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Which theories do we call sociological theories? Those that share this premise: from the meeting of individual units there results an original reality, something greater than and different to their mere sum.

Arguably no thinker has made greater use of this premise than Proudhon. Properly sociological theories are truly the centre of his system. It is worth identifying them in order to better understand his attitude, which is so often difficult to classify in relation to different philosophical tendencies.

Until now, this approach does not appear to have attracted commentators, who no doubt saw, to a greater or lesser extent, the great difficulties that it presents. One antithesis in particular has stood in their way: the classic opposition between the premise of sociology and the affirmation of individualism. Is it not commonly believed that the latter implies an “atomist” or at least “nominalist” social philosophy, the idea that the only realities to be taken into account are the distinct individuals? Who most strongly affirmed the superior value of the individual? Was it not Proudhon, the father of anarchy himself? Let us recall in any case his diatribes against communism, inspired by the desire to defend “the free, active, rea-

soning, unsubmitive personality of man¹. Proudhon wants equality, but on the condition that it is the natural product of liberty. “O Liberty, charm of my existence! Without you work is torture and life is prolonged death².” He himself recalls that he remains a man of liberty and individuality above all³. Louis Blanc accused him of pushing this belief to the point of frenzy, and therefore of placing himself “completely outside the movement of this century⁴”. Conversely, Proudhon accused Louis Blanc of “contradicting the manifest tendencies of civilisation”: its wish is not to subordinate the private person to the public person, but on the contrary for every human soul to become “a pattern of humanity as a whole⁵”. With such intense personalist feelings, how can social realism in any form be logically compatible?

Whether or not the two tendencies are logically compatible, one thing is sure in the meantime: they coexist in Proudhon’s work. Just as fiercely as he affirms the value of the individual, Proudhon insists on the reality of the social being. The arguments he uses to demonstrate this are, in his eyes, among his greatest intellectual accomplishments. In his *Theory of Property*⁶, when he assesses the sixteen “very positive” demonstrations he leaves to the world despite being called a “demolisher”, does he not cite in the first line a theory of collective force, a “metaphysics of the group”, to which he relates his theory of nationalities and his theory of the division of powers? He hoped to clarify these theories in a book he promised many times; but he had already sketched its broad outlines on more than one occasion. The fourth and seventh studies of *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* devote a large amount of space to the notions of collective power and reason. *The System of Economic Contradictions* indicates the needs and powers specific to Prometheus; that is, to society considered as a unique being⁷. But above all, as early as his first memoir on property, Proudhon exploits the distinction between the collective force and the sum of the individual forces; he would go so far as to declare that this distinction is the cornerstone of his thought. What this means is

that the sociological concern is present throughout his work from start to finish.

In order to conveniently summarise and classify the theories put forward, and recalling how Proudhon passes from each term to the next, we will discuss *collective force*, *collective being*, and *collective reason* in turn⁸.

The collective force is greater than the sum of the individual forces. When such forces combine, a surplus of energy emerges that is not the product of any of the individual forces, but of their association. A very simple thought experiment suffices to demonstrate this. Two hundred grenadiers, under the direction of an engineer, stood the obelisk of Luxor upon its base in a few hours⁹: should we suppose that one man could have accomplished the same task in two hundred days? Here is a ditch to be dug: a hundred workers, divided into squads to spread the work – diggers, loaders, carriers and fillers – spend one day on the task. A single worker in charge of all these tasks would spend much longer than one hundred days! This is proof that the union and harmony of labourers, the convergence and simultaneousness of their efforts, are creators of value¹⁰.

This observation was one of Proudhon's key arguments in his attack against property in the first period of his life. He would denounce the individual appropriation of the fruits of common labour as a particular kind of theft. You might argue that the capitalist reaps his profits legitimately: has he not paid the *daily wages* of the workers he employs? Say he has paid as many times *one day's wage* as he has employed workers each day: it is not the same thing¹¹. The employer monopolises the value that results from the cooperation of workers, "different in quality from the forces that compose it and superior to their sum", at no cost. Say's axiom, "every product is worth what it costs"¹², is therefore violated here. Between

masters and workers, an “accounting error” is revealed¹³. Generalising this, we would realise that since all production is necessarily collective, all accumulated capital is social property: it is *impossible*, as Proudhon liked to say, for anyone to have exclusive ownership of it.

Here we recognise similar arguments to those used by Karl Marx in the first part of *Capital*. In order to oppose the private nature of appropriation in the capitalist regime with the social character of production, he too shows the “collective Briareus” at work: when this Briareus applies itself to building a house, do its hundred hands not move the stones much faster than the hands of isolated workers going up and down the scaffolding? When “simple” cooperation becomes “complex”, hard work is broken down, and the movement of machines involves and coordinates the actions of more and more people, it becomes increasingly apparent that the value created is not the work of, and therefore should not belong to, any particular person: it emerges from groups¹⁴.

Should we say that Karl Marx borrowed the core of this argument from Proudhon? We know how much the young Marx in Paris admired the brilliant typesetter, who seemed to give the “conscious” proletariat life and voice¹⁵. In particular, we recall the esteem the writer of *The Holy Family* had for *What is Property?*, which he compared to Siéyès’ *What is the Third Estate?* in marking a watershed moment in the history of classes. It would be little wonder if the distinction between collective and individual force passed from this famous memoir to *Capital*. But it must be admitted that this distinction could have reached Marx’s mind by other paths. “Quantitative changes, when they reach a certain degree, lead to qualitative changes”: this was one of Hegel’s favourite principles. Was it not this principle that drew the attention of his socialist disciples to the new facts that arise when a certain number of individual units are grouped together? The way Engels explains these facts in *Anti-Dühring* suggests this is the case¹⁶. No doubt what occurred

by the rational bond of equal exchange. In this sense, if we want to refer to the doctrines that claim to respect and enforce the equal freedom of all individuals as individualistic, we are right to continue saying that Proudhon's dominant tendency remains individualistic. His originality lies in putting to work, to the glory of the individualistic ideas thus understood, the very sociological spirit that for a long time seemed only to discredit them.

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in Marx's brain, as had happened so many times, was a synthesis of the two traditions, German and French.

The fact remains that Proudhon was the first to introduce this theory of collective force¹⁷: he was the first to clearly note, along with the economic principle linked to the phenomenon he observed, the different sociological consequences that derive from it. One of the men of whom Proudhon willingly proclaims himself a disciple is Adam Smith. It was first through political economy – the science that right away offered “the highest degree of positivism”, the key to history, the theory of order, the creator's last word – that the young prophet of *The Creation of Order in Humanity* wanted to renew philosophy¹⁸. It is in *The Wealth of Nations* that he claims to have found the seed of his theory of collective force. Man is the working animal par excellence. “This one word, Work, therefore contains a whole order of knowledge.” Adam Smith recognised this, not only showing that work in general is the source of all exchange value, but that the division of labour in particular is the source of all progress in production. But the collective force is nothing but a consequence of the division of labour, a precondition of fruitful cooperation and “commutations”¹⁹. Germain Garnier had pointed this out in passing; all Proudhon had to do was develop this remark in order to draw out all the “organic applications” of Smith's theory. On this point and on many others, it can be shown that the socialist doctrines are first and foremost the bold heirs of orthodox political economy.

