

# Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

an uncomfortable thinker

Nicola Chiaromonte

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Said Fouché: "Give me a scrap of paper with a man's signature, and I will have him executed". This may be a basic principle of State Police procedure, but in intellectual affairs it is simply no good.

By quotations carefully extracted from their context, Mr. Schapiro [J. Salwyn Schapiro, "P. J. Proudhon, Harbinger of Fascism", *The American Historical Review*, July 1945] attempts to prove that Proudhon was: 1) "a harbinger of Fascist ideas... (who) sounded the Fascist note of a revolutionary repudiation of democracy and socialism... the intellectual spokesman of the French middle-class"; 2) a supporter of dictatorship in general, and of Louis Napoleon in particular; 3) an antisemite; 4) an enemy of the American Negroes; 5) an advocate of war; 6) an enemy of the Common Man; 7) an antifeminist.

The first charge is proved by Mr. Schapiro in the following way: Proudhon was a petty-bourgeois and a harbinger of Fascism because he did not believe in the Marxist notion of "class struggle", or in that of a violent revolution crowned by the victory of the proletariat, while he saw that in modern times a violent revolution could only mean dictatorship and the triumph of some kind of middle class. But Marx and the socialists, adds Mr. Schapiro, were wrong anyway, insofar as they did not fully understand the nature and the historical role of the middle class, while Proudhon's "inharmonious" insights have been borne out by contemporary events.

From all this, one thing is strikingly evident, namely that while Mr. Schapiro does not himself believe in the validity of Marxist notions, he uses them to define Proudhon and to show that he was, if not so wrong after all, then bad. This gives his argument a peculiar twist. Because from a marxist point of view it may be correct to say that Proudhon was a petty bourgeois, a traitor and a Fascist, since he did not believe in class warfare, in the dictatorship of the proletariat, and such things. But if one thinks that marxist notions are wrong anyway (and on such a fundamental point as the historical role of the various classes), then we are entitled to ask that he judge Proudhon on some other clearly defined grounds, and on the basis of what Proudhon actually meant.

It is my contention that Proudhon's arguments (bad or good, that's another story) are stated with perfect clarity in his work for anybody who is willing to make the necessary effort to understand them. If I had to restate them in a few words, I would say that Proudhon's fundamental concern was to discover in the actual workings of human society a truth that would not be a

“class” truth, so that the triumph of social justice would be a triumph of Reason, not of violence, a creation of society itself, not in any way an imposition from above, whatever name the “above” might have— God, State coercion or Class Dictatorship. This truth he called Justice, and he meant both the “idea” and the concrete reality of Justice present, in a positive or in a negative way, in every social situation. This idea inspires his whole work, and Proudhon gave it an unsystematic but very impressive treatment in the two thousand pages of *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Eglise*. These two thousand pages are completely neglected by Mr. Schapiro, who on the other hand makes an abundant use of excerpts from Proudhon’s correspondence treating them as if they were meant to be theoretical formulas, and not personal opinions personally and privately expressed.

From Mr. Schapiro’s essay, furthermore, one would learn that Proudhon was an anarchist, but nothing at all about the substance and essential meaning of Proudhon’s relentless fight against what he called *le principe gouvernemental*. It becomes then far too easy for Mr. Schapiro to hang Proudhon in effigy for being a supporter of dictatorship on the basis of his attitude toward Louis Napoleon. That such an accusation could be uttered at all is so preposterous that it would be unbelievable if we did not have so many examples today of how completely intellectual prejudice (and the obdurate will to talk formulas instead of sense) can twist the judgement of respectable people.

To understand Proudhon’s attitude toward Louis Napoleon nothing is needed but to read what he wrote on the subject keeping in mind what really happened in that tragic year, 1848. There was, among other things, the rage, the despair, the utter contempt for socialist and democratic politicians, in a man who, as early as 1840, had seen defeat, dictatorship, and also war, coming *because* of the immense stupidity of demagogues who (drunk with visions of 1793 and barricades) were ready to send the workers to be slaughtered for the sake of empty phrases and petty ministerial changes. Which was what they did in June, 1848.

