

# Proudhonism and Marxism\*

Original Author: Gaétan Pirou

Translation: Shaun Murdock

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## Proudhonism and Marxism

A contemporary study of Proudhonian ideas might have one of two objectives. Either we will strive to retrace Proudhon's historical physiognomy,<sup>1</sup> discover the guiding principles of his thought, and explain them by his heredity and temperament, the social circles he lived in and the events he witnessed. Or else, concerned more with utility than with reconstruction, we will only retain from Proudhonism what may be used by scholars to understand today's world and foresee tomorrow's, and by reformers to build an effective, fruitful doctrine for action. Both methods are equally legitimate. The first is necessary for historians of ideas, for whoever wants to restore Proudhon to us as he was. The second should be preferred if we seek less to describe the past than to shed light on the present and prepare for the future.

Depending on which of these two angles we approach it from, the relationship between Proudhonism and Marxism appears very different.

Historically Proudhon and Marx are adversaries and constitute an antithesis.<sup>2</sup> After having maintained friendly and sustained relations in 1844 during Marx's stay in France, and having spent whole nights discussing philosophy and political economy, they fell out irredeemably when Marx had replied to *Economic Contradictions* with *The Poverty of Philosophy* and dismissed Proudhon as petty bourgeois. The years passed without softening this animosity. In 1865, in his famous letter to the *Sozial Demokrat*, Marx did not hesitate to judge Proudhon's memoir in these terms, forgetting his past praise: 'What Is Property? In a rigorously scientific history of political economy this writing would scarcely be worthy of mention', and he protested against Proudhon's 'scientific charlatanism', 'unbearable chatter', and 'imbecile cynicism'.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, between Proudhon and Marx the contrast of spirit and tendency is obvious. Whereas Marxist thought arose from the development of industrial life, from mass production concentrated and socialised in its technical forms if not in its legal regime, Proudhonian thought is fundamentally rural in origin and orientation: the social cell of the future society that Proudhon envisages is neither the factory nor the workers' group, but the peasant family with austere morals and an individualistic life, whose property, founded on possession, takes on an absolute and sacred character. If Marx thinks that the fundamental explanation of world history lies in variations of economic technique, according to Proudhon the guiding thread that enables us to find our way in the chaos of historical events is philosophical in nature: history is a long process of reasoning and society a metaphysics in action. And while for Marx only a change in the mode of production is capable of putting an end to economic instability and class struggle, Proudhon seeks the solution of the social problem in a reform of circulation and exchange, leading to the gradual disappearance of all usurious levies.

Opposed during their lifetime in personality and doctrine, Proudhon and Marx were opposed even after their death by struggles between their followers. The triumph of Marxism in the International after 1867 was accompanied by the decline of Proudhonism, and the Proudhonian

<sup>1</sup> **Translator's Note:** The original French *physionomie* implies the 'face' or 'character' of his history; retained here to preserve the 19th-century flavour of the original text.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bourguin. *Des rapports entre Proudhon et K. Marx*, *Revue d'Economie Politique*, March 1893 and Harmel. *De Proudhon à Marx. La Clairière*, August 15, 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also the unpublished letters of Marx and Engels published in the *Mouvement Socialiste*, March–April 1913 and January–February 1914.

renaissance at the beginning of the 20th century asserted itself more and more as the crisis and the disintegration of Marxist ideas intensified. When Proudhon goes up, Marx somehow automatically goes down. Those who praise Proudhon – Fournière or Rouanet – judge Marx lukewarmly, while the orthodox Marxists – Charles Rappoport, for example – do not hide their contempt for Proudhon.

Finally, during the war, the antagonism was even more lively and acute than before, and some wanted to raise it to the height of a conflict between two national psychologies. Opposite Marx, profoundly German in his authoritarianism and materialism, Proudhon stood as the symbol of the French mind by his stubborn liberalism and abundant idealism. Summarising this thesis, Charles Turgeon wrote: ‘In this duel, where the antipathy of two minds is heightened by the incompatibility of two doctrines, it is possible to see, above the antagonism of two exasperated egos, even above the clash of two doctrines and the opposition of two tactics [...] a more serious and more irreducible conflict, the conflict between the French mind and the German mind.’<sup>4</sup>

I do not dream of denying that this way of presenting things is broadly accurate. If we want to put Proudhon back into his historical context, summarise his ideas faithfully, and describe his past influence, we are necessarily led to highlight how Proudhonism differs from Marxism.