In the way in which Proudhon used his legacy we can recognise, besides Smith's influence, that of another master, whom Proudhon admits less willingly but whose inventions were nevertheless always present in his thought: his fellow Franc-Comtois, Charles Fourier. Just as Marx remained unwillingly influenced by Hegelianism, Proudhon remained unwillingly influenced by Fourierism. The vocabulary of *The New Industrial World* – administrations, pivots, households, etc. – would appear until

his final works. But above all, for a long time the concept of *series* would remain his obsession and his supreme hope. It is this concept that he relies on in *The Creation of Order* to renew logic and bring order to the chaos of science. He would not fail to combine it with the concept of the division of labour, which he borrowed from economic science. When we say *series*, we are referring to specified groupings and coordinated units, among other things. But are specified groupings of coordinated units not precisely the natural fruits of the division of labour? This is why Proudhon wrote²⁰ that the division of labour was the series revealing itself before our eyes, “embodying itself in society”. The concept of series thus conforms to that of work in two aspects: that of nature and that of society. Human work can be defined as an effort to superimpose artificial series on natural series in bodies, or to replace natural series with artificial series²¹: it changes the relations between elements, thus creating new forms. But in order to achieve this transformation of the world, it is still necessary for people to organise their activities themselves according to certain relations. They thus form social series which are substrates of the collective force.

Let us note that while Proudhon generalised the economists’ observations in this way, he would not go so far as to adopt the assertion that many, including the socialist reformers of his time, contented themselves with: “The association is creative.” To him, such phrases seemed vague and laden with mysticism. On this point, he clearly separates himself from Fourier, as well as from Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc. In *The General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century*, he fiercely criticises the social principle²². This is because he sees it both as a synthesis of confused ideas and as a threat to individual freedom. “Association, presented as a universal institution, the principle, means and end of the Revolution, appears to me to hide a secret intention of exploitation and despotism.” In fact, association in itself has no organic or productive virtue: it would be foolish indeed to subdue individual initiative and leave the field

machines. He is, it seems, even more afraid of the abuse of authority than of the excess of inequality. To save civilisation, he relies solely on the virtue of equitable contracts. Individuals will finally decide to measure the value of the products they exchange by the amount of labour they have incorporated into it.

This solution has only one flaw: it presupposes among the contracting parties the firm commitment to be just, the resolve not to abuse a privileged situation, the desire for equality. The whole edifice built by the powerful accountant’s imagination that lived inside Proudhon is ruined in advance if the individual favours themselves over others, and does not effectively recognise their equal dignity. More than once Proudhon sensed this. And it is no doubt because he sensed it that he does not remain an individualist pure and simple. He seeks an authority to provide a basis for the precept he needs. He tries to prove that his desire for equality is necessitated by the very nature of the collective being, by its progress, by the consciousness that it gains of the conditions for its balance. To discipline individual reasons, the so-called father of anarchism appeals to the prestige of collective reason.

But in thus lending life and reason to the collectivity, he takes great care not to make it oppress and absorb individuals. He finds a way to justify his defiance of the State through the manner in which society is realised. It is economic society that he personifies; that is, precisely the society that presupposes exchange, commerce, contract, all the free play of individual activities. Similarly, it is not from the elimination of personal reasons, but from their antagonistic affirmation that he derives the system of impersonal reason. It is only when it comes to putting active feelings at the service of this reason that Proudhon, no doubt informed by his own experience, sees the value of the fusion of souls. He thus praises the miracle of the family. But it should be noted that in no way does he want citizens, composed of families, to work towards establishing a public order conceived in their image. He wants to leave them face to face, confronting their claims, measuring their rights, united solely

From this point of view, we discover that the woman in marriage – the wife, the mother – is the most precious auxiliary of right itself. “Man holds onto society by woman, neither more nor less than the child holds onto the mother by the umbilical cord⁹⁶.” The family spirit paves the way for the civic spirit. This small group, which the citizen must support, in turn supports them, contains them, exalts their honour, restrains their pride. Being single implies being unsociable, “uncontrollable”, “unreachable”. If family ties, so strong but yet so soft, were to break down, we would then see “with indomitable violence, the contradiction between the individual and the society⁹⁷” break out. Society persists through the subordination of all human forces and faculties, individual and collective, to justice. The family naturally prepares this subordination. Domestic discipline is the best school we can imagine for contractual solidarity. The ideal that collective reason reveals from the confrontation of individual reasons cannot become a reality unless the feelings of individuals have first received social guidance within families, groups especially favourable to moral education. Ultimately, once again, the fruits of reflection presuppose the fruits of spontaneity.

These brief summaries provide a glimpse of the complexity of what may be called the sociology of Proudhon, in which one can sense a wide variety of intersecting influences. Proudhon as a sociologist sometimes reminds us of A. Smith, sometimes de Bonald, occasionally Rousseau, most often Saint-Simon. But in the series of systems that pave the way for sociological investigations, his sociology occupies a unique place, undoubtedly determined by the very nature of the tendencies that he wants to satisfy above all.

Proudhon remains faithful to the passion for equality that his first life experiences instilled in the depths of his heart, but he is a liberal egalitarian. He reacts against so many utopias which he saw built and which all more or less tended to turn people into

wide open to this problematic and suspicious power. But carefully consider the mechanism of the division of labour. Here, the workers remain autonomous, and each of them deploys all their energy: however, from their concerted energies²³, we see the birth of a surplus of power whose benefits are to be shared among them equally. Why look further for the secret of the effects of collectivity? On the strength of this economistic analysis, Proudhon mocks the sociocrats’ attempts to explain the superior return that labour yields when it is organised in association. They invoke imitative competition, mutual stimulation, pleasure arising from grouping by natural affinities, etc. From these psycho-sociological explanations, Marx would perhaps retain or rediscover something: Proudhon does not want to keep anything from it. The forces shown at work here are not, in his view, industrial forces. All of these fanciful theories are nothing but the “mystical and apocalyptic” expression of facts discovered in industrial practice²⁴. Read Adam Smith again, and you will have the key to your puzzles; you will suddenly be brought back from mysticism to positivism.

But if Proudhon wants us to stick to the analyses introduced by the economists in order to explain the genesis of this collective force, he at least extends the field of application of this force well beyond the circle of political economy proper. It is not only in a workshop, but in an army, an orchestra, or an academy that he sees the constitution of “the synthetic power [...] unique to the group, superior in quality and energy to the sum of the elementary forces of which it is composed”. Elsewhere he observes that what he says about the division of labour in industry can be repeated about the division of powers in politics. It is therefore not only by its sensory effects that the force indicated by G. Garnier is revealed. It is capable of producing something other than a surplus of monetary wealth. The intellectual world, like the material world, is subject to its law. In the very realm of intangible things, it remains queen.

In expanding the theory of the division of labour in this way, Proudhon, one imagines, would naturally encounter the clichés that the philosophy of solidarity has reintroduced nowadays.

