

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# The presence of Proudhonism in contemporary sociologies

Pierre Ansart

Pierre Ansart

The presence of Proudhonism in contemporary sociologies

1992

Retrieved on 21st April 2022 from [www.persee.fr](http://www.persee.fr)

Translated from the French by Shaun Murdock.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

1992



# Contents

Genetic structuralism . . . . .	6
Dynamic sociology . . . . .	9
The sociology of organisations . . . . .	14
Methodological individualism . . . . .	17

remains relevant because the problem remains. Likewise, his critique of the state and his analysis of its centralising tendency remains largely relevant. It seems to us that this is the essential reason for the presence of Proudhonism in sociologies that question political domination or bureaucratic burdens today. Proudhon is in some way present because of the permanence of his objects of study. And in this sense, the collapse of communism is making his analyses relevant again.

But it is also worth mentioning the permanence of the aspirations that he had so passionately expressed. Indeed, and not only in Europe, the burden of alienation continues to inspire resistance, condemnation and manifold attempts to escape socio-economic and political constraints, to find solutions, whether moderate or radical. Aspirations to self-management, socio-economic federalism and political autonomy are 'phenomena', realities that sociologies of change continue to find in their observation of social movements and resistance to oppression. Yet again, without explicitly referring to Proudhon, sociologists find social dynamisms that he had expressed in his time.

This not to say that Proudhon's work has been adopted in its entirety. The pages on the status of women are well forgotten, for example, if not by historians of ideas. But conversely, some of his bold ideas remain misunderstood and to some extent go beyond contemporary sociologies. Thus, the intellectual boldness of *The System of Economic Contradictions*, which consists in systematically rethinking economic contradictions and social tensions, remains ignored today while the social sciences separate economics and sociology, and very rarely dare to go beyond these disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, it cannot be claimed that Proudhon's anarchist and condemnatory ardour is fully echoed in current sociologies. And in this respect, Proudhon today remains the image of an uncrossed boundary, a critical image and, to some extent, a provocative body of work.

Proudhon thus escapes the simple dichotomy between determinism and freedoms. If we do not mind the anachronism, we could claim that his theories contain arguments against the individualist critique. Nevertheless, despite these nuances and reservations, the fact remains that methodological individualism can only find aspects to criticise in Proudhon's work. The analysis of social classes and social conflict, the condemnation of individualist illusions, the constant consideration of the social revolution: all these major themes in Proudhonian thought remain targets of criticism for a firmly individualistic sociology attached to the study of individual behaviours and interactions, and sceptical of thinking about revolutionary ruptures.

At the end of this investigation on the presence of Proudhonism in contemporary sociologies, we therefore arrive at a complex conclusion. While sociologists have largely forgotten Proudhon's texts and works, there is a clear continuity of his theories, especially in dynamic sociology and, as we have seen, in the critical approach to bureaucracies.

This continuity undoubtedly requires several additional explanations. We cannot ignore the importance of critical works, of multiple reprints which despite the converging hostilities from opposed political perspectives, have continued to evoke, publicise and update Proudhonian thought after 1865. The anarchist tradition has continued to maintain interest in and restate the importance of this founding work. Similarly, we must account for a rebellious sensibility of which Proudhon was a pre-eminent expression and which has continued through the tragedies and lapses of history.

Nevertheless, it seems necessary for us to give more importance to the continuity of the problems than of the writings. Proudhon asked general questions about alienation in work and in political life that are universal in nature, ensuring the ongoing relevance of his condemnation. Specifically, he tackled social realities which have not at all disappeared. His condemnation of state bureaucracy

It would certainly be misleading to imagine the continuation of a direct 'influence' of Proudhon's work in today's social sciences. Such a contested theoretical system, rejected by academia, could not constitute a faithfully conveyed legacy some 130 years later.