But it is not at all the same when, moving on to the second point of view that I mentioned earlier, we focus mainly on the current scientific and practical value of Proudhonian thought. If we put ourselves on this terrain deliberately – as I would like to do in the following pages – we will be led to highlight Proudhonian ideas to which commentators, and perhaps Proudhon himself, have sometimes only granted secondary importance, but which, appreciated with the benefit of hindsight and experience today, turn out to be uniquely profound and eminently useful for the effort of revision and reconstruction required by the needs of the present hour.

Subsequently, the aspects in which Proudhon is opposed to Marx will no longer appear to us as the most essential, the most worthy of being retained, but on the contrary those in which Proudhon lays the groundwork for Marx and complements him. Proudhonism and Marxism have not been able to fully withstand the formidable test of time. On many points they have crumbled. Without wanting to maintain a fake, fragile unity at all costs, let us keep the most resilient and solid pieces. We will see that they are in harmony and can fit together, so to speak. The construction that we will thus build will perhaps be quite different from original Marxist thought and Proudhonian thought. Perhaps Marx and Proudhon would not always recognise their inspiration and contribution at first sight. But what does it matter if, in doing so, we succeed in incorporating the best of their work into a historical philosophy and a social doctrine capable of bringing us the wisdom we need today?

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Proudhon was a brilliant and vigorous dialectician. But he was also an observer and a realist. His peasant origins, his professional life, and his positive philosophy developed a taste for the concrete in him. Thus from his work, which at first glance appears as a series of syllogisms and abstract formulas, as a veritable social algebra, an attentive analysis can easily derive a

<sup>4</sup> Charles Turgeon. *Essai sur la conception de l'histoire et du progrès d'après Proudhon. Revue d'Economie politique*, 1915, p. 258.

conception of method, of historical development, and of revolutionary tactics that resembles Marx's in many respects.

**I.** – Where does the originality and utility of *Economic Contradictions* come from if not the fact that in it Proudhon poses in a new form, imbued with relativism and historicism, the problem of the relationship between political economy and socialism?

He refuses to condemn political economy in its entirety. According to him, the individualistic, optimistic theories and conservative, liberal doctrines of Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, and Bastiat deserve to be studied because they express and summarise a set of observations borrowed from the economic life of a certain period and in certain countries. The economists' error is to have treated what were only temporary historical categories as general, eternal laws, and 'to regard every accomplished fact as an injunction against any proposal of reform'.<sup>5</sup> Thus interpreted, political economy is no more than an 'impertinent rhapsody'.<sup>6</sup> However, reduced to its true limits and meaning, and conceived as 'the collection of observations thus far made in regard to the phenomena of the production and distribution of wealth',<sup>7</sup> political economy retains a high value. Proudhon declares: 'It may be, then, that political economy, in spite of its individualistic tendency and its exclusive affirmations, is a constituent part of social science, in which the phenomena that it describes are like the starting-points of a vast triangulation and the elements of an organic and complex whole'.<sup>8</sup>

As for socialism, it has made the mistake of confining itself to the abstract and the *a priori*, of lacking, in the same way as political economy, historical meaning. 'The error of socialism has consisted hitherto in perpetuating religious reverie by launching forward into a fantastic future instead of seizing the reality that is crushing it'.<sup>9</sup> Hence the utopias, the arbitrary reconstructions that Proudhon rejects because they are out of touch with reality and therefore of no practical interest. Hence the artificial opposition that has arisen between political economy and socialism. While political economy, steeped in routine, misunderstood the future, socialism, lost in abstraction and dreams, despised tradition and denigrated the past. Proudhon writes forcefully: 'Both denying in turn, socialism the experience of humanity, political economy the reason of humanity, both lack the essential conditions of human truth'.<sup>10</sup>

To discover this human truth and thereby reconcile political economy and socialism is the goal that Proudhon sets for himself; and to achieve it, he undertakes to study society 'in the sum total of its successive manifestations',<sup>11</sup> to discover the tendencies of the development of history. In *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, he himself characterises his method in these terms, in which the most orthodox Marxist would find nothing to reproach him for: 'What I am about to say, as what I have said, is therefore neither prophecy, nor agitation, nor alarm [...] I tell what is; consequently what will be [...] Once again, I am no more a fortuneteller than I am a man of party or sect. I deduce the general consequences of the future from the

<sup>5</sup> *Contradictions économiques*, I, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, II, p. 395.

