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On the Concept of the Petty Bourgeois

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Proudhon. I have read not only all of his works, but also his 14 volumes of correspondence with great benefit. I still have a complete collection of all of his daily newspapers, from which one can gain a true picture of him and his time. Anyone who thinks that Proudhon can simply be dismissed as a petty bourgeois has never made the effort to really get to know him. Incidentally, this is only the case in Germany, where under the influence of Marxism every other social movement was suppressed or never really emerged. It was Marx himself who tried to dismiss Proudhon and every opponent who was not convenient for him with the meaningless term petty bourgeois, and here in Germany in particular this was taken as a revelation without even making the effort to ask what one should actually understand by it.

What is a petty bourgeois? At best, it is only a very vague sociological term. One can understand it as a person who ekes out a living under comfortable economic conditions. But what is gained by that? Nothing at all. If it could be proven that a person who belongs economically to a certain social class is

completely dependent on this membership in his thoughts and actions, the question would be quickly solved. But no one has been able to provide this proof so far. Almost all the great pioneers of socialist thought came from the camp of the petty bourgeoisie, the upper bourgeoisie, the aristocracy and the intellectuals. Only Weitling, Proudhon and a few others came from the working class. (Please note! I am not talking here about the followers of socialism, but about its theoretical founders.) When I emphasize here that Proudhon came from the working class and had to earn his living as a typesetter for many years of his life, I do not consider this to be his special advantage and even less the cause of his intellectual development.

We still know very little or nothing about the inner causes of the creative talent of such a brilliant person as Proudhon was. Even the sharpest psychologist has not yet been able to unravel this secret of nature for us; but it is certain that this inner creative drive cannot be explained by a person's belonging to a certain social class. But the term petty bourgeois cannot be applied to Proudhon, even if we look at it purely sociologically, because he was never a member of the petty bourgeoisie by descent, and not later either, when he gave up typesetting and devoted himself entirely to writing.

Marx did not want it to be understood that way. He used the word in a purely contemptuous sense because he believed that he could hit his opponent all the harder with it. If the word had been merely a sociological means of classification for him, like the geographer's division of the earth into latitude and longitude, he would have had to judge his closest and perhaps only real friend, the rich manufacturer Friedrich Engels, in a similar way, whose economic circumstances went far beyond the living standards of the petty bourgeois.

But he didn't even think about that. Despite the materialistic view of history, the word had a purely psychological meaning for him, with a derisive aftertaste. What he wanted to be understood by it was a narrow-minded person who can-

not get beyond the depths of thought, or what is commonly called a philistine. Today the word "counter-revolutionary" fulfils the same function, and because this compliment has become monotonous to the point of boredom, anyone who does not swear by the wisdom of the Kremlin is now also called a "fascist", since no other patent term is available.

But anyone who considers Proudhon a philistine or even a narrow-minded person has never tried to penetrate his work or even do him justice as a human being. Proudhon was, without doubt, one of the boldest thinkers of all time and raised problems that will continue to preoccupy people for centuries to come. He was also a real fighter who followed his inner convictions with uncorrupted honesty and never kept quiet about things that needed to be said out of convenience or personal calculation. No man was hated as bitterly by reactionaries of all shades as he was, something he often had to experience firsthand. A man who had to languish in prison for years for his convictions and who later, already plagued by illness, could only escape new persecutions by being banished, was certainly not a philistine. However one may judge his views, no one can in good conscience make this accusation against him.

Proudhon has often been accused of inconsistency because he judged things differently in his later works than in his first writings. But that is precisely where his greatness lies. He was a man who struggled tirelessly with himself and was therefore always in the process of becoming. For most people, consistency only begins when thoughts are frozen. He himself once said with a hint of irony: "A consistent person is someone who is mentally exhausted and can no longer rise above himself". We should always remember these words today, when the spirit begins to dry up due to the hopeless flood of slogans. Only when we finally free ourselves from the propaganda rubbish of the rat catchers on the right and left who are so busy today, in order to really approach the great problems that our time

has presented us, will a new spiritual ascent be able to begin.
The faster and more thoroughly this happens, the better.