

## Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's Mutualist Social Science

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### Introduction

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was born in Besançon, the capital of the Franche Comté region of France, on 15 January 1809. These were formative times for France and Europe. The Napoleonic wars were turning in favour of the Holy Alliance, and it was the beginning of the end of the First Republic. In 1814, a year before the fall of Napoleon, the Austrians laid siege to Besançon and, following the end of the war, the city was struck by successive waves of famine, compounding the Proudhon family's poverty. Pierre-Joseph's father was a cooper and taverner, who infamously refused to profit from his customers, and his mother was from a modest peasant background. These deprivations made completing a timely, formal education impossible. Nevertheless, his intellect stood out, and his father urged him to take an apprenticeship as a proof-reader and typesetter for a local press, which was highly skilled intellectual work at the time.

The press printed two types of texts in huge quantities, both of which would have a lasting influence on Proudhon's intellectual development and his socialism. The first was the Bible and the endless theological commentaries on it, which prompted him to learn Hebrew at the age of twenty and, later in life, to proclaim theology to be 'the science of the infinitely absurd'.<sup>1</sup> The second was the works of his compatriot from Besançon, Charles Fourier, in particular the *Nouveau Monde Industrielle* (*New Industrial World*, 1829). This text, in all its erratic, neologistic splendour, was a harbinger of bourgeois industrialism and socialist communalism. Its combination of feminist (a term he probably coined), anti-rationalist, anti-clerical, industrial, and communalist futurism, which would also

<sup>1</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *What Is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, trans. D. R. Kelley, ed. B. G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 25.

become so central to the Saint-Simonian movement that followed, was the pole star of Proudhon's socialism in his early years. He melded this set of influences with the debates about republicanism and scientific positivism, to develop his own *science sociale*, which became federalist anti-statism in the final fifteen years of his life. It was also during these last years that he turned back to the Napoleonic wars that had so structured his life. Uniquely among socialists, Proudhon extensively theorized the relationship of international relations to the possibility of freedom from domination.

Throughout this intellectual evolution, Proudhon's primary concern would be the arbitrary and stifling domination of the church, the state, the emerging structures of bourgeois French capitalism. The turn to federalism and international relations, from 1851, developed a unique and insightful account of the ways in which religion, state, and capitalism were being transformed by war, and shaping revolutionary possibilities in turn. As I will show, even though he came to it last, in many respects international relations were analytically primary for Proudhon: the possibility of revolutionary social change at the end of the nineteenth century was determined by the balance of European great power politics. Without international peace and stability, the social revolution would be impossible, he argued. This theory led him to defend the Concert of Europe, reject the Italian *Risorgimento* and the unification of Poland, and dismiss national unity as a focus for revolutionary socialism. Needless to say, this attracted considerable criticism.

This theory of international relations was also underpinned by a sophisticated political philosophy and social science. It foregrounded a scientific understanding of emancipation born of the correct organization of society, predicated on a philosophical, even Heraclitian understanding of change and impermanence, the equivalence of exchange relations, the irreducibility and infinite collective plurality of human life, and the moral autonomy and agency of 'natural groups'. Natural groups were any collection of individuals that developed a 'collective consciousness', moral collective personhood, and a *puissance* or force of their own. These forces could be collective ideas, actions, or products. The product of labour is an emergent property, irreducible to any one individual in the process. This produce of collective endeavour was rightfully the group's to exchange as they chose, democratically. Under liberal bourgeois property relations, this product, including any surplus,<sup>2</sup> becomes the

2 For a fuller discussion, see I. McKay (ed.), *Property Is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), Introduction and p. 796. Note that where English translations of Proudhon's works are available I have used those and refer to them using

property of the title-holder or capitalist, not the workers who produced it, and title-holders are free to transfer that title as they please. Proudhon located this historic injustice at the heart of *dominium*, the symbiotic relation between states and proprietors, one born out of expropriation and perpetuated through the normalization of liberal theories of sovereignty and property.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I will flesh out these key ideas. The chapter has five sections. In the first I briefly discuss the historiography of Proudhon's thought. In the second section I set out the origins and general contours of Proudhon's social science. I then show how this links to his mutualist socialism in the third section before turning to his federalist theory of international relations in the fourth section. In the final section, I turn to his anti-feminism and antisemitism. Proudhon was neither the first nor the last patriarchal racist in the history of socialism, but the epithets have stuck to him more tenaciously. I link both to his wider social theory, to show how they were integral to, but self-evidently a fundamental contradiction of, his thought. I conclude by showing how these main aspects of Proudhon's social theory were engaged, by the right and left, after his death.

### The Contested Oeuvre of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

Proudhon was a self-taught public intellectual who gained mainstream, academic, and popular recognition, and lived solely by the income he generated from his prolific output. Publish or perish was very much the literal reality of his life, and from 1851 he was writing to support his wife and two children. And he was prolific. Proudhon's collected works now span more than fifty volumes. These include the definitive twenty-six volumes of his published works, the *Oeuvres Complètes* (*Complete Works*), eight posthumous works, and eighteen volumes of letters and notebooks, with many more new editions now available, in print and online, thanks to the work of Edward Castleton and others.<sup>4</sup> This collection does not include his commissioned newspaper articles, nor his own publishing ventures, including multiple journals and newspapers. Even his most systematic and extensive works, like *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* (*On Justice in the Revolution and*

their translated English title. Translations into English from the original texts are my own.

3 For more on this, see R. Kinna and A. Prichard, 'Anarchism and non-domination', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 24 (2019), pp. 221–40.

4 Edward Castleton has archived and generated facsimiles of Proudhon's unpublished notebooks, manuscripts, and letters, which are publicly available online from the Besançon municipal library: <http://memoirevive.besancon.fr>, last accessed 13 August 2020.