Of Proudhon, we can repeat what we said about Bastiat²⁵. However concerned he may have been for individuality, he was in a certain sense a solidarist *avant la lettre*. “There is not a man, then, but lives upon the products of several thousand different industries; not a labourer but receives from society at large the things which he consumes²⁶ [...] All industries are united by mutual relations in a single group; all productions do reciprocal service as means and end [...] Now, this undisputed and indisputable fact of the general participation in every species of product makes all individual productions common; so that every product, coming from the hands of the producer, is mortgaged in advance by society.” Elsewhere²⁷: “As long as we live, we work for as many masters as we have co-workers, we have as many creditors as partners.” But let us note that Proudhon does not just recall the interdependence of individuals. What distinguishes his solidarist argument from that of someone like Bastiat is specifically the idea that whenever a group is formed, a new force emerges. People are not just debtors to each other: they are creditors to each other, and therefore contributors to a kind of common mass of wealth constituted by the very association of their activities. From this point of view, the proof of solidarity appears as a corollary of the theory of collective force²⁸: as valid a proof, let us say, in the intellectual order as in the material order. And that is why, in the world of ideas as in the world of things, he was able to present the individual, even the genius, as a debtor. “The finest genius is, by the laws of his existence and development, the most dependent upon the society which creates him: who would dare to make a god of the glorious child²⁹?” Proudhon insisted on this conclusion with a wicked pleasure: he, the “poor industrialist” bursting onto the literary scene, would find it a pertinent argument against the pride of the men of letters, the “intellectuals” as we would say today, who do not shirk from demanding

of this school as incapable of conceiving of anything other than a household economy. The society whose progress must be supported is economic society, born of the workshop, which individualises people⁹⁵. As for political society, born of the family, which aims to merge people into one other, we must hope for and hasten its dissolution. Domestic in origin, the order that the State establishes is authoritarian in its means, communist in its tendencies; but true, definitive order must be both egalitarian and liberal. It is supported by innumerable pillars erected by the wills in agreement: fair contracts.

But through a detour, to this order which is anti-family in tendency, the family finds itself rendering the most distinguished services. For collective reason to finally discover the conditions of balance, which are also the rules of justice, would be a great deal, but it would not be everything. For the conscious idea to become active, the contribution of feeling appears necessary. As his reflections as a moralist deepen, Proudhon becomes more aware of this: though so critical of “idealism”, which he sees as the great deviant of moral life, he comes to recognise that justice itself needs the reinforcement brought by nurturing feelings methodically.

Certainly, idealism cannot discover the rational law of equal exchange, but once it has been discovered it can help it overcome any resistance it encounters. It presupposes among all individuals the will to respect and to ensure respect for the dignity of people, both their own and that of others. But does experience not prove that when we appeal to this sense of dignity, the individual thinks of themselves first and foremost? To combat the selfish instinct, which so easily takes the shape of right, would it not be useful for justice to form its own organ? By its action, hearts would be inclined to this social goodwill without which balance itself could not be established. This organ is precisely the couple, the *androgyné* where the selves complement each other and, at the same time as, their absolutisms correct each other. “For the production of justice, we need a *premotion*, a grace, say theologians: we need love.”

by workers, reflecting in their autonomous groups, is not an exclusively working-class idea, but a human, universal, rational idea: that of justice in exchange – service for service, product for product – which will equalise people by ensuring their independence. In other words, whether they are made up of workers' companies or otherwise, what Proudhon expects of particular societies is not, it seems, that they prepare so many specific collective souls: it is that by offering favourable environments for the confrontation of individual reasons, they each favour the uncovering of this impersonal reason that speaks of justice.

However, among these societies, there some whose role deserve to be specified separately, those formed spontaneously, prior to the State, even prior to the economic association: families. Throughout his career as a thinker, Proudhon, as a son, husband, and model father, appreciated the value of the domestic group. If there is one religion he keeps, it is that of the home. Saint-Simonians and Fourierists easily arouse his anger, even his disgust: more than their mysticism or illuminism, their shared indecency alarms him. In the chapter on duties of the family, he is as intransigent as Auguste Comte. Both are anti-feminists: they fear opening up the slightest breach in the family unit.

In truth, Proudhon cannot praise unreservedly the influence that the domestic grouping has historically wielded. Is it not responsible for the authoritarian form of the political grouping? The latter is merely the long shadow cast by the former. Like de Bonald, Proudhon observes this fact. But his ideal is the inverse of that of theocrats; far from rejoicing, he complains about this sort of relic. And the reason he criticises the governmental socialism of Louis Blanc, for example, is precisely that its doctrine is nothing more than a clumsy application of the domestic economy to society⁹⁴. Before Spencer, Proudhon mocks the anti-individualists

privileged wages and indefinite ownership of their works. In 1841, in his letter to Blanqui³⁰, he praises Mr. Wolowski for having declared himself, in his course at the *Conservatory of Arts and Crafts*, to be against the perpetual and absolute ownership of works of genius for the benefit of authors' heirs. The exchangeable value of a book is due even more to social reality than to the talent displayed in it. "Society has a right of collective production over every creation of the mind." When he demonstrates these formulas, Proudhon says, Mr. Wolowski is merely generalising the principle of collective force that Proudhon had established in his first memoir. Later, when he himself attacked the *Literary Majorats*, Proudhon would attend to developing all the consequences of these observations.

"It is a fact³¹ that when an idea's time has come, it sprouts everywhere at the same time, like a seed, such that the merit of the discovery, compared to the immensity of human production, is reduced to almost nothing. Here is a field of wheat: can you tell me which ear came out of the earth first, and do you claim that the others that came after owe their birth only to its initiative? Such is more or less the role of these creators, to whom we would have the human race pay a royalty."

To guarantee ownership of their works to their heirs would not only be to declare things venal which are not venal by nature; it would be to surrender public assets over which society has eminent rights, "to violate the law of collectivity".

Thus, the collective force gives rise to reserves of wealth, both intellectual and material, which the passing individuals tap into. But is it enough to say this? The collective force does not only accumulate things; it constitutes beings, living a life of their own. For Proudhon there is not only a solidarism, but a social realism.

His expressions abound in it, whichever book we look at any period in his intellectual development. In *The System of Economic Contradictions*³²: “In the eyes of anyone who has reflected upon the laws of labour and exchange, the reality, I almost said the personality, of the collective man is as certain as the reality and the personality of the individual man.” In his articles in *Voix du peuple*, he told those who seem to regard the collective being merely as a creation of the mind: “[S]ociety is a person, understand! just as humanity as a whole is a person”. In *The General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century*³³³⁴: “[T]here can be no question of touching Society itself, which we must regard as a superior being, endowed with independent life”. In *Justice*: “This is how the hypothesis [which Proudhon would personally try to demonstrate] is formed of a social, real, positive and true being.” In *Pornocracy*³⁵: “Collectivities are not pure fictions of our understanding; they are realities as real as the individuals, monads or molecules of which they are composed.”

