

Proudhon, Sociologist and Activist of the Autonomy of the Social

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If Proudhon can and should be read as a forerunner of sociology, is it not above all because he was one of the first to have systematically hypothesised the autonomy of its very object, the “social”? As everyone knows, this hypothesis is foundational to sociology. The late Pierre Ansart reminded us that the heart of Proudhon’s sociological thesis is an “essential heterogeneity of the social relative to the individual”.¹ Before him, the Durkheimian Célestin Bouglé emphasised that if Proudhon’s work pertains to sociological theory, it is because it shares the premise that “the meeting of individual entities generates an original reality, something greater than and different to their mere sum”. And, he continued, “arguably no thinker has made greater use of this premise than Proudhon” because “he constantly opposes, to purely individual phenomena, the notions of collective force, collective being and collective reason”.²

However, this theory of the irreducibility of the social – of the collective – to the individual does not exhaust this hypothesis of the autonomy of the social. It raises another question: that of the relationship between the social, the political and the economic. In the war of the sciences, sociology was only able to assert itself as an autonomous science by rejecting the self-proclaimed status of both political philosophy and political economy as the science of society.³ It did so by refusing that the mystery of the social order – the fact that there is, among or between people, something rather than nothing (chaos, arbitrary violence, war of all against all, etc.) or, to put it another way, the fact that people manage to give a lasting form to their coexistence – can be resolved either by identifying society with a system of power, as if the heteronomy of its political establishment, even if it were legitimate, were the absolute condition for the possibility of human coexistence; or by reducing it to a market, as if commercial ties alone were sufficient to make society. But is it not this double refusal that also defines the unique anarchism and socialism of Proudhon? Is it not this hypothesis of an autonomy of the social that enables both sociology as a scientific discipline, and socialism or anarchism as paths for emancipation?

Let us therefore attempt to unravel some of the simultaneously sociological and normative questions raised by this Proudhonian plea for an autonomy of the social.

The irreducibility of the social to the political and the economic

In his *Carnets* of 1852, Proudhon said: “I do politics to kill it. To put an end to politics.” This confession summarises, in a particularly polemical tone, his well-known critique of governmentality. But this desire to end the “governmental bias” should not be reduced to a purely negative injunction to abolish all powers. It is also an invitation to accede to a “constitution of society” that is no longer based on the hierarchy of political powers but on the free organisation of social forces. It is in *Confessions of a Revolutionary*, written, as Pierre Ansart also recalled, “in a sort of anger after the failure of a hoped-for social revolution”⁴, that Proudhon makes this fundamental distinction:

“In every society I find the distinction between two kinds of constitution, one of which I call the *social* constitution and the other the *political* constitution; the first, inherent to humanity, liberal, necessary, the development of which consists above all in weakening and gradually eliminating

¹ Ansart, P., *Sociologie de Proudhon*, Paris, PUF, 1967, p. 18.

² Bouglé, C., *Sociologie de Proudhon*, Paris, A. Colin, 1911, p. XIII.

³ Cf. Chaniel, Ph., *La sociologie comme philosophie politique. Et réciproquement* [Sociology as Political Philosophy and Vice Versa], Paris, La Découverte, 2011, particularly the introduction.

⁴ *Op. cit.*

the second, which is essentially factitious, restrictive and transitory. The social constitution is nothing but the equilibrium of interests founded upon free *contract* and the organisation of *economic forces*, which are in general: Labour, Division of Labour, Collective Force, Competition, Commerce, Money, Machines, Credit, Property, Equality in transactions, Reciprocity of guarantees, etc. The political constitution has *authority* as its principle. Its forms are: Class Distinctions, Separation of Powers, Administrative Centralisation, Judicial Hierarchy [...]. These two constitutions are [...] of utterly different and even incompatible natures”.⁵