*the Church*, 1858), which comes in at 2,358 pages, and *La Guerre et la paix* (*War and Peace*, 1861), at more than 194,000 words, sold tens of thousands of copies each, with works such as *What Is Property?* (1840) and *The Principle of Federation* (1863) not eclipsed until decades later by Marx's *Capital*. By the time of his death in 1865, Proudhon was without doubt one of the most significant socialist theorists in Europe. Nevertheless, like almost all writers, he was always on the verge of poverty, and lacking a benefactor and permanent library, moving periodically, being jailed for three years, and being twice forced into exile, with no let-up in output, meant his writings had to be based on borrowed books and notes collected sometimes decades before in his indispensable, but rambling *carnets*. This explains some of the inconsistency across his writings.

In the English language much of the reception of Proudhon's writings is filtered through Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), a riposte to *System of Economical Contradictions, or the Philosophy of Poverty* (1846). This book was certainly an interesting marker in the development of Marx's thinking, but a careful and considered reconstruction and engagement with Proudhon's ideas it is not. Based on this text, and much of the Marxist-inspired secondary literature, many English-language commentators persist with the myth that Proudhon was impenetrably incoherent and/or a liberal individualist.<sup>5</sup> These myths have no doubt been off-putting for a number of would-be novice researchers. Thankfully, more recent contextualist histories of Proudhon's thought have reset our understanding of Proudhon's place in the history of socialism.<sup>6</sup> What these show is that, while Proudhon's ideas inevitably developed over time, and in such prolific output there is inevitably some contradiction, his underlying social philosophy was nevertheless remarkably consistent and coherent. This said, his theory is always shrouded in contemporary detail, which gave it popular appeal at the time, but which means it also dated quickly, and now demands considerable knowledge of the historical context in order to make sense of it. Nevertheless, this speaks to the politically engaged nature of his political theory.

5 See, for example, P. Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge, 1980), and A. Ritter, *The Political Thought of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). For a set of criticisms of Marx's reading of Proudhon, see I. McKay, 'Proudhon's constituted value and the myth of labour notes', *Anarchist Studies* 25, 1 (2017), pp. 32–67.

6 The standard text is K. S. Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Socialism v. *Science Sociale*

It is often claimed that Proudhon was not a socialist. But it is more accurate to show that Proudhon associated socialism with communism and Jacobinism, and both almost entirely with the writings of Louis Blanc. As an anti-statist, he could not associate with this Jacobin republicanism. In *System of Economical Contradictions*, he defines socialism as an immature political ideology, ill defined and imprecise, but always the child of Blanc's Jacobinism. In his 'Manifesto for Election' in 1848, he remarked that, 'For us, socialism is not a system: it is, quite simply, a protest.'<sup>7</sup> What socialism lacked was any scientific underpinning, resulting in a doctrine of authority, not unlike a religion. Proudhon's social science, which he spent the rest of his life trying to set out, sought out a more secure scientific basis for the emancipatory organization of labour.

Three intellectual tendencies in Restoration France made the most telling impact on Proudhon's social science. These were the various inflections of Saint-Simonism, which includes the ideas of Charles Fourier and Auguste Comte and the communalism of Etienne Cabet; the liberalism of Adam Smith, Benjamin Constant, Jean Baptiste Say, Jules Barni, and others; and the radical republicanism of the Jacobins, including, most notably for Proudhon and for European politics generally, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his followers, including Immanuel Kant. However, his first and lasting adversary was the Catholic Church. These intellectual foils can be clearly seen in his first three publications.

Proudhon's first published piece was the prize-winning *De la célébration du dimanche* (*On the Celebration of the Sabbath*, 1839). This essay explored the social, communal function of the observance of the Sabbath. For Proudhon, the Sabbath could be retooled in republican ways by appealing to a secular communion. The promise of religion, he argued, could be truly realized only in a secular, egalitarian society. In almost every book he published subsequently, this primordial and primitive nature of theodicy was the philosophical and historical genesis of secular and republican modernity. It was not a transcendence, but a humanization, of religion. He soon proclaimed himself an anti-theist, not just denying the plural ideas societies hold of gods, or their social function, but rejecting the notion of god as such. For Proudhon, religion served a social and intellectual function in the early stages of our development: it is what you get when you do not have better empirical

7 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 'Manifesto for Election', in McKay (ed.), *Property Is Theft!*, p. 372.

explanations. Piercing the divine, the originary philosophy, as he put in *La Guerre et la paix*, is the object of science.<sup>8</sup>

Proudhon's second book was the product of the prize scholarship that *De la célébration du dimanche* won him. *What Is Property? Or an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* (1840) remains Proudhon's most famous book in the English language, giving birth to anarchism as a political ideology, but also arguably socialism as such. Marx is surely right that this was the first scientific treatment of the concept of property in history. In brief, Proudhon argued that the exclusive right to a thing, dominium, was impossible to defend by recourse to nature or reason. It could only be sustained, in practice, by the state in the interests of proprietors, those who profit from rent, usury, debt, and the labour of others. Because the state is imperative to the enforcement of property rights, and needs proprietors to fund its activities in turn, the one could not be removed without the removal of the other. Private property is impossible, even with state force, because the state itself demands its share. The reality, Proudhon argued, was that all property was usufruct, mutually agreed use, and what was needed was more egalitarian rules to govern this necessarily social relation. Calling for the removal of the state, Proudhon declared himself an 'anarchist',<sup>9</sup> the enemy of all domination, material and ideal, from slavery to the ontological absolute, which was at this time primarily associated with the idea of God.

