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# Proudhonism and Marxism

Gaëtan Pirou

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A contemporary study of Proudhonian ideas might have one of two objectives. Either we will strive to retrace Proudhon's historical physiognomy,[1] discover the guiding principles of his thought, and explain them by his heredity and temperament, the social circles he lived in, and the events he witnessed. Or else, concerned more with utility than with reconstruction, we will retain from Proudhonism only what may be used by scholars to understand today's world and foresee tomorrow's, and by reformers to build an effective, fruitful doctrine for action. Both methods are equally legitimate. The first is necessary for historians of ideas, for whoever wishes to restore Proudhon to us as he was. The second should be preferred if we seek less to describe the past than to shed light on the present and prepare for the future.

Depending on which of these two angles we approach it from, the relationship between Proudhonism and Marxism appears very different.

[1] **Translator's Note:** The original French *physionomie* implies the 'face' or 'character' of his history; retained here to preserve the 19th-century flavour of the original text.

Historically, Proudhon and Marx are adversaries and constitute an antithesis.[1] After having maintained friendly and sustained relations in 1844 during Marx's stay in France, and having spent whole nights discussing philosophy and political economy, they fell out irremediably when Marx replied to *Economic Contradictions* with *The Poverty of Philosophy* and disdainfully dismissed Proudhon as petty-bourgeois. The years passed without softening this animosity. In 1865, in his famous letter to the *Sozial-Demokrat*, Marx did not hesitate to judge Proudhon's memoir in these terms, forgetting his past praise: '*What Is Property?* In a rigorously scientific history of political economy this work would scarcely be worthy of mention', and he protested against Proudhon's 'scientific charlatanism', 'unbearable chatter', and 'imbecile cynicism'.[2]

In fact, between Proudhon and Marx the contrast of spirit and tendency is obvious. Whereas Marxist thought arose from the development of industrial life, from large-scale production concentrated and socialised in its technical forms if not in its legal regime, Proudhonian thought is fundamentally rural in origin and orientation: the social cell of the future society that Proudhon envisages is neither the factory nor the workers' group, but the peasant family with austere morals and an individualistic life, whose property, founded on possession, takes on an absolute and sacred character. If Marx holds that the fundamental explanation of world history lies in variations of economic technique, according to Proudhon the guiding thread that enables us to find our way in the chaos of historical events is philosophical in nature: history is a long process of reasoning and society a metaphysics in action. And while for Marx only a change in the mode of production is

[1] Cf. M. Bourguin, 'Des rapports entre Proudhon et Karl Marx', *Revue d'économie politique*, March 1893, and L. Harmel, 'De Proudhon à Marx', *La Clairière*, 15 August 1918.

[2] Cf. also the unpublished letters of Marx and Engels published in *Le Mouvement socialiste*, March–April 1913 and January–February 1914.



lusions that marred Proudhon's, and which stemmed from the fact that Proudhon, like him, had too often allowed himself to be carried outside reality by his idealism and optimism.

Whatever attachment and respect we may hold for the great figure and powerful genius of Jaurès, it is our duty neither to conceal nor to soften our thought on this point. The lessons of the war, the immersion in realism into which it plunged us, must, it seems to me, lead us to reverse the proportions of the blend that Jaurès had established between Proudhonian thought and Marxist thought. Rather than borrowing from Proudhonian ideology the guiding lines of our conception of the world, and asking of Marx only details or examples, it is Marxism (and what in Proudhonism corroborates and converges with it) that will furnish us with the method and the body of central ideas, to which will be adapted the corrections and complements that Proudhonian thought, in what is specific to it, can usefully provide us. Even thus delimited, the value of Proudhonism remains considerable. And it will be called upon to grow gradually in the future as hard economic constraints loosen, as iron necessities soften under the pressure of human will and reason – as human beings, leaning upon reality in order to transform it, succeed in imbuing the world with a larger share of their ideal.

tive, modern doctrines, enamoured of rational reconstruction, will be led to extend their efforts at flexibilisation to moral and family life. Between the one and the other the gulf is widening and will widen every day, and socialism will necessarily orient itself towards the emancipation of women, the broadening of marriage, and the attenuation of paternal and marital authority – all reforms that would have horrified Proudhon. If, therefore, one wishes at all costs to keep severe ethical preoccupations at the forefront of Proudhonism, it is not in a socialist direction that one will be drawn, but in a conservative and even reactionary direction. As is well known, Georges Sorel and Édouard Berth today have more readers and disciples in *Action Française*[(5)] circles than in the CGT.[(6)]