This fit of anger is also a theoretical and normative act of force, as if society could – and should – no longer be established on the basis of political heteronomy but on the autonomy of the social, on the mutual guarantee of the liberty of all by all, which on the contrary allows us, under the supreme law of justice and contract, to do without any government. By this radical gesture, Proudhon can thus be interpreted, inseparably, as a pioneer of anarchism but also of sociology. Indeed, while Proudhon constantly suggests that it is necessary to “proceed [...] to social reform through the extermination of power and politics”, such a reform, in all its radicality, assumes a science of the social (which he calls for as early as *The Celebration of Sunday* in 1839) capable of asserting that the social order – and Proudhon also continues to advocate for order – is an immanent order: an order that precedes the political order, and that cannot therefore proceed from it. In this sense, this new science requires dethroning political philosophy in its age-old ambition to constitute “the” science of society, in order to better assert the primacy of the “social constitution” over the “political constitution”.

It is reasonable to assume that this hypothesis of an autonomy of the social, with its own constitution and consistency, results from an optimism characteristic of pre-Marxist socialisms. This idea of an order created spontaneously in humanity, without the intervention of a coercive power, is especially reminiscent of the Fourierist utopia. As Miguel Abensour stressed, what distinguishes these master dreamers is first and foremost their desire to subvert modern society precisely by preventing the State from embodying the One or the universal. Indeed, he said, where does the utopian strategy start from, if not civil society and “the multiple centres of socialisation that it carries within itself”? And what is its aim, if not to substitute a “society of societies” for the exteriority of power and State violence? In this sense, he said again:

“Decentralisation, the multiplication of places of socialisation [...], an invitation to plurality, dissemination, a call for communication between groups, series constantly being made and unmade, the proliferation on the same territory of micro-experimental communities ‘behind the back’ of State unification: such are utopia’s ways of allowing a new way of living together to be established”.⁶

But, paradoxically, does this hypothesis of an autonomy of the social not also shape the thesis defended by the liberal economists, whereby the natural harmony of interests is sufficient to produce such an order? And besides, would Proudhon not suggest that the solution to the social problem should not lie with the public authorities, but precisely with the “identity of interests”, to the point of defining himself as a financier? In one of his last texts, *War and Peace* in 1861, he wrote: “What governs the world [...] is not the Gospel, nor the Koran, nor Aristotle, nor Voltaire; no more is it the constitution of 1852 or that of 1793. It is the *Great Ledger*, whose pages

⁵ *Confessions d’un révolutionnaire*, Paris, Editions Tops/Trinquier, 1997, p. 173.

⁶ Abensour, M., « Le procès des maîtres rêveurs » [The Trial of the Master Dreamers], in *Libre*, no. 4, Paris, Payot, 1978, p. 226.

carry only two words in large letters: on one side *Debit*, on the other, *Credit*.⁷ It is therefore not without reason that C. Bouglé could characterise the sociology of the author of *The Stock Exchange Speculator's Manual* as a “sociology of an economist and an accountant”.

However, despite his fascination with political economy and what he called “banking solutions”, and also his provocations against the “sentimental socialism” of his age, for Proudhon it is a question of identifying other laws: laws other than economic laws alone, laws apt to found this autonomy of the social not only against political heteronomy, but also against “economic insolidarity”, the “respect for parasites”, the “necessity of poverty”, and even the “homicidal Providence” promoted by the economists. Such laws are those of the Collective Being, laws that come only from itself. And it is up to the new science of society mentioned as early as 1839 to identify them. In specifying that this science must be discovered, not invented, Proudhon invites us to consider that there is an intelligence of the social which is specific to it and which must be explained from within. This social intelligence is manifested in particular in the subtle “balancing” of individual forces which produces a collective force, a distinct power generated by the association of people. And it is through this collective force that the *sui generis* reality that constitutes the Collecting Being is manifested; in short, any social group, whether it is the ensemble constituted by the famous workers erecting the Luxor obelisk, a workshop, an orchestra, an academy, an army or “society”.

In this sense, the inner essence of society is, in his words, “organic” in nature – the order it embodies results from and is manifested in cooperation (and conflict) among the immanent forces of which it is composed – not “mechanical”, in the sense of an artificial or conventional order that comes from outside. On the contrary, the order of social order comes from within. It emerges from social practices themselves. Thus the bond – or solidarity – that unites its different members is not the artificial result of an external constraint, but inherent in the spontaneity and creativity of social life. Thus, while the Collective Being is a *sui generis* reality, it is not a transcendent reality.