<sup>10</sup> *Contradictions économiques*, I, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Idée générale*, p. 180.

facts of the present; some leaves from the book of Destiny that I throw to the winds. This is to be, that is all I can say, because it is written, and we cannot prevent it.<sup>12</sup>

**II.** – The mark of realism can also be found in Proudhon's conception of historical development. If it is true that Proudhon imagines history as a rigorous deduction, of which a philosophical law provides its key and directs its development, he nevertheless does not close his eyes to the lessons of experience, and does not refuse to see the role that the phenomena of force and economic factors play in people's lives. In this way, his thought remains infinitely fuller and richer than that of the pure intellectualists and it contains insights that a positive, synthetic philosophy of history should incorporate.

For example, what is Proudhon's attitude towards war? He condemns it in principle and predicts its disappearance. And yet, he cannot help feeling a degree of sympathy for it: it seems legitimate to him insofar as it allows all the conflicting forces to assert and gauge themselves.

Certain passages in *War and Peace* clearly show that there is a realist concern in this recognition of a right of force. Doesn't Proudhon maintain that the jurisdiction of force is in accordance with the orientation of the modern mind, 'foreign to theology, weary of metaphysics, eager for positive ideas and in love with things that can be priced and counted'?<sup>13</sup> And to establish, against sentimental pacifists, that war is the natural state of the human race, that 'true, universal, perpetual peace would be death', Proudhon invokes the following considerations: 'Weaklings<sup>14</sup> ask how beings blessed with reason can even think that they are doing themselves honour by engaging in such terrifying combat. Instead, they should be asking how, if the world is made up of forces, those forces, interacting with one another, are consequently in contention with one another. Because the interplay of forces bears no resemblance to the dancing of the muses who, in their harmonious chorus, pass one another, link up with one another, retreat, join up again, without their deft, rapid movements generating any strains or collisions. Forces do nothing for show; of necessity, their actions bring about an outcome; for this is happen, they must collide with each other, break each other, devour each other. Only in those circumstances are they productive.'<sup>15</sup>

Of these forces in action, the main ones, although they are not always the most apparent, are economic forces. Proudhon, a shrewd observer, realises this. Shall we say that in this respect he proved to be a precursor of historical materialism? Certainly not, if we rate Proudhon's ideas according to the place they held in his thought, for these declarations of the primacy of the economic over the political or the ideological are secondary to the intellectualist *leitmotif* that dominates his work. But if, as Droz advises us, we proceed to 'this choice of the best to which the classics themselves must be submitted in order to last other than by name',<sup>16</sup> we must then recognise the importance of certain texts by which Proudhon agrees with the Marxist interpretation of history, to the extent that the latter is true and solid.

<sup>12</sup> *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 272.

<sup>13</sup> *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 282.

<sup>14</sup> **Translator's Note:** Proudhon uses the term *femelletertes*, a derogatory word for 'weak women' or effeminate men; translated here as 'weaklings', but it is worth noting the misogynistic undertone typical of Proudhon's polemics.

<sup>15</sup> *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 282.

<sup>16</sup> Droz. P.-J. Proudhon, Librairie de Pages libres, 1909. p. 30.

In 1840 and 1841, he studies the regime of property. Proudhon notes its influence and consequences on the various aspects of social life. In the *First Memoir*, he declares that property has been the life-principle and definitive cause of all revolutions.<sup>17</sup> In the *Second Memoir*, he writes: ‘As is the property of a nation, so is its family, its marriage, its religion, its civil and military organisation, and its legislative and judicial institutions’,<sup>18</sup> and he devotes a specific chapter to showing how property alone explains the history of Sparta, Athens, and Rome.

