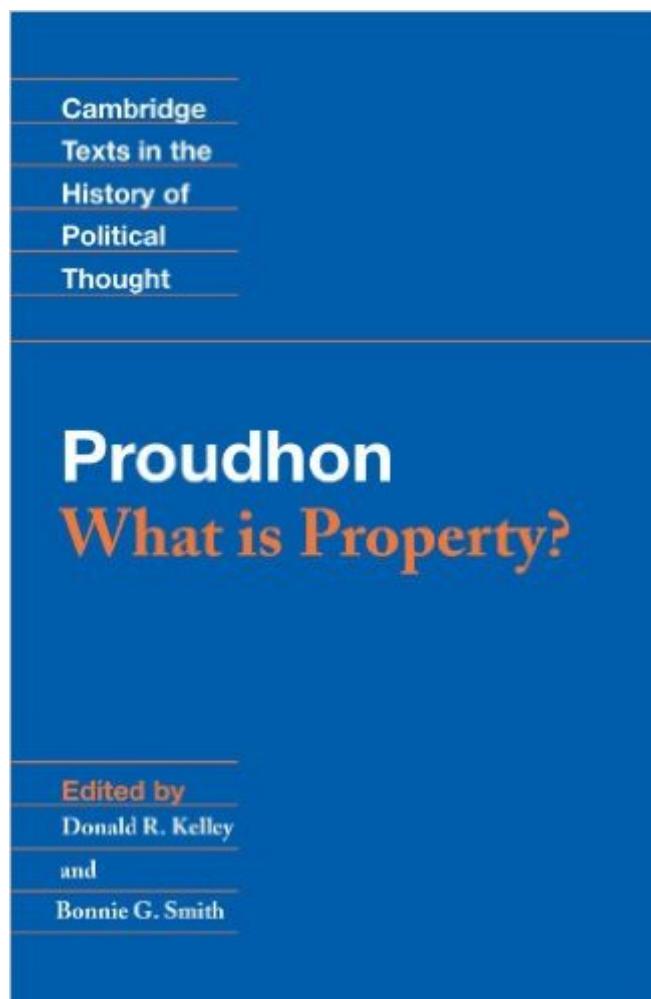


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# Proudhon: What Is Property? (Cambridge Texts In The History Of Political Thought)



## Synopsis

This is a new translation of one of the classics of the traditions of anarchism and socialism. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was a contemporary of Marx and one of the most acute, influential, and subversive critics of modern French and European society. *What is Property?* (1840) has become a classic of political thought through its wide-ranging and deep-reaching critique of private property as at once the essential institution of Western culture and the root cause of greed, corruption, political tyranny, social division, and violation of natural law.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Note: The previous reviewer is a known troll on various political discussion boards; he has developed a rabid hatred towards Anarchist ideology, so, if I were a customer considering this book, I would take his review with a grain of salt - it's full of very personal venom. For instance, to put Proudhon and Marx in the same category is blatant proof of the reviewer's prejudices; clearly, he has either not read the text or he is purposefully misrepresenting it. Proudhon would never have supported the authoritarianism espoused by Marx or any of his contemporaries and successors. Proudhon's discourse on property is a great thing to pit against the theories of Hobbes, Locke, and others. He examines property both as a natural right and as one derived from labor, attempting to prove both as false. Whether or not he successfully does so is up to the reader. This is a great book for people interested in political thought and social theory; regardless of whether or not

you are a staunch capitalist or socialist, this book will either give you something to think about. For strong supporters of property, it may help solidify your beliefs while you read it with critical analysis. For opponents of property, it may give you support in your beliefs, or re-affirm that which you already feel. This book is recommended to any and all interested in the history of modern political thought; you just can't review literature as an ideologue, as the previous reviewer has shamefully done.

If all you know about Proudhon is that he said "property is theft," then this is the place to start learning the rest. If that is all you want to know, then skip it; you will be frustrated and disappointed. Proudhon makes a series of analyses of property theories as they existed in his era. He finds them wanting in consistency, so that they turn on themselves (basing "property," paradoxically, in what any consistent application of that very theory would consider "theft") or simply fail to deal with the complexities of even 19th century production (leading to the conclusion that property, using other standards, is "impossible.") The First Memoir ends with an early attempt by Proudhon to establish a dialectical balance between the aims of the early capitalists and early socialists, positing a form of liberty in the counterbalance of "communism and property." Proudhon's thought developed considerably after this early work, but he never abandoned the basic terms of the analysis, even when he came, towards the end of his life, to the conclusion that some form of property was necessary to preserve freedom.

The title is perhaps one of the most famous rhetorical questions ever, and should be placed historically in the same range as "Quo usque tandem, Catilina" etc. Proudhon sets himself the task of analyzing the foundations of modern society, and inevitably is drawn towards a critique of the modern political economy, as was popular in the 19th century. Just like Locke, he then "reverse engineers" the economic relations to find their basis in private property, but quite unlike Locke he brilliantly argues why this is in fact an evil thing and not a force for good, as Locke thought. Working from the hypothetical "state of nature", he shows how possession during use is a natural phenomenon, but a permanent property claim over something that was once part of nature is a later invention, and has since caused all strife and misery that competition over scarce goods is wont to do. As a critique of modern society, this work deserves reading by everyone, regardless of whether you approve of current economic structures or not. The only downside to the book is Proudhon's rather messy attempt to offer an additional immanent critique of capitalism, which only leads the reader to conclude economic ignorance. That is a pity, for the question itself is not only worth

asking, but of the various historical answers given this is one of the best argued and most radical. Notable is Proudhon's influence on Marx and their subsequent falling out over Proudhon's idealism, as seen in his later work "The Philosophy of Poverty" and Marx's reply "The Poverty of Philosophy".

Proudhon writes with a flair that captivates the reader and thrusts him into the revolutionary spirit. Fans of Michael Bakunin and Rudolf Rocker will love this work. One of the best reads on early anarchist thought. If you are anti-property you will love this book!

This is one of the greatest books ever written and is absolutely critical reading for anyone hoping to develop and understanding of private property (as opposed to personal property) and its commanding role in contemporary society. I really can't recommend it highly enough.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) was a French politician, mutualist philosopher and socialist, as well as the first person to call himself an "anarchist". He stated in the Preface to this book (which was first published in 1840), "I acknowledge that... the mind may legitimately hesitate about abolishing property... it is necessary to show how the new system will satisfy all the moral and political needs which led to the establishment of the first... However, if a single man may not be able to finish this enterprise, one may be enough to begin it." He begins with his famous slogan, "Property is theft!", adding that "This is the battle-cry of '93, the signal for revolutions!" (Pg. 13) Either society must perish, or it must destroy property. (Pg. 43) He asserts, "Who is entitled to the rent of the land? The producer of the land, no doubt. But who made the land? God. Therefore, proprietor, retire." (Pg. 71) The fact of "universal consent" does NOT justify property. (Pg. 74) He argues in favor of the equality of wages (pg. 99), suggesting that "Give men liberty... and you will see the most perfect equality prevailing in their exchanges without consideration for superiority of talent and knowledge." (Pg. 104) By contrast, property, "after having robbed the labourer by usury, murders him slowly by starvation." (Pg. 140) He considers communism to be "the first term of social development." But as such a society develops, communism becomes "the first kind of slavery." (Pg. 195) He describes himself as an "anarchist" (Pg. 205), and Anarchy as "the absence of a master, or a sovereign." (Pg. 209) The goal, or "third form" of society---"the synthesis of communism and property, we shall call LIBERTY." (Pg. 212) Proudhon's works are of definite interest to students of Anarchism, political philosophy, or to modern libertarians.

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