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Principles of the Philosophy of Progress

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

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1850–55

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Ms. 2867 contains a section on the “Principles of the
Philosophy of Progress,” which focuses on the character of
collective beings and collective reason.

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1850–55

English system will extend everywhere: then large-scale cultivation could unite with *parcellaire* possession, and the revolution foreseen by socialism, the revolution of property that draws along with it all the others, will be accomplished.

17.—But the most serious consequence, in the eyes of the philosopher, of the combined use of the divisional and collective forces, is the *de facto* solidarity that this use gives rise to among the workers, and as a result the guarantee of rights that it calls for.

It is obvious, setting aside some interests of capital, which must not concern us here, and some privilege of the businessmen [entrepreneurs], whose initiative desires a remuneration, that the worker enmeshed in this organism, which reduces them to the role of a simple cog, barred from their liberty by their admission into the workshop, enchained, if we can put it that way, by their own cooperation, cannot be left without compensation. The freedom of movement that they lose of the one hand must be found again elsewhere; the intellectual inertia to which their specialty condemns them must be recovered in a higher combination. It is in vain that *Economism* opposes to the degradation of the hardworking masses the wealth of a progressive society; it is in vain that it invokes against these damned souls of civilization the necessity of its alleged principles, and that it offers them the consolations suggested by a hypocritical religion. There is no right against rights, no necessity that stands against justice, no religion that demands the mass to die of starvation in order to fatten a handful of the elect.

also []. That use is complex: each of the laborers who make up the group executes a distinct operation.

The result of that combination is known: A. Smith and J.-B. Say analyzed it very well. The worker who, instead of successively [] all the parts of his industry, always performed one, will become proportionally more skillful in that one;—there is for all less loss of time; finally, the machines, which one can consider as automatic workers, working in a more continuous manner, which increases the revenue from the capital []. For all these causes, production is noticeable increased, and while the worker, laboring outside that combination, could produce, with the same division of labor, the use of the same machines, and the same diligence, only 3000 pins a day, in the organized workshop he will produce 4800. The profit is thus more than a third []: this third, true work of the [], it is not, as I have said, to the division of labor that we must attribute it, but to the collective force.

6. All human labor tends to be organized more and more on that principle of the collective force and divisional force combined. It is this tendency that constitutes the economic movement of our century, a movement so formidable that it absorbs and converts all the others. It is for this reason that modern society separates itself definitively from ancient, catholic, feudal and barbaric society, where the industrial production, being unproductive, generally followed the example of agricultural production, given over from time immemorial to simple, individual labor.

Today, everything is subject to the law of organization. Already, in England, agriculture is *industrialized*, managed, not only by the division of labor, as with all the peasants, which the succession of the seasons is sufficient to command, but by the use of machines and collective force. Sooner or later, the

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V. OF COLLECTIVE ORGANIZATION

4. Whoever says *organization* says *analysis* and *synthesis*, indissolubly united. Whoever says *organization of labor*, then, says 1) decomposition of the labor into its elementary or constituent operations; 2) recomposition of those same operations into a single action.

The organization of labor exists from the beginning of humanity; I mean since the day when the human species becomes industrious. It would be strange that anyone who have the pretension, in this matter, of having discovered anything. But if socialism has fallen too often into the folly of fabrications, Economy, from its side, has been no less wrong in refusing to open its eyes and see the facts, in presenting its ignorance as dogma.

5. Industrial organization consists of the combined use of two forces: the collective force and the division of labor. Let us again take up the example of A. Smith.

It is proven, although the conscientious and diligent investigator says the contrary, that the division of labor exists as much for the solitary laborer as for a large workshop: it is by that division that he manages to multiply his products in sufficient quantity to make a living. Without it, his efforts would come to naught; he would only produce trifles.

Now let us [], as A. Smith and J.-B. Say have so well explained it, a workshop arranged in such a manner that each of the individual operations in which the function of the worker is divided are performed by a special worker, and we will see a new fact produced, and, as a result of this fact, some superior results: this fact is a new application of the collective force.

In the examples above, No. 3, the use of the collective force is *simple*, all of the individuals form the group identically executing the same task. In the work where the divided work is

2. So what is the division of labor, so badly understood by the economists that this single rectification ruins their whole system?

