

Proudhon, the First Liberal Socialist

Monique Canto-Sperber

“Proudhon? He is a liberal masquerading as a socialist,” observed Pierre Leroux.¹ Louis Blanc, in turn, strongly disapproved of the liberal orientation of Proudhon’s thought.² Two such usages of the term “liberal” cannot fail to intrigue the historian. When we think of the abyss that came to separate the common understandings of liberalism and socialism in the thirty years that followed the appearance of the term *socialisme*, it is astonishing to see such a conjunction of the adjectives *libéral* and *socialiste*. The opportunity to present the work of Proudhon in a somewhat unusual light is provided by the desire to understand how this author could simultaneously embody two such opposing terms.

The work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon holds a singular place among those of French thinkers who were interested in the reform of society during the first half of the nineteenth century. What’s more, the thought of Proudhon is richly represented in the Gimon Collection held by the Stanford University Library. The works contained in the collection, which brings together extremely rare first editions, such as an exceptional collection of periodicals edited by Proudhon, provide an occasion to reflect upon the question of Proudhon’s liberal socialism.

Socialism and liberalism are often presented as two political philosophies with opposite conceptions of man and of society.

Liberals defend the primacy of the individual and the autonomy of human activities. They believe that private property is the best guarantee of personal liberty. Economic life must result, according to them, from the free interaction, without any intervention, of economic initiative and contracts brokered directly between employers and workers. Liberal thinkers reject entirely any idea of societal organization and all encroachments on property and liberty.

Socialists, on the other hand, since the middle of the nineteenth century, have seen social and economic disorder as being the result of economic liberalism. Scarcity becomes most acute at the moment when the economy faces crises of overproduction. A working class is created and lives in appalling poverty. Liberty left to economic initiative produces above all chaos and degradation. The first socialist thinkers put forth many remedies against this state of things; they advocated the necessity to put first the needs of social cohesion, organize productive activities, “socialize” economic initiatives, and, as Marxist socialists later put it, undertake to liberate one particular class of society, the working class, in order to liberate all of society. Later, Marxist socialists would not hesitate at all to call for the socialization of property.

But one cannot stop at such a head-on opposition between liberalism and socialism. Both the evolution of liberalism over two centuries and the radical transformations of socialism have opened up the channels that connect these two movements.

Since the end of the nineteenth century liberal thought has been significantly transformed. It has shown itself to be more and more attentive to the concrete conditions of liberty, above all in its social dimensions. It has defended an idea of the individual, no longer conceived as an atom detached from the social world, but rather as a being whose

inner formation results from interactions with that social world. It has justified the need for a common order in society and the necessity of public goods and guarantees dispensed to all. It has defended a conception of property that is, in part, social.

On the other hand, socialism has integrated more and more ideas originating in liberalism. Over two last centuries, socialism has become reformist, watchful of rights, protective of individuals. It has recognized the positive role of the market and the role of economic initiative. As to the French socialist party, this evolution has resulted from the situation in which it has found itself, a situation that requires it to take part in the struggle against communist totalitarianism and to assume the functions of a governmental party.

The evolution of socialism toward liberalism is due not only to the necessity of adapting to a market economy, today practiced in nearly every country in the world. It is also the continuation of a trend that has been evident since the middle of the nineteenth century, and of which Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was the precursor, a liberal current in the heart of socialism.

It is perhaps a bit paradoxical to claim that there have always been liberals in the French socialist tradition. The object of this essay is to try to clear up this paradox, to show that the liberal orientation of socialism dates to the middle of the nineteenth century and that the work of Proudhon was among its first illustrations.