For Proudhon, the promise of the republic was a 'positive anarchy',<sup>10</sup> not only freedom from slavery, but also an enabling set of federated institutions that protected the maximal freedoms agreed, directly, by all. Proudhon's anarchism was the heir and logical conclusion of nineteenth-century republicanism, in particular the ideas of Rousseau. From Rousseau he developed ideas of communal self-governance, an explicit rejection of church and the *ancien régime*, and an account of constitutional republicanism that could harness the will of the collective, protect the moral dignity of the individual, and throw off the shackles of domination. But, unlike Rousseau, Proudhon celebrated communal autonomy and rejected the centralization and the mythological construction of the nation. Universal male suffrage was designed to elide social pluralism or factions, he thought. Proudhon objected to it on these terms, arguing that democracy ought to be the direct voice of all social groups as well.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the conjoining of the state and the people was being described as a 'Supreme Being', the metaphysical colossus of the

8 P.-J. Proudhon, *La Guerre et la paix. Recherches sur la principe et la constitution du droit des gens*, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions Tops, 1998), vol. 1, p. 40.

9 Proudhon, *What Is Property?* (1994), p. 205.

10 Cited in Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, p. 170.

revolution. The state was the aggregation of the will of the people. Proudhon's objection was that the state ran roughshod over the constituent groups of society, which were more immediately and tangibly real than the metaphysical monster the Jacobins sought to construct. Proudhon's third book, *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité* (*On the Creation of Order in Humanity*, 1843), was directed primarily to refuting Saint-Simonian and Jacobin ideas such as these, but Fourier's account of order was the main object of attack.

The essence of Fourier and the Saint-Simonians' argument was that humans had natural proclivities, aptitudes, and gifts, determined by biology, which would find their fullest expression in a social order that encouraged and nurtured them. For Fourier, the communalists, Icarians, and the communists, the collective was superior to the sum of the individual wills, and had an autonomous personality. But to realize this supreme being demanded the design of fantastically intricate utopias, all of which were closed communities, hierarchically organized, in which individual autonomy, the egoist pathology at the heart of society, could be sublimated into the communal whole. In Comte's *System of Positive Politics* (1851), arguably the nadir of this line of argument, these communities would stretch to national borders and be administered by a cadre of 'Priest Scientists', with the bourgeoisie below, guiding a docile and happy labouring class to the ends of social harmony. All other social factions would vanish: 'the government of things replaces that of men', and the state eventually withers away.<sup>11</sup>

In nearly all his subsequent works, Proudhon objects to and develops his critique of this type of hierarchical and arbitrary authority, in which individuality vanishes from the philosophy of history and politics. In response, he drew on Kant and the liberals to defend the moral dignity of the individual and developed a philosophy of history around an idea of 'immanence'.<sup>12</sup> As he put it in *De la justice*, to talk in terms of immanence makes one 'a true anarchist'.<sup>13</sup>

11 A. Comte, 'Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganisation of Society', in H. S. Jones (ed.), *Comte: Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 108. In 1852, Auguste Comte sent Proudhon a copy of his *System of Positive Politics*, with a request to join Comte in proselytizing the positivist religion, which Proudhon declined for the same reasons he turned down Marx in 1846: he objected to the idea of Comte's Priest Scientists, among other things.

12 The significance of this latter concept is often underestimated in the existing secondary literature. For an exception, see J. S. Cohn, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Politics* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), pp. 73–6.

13 P.-J. Proudhon, *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* (Paris: Fayard, 1988–91), p. 637.



For Proudhon, if something is immanent it is latent within and emerges out of concrete social processes, realized in and through purposeful, directed individual and collective human agency. Where he differed from Comte was in arguing that there was no necessary directionality to this process, because individual agency was, philosophically at least, free. Comte famously argued that the positivist future is pre-ordained in the material structures of history. The correct scientific understanding of time, he said, should proceed from the past, to the future, to the present: 'the dead rule the living', as he famously put it.

Developing liberal ideas, in particular Adam Smith's theory of the division of labour, Proudhon argued that human ingenuity and initiative were central to the production of history.<sup>14</sup> Production is free when it tends towards the increasing division of labour, to specialization, to artistry, and to co-operation and co-ordination, and the free exchange of ideas and materials to this end. As he detailed in *The Philosophy of Progress* (1853), progress was not the fulfilment of a telos, end, or utopia. Progress was, indeed ought to be, the conscious development of social and political systems that enabled the utmost freedom for individuals and groups. Progress was the development of openness, not the realization of a transcendent ideal. Anything that constrains this free flow of human initiative, purposefully or unintentionally, is unjust and by definition antithetical to the possibility of progress.<sup>15</sup> Teleological and transcendent accounts of history are as unjust as direct domination, because, being false, they arbitrarily close down the scope of free thought and agency.

Following Kant, Proudhon argued that the dynamism of history emerged from a perpetual rebalancing of the 'antinomies' in new social and historical contexts. For Kant, the antinomies were noumenal, ideal, and free, but had no corollary in the material world, which was mechanical and deterministic. Proudhon, by contrast, developed a metaphysics he called 'ideo-realism', which posited that ideas are phenomenal, born of both nature and context, and also, in turn, enabling human agency. Proudhon argued that the ideas were not lenses, which once polished sufficiently would give us a perfect understanding of reality. Rather, following Comte's biological naturalism, he argued that our ideas were generated by our physical being, in society. Our bodies are 'moral organs', as he put it in

<sup>14</sup> See McKay (ed.), *Property Is Theft!*, pp. 180, 289, 546, 658, 668.

<sup>15</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *The Philosophy of Progress* (2012 [1853]), trans. S. Wilbur, [www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/working-translations/the-philosophy-of-progress-revised-translation/](http://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/working-translations/the-philosophy-of-progress-revised-translation/), last accessed 13 August 2020.



*De la justice*.<sup>16</sup> In other words, ideas are real and are as shaped by society as shaping of it. This was a nuanced argument for the 1850s, where materialist structuralism, or liberal idealism, predominated.