Should these phrases written by the “father of anarchy” surprise us? Our surprise will soon diminish, in any case, if we recall the theory of being and knowledge that the author settled on. It is not because he has stopped being a relativist, but on the contrary because he is a relativist to the very end, that Proudhon can make society real in this way. Because he affirms that reason only grasps relations, he is able to lend as much existence to collectivity as to individuality.

Already in *The Creation of Order*, explaining the role reserved for the kind of critique of the sciences that he calls metaphysical, he hints at the consequences of the principle that order alone, in nature, is accessible to us: we can perceive laws or relations, never substances or causes. But it was above all in 1851, when to answer Mr. Romain-Cornut he looked back at all his works and the movement of his thought, that he brought this principle to the fore. In the face of the *absolute* which he denies in all and everywhere, his originality is, he declares, to affirm in all and everywhere *progress*.

cious truths, it is not only in the industrial company that the collective reason speaks, but also in the scholarly or artistic company; in the academies, schools, municipalities; in the national assembly, in the club, in the jury, in “every meeting of men, in a word, formed for the discussion of ideas and the inquiry into questions of right⁹⁰⁹¹”.

And then, as this phrase itself warns us, these groups, whatever they may be, cannot hear the conclusions of the collective reason unless they have first given voice to the individual reasons. From this point of view, sentimental unanimity is not something to hope for; it is something to fear. Above all, the collectivity questioned must not “vote as one man in the name of a particular feeling that has become common.” The collectivity would thus become as unfriendly to Proudhon as to Rousseau himself. Multiplicity, opposition, even contradiction of opinions: let us remember that these are, for our philosopher, within particular societies and elsewhere, the preconditions for the impersonality of the conclusions. This means that in drawing Proudhon’s thought to syndicalism, it would be too much to turn it back against individualism. It also means that he did not in any way share the faith of “the new school” in *class instinct*. This instinct, once stimulated to the right degree, would supposedly cause the working class to march as one against the bourgeoisie. But at no point does Proudhon take pleasure from this prospect⁹². He indignantly denounces any attempt to “excite working-class democracy to scorn and hatred for the terrible and elusive colleagues of the middle class.” He refuses to give the working class a kind of “power of extortion” that would allow it to stop worrying about winning the majority over to its idea peacefully and legally. Not content with blaming strikes, he goes so far as to oppose the workers being given a right of coalition that would destroy competition, precisely by invoking against E. Ollivier the sort of force inherent to collectivities⁹³. Proudhon does not dream of setting class interests against one another: he dreams of balancing the rights of individuals. The idea that he wants to be discovered

they constitute the true “pivots of democracy”. Nevertheless, in order for them to provide all the services legitimately expected, their organisation must be subject to certain conditions: those that enable the collective reason to be revealed through debate between individuals.

We recently discovered Proudhon to be the authentic ancestor of the syndicalist philosophy that, by correcting the political deviations of socialism, strives to disassociate itself from democracy. The vocabulary of Proudhonian sociology has been used to define, between individualist anarchy and statist socialism, the positions of revolutionary syndicalism. And it⁸⁹ is very true that the commentary that Proudhon hastily wrote on his deathbed for the *Manifesto of the Sixty* reads in places like a hymn to “class consciousness”. The working class has won its “political capacity” precisely because its members have finally become aware of the special situation of the collectivity that they compose. They look within to identify the original idea that responds to this situation. They have now understood that they must think among themselves. Their collective self arises from opposition to one another. Proudhon no doubt foresaw the role that the workers’ associations, the “workers’ groups”, could play as organs of this self. A centre of education as well as of production, in his eyes the workers’ association is first of all its centre of consciousness. It is therefore possible to argue that if he had known them, he would have applauded the actions of the unions seeking to discover the thought of producers by bringing them together. However, we must not be too hasty on this point either. We would have a very narrow idea of Proudhon’s sociology if we were to believe, for example, that according to him the working group is the single organ of justice, and above all that in his eyes it would suffice, for social progress to be achieved, to rouse the non-owners against the owners in some way and drag them along by some irresistible collective emotion.

Let us first recall that for Proudhon, whatever privilege he may grant to labour, which he honours as the revealer of the most pre-

But this affirmation implies another. What Proudhon hunts down in the notion of the absolute is not just the notion of immobility, but of simplicity, which some would make the supreme reality. But the search for simple elements is most unsatisfactory of all. They escape us as we think we are getting closer to them³⁶. In truth, we never catch simple beings: *all that exists is grouped*. Every truth is a relation. Every being is a group. The notion of group here seems to take the place of the very notion of series in Proudhon’s mind, or at least, in his eyes, the series becomes increasingly defined by the group. He insists on the necessarily synthetic nature of being³⁷. To traditional ontology, he opposes a truly sociological philosophy.

Thus the sort of reversal of argument made by those accused of social realism may have already been used by Proudhon. You might argue that society, unlike an individual, does not have an independent existence. But remember that the individual is itself already a multiplicity, a colony, a society. Why would you refuse the reality that you grant to this primary composite to the other, secondary composite³⁸? It should be added that Proudhon saw very clearly how this sociological conception of the world may be used to safeguard the originality of beings by preventing the uniform “reduction” of the superior to the inferior. If we recall that the group is more than the sum of its elements, then the sudden appearance of new things in the Universe will no longer seem disconcerting to us. In particular, if humans are capable of deviation, it is precisely because they are composites of composites. All the powers of nature are gathered in them, but from their very gathering together a higher power arises, through which they become “above nature”. “It is this force of collectivity that man refers to when he speaks of his soul.” “It is with the aid of these notions of collective force, of group, of series that I rise to the intelligence and certainty of my *free will*³⁹.”

Proudhon would make great use of this philosophy to solve the social problems, whether economic or political, that he meets on his way, as we can see as early as *The Philosophy of Poverty*. If he

aims to solve the antinomies that political economy crashes into by means of a truly *social* economy, it is precisely by relying on the theory of the collective being, an organic and synthetic unit⁴⁰.

Picture society as a huge Prometheus gradually dominating nature, in turn farmer, winemaker, baker, weaver, organising his work according to his needs, multiplying his needs in proportion to his work. This hypothesis will finally allow you to understand the nature of general wealth, whereby all values produced by private industries combine in proportion⁴¹. As long as you stay at the point of view, familiar to classical economics, of individuals seeking to win out over each other, you see the opposition of use value and exchange value. With each person trying to increase values for their own benefit, all contribute to diminishing them. It is a world both of perpetual fluctuations and of fundamental contradictions. Conversely, take the point of view of the group: useful value and exchangeable value absorb each other and disappear, “leaving in their place a compound possessed, but in a superior degree, of all their positive properties”. Value is ultimately *constituted*. It appears that production and consumption are in harmony and that society has only one interest: to increase the number of products that can indeed, according to Say, be exchanged for products, “to align values” such that all labour leaves the worker a surplus, and that every worker can at least buy back the value of their product⁴².