The liberal current within socialism

It is well known that Pierre Leroux is considered to have coined the term “socialism” in 1834 to give a name to the philosophy that defined itself in opposition to individualism and liberalism.³ He himself expressed “an equal horror of both individualism and of socialism” and was opposed to “absolute socialism” according to which society is all and the individual is nothing. In notes written ten years after the fact, in 1845, and again in 1850, Leroux gave valuable insights into the usage of the term “socialist” in the middle of the 1830s: “Ce que j’attaquais sous ce nom (de socialisme), c’était les faux systèmes mis en avant par de prétendus disciples de Saint-Simon et par de prétendus disciples de Rousseau égarés à la suite de Robespierre et de Babeuf, sans parler de ceux qui amalgamaient à la fois Saint-Simon et Robespierre avec de Maistre et Bonald.”⁴

The labels that Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc reserved for Proudhon, noted above, are not without a certain merit. They suggest that since the middle of the nineteenth century a tendency of socialism which corresponds broadly to the work of Proudhon, to the Proudhonian strain of thought, and in part to that of Fourierism, was commonly perceived as “liberal.”⁵ This tendency defends ideas that are dear to liberal philosophy, such as an obstinate attachment to liberty, the rejection of revolutionary violence, and a distrust of all forceful change of the social order. In fact, the critical usage of the term “liberal” tends to show that such interpretations of socialism had been very early perceived in the socialist camp, witness the unexpected (if not contradictory) designations Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc are using concerning Proudhon.⁶

From the 1860s, the general idea of liberal socialism was already widespread enough that one can recognize its characteristic traits. A liberal interpretation of socialism defends the independence, at least partially, of social and economic activities in relation to the state, the autonomy of civil society, a full conception of individuality and liberty, the idea of social responsibility, and the necessity of democracy and strong legal

institutions. In this way, it also defends social and political pluralism. From its first formulation, in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was clearly opposed to the “communitarian” (or collectivist) interpretation of socialism, one that called for the socialization of property and the collective organization of production. It was opposed no less strongly to state-controlled socialism, by which political reform governs social reform and the process of social emancipation is largely dependent on state initiatives.

Socialism’s split into several forms appeared very early in France. This split concretized the dual sources of inspiration admirably described by Elie Halévy:

Le socialisme, depuis sa naissance, au début du XIXème siècle, souffre d’une contradiction interne. D’une part, il est souvent présenté par ceux qui sont les adeptes de cette doctrine, comme l’aboutissement et l’achèvement de la Révolution de 1789, qui fut une révolution de la liberté. . . . Mais il est aussi, d’autre part, réaction contre l’individualisme et le libéralisme ; il nous propose une nouvelle organisation par contrainte à la place des organisations périmées que la Révolution a détruites.⁷

Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century in France, two elements proper to political history contributed to narrowing the distance between socialism and liberalism: their common desire to claim the legacy of the French Revolution, and the role of republicanism. The social and economic history of France has undoubtedly tempered the spread of liberal ideas, which have had to conform to the existence of a strong administrative power, of limitations imposed on the right to property, and to the presence of economic and social regulations curtailing the liberty of contracts and of the market.⁸ These conditions have in no way weakened liberal ideas, but they have facilitated their appropriation by certain socialist thinkers.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Gimon Collection

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was born in Besançon in 1809 into a family of peasant and worker background. Having received a scholarship, he moved to Paris, where his first work, published in 1840, *Qu’est-ce que la propriété?* gave him instant notoriety. He met Marx in 1844, but the publication of his *Système des contradictions économiques* provoked Marx’s criticism and a break in their relationship. Elected deputy in 1848, he was arrested and imprisoned from 1849 to 1852 for insulting the president of the republic, Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. Exiled in Belgium from 1858 to 1862, he decided to return to France after the liberalization of the empire in 1863. He died in Paris in 1865.

The works of Proudhon held in the Gimon Collection are of inestimable value. We find here a first edition of *Qu’est-ce que la propriété?, ou, Recherches sur le principe du droit et du gouvernement*, published by J.-F. Brocard in 1840, an edition that includes responses to objections raised by Adolphe Blanqui and Victor Considerant. Also in the Gimon collection is a superb edition of *Confessions d’un révolutionnaire, pour servir à l’histoire de la révolution de février*, two letters: the letter of 9 September 1855 to Monsieur Bouteville (on the Crimean War and the balance of powers) and the letter of 1849 to Monsieur Sauvage in Lyon, as well as a first edition of *Système de contradictions*

économiques, ou, Philosophie de la misère, which was published by Guillaumin and Co. in 1846.