On the contrary, social sciences, and especially sociology, have been reshaped by transformations that were also apparent rejections of the Proudhonian problematic. The transformation initiated by Durkheim, who was so important for the history of sociology throughout the first half of the 20th century, took place against social philosophies and their excessive ambitions. By implication, Durkheim's severe criticisms of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer also reached the philosophies of history and the social philosophies of which Proudhon could be suspected. Furthermore, the transformation in research methods which occurred at the end of the 20th century, calling for restricted, fragmented research, discouraged intellectual bravery which was henceforth rejected in the field of political ideas. Finally, the wide spread of Marxism exerted strong pressure to fight against Proudhon's theories.

Similarly, contemporary French sociologists have hardly been inclined to count Proudhon among their leading thinkers, despite the efforts of Célestin Bouglé and then Georges Gurvitch. Among the authors of the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was mainly the works of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim that fulfilled this role. Proudhon, like Tocqueville and Le Play, was largely absent in sociologists' education, but for diametrically opposite reasons.

In contemporary sociologies, there is a peculiar paradox. While there are few explicit references to Proudhon's work, it is striking to see the appearance of themes, questions, and answers that bear the hallmarks of a resurgence of themes and questions expressed in Proudhon's writings. But these revivals are in no way identical among today's various sociologies, as if the theories of the anarchist from Besançon were still implicitly being debated, approved and rejected.

Two questions therefore arise that we would like to deal with in turn. First, which sociologies revive questions or topics addressed by Proudhon or his theories? This question will lead us to examine four contemporary paradigms: genetic structuralism, dynamic sociology, the strategic approach, and methodological individualism.<sup>1</sup> We will then outline to what extent these different paradigms are opposed in the accounts that we can reconstruct with Proudhon's work.

The answer to the second question will be much more difficult. To the extent that we will have highlighted the presence of Proudhonian themes in some contemporary work in sociology, how can we explain these continuations or 'returns'? How can we explain the presence of the forgotten? On this matter, we can probably only suggest hypotheses.

## Genetic structuralism

Without seeking to make an exhaustive list of points of reconciliation and separation between Pierre Bourdieu's works and Proudhon's writings, it must be emphasised that Bourdieu's analyses lead him, like Proudhon, to highlight the division of society into social classes. This point distinguishes them from the other three schools that we will discuss. Bourdieu's work combines investigations into cultural practices,<sup>2</sup> inequalities in the educational system,<sup>3</sup> and distinction strategies<sup>4</sup> to explore, in all their consequences, the effects

---

<sup>1</sup> We have proposed this necessarily simplifying classification in a work devoted to French sociologies in the years 1980–1990: Pierre Ansart, *Les sociologies contemporaines* [Contemporary Sociologies], Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu et A. Darbel, *L'amour de l'art* [Love of Art], Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu et J.-C. Passeron, *La reproduction* [Reproduction], Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction, critique sociale du jugement* [Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste], Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1979.

(neither deterministic nor individualistic) may prove to be its theoretical strength.

The idea of 'collective force' is not to be confused with a reality (a 'thing' in the Durkheimian sense) and even less as an essence. Collective force is not a tangible being, but should instead be considered an 'emergent' phenomenon since it is produced only by the active combination of workers. Equally, as Proudhon says, if it can be said that it has a reality, it is a completely 'separate', non-physical reality<sup>30</sup> that only a science of social processes could study.

Likewise, must we believe that socio-economic contradictions completely destroy freedoms? On this point, Proudhon attempts to make two assertions corresponding to two types of social experiences. On the one hand, he constantly returns to analysing the visible or hidden constraints, whether economic, political or ideological, that hinder social groups, especially the working classes. He does not aim to show the existence of a unique and unilateral historical determinism leading to a revolution; rather, he intends to identify the plurality of needs and determinisms that together cause historical ruptures.<sup>31</sup> But on the other hand – and this is the whole purpose of his critical activity – he strives to show that forms of individual and collective liberation and emancipation are possible, as is the achievement of greater justice. The notion of political capacity is typical of these emergences of specific freedoms. This can be seen in the case of the political capacity of the working classes: people who have been dominated by economic, political and ideological constraints can escape the forces that oppress them. They harbour the potential for emancipation, and it is the revolutionary intellectual's role to facilitate achieving these freedoms.