However, people, whether willingly or by force, constantly project such transcendent instances through a process that Proudhon calls “externalisation”, by giving themselves a religion, subordinating themselves to a power, or surrendering themselves to the “homicidal Providence” of the economists’ supposed laws; in short, by attributing to what is only a human work the capacity to create social reality. Considering the autonomy of the social thus opens up to a critical point of view these forms of alienation and domination, from which society must extricate itself so that it can in some way “recapture” itself and retrieve its “inherent, secular constitution”.

Justice, or the normative autonomy of the social

But what can this capacity of the social to capture or recapture itself be supported? On which lever? What is the pivot, the axis of a society restored to itself, master of itself? For Proudhon, this lever, this axis, this pivot is, as everyone knows, the idea of justice. Through justice, Proudhon proposes to recognise a normativity immanent to the Collective Being. The social is not a normative no man’s land, a simple play of forces: the very texture of social reality is, as he put

⁷ *La guerre et la paix*, in *Œuvres complètes de P.-J. Proudhon* [Complete Works of P.-J. Proudhon], Paris, Marcel Rivière, 1927, p. 463.

it, “ideo-realist”. This assumes that justice is not an abstract ideal, a transcendental implant, but a practical reality, an “idea-force” in Alfred Fouillée’s sense, enshrined in interpersonal practices and relations, a manifestation of what I have called the intelligence of the social.

Here we see the emergence of Proudhon’s sociological, Durkheimian argument: within social reality itself there is a distinct force of obligation, which in some way renders any external constraint parasitic (hence his criticisms of Hobbes): a force of obligation which links people together and which they are linked to, which holds them together and which they hold on to. For this reason, the imperative of justice – which for Proudhon can alone freely oblige people to one another – is indeed the condition of the autonomy of the social. Conversely, this means that any unjust order can only be heteronomous. And as everyone knows, it is on this pivot – because for Proudhon everything revolves around justice – that Proudhon defends his mutualism and then his federalism.

However, it is first and foremost at the heart of the most anodyne interpersonal relations that he emphasises the socialising and individualising force of this free obligation of justice. Thus in *Justice* he opposes the “oblique” look, cast “from top to bottom”, that of contempt, inherent in the relationship between superior and inferior, with the respect, the “equality of consideration”, manifested in the greeting exchanged between two people who look at each other face-to-face, in the eyes, as equals. Justice thus means equal and reciprocal respect for the dignity of each person. This means for us that the autonomy of the social presupposes the reciprocal and egalitarian quality of interpersonal relations that we find in simple greetings. But, more broadly, for Proudhon, it is society as a whole that takes shape through these transactions, reciprocal exchanges, pacts of mutual respect, all of which respond to justice.

However, we should not misunderstand the meaning of the imperative of reciprocity which, for Proudhon, ratifies interpersonal relations under the seal of the contract. The “regime of contracts” that he calls for, as the concrete form of the “system of immanence” that he opposes to the “system of transcendence”, is not, of course, the reign of interest. If he sees in the contract the exclusive expression of a realistic justice, his contract-based rhetoric is in part misleading. Social life cannot be exhausted in the strict accounting of a generalised system of give-and-take. Referring to the mutualist organisation, he writes:

“Which private or social virtue will you accuse men of lacking who reciprocally promise each other everything, who, without granting *anything for nothing*, guarantee each other everything, assure each other everything, *give each other everything*: Education, Work, Trade, Property, Wealth, Security?”⁸

“Giving everything without granting anything for nothing”: this phrase is striking as it recalls the very logic of the Maussian gift⁹, the subtle articulation between generosity or unconditionality (“giving everything”) and reciprocity or conditionality (“without granting anything for nothing”). In short, if we need to know how to calculate, we also need to know how to give everything. Thus the moral dimension of Proudhonian sociology appears more clearly, and thereby how much the autonomy of the social requires the social order to be understood as a moral order. This is why the Proudhonian “regime of contracts” in which this autonomy is achieved in practice is based less on the calculation of well-understood interests than, first of all, on the ca-

⁸ *De la capacité des classes ouvrières* [Political Capacity of the Working Classes], in *Œuvres complètes de P.-J. Proudhon*, Paris, Marcel Rivière, 1924, p. 224.