**II.** Unlike the theorists of revolutionary syndicalism, who philosophically belong to the anti-intellectualist and Bergsonian current, Jaurès was well suited to understand, love, and share Proudhon's rationalist tendencies. Proudhon and Jaurès belong to the same family of minds concerned with logic and clarity, confident in the future of the ideas of justice and social progress. Yet precisely because of this affinity, Jaurès did not, in his synthesis, grant Marxism, realism, or materialism a sufficiently large place. Although he held a great admiration for Marx, we hardly risk being mistaken in affirming that he always remained rather far removed from true Marxist thought, and that even when he appeared to adhere to it, he did so – perhaps without realising it – more out of tactical skill than out of deep and intimate conviction. More a philosopher than an economist, Jaurès in short asked of Marx only the confirmation of theses to which he was already won over in advance. Thus we find in his thought and work some of the errors and il-

[(5)] **Translator's Note:** *Action Française* was a far-right, monarchist, and anti-parliamentary political movement founded in 1899.

[(6)] **Translator's Note:** The CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*) is a major French trade union confederation, historically associated with revolutionary syndicalism during this period.



capable of putting an end to economic instability and class struggle, Proudhon seeks the solution of the social problem in a reform of circulation and exchange, leading gradually to the disappearance of all usurious levies.

Opposed during their lifetime in personality and doctrine, Proudhon and Marx were opposed even after their death through the struggles between their disciples. The triumph of Marxism in the International after 1867 was accompanied by the decline of Proudhonism, and the Proudhonian renaissance at the beginning of the 20th century asserted itself all the more strikingly as the crisis and disintegration of Marxist ideas intensified. When Proudhon rises, Marx, by an almost automatic movement, falls. Those who extol Proudhon – a Fournière or a Rouanet – judge Marx lukewarmly, while orthodox Marxists – Charles Rappoport, for example – do not hide their contempt for Proudhon.

Finally, during the war, the antagonism was marked even more vividly and acutely than before, and some sought to elevate it to the height of a conflict between two national psychologies. Opposite Marx, profoundly German in his authoritarianism and materialism, Proudhon was held up as the symbol of the French mind through his intransigent liberalism and generous idealism. Summarising this thesis, Charles Turgeon wrote:

> In this duel, where the antipathy of two minds is heightened by the incompatibility of two doctrines, it is permissible to see, above the antagonism of two exasperated prides, even above the clash of two doctrines and the opposition of two tactics […] a more serious and more irreducible conflict, the conflict between the French mind and the German mind.[3]

[3] Charles Turgeon, 'Essai sur la conception de l'histoire et du progrès

I do not dream of denying that this way of presenting things is broadly accurate. If we wish to place Proudhon back within his historical context, synthesise his ideas faithfully, and characterise his past influence, we are necessarily led to bring to the foreground how Proudhonism stands opposed to Marxism.

Yet it is not at all the same when, moving on to the second point of view mentioned earlier, we focus primarily on the current scientific and practical value of Proudhonian thought. If we place ourselves deliberately on this terrain – as I would like to do in the following pages – we will be led to highlight certain Proudhonian ideas to which commentators, and perhaps Proudhon himself, have sometimes granted only secondary importance, but which, appreciated with the benefit of hindsight and experience today, prove to be singularly profound and eminently useful for the work of revision and reconstruction imposed upon us by the necessities of the present hour.

Consequently, the aspects in which Proudhon stands opposed to Marx will no longer appear to us as the most essential or the most worthy of retention, but on the contrary those in which Proudhon prepares the ground for Marx and complements him. Proudhonism and Marxism have not been able to withstand the formidable test of time intact. On many points they have crumbled. Without seeking at all costs to maintain an artificial and fragile unity for them, let us retain their most resilient and solid fragments. We will see that they harmonise and can, so to speak, fit together. The construction that we will thus build will perhaps differ considerably from original Marxist and Proudhonian thought. Perhaps Marx and Proudhon would not always recognise their inspiration and contribution at first sight. What does it matter if, by this means, we succeed in incorporating the best of their work into a historical philosophy and a social doctrine capable of bringing us the insights we need today?

d'après Proudhon', *Revue d'économie politique*, 1915, p. 258.