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Pierre Ansart, *Sociologie de Proudhon* [Sociology of Proudhon], Paris, PUF, 1967, p. 17–30.

<sup>31</sup> Georges Gurvitch, *Proudhon sociologue* [Proudhon, Sociologist], Paris, Centre de documentation universitaire, 1955.

doubted that in this feud Proudhon belongs to the followers of anti-individualist sociology. The concept of ‘collective force’ that he developed from 1840<sup>28</sup> is characteristic of the orientation that proponents of methodological individualism may call ‘sociologistic’. Through this concept, Proudhon aims to show that combining the labour of individuals yields a particular reality, a real force, which is not reducible to the sum of individual contributions. And, since this phenomenon is general, Proudhon often returns to this idea that society is a being, even if it is a system of contradictions, whose reality and laws should be studied.<sup>29</sup>

A temptation of individualist sociologists is to force the opposition between ‘totalists’ and ‘individualists’, as if all sociologists of social totalities were radically opposed to individualist theories and were drawn toward determinist, substantialist or essentialist illusions.

However, while Proudhon is undoubtedly a theorist of classes, contradictions and social conflicts, he nevertheless avoids this simple dichotomy between ‘holism’ and individualism. And perhaps this complex position partly explains the presence of Proudhonian themes in modern sociologies.

While he does affirm the existence of an identifiable system of contradictions, and thus the possibility of considering the social totality, is he convinced of the existence of ‘laws’ of history, and does he consider humans the victims of economic or historical forces? This is doubtful: his sociology does not lead to determinism or, in other words, his anti-individualism does not lead him to deny individual freedoms. It is undeniable that this is an original and heterodox position, and that Proudhon could often hesitate and introduce ideas that are difficult to reconcile, but this original position

---

<sup>28</sup> Proudhon, *Qu’est-ce que la Propriété ?* [What Is Property?], 1840.

<sup>29</sup> Célestin Bouglé has stressed this aspect, tending to treat Proudhon as a pre-Durkheimian sociologist; cf. *La sociologie de Proudhon* [Sociology of Proudhon], Paris, A. Colin, 1911, p. 70–81.

that this class division of society and individuals’ membership of one of these classes have on behaviour and representation.

Moreover, regardless of the distance between the authors’ conceptions of class, it must be emphasised that Proudhon’s ternary scheme, which distinguishes the bourgeois class, the middle class and the working classes,<sup>5</sup> is reproduced at the end of Pierre Bourdieu’s investigations, which led him to distinguish the *grande bourgeoisie*, the *petite bourgeoisie* and the popular classes.<sup>6</sup>

This reconciliation, despite the differences and divergences, has serious consequences, and places Proudhon and P. Bourdieu in a certain sociological tradition whose originality is underlined by the lively debates surrounding it today. This tradition, which may be called ‘class-based’ in the sense that it stresses the existence of classes as social realities, assumes that a certain knowledge of the social totality is accessible and that a ‘science’ can be established based on this reality. This fundamental intuition is found across the work of Proudhon, who does not doubt that this knowledge may be accessed, and that of P. Bourdieu, who adopts this premise. And this totality can be known through its main divisions, through the ‘war’ which puts proprietors and non-proprietors in conflict<sup>7</sup> and through the struggles for distinction among the various social classes.<sup>8</sup> Broadly, it can be said that the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators is part of the great class-based tradition inaugurated by Saint-Simon, Proudhon and Marx, understanding society as a system of antagonistic classes and as a totality that can be known through this interpretative framework.

---

<sup>5</sup> This ternary scheme is constantly adopted from the First Memoir (1840) to *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* (1865).

<sup>6</sup> Cf., for example, P. Bourdieu, Boltanski, Castel, Chamboredon, *Un art moyen* [A Middle-brow Art], Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques* [System of Economic Contradictions] (1846), Paris, Marcel Rivière, 1923.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction*, op. cit.