⁹ Mauss, M., « Essai sur le don » [Essay on the Gift], in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, PUF, 1989.

capacity of people to oblige each other reciprocally. Or, to express it another way, because the law of justice is immutable and objective, the contracts that implement it – or approximate it – are, for Proudhon, irrevocable by their very nature. Their model is much more that of the oath, the promise, the pact of trust:

“Men, having made a pact of probity, loyalty, guarantee and honour between themselves, cannot say in separating from each other: we were wrong; now we will become liars and rascals again; we will gain more that way”.¹⁰

In short, he concludes later, “one does not go back on a pact, on a profession of faith, as with the mutualist profession of faith, as with the federative pact”.¹¹ It is this fidelity to the pact (and the conjugal pact should also be included, but that is another matter), whatever the price, and if necessary against one’s own interests, that sums up the Proudhonian law of justice. And it is justice that, on the model of the conditional unconditionality of the Maussian gift, enables this self-institution, both performative and normative, of the social.

Conclusion

This performative and instituting dimension of the imperative of justice deserves to be measured in all its radicality. It implies that the social order can no longer be based on any form of authority, on any form of traditional consensus, or even on shared beliefs, but on justice and equality alone as the internal requirement for social practices and relations. Here, Proudhonian anarchism curiously meets the sociology of Durkheim. For the latter, because the forms of mechanical solidarity of past societies are now behind us, what has become necessary is a very different form of social solidarity that does not depend on the authority of collective beliefs, but rather on a shared commitment to equality in participation and reciprocity in cooperation; in short, on justice. This is the historical condition of the autonomy of the social. And this was the conclusion of *The Division of Labour in Society*:

“The task of the most advanced societies may therefore be said to be a mission for justice. [...] Just as the ideal of lower societies was to create or maintain a common life as intense as possible, in which the individual was engulfed, ours is to inject an even greater equity into our social relationships, in order to ensure the free deployment of all those forces that are socially useful. [...] Just as ancient peoples had above all need of a common faith to live by, we have need of justice. We can rest assured that this need will become ever more pressing if, as everything leads us to foresee, the conditions that dominate social evolution remain unchanged.”¹²

Neither Durkheim nor Proudhon believed, as the conservatives of their time did, that the problems confronting modern societies came from a growing division of labour or the development of individualism, eroding tradition. For Durkheim, they result from the fact that we continue to think and act as if authority and consensus were essential, when they have in fact been replaced by justice and equality as prerequisites for implementing new forms of cooperation between people. Moreover, as Durkheim shows – and Proudhon, through his distinction between social constitution and political constitution, could only share its analysis – modern societies still too often seek to rely on the authority of formal systems that can no longer create ties. On the con-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹² Durkheim, É., *De la division du travail social*, PUF, Paris, 1991, p. 381.

trary, a new form of spontaneous social order must be created to challenge this type of authority by developing and consolidating itself from the bottom up. Ultimately, the problem of modern societies results from the inability to recognise that individual freedom is possible only in a certain social context, and under the condition of a certain quality – egalitarian and reciprocal – of interpersonal relations, and from the resulting failure to implement the justice needed to fully achieve it. As such – and this lesson of sociology is of course valid for our contemporary societies – do Durkheim and Proudhon not concur in showing that only by consolidating this autonomy of the social – the reciprocal quality of social relations that Marcel Mauss, a socialist activist and Durkheim’s nephew, would designate under the concept of gift¹³ – can we achieve freedom and justice for all?

¹³ Cf. Chaniel, Ph., *La délicate essence du socialisme* [The Delicate Essence of Socialism], Lormont, Le Bord de l’eau, 2009.

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