*Classes* 'soft and nebulous'. The theorists of syndicalism helped to dispel these prejudices. Yet they made the mistake of attaching themselves excessively to the individualist and traditionalist aspects of Proudhonian thought, thereby rendering fragile their synthesis of Marxist and Proudhonian theories.

Indeed, by placing the emphasis, without qualification or reserve, upon Proudhonian individualism, they were inevitably led to orient themselves towards Nietzsche far more than towards Marx. Of the three ancestors to whom they refer in turn – Nietzsche, Marx, Proudhon – it seems clear that the first is their most authentic master, and that the notion of the working class upon which their system rests is a transposition of Nietzschean theses onto the social plane, just as imperialism is another such transposition onto the national plane. Are not the doctrines that place the individual, the class, or the nation above all else as an absolute variants of the same mystical, romantic state of mind, and do they not all exhibit the common trait that contempt for reason and forgetfulness of measure cause them to lose their sense of limits and of the universal? Today, when more than ever we feel how indispensable this sense of limits is to the maintenance of order and civilisation, it is not in that direction that we can seek our path and our salvation.

As for the moral traditionalism that constitutes one of the most curious aspects of Proudhonian thought, it does not seem to us either that a doctrine of the future can grant it the pride of place that Georges Sorel and Édouard Berth reserve for it. While in Proudhon an intransigent, austere moralism was able to coexist with great boldness in the revision and critique of political and social institutions, we cannot elevate this particular case to the height of a system. On the contrary, it seems to us that doctrines seeking to maintain moral rules and practices in their rigidity and purity will increasingly be drawn to adopt a distrustful and hostile attitude towards the critical spirit, towards popular parties and classes, whereas conversely innova-

numerous and the most important, and that rational theories are often merely an ideological screen and stage-set – a veneer with which human beings like to coat their conduct, and which does not reveal its deep motives. Certain of Proudhon's solutions thus appear questionable and fragile to us. We are no longer as assured as he was that one can 'drown love in justice' without misunderstanding its nature, or eliminate Christianity without imperilling individual and social morality, or affirm that humanity, once social reform has been accomplished, will enter an era of serenity and felicity.

Individualism and rationalism, when they present themselves as abstract theories, as absolute concepts, all too often succeed only in mutilating and deforming the social reality that they claim to dominate and regiment. They are valid insofar as they express and translate active forces, and that is why we will draw from Proudhonism what is useful and fruitful in it not by opposing it to Marxism, but by borrowing from it, in order to combine them with economic materialism, the elements of a broadly realist doctrine.

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In the final years before the war, the idea of reconciling Marx and Proudhon was, so to speak, in the air. One may even regard the theories of revolutionary syndicalism and the doctrine of Jaurès as efforts at a synthesis between Proudhonism and Marxism. Yet however useful these attempts may have been in certain respects, it does not seem to me that they can suffice or fully satisfy us today.

**I.** The school which, under the direction of Georges Sorel, sought to extract a philosophy from revolutionary syndicalism had the great merit of rescuing from the oblivion into which they had unjustly fallen certain crucial parts of Proudhon's work. We can appreciate how necessary this was when we recall that in 1892 a mind as ordinarily judicious and well-informed as Maurice Bourguin denied Proudhon any historical sense and declared *On the Political Capacity of the Working*



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Proudhon was a brilliant and vigorous dialectician. But he was also an observer and a realist. His peasant origins, his professional life, and his positive philosophy developed a taste for the concrete in him. Thus from his work, which at first glance presents itself as a chain of syllogisms and abstract formulas – as a veritable social algebra – an attentive analysis can easily extract a conception of method, of historical evolution, and of revolutionary tactics that in many respects is akin to Marx's.

**I.** Whence comes the originality and interest of *Economic Contradictions* if not from the fact that in it Proudhon poses in a new form, imbued with relativism and historicism, the problem of the relationship between political economy and socialism?