Justice was the historically evolving product of human agency. It was codified in law, as right, but not reducible to it. Justice evolves, he argued, and so then must our laws, as we rebalance the poles of the antinomy. For example, good and evil are not only intellectual categories: for Proudhon they are real and realized or institutionalized in society. Society makes us, and our ideas of the good, but we have a purposeful ability to shape social facts in line with new equilibria between our conscience and the discoveries of science. Collectively, then, we establish temporary equilibria between the poles of the antinomies, like good and evil, liberty and authority, (re-)reconciling one with the other, with appeal to, or by reshaping, the prevailing wisdom of that historical era and our conscience.

In *Du principe fédératif* (*The Federative Principle*, 1863), he argues that it is not only that the balance between the needs or relative virtues of liberty and authority changes over time, but also that the very nature and meaning of the terms themselves change too.<sup>17</sup> The resolution is immanent to our intellect and society, shaped but not preordained by history. In constructing our own ideas about the world and balancing the inevitable antinomies of thought and of life, we come to make our own histories. Whether this is progress or not depends on whether it widens the scope of freedom and initiative, not whether it fulfils a historic ideal or telos.<sup>18</sup>

The antinomy between individual and community is another central antinomy in Proudhon's philosophy. Crucially, the individual neither thinks nor acts in isolation, but always in communion. Proudhon called the communities that individuals join or form 'natural groups'. They were natural insofar as they emerged out of the organic needs and actions of individuals. These groups are empirical, real, self-directing, and collectively conscious, an idea he adapted from Comte's theory of 'social facts'. These communities or associations are, *inter alia*, functional, affective, compelled, instrumental, accidental, but always supervenient, collective consciousnesses. He objected to the metaphysical claim that social groups were somehow superior, because different from people. As he put it, 'how can

<sup>16</sup> Proudhon, *De la justice*, p. 2057.

<sup>17</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation*, trans. R. Vernon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see H. De Lubac, *Un-Marxian Socialist: A Study of Proudhon*, trans. R. E. Scantlebury (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948).

the genus possess a quality that is not in the individual?'<sup>19</sup> Individuals are the moral basis for groups, not vice versa.

## Mutualism

Mutualism, another of Proudhon's neologisms, can be understood as the mature articulation of his social science. On the basis that society is ontologically complex and irreducible to any one individual, but nevertheless structured historically by the division of labour and collective forces, he demanded a general egalitarian principle of reciprocity between everything from individual behaviour through to the federal constitutional relations of peoples in a global society. In *The Political Capacity of the Working Class* (1865), his last book, mutualism implied:

mutual insurance, mutual credit, mutual aid, mutual education, reciprocal guarantees of job opportunities and markets, of exchange, of labour, of the good quality and fair pricing of goods, etc. This is what mutualism intends to create, with the help of certain institutions, a principle of the State, a law of the State, I even would say a sort of religion of the State, the practice of which is as easy for citizens as it is beneficial to them; one which requires neither police, nor repression, nor constraints, and cannot, under any conditions, for anyone, become a cause of deception and ruin.<sup>20</sup>

This is not a state we would recognize today. Proudhon is calling for the full, transparent participation of citizens in all public affairs, localized in their respective, linked and overlapping, groups, with responsibility shared by all. This 'positive anarchy' is any social order in which there is no final point of authority, because authority is mutualized. In the absence of hierarchical authority relations, it is incumbent on the constituent groups to organize their relations in ways that maintain their mutual freedoms, and these relations must of course be reciprocal, because, as Kant put it, for one to be

19 Cited in M. C. Behrent, 'Pluralism's Political Conditions: Social Realism and the Revolutionary Tradition in Pierre Leroux, P.-J. Proudhon and Alfred Fouillée', in J. Wright and H. S. Jones (eds.), *Pluralism and the Idea of the Republic in France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 110. For Constance Margaret Hall, Proudhon was one of the first to theorize an equilibrium between the collective and the individual in this way: C. M. Hall, *The Sociology of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 1809-1865* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971). For more on the theory of collective intentionality, see A. Prichard, 'Collective intentionality, complex pluralism and the problem of anarchy', *Journal of International Political Theory* 13, 3 (2017), pp. 360-77.

20 McKay (ed.), *Property Is Theft!*, p. 730.

free, all must be free. Anarchist or mutualist politics becomes a quintessentially constitutional politics, setting out and then institutionalizing the relative powers and responsibilities of groups and individuals, functionally and in accordance with the prevailing or historical norms of justice, themselves transformed by the findings of science and education. As such, mutualism can be understood as a 'permanent revolution', another term he probably coined.<sup>21</sup>

Proudhon's politics was revolutionary insofar as it implied the constant search for, and overthrow of, all arbitrary systems of domination. The most common form of arbitrary domination is that which results within and from the formation of any collective or association, the arbitrary domination of one individual by another, or by groups of others. Groups become dominating when minorities and majorities dominate without any intermediary group, constitutional provision, or democratic voice to explicitly justify it. The French economy was a case in point. Proudhon described the emerging economy as 'industrial feudalism' and *militarisme*. The former denoted the arbitrary powers industrialists had over the workers once the factory doors were closed, and the second referred to the conjoining of state and military industry to the ends of general exploitation and war.<sup>22</sup> Proprietors, politicians, military industrialists, monarchs, and emperors exercised arbitrary power over workers, subjects, and citizens, and universal suffrage could not resolve this, he argued. Universal suffrage was more akin to a plebiscite on a general system of injustice pre-arranged by elites.