In this broad tradition, P. Bourdieu's works diverge considerably from Marxian economism in that they focus little on the economic characteristics of the different classes and instead concentrate on the culture specific to each class, on representations and symbolic behaviours, attaching greatest importance to relations of meaning and symbolic domination.

P. Bourdieu thus revives a way of thinking similar to that of Proudhon with regard to the very conception of social classes. Indeed, while maintaining an economic definition of classes in terms of conflict between proprietors and non-proprietors, Proudhon added that each class recreates its own culture, customs, values and ideologies.<sup>9</sup> The concept of *habitus*, proposed by P. Bourdieu to designate models of perception and practice that are transferred to the subject, internalised, and become sources of reproduction for agents of different classes, is of course not a Proudhonian term, but it correlates well with Proudhon's indications on the transmission and reproduction of class cultures. And just as Proudhon stresses collective illusions and the importance of religions, for example, in behaviours and the recreation of the social hierarchy, P. Bourdieu's analyses firmly support this critical analysis of symbolic domination, considered to be a major element in social inequalities and their reproduction.

A debate was thus opened based on comparable premises and would lead to a fierce conflict on the points of disagreement. Indeed, the question that runs through all of Proudhon's work is undoubtedly that of the political action of the working classes, a question answered in *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, where the conditions that will allow the dominated classes to emancipate themselves from capitalist domination are clearly analysed.<sup>10</sup> On this decisive point, which affects not only the whole concept of

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf., for example, in *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise* [Justice in the Revolution and in the Church] (1856), 6th Study, 'Le Travail' [Work].

<sup>10</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *La capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, Part II, ch. I.

significant in itself, and we will need to propose an interpretation of it.

Beforehand, we must consider the fourth paradigm that we define: methodological individualism. This final confrontation will provide us with new elements to consider.

## Methodological individualism

At the opposite pole from sociologies inspired by Marxism, sociologies close to this current reject any temptation to attribute consciousness and reality to notions such as 'classes', 'peoples' and 'nations'.<sup>27</sup> The fundamental principle of individualistic methodologies, Raymond Boudon stresses, is to firmly dismiss these entities and the illusions attached to them, taking only individuals, their behaviour and their choices as the main object of study and unit of reference. Dismissing any 'holistic' conception that would make society a totality transcending its constituent parts and imposing itself on individuals, and opposed to the illusion of discovering social determinisms, methodological individualism aims to study individual behaviour and observe the emergence of patterns based on individual conduct and choice.

Criticism of Marxism, and more specifically of its official version, is a favourite target of this individualist paradigm: criticism of the concept of objective social class, illusions of 'class consciousness' and class struggle, 'laws' of history, historicism and so on.

When set against Proudhonian theory, this critique is very clarifying, and allows us to better characterise it and to situate it more clearly with respect to contemporary sociologies.

Sticking first and foremost to the general theories of 'collective force', class 'warfare' and the three alienations, it cannot be

---

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Boudon, *La logique du social : introduction à l'analyse sociologique* [The Logic of Social Action: An Introduction to Sociological Analysis], Paris, Hachette, 1979.



From this perspective, the bureaucratic phenomenon is not inevitable, and some de-bureaucratisation is a realistic prospect. Proudhon does not envisage a utopian society without organisation or regulation any more than Michel Crozier and his collaborators. But they believe that the ills of bureaucracy (and especially French bureaucracy)<sup>25</sup> can realistically be reduced by a fundamental reorganisation of institutions.

It will not be argued that the proposals of current sociologists of organisations reproduce Proudhonian anarchism to the letter, and it would be an exaggeration to make such a confusion, but it is remarkable that the overall sense of reformist proposals closely resembles the Proudhonian inspiration at two levels.

At the general level of the economy and administration, there is a very broad agreement on the need to decentralise, to break down unitary structures, sources of waste, inefficiency, and perverse effects.<sup>26</sup> The criticisms that were made against state omnipotence, against the stifling expansion of centralisation, reproduce Proudhon's 1846 condemnations with striking continuity, when he asserted that state and economic centralisation necessarily led to inefficiency and the subjugation of producers.