He refuses to condemn political economy wholesale. According to him, the individualistic, optimistic theories and conservative, liberal doctrines of a Smith, a Jean-Baptiste Say, or a Bastiat deserve to be studied because they express and summarise a body of observations drawn from the economic life of a particular era and particular countries. The economists' sole error is to have mistaken what were merely transient historical categories for general, eternal laws, and 'to see in every accomplished fact a decree of proscription against any hypothesis of change'.[4] Thus interpreted, political economy is no more than an 'impertinent rhapsody'.[5] Restored, on the contrary, to its true limits and meaning, and conceived as 'the collection of observations thus far made regarding the phenomena of the production and distribution of wealth',[6] political economy retains a high value. Proudhon declares: 'It may be, then, that political economy, despite its individualistic tendency and its exclusive affirmations, is a constituent part of social science, in which the phenomena that it describes are like the primary

[4] *Contradictions économiques*, I, p. 103.
[5] Ibid., p. 46.
[6] Ibid., p. 37.

benchmarks of a vast triangulation and the elements of an organic and complex whole.'[7]

As for socialism, it has made the mistake of confining itself to the abstract and the *a priori*, of lacking, just like political economy, a historical sense. 'The error of socialism has consisted hitherto in perpetuating religious reverie by launching forward into a fantastic future instead of seizing the reality that is crushing it.'[8] Hence those utopias, those arbitrary reconstructions that Proudhon rejects because they bear no relation to reality and are consequently of no practical interest. Hence the artificial opposition that has been established between political economy and socialism. While political economy, bogged down in routine, misunderstood the future, socialism, lost in abstraction and dreams, despised tradition and slandered the past. Proudhon writes forcefully: 'Both denying in turn – socialism the experience of humanity, political economy the reason of humanity – both fail in the essential conditions of human truth.'[9]

To discover this human truth and thereby reconcile political economy and socialism is the goal that Proudhon sets for himself; and to achieve it, he undertakes to study society 'in the sum total of its successive manifestations',[10] to discover the tendencies of historical evolution. In *The General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century*, he himself characterises his method in terms with which the most orthodox Marxist would find no fault:

> What I am about to do, like what I have already done, is therefore neither prophecy, nor agitation, nor appeal […] I state what is, consequently what will be […] I am no more a fortune-teller than I am

[7] Ibid., p. 43.
[8] Ibid., II, p. 395.
[9] *Contradictions économiques*, I, p. 43.
[10] *Idée générale*, p. 180.



Forewarned by his intellectualist and rationalist philosophy against political indifferentism,(4) Proudhon is also protected by it against the temptations of national indifferentism. He loves in France 'the homeland of the singers of the Eternal Revolution'.[35] He realises that, 'despite all servitudes, in no place on earth, neither in Europe nor in America, is the mind – which is the whole of man – as free as here'.[36] Yet if his patriotism finds its foundation in the love of reason and justice, it also finds its limits there. Though a patriot, Proudhon is by no means a nationalist, and he goes so far as to say, in a letter to his friend Beslay: 'I would be man enough to sacrifice my homeland to justice if I were forced to choose between the one and the other.'[37]

Let us not conceal from ourselves, moreover, that Proudhon's intellectualism did not always inspire him felicitously, and that in this respect too a serious work of revision and free selection is required of us. Proudhon, in the ardour of his faith in the explanatory and organising reason of the world, did not always assess at their true value the forces that in real life thwart and combat it, often with success. His economic realism made him sense the power of interests, not that of sentiments and instincts. Today, while we are increasingly convinced, notwithstanding the efforts of anti-intellectualist schools, that reason furnishes us with a marvellous instrument of scientific investigation, observation and experience have on the other hand led us to recognise that 'non-logical actions', to use Vilfredo Pareto's expressive terminology, remain in our day, despite the progress of science and the critical spirit, the most

[35] *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'État*, p. 280.
[36] *Mélanges*, III, p. 33.
[37] *Correspondance*, IV, p. 256.

(4) **Translator's Note:** In theology and political philosophy, *indifferentism* is the view that differences of religious or political doctrine are of secondary or negligible importance.

conception and the Catholic conception of human destiny, the antagonism is absolute, and there is no social institution, no practical solution, no individual approach on which they can agree. Always, where the one approves, the other condemns […] Whoever gives himself to the one conception thereby separates himself from the other.'[32] I do not know whether Bourde had read Proudhon, whose name he does not mention, but assuredly his vigorous and subtle study of the revolutionary spirit would have delighted the adversary of Mgr Mathieu, Cardinal-Archbishop of Besançon.