Ironically, Proudhon stood for election to the National Assembly, twice, succeeding the second time in 1848, and campaigned on a mutualist platform. Once elected, he participated in the infamous Committee of Finance, alongside Adolphe Thiers, who would later turn state guns on the people of Paris during the June Days of 1848 and then again in 1871. Proudhon objected to the national workshops programme. Established in response to public protests for 'the right to work', these workshops, Proudhon argued, would centralize power and would leave the underlying social origins of the problem of unemployment untouched.

His protests against one of the earliest examples of social democracy failed, and if he was not an anarchist beforehand, he certainly became one then. He redoubled his critique of private property, much to the chagrin of the Parisian

21 Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, p. 186.

22 'Militarisme' was another of Proudhon's neologisms. See V. R. Berghahn, *Militarism: The History of an Intellectual Debate 1861–1971* (Leamington Spa: Berg Publishers, 1981), p. 1.

bourgeoisie, arguing that private capital should be liquidated through mutual exchange banks. He argued that the only way to gradually make property a social product, and to allow labour to organize itself, was to institute interest rates at, or as near as possible to, zero and to develop mutual exchange banks to serve as autonomously worker-run associations. This last system he later called 'autogestion', an idea revived by French radicals seventy years later. Once these groups were the economic base of society, the state would resemble a regional delegate assembly with strict mandates, initiating large infrastructure projects, but otherwise stepping out of the economic and political organization of society, which would be left to the federations of worker assemblies, the latter therefore the 'toothstone of universal republic'.<sup>23</sup> He was jailed for these ideas in 1849.

### International Relations and the Future of the Revolution

It was not until his final years that Proudhon properly theorized the 'universal republic'. His ideas took root while he was incarcerated in Sainte-Pélagie (1849 and 1852). It was during this time, and over the subsequent years, that he adopted the term 'federalism' to define his politics, too, and generalized this mutualist theory to European politics and the philosophy of war and peace.

While incarcerated, he struck up an enduring friendship with Giuseppe Ferrari, the celebrated Italian federalist, who published one of his most important works, *The Republican Federation*, in 1851. Ferrari, Alexander Herzen, the painter Gustave Courbet and Charles Beslay (two future leaders of the Paris Commune), and Alfred Darimon came to visit him in jail, and would spend their evenings discussing the failure of the Second Republic, the Battle of the Sonderbund to defend the Swiss Confederation in 1847, and the debates over the unification of Poland, Germany, and Italy.<sup>24</sup> Proudhon's ideas developed over the following years and were nourished by the ideas of Jules Michelet, the celebrated French historian, whose lectures Proudhon

23 Cited in E. Castleton, 'Association, mutualism, and corporate form in the published and unpublished writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon', *History of Economic Ideas* 25, 1 (2017), p. 164.

24 A not insignificant footnote to this period of incarceration is Proudhon courting and marrying his wife, Euphrasie, fathering his first child, and writing three more books before release. For more on the productive and enduring friendship between Proudhon and Ferrari, see C. M. Lovett, *Giuseppe Ferrari and the Italian Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

attended in 1839. Michelet sent Proudhon a copy of his *History of the French Revolution* in 1853. His argument that the Jacobins had destroyed the organically federal nature of French society would resonate strongly with Proudhon.<sup>25</sup>

This federalist theory was crystallized during his five years in exile, between 1858 and 1863. After the collapse of the Second Republic, Marx, Mazzini, Louis Blanc, Pierre Leroux, and others fled to London. Proudhon, by contrast, went into exile in francophone Brussels for two months in 1849, but returned to face the music and was incarcerated in Sainte-Pélagie later that year. Nine years later, when the publication of his magnum opus *De la justice* prompted a fine, censorship, and then the threat of imprisonment, Proudhon again chose exile in Brussels. This divergence was hugely significant for Proudhon's social theory. Unlike his contemporaries, Proudhon turned to international rather than class conflict. On the one hand, this is unsurprising because there was no mass working-class movement to speak of at the time but, on the other hand, it is also striking how little attention his contemporaries paid to the subject of war and European politics.

Between 1858 and 1863, Proudhon completed *La Guerre et la paix*, two books on the unification of Italy, one on the post-war settlement of 1815, and manuscripts on the unification of Poland and the concept of natural borders, the latter published posthumously in 1875. In these works, Proudhon developed his ideas of collective force and natural groups to their logical conclusions. He argued that the epitome of collective force in history was war. War had historically been understood as a 'divine' expression of social agency, shaping the most profound storytelling, from the Iliad to the Bible, justifying empire and religion. But the brutality of war, he argued, contravened the 'divine' principles it sought to realize. The philosophers rationalized this historical evil in terms of a secular theodicy. Kant, his foil here, had argued that good would inevitably emerge out of the evil of war, fulfilling the telos of history and the structures of reason.<sup>26</sup> Proudhon was not so sure.

25 Michelet included Proudhon's thank-you note as the preface to the second, 1868 edition. See G. Navet, 'P.-J. Proudhon: Pluralism, Justice and Society', in Wright and Jones (eds.), *Pluralism and the Idea of the Republic in France*, pp. 85–98.