In 1851, he wonders: what is the foundation of our modern societies and the secret agent of their transformation? Proudhon does not hesitate to answer: ‘Political economy is in fact the queen and ruler of this age [...] Social economy, little-known divinity, leads the world.’<sup>19</sup>

In 1865, he looks for the root causes of war. He would find them in the economic order: ‘In order to have the final word on war, we [...] must consider that, independent of the promptings of religion, homeland, State, constitution, dynasty, [...] there is the informal – God forbid that declarations of war should ever bring it up! – but very real consideration of subsistence [...]’<sup>20</sup> The primary, universal and ever-constant cause of warfare, however it is ignited, [...] is the lack of subsistence; in its extreme form, the rupture of the economic equilibrium.<sup>21</sup>

At the end of his life, he tries to determine the respective importance of economic functions and political functions. It is to the former that he gives pride of place: ‘Despite their ceremonial majesty, political functions play a much less fundamental role than economic functions. Before legislating, administering, building palaces and temples and waging war, society works, ploughs, navigates, exchanges, and exploits the land and the sea. Between the economic functions and the political functions, there exists a similar relation to that which physiology indicates, among animals, between the functions of organic life and the functions of social life: it is through social life that the animal manifests itself externally and fulfils its mission among creatures, but it is through organic life that it exists, and all that it does in its freedom of action is really only a more or less reasoned *conclusum* of its primordial powers.’<sup>22</sup>

Even more striking is this passage from an article published by Proudhon in *Le Peuple* in November 1848, in which he tells us how a change in the economic system gradually brings about a transformation of society as a whole: ‘If ancient religion, the well-worn systems of philosophy, the old political constitutions, the judicial routine, and the old forms of community and association and of literature and art have only been particular expressions of the material state of societies, is it not obvious that once this state comes to change, in other words once political economy is revolutionised from top to bottom by a change in the relationship between the two great forces of production, labour and capital, everything changes in society, religion, philosophy, politics, literature and arts?’<sup>23</sup>

One certainly cannot read these lines without thinking of Marx’s distinction between the base and the social superstructure.

<sup>17</sup> *Premier Mémoire*, p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> *Deuxième Mémoire*, p. 180.

<sup>19</sup> *Idée générale*, p. 314.

<sup>20</sup> **Translator’s Note:** The French *subsistances* refers specifically to material provisions or the food supply, a central concern in the political economy of war.

<sup>21</sup> *La Guerre et la Paix*, II, p. 98.

<sup>22</sup> *Capacité politique des Classes ouvrières* (written in 1865), p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> Cited by Droz, *op. cit.*, p. 88, 89, note I. Other similar texts can be found in C. Turgeon, *art. cit.* Cf. also Gaétan Pirou, *Proudhonisme et Syndicalisme révolutionnaire*, Paris, Rousseau, 1910, pp. 201, 205 and 263.

**III.** – In the presence of struggle between parties and classes, Proudhon's sympathies instinctively lie with the middle class and reformist tactics. It was because Marx sensed this that he so brutally condemned Proudhonism. However, a deeper examination reveals an entirely different current in Proudhon's work that at certain times inclines him towards the working class and methods of revolutionary action. This current never managed to gain the upper hand because it was too contrary to the most general and deepest tendencies of Proudhonian philosophy. However, already visible in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, it is asserted and specified in Proudhon's final great work, which today we consider the most suggestive and prophetic: *Political Capacity of the Working Classes*. In *Justice*, Proudhon says: 'The idea, with its categories, is born of action, and must return to action, at the risk of the degradation of the agent'.<sup>24</sup> And he deduces from this that the artisan, the man who acts, is in no way inferior to the intellectual, the man who thinks.

'He who has his idea in the palm of his hand is often a man of more intelligence, or at least more complete, than he who holds it in his head, unable to express it except by a formula.'<sup>25</sup> For the same reason, industry ranks higher on the scale of Proudhonian values than science. 'Science, in fact, is speculative in essence and does not require the exercise of any faculty other than the understanding. Industry, on the contrary, is both speculative and plastic; it presupposes in the hand a skill of execution adequate to the idea conceived by the brain [...] The duly instructed worker represents complete intelligence, intuitive and plastic.'<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, any philosophy that is not based on experience and practice is only a useless and even dangerous speculation, because it tends to lead man towards daydreaming and pure contemplation, to push him away from work and action; according to Proudhon, it is the error that Christianity has committed, and of all the criticisms that Proudhon aims at it, it is perhaps the one closest to his heart. The true and fruitful idea can only arise from contact with reality. Moreover, it can only be translated into action with the cooperation of practitioners and the working masses. 'No doubt ideas are born in the brain of the thinker, but they only succeed if the people attach themselves to them and make them institutions and customs that legislators and justices then transform into articles of law and rules for the courts.'<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, since the man of the people is closer to the truth than the intellectual, the latter cannot dictate duties and conduct to the former. He should limit his ambition to expressing the aspirations of the masses in words. 'We are the monitors of the people, not their initiators. Our whole science consists in observing the manifestations of the people, soliciting their word, interpreting their acts. To interrogate the people is our whole philosophy, our whole politics.'<sup>28</sup>