At the level of social relations within the company, it is remarkable that Proudhon's calls for worker autonomy within what he calls 'worker companies', and his condemnation of hierarchical systems that force producers to compete against each other, have today become basic principles of criticisms of authoritarian and de-personalising systems.

It should be noted that these sociologists of organisations do not claim any membership of Proudhonism and that the connections we highlight here are not part of their argument. This silence is

---

<sup>25</sup> M. Crozier, *La société bloquée* [The Stalled Society], Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1970.

<sup>26</sup> M. Crozier, *Etat modeste, Etat moderne : stratégie pour un autre changement* [Modest State, Modern State: Strategy for Another Change], Paris, Fayard, 1987.

classes but also the whole interpretation of social action, we can say that based on his various works and investigations, P. Bourdieu's response is at odds with Proudhon's analyses and expectations. To Proudhon's dynamic but 'workerist' vision, which credits the 'working' classes with strong revolutionary potential, P. Bourdieu responds with an analysis of the 'popular' classes that emphasises their cultural dispossession and the absence of symbolic means of action against their exploitation. It is as if those working classes with revolutionary potential had disappeared from historical reality, leaving behind only the deculturated masses whose presence Proudhon had indicated, not without concern.

The conflict in this analysis is confirmed by two conflicting responses to the problem of determinism. Against the relatively optimistic response of Proudhon who, not without hesitation, expands the margins of freedom and indeterminism of human behaviour, P. Bourdieu puts forward a sceptical response stressing power relations, the influence of dispossession and the power of mechanisms of reproduction.

It is therefore not surprising that P. Bourdieu cites Proudhon's writings quite often. These citations suggest the existence of a common problematic on classes, relations of domination and relations of meaning, but they always result in polemic condemnations, evoking Marx's insults and rejecting Proudhon's petit-bourgeois hesitations.<sup>11</sup>

## Dynamic sociology

The second great current in sociology today, dynamic sociology, leads to completely different conclusions and a significant re-evaluation of Proudhon's work. By the term 'dynamic sociology' proposed by Georges Balandier, we mean a large body of work whose research centres on the study of change, mutations, social

---

<sup>11</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction*, op. cit., p. 50–52, 424.

movements and the future of societies. The works of Georges Balandier, Alain Touraine, Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean Duvignaud, for example, are part of this broad movement.<sup>12</sup>

This research no longer questions reproductions and determinisms, but the nature and extent of social transformations, not only at the economic or political levels, but at all levels and in all dimensions of the social, thus reviving Proudhon's broad questioning. And contrary to the evolutionist outlook exemplified by Auguste Comte or Herbert Spencer, these current sociologies are not based on a theory of progress or philosophy of history. As with Proudhon, while change is obvious and the subject of his thought, it is not reduced to an imagery of progress or a historicism. It is a matter of questioning changes and their meaning by rejecting eschatological illusions, without denying the possibility of decline.<sup>13</sup> The future remains open to progressions and regressions.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to Hegelian or Marxian philosophies, it is possible that these changes, however deep, may reveal anthropological continuities and permanencies, and therefore that Proudhon's apparent eclecticism in seeking to identify both the permanent and the transformations is the most reasonable way to rigorously consider and assess the changes.

The anthropological approach, identifying permanencies to better think about change, finds it full relevance in this perspective. Georges Balandier, by sketching a political anthropology and analysing the tensions that, in his view, cut across all possible societies, arguably reproduces a Proudhonian outlook that is neither fascinated by the repetitions nor trapped in an illusion

---

<sup>12</sup> The list of names we suggest here is far from exhaustive. Cf., P. Ansart, *Les sociologies contemporaines*, op. cit., ch. II, VI, and X.

<sup>13</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, 9th Study, 'Progrès et décadence' [Progress and Decline].

<sup>14</sup> Here we exclude *De la création de l'ordre* [The Creation of Order] (1842), in which Proudhon temporarily remains under the influence of Auguste Comte.

role in contemporary society is played by industrial and administrative organisations, he revives one of Proudhon's central concerns.