The Gimon Collection offers in addition two folio volumes of periodicals successively created and directed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (*Le Représentant du peuple*, *Le Peuple*, *La Voix du peuple*, and *Le Peuple de 1850*). This is an invaluable source for studying Proudhon's thought, not only because of the access it permits to the texts themselves, but above all because of the glimpse it gives us of his political philosophy in the process of formation. These same volumes include twenty separate works, with two subcollections, now classified by Stanford Library under the title of the first piece found in the first volume: *Réforme économique*. All of these texts related to Proudhon had originally been bound together by the original collector under the title *Proudhon: Recueil des journaux publiés par lui*, forming one of the most important *recueils factices* in the Gimon Collection, since they contain documents of a diverse nature (journals, pamphlets, and speeches.)

Besides the journals published by Proudhon, the first volume of the two *recueils factices* contains texts that are decisive for understanding his thought, such as the promotional flyer for the Exchange Bank (“afin d’organiser, au moyen d’une banque générale d’Echange . . . a circulation directe et régulière des produits, et par suite de procurer la réforme du travail industriel et agricole.”); Proudhon’s speech before the Assize Court of the Seine (Cour d’Assise de la Seine) on 28 March 1849, and, most important, his speech delivered to the Assembly on 31 July 1848, in response to Adolphe Thiers’ report on the proposed revenue tax.

The texts assembled here cover a decisive period in Proudhon’s life, 1847–1850, a time when Proudhon entered national politics, served in the Constituent Assembly and launched his political journals. The first, *Le Représentant du peuple: Journal quotidien des travailleurs* first appeared on Sunday, 27 February 1848 (after the publication of two *specimen* issues, one dated 14 October 1847, the other, 15 November 1847, predating by several months the events of February, 1848). Three issues of the journal were published between Sunday 18 and Tuesday 20 February, 1848; the publication then reappeared on 1 April and continued until 21 August.

Two major themes dominate *Le Représentant du peuple*. One is republican and reform oriented, as the article titled “Les Socialistes et les politiques,” which appeared 27 April 1848, demonstrates.⁹ The other prevalent concern of the journal is intervention in the economy and in society. One of its regularly used slogans attests to the dominance of this worry: “The political constitution is nothing, the economic constitution is everything.” In the same vein, one reads, on the masthead of a long series of issues: “What is the producer? Nothing. What should he be? Everything.” This formulation is completed, beginning the first of April 1848 with: “What is the capitalist? Everything. What should he be? Nothing.”

Every issue of *Représentant du peuple* carries a *Revue de l’étranger*, a *Revue des journaux*, a heading for *Faits divers*, and one for *Variétés*. Beginning in June there is also a section devoted to the meetings of the Assembly.

Le Peuple took over, beginning 2 September 1848, with the motto “Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” the subtitle *Journal de la république démocratique et sociale*, and a reference to “rédacteur en chef, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.” Its publication was interrupted briefly on 29 March 1849, and ended definitively with the issue of 13 June 1849.

La Voix du peuple began 25 September 1849 and stopped on 1 May 1850 (this issue explains that the journal was interrupted due to the suspension of its permit to publish. In these two publications, the republican engagement that marked *Le Représentant du peuple* is less evident. We even find formulated here, in an unexpected fashion, a desire for the weakening of the political order: “The royalists have all of a sudden found themselves in accord with us on one principle: the administration of power through administrative decentralization,” we read in the issue dated 6 October 1849. A notable episode from the run of *La Voix du peuple* is Proudhon’s polemic against Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc beginning 3 December 1849 and running through several issues. In the last edition of this series, we see a premonition of the *coup d’état* of Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, which would take place 2 December 1851, with the following appeal: “To the bourgeoisie: do not revolt, do not abdicate.” Finally, the last of the journals edited by Proudhon appeared 15 June 1850 under the title *Le Peuple de 1850*. It was only published for a few months and ended 13 October 1850.

