Proudhon throughout History

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Abstract

Proudhon remains a strangely irritating author, as if his work were still somehow present and threatening. Before the collapse of the communist regimes, the various resurgences of Proudhonism at different times in this long history have given rise to nostalgia as much as intellectual and political rediscoveries, while official communist ideology interpreted this phenomenon more darkly. At the present time, research is being carried out that explores Proudhon's idea that the free play of economic forces and social contradictions is not a viable long-term response and will only satisfy the governing and possessing classes.

The history of Proudhonism is oddly marked by approvals and condemnations, enthusiastic readings and indignant refutations. While so many nineteenth-century political thinkers are referenced by scholars without arousing particular passions, Proudhon remains a strangely irritating author, as if his work were still somehow present and threatening. While historians and scholars carefully try to assess his place in history, his name continues to elicit strong emotional reactions, both positive and negative. And even in scholarly research, we cannot fail to notice approving and disapproving attitudes, as if he still needed to be defended or attacked. Before the collapse of the communist regimes, the various resurgences of Proudhonism at different times in this long history have given rise to nostalgia as much as intellectual and political[1] rediscoveries, while official communist ideology interpreted this phenomenon more darkly. How can we explain the particularly emotional character of this history of Proudhonism and what does this signify?

This intensity of emotion towards Proudhon's theories is not recent, and we may say that it was expressed throughout the writer's life. As early as 1840, the *First Memoir* on property was received with keen interest among the working classes where his opening phrase ("Property is theft") quickly became a familiar slogan. But it also provoked anger from the members of the Suard Academy, and then, when his *Second Memoir* was published, concern from the justice system. *The System of Economic Contradictions* attracted admiring and approving readers but

[1] On the history of Proudhonism and these "returns" to Proudhon, cf. *Mil neuf cent, Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, no. 10, 1992 : "Proudhon, l'éternel retour" [Proudhon: The Eternal Return].

sparked the wrath of Marx. In 1848, Proudhon was regarded as a prominent defender of the popular classes, and the results of his election to the National Assembly in June show that he was not trusted only among the artisans. But the events of June that shattered popular hopes also harmed trust in the people's spokesman, and in 1850 the moderates, who had once participated in the February Revolution, turned against Proudhon whom they saw as a disturbing annoyance.[2] After having been followed and discussed, he quickly became known as "l'homme-terreur". The story of enthusiasm and anger does not end there: Proudhon, welcomed without hesitation by the citizens of Brussels in 1858, had to flee the city four years later following a violent protest against him. In 1861, his book *War and Peace* provoked indignation and, furthermore, a complete misunderstanding. The following year, his opposition to Italian unity attracted very little approval and almost universal animosity.

Marx's subsequent attitude exemplifies the fury of these reactions, although it may be interpreted in different ways. We know that Marx initially expressed extreme admiration for the *First Memoir*, and that he regarded Proudhon as an authentic representative of the revolutionary movement,[3] before pillorying him and giving him the infamous epithet "petty bourgeois".[4] But the story of these contradictory emotions did not end in 1847: the fervent admiration expressed in *The Civil War in France* is also a tribute to Proudhon, since in it Marx praises precisely the communalism and federalism that Proudhon had systematically theorised nearly a decade earlier.

Among these impassioned returns to Proudhonism, we must also include the dramatic period of the Paris Commune. Whereas the twenty years of the Second Empire gave no indication that a federalist movement was possible, the insurrection of March 1871 was driven by popular enthusiasm, where a historic return to Proudhon's federalist hopes and his pluralistic conception of a new social order could clearly be discerned.

After 1880, two great impassioned returns to Proudhon could be contrasted: one positive, that of anarcho-syndicalism; the other negative, that of communist ideology which would make Proudhonism the symbol of evil. Of course, anarcho-syndicalism's return to Proudhon[5] is based on political explanations and supporting arguments, but it also charged with feeling and emotion. Georges Sorel, Gaétan Pirou, Célestin Bouglé, Georges Dolléans and others treat the rediscovery of Proudhonism as a "resurrection" and as the revival of someone once forgotten. A revival not made without horrified cries, as Eduard Bernstein testified in 1900 in the French edition of his work *Evolutionary Socialism* in which he writes in the preface: "Hence that horrified exclamation by a few Marxists to me. He is resurrecting Proudhon!"[6]

[2] "The boldness of Mr. Proudhon's proposals [...], the challenge thrown at all beliefs, all received opinions, inspired violent indignation [...] Proudhon suddenly gained a reputation, among a small but growing circle, that attracted greater revulsion than sympathy." Daniel Stern, *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* [History of the 1848 Revolution], Paris, A. Lacroix, 1880, p. XVII

[3] "But Proudhon makes a critical investigation – the first resolute, ruthless, and at the same time scientific investigation – of the basis of political economy, private property. This is the great scientific advance he made, an advance which revolutionises political economy and for the first time makes a real science of political economy possible." Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *La Sainte Famille* [The Holy Family] (1845), Paris, Éditions sociales, 1969, p. 42.