From *The System of Economic Contradictions*, and before the analyses of 1848–1851, Proudhon launches a vehement critique of the organisations of his time, emphasising their hierarchical nature which subjugates the producers and the inefficiency of this oppressive system. His critique of the deskilling of workers in *The System of Economic Contradictions* carries more force than it could have for Adam Smith and his followers, in that this destruction of knowledge and skills is linked to a revolutionary vision that presents it as solvable. This critique extends to the whole way in which work is organised, which is not only condemned for the appropriation of capital, but also for the structure of domination which embeds relations of power and submission within the company. For Proudhon, the growth of bureaucracies that would inevitably result from a communist revolution would have a catastrophic impact both on worker freedom, which would be destroyed, and on productive efficiency: the bureaucratisation of the economy would necessarily lead to 'poverty'.<sup>22</sup>

It can be said without contradiction that Michel Crozier's analyses of the *Bureaucratic Phenomenon*<sup>23</sup> go back from Max Weber to Proudhon. And on this point, we should probably correct the histories of sociology that make Max Weber the first sociologist of bureaucracy. Whereas Max Weber emphasised the rationality of bureaucratic laws and rules and was close to making bureaucracy the modern symbol of rationality, Proudhon, on the contrary, condemned its flaws: hierarchy, submission and inefficiency. This is what Michel Crozier proposes to analyse, placing the burdens, inefficiencies, and failures of bureaucracies, and not their so-called rational functioning, at the centre of his analysis.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère*, 9th Epoch, 'La communauté' [Community].

<sup>23</sup> Michel Crozier, *Le phénomène bureaucratique*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1963.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Introduction'.

It is therefore not surprising that Proudhon's work is read positively in this school of thought, even if the details of his writings are not subject to dedicated research by these sociologies, which are more concerned with analysing contemporary phenomena than commemorating the past. G. Balandier, G. Gurvitch, Alain Touraine, Edgar Morin and Claude Rivière all explicitly emphasised this lineage. Moreover, an interpretation of Proudhon's work was proposed which hints at an explanation of this theoretical lineage. Alain Touraine suggests that since the 19th century, two opposing tendencies have divided the working classes: one aimed at organising parties and hierarchical unions, and the other aimed at defending working-class culture and autonomous working-class action. Proudhon represents the second tendency and, for this reason, would be the inspiration for a sociology of collective action.

## The sociology of organisations

We must continue our investigation and examine more closely how a sociology of organisations seems to expand Proudhonian thought. It will not in any way be claimed that current sociology repeats or rehashes analyses from the past. The emergence of new phenomena is enough to rule out such a possibility, but it seems to us that a Proudhonian spirit continues unambiguously in the modern criticisms of organisational and bureaucratic ossification.

The question of the workshop or company as a place of specific social relations is indeed a basic question in Proudhon's thought. And while he is not satisfied by general calls for an insurrection such as those of Auguste Blanqui, it is because he also considers a radical reform of companies themselves to be essential. To affirm that the company must replace the government is also to state that the organisation will be the centre and the fundamental site of industrial society. When Michel Crozier points out that the decisive

of progress, but careful to grasp both the permanent and the changing, the anthropological and the historical.<sup>15</sup>

In this conception of change, 'social order' is no longer a fetishised term and an image of perfection. The Proudhonian meaning of disorder finds unique relevance after so many illusions of order, drawn either from conservative schools or from so-called revolutionary schools. For these sociologists of change, as for Proudhon, disorder is not necessarily nor exclusively destructive; rather, disorder should be acknowledged and the possible transformations of disorder into order should be examined.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, disorder is not a negative value, and the question arises as to how the transitions between order and disorder occur.

Moreover, the notion of order, like that of structure, is subject to critical evaluation in these sociologies. Here, it is doubted whether stabilities, structures and order are the living dimensions of the social, and it is readily suspected that the fetishism of order recreates naively conservative illusions. It is suggested that there is more to collective life than order and that, on the contrary, making the most of collective life implies pluralism, diversity, and individual and collective initiatives, and that true social life arises from this multiplicity of actions.