Regarding these several extremely hectic years in Proudhon’s life, it is worth considering Victor Hugo’s testimony. Hugo was elected to the Assembly, in the by-elections of 4 June 1848, at the same time as Proudhon and Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. In Hugo’s diary, which was published under the title of *Choses vues*, we find four portraits of Proudhon during 1848. Hugo seems to have been fascinated by him. He describes Proudhon in the famous speech that he gave to the Assembly on 30 July 1848, a speech devoted to the projects of rent reduction and of the People’s Bank: “Proudhon n’était ni sans talent ni sans puissance. Cependant, il plia sous l’insuccès et n’eut rien de l’effronterie sublime des grands novateurs.” According to the account that appears in *Histoire d’un crime*, the two men would see each other again, on 2 December, the day when Proudhon, locked up in Sainte-Pélagie for offending Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, obtained an exit permit. Their last meeting would take place in May 1861, in exile, in Brussels.¹⁰

The reconciliation between Victor Hugo and Proudhon is even more interesting in that Victor Hugo claims for himself the appellation of “socialist liberal.” In a famous text on the political stages of his life, dated by him from 1818 (when he was a royalist) to 1849, Victor Hugo describes himself as having been at that time “libéral-socialiste-démocrate-républicain.”¹¹ In this judgment, the terms are casually juxtaposed, which suggests that the simple association of socialism and liberalism was not, at the time, considered a real problem.

Against the spirit of the system: An early critic of Marx

In his rejection of utopianism, Proudhon defined himself as a realistic experimenter. He frequently blamed Rousseau, who made use, according to him, “of a priori assumptions without foundation” instead of reasoning out the relations of things.¹² Proudhon elsewhere critiqued communism and collectivism, which deny the individual and all that gives meaning to individual liberty:

Le communisme reproduit, mais sur un plan inverse, toutes les contradictions de l’économie politique (libérale). Son secret consiste à substituer l’homme collectif à l’individu dans chacune des fonctions

sociales, production, consommation, éducation, famille. Et comme cette nouvelle évolution ne concilie et ne résout toujours rien, elle aboutit fatalement, aussi bien que les précédentes, à l'iniquité et la misère.¹³

To this must be added Proudhon's rejection of any form of social organization that diminishes the role of individual liberty. Criticizing the supposed "laws of humanity," Proudhon exclaimed: "Vous me paraissez oublier totalement une chose essentielle, une chose qui produit tout le bien et tout le mal du monde, à savoir la liberté. Oui, dis-je, vous auriez raison si l'humanité était fatalement et invinciblement enchaînée à ses propres lois, mais il n'en est pas ainsi."¹⁴

From 1840, Proudhon criticized the notion of an ideal social organization, saying in various ways that he could not tolerate the concept of systems. He refused all "a priorisme" in social and political matters. Through that process of thinking, Proudhon founded a tradition central to French socialism. The neo-Kantian philosopher, Charles Renouvier, at the turn of the century, would express a comparable conviction:

Le plus grand danger politique est toujours celui de l'utopie, . . . il provient de la foi dans la bonté fondamentale de l'homme, dans le progrès indéfini de l'humanité, et dans un avenir assuré de bonheur : croyance qui, descendue peu à peu des têtes philosophiques dans le peuple, constitue un état des esprits qui ne s'était pas encore vu dans le monde.¹⁶

In the 30s, the socialist Henri de Man attacked political dogmatism. Even later, after the Second World War, several French socialists, André Philip, Pierre Mendès France, and Michel Rocard, ceaselessly denounced the dangers of utopia and blindness "to realities because of the abstractions of the ideal."¹⁷ These authors demanded the renunciation of utopia in favor of the precise study of social realities, the results of political force, and economic constraints. They manifested as well a distrust for all brutal changes in the political order made other than through a form of internal evolution that was agreed upon and self-conscious.

