in their decision to create industrial federations, which in turn played a decisive role in the ability of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism to regain control of the economy in areas that the fascists did not control. Besnard’s book puts into perspective the role of workers’ unions in an international context of rising fascism: it is a programmatic work that develops a number of transitional demands aimed at mobilizing workers in the period of global crisis that was to lead to the Spanish Civil War and World War II. An essential principle addressed in the book is that the establishment of a socialist society (libertarian, obviously) cannot be achieved without the producers being *previously* organized in their class organization *as producers*, on the basis of their role in the production process: vertically in industry federations, horizontally in local, regional federations, etc. Whether such an organization is called a “union” or otherwise is of no importance whatsoever. From Besnard’s point of view, and that of anarcho-syndicalists in general, it is obvious that a libertarian society will be implemented by an organisation that *pre-exists* the revolution, which does not seem to be the case for Katja.

Gaston Leval, for his part, lived through the Spanish revolution from the inside and brought back a large number of files, reports and documents, on the basis of which he wrote a book (published in 1971) recounting the entire collectivisation movement in Spain, in agriculture, industry, transport, medicine, etc.

Capitalist society has changed enormously since Besnard’s book was published, and it needs a serious updating by integrating into the decision-making process everything that information technology can bring, which Katja shows perfectly. What we need to remember about this book, despite

its somewhat exaggerated concern for precision,⁷⁸ is that it is necessary to reflect today on the forms of organisation of tomorrow's society and on the need for planning – the subtitle of the book is “Should we draw up the constructive plan of the world revolution?”.

Concerning Leval's book, what should be retained is that it provides us in great detail with concrete examples of libertarian organisation at a macro-economic level from which it would be foolish not to draw inspiration when thinking about tomorrow's society, rather than from purely theoretical developments.

Since the materials we need for our survival are not available in infinite quantities, the need to plan production and distribution seems obvious, and choices have to be made and priorities established. Clearly, this simple observation puts into considerable perspective the idea that we can consume according to our needs, if by this we mean unreasonable consumption. Introducing this perfectly subjective element into economic reasoning disqualifies it and deprives it of any normative value.

Christain Cornelissen writes that natural riches being in limited quantities, “every producer is constantly taking, by the very fact of production, elements from a common treasure – elements that cannot be used at the same time for any other production or for any other direct consumption. This is all the more important as the riches in question are less abundant and for this reason more sought after”.⁷⁹

The idea of planning stems directly from the finite nature of the resources available and the need to make choices about how these resources are allocated, which implies the establishment of statistical forecasts, stock management, etc. and, whether we like it or not, the setting up of a standard to guarantee an equilibrium in the exchanges that will be made at the level of workplaces. Whether this standard is purely abstract, digital if you like, or in the form of “vouchers” is of little importance. Already today, an enormous mass of exchanges are not made in money.

One of the criticisms I would make of Einsfeld's text is that she clings to her opposition to vouchers when, empirically, the only example of the application of a libertarian macroeconomy over several years has found no other means than work vouchers, as a transitional means. This is a fact that deserves at least some thought in the search for a better solution. Katja forgets that Kropotkin said that “collectivism” was the transitional means towards anarchist communism. It seems obvious to me that the transition

78 Besnard, who was a railway worker, was accused by some activists of the time of having a “stationmaster's vision”.

79 Christian Cornelissen, *Théorie de la valeur*, éd Marcel Gard, 1926, p. 158:

from one secular social system to another cannot be made overnight. It will be up to the people who implement this transition to resolve the problems, the scale of which we have no idea today. It would be more modest of us to consider that we do not have to give lessons to future generations.

Katja Einsfeld's criticisms of the market are entirely legitimate, but unfortunately her analyses of this concept are insufficiently developed, insofar as she fails to convey the enormous complexity of this phenomenon, and insofar as she seems to limit the market to the function of making everyday consumer goods accessible, whereas its questionable character lies mainly in the fact that it makes production tools accessible, which enables the accumulation of capital.

Finally, any reflection on the market remains secondary if we do not examine *what it is ultimately only a symptom of*: value, a concept of which thousands of pages published in hundreds of books have not managed to penetrate the mystery, which leads me to think that it is simply a convention that only works because people believe in it.⁸⁰ The socialist movement is based on the idea of labour value, which may be just another convention. On this question, I will stick to Proudhon's point of view, who thought that we had to wait until science would probably one day make it possible to unravel this mystery. For Proudhon, let us remember, the problem is not to *abolish* value but to *constitute* it: as long as labour has not been truly socialised and the definition of value has not been found, political economy will be "the theory of unhappiness and the organisation of misery": "It is therefore important to resume the study of economic facts and routines, to extract the spirit from them and to formulate their philosophy."⁸¹

80 See "About the Abolition of the Law of Value", <https://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article1015>

81 Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions économiques*.

This is not the place to develop Christian Cornelissen's critique of labour-value, which challenges both liberal and Marxist theory, and which could be seen as a continuation of Proudhon's theory.

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