[4] Karl Marx, *Misère de la Philosophie* [The Poverty of Philosophy] (1847), Paris, Costes, 1960.

[5] Cf. Patrice Rolland, "Le retour de Proudhon (1900-1920)" [The Return of Proudhon (1900–1920)], Mil neuf cent, *Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, 1992, no. 10.

[6] Eduard Bernstein, *Socialisme théorique et social-démocratie pratique*, Paris, Stock, trans. A. Cohen, 1900.

It is indeed as a disturbing resurrection that these defenders experienced this return. In fact, the history of the First International was marked by the struggle of the collectivists and communists against the Proudhonians and Bakunin. Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, seemed to have declared Proudhon's definitive excommunication. However, a new social movement became involved in other activities, giving new life and presence to yesterday's outcast.

The October Revolution and its descent into the Leninist, then Stalinist State, would inspire a new revival, perhaps more easily explained but no less impassioned. The state bureaucracy was compelled to fight against all forms of opposition and, in particular, against an anarchism that would contrast its revolutionary promises with the realities of a despotic State. Proudhon thus assumed the diabolical figure of the triumphant revolution's worst enemy. Of all the returns to Proudhon, this is perhaps the most understandable and politically logical: as the Bolshevik Party tightened its grip on behaviour and expression, he who denounced the State and political bureaucracy logically became the iconic enemy and a symbol of dangerous resistance. We can follow the extreme contradictions in Lenin's work with regard to the Proudhonian spirit: in 1902, in *What Is to Be Done?* , advocating the centralised party and bringing professional revolutionaries together in perfect unity, he firmly rejected the Proudhonian and anarchist tendency, but in 1917, the analyses in *The State and Revolution* struck anti-state tones that Proudhon would not have rejected. It was after seizing power that Proudhonism became a threat and a voice to be stifled.

The collapse of the communist regimes and their legitimising rhetoric marked a calming of these condemnations and abuses. If one can speak of a new return to Proudhon, it is certainly in a calmer, less sectarian climate, more conducive to a better assessment of his place in history and of the meaning of his work. However, after the great revivals that we have just briefly recalled, this complex work continues to occupy a contested place among the great predecessors. We must assume that this turbulent and unfinished history of admiration and condemnation, support and excommunication, is not accidental, and that there are relatively discernible reasons for it, even if these reasons may be intersecting and contradictory, which is no surprise in matters of political affiliation.

We can hypothesise that the extreme reactions towards Proudhon's work in the past, and in a lesser vein still today, are due to strong, non-accidental reasons. It seems that the critique of the three alienations of property, the State and religion touches on three fundamental questions of the social order, and that these questions, whatever changes they may have undergone over more than a century, remain open, provoking explicit and implicit stances and reactions. Moreover, while the conditions have changed, the basic emotional reactions towards these three foundations of the social order have a degree of historical continuity, and it is perhaps in this regard that Proudhonian discourse most directly addresses ongoing attitudes. Finally, Proudhon's specific answers, his refusal to believe in simple and inevitable solutions, his very ambiguities, between optimism and clear-headedness, seem to us to be in tune with current emotional contradictions.

The critique of property is Proudhon's first theme, and despite the different versions, a constant theme. Critique of the principle of property and refutation of theories defending it in *What Is Property?* (1840), analysis of the contradictions generated by the regime of property in *The System of Economic Contradictions* (1846), attempts to solve the problem in *The Federative Principle* (1846) and *Theory of Property* (posthumous) – the denunciation of the appropriation of capital is a constant critical theme.

This obsession may seem outdated today. Such critiques are said to belong to a bygone era of capitalist development. How can these condemnations be given credence when communism has

proven to fail and socialism is exploring various capital management models? However, things are far from being so obvious, and although social suffering linked to the possession and deprivation of property has changed in form and place, it is still no less acute throughout the world than in the 1850s. The occurrence of appropriation remains a focal point for satisfaction and dissatisfaction, enjoyment and envy, attraction and revulsion. Statistics and surveys can measure inequality and inequality, the closing or widening of income gaps, but they cannot accurately reflect all of the ever-present desires and irritations surrounding the nagging issue of property.