26 On Proudhon's international theory, see A. Prichard, *Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); F. Ferretti and E. Castleton, 'Fédéralisme, identités nationales et critique des frontières naturelles. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), géographe des "Etats-Unis d'Europe"', *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography* (2016), pp. 1–23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cybergeo.27639>; E. Castleton 'Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *War and Peace: The Right of Force Revisited*', in B. Kapossy, I. Kakhimovsky, and R. Whatmore (eds.), *Commerce*

Proudhon argued that the inevitability of perpetual peace was guaranteed only if the martial impulse could be retooled to productive ends. Industrialization was the key, but progress could be guaranteed only if production and politics were diversified not centralized, communalized not militarized. The signs were not great. He argued that the militarist capabilities of states were enabling unification and centralization in unprecedented ways. For this reason, Proudhon advocated federalism, not unification, as a working-class revolutionary politics. His final works were appeals to revolutionaries such as Mazzini and statesmen such as Napoleon III to draw back from the tendency to unification, and to celebrate and constitute regional federal autonomy. Federalism could constrain states, enable a sophisticated division of labour, and give political voice to the groups necessary to reconstitute society from the bottom up. Rather than advocate for the end of the 1815 treaties signed at the Congress of Vienna, as his radical compatriots had, Proudhon argued for the embedding of its secular, quasi-constitutional international architecture as the precondition of revolutionary domestic reforms. The congress balanced French power through treaty and military force; it did not seek to destroy France. And this was precisely how Proudhon understood federalism: balancing forces through pacts. Without this international stability, progress and justice in places such as Italy or Poland would be impossible, he argued. Unifying states would make them prizes for the more powerful to seize, whether from outside, as in the case of Poland, or internally in the case of Italy.<sup>27</sup>

Proudhon modelled his future for Europe on the cantonal and communal autonomy enshrined in the Swiss constitution, arguments championed by Proudhonists in the League of Peace and Freedom, particularly the Bern congress (1868), and the meetings of the International Working Men's Association in the years immediately before and following his death (1864–8).<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Mazzini, Proudhon's foil here, left Switzerland out of his map of the future Europe of Nations, believing the country too diverse to survive the revolutionary period. Proudhon was on the right side of history, but the wrong side of the argument; as he prophetically put it: 'the twentieth century must open the era of federations, or else humanity will resume a thousand years of purgatory'.<sup>29</sup>

*and Peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 272–99.

27 For more on this, see A. Prichard, 'Deepening anarchism: international relations and the anarchist ideal', *Anarchist Studies* 18 (2010), pp. 29–57.

28 E. Castleton, 'The origins of "collectivism": Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's contested legacy and the debate about property in the International Workingmen's Association and the League of Peace and Freedom', *Global Intellectual History* 2 (2017), pp. 169–95.

29 P.-J. Proudhon, 'The Federative Principle', in McKay (ed.), *Property Is Theft!*, pp. 710–11.



Fig. 12.1 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 1850. (Photo by Apic/Getty Images.)

### Anti-Feminism and Antisemitism

Proudhon's mutualist socialism was, for all its ingenuity, also deeply sexist and racist. He actively and systematically promoted a provincial patriarchal, sexist politics and the antisemitic and racist tropes that suffused socialism at this time. These views surface throughout his writings, but in unequal measure. While his antisemitism never reached the systematic exposition of Marx's pamphlet 'On the Jewish Question' (1846), for example, this cannot be said for his anti-feminism, which was the subject of three books. Two were published as the eleventh and twelfth études of his magnum opus, *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* (1858), titled 'Love and Marriage' and 'Women', and the third was penned during his final, sick, and often deranged days, published posthumously in 1875 as *La Pornocratie. Ou, les femmes dans les temps modernes* (*Pornocratie, or Women in Modern Times*). Including this discussion here is as much a warning to contemporary socialists as it is an uncovering of the past, and reconstructing this aspect of Proudhon's thought helps illustrate, via a concrete example, the pros and cons of his wider theory.



My summary of Proudhon's place in the history of socialism comes full circle at this point, because his antisemitism and anti-feminism have similar intellectual foils: Saint-Simonism. What makes this so much more painful for the progressive and sympathetic reader of Proudhon's work is that the Saint-Simonian movement was a welcome home for radical feminists, both men and women, and black and Jewish radical intellectuals. Indeed, some of the most progressive parts of French politics stemmed from this group, most of whom graduated from the new Ecole Polytechnique during the July Monarchy. These highly educated public intellectuals and reformers were also economists, financiers, and bankers by training, and often by family heritage, with many subsequently becoming senior figures in a range of posts in the republican and imperial governments, including Michel Chevalier, who would negotiate the Cobden–Chevalier free trade treaty in 1860, Pierre Leroux, and many others. This professional evolution would fuel antisemitic conspiracy theories throughout the period.

The feminist movement at this time also emerged out of, indeed, could be seen as synonymous with, Saint-Simonism and was largely a male movement. Alongside Fourier, and Saint-Simon's search for the 'Female Messiah' (pursued enthusiastically by Prosper Enfantin and Auguste Comte), there were also the writings and activism of the female Saint-Simonians, including Jenny D'Héricourt and Jeanne Derroin, among others.<sup>30</sup> Both were active in caring for women left destitute by the exploitation of men, including concubines, prostitutes, and abandoned wives and their children, as well as leading radical publishing initiatives and political campaigning. While the men focused their energies on *Le Globe*, the women ran journals such as *La Voix des femmes* (*The Voice of Women*) and *Opinion des femmes* (*The Opinion of Women*). *Tribune des femmes* (*Women's Tribune*), which originally had a unisex editorial team, was later run as a wholly independent journal for women by women. Also, Flora Tristan, grandmother of the artist Paul Gauguin, was an active feminist campaigner on women's issues, who called on workers to emancipate themselves through unionization four years prior to the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*.

Combining his anti-feminism with standard antisemitic tropes of Jewish conspiracies, Proudhon believed that neither D'Héricourt nor Derroin had

30 K. Offen, 'A nineteenth-century French feminist rediscovered: Jenny P. D'Héricourt, 1809–1875', *Signs* 13 (1987), pp. 144–58. See also S. Wilbur, [www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/the-sex-question/welcome-anarchy-sex-question/](http://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/the-sex-question/welcome-anarchy-sex-question/), last accessed 6 August 2020.

the intellectual capacity or philosophical acumen necessary to properly articulate their critiques themselves, and implied that Prosper Enfantin was the figure behind their writings. This paranoid, conspiratorial view of the influence of the Saint-Simonians was also reflected in his writings about the path beyond liberal bourgeois property relations. His view was that the Saint-Simonians were singularly unable to deliver on their promises because they were, at root, Jewish and bankers. Saint-Simonism was doomed for many reasons, Proudhon believed, but one of them was because, he argued, Jesus was a Christian, not a Jew.<sup>31</sup> The attempt by these socialists to liberate women, Proudhon argued, would simply result in communalizing them, replicating the 'bank-ocracy' central to conspiratorial antisemitism of the time with a porn-ocracy.