But for this ideal to be realised, values must in fact be measured by labour. We must not see the idle owners taking a disproportionate share of trade like a kind of toll, or the producers condemned to poverty wages. When the producers’ purchasing power, and therefore consumption, is reduced to the smallest share, the entire system of production is threatened. This means that harmony presupposes equity. The theory of the proportionality of values, itself deduced from the theory of the social being, leads to the theory of equality⁴³.

It may be doubted whether Proudhon’s arguments here achieve perfect clarity. What at least begins to appear clearly is the dual

that the “economic organisation” where this collective force takes hold must reabsorb the governmental power.

Where a free agro-industrial federation has been established, what need will there be for legislators, prefects, public prosecutors, customs officers, police officers? When agreement is reached through the proliferation of equitable contracts, the coercive apparatus will no longer need to function. “Contractual solidarity” (a phrase that would appear much later) renders authoritarian centralisation useless⁸⁸. Proudhon is therefore far from seeing the world of trade as a dispersive atomism. He is far from believing that when individuals are face to face, debating the conditions of their exchanges, the collective mind lacks support. On the contrary, it is this very debate that brings its verdict. Let free people contract equally: it is then that justice, the supreme interest of society, manifests itself; in other words, it is then that the collective reason speaks.

We now understand how Proudhon could write that political economy is the depository of the secret thoughts of society. His sociology is neither statist, nor democratic, nor nationalist; it is a sociology of an economist, of an “accountant”, of a “mutualist”, at the same time liberal and egalitarian. It lends force, life, even intelligence to society; but it is arranged in such a way that this force, this life and this intelligence presuppose the worker-traders’ equal freedom rather than crushing it.

Egalitarian and liberal as well as federalist, we can sense the specific attitude that Proudhon would adopt towards the specific groups existing or arising within nations themselves. To be sure, he grants these groups great recognition. And it is on this point that his politics is most clearly opposed to Rousseau’s. “War on particular societies” was the motto of the author of *The Social Contract*. On the contrary, for the author of *The Federative Principle*,

essentially producers, and abdicate all pretension to govern each other⁸⁷.”

The tradition that Proudhon joins with here is a very different tradition from that of Rousseau and the political contract theorists: it is that of the economists of the late 18th century, which provided Saint-Simon with the elements of his central antithesis. In both the feudal regime and the industrial regime, Saint-Simon clearly opposes, to the government of persons, the administration of things. On this point, Proudhon’s thought simply welds to Saint-Simon’s. He clearly indicates this himself: “*Commutative justice, the reign of contracts*, in other words the *economic or industrial reign*: these are the different synonyms of the idea whose advent will abolish the old systems of *distributive justice*, of the *reign of laws*, in more concrete terms of the *feudal, governmental or military regime*. The future of humanity lies in this substitution”.

In Hegel, too, the influence of the concepts elaborated by the economists had been felt: in *Philosophy of Right* and *Philosophy of Mind*, between the family and the State there is the “*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*” in which the “system of needs” is realised. And it is undoubtedly from there that it passed into Marx’s philosophy, providing its substructure to the whole social world. But for Hegel, the order constituted by the system of needs is in no way an order capable of being self-sufficient. Rather, the philosopher sees in it, by the very fact that individuals take their particular interests as ends, a kind of return to atomism. At its core, associations born from commerce seem to him least associative of all: they cannot serve as a support for the collective spirit. And this is why the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* must be by surpassed by the State, which alone allows the social essence to reach consciousness of itself. On this point, the Proudhonian tendency is the exact opposite of the Hegelian tendency. For the author of *General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century*, civil society is the milieu in which he wants to dissolve, submerge the State. “What we put in place of the public force is the collective force.” In elliptical terms, he thus indicates

tendency that marks the originality of his project: both realist and egalitarian, it presents the phenomena of production, consumption and circulation as the manifestations of the activity of a unique being; it goes so far as to personify society, but with the sole goal of establishing equity in exchanges between individuals.

The same tendencies come to the fore in his explanation of the genesis and nature of social power. Proudhon, like de Maistre and de Bonald, protests against philosophers who see the State as nothing more than an artificial being, the product of a convention between individuals. On this point, religious mysticism was closer to the truth. It at least maintained this feeling among peoples that a State is not a thing that we manufacture⁴⁴. In fact, social power does not come from deliberation between individuals; it arises from groups coming together. In families or businesses, when the elementary associations – different in nature and object, each formed to perform a specific function and create a specific product – enter into relations, the collective forces that emerge from these associations somehow concentrate into a new power, which rules over their shared life. The quality of the power in question varies, its authority rising or falling according to the number and variation of these “forming groups”. This proves that it is nothing more than their shared emanation.

But if this is the case, it is abundantly clear that the profit from the social power, as of any collective force more generally, must return to all of those who have contributed to it in proportion to their contribution. But is this the story that history tells us? Too often we see the force constituted in this way being “alienated”⁴⁵ for the benefit of a dynasty, race or caste. Too often religion ratifies these abuses of power instead of opposing them. It covers these kinds of manipulations with its cloak of illusion. But from the moment the origin of the State is revealed, diversions and monopolisations become “impossible”. Here again, the theory of collective reality, properly understood, puts humanity back on the path of justice⁴⁶.

If these are his tendencies, we can imagine how Proudhon's social realism would move either towards or away from what is called "organicism". Proudhon also uses biological metaphors on different occasions for different purposes. He first uses them to criticise the solutions offered by his predecessors. He calls these solutions utopian because they are too mechanistic. Referring to a phalansterian theory, he says: "A deplorable error, but a natural one in a system in which society is seen as a machine rather than as a living being. Society is reformed only by always growing and developing, and this fact, the most striking in history, is the condemnation of all the hypotheses that proceed by overthrowing the forms and replacing the system." Let us not touch what lives: would Proudhon in turn have approved this phrase, at least at a certain time? In any case, the idea of spontaneous growth inherent in societies allows him to oppose the systems of the time with a continuist philosophy of history. But even more so, it is a pluralistic view of things that he proposes by comparing societies with organisms. Should Proudhon be classed as a "polytheist" alongside Louis Ménéard? He would at least increasingly worship multiple forces, irreducible to each other, whose relative independence seems to him to be the very condition of life.

The simplistic reformers remind him of doctors who would say: "With its diverse elements – bone, muscles, tendons, nerves, viscera, arterial and venous blood, gastric and pancreatic fluids, chyle, lachrymal and synovial humours, gas, liquids and solids – the body is ungovernable. Let us reduce it to a single, solid, resilient matter, bone for example; hygiene and therapy will become child's play." But neither society nor the human body becomes ossified. In its complication, always in motion, he discovers "a thought, an intimate collective life that develops outside the laws of geometry and mechanics; that is loath to assimilate to the rapid, uniform, infallible movement of a crystallisation; of which the ordinary, syllogistic, fatalist, unitary logic is incapable of taking account, but which is explained marvellously with the aid of a broader philosophy, ad-

as something other than the sum of the particular wills. For the former to be constituted, he wants "the pluses and minuses to destroy each other"⁸⁶. And he sees this reciprocal neutralisation as the guarantee of equality. The fact remains that, more so than Rousseau, Proudhon insists on the need for prior debate. Daily discussion is in his view the indispensable "usher" of justice. "In order to ensure peace, keep social energies in perpetual struggle" is the paradoxical solution he settles on: for the collective self to arise, the individual selves must be set against each other. Above all, Proudhon firmly refuses to allow individuals, having decided one fine day to create the State, to surrender in its hands and pride themselves on now being the humble slaves of their creation. We know that he aims not for the apotheosis of the State, but rather its dissolution: what he hopes for from the regime of partial, truly synallagmatic and commutative contracts, through which individuals freely debate the terms of their exchanges, is precisely that it enables an order without masters, without functionaries, without government.