Proudhon has attempted this study, this interrogation, on several occasions, and it is in the *Political Capacity of the Working Classes* that he best succeeded in drawing lessons from it.<sup>29</sup> First, he notes the existence of distinct and opposing classes within contemporary societies. Although privileges have been abolished in the political order since 1789, the resulting legal equality has not had the effect of equalising material life, the conditions of production and exchange. The

<sup>24</sup> *Justice*, II, p. 215.

<sup>25</sup> *Majorats Littéraires*, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Justice*, II, p. 244.

<sup>27</sup> *Capacité politique*, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> *Mélanges*, I, p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> L. Harmel. *Le Testament de Proudhon. La Clairière*, March 1, 1919.

free play of economic factors has given rise to class antagonism, which it would be childish to ignore and which should instead be explained and highlighted. However conciliatory Proudhon was, he did not forget that according to the Hegelian philosophy dear to him, it was when the antithesis was clearest that synthesis was easiest. Applying this idea to the working class, Proudhon concludes that the best tactic for it is intransigence and secession. ‘To distinguish oneself, to define oneself, is to be; just as to merge and be absorbed is to lose oneself. To break away, a legitimate secession, is the only means we have for affirming our rights and, as a political party, of being recognised’.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the working class should shut itself away, repudiate any alliance with the bourgeois parties, march alone into battle with the consciousness of its unity, cultivate within itself the feeling of revolt against the propertied classes and the liberal professions towards which it shows far too much respect and humility.<sup>31</sup> The bourgeoisie in whom Proudhon trusted for a long time, but whom at the end of his life he judged severely, is no longer a class that wants, but a coterie that traffics.<sup>32</sup> On the contrary, since 1848 the working class has possessed consciousness of itself and the idea that corresponds to it. All it lacks to enjoy political capacity is a practical programme of action. The day it has this – and Proudhon strives to spell it out – it will be able to engage in struggle in complete confidence: willingly or by force, capital will have to bow before the supremacy of labour.

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Thus, in many respects, Proudhon heralds or confirms Marx. But it would be an ingratititude and an error to accept his thought only insofar as it agrees with Marxist thought. Proudhonism also has value today to the extent that it brings to too-exclusive, too-schematic Marxism the relaxations and additions needed to adapt it to the requirements of contemporary science and practice. The present task of sociologists and socialists seems to be to take as given the realistic and scientific method that Marx, if not invented, at least defined and applied with incomparable vigour and power, and in the name of this same method, to correct what is too one-sided and too mechanistic in the Marxist construction. To carry out this task, they must turn to Proudhonian doctrine. Two of his guiding ideas will be of invaluable help to them above all.

**I.** – We know how much Proudhon worshipped individual liberty. ‘Liberty’, he wrote in his manifesto to the electors whose votes he solicited in 1848, ‘liberty, that is my whole system: liberty to infinity, absolute liberty, liberty everywhere and always.’ It is because he wants to keep it beyond all reach that Proudhon rejects the systems of reform that increase the State’s sphere of action and powers at the expense of individual initiative, that he defends the institution of private property against the attacks of some of his friends, and that he accepts the principle of association only with reserve and distrust. Even when he seems to place the concern for justice above all others, Proudhon does not intend to sacrifice liberty, since for him justice is ‘balance between forces, that is to say between liberties’.<sup>33</sup>

Proudhon therefore constantly has in mind the inviolable right of the human individual, and this allows him to pose the social problem in a more correct and complete way than Marx. Marxists shrink this problem and falsify its meaning when they place themselves solely on the terrain of action and economic development, when they see the social question as a simple ‘question

<sup>30</sup> *Capacité politique*, p. 185.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Théorie de la Propriété*, p. 144.

of the stomach'. If it were only that, it would be relatively easy to resolve: agreement between rival interests is always possible. The seriousness of social conflicts comes from the fact that the workers' revolt does not only have material causes and aspects; it is as much the daughter of democracy as of large-scale industry, and if it is becoming increasingly acute, then it is because under the influence of an intellectual and political revolution, individuals are demanding their independence more and more fiercely, while as a result of the industrial revolution, the need for organic and collective action is becoming more and more imperative. Marx did not clearly see this duality of origins and elements. And on the eve of the war, the revival of Proudhonian ideas in French syndicalist circles certainly owed a lot to the fact that, more so than orthodox Marxism, Proudhonism fed and echoed workers' sense of personal dignity and human value.