Proudhon more often extolled the opposite of racism, that all men are equal. Women too. But between the two there was no equality. Men were, he argued, physiologically superior to women, which, corresponding to his general theory of force, underpinned the social distinction of roles between men and women too. Proudhon argued that men and women had fixed biological traits, derived primarily from their sex organs, that fundamentally shaped their social capacities and functions. This was by no means an original or unique idea. Indeed, the Saint-Simonians, such as Comte, had said much the same thing about the fixed biological and intellectual capacities of the workers, industrialists and scientists, and women (even Marx, a Jew himself, had said the same of 'Jewishness'). Women, he thought, were the passive recipient of 'the germ' during the act of procreation, having no seed or active role of their own.<sup>32</sup> He assumed men were virile and women beautiful; indeed, women were physically inferior to men to a ratio of 28:7, their brains on average four ounces lighter, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

Building on this phrenology, one of the precursors to race science, Proudhon followed the Saint-Simonians in arguing that these differences demanded social institutions to equalize natural inequalities. Proudhon's solution was an almost misogynistic paternalism. He followed the Greeks in arguing that the family was the generative origin of collective

31 For more on this topic, see R. S. Wistrich, 'Radical antisemitism in France and Germany (1840–1880)', *Modern Judaism* 15 (1995), pp. 109–35; M. Battini, *Socialism of Fools: Capitalism and Modern Antisemitism*, trans. N. Mazhar and I. Vergnano (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

32 P. Hauptmann, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Sa vie et sa pensée 1849–1865* (Paris: Relié, 1987), p. 67.

33 P.-J. Proudhon, *La Pornocratie. Ou, les femmes dans les temps modernes* (Paris: A. Lacroix, 1875), p. 35.

consciousness, the *oikos*. Here, due to immutable biological differences, the father is the natural leader and the first to appropriate and lead this social *puissance*, protecting the public face of the family, while the wife manages the social economy within. Proudhon understood patriarchy as a 'law of nature', where the strongest must guide the weaker sex.<sup>34</sup>

This primal appropriation had to be balanced by other familial obligations, most importantly love.<sup>35</sup> But this is only possible, Proudhon argued, in the institution of marriage. Marriage is the harmonization of the sexual or biological antinomy. Sex is for procreation alone, and lust the basest of vices. As far as Proudhon was concerned, in seeking to destroy the marriage contract, the Saint-Simonians were undermining society itself. For him, marriage was an institution that gives social force to affective virtues; love is, he thought, the true emotional bond that binds men and women together, giving us the family, on which all social order must rest. The family is the incarnation of justice because it is the immanent equilibrium of difference that consecrates a balance of affections, roles, and duties; it is where the androgyny of humanity is realized in microcosm. Interestingly, Proudhon accepts homosexual love, but not as the incarnation of justice. Homosexuality falls short of the transcendent equilibrium of the sexual antinomy between opposite sexes.<sup>36</sup>

The Saint-Simonians, and their female feminist followers, were, for Proudhon, leading society towards a 'pornocracy'. Proudhon defines a pornocracy as a social order which combines the enfranchisement of women with general promiscuity.<sup>37</sup> The general acceptance of concubinage within Parisian middle- and upper-class male society was the polar opposite of his maternal peasant upbringing.<sup>38</sup> Proudhon also denounced divorce because it consecrated the power of the church, and left women abandoned to servitude and prostitution.<sup>39</sup>

To enfranchise women without protecting the social conditions necessary for them to thrive (that is, the family) would be to cast them into the unknown, without support or public function, leading inevitably, he thought,

34 Proudhon, *De la justice*, p. 706. 35 Ibid.

36 Daniel Guérin speculated that Proudhon may have repressed his own homosexual feelings. For more on this, see A. Copley, 'Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: a reassessment of his role as a moralist', *French History* 3 (1989), pp. 206–7.

37 Proudhon, *La Pornocratie*, p. 74.

38 For more on the gendered nature of the peasant family, see M. Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family: Rural France in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

39 Proudhon, *La Pornocratie*, p. 52.

to prostitution. This argument bears comparison to his argument in favour of the confederalists of the southern states of America, in *La Guerre et la paix*. Proudhon argues that the true friend of the slave is one who would nurture and educate them to freedom, rather than simply enfranchise them and leave them to the rapacious whims of industrial capitalism and wage slavery.<sup>40</sup> But, even with such social support, a woman, he argued, could never be a man's associate or a fellow citizen, while black male slaves could be the equals of white men.