Not to speak of the fact that the famous pamphlet *La Révolution démontrée par le Coup d’Etat* was so much of a bonapartist pamphlet that its author was forbidden to publish anything on political matters after that; and not to mention the other well-known fact that Proudhon was in jail for three years and in exile for seven years because of his strenuous fight against bonapartism, I would maintain that his attitude toward Louis Napoleon was fundamentally clear, and also intelligent and very honest. He saw with perfect lucidity (as Mr. Schapiro himself grants) that the combination of a government machine of which only the authoritarians understood the nature, and of a mass of people left in a state of chaotic disillusionment and bewilderment, would unavoidably spell dictatorship, Empire, and eventually war. For Proudhon, it was by no means a question of middle class against proletariat. In fact, he stressed over and over again how the inertia (or “passive support”) of the disgusted workers had been an essential factor in the success of the Coup d’Etat, while the “liberal” middle class disliked intensely the idea of losing the political franchises which they themselves, through the hands of their sons and husbands and fathers, had helped to destroy in the persons of the Parisian workers. Moreover, what Proudhon meant when he said that Louis Napoleon could be “the Revolution or nothing” was not to express faith in a man whom he had opposed with all his strength and for whom he had no respect whatsoever, but rather to proclaim his conviction that, Napoleon or no Napoleon, the Revolution could not be stopped, and that the ridiculous Cesar had no choice but to go willingly in its direction or to be dragged along by historical necessity.

With the best men of his time, Proudhon saw (with wide open eyes and without any sentimentality or illusion about the actual vicissitudes of history) the immense social upheaval of modern times in the form of “irresistible progress”. That upheaval was to him such a fundamental and evident fact, and it coincided to such a point with the necessity of Truth itself, that it would have been grotesque for him to think that a Monsieur Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte could be anything but its tool. Political fury, intellectual boldness, and his love for grandiose visions, often led Proudhon to make statements that might sound queer, or even absurd. But after all, if Proudhon is known for something, it is for his unbounded hate for any form of coercion. In order to admit that he meant to *support* the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon, one would have to assume that he nourished some obscure personal ambition. At that very moment, anyone who has any familiarity with his life and works would hear the echo of the thundering words he once threw in the face of Monsieur Thiers, in Parliament: “Monsieur Thiers, I am ready to tell the whole story of my life here from this tribune. I challenge you to do the same”.

So far, so good. Mr. Schapiro’s attack on Proudhon appears to be the result of misunderstanding and lack of sympathy, rather than of deliberate hostility. But when he comes to Proudhon, the advocate of war, antisemite and anti-Negro, he is being inexcusably devious, and should know much better.

Proudhon’s *La Guerre et la Paix* is a passionate effort to see clearly into “the mysterious bonds that unite might and right”. In order to do that, the author starts out by taking for granted that war *is* in human nature, that in war humanity has really sought to appease, in an obscure and fearful way, the need for justice by which it is possessed. Everybody who has read the book knows that its first part takes the deliberate form of an apology for war. As a matter of fact, such an approach is typical of Proudhon, and constitutes one of the most original characteristics of his method, which is, in a sense, truly Socratic. But everybody who has read the book also knows that it ends with the demonstration that, while war can only be understood and justified as a violent search for justice in society, never can justice be achieved through war, but only through the establishment of real just relations between men and between nations, and that there can be neither justice nor peace except in a free federation of peoples.

Mr. Schapiro just ignores all that. And his attitude would not be correctly described if one did not stress that only a couple of pages before accusing Proudhon of being a warmonger he had accused him of being a traitor to the proletariat and an enemy of socialism because Proudhon did not believe in violent revolution. Evidently, Mr. Schapiro prefers to assume that Proudhon was a man without any intellectual or moral consistency to wondering a little about what he, Mr. Schapiro himself, is writing.

In the same book, speaking on the eve of the American Civil War, Proudhon states quite bluntly that this “war of liberation” will not liberate the Negroes, that they will, in the best hypothesis, pass from one kind of slavery into another, and that, all considered, it would be better for them to remain under their Southern masters and strive for their freedom through betterment and self-education than be liberated by the Northern *armies*. One is free to disagree completely with such an opinion. But, if one knows Proudhon at all, one will also know on what assumption the statement is uttered. The assumption is the basic one for Proudhon: that it is worse than meaningless to say or imply that man can be “liberated” by any machinery whatsoever, governmental or other. Man, according to him, can only be helped to liberate himself by his fellow men, in the course of common life and common effort. It may be that Proudhon on the American Civil War was guilty of hasty generalization (although I understand that there are a

few people today who would be ready to grant that he was right). But Mr. Schapiro is, to my knowledge, the only person who has ever thought of accusing the great heir of the eighteenth century *philosophes* of being “anti-Negro”.

As for anti-semitism, Mr. Schapiro’s indictment of Proudhon’s on this account is based on the fact that Proudhon uses several times the word “Jew” in connection with bankers, the Stock Exchange, financial capitalism, and institutions of a similar kind. Besides the fact that the connection was not, after all, altogether arbitrary and without foundation, one might as well label Voltaire as an antisemite because, since he disliked the Bible with some intensity, to him the word “Jew” was, to all practical purposes, synonymous with superstition.

