

# Two Resurrections\*

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January 2026

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\*Originally published as: C. Bouglé: Deux Résurrections: Saint-Simonisme et Proudhonisme. *L'Europe nouvelle*, 1(42), October 24, 1918, pp. 2005–2007.

## Two Resurrections: Saint-Simonism and Proudhonism

Seemingly abandoned in favour of foreign doctrines, old French socialist thought nonetheless continued to shape the mindset of the working class and its activists. In recent years, we have seen its resurgence, more or less consciously, but distinctly.

It falls to the author of *The Sociology of Proudhon*<sup>1</sup> and an upcoming volume that will take us *Among the Socialist Prophets*<sup>2</sup> to specify for the readers of *New Europe*<sup>3</sup> the signs that mark this resurrection of the doctrines of '48.

Anyone who combines a curiosity about present realities with some knowledge of the classical systems of social philosophy cannot help but seek a connection between these two domains. Among the doctrines developed by our great socialist innovators, don't some resonate with the economic facts we are witnessing today? Could their resurrected ideas serve as focal points for coordinating the many transformations that are spontaneously emerging before our eyes? It appears that such principles, capable of being revived to organise life, might be found in Saint-Simonism and others in Proudhonism, with one possibly complementing or correcting the other.

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Charles Rist recently wrote in the *Political Economy Review*,<sup>4</sup> 'What we need is neo-Saint-Simonism.' Is this merely wishful thinking? There is more to the economist-historian's words. He recognises that facts are shaping the resurgence he envisions by the very force of things – by the necessities of war – there is, now more than ever, a hint of Saint-Simonism in the air.

Indeed, it's one of the current paradoxes: the war, which they detested more than anything in the world, has dragged these great pacifists behind its chariot, reopening paths to their programme.

They believed in peace, made nearly inevitable by the very progress of industry. They didn't foresee that a nation would synthesise two elements they considered irreconcilably hostile to each other: militarism and industrialism. This unexpected synthesis set the stage for a formidable explosion, potent enough to shatter the faith of the Saint-Simonians.

Yet if they were profoundly mistaken in this regard, how often did they speak a language that is only today becoming common? Their brand of industrialism stands against what they call constitutionalism. And their socialism prioritises the importance of production.

This implies that two issues lose their interest in their view: the forms of government and the modalities of distribution. Many today, coming from very different perspectives, would agree that we've been too fixated on these two sets of issues. 'Less politics' – to embrace this motto is to recall, in line with the Saint-Simonian tradition, that what matters above all is the development of the nation's resources.

To succeed in this mission, to prepare what Herriot terms the economic reorganisation of the nation, it's crucial to diminish the significance of the very doctrines that could still divide parties

<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: Bouglé published *La sociologie de Proudhon* in 1911.

<sup>2</sup> Translator's Note: *Chez les prophètes socialistes* (1918).

<sup>3</sup> Translator's Note: *Europe nouvelle* (1918–1940).

<sup>4</sup> Translator's Note: *Revue d'économie politique* (1887–).

yesterday. In our battle with nature, we must maintain some of the united front that was necessary to resist the enemy. Audibert<sup>5</sup> recently asked if we could establish a party above all parties, a productivist party?

Productivist – this new term signifies not so much a birth as a rebirth: the rebirth of the mindset of the forefathers of producers. Lysis<sup>6</sup> repeats in all tones: ‘Intensify production: distribution will take care of itself. That is the true formula of the new democracy.’ To establish his thesis, he willingly denounces what he calls the French error. He overlooks just one thing: the concept he’s embracing is a long-established French idea. The ground he’s rediscovering is, in fact, venerable French soil.

Transforming the nation into a vast workshop, and ensuring that one person is less exploited by another by first better exploiting the earth – this is indeed the supreme ideal for the Saint-Simonians. Their thought would progress in stages from liberalism to socialism. But their brand of socialism, as noted by one of their best historians, Elie Halévy, would always remain a socialism centred on production.

To achieve this ideal, some of the methods extolled by the Saint-Simonians coincide precisely with those imposed by the necessities of war.

The state had to intervene in nearly everything, but not without changing its ways. To the joy of Maxime Leroy, a lawyer eager to embrace new developments, administrative action has taken unprecedented forms. Faced with shrinking supplies and growing demands, it became necessary to purchase for the nation, and to distribute goods among provinces and raw materials among factories.

Immense and complicated tasks that could not possibly be accomplished without the collaboration of seasoned professionals. Thus, industrialists, merchants, bankers, and engineers were brought into regional committees, interministerial offices, and government councils. This is what Maxime Leroy refers to as ‘the administrative ascent of the producers.’ But isn’t this rise precisely what the author of the *Letters from an Inhabitant of Geneva* was advocating? In the various ‘Chambers’ he proposed, to finally make politics truly industrial – chambers of invention, examination, and execution – he envisioned a means to grant political influence to those who had demonstrated economic prowess. He carved out steps for the rise of expertise.

However, it’s not merely the consultation with industrial experts that lends a unique character to the renewal efforts we are witnessing. The movement is broader. It is a movement toward general convergence, a sort of universal syndicalisation. Willingly or not, it’s impossible to work in different directions. The state itself, because of the requests it makes to allied nations, must remind the factory, trading post, and bank owners that operating in a scattered fashion is no longer viable.