If the struggle engaged between the *Ancien Régime* and the Revolution in 1789 is in its essence philosophical and spiritual, this is equally true of the political and social conflicts unfolding before our eyes today. This means that Proudhon does not conceive of socialism as a doctrine or movement with a purely utilitarian and economic content. For him, socialism derives its value from the fact that it satisfies, better than the present regime, our ideal of equality and justice. In this sense it is the extension and flowering of democracy, and we know that although Proudhon sometimes expressed himself in rather harsh terms regarding the Republic and universal suffrage, he is no less firmly and profoundly democratic. One of the merits he recognises in the democratic regime is precisely that it opens the way, through the political equality it institutes, to economic and social equality. 'Between equality or political right and equality or economic right there exists an intimate relation, such that where one of the two is denied, the other will not be long in disappearing.'[33] Conversely, where political equality reigns, economic equality must one day or another triumph. 'For me', declares Proudhon, 'socialism is the formal term, the complete expression of the Republic.'[34]

[32] Paul Bourde, 'Qu'est-ce que la Révolution française ?', *Mercure de France*, October 1914, p. 410.

[33] *Capacité politique*, p. 214.

[34] *Mélanges*, II, p. 132.



> a man of a party or sect. From the present I deduce the general consequences of the future. These are a few leaves from the book of destiny that I cast to the wind. That will be: that is all I can say, because it is written and we cannot prevent it.[11]

**II.** The imprint of realism is likewise found in Proudhon's conception of historical evolution. While it is true that Proudhon represents history as a rigorous deduction for which a philosophical law provides the key and governs its development, he nevertheless does not close his eyes to the lessons of experience, and does not refuse to see the role that phenomena of force and economic factors play in the life of peoples. In this way, his thought remains infinitely fuller and richer than that of pure intellectualists, and contains insights that a positive, synthetic philosophy of history would do well to incorporate.

What, for example, is Proudhon's attitude towards war? He condemns it in principle and predicts its disappearance. And yet he cannot help feeling a certain sympathy for it: it seems legitimate to him insofar as it allows all conflicting forces to assert and measure themselves.

Certain passages in *War and Peace* clearly show that a realist concern underlies this recognition of a right of force. Does not Proudhon maintain therein that the jurisdiction of force conforms to the orientation of the modern mind, 'foreign to theology, weary of metaphysics, eager for positive ideas, fond of things that can be valued and discounted'?[12] And to establish, against sentimental pacifists, that war is the natural state of the human race, that 'true, universal, perpetual peace would be death', does not Proudhon invoke the following considerations:

[11] *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 272.

[12] *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 282.

> Weaklings[(2)] ask how beings endowed with reason can think they honour themselves by engaging in such dreadful combat. Let them ask instead how, the world being composed of forces, those forces act against one another and consequently fight one another. For the interplay of forces bears no resemblance to the dance of the Muses who, in their harmonious choruses, cross, intertwine, withdraw, and rejoin without their light, rapid movements producing any friction or collision. Forces do nothing for show; their action necessarily concludes in a real outcome: for this to happen, they must collide with one another, shatter one another, devour one another – on that condition alone are they productive.[13]

Of these forces in action, the principal ones, although not always the most apparent, are economic forces. Proudhon, a shrewd observer, realises this. Shall we say that in this respect he proved to be a precursor of historical materialism? Certainly not, if we assign to Proudhon's ideas a weighting calculated according to the place they occupied in his thought, for these declarations of the primacy of the economic over the political or the ideological are secondary in his work compared with the intellectualist *leitmotifs* that dominate it. Yet if we proceed, as Edouard Droz advises us, to 'that selection of the best to which the classics themselves must be submitted in order to endure otherwise than by name',[14] we must then recognise the importance of certain texts in which Proudhon converges with

[13] *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 282.

[14] E. Droz, *P.-J. Proudhon*, Librairie de Pages libres, 1909, p. 30.

[(2)] **Translator's Note:** Proudhon uses the term *femmelettes*, a derogatory word for 'weak women' or effeminate men; translated here as 'weaklings', though it is worth noting the misogynistic undertone typical of Proudhon's polemics.



suggestive book *Between Two Worlds*, sets forth the spirit of the Revolution in these terms:

> The French Revolution was something altogether different from the fall of an old dynasty or a change of institutions; it was the fresh assault launched by the Titans upon Olympus; it was the most formidable act of will of which history was ever witness – the act of will that overthrew all the old standards of measure by means of which man had hitherto judged the quality of the world and that imposed new ones; it was the pitched battle that man waged against God to cast Him down from His throne. For centuries man, through the skirmishes of philosophers and scholars, had disrupted communications between earth and heaven, until at last, when the hour had come, the main battalions set off, charged to the assault, and God was reduced to nothing more than a philosophical phantom. Upon the steps of His throne sat the human mind.[31]