It is the art for the laborer, individual or collective, of attacking a function, too difficult in its totality, or too complicated, or too meticulous, of attacking it, I say, in its elementary parts, in such a way that the mind and body of the laborer who, formerly, finding themselves overwhelmed by it, could now deliver themselves from it with a superior force. Thus, in the division of labor as in the collective force, the principle is the same: it is to always attack a lesser task with a greater force. While, in one case, the laborers, individually too weak, form into groups, in the other they break, as it were, the bundle of their operations, in order to take them up again, with more advantage, in detail. What is the group, with its immense power, in comparison to a mass inaccessible to the individual, that one becomes vis-à-vis some fragmented operations, the ensemble of which makes up its industry.

3. Let A. Smith and J.-B. Say pretend then that the sometimes fantastic dexterity that the worker acquires then in a fragmented operation exclusively repeated; the economy of time obtained by that specialization of laborers, and the more advantageous use of machines in a large enterprise, should be counted for something in the results of the industrial organization, it is not in my thought to deny it. I would simply observe that these facts, in which they think to find the *cause* of the results of the division of labor, are themselves effects of the collective force.

I. THE CONDITIONS OF EXISTENCE.

Man is made up of parts called members or organs. What makes his reality is the *animistic* gathering of these organs in a whole that, as long as it lives, is called a *person*.

In the same way, a society is made up of parts that are persons or aggregations of persons. What established the social reality is the *intellectual* consent of these persons and aggregations in an ultimate whole that we call, as long as it endures, company, association, municipality, city, people, etc.

It is thus with all the existences that we can observe: it is always conglomerations of organisms or societies, formed of simpler parts, according to some unifying law.

1.—I generalize from this observation and I say: Every perceptible existence, from the grain of sand or drop of water to the man and the society, invariably and necessarily possesses the double character of *unity* and *collectivity*. So I have a right to consider the two terms as correlative and inseparable, as much in nature as in logic, and I define the being as a *group*.

The idea of a simple being is contradictory. Atomism is a fiction. For the same reason, substance in itself, prior to all phenomenality, is only a metaphysical notion: it does not *exist*.

2.—Every being, which is to say every group, or to remain within the terms of the definition, every unity-collectivity, by the very fact that it is a plurality of elements assembled according to a law, manifests an internal, radiant energy, capable at least of maintaining the unities that make up the group.

I generalize further, and I say: Existence implies *force*. These two ideas, like those of unity and collectivity, are correlative and inseparable, in nature as in the understanding. An existence without force is a contradiction. A force, without a group that sustains, represents and produces it, is, like substance in itself, a chimera: it does not exist.

3.—All beings, by virtue of the personal, radiant energy that constitutes them, attract and repel one another reciprocally,

tend to unite to form other groups or to be absorbed and dissolved, by the centralization and dispersion of their forces. That is an empirical fact sufficiently demonstrated by molecular attraction, the phenomena of vegetation and life, and History...

I generalize once again and I say: Creation is the ascending movement of existences; the chain of beings has no end: the universe, always changing, is eternal.

4.—There is then, for every being, two manners of manifesting its existence, and it could only have two: its *composition*, and its *action*.—Action, in certain beings becomes *thought* and *speech*.

Let us apply these principles to the study of economic phenomena.

II. THE FORCE IN THE SOCIAL BEING.

1.—There exists between men a tendency or attraction that pushes them to group and act, for their own great interest and the most complete development of their individuality, collectively and as a mass.

What is the principle of that tendency? The same as that of the attraction between all beings: It is a property and a condition of their existence (p. 2); it is impossible to know more of it, and consequently senseless to ask more. Let us limit ourselves to reasoning from the point of view of the aim.