An essential distrust thus brings these dynamic sociologies closer to the Proudhonian outlook: the distrust of hierarchies and state structures. Of course, to call dynamic sociologies anarchist would be an exaggeration, but they reiterate Proudhonism's fundamental distrust of any social ossification and, characteristically, of hierarchies. Like Proudhon, these sociologists tend to suspect all hierarchies of being the temporary result of relations of force and of carrying a risk of destructive immobility. In particular, this

---

<sup>15</sup> Georges Balandier, *Anthropologie politique* [Political Anthropology], Paris, PUF, 1967.

<sup>16</sup> G. Balandier, *Le désordre; éloge du mouvement* [Disorder: In Praise of Movement], Paris, Fayard, 1988.

distrust is of state structures, readily considered as the symbol of ossification and repression.<sup>17</sup>

A fundamental question arises for these sociologies of change as to how to explain these changes and based on what fundamental questions. Again, these sociologies adopt Proudhonian criticisms of simple answers, particularly economisms, idealisms and statisms. Indeed, Proudhon, while repeatedly proclaiming the importance of economic transformations, is resolutely sceptical of reductive theories that make economic structures and their evolution the only laws of history. Likewise, he does not adhere to Comte's theories on the exclusive role of 'ideas' and philosophies. And, of course, his whole anarchist critique condemns the illusion that only political or state forces, and especially that great men, are the only agents of history.

Like Proudhon, sociologies of change have no single answer to this explanatory problem and, following the example of the author of *The System of Economic Contradictions*,<sup>18</sup> tend to distrust dogmatic answers on this matter. Attentive to the complexity of transformations, they offer multiple approaches and responses, and in these nuances they reproduce the various responses that Proudhon put forward, which may have seemed confused to his contemporaries. The concepts of contradictions, systems of dialectical contradictions, antagonisms, oppositions, resistances and so on, which may have seemed unnecessarily complicated to readers eager for simple answers, are constantly adopted in the vocabulary of sociologies attentive to the inexhaustible complexity of the real.

For these sociologists, as for Proudhon, the concept of conflict is a major concept to be analysed. Economic conflict in the relations between capital and labour is widely addressed and emphasised. But this antagonism is in no way considered exclusive. As Proudhon

---

<sup>17</sup> Cornélius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* [The Imaginary Institution of Society], Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1975.

<sup>18</sup> Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques* (1846).

hon had frequently stressed, the exercise of power and domination is no less a generator of conflict and resistance. Firmly avoiding economism, these dynamic sociologies are attentive to the plurality of contradictions, antagonisms and resistances, whether economic, social, cultural or symbolic. Conflicts over ideas and values are not mere epiphenomena whose true sources are to be uncovered by economic analysis, but as historical elements, in the same way that symbolic systems are a dimension of social practices. These sociologies rediscover the Proudhonian intuition that turns speech into action, and action into meaning: as Proudhon wrote in 1849, 'To act is always to think; to speak is to do'.<sup>19</sup>

Sociologies of action<sup>20</sup> are probably those that pursue the Proudhonian project the most closely. Indeed, they are attentive to conflicts and contradictions and, moreover, put social practices and the conditions under which they emerge at the forefront of their thinking. When Alain Touraine wonders about the conditions under which a group, a social category, can achieve action and manifest as a 'social movement',<sup>21</sup> he closely reproduces Proudhon's analyses in 1865. In *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, Proudhon asked the same question: how a real, objective class could acquire 'political capacity' and thus undertake collective action. He thus ushered in a problematic that has become central to modern sociologies: the question of how to establish and assert collective action. And his response, which theorises the transition from the economic to the political via the awareness of identity, broadly provides an answer that is central to much contemporary research.

---

<sup>19</sup> Proudhon, *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* [Confessions of a Revolutionary] (1849), Paris, Marcel Rivière, p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> Alain Touraine, *Sociologie de l'action* [Sociology of Action], Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1965.

<sup>21</sup> A. Touraine, *La voix et le regard* [The Voice and the Eye], Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1978.