On the other hand, there would be no point in denying that Proudhon was antifeminist. Alexander Herzen, who had an immense respect and love for Proudhon, was quite incensed by the narrowness of his views on the rights of women and on the family as an institution. Certainly, when he speaks of women and of family discipline under the father, Proudhon shows the worst side of his peasant nature. Not only that, but, by going back to the Roman notion of a family founded on an inflexible patriarchy, he also contradicts the very substance of his social philosophy which is from one end to the other a relentless attack against the philosophical and social foundations of Roman and Napoleonic law.

There is one point, however, on which I am ready to yield to Mr. Schapiro not only willingly, but also with great enthusiasm. This is when Mr. Schapiro says that Proudhon was “an enemy of the Common Man”. Yes, thank God, he was. Proudhon hated the “common” man, he hated the “average” man, he hated the “class” man, he hated profoundly and mercilessly any kind of fiction by which straight, unalloyed, naked human reality could be hidden, distorted, warped—hence oppressed and suppressed. Moreover, Proudhon was not at all a lover of humanity. He was something better. He was a man himself, a thinking man and a free man.

On the whole, since Mr. Schapiro has chosen to depict Proudhon by way of arbitrary quotation, he might as well have accused him of being also:

1. an enemy of free nations, because to him the Polish and Italian patriots were muddle-headed sentimentalists who assumed that freedom from foreign domination plus some form of constitutional government would automatically mean real freedom and the idyll of nationhoods, while he, Proudhon, thought that the arithmetical operation would rather be: nationalism plus a reinforced State equal despotism, war, and the disruption of any hope for European unity;
2. a nationalist, because, on the strength of the aforesaid conviction, he vehemently criticized Napoleon III and his Italian “war of liberation” as being completely at loggerheads with the French “national interest” which it was supposed to further, since the French nation could not possibly have any interest in the formation of a new military State at its frontier;
3. a supporter of “law and order”, because he repeatedly maintained that “political Government” actually meant social anarchy, while free association and the “federal principle” were the only possible basis of real law and real order in society;
4. a philistine, because he attacked some of the foremost writers and artists of his time, Victor Hugo, George Sand and Delacroix among others, as being “immoral and false”;

5. a futurist, because, writing on art, he not only upheld Courbet as a great painter but also attacked the “absolutistic cult of Form”, predicted that “truthful artists will be persecuted as enemies of Form and of public morality”, and outlined a notion of “critical idealism” in which truth about the human world and rejection of moral, social and artistic conventions were united in a way which is not far from the way of Tolstoi and of Van Gogh.

In fact, all this, together with Mr. Schapiro’s attack, simply points out Proudhon’s great originality as a thinker: his tenacious refusal to take things for granted; his eagerness to discover new aspects of reality as well as new ways of demonstrating the truth in which he believed; and, when arguing, his constant ability to argue his own case starting from the very grounds of his adversary—which is one of the aspects of his Socratism, and leads him to make statements that could easily be shown to come very near to certain fundamental notions of modern philosophy.

There is, however, a more general question involved in all this. It does not specifically concern either Mr. Schapiro or Proudhon, but rather the two entirely different types of attitudes represented by them. What is striking in Mr. Schapiro’s case is that he is unable to give a satisfactory account of the type of complex approach represented by Proudhon. Why?

I think it is impossible to understand Mr. Schapiro’s attitude if one does not assume that what he is actually asking for is a one-track, monolithic theory, a theory giving all the answers, complete with instructions how to prove it, and also to disprove it.

Such a theory would have to be built on a level of half-truths dogmatically asserted. Mr. Schapiro, one suspects, would have liked to be able to reduce Proudhon’s ideas to a statement of the kind: “The world is bad because financial credit is not given freely. The free credit bank would make it good”. He would then have had the choice of saying: ‘After all, it is not nonsensical, since free credit would certainly be a good thing’—or else (like Marx) of getting indignant and treating Proudhon as a nincompoop who wants to solve the social question with the one magic stroke of free credit. The important point, in both cases, would be that one would not have to deal with “contradictory and inharmonious” statements, but only with simple-mindedness.

Fortunately, Proudhon is far from being the kind of comfortable thinker Mr. Schapiro (and a few others) like to deal with. He is the kind of thinker who, because he believes in truth, feels free to challenge everything short of truth. For Proudhon practical solutions cannot be but partial, and the essence of the social problem is that it remains open. In fact, what one finds at the root of Proudhon’s thought is the unshakeable conviction that human society constitutes an ever present and ever resurgent problem, which might or might not have a final solution, but in any case requires above everything else that it be kept open throughout the vicissitudes of history. This is, for Proudhon, the mission of the honest man and of the intellectual, and can only be fulfilled through intellectual freedom and actual common work.

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Still, to defend Proudhon against a certain kind of misunderstanding seems superfluous. The mere fact that, after having been buried so long ago under the terrifying epitaph: “PETTY BOURGEOIS”, he is still being called names seems a sufficient testimony to the vitality and truthfulness of what is left to us of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *homme du peuple*.

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