Another liberal trait of Proudhon is his precocious opposition to Marx. In a famous letter addressed to Marx on 17 May 1846, Proudhon, in a premonitory style, cautioned Marx against dogmatism: "Ne nous faisons pas les chefs d'une nouvelle religion; cette religion fût-elle la religion de la logique, la religion de la raison. Accueillons, encourageons toutes les protestations; flétrissons toutes les exclusions, tous les mysticismes." Proudhon also forcefully criticized revolutionary aspirations:

Peut-être conservez-vous encore l'opinion qu'aucune réforme n'est actuellement possible sans un coup de main, sans ce qu'on appelait jadis une révolution. . . . Je crois que nous n'avons pas besoin de cela pour réussir ; et qu'en conséquence nous ne devons point poser l'action révolutionnaire comme moyen de la réforme sociale, parce que ce prétendu moyen serait tout simplement un appel à la force, à l'arbitraire, bref une contradiction. Je me pose ainsi le problème: *faire rentrer dans la société par une combinaison économique les richesses qui sont sorties de la société par une autre combinaison économique . . . de manière à*

engendrer ce que vous . . . , vous appelez communauté, et que je me bornerai pour le moment à appeler *liberté, égalité*.¹⁸

The defender of liberty and of the autonomy of social functions

Pleas for liberty are constant in Proudhon's work. Liberty is not reduced to formal liberty (preservation from domination by others) but touches directly on the definition of liberty in its usage and in its connections with equality. A group of texts published in the issue of *Peuple* dated 16 April 1848 is extremely instructive in this regard.

Quand (l'homme juste) parle de liberté, c'est moins la sienne propre qui le préoccupe que la liberté en elle-même, étendue à tous ses semblables ; or, dès l'instant où la liberté revêt ce caractère d'universalité, elle perd cette parenté qu'elle semble avoir trop souvent avec le plus brutal et le plus monstrueux égoïsme. . . . Du moment que la liberté n'est plus un privilège, elle est tout à la fois rationnelle et légitime; elle est l'égalité.

The use that each individual can make of his liberty makes up the very content of that liberty.

Les égoïstes ne demandent pas mieux que de décréter la liberté générale, pourvu, et c'est ce qu'ils omettent de dire, que tout le monde ne possède pas le moyen de faire usage de cette liberté. . . . Or il faut arriver au jour où toute fiction soit bannie de la loi, c'est-à-dire où la liberté est tellement positive, générale, pratique, sans exception, qu'elle se confonde fraternellement avec l'égalité.¹⁹

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the problem of who will realize social reform has been in play: the state, after taking political power? Or worker associations and cooperatives, working toward the amelioration of their own conditions? Will social reform result from political reform or from the sudden awakening of the workers to their "political capacity," to use Proudhon's phrase, a sudden awakening that will incite them to adopt specific modes of action? The chasm that divides Louis Blanc and Proudhon has persisted in one way or another within the French socialist party (until the "deuxième gauche" and beyond); it has guided the great debates undertaken in France on political action and social representation. The necessity of finding forms of action that could be enacted by the social body, from Proudhon's equitable exchange to the idea of self-management, is recurrent throughout the liberal socialist tradition. The sudden awakening of each individual to his social and economic role is the beginning of emancipation.²⁰

This conviction is underpinned by a conception of work as playing a critical role in the realization of the self. The kind of work Proudhon has in mind is, to be sure, the qualitative and individual work in which he saw the conditions for social activity and moral autonomy. Nothing is more opposed to this conception than the Marxist idea of work. The philosopher and Germanist, Charles Andler, biographer of Nietzsche and disciple of Proudhon in many ways, precisely analyzed this point in a work that appeared in 1911.

Nous revendiquons pour cette moralité nouvelle du producteur tout ce que les moralités aristocratiques ont conçu de plus noble et de plus haut. . . . Nous admettons que la capacité du travail est un titre de noblesse. . . . Nous ne croyons plus qu'il y ait du travail incorporé dans les produits de l'homme. On l'a cru autrefois. Tout le marxisme est fondé sur cette croyance qui a rempli l'économie politique durant cent cinquante ans.²¹

The denial of a quantitative and abstract conception of work, conceived as alienation, is found as well in the work of socialist philosopher Jean Jaurès.