But is it not this irritation and fundamental dissatisfaction that Proudhon expresses? It has often been rightly noted that the rebellious cry ("Property is theft!") was not as original as one may think and that it had been expressed in different terms well before 1840. It should undoubtedly be compared with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), which shares its vigour and acerbic outrage. We can even see a new formulation of religious indignation against the injustice of the earthly city – Pope Leo the Great had said, before many Church fathers: "Usury of money is the death of the soul". But the old and rather archaic nature of this cry in no way weakens its emotional power. What Proudhon expresses in these few words, which he would then constantly theorise, is that through the property relationship, a particular social relation is called into question and that, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already expressed, the social relationship necessarily became a relationship of force. Can this relationship of force be overcome, or must we come up with economic, political and ideological compromises? This question would constantly be revisited over the twenty-five years of thought between the *First Memoir* and *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*.

Proudhon's originality in the social movement of the mid-19th century on this point is to increase outrage against property without, however, providing a simple solution to it. While liberals and conservatives see appropriation either as an incidental or wholly beneficial phenomenon, and the communists see it as a temporary evil that a revolution can erase, Proudhon maintains that it is socially illegitimate, a source of destructive contradictions, but nevertheless that there is no eschatological solution to this torment. He fights against liberals who hide the violence and suffering linked to property, but he also fights against the supporters of "community",[7] whose dangerous illusions he condemns. He even defends Roman possession and glorifies peasants' physical ties to the land, which they cultivate better and with greater enjoyment when they own it.

There is thus an apparent intellectual contradiction, but the contradiction is based in fact. It is an economic contradiction, since property allows the healthy accumulation of capital but also causes worker subordination and poverty; a social contradiction, since property divides capital and labour and provokes "war" between the two; and a psychological contradiction between the enjoyment of the possessors and the suffering of the dispossessed. But paradoxically, Proudhon's attitude is in no way one of resignation. He does not believe that a political revolution could ever resolve permanent problems whose complexity is a condition of economic functioning, but nevertheless he does not stop seeking realistic means to calm the suffering caused by appropriation without destroying its dynamism, whether through immediate measures such as the Bank of the People in 1849 or through highly elaborate measures such as Federalism in 1863.

Citizens are encouraged to face up to the suffering resulting from property, appreciate its fatal nature, and called not to resign themselves to it but to participate in balances and exchanges in

[7] Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques* (1846), ch. XII.

order to circumvent its injustices. Is this peculiar mix of anger and realistic hope so distant from a certain current sensibility?

Proudhon's second passion may be even closer to a certain current sensibility, and is why he is regarded as the "father of anarchism": his denunciation of political alienation. It was during the period of the 1848 Revolution, when the hope for establishing a whole new society was asserted, that Proudhon most vigorously expressed his denunciation of the State, particularly in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851), but this critique had been outlined ever since his earliest writings. His later writings, though more moderate on this point, continue to denounce state centralisation.

Again, beyond the historical conditions and the variety of circumstances, the Proudhonian critique touches on a problem that today's societies have not solved. Citizens' relationships with the State continue to oscillate from trust to hostility, depending on class and social status and according to their conditions and interests, always imbued with hopes and disappointments. In France, in particular, this relationship is filled with agitation sustained by partisan promises and disillusion, but no nation completely avoids this twofold relationship, nor can it evade the burdens and controls of state machinery. But is Proudhon's anti-state sensibility not in tune with this contemporary sensibility, at least in environments not directly favoured by state structures? Proudhon sketches the broad outlines of an abstract state power motivated by a dynamic whose extent and invasiveness is hidden. Beyond the historical and political explanations,[8] which are not lacking, he paints an image of dull violence that devours its victims, the citizens. His essential characterisation of the State – that it appropriates citizens' political will – strongly accords with the experience of today's citizens, who find themselves before an obscure, threatening and crippling technocracy. Here, theoretical analyses and proofs matter less than the emotional intuition that permeates the text and lends it emotional significance. Perhaps this is why pages of Proudhon remain perfectly understandable by contemporary citizens, without the need for explanation or comment. If, for example, today's citizens read or heard this passage on the State's violent grip – "To be GOVERNED is to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorised, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished…" – we would expect them to understand its meaning immediately and recognise their emotional experience there. Proudhon also says that State power is fascinating and that it may exercise, whether consciously or unconsciously, a seductive power over uninformed citizens. There is thus a permanent emotional ambiguity with regard to State power, which varies according to social groups and the various interests, but which permeates the whole of civil society.

It is regrettable that Proudhon did not maintain his radical denunciation of the State and believed that he had to seek a balance, a dialectic, between the principle of authority and the principle of liberty.[9] But it is precisely one of Proudhon's essential peculiarities to radically denounce state appropriation and then to seek realistic solutions to the dilemma. Here, too, his critique leads neither to resignation nor to nihilism: according to *The Federative Principle*, the dialectic between authority and liberty cannot be avoided, and everyone must face up to its specific consequences. Are these appeals not largely in tune with a certain contemporary sensibility?

[8] Cf. Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* (1849) and *Idée générale de la Révolution* (1851).

[9] Proudhon, *Du Principe fédératif de la nécessité de reconstituer le parti de la révolution* (1863).