However, if Proudhon saw how the problem arises, he was far from solving it. His optimistic philosophy led him to believe that unlimited individual liberty and perfect social justice could easily coexist, that the free will of men would be enough to ensure economic order, and that the State would one day disappear and give way to the reign of contracts: naïve illusions that we cannot share. But even this constructive part of Proudhon's work is not completely outdated and obsolete. Because he increasingly understood political issues and felt that rigid, traditional forms of authority should be replaced by more flexible, more democratic combinations, Proudhon was on the path to economic federalism. He did not delve into and analyse this notion as Paul Boncour or Maxime Leroy have done today. It is nevertheless fortunate that he had the vision of this fruitful idea, which enables us to reconcile and realise what is accurate and legitimate in Marxist economism and Proudhonian individualism.

**II. –** By highlighting the growing importance in the modern world of the will of individuals to assert their personality and govern themselves freely, Proudhon humanises history and social philosophy. Likewise, Proudhonian rationalism fortunately broadens and corrects the Marxist conception of historical development on many points. Whether it is a question of the meaning of the 1789 Revolution, the content of socialism, or the idea of the homeland, it seems to me that Proudhon has often been more correct than Marx because he understood that we do not gain an accurate account of the transformations that societies experience if, in order to explain them, we focus exclusively on their economic and technological substrate.

Contrary to those who consider it as a simple change of political regime or as a simple transfer of property, Proudhon believes that the French Revolution marks the beginning of an entirely new era for the world; and in his great work, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, Proudhon, reviewing all the social problems in turn, shows that for each one the revolutionary philosophy, relying on experience and on reason, leads to solutions incompatible with those adopted in the ancient world, built on the principle of revelation. Is this view of things correct? Here is not the place to discuss it. But we can at least point out that it is confirmed by the opinion of some of the most recent and authoritative sociologists. Let us mention only two. The Italian historian, Guglielmo Ferrero in his highly original and suggestive book, *Between Two Worlds*, expresses the spirit of the revolution in these terms: 'The French revolution was something very different from the fall of an old dynasty or a change of institutions; it was the Titans' fresh attack on Olympus; it was the most formidable act of will ever witnessed in history; it was the act of will that overthrew all the old standards by which man had hitherto judged the quality of the world and that imposed new ones; it was the pitched battle that man fought against God to throw

him down from his throne. For centuries man, by the squabbles of philosophers and scholars, disturbed the communications between earth and heaven, so that finally, when the hour had come, the big battalions set off, marched to the assault and God was reduced to a philosophical phantasm. On the steps of His throne sat the human mind.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Paul Bourde, seeking to define the main tendencies of the revolution, declares that it has brought to the world a new conception of human destiny, which can be analysed as a triple belief in the natural goodness of man, the right to happiness in the present life, and continuous and infinite social progress, and he shows how these three fundamental articles of the revolutionary creed are radically opposed to Christian dogma: ‘The belief in human excellence is the negation of the belief that man’s nature is corrupt; the belief in happiness in the present life is the negation of the belief that life is penance; and the belief in progress is the negation of the belief that the earth is a place of atonement. Between the revolutionary conception and the Catholic conception of human destiny, the antagonism is absolute and there is no social institution, no practical solution, no individual approach to the subject on which they can agree. Always, where one approves, the other blames [...] Whoever gives himself to one conception thereby separates himself from the other.’<sup>35</sup> I do not know if Bourde had read Proudhon, whose name he does not mention, but his fine, vigorous study of the revolutionary spirit would certainly have satisfied the opponent of Mgr Mathieu, Cardinal-Archbishop of Besançon.