Il ne faut pas juger du tout de l'ordre socialiste et de l'esprit socialiste par les mesures de protection provisoire que nous proposons aujourd'hui contre les excès du régime capitaliste. Si nous demandons la limitation légale de la journée de travail, ce n'est pas du tout pour niveler tous les efforts, toutes les activités. . . . Dans l'ordre socialiste, ces périls et ces maux auront disparu, et quand tout travailleur sera assuré de sa part de travail, quand il sera payé pour tout son travail, ceux qui, par-dessus ce travail minimum, voudront par un effort complémentaire s'assurer plus de bien-être ne feront tort à personne ; ils feront du bien à eux-mêmes et à la civilization.²²

Moreover, Proudhon never stopped defending the autonomy of social and economic functions in relation to the state. On several occasions he crossed swords with Louis Blanc, strongly opposing all state controlled socialism. In *Contradictions économiques*, he raged at the partisans of governmental initiative in social and economic matters, who “want to obtain the good of the people at their own expense.” He equally criticized the creation of the national workshops in 1848, the first attempt to organize state employment. The national workshops are only an artificial creation, complained Proudhon, not part of an economic system. “Ils sont sans capital et sans débouché. On veut tout ramener à l'Etat: communisme pur, dépression du travail, enrichissement.”²³ The state cannot by itself create an economic and social force. The defense of the autonomy of civil society is at the heart of liberalism. The social body is a complex reality that results from the interactions and exchanges of individuals, and which should not be organized or administered by the state.

Not a social contract, but contractual ties

True to his liberal orientation, Proudhon manifested a certain distrust with regard to the legitimation of the state by popular sovereignty. For Proudhon, the sovereignty of the people, founded upon universal suffrage, was neither more moral nor more authentic than that of law or force. This way of seeing is strongly critical of the Rousseauist idea of the social contract, which suggests the abdication of individual will and a form of negation of the individual personality (dissolved in a collective entity, the general will) and of the autonomy of the social body.

By contrast, Proudhon calls for “contracts” that assure forms of government in society. Contracts have to be framed in such a way that they neither produce alienation

nor require the surrender of individual liberty.²⁴ Proudhon praised contractual, voluntary ties between people, these “societal contracts,” where “the associates enjoy all of their independence while maintaining all the advantages of the union,” and in which he saw the first engine of social emancipation. Proudhon extolled as well “the organization of economic forces under the supreme law of the contract,” not a social contract à la Rousseau, but a voluntary contract that would not involve either alienation or the sacrifice of individual autonomy, a contract “entirely based on liberty and free discussion.”²⁵ These contracts, fundamental elements of Proudhonian federalism, express “the organic union of wills, individually free and sovereign, which can and must work together.”

Proudhon was distrustful of all extensions of state powers beyond its own domain, because such extension would represent a direct threat to individual liberties. Proudhon pointed out that if the state is “the incarnation of this universal and common law that unites all groups,”²⁶ the question of the limits of the state is the condition itself of liberty.²⁷ The necessity of defining the role of the state more restrictively gives concrete reality to the challenge thrown down by Pierre Leroux in 1848 to socialists who supported the all-encompassing state. The piece is worth citing at length:

Je ne suis pas socialiste . . . si l’on entend par ce mot une opinion qui tendrait à faire intervenir l’État dans la formation d’une société nouvelle. . . Non ce n’est pas pour réaliser de tout point une société nouvelle que vous avez reçu mandat du peuple, mais pour permettre que cette société nouvelle se réalise par les efforts individuels des citoyens s’échappant au néant de l’individualisme, et convergeant par des essais d’association de toute nature. . . . Entre l’intervention de l’Etat dans les relations sociales et la négation de toute médiation et de tout droit tutélaire de sa part, il y a un vaste champ où l’Etat peut et doit marcher.²⁸