Underpinning all of this is a vitalist and biological conception of force. While might does not make right, he argues, no right can exist without force to sustain it, either the force of arms or force of will. But Proudhon argues that only men have this public, combative role, derived mainly from their superior strength. Women cannot be soldiers, cannot be combatants, and so cannot have a public role.<sup>41</sup> Proudhon's logic, his prejudices, and his reading of history, of the Bible, and of the history of war led him to a degree of ambivalence around wartime sexual violence, which is deeply upsetting. Proudhon argues that temperance, honour, and chastity ought to be the guiding virtues of military men but that, because of the structural pressures of conflict, they routinely fail to reach this ideal. Citing liberally from the book of Exodus (22:21), Proudhon points out how historically women become the property of the victor, 'the soldier's conquest',<sup>42</sup> for three reasons. First, because assimilation of property or territory is the *sine qua non* of war. Secondly, because men's sexual appetites are excited on the battlefield. And, finally, he argues, because women are naturally enamoured of the virility of the soldier. It is only if war and society are transformed that women will no longer be seen as objects of male domination and exploitation.<sup>43</sup>

Jenny D'Héricourt should have the final word:

You wish to subordinate women because in general they have less muscular force than you; but at this rate the weak men ought not to be the equals of the strong, and you combat this consequence yourself in your first 'Memoir on Property' where you say: 'Social equilibrium is the equalization of the strong and the weak.'<sup>44</sup>

40 Proudhon, *La Guerre et la paix*, vol. I, pp. 182–5. 41 *Ibid.*, p. 68, n. 106.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

44 J. D'Héricourt, *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman or, Woman Affranchised: An Answer to Michelet, Proudhon, Girardin, Legouvé, Comte, and Other Modern Innovators* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1981), p. 34.

D'Héricourt sought to develop his sensible ideas and to correct him: an immanent critique. Recall that, in Proudhon's view, social and intellectual antinomies are dynamic and complex, and sex differences are not solely responsible for defining human potential. But Proudhon's categorical anti-feminism contradicts all of this. As D'Héricourt puts it: 'You have naively mistaken the scalpel of your imagination for that of science.'<sup>45</sup> Proudhon wilfully ignored the latest scientific evidence that contradicted his claims regarding women's role in reproduction, the biological basis of his account of sex differences and patriarchy. D'Héricourt continues:

You say . . . she cannot be a political leader . . . And history shows us a great number of empresses, queens, regents, sovereign princesses who governed wisely, gloriously, proving themselves vastly superior to many sovereigns . . . [You say] [w]omen cannot be philosophers or professors . . . [but] Hypatia, massacred by the Christians, professed philosophy brilliantly . . . in France at present, many graduates of the Ecole polytechnique set great store in [the] geometrician Sophie Germain, who dared to understand Kant . . . The argument presented by Mr Proudhon is, as we have just seen, contradicted by science and fact.<sup>46</sup>

In this case, Proudhon was on the wrong side of history and the argument. Indeed, it is instructive that Switzerland, Proudhon's idealized constitutional order, was the last state in Europe to introduce universal suffrage, in 1991, waiting on its smallest canton, Appenzell Innerrhoden.

## Conclusion

More than any other thinker of that time, Proudhon's prodigious output, the sheer complexity of the revolutionary times in which he took part and then wrote about, and the historical distance between him and us make him irreducible to 'Proudhonism', 'socialism', or 'anarchism'. But interrogating all three in context can help us understand the origins of the socialist movement and its multiple lines of flight. Proudhon's socialism was predicated on a sophisticated social theory, an anti-Jacobin and pluralist politics, with a philosophy of history that was open, balancing agency and structure to the ends of justice.

45 Ibid., p. 58.

46 Cited in A. Primi, 'Women's history according to Jenny P. D'Héricourt (1809–1875), "Daughter of Her Century"', *Gender and History* 18 (2006), p. 154.

There is no doubt that Proudhon's thought was, like all such grand theorizing, flawed, and often deeply so. We should object to it on the basis that it is anti-feminist and antisemitic, and these criticisms hold more water than the Stalinist and Leninist critiques of Proudhon's ideas. He cannot be accurately described as a petty bourgeois nor can we argue, as others have done, that he was a proto-fascist, quite simply because he was an anti-statist and anti-capitalist.<sup>47</sup> These three sets of criticisms are used to justify ignoring what is otherwise a unique anti-statist contribution to the history of socialism. However, the Cercle Proudhon and Action Française were both able to ignore this simple fact, and claim Proudhon as an intellectual forebear to their antisemitic, chauvinist, and nationalist politics. Likewise, the doctrine of national syndicalism, led by a group of French monarchists, would also claim Proudhon to their cause. Proudhon's federalism was also evoked by the French Republican Federation, a right-wing parliamentary coalition, which opposed the Jacobin, dirigiste tendency in France, and the defence of Dreyfus.

In the English language, Proudhon's positive legacy is still to be properly uncovered. While his links to late nineteenth- and twentieth-century anarchism have been made abundantly clear, more remains to be said about the influence of Proudhon on mainstream European constitutional politics. Francisco Pi y Margall became president of the first Spanish Republic in 1875, and had translated three of Proudhon's constitutional works into Spanish. Four years prior to this, the anarchistic Proudhonists shaped the Paris Commune, then the IWMA, and thirty years later Proudhonism would become central to Georges Sorel's theory of revolutionary anarcho-syndicalism. The functionalist and jurisprudential writings of David Mitrany and Harold Laski were deeply influenced by Proudhon's federalism, and more has yet to be written about Proudhon's influence on the Russian anarchist movement too, in particular Leo Tolstoy, who came to visit him for a fortnight in 1860, in Brussels, while he was writing *La Guerre et la paix*. The evidence suggests Tolstoy eventually took more than the title for his own magnum opus and for the development of his Christian anarchism.<sup>48</sup>

This said, for all the careful re-reading and historical reconstruction and contextualization, Proudhon's place in the history of socialism will probably always be contested, but the effort to understand his ideas, and their

47 J. S. Schapiro, 'Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, harbinger of fascism', *American Historical Review* 50, 4 (July 1945), pp. 714–37.

48 B. Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoi in the Sixties*, trans. D. White (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1982).

reception, is hugely rewarding. Diligent and meticulous scholars are charting the path for others to follow. But in spite of this, indeed, perhaps because of these new careful histories, and the insights we gain, the definitive Proudhon is likely to remain elusive.

### Further Reading

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