If the struggle between the *Ancien Régime* and the Revolution in 1789 is essentially philosophical and spiritual, this is also true of the political and social conflicts taking place today before our eyes. This means that Proudhon does not represent socialism as a doctrine or as a purely utilitarian and economic movement. For him, socialism derives its value from the fact that it satisfies our ideal of equality and justice better than the present regime. In this sense, it is the extension and development of democracy, and we know that although Proudhon sometimes expressed himself in rather harsh terms on the Republic and universal suffrage, he is not no less firmly and profoundly democratic. One of the merits that he recognises in the democratic regime is precisely that it opens the way to economic and social equality through political equality. ‘Between equality or political right and equality or economic right, there is an intimate relationship, such that where one of the two is denied, the other will soon disappear.’<sup>36</sup> Conversely, where political equality reigns, economic equality must one day or another triumph. Proudhon declares: ‘For me socialism is the formal term, the complete expression of the Republic.’<sup>37</sup>

Warned by his intellectualist and rationalist philosophy against political indifferentism,<sup>38</sup> Proudhon is also protected by it against the temptations of national indifferentism. He loves France as ‘the homeland of the singers of the Eternal Revolution’.<sup>39</sup> He realises that, despite all the servitudes, in no place on earth, neither in Europe nor in America, is the spirit, which is the whole of man, as free as here.<sup>40</sup> But, if his patriotism is founded in his love of reason and justice, it is also limited by it. Though a patriot, Proudhon was not a nationalist, and he went so far as to

<sup>34</sup> G. Ferrero. *Entre deux Mondes*, p. 325, 326.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Bourde. *Qu'est-ce que la Révolution française?* *Mercure de France*, October 1914, p. 410.

<sup>36</sup> *Capacités*, p. 214

<sup>37</sup> *Mélanges*, II, p. 132.

<sup>38</sup> **Translator's Note:** In theology and political philosophy, *indifferentism* is the belief that differences of religious or political opinion are of no importance.

<sup>39</sup> *Révolution démontrée par le Coup d'Etat*, p. 280.

<sup>40</sup> *Mélanges*, III, p. 33.

say, in a letter to his friend Beslay: 'I would be man enough to sacrifice my country to justice if I were forced to choose between the two.'<sup>41</sup>

Let us not hide that Proudhon's intellectualism did not always inspire him positively and that, in this respect again, a serious task of revision and free choice is imposed on us. Proudhon, in the ardour of his faith in the explanatory and organising reason of the world, did not always correctly evaluate the forces that thwart it and fight against it in real life, often successfully. His economic realism made him sense the power of interests, not that of feelings and instincts. We are more and more convinced today that reason provides us with a marvellous tool for scientific investigation, notwithstanding the efforts of the anti-intellectualist schools; however, observation and experience have led us to recognise that despite the progress of science and critical thinking, 'non-logical actions', to use Vilfredo Pareto's expressive terminology, remain the most numerous and the most important today, and that rational theories are often merely an ideological screen, a veneer with which people like to cover their conduct, and which does not reveal its deep motives. And some of Proudhon's solutions thus seem questionable and fragile to us. We are no longer as sure as he was that we can 'drown love in justice' without misunderstanding its nature, or eliminate Christianity without endangering individual and social morality, or assert that humanity will enter an era of serenity and bliss once social reform has been accomplished.

Individualism and rationalism, when they present themselves as abstract theories, as absolute concepts, too often succeed only in mutilating and deforming the social reality that they intend to control and govern. They are valid insofar as they express and convey active forces, and this is why we will draw everything useful and fruitful in Proudhonism not by contrasting it with Marxism but by borrowing from it, in order to combine elements from a largely realist doctrine with economic materialism.

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In the final years before the war, the idea of reconciling Marx and Proudhon was, so to speak, in the air. One may even consider the theories of revolutionary syndicalism and the doctrine of Jaurès as efforts to synthesise Proudhonism and Marxism. But however useful these attempts have been in certain respects, it seems to me that such efforts are not enough to fully satisfy us today.

**I.** – The school that, under the direction of Georges Sorel, sought to derive a philosophy from revolutionary syndicalism had the great merit of rescuing certain crucial parts of Proudhon's work from the oblivion into which they had unjustly fallen. We will appreciate how necessary this was when we recall that in 1892, a mind as usually judicious and well-informed as Maurice Bourguin denied Proudhon any historical significance and declared *Political Capacity of the Working Classes* 'soft and nebulous'. Syndicalist theorists contributed to dispelling these prejudices. But they made the mistake of attaching themselves too much to the individualist and traditionalist aspects of Proudhonian thought and thereby weakening their synthesis of Marxist and Proudhonian theories.