At the time that the provisional government of the Second Republic recognized the right to work on the 25 February 1848 and the National Workshops and the Luxembourg Commission were created, the question arose as to how to connect the liberty of economic agents, contractual relations, and social assistance.²⁹ The socialists, it should be noted, were divided between those who defended the intervention of the state and those who considered that access to work must result from the self-organization of the social world and not be granted by the government. Proudhon was the most eloquent proponent of this point of view. Attacking “government socialism” and the Luxembourg Commission, he exclaimed,

C’est pour avoir obstinément voulu la révolution par le pouvoir, la réforme sociale par la réforme politique que la révolution de février a été ajournée. . . . En mars, avril et mai, au lieu de vous organiser pour le travail et la liberté, en profitant des avantages politiques que vous donnait la révolution de février, vous courûtes au gouvernement, vous exigeâtes de lui ce qui vous seuls pouviez vous donner, et vous fîtes reculer de trois pas la révolution.³⁰

It is doubtless necessary to return to Proudhon to grasp the way liberal socialists understood the connection between the obligation of assistance and the marketplace. In chapter 5 of *Contradictions économiques*, Proudhon recognized the gravity of social ills produced so often by economic competition. But he also sang the praises of such competition; he pointed out that it alone can sustain individual initiative and maintain in each a legitimate sense of pride. How can this contradiction be resolved? Proudhon implicitly proposed a form of assistance furnished in synergy between the state and civil society. His principle can be summed up in the formula: "Let everyone have the means of competing." Assistance must be provided in order to give to each person the ability to act, the capacity of exercising an affirmative liberty. The question of social assistance is thus directly tied to that of the preservation of individual liberty, understood as the power to act.

Social unity, the direction of conflicts, and the federation

Finally, Proudhon was consistently opposed to class struggle. He recognized the educative, and even emancipatory, role of the bourgeoisie. I noted above that in 1848 Proudhon dedicated his *Programme révolutionnaire* to the bourgeoisie. It is necessary to rally those who live by their work (the bourgeoisie) and not by their capital (*rentiers*), he exclaimed. In addition, the bourgeoisie safeguards the idea of liberty: "Au fond, la bourgeoisie, c'est la liberté." Bourgeoisie is accustomed to the exercise of municipal, departmental, and cooperative liberties and to individual guarantees of liberty; it rests on a historic and cultural experience that distances it from the centralizing and state-controlled temptations of *le peuple*. On the other hand, *le peuple*, according to Proudhon, is more communally engaged in the defense of equality. Only an alliance between *le peuple* and the bourgeoisie can guarantee respect for liberty in the search for equality. In the famous chapter 10 of his work *L'Armée nouvelle*, Jaurès defended a very similar idea. There, again, Proudhon is at the base of a strand of thought that resurfaces later in French socialism, expressing reticence at the idea of a division of society into classes, each class being defined through its economic function.

As a liberal who defended the autonomy of civil society, Proudhon, the first liberal socialist, accorded great importance to forms of social organization. The idea of federalism, like that of social democracy, corresponds to the desire to endorse the participation and initiative of all at the heart of the social body and to elaborate forms of democracy that represent the diversity of interests and professional activities.³¹

The idea of social democracy saw the light of day in 1848. According to the terms of the manifesto of the journal *La Réforme*, the workers "associated thanks to the action of democratic power, a democratic power that has the sovereignty of the people as its principle, universal suffrage as its origin, and for its goal the realization of this formula: liberty, equality, fraternity." The idea of worker representation is advocated by Pierre Leroux and reiterated by the *Manifeste des Soixantes* of 1863 (written by a group of workers). Proudhon goes as far as envisioning an overall reorganization of economic rights beginning with professional and social organization: "Le principe de mutualité, entrant dans la législation et dans les moeurs, et créant le droit économique, renouvelle de fond en comble le droit civil, le droit commercial et administratif, le droit public, le droit

des gens.”³² These ideas would be taken up again in the continual process through which contemporary notions of social representation and the right to work have been formed.³³