Similarly, Paul Bourde, seeking to define the master tendencies of the Revolution, declares that it brought to the world a new conception of human destiny, which can be analysed as a threefold belief in the natural goodness of man, the right to happiness in the present life, and continuous, infinite social progress, and he shows how these three fundamental articles of the revolutionary creed stand radically opposed to Christian dogmas: 'Belief in human excellence is the negation of the belief that man's nature is corrupt; belief in happiness in the present life is the negation of the belief that life is a penance; and belief in progress is the negation of the belief that the earth is a place of expiation. Between the revolutionary

[31] G. Ferrero, *Entre deux mondes*, pp. 325–326.

plexity of political questions and recognised that rigid, traditional forms of authority ought to be replaced by more flexible, more democratic combinations, Proudhon was set upon the path of economic federalism. No doubt he did not probe and analyse this notion as Paul-Boncour or Maxime Leroy were to do in our own day. Yet it is already a fine achievement that he had the intuition of this fruitful idea, which makes it possible to harmonise and realise what is accurate and legitimate in Marxist economism and Proudhonian individualism.

**II.** By highlighting the growing importance assumed in the modern world by the will of individuals to affirm their personality and govern themselves freely, Proudhon humanises history and social philosophy. Likewise, Proudhonian rationalism fortunately broadens and corrects on many points the Marxist conception of historical evolution. Whether it is a question of the meaning of the Revolution of 1789, the content of socialism, or the idea of the homeland, Proudhon seems to me to have often seen more accurately than Marx, because he understood that one cannot gain an exact account of the transformations undergone by societies if, in order to explain them, one focuses exclusively on their economic and technical substrate.

Contrary to those who regard it as a mere change of political regime or a simple transfer of property, Proudhon holds that the French Revolution marks the beginning of an entirely new era for the world; and in his great work, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, Proudhon, reviewing all social problems in turn, shows that for each of them the revolutionary philosophy, resting upon experience and reason, leads to solutions incompatible with those adopted by the ancient world built upon the principle of revelation. Is this view of things accurate? This is not the place to debate it. Yet we may at least point out that it is confirmed by the opinion of some of the most recent and authoritative sociologists. Let us cite only two. The Italian historian Guglielmo Ferrero, in his highly original and



the Marxist interpretation of history in what is true and solid in the latter.

When, in 1840 and 1841, he studies the regime of property, Proudhon marks its influence and repercussions across the various aspects of social life. In the *First Memoir*, he declares that property has been the generative principle and determining cause of all revolutions.[15] In the *Second Memoir*, he writes: 'As has been the constitution of property among a people, such also has been the family, such the marriage, such the religion, such the military and administrative organisation, such the legislation and judicial procedure',[16] and he devotes a special chapter to showing how property alone explains the history of Sparta, Athens, and Rome.

When, in 1851, he asks what is the foundation of our modern societies and the secret agent of their transformation, Proudhon does not hesitate to answer: 'Political economy is the queen and ruler of the age [...] Social economy, little-known divinity, leads the world.'[17]

When, in 1865, he seeks the underlying causes of war, it is in the economic order that he discovers them:

> In order to have the final word on war, we must [...] consider that, independently of the motives of religion, homeland, state, constitution, dynasty, there is the unofficial – God forbid that declarations of war should ever speak of it! – yet very real factor of subsistence [...][(3)] The primary, universal, and ever-constant cause of war, in whatever manner and for whatever motive it is kindled, [...] is

[15] *Premier Mémoire*, p. 193.
[16] *Deuxième Mémoire*, p. 180.
[17] *Idée générale*, p. 314.

[(3)] **Translator's Note:** The French *subsistances* refers specifically to material provisions or the food supply, a central concern in the political economy of war.