Indeed, by emphasising Proudhonian individualism without softening or reserve, they were led to align themselves much more with Nietzsche than with Marx. Of the three ancestors they refer to in turn – Nietzsche, Marx, Proudhon – it seems that the first is their most genuine master and

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<sup>41</sup> Correspondance, IV, p. 256.

that the notion of the working class that their system is based on is a transposition of Nietzsche's theories on the social level, as imperialism is on the national level. Aren't the doctrines that treat as ultimate absolutes the individual, the class, or the nation not variants of the same mystical, romantic state of mind, and don't they all present the common feature that their contempt for reason and disregard for moderation make them lose their sense of the limits and the universal? Today, when more than ever we feel how much this sense of the limits is necessary to maintain order and civilisation, it is not in this direction that we can seek our way and our salvation.

As for the moral traditionalism that constitutes one of the most curious aspects of Proudhonian thought, it does not seem to us either that a future doctrine could grant it the same pride of place that Georges Sorel and Édouard Berth reserve for it. If in Proudhon a stubborn, austere moralism could coexist with great boldness in his revision and critique of political and social institutions, we cannot raise this particular case to the height of a system. On the contrary, it seems to us that the doctrines that intend to keep rules and moral practices rigid and pure will thus be increasingly led to adopt a defiant, hostile attitude towards the critical mind, towards the parties and the popular classes, while conversely the innovative, modern doctrines, enamoured with rational reconstruction, will be led to extend their efforts of flexibility to moral and family life. Between one and the other the gap is widening and will widen every day, and socialism will necessarily be directed towards the emancipation of women, the expansion of marriage, the reduction of paternal and marital power – all reforms that would have horrified Proudhon. If, therefore, we want to keep severe ethical concerns at the forefront of Proudhonism at all costs, it is not in the socialist direction that we will be drawn, but in a conservative, even reactionary direction. As well we know, Georges Sorel and Édouard Berth today have more readers and followers in *Action Française*<sup>42</sup> circles than in the CGT.<sup>43</sup>

**II. –** Unlike the theoreticians of revolutionary syndicalism who philosophically belong to the anti-intellectualist and Bergsonian current, Jaurès was well placed to understand, love and share Proudhon's rationalist tendencies. Proudhon and Jaurès belong to the same family of minds concerned with logic and clarity, confident in the future of the ideas of justice and social progress. But precisely because of this affinity, Jaurès did not grant Marxism, realism, or materialism a large enough place in his synthesis. Although he had great admiration for Marx, we hardly risk being mistaken in asserting that he always remained quite far from true Marxist thought, and that even when he seemed to give his support to it, he did so, perhaps without being aware, by tactical skill rather than by a deep and intimate conviction. In short Jaurès, more a philosopher than an economist, only asked Marx to confirm theories of which he had already been convinced. We thus find in his thought and work some of the errors and illusions that marred Proudhon's and which were due to the fact that Proudhon, like him, had too often let himself be separated from reality by his idealism and optimism.

Whatever attachment and respect we have for the great figure and powerful genius of Jaurès, we have a duty not to hide or soften our thoughts on this point. It seems to me that lessons of the war, the immersion in realism into which it plunged us, must lead us to reverse the balance that Jaurès had established between Proudhonian thought and Marxist thought. Rather than

<sup>42</sup> **Translator's Note:** The *Action Française* was a far-right, monarchist, and anti-parliamentary political movement established in 1899.

<sup>43</sup> **Translator's Note:** The CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) is a major French trade union centre, historically associated with revolutionary syndicalism during this period.

borrowing from Proudhonian ideology the guidelines of our conception of the world, and asking Marx only for details or examples, it is Marxism (and what corroborates and agrees with it in Proudhonism) that will provide us with the method and the body of central ideas, adapted by corrections and additions that Proudhonian thought, to the extent that it is specific, can usefully give us. Even limited in this way, the value of Proudhonism still remains considerable. And it will be called upon to grow gradually in the future as hard economic constraints are loosened, as iron necessities are softened under the pressure of human will and reason – as people, relying on reality to transform it, succeed in imbuing the world with a larger part of their ideal.