The idea that clearly comes to the surface here is the idea of economic society as opposed to political society; it is the idea of *civil society*. When Proudhon calls for universal debate to precede the establishment of commutative contracts, the ideal he wants to serve is undoubtedly that of freedom of thought against the theocratic tradition, but even more so that of equity of exchanges against any statist intervention. Those selves who confront their claims are above all, in his eyes, mercantilists; and the truth that collective reason must derive from their confronted claims is the value of things, measured by the labour embodied in them. In short, it is above all the life of commerce that Proudhon considers when he develops his theory of the relationship of individual thought to impersonal thought. "Translate these words, *contract*, *commutative justice*, which are the language of the law, into the language of business, and you have Commerce, that is to say, in its highest significance, the act by which man and man declare themselves

While these are Proudhon's tendencies, it is clear that he cannot in any case ask for the silence of personal reasons in order for the public reason to be heard. On the contrary⁸³: each should freely express their idea and clearly convey their claims. It is the clash of ideas that casts the light. From the antagonism of claims, rules emerge that rest on the relations between things. "The impersonality of the public reason presupposes as a principle the greatest contradiction; as an organ, the greatest possible multiplicity." Here, Proudhon finds one of his dearest ideas: the idea of *balance*, by which forces are set against one another in order to discover the conditions for their balance. Each human self is an insatiable ambition that tend towards the absolute. To correct this "exorbitance", there is nothing better than putting man before man, balancing the self with another self. The individual absolutisms thereby become neutralised; there is a sort of "airing of ideas". Truths appear which determine just relations, and whose system is the framework of public reason. "When two or several men have to come to a conclusion about a question through contradiction, either of the natural order or, and for a greater reason, of the human order, what results from the reciprocal and respective elimination that they are led to make of their subjectivity, i.e. the absolute that the self affirms and represents, is a common manner of seeing, which no longer resembles, either in content or in form, what it would have been without this debate, their individual way of thinking. This manner of seeing, into which only pure relations enter, without mixtures of metaphysical and absolutist elements, constitutes the collective reason or public reason." There is therefore no need to conceive it as a separate metaphysical entity, a previous and superior *Logos*⁸⁴: it is "the result of all the particular reasons or ideas, whose inequalities, arising from the conception of the absolute and its egoistic affirmation, compensate for each other by their mutual criticism and cancel each other out"⁸⁵.

Here again, we might ask if Proudhon is as far from Rousseau as he believes himself to be. Rousseau also views the general will

mitting in one system the plurality of principles, the struggle of elements, the opposition of contraries and the synthesis of all the indefinables and absolutes⁴⁷."

But although he uses organ-related analogies to draw our attention to the spontaneity of movements and the multiplicity of social elements, Proudhon is not unaware of their dangers. In particular, he seems to sense that they might provide arguments against the desire for egalitarian justice which is the core of his soul. How many times since Hegel have we not repeated that societies, by the very fact that they are organisms, require a strict hierarchy, and not just adherence to the traditional distribution of tasks, but respect for the privileges and prerogatives of the ruling classes! Proudhon strives to destroy these arguments in advance when he recalls that "[a]s an organism, society, the moral being par excellence, fundamentally differs so much from living beings, in whom the subordination of organs is the very law of existence⁴⁸". It loathes "any idea of hierarchy". Rather than the subordination of organs, the social system involves the balancing of forces, services and products. It thus appears as a general equation, a set of weighing scales. Scales would definitively take the place of organisms in Proudhon's imagination. When he wants to specify his conception, which is always egalitarian in tendency, he more often uses the vocabulary of the physical and mathematical sciences than that of the biological sciences.

As history unfolds and consciousness gains ground, does the latter not become less and less suited to reality?⁴⁹ As governments become democratic, it seems increasingly illusory to derive morality from physiology; comparing the State to all known animals is therefore be to no avail: "Here⁵⁰, physiology counts for nothing; the State figures as the product, not of organic nature, of the flesh, but of intelligible nature, that is, the mind."

In fact, naturalist tendencies do not succeed in dominating in Proudhon's philosophy. More than once, no doubt to react against the spiritualism of the academic philosophers whose courses he

had attended, he hints at a desire to erase the distinctions between forms of being. He tries to reunite humanity with animality and sends societies back to the school of life. At times he seems to believe that nature, methodically consulted, would lend a superior authority to the egalitarian dreams that obsess him: it would at least provide him with as many justifying analogies as it does to the followers of aristocratic doctrines⁵¹. But, without losing the hope of demonstrating that justice's system of laws is ultimately the same as the world's system of laws⁵², he realises that societies will never grasp these laws more directly than by looking within and analysing the content of this consciousness which constitutes one of their originalities. They are "spiritual collectivities"⁵³. And it is because the mind gives itself free rein that the *social reign* must be superimposed on others.

In Proudhon's eyes, the main characteristic of this reign is that it is an "industrial reign". We know the major role that the author of *Justice* grants to technology. In any case, from *The Creation of Order* he comments on Franklin's thought: "Man is a tool-making animal"⁵⁴. He writes that labour is the plastic force of society, the typical idea that determines the various phases of its growth; that the "progress of Society is measured by the development of industry and the perfection of instruments." In this respect, as has been rightly noted⁵⁵, he emerges as one of the precursors of historical materialism. Is this not first of all, as Marx himself points out, a philosophy of technology, an attempt to explain everything, in the development of societies, by the improvement of the means of production? But while Marx draws from this theory the conclusion that ideas are merely insignificant shadows and reflections, veritable epiphenomena, Proudhon continues to place ideas at the centre of society and to show the collective mind at work in history. To establish this mind's laws of development, measure its progress, identify its tendencies, express its wishes: this is precisely the primordial task that he had assigned to what we call sociology. And that is why, having recalled how he understands collective force

icy: he stubbornly refused to lament the partitioning of Poland and advocate the establishment of Italian unity. To justify this attitude which scandalised so many people, he wanted to define the notion of nationalities once and for all⁷⁹. He did not manage to complete his project in time. We can at least see quite clearly, through the discussions outlined in various places in his works, the direction in which the tendencies of his mind led him. He protests against those who would make nationality a "physiological and geographical thing"; he tries to prove that it is at its core, and in fact is increasingly becoming, a "legal and moral thing". Unlike de Maistre, far from seeing the written constitutions, by which people try to determine the conditions of government, as unnatural and therefore unsustainable products, he is pleased that since 1815 the era of constitutions has been open⁸⁰. It represents a win for the regime of liberty over the regime of authority. It heralds the moment when all associations will rest on voluntary pacts.