Due to limitations on available freight and tightening credit, agreements must be made today on quantities to import or export, just as tomorrow agreements must be made on the order of priority for restocking and rebuilding. Whether intended or not, the war has taught the business

<sup>5</sup> **Translator’s Note:** Marcel Audibert (1883–1967) was a journalist, jurist, and writer.

<sup>6</sup> **Translator’s Note:** Eugène Letailleur (1869–1927), who went by the alias Lysis, was a banker and writer who opposed modern finance. He published several articles in *L’humanité*.

world solidarity. And it is perhaps in this aspect that the war has most advanced us toward Saint-Simonism.

For that was indeed their obsession: to organise. We should not be misled into thinking that the formula was invented by Ostwald.<sup>7</sup> The Saint-Simonians, nearly a century ago, reiterated this theme in every way. When the Péreire brothers worked on consolidating credit companies as well as railroad companies, they were merely implementing, in their way, an idea dear to their school. ‘The real purpose of political economy,’ Enfantin proclaimed, ‘is the coordination of efforts.’ To achieve this coordination, which aims to limit the drawbacks of anarchic competition, there must also be an understanding among bankers, who act as the generals of industry, and whose banks ought to serve as ‘representative chambers of workers, constantly striving to procure for them the materials of production at the lowest possible cost.’

This illustrates that many of the ‘reforms’ now demanded as necessitated by circumstances are precisely those anticipated and prepared for by the great social innovators, the Saint-Simonians. Post-war France could, without diminishing its stature, return to their teachings.

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Yet something essential is lacking in this school, something that might be dangerous to discard: and that is nothing less than the democratic spirit.

The disciples of the gentleman-messiah may turn to socialism, but they will not revert to democracy. They approach the people, but always with the underlying intent to lead them. The sentiment they most willingly instil is not merely confidence in talent, but reverence for superiors. Thus, they remain, as was said at the time, hierarchs. The notion that the people might wish to act independently, or even to critique and oversee, is difficult for them to accept, while the potential for those with abilities to abuse power concerns them very little.

And it is precisely here that Saint-Simonian tendencies could be beneficially supplemented or corrected by Proudhonian tendencies. To remind us of the rights of the people and the ‘capacity’ of the working class, there is no equal to the former typographer turned economist. Born of the people, he stayed true to his roots; he was a democrat as naturally as one breathes.

And I’m well aware that shortly before the war, there were attempts to conscript his defiant spirit into the ranks of the anti-democrats.<sup>8</sup> Few intellectual co-optations were more paradoxical than this one. What Proudhon absolutely opposed was the promotion of statism in the name of democracy, the strengthening of authoritative institutions. That’s why he launched such a fervent attack against someone like Louis Blanc. But he was the first to advocate for what he termed, before Sidney Webb, industrial democracy. He insisted that to truly establish a stable order – an order stable because it is egalitarian – control by the producers in economic life is essential. And by producers, he didn’t mean the captains of industry, but rather the industrial army, the mass of workers. Only they can harmonise ‘the Marianne of the fields with the Sociale of the cities.’

Thus, they will act in unison on the rates of exchange. They will restore the true value to the products of labour by liberating them from the tolls imposed by financial speculation in all its

<sup>7</sup> **Translator’s Note:** Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932) was a German chemist and philosopher. He received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1909.

<sup>8</sup> **Translator’s Note:** Alluding to the national syndicalist political party *Cercle Proudhon*.

forms. They will ultimately make credit accessible to workers. If Saint-Simonian socialism is centred on production, Proudhonian socialism focuses on exchange. It is primarily through the reformation of the People's Banks that he envisions the salvation of the world. However, it is self-evident that the workers' cooperatives he envisions, aimed at forming an egalitarian agro-industrial federation, could not influence exchange rates without first addressing the conditions of production.

Therefore, it's not only cooperatives but also trade unions that can claim allegiance to the Proudhonian tradition. Anyone who believes that the primary requirement for the rejuvenation of economic life is the direct involvement of workers in governance is, at heart, a Proudhonist.

'The maximum production for the maximum wage in the shortest amount of time,' that's our agenda, Jouhaux declared in a session that has since become renowned. For his part, Albert Thomas in *Workers' and Social Information*<sup>9</sup> encapsulated the sentiment of today's working class with the phrase: 'everything that is produced belongs to us.' These declarations are sure to please the neo-Saint-Simonians. But for this grand scheme to be fully realised, is it sufficient to place our trust in the 'superiors'? Wouldn't it be prudent to suggest, or even imperative to enforce, certain measures that prevent industry from neglecting the human element for the sake of objects? This implies that we might need to call upon Proudhon for support...

Indeed, those who aim to rejuvenate syndicalist doctrines, considering the very lessons learned from the war – the editors of *The Clearing*<sup>10</sup> for instance – are not misguided: they constantly revisit the concept of a return to Proudhon...

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Thus, alongside Saint-Simonism, Proudhonism is being revived before our eyes – both seemingly invigorated in an unexpected manner by the great shock.

Revived – to clash once more as in the past, or to cooperate by mutually imposing limits? In short, are we on the verge of witnessing a renewed confrontation, or a pragmatic union?

Should the organisation of industry, which is universally acknowledged as necessary, proceed top-down, in the Saint-Simonian manner, or could it make significant room for grassroots aspirations, in the way Proudhon would have preferred?

It's a weighty question, as one might surmise. The observer might be able to respond, perhaps in a few years' time...

<sup>9</sup> Translator's Note: *Information ouvrière et sociale* (1918–1920).

<sup>10</sup> Translator's Note: *La clairière* (1917–1919).