> the lack of subsistence – or, in more elevated style, the rupture of economic equilibrium.[18]

When, at the end of his life, he attempts to specify the respective importance of economic functions and political functions, it is to the former that he accords pride of place:

> Despite their ceremonial majesty, political functions play a far less essential role than economic functions. Before legislating, administering, building palaces and temples, and waging war, society works, ploughs, navigates, exchanges, and exploits the land and the seas. Between economic functions and political functions there exists a relation analogous to that which physiology indicates among animals between the functions of organic life and the functions of relational life: it is through the latter that the animal manifests itself externally and fulfils its mission among creatures, but it is through the former that it exists, and all that it does in its freedom of action is in truth only a more or less reasoned *conclusum* of its primordial powers.[19]

More striking still is this passage from an article published by Proudhon in *Le Peuple* in November 1848, in which he indicates how a change in the economic regime gradually brings in its wake a transformation of society as a whole:

> If ancient religion, the threadbare systems of philosophy, the old political constitutions, judicial routine, and the old forms of community and association as well as of literature and art have been nothing more than particular expressions of

[18] *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 98.

[19] *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (written in 1865), p. 162.



of sacrificing liberty, since for him justice is 'equilibrium between forces, that is to say between liberties'.[30]

Proudhon therefore constantly keeps in mind the inviolable right of the human person, and this enables him to pose the social problem more correctly and completely than Marx. Marxists narrow and distort the meaning of this problem when they place themselves solely on the terrain of economic action and evolution, when they see in the social question a mere 'question of the stomach'. If it were only that, it would be relatively easy to resolve: between rival interests an agreement is always possible. The gravity of social conflicts stems from the fact that the workers' revolt does not have solely material causes and aspects; it is the daughter of democracy as much as of large-scale industry, and if it is assuming an ever-growing acuity, it is because under the influence of an intellectual and political revolution individuals are demanding their independence ever more fiercely at the same time as, owing to the industrial revolution, the need for organic and collective action is becoming ever more imperative. Marx did not clearly perceive this duality of origin and elements. And the renaissance of Proudhonian ideas on the eve of the war in French syndicalist circles was certainly due in large measure to the fact that, better than orthodox Marxism, Proudhonism nourished and echoed the workers' sense of their personal dignity and human worth.

Moreover, while Proudhon saw how the problem is posed, he was far from having resolved it. His optimistic philosophy led him to believe that unlimited individual liberty and perfect social justice could easily coexist, that the free will of human beings would suffice to ensure economic order, and that the State would one day disappear to make way for the reign of contracts – naive illusions that we cannot share. Nevertheless, even this constructive part of Proudhon's work is not entirely outdated or obsolete. Because he increasingly sensed the com-

[30] *Théorie de la propriété*, p. 144.

sciousness of itself and the idea that corresponds to it. All that it lacks to enjoy full political capacity is a practical programme of action. The day it possesses this – and Proudhon strives to sketch it out – it will be able to engage in the struggle with complete confidence: willingly or by force, capital will have to bow before the supremacy of labour.

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Thus, in many respects, Proudhon heralds or confirms Marx. Yet it would be an ingratitude and an error to welcome his thought solely insofar as it coincides with Marxist thought. Proudhonism also retains contemporary value insofar as it brings to an overly exclusive, overly schematic Marxism the flexibility and complements needed to adapt it to the requirements of contemporary science and practice. To take as definitively acquired the realistic and scientific method that Marx, if not invented, at least defined and applied with incomparable vigour and power, and, in the name of that very method, to correct what is overly one-sided and mechanistic in the Marxist construction – such seems to us to be the present task of sociologists and socialists. To carry out this task, it is towards Proudhonian doctrine that they must turn. Two of its guiding ideas, above all, will be of precious assistance to them.

**I.** We know what worship Proudhon professed for individual liberty. 'Liberty', he wrote in his election manifesto to the voters whose suffrage he solicited in 1848, 'liberty, that is my whole system: liberty to infinity, absolute liberty, liberty everywhere and always.' It is because he wishes to keep it beyond all reach that Proudhon rejects reform systems that expand the sphere of action and powers of the State at the expense of individual initiative, that he defends the institution of private property against the attacks of certain of his friends, and that he accepts the principle of association only with reserve and distrust. Even when he seems to place the concern for justice above every other preoccupation, Proudhon has no intention



> the material state of societies, is it not evident that, once this state comes to change – in other words, once political economy is revolutionised from top to bottom by a change in the relationship between the two great forces of production, labour and capital – everything changes in society: religion, philosophy, politics, literature, and the arts?[20]

One certainly cannot read these lines without thinking of the distinction, which Marx was to make classic, between the social base and superstructure.