The tendency in the group, fatal in some species, free and reflective only in our own, of all our most precious faculties, is a fact. The philosophers and naturalists, considering it in its mystical and superficial expression, have called it *attraction* or *instinct of sociability*, *sympathy*, *devotion*, *patriotism*, *charity*, *fraternity*, *humanity*, etc. They have seen in it one of the hallmarks of our destiny, the basis of justice, morals and religion itself. They have not gone further. The *useful* side, the *economic* and *productive* power of the human group, indepen-

ist can be subject to fractions. It is then from that opinion that they tell us, the one that a worker laboring in isolation could not manage to fabricate *20 pins*, the other that this same worker could not make *two cards* in a day. And the others who have followed them have all taken the thing seriously: it is accepted as certain in political economy that the same individual who can produce 4800 pins in a day, when he labors [], in a workshop where the chore is distributed, could not produce 20 of them if he was alone.

It is, however, notorious, and known to the least of the workers, that in all industries the division of labor can receive its application, whether by a single worker or by a group. A. Smith himself [] when he reports that in the workshop visited by him only ten persons executed the 18 operations of the pin-making industry, which supposes that some of those persons executed several of them. And J.-B. Say confirms it, when he adds that at the card-making factory, 30 workers are sufficient to make 70 distinct manipulations.

1. The division of labor, for the individual as for the group, [], for example, instead of executing, successively and without stopping, on *one* pin or *one* card, the 18 or 70 fragmented operations of which the fabrication is made up, executing them simultaneously on several.—Assuredly [] according to the [] of these methods, a worker [] not 20 pins per day; he would consume himself, at that ridiculous task, in powerless efforts. But if he distributed the manipulations intelligently, then, instead of a few units he would produce thousands; and if my intelligence counts for something alongside that of A. Smith, I would say that if he had one [] factory where 10 persons produced, by the division of labor, 48,000 pins per day, I knew myself a pin-maker who, thanks to the same division, working all alone, as at his profession.

It is thus that two of the founders of political economy accounted for the division of labor and its effects: I will later [] what is false and puerile in their [account].

8. But, what is, according to A. Smith and J.-B. Say, the reason for that prodigious multiplication of one single product, by a wisely combined division of labor?

According to the two writers, that reason, or that cause is triple: first, there is 1) the dexterity acquired by each worker, in a simple and often repeated operation; 2) suppression of the *loss of time* that workers make, in passing from one occupation to another, changing place, position and tools; 3) finally, the use, for each divided [parcellaire] function, of the most expeditious procedures, that is to say of machines, which are only truly advantageous in the large establishments where the abundance of work allows its division.

A. Smith, after having signaled these three *causes* of the fecundity of the division, adds that the *principle* of that division is the need for the exchanges; and as soon

9. Now, it is false that [in] the trade of the pin-maker, a single worker cannot come to produce 20 pins in a day; it is false that in the industry of the manufacture of cards and tarots, the same worker could not, at the same time, produce more than two cards; and Smith and Say, admiring the effects of the division of labor, have ended up not really seeing a thing there. It is even more false that the dexterity acquired and the suppression of the *losses of time*, of which I do not deny the merits, are the causes of that great fecundity: as for machines, they form a separate category in science, they should not figure in a theory of the division of labor. The advantage that results from the machine is one thing; that which results from the division of labor is another: the duty of the two professors was not to confuse them.

10. To believe A. Smith and J.-B. Say, who have only sought to imitate it, the division of labor will only exist where there again appear as many specialties of workers as the labor to ex-

dent of the work of the individuals, has completely escaped them. For all of them, as for the economists, the *social instinct* has remained a sort of platonic love, a budding idea that has never been expressed and realized. There, in fact, the evangelical work has stopped, and there moral philosophy has broken, both powerless to resolve the complicated problem of human relations, and on the highest questions of public and private right, reduced to appeal to divine authority and the reason of State.

2.—It is up to our century, to the positive and precise genius of modern societies, to study the social instinct in its practical development, and follow it in its speculative, moral and industrial manifestations.

From the formation of individuals into a group there results a *force*, numerically equal to the sum of the individual forces that make it up, but which is, by virtue of its unity, very superior in its application, and which must for this reason must be considered as the soul of the group, its own essential energy, its life, its mind. So that the individual, sensitive, intelligent, active and free, being taken for an elementary unity, the various groups in which it can enter form so many unities of a more and more elevated order, endowed, like the individual, with sensitivity, will, intelligence and action.