Proudhon's third denunciation, of religion, may have seemed in the eyes of many rationalist or scientifically minded people to be a somewhat outdated polemic. In 1865, Marx recognised Proudhon's book *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* as a useful work, but only because of the rather backward mindset, in his view, of the French workers. For him, since religious beliefs were linked to archaic, feudal structures, the development of capitalism had the side effect of dispelling these outdated illusions.

The robust upholding and evolution of religions throughout the world and the resurgence of aggressive fundamentalisms and sects of a religious nature have led, conversely, to reconsidering religious facts from another perspective. Today there is a strong tendency to link two attitudes that are difficult to reconcile: one consists in recognising all meanings (political, social, artistic) of religious facts, while the other highlights the risks (war, hatred, terrorism).

This ambiguity is one of the pillars of Proudhon's analysis of religion. Proudhon highlights, as it is repeated today, that the philosophies of transcendence gave all individual and collective practices shared meanings, a unity that is psychologically reassuring and socially effective. In doing so, as he likes to recount, every religion created a certain social bond among its followers; it "bound" individuals together by creating a shared imagination. But his argument also leads to showing that this community that linked individuals together came at the cost of subjecting people to a principle that was external to them, an alienation that destroyed their autonomy. The purpose of his great book, *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, is to set forth all the consequences of this heteronomy, this submission to a transcendent principle, in all aspects: economic, political, moral. Religion is therefore both respectable and redoubtable, worthy of respect and even worthier of being fought against. It is understandable that because of this critical aspect, Proudhon's work remains irritating or despicable in the eyes of devotees of all persuasions.

But once again, the Proudhonian critique does not lead to nihilism. The goal of this denunciation is not to commit to the destruction of beliefs, and in this respect there is great distance, for example, between Proudhon and Stirner, as the latter indeed noticed. As the title suggests, Proudhon's goal is twofold: of course, the dangers of doctrines of transcendence must be denounced, but more importantly, this critique is the starting point for a search for a positive theory of justice. Once again, the Proudhonian sensibility in no way leads to resignation, but to seeking solutions to the different contradictions that are the very substance of life.

If there is therefore a clear affinity between major forms of today's shared sensibility and Proudhon's analyses, it will not be surprising to note that some proposals made over a century ago resonate strongly today. Let us mention here, without intending to develop them further, two great Proudhonian projects – federalism and the theory of justice – emphasising the link between political sensibility and these projects.

It may be said that the movement now inspiring a re-evaluation of European federalism, in endlessly discussed forms, is based on one fear and one hope: the fear of seeing the continuation of conflicts that have caused bloodshed in European nations, and the hope of building a new community with greater economic and political cohesion. Keeping just to these aspects, it can be noted that they reproduce a collection of attitudes that also underlay the Proudhonian federalist project. In the 1860s, he saw federalism as a socio-political system capable of breaking the despotic and warlike dynamics of the great States, a transnational regime making a return to military confrontations impossible. Similarly, provided that federalism were conceived as an economic and social regime and not only as an inter-state arrangement, it must completely reorganise socio-economic balances and exchanges, while also transforming all the old structures.

This hope is not absent from current expectations, which of course does not mean that the true Proudhonian project is now being implemented; on this point, there is a large gap between hope and reality.

It is no less remarkable that a broad reflection on the theme of Justice is being developed today, which of course seeks different means and ends from Proudhon's.[10] An intuition that motivates current research accords with Proudhon's theory that the free play of economic forces and social contradictions is not a viable long-term response and will only satisfy the governing and possessing classes. As he repeats in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, the collapse of transcendent beliefs and the system of inequality that they legitimise runs the risk of surrendering humanity to its troubles, to economic, social and political violence. This does not imply that new, dangerous transcendences must be invented. On the contrary, we must take stock of the economic realities, examine the failures of the regime of property and the social inequalities that it reinforces, and bring the demands of individual consciousness up to date in order to define the principles of Justice and its applications in the different areas of life. For Proudhon, a society cannot be based on illusory principles and become a source of dependence and submission, nor surrender itself solely to the determinisms of economic forces. Nor can it find peace and freedom within the straitjacket of State order. It requires an ideal and real order, a representation of what it must be, a principle that guides collective and individual action.

Is this justice being achieved, and can we confidently expect the coming transition from a world of injustice to a world of justice? Proudhon is far from asserting this, and after having at times believed in certain progress, he considers regression to be a historical possibility. Humanity's troubles are too glaring for us to be led astray by the illusion of a just future. We must make a careful assessment of violence and injustice and their fundamental causes, and fear the worst without losing hope. Justice remains the goal to be achieved, the task to be carried out.

[10] We allude to the rebirth of the debate marked by John Rawls' work, *Theory of Justice*, 1971.

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