The ardour and vehemence of his imprecations against Rousseau has often been noted. But it should be underlined that what he reproaches him for is not the artificialism for which de Bonald criticised him; it is for not having envisaged a society emerging from a convention. It is for having only legislated for the strictly political forms of association, and also for considering only a single contract, undefined in its conditions, unrealisable in practice. Far from eliminating the idea of contract from his philosophy, Proudhon retains it and gives it a central place. His ambition is to bring this idea down into reality itself. He would thus be led to replace the single contract, which is only an abdication of the masses in the hands of an arbitrator, with a number of truly synallagmatic contracts. It is through positive contracts, duly countersigned by the parties, that the conditions for cooperation should be settled^{81,82}. And it is undoubtedly so that these multiple contracts can become the rule that Proudhon is led to prefer federalist organisations to unitary organisations.

vidual, in a word, synthetic, can be obtained by balloting, which is the official expression of diversity⁷⁵?”

On reading these texts, we might think that in Proudhon's eyes, in order for the people to think, they must be in some way undivided, that the individualities must dissolve into a higher unity. Indeed, Proudhon often uses the unitary language of the Revolution to explain his theory. “God forbid that the people could ever be wrong or lie. I say the people one and indivisible, not the multitude which is only plurality without unity⁷⁶.” At the beginning of a chapter of *Economic Contradictions*⁷⁷, he describes lyrically, in the kind of vision that he dedicates to Lamartine, the quasi-disappearance of the individual in social communion: “[F]rom this intimate trade, we had the exquisite feeling of a unanimous will. In this ecstasy of an instant, in this absolute communion which, without erasing the characters, raised them by love towards the ideal, we felt what society can, must, be: and the mystery of immortal life was revealed to us.” And if we go back to *The Celebration of Sunday*⁷⁸, we find a full defence of the kind of “fusion of intelligences and hearts” that Moses dreamed of for his young nation. He wanted it to be “not an agglomeration of individuals, but a truly fraternal society”. Here, do we not find the lineaments of a theory of *Volksgeist*, analogous to that which served as a bedrock of legal and economic nationalism in Germany?

It would nevertheless be completely wrong to believe that as Proudhon's thought develops, it would join with that of Savigny, for example. On the contrary, the distance between *Volksgeist* and “collective reason” would only increase. It is all the more clear, as his feeling takes shape, that he abhors any reabsorption whatsoever of individuality. He refuses to rely on the obscure powers of unanimous feelings. In particular, he does not grant that the last word of political wisdom is to give in to the spontaneous movements that arise from the kind of fusion of hearts achieved in national unity. We know Proudhon's resistance to those who invoked the principle of nationality as a sure guide to foreign pol-

and collective being, it is important that we emphasise the way in which he conceives of collective reason.

From his first works, this notion is undoubtedly present in Proudhon's mind. In *Warning to the Proprietors*⁵⁶, does he not define society as an unconscious collective mind that, with admirable certainty, follows laws that the scholar's eye finds hard to discern? But as his experience broadens, he pays more attention to this impersonal reason which lives in human society. He increasingly recognises its authority; he would go so far as to oppose its oracles to the problematic conclusions of personal reason. In *Justice* he already indicates why collective reason has synthetic ideas that are very different from, and often opposite to, those of the individual self. But it is in one of his final writings, *Theory of Property*, that he draws the greatest effect⁵⁷ from this antithesis. We know that here, in order to establish it as an insurmountable barrier to the encroachments of the State, he tries to justify not only the right to *possession* which not even his first memoir challenged, but the right to absolute *property*, the *jus utendi et ab utendi* according to the ancient quiritary formula: an indefensible right, Proudhon acknowledges, for anyone only wants to judge it according to the norms of individual reason. But this method, so often applied as it has been by jurists, is imprudence itself: the maxims of general reason that end up imposing themselves on individual reason are often the opposite of those that the latter gives us. There are opposites that the social genius is pleased to unite, “while the individualist reason most often only knows how to put them in discord⁵⁸”. The “inspirations of that immanent reason which directs human collectivities” naturally surpass the self's conceptions. If Proudhon went one step further, he would bring us back to Joseph de Maistre. Does he not seem to think that the more incomprehensible or inadmissible an institution appears to individual reason – as is precisely

the case with quiritary property – the more likely it is that, in accordance with the requirements of a higher reason, it is thereby “providential”?

We can at least see clearly how this antithesis justifies the method that Proudhon advocates, his distrust of *a priori* constructions, his trust in the lessons of history. Since collective reason does not use the same yardstick as individual reason, it is clear that the latter cannot deduct from its funds the products of the former. Here, Proudhon’s precepts foreshadow those of the sociologists who remind us of the need to study social institutions from the outside, as things, in facts. According to him, the knowledge of social laws, by the very fact that it corresponds to the theory of collective ideas, could never be anything but an empirical knowledge⁵⁹.

But conversely, because they also reflect the ideas of a collective reason, the empirical knowledge of historical facts may reveal an eternal order. Humanity as a whole, humanity as a social being, can neither deceive nor be deceived⁶⁰: it is infallible. This is the first postulate of Proudhon’s philosophy of history. How, if it were otherwise, could there be any truth? Collective reason is nothing other than absolute reason revealing itself in history⁶¹. From this point of view, society and God are merging: the thought of one merely becomes aware of the will of the other⁶².

However, we must not rush to identify these two terms with each other in all respects. Between society and God, the way in which eternal truths are revealed forces us to maintain an infinite distance. There is a system of ideas, greater than time, that determine the conditions for social balance⁶³. Proudhon especially displays this conviction in the first period of his life, but it seems to be present in his thought until the end and accounts for his intellectual attitude. And for this reason it may be argued that Proudhon does not escape Platonism either. It is even his Platonism that explains the particular colour of his anarchism. If he objects so strongly to government arbitrariness, it is because he believes that a “scien-

because they were allowed to gain more from this “disease of opinion” that Aristotle studied under the name of politics: it prevented them from being in communion with the people. They did not believe in it: they did not understand it; they did not know how to ask it⁷².

“Let everyone, in these difficult days, turn to the people’s side; let everyone study its sovereign thought, which is that of no party, of no school, and which can nevertheless be seen in all schools and in all parties: it will be able to define itself and answer all our questions, provided we know how to ask it. *To ask the people!* This is the secret of the future! *To ask the people:* this is the whole science of society⁷³.”

But again, how should we go about getting an answer from the people? “No more than God do the people have eyes to see, ears to hear, a mouth to speak.” They speak only through the mouths of individuals. So what option do we have but to ask individuals to express their opinions by a vote? We will count those voices. And we will have the right to assume that the opinion shared by the greatest number of them corresponds to the collective thought. This is the solution envisioned by democracy. But this solution, too, is in Proudhon’s eyes only a trick. He proves to be just as stern to believers in universal suffrage as to those with faith in the State.