Thus, alongside the individual man arises the Collective Man, which is certainly something other than the sum or addition of the individual energies that form it, but, which, converting all these energies into a higher energy, *sui generis*, has the right to be treated from now on not as a being of the mind, but as a reason and veritable person. Such is the immense fact, principle of supernaturalism that must in the end rest on its certain base, the economic science, which I will attempt to summarize.

III. SIMPLE COLLECTIVE ACTION

3.—The collective force is generally recognized in every action that surpasses the scope of an individual force, working as long, and with the aid of all the tools and instruments that you might want.

One man, with a plow and some oxen, can turn over one acre in a day: ten men, with ten plows and ten pair, would work ten acres in the same amount of time. There would be time saved relative to the surface works: but as each plow can be considered as working for a simple individual, as each plow can, in ten days, accomplish the work of the ten, while there may be concert, community or exchange of services, there is not collectivity.

Just so, one businessman, disposing of material that he has purchased and workers that he has hired, can, in three months, build a fine looking country house. There again, there is time to be saved by the promptness of the construction: nevertheless, we can conceive that, in a pinch, the same individual could exercise in turn all the functions of stonemason, carpenter, etc.; and in time build his house by himself alone. We would see in the first operation rather an effect of exchange than of collective force. There again, we do not recognize the group.

Economy consider considers separately, as distinct principles and special forces, *exchange* and *community, observation*, etc. It does not confuse them with collective *force*. (See The General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century, Ch. III and VI.)

But here is where we will see it appear: let us begin with the simplest cases.

A man, of middling strength, can easily carry, for 60 feet, a burden of 125 kilograms. Let that man repeat that operation a thousand times in a row and he will have transported on his shoulders a whole boatload.

This is how the dockhands proceed in the ports. But let it be a question of a block of 2000 kilograms: individual strength

who color the side destined to form the back of the cards; the same who print in black the outline of the figures; other workers print the colors of the same figures; others dry the cardstock at the stove once it has been printed; once they are printed, other are occupied smoothing them on both sides. It is one particular occupation that cuts them with equal dimensions; it is another to assemble them to form packs; another still to print the wrappers for the packs, and yet another to pack them; without counting the functions of those persons responsible for sales and purchases, for paying the workers and keeping records. In the end, if we are to believe the people in that trade, each card, one little bit of cardstock that will fit in the hand, before being in a saleable state, is subject to not less than 70 different operations, which could all be the object of the labor a different sort of workers. And if there are not 70 series of workers in each card factory, it is because the division of labor has not been pushed as far as it could be, and because the same worker is responsible for two, three, or four distinct operations.

“The influence of the division [partage] of occupations is immense. I have seen a factory for playing cards where thirty workers produce 30,500 cards each day, that is to say more than 500 cards per worker, and we can assume that if each of these workers found themselves obliged to do all the operations by themselves, and even supposing them practiced in their art, *they would perhaps not finish two cards in a day and consequently, instead of producing 15,500 cards, they would only make 60.*”

“In several manufactories, these eighteen operations are almost all executed by different hands. However, I have seen one manufactory of this sort, which employed only ten men, some of whom, consequently, performed two or three distinct manipulations. The establishment was poor, and as a result poorly provided with the necessary machines; but their zeal sometimes made up for it all, and the common labor gave them about twelve pounds of middle-sized pins each day. Now the point being made up of four thousand pins, it follows that more than forty-eight thousand pins came each day from the hands of ten persons, and that each of these workers, doing a tenth of the general labor, must be considered individually as the artisan of four thousand eight hundred pins per day.”

Now here is the example supposed by J.-B. Say:

“The division of labor seems to have been pushed even farther in the fabrication of playing cards. It is not even the same workers who prepare the paper of which the cards are made, nor the colors with which they are printed; and by only paying attention to the single use of these materials, we will find that a deck of cards is the result of several operations, each of which occupies a distinct series of workers, male or female, who always apply themselves to the same operation. It is different persons, and always the same, who skim off the lumps and blockages that are found in the paper and harm the equality of thickness; the same who glue together the three sheets of paper of which the card-stock is made and put them in the press; the same

becomes powerless and if it is reduced to its own means the block runs the risk of remaining in place forever. For such a great effort, a group is required.