**III.** Confronted with the struggle of parties and classes, Proudhon's sympathies instinctively go to the middle class and reformist tactics. It was because Marx sensed this that he so brutally condemned Proudhonism. However, a closer examination reveals an entirely different current in Proudhon's work that at certain moments inclines him towards the working class and methods of revolutionary action. This current was never to gain the upper hand because it ran too counter to the most general and deepest tendencies of Proudhonian philosophy. Nevertheless, already visible in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, it is asserted and specified in Proudhon's final great work, which we regard today as the most suggestive and prophetic: *On the Political Capacity of the Working Classes*. 'The idea, with its categories', says Proudhon in *Justice*, 'is born of action and must return to action, on pain of the degradation of the agent.'[21] And he deduces from this that the artisan, the man who acts, is in no way inferior to the intellectual, the man who thinks.

'He who holds his idea in the palm of his hand is often a man of greater intelligence, or at any rate more complete, than he

[20] Cited by E. Droz, op. cit., pp. 88–89, note 1. Other similar texts may be found in C. Turgeon, art. cit. Cf. also Gaëtan Pirou, *Proudhonisme et syndicalisme révolutionnaire*, Paris, Rousseau, 1910, pp. 201, 205, and 263.

[21] *De la Justice*, II, p. 215.

who carries it in his head, incapable of expressing it otherwise than by a formula.'[22] For the same reason, industry occupies a higher rank on the scale of Proudhonian values than science. 'Science, indeed, is essentially speculative and requires the exercise of no faculty other than the understanding. Industry, on the contrary, is both speculative and plastic; it presupposes in the hand a skill of execution adequate to the idea conceived by the brain [...] The duly instructed worker represents complete intelligence, intuitive and plastic.'[23]

Consequently, any philosophy that does not rest upon experience and practice is nothing more than useless and even dangerous speculation, because it tends to draw man towards daydreaming and pure contemplation, turning him away from work and action; according to Proudhon, this is the failing into which Christianity fell, and of all the reproaches that Proudhon addresses to it, this is perhaps the one closest to his heart. A true and fruitful idea can arise only from contact with reality. Moreover, it can be translated into acts only through the co-operation of practitioners and the working masses. 'No doubt ideas are born in the brain of the thinker, but they succeed only if the people attach themselves to them and turn them into institutions and customs that legislators and judges subsequently transform into articles of law and rules for the courts.'[24]

Consequently, since the man of the people is closer to the truth than the intellectual, the latter cannot claim to dictate duties and conduct to the former. Let him limit his ambition to translating the aspirations of the masses into formulas. 'We are the monitors of the people, not their initiators. Our whole science consists in observing the manifestations of the people, soliciting their word, interpreting their acts. To interrogate the

[22] *Les Majorats littéraires*, p. 27.
[23] *De la Justice*, II, p. 244.
[24] *Capacité politique*, p. 63.



people is for us the whole of philosophy, the whole of politics.'[25]

Proudhon attempted this study, this interrogation, on several occasions, and it is in *On the Political Capacity of the Working Classes* that he best succeeded in drawing out its lessons.[26] First, he notes the existence, within contemporary societies, of distinct and opposing classes. Although privileges have been abolished in the political order since 1789, the resulting legal equality has not had the effect of equalising material life or the conditions of production and exchange. The free play of economic factors has given rise to class antagonism, which it would be childish to ignore and which ought instead to be specified and accentuated. However conciliatory Proudhon was, he did not forget that according to the Hegelian philosophy dear to him, it is when the antithesis is sharpest that synthesis is easiest. Applying this idea to the working class, Proudhon concludes that the best tactic for it is intransigence and secession. 'To distinguish oneself, to define oneself, is to be, just as to merge and be absorbed is to lose oneself. To break away – a legitimate secession – is the sole means we have of affirming our right and, as a political party, of gaining recognition.'[27] Therefore, let the working class fold back upon itself, repudiate any alliance with the bourgeois parties, march alone into battle conscious of its unity, and cultivate within itself the spirit of revolt against the propertied classes and the liberal professions towards which it displays far too much respect and humility.[28] The bourgeoisie, in whom Proudhon placed his trust for a long time, but whom at the end of his life he judged severely, 'is no longer a class that wills, but a coterie that traffics'.[29] The working class, on the contrary, has possessed since 1848 con-

[25] *Mélanges*, I, p. 137.
[26] L. Harmel, 'Le Testament de Proudhon', *La Clairière*, 1 March 1919.
[27] *Capacité politique*, p. 185.
[28] Ibid., p. 38.
[29] Ibid., p. 51.