It is not only the majoritarian system, or the representative system, that he despises⁷⁴. Of course, to him it seems unfair that half of the citizens plus one should impose law on the other half: “Democracy is ostracism.” It seems inevitable to him, moreover, that the representatives will abuse the power entrusted to them: “Democracy is a disguised aristocracy.” But even if we introduced direct rule, the government of the people by the people, the results would not be any better. Establishing voting by head, *viritim*, is enough to prevent a collective thought from expressing itself. Universal suffrage is an axe to divide the people. “[The] testimony of discord, it can only produce discord.” “How can you believe that an expression of opinion at once particular and general, collective and indi-

sees a source of inevitable abuse. Whether democratic or monarchical, a State always involves a delegation of powers, thereby enabling corruption. The State is the “*external* constitution of the social power”⁷⁰; it is organised to allow “alienations” of that very power. For too long the people’s imagination has helped it. This idealism, which Proudhon denounces as one of the worst enemies of the morality of human dignity, has surrounded governments like a halo. This prestige may have been useful at some time in history, but soon became the most dangerous of all. It is high time that these “political myths” were destroyed forever by carrying out a “purification of ideas”. Instead of encouraging society to find its centre of consciousness in the State, it must understand that it is itself a social product: not a fire, but smoke.

Essentially, Proudhon accuses those who continue to revere the State as the necessary centre of consciousness of society of lacking sociological faith. Still led astray by biological metaphors, they seem to believe at all costs that this great body needs a head, and that it can only think by delegation. According to this hypothesis, it is impossible for the collective power, “which belongs essentially to the masses, to express itself and act directly, without the mediation of bodies established deliberately and, so to speak, *ad hoc*. It seems, we say – and this is the explanation of the constitution of the State in all its varieties and forms – that the collective being, society, existing only in the mind, cannot make itself felt save through monarchical incarnation, aristocratic usurpation, or democratic mandate; consequently, that all it is forbidden any specific and personal manifestation.” It is precisely against this scepticism that Proudhon erects his theory. For him, although he is, as he said, a Pyrrhonian in politics, the other side of his Pyrrhonism is his faith in the intellectual capacities of the people themselves. “We deny government and the State, because we affirm what the founders of States have never believed in: the personality and autonomy of the masses”⁷¹. If he speaks out vehemently against those who diverted the 1848 Revolution by wanting to lead it, it is precisely

“scientific” organisation of humanity is possible: “scientific” meaning in accordance with this aforementioned idea of justice of which he constantly dreams⁶⁴. And, because the idea itself is only discovered by collective reason, we end up with this paradox whereby Proudhon’s anarchism is justified first of all by its confidence in the discoveries of collective reason.

But these discoveries themselves are only made gradually, after a long series of efforts, trials and errors, hopes of all kinds – a long and arduous road for humanity. It rises up to the truth by falling. It only achieves balance after centuries of oscillations. Revelation by pain, by war, by evil, which provides Proudhon with precisely the means to turn humanity back against God. Why has God not given humans these eternal truths, of which His intelligence is the link? Why does He let the tables of justice be spelled out for them so laboriously? He could have given them the synthetic intelligence to perceive the conditions for balance intuitively. Instead, He condemns them to a slow dialectic that progresses by way of successively resolved antinomies. This is why antithesis between God and humanity persists. This is why humanity has the right, or rather the duty, to consider God as a sworn enemy. This is why we must be not atheists but antitheists⁶⁵.

This explains the original position that Proudhon would take on this question of the relation between society and divinity. He begins by finding a common path with what he calls humanism, a term that applies in his thought, it seems, to the doctrines of both Feuerbach and Auguste Comte. But at some point he sets himself clearly apart from it.

The author of *Economic Contradictions* would undoubtedly agree that “[h]umanity in its ensemble is the reality sought by the social genius under the mystical name of God”. Like Feuerbach, he denounces the “projections” by which humanity ascribes to the absolute, in divinity, the qualities that it holds close to its heart. He does not fail to add that the idea of God is above all social. “[I]t is much more a collective act of faith than an individual conception”.

It is from the collective self, taken as the upper pole of creation, that humanity *extends* the idea of the individual creator⁶⁶. In their gods, societies worship emanations of their own spontaneity. From this point of view, theocracy appears as “a symbolism of the social force⁶⁷.” And Proudhon would arrive at this formula, which could serve as a motto for more than one contemporary work: “What the theologian pursues, without knowing it, in the dogma that he teaches, is not the mysteries of the infinite: it is the laws of our collective and individual spontaneity⁶⁸.” But are these explanations sufficient reasons either to deny God or divinise society? Proudhon does not think so. And it is here that he makes his reservations about this humanism, which he sees both as the last form of atheism and as an attempt to launch a new religion. Even if our conception of God is anthropomorphic, or more precisely sociomorphic, this cannot directly prove that God does not exist. On the contrary, one may continue to need, from various points of view, the hypothesis of God. In the meantime, one thing is certain: that by the very fact of elevating human attributes to infinity in order to define God, we open up an unbridgeable gap between God and man. Human attributes raised to infinity are no longer applicable to humanity. Its essence is imperfection, and that is why perpetual struggle is its lot. So let us not elevate humanity to God, as this would denigrate both. Both terms can only be understood by their antithesis⁶⁹.

And one could undoubtedly try to explain this very antithesis by the nature of social reality, which dominates the individual. Proudhon anticipates this kind of explanation: “Will it be said that the opposition between man and the divine being is illusory, and that it arises from the opposition that exists between the individual man and the essence of humanity as a whole?” But then it must be granted that humanity as a collective being does not undergo this process of trial and error of which by definition the divine being is spared. This is precisely what Proudhon denies. Collective reason tends towards eternal balance, but does so humanly, gradually discovering it by way of a slow progress which is the necessary

preface of order. And that is why, ultimately, it cannot be identified with the divine intelligence.

But is this collective reason really a reason; that is, does it imply a consciousness? So far, we hardly see this consciousness at work. The philosopher examines humanity’s deeds and gestures, compares the “manifestations of collective spontaneity”; he follows the series of institutions whose very ruins make up the terraces of order. He thus becomes capable of inferring the principles that govern the general movement. But it is only in his personal intelligence that these principles become conscious. Should we therefore grant that, always and everywhere, their action is exerted on societies without them realising, as if by night? Humanity, Proudhon says somewhere, is like the ropemaker who walks backwards towards the end of their journey. Will it never turn back around? Does a moment not come when society, ceasing to be “unconscious”, creates bodies for reflection that we could use to understand its thought, finally turned back on itself?

The first answer that comes to mind is that these bodies have existed for a long time; they are the States. The very action they want to exercise forces them to become aware of the principles that govern the spontaneous movement of societies. In the State and through the State, society becomes conscious, and in this sense the State is truly the throne of God. It was Hegel’s solution, and it was also, *mutatis mutandis*, Louis Blanc’s solution. But it could not in any way be Proudhon’s solution.

His hatred of statism in all its forms is one of his most powerful feelings. It would be to no avail to assure him that with the happy tipping point of democracy, humanity will finally pass from the politics of the master-State to that of the servant-State. Would government forces now apply themselves to guaranteeing individual rights? But wherever there is governmental force, Proudhon