One worker has been able, in the past, over time, to cut and sculpt the obelisk of Luxor in the quarries of the Thebaid. In order to accomplish the loading, the transport to Paris, the unloading and the erection of the monolith, required a squadron commanded by an engineer, obeying his words like a single man.

A gravedigger can dig a hole in the sand, erect a beam there and then, after filling the hollow and stuffing the empty space by reversing the excavating, begin the same work again until he has moved around a surface as great as Notre Dame. The same individual, if it were a question of a piling in a river, sinking there by hammer blows some oak stakes, six meters in length and 0.80 centimeters around, would never come to the end of the task. Here, the action of the group is indispensable.

A boater could, by multiplying his voyages, transport a cargo of 1000 tons from Paris to the Havre. He could never, with his little boat, transport the same mass from Calais to Dover, although the distance is much less. To contend with the ocean requires nothing less than a large ship, and consequently the effect of a group.

We can multiply infinitely these examples that modern industry presents at every step.

4.—Collective force is thus *something other* than the sum of the individual forces of which it is made up: I add that in the application it is, by virtue of its unity, *greater* than that sum.

A man, whose muscular strength, in all parts of his body, is equal to six times that of an individual of average vigor, would not only render as much effective labor as six men, but in a struggle he would lay them low. The reason is that, being able to deploy on each side a superior power, or to oppose a superior resistance, he crushes his divided adversaries in a mass.

This is the image of the group: its strength or force, numerically equal to that of its components, is *more than equal* in its unity to all together specifically. The military men know it well, their whole science consists, through progressions of attacks and retreats combined, in breaking up the enemy mass so that they can oppose everywhere a greater force to lesser forces.

A warship with 100 cannons will chase off 500 fishing boats; a steamer with a force of 100 horsepower, giving the same service as a crew of 100 horses, will be much superior to them with regard to general costs and risks; a large agricultural operation will give, for the same amount of land cultivated, finer and more abundant products, and at lower cost, than would a dozen little farms. The mechanical arts abound with facts of this nature: the Creusot steam hammer, which represents in weight two or three hundred times the big hammer of a blacksmith, produces more effect in a single fall than two hundred blows struck by a worker; the work of a mechanical saw offers more precisions than if it is used by a half-dozen arms; the sound created by one hundred singers in unison is truer than each of the individual voices.

These facts, which each can multiply as they please, suffice to establish the reality of the collective force, of that force that the economists have forgotten even to mention in their books, and that still, by its innumerable applications, its transformation, its political, morel, religious and intellectual consequences, dominates science and governs civilization.

IV. OF COMPLEX COLLECTIVE ACTION.

Everyone has read, in A. Smith, J.-B. Say, and others, the marvelous results of that force; but what few people have noticed, no doubt, is the technical inexactitude with which these two masters of the science explain its nature. They have not

seen that what they call *division of labor* or *separation of industries* is only an application, in reverse, of the *collective force*, so that the same scientific demonstration suits them both. And because they have not seen it, not only have they been led to omit from their treatises the initial force, which is the agglomerated force, but they have understood nothing in the theory of the one they wanted to set out, the force of division.

As that question is serious, essential in science, I must, by a rapid discussion, furnish the proof of what I have claimed.

7. I begin by citing A. Smith:

“Let us take, for example, a manufacture the object of which appears frivolous, but that has merited more than once that we have noted the details with a sort of admiration, I mean the fabrication of pins. Let the most industrious worker, but still a novice in their trade, wish to give himself up to it, *he could perhaps manage to make in a day only a single pin, and certainly not as many as twenty*, so diverse and multiplied are the labors demanded by a pin! He thus needs to divide the labor, first separate this trade from all the others; he must then follow, with all the details that they demand, so many individual trades; then finally he must create, to speed up the whole of the work, the play and movement of the machines: such is, in fact, that art today. One man draws out the brass wire, another straightens it, another cuts it, farther along one sharpens the point, and then one prepares the end that must receive the head. To shape that head requires two or three distinct manipulations; to place it is a new occupation; to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade to line them up on the paper. In the end, eighteen operations make up the grand art of making a pin.