The idea of association has found great favor throughout the liberal socialist world. The association of workers, and even of workers and owners, has for a long time seemed a good means of putting to an end the servility of work and of giving a concrete sense of autonomy of producers. It creates a means of collective action, local and voluntary, which gives earned benefits to workers and puts them in a position to make concrete their liberty. In this sense, the multiplication of associations reinforces their active capacity to work toward their emancipation. Initiated by Buchez and his disciples, debates on association would inspire the creation in July 1848 of the *Conseil d'Encouragement aux associations entre ouvrier et aux associations entre ouvriers et patrons*.³⁴ Proudhon, Charles Renouvier, and Léon Bourgeois were all interested in contractual associations and cooperative production. This interest is echoed in Durkheim's praise of corporations in the second preface to *La Division du travail social*.

But association, for a liberal, should not be founded on anything other than on contracts entered into freely and voluntarily. Proudhon clearly defined the possible dangers. Association must result from the active will of the participants, allied for the realization of a common goal, and must be open to cancellation should any of the parties wish it. Liberal socialists distrusted association conceived as a force for social reorganization, and they feared the idea of an association that would acquire a kind of transcendent significance in relation to the people who composed it. Liberal socialists refused to make out of associations a system of collective constraints imposed on individual wills. Association is a useful tool of emancipation, but one must not be blind to the times when it comes in conflict with liberty. Associations must therefore be conceived in such a way as not to be transformed into the means of domination.

Proudhon was often opposed to the interpretation of association, extremely popular among the socialists and the reformers of his time, that saw in the related principles of association and mutuality the means of remedying the antagonisms of the market and the lack of social cohesion. Proudhon's reservations on the subject of association came from the fact that he saw it as a political reality more than as an economic one, and also as a source of depersonalization. Association, he explained, is an equivocal engagement; it can induce a fusion of wills and a form of government; furthermore, it is not in and of itself an economic force, it does not have a “vertu productrice ou organisatrice”; it is also a drag on the liberty of workers, “défendant la communauté et l'indivision, prenant l'agglomération pour l'union, la promiscuité de l'atelier pour la fraternité.”³⁵ Proudhon recognized at the same time that economic evolution causes the weakening of individual initiative for the benefit of anonymous societies. His criticism of social utopia did not, however, prevent him from championing a grouping of free wills capable of entering into economic competition.

Proudhon, liberal on this point, was reticent with regard to a conception of society that opposed individual and general interests. He recognized in intermediary bodies the virtue of permitting a differentiated grouping of interests and opinions and of representing under this rubric the foundation of a true pluralism. He deplored the fact that political representation is the only source of justification for the legitimacy of collective norms, and claimed as a result forms of social legitimacy proper to civil society. Animated by the same themes, liberal socialists have shown a lively interest in the ideas

of worker representation, “*républiques de métier*,” and the sovereignty of work. Proudhon went a long way down this road. He hoped to derive collective thought and public reason from the people as a whole, in order to enliven society “by the spontaneity of free and enlightened forces,” in the form of a professional federalism capable of coordinating contractually the totality of social functions.³⁶ Eugène Fournière, at the end of the nineteenth century, would defend the idea of self-government through associations. “*Toutes les catégories de l’activité sociale, dit Fournière, sont représentées par des associations, et chacun de ces groupements est une démocratie plus ou moins parfaite, à la mesure même des sentiments de liberté et d’égalité apportés par les individus qui le composent.*”³⁷

Proudhonisme’s impasses and its influence

Reference to Proudhon seems to underlie the work of many authors who could be connected to the liberal current in socialism, even if it is not so dominant a theme in their work as to brand them definitively. This is primarily the reason why the legacy (real or reconstructed) of Proudhonism is extremely diverse. It runs from direct action syndicalism through the extreme right.³⁸ It is due also to the fact that many themes of liberal socialism do not adhere to the Proudhonian line of thought and even call it into question. In particular, Proudhon hardly elaborated a normative understanding of democracy and of political legitimacy. He believed that social reform would lead to the extermination of power and politics; furthermore that through such reform, the masses could and should control themselves without the security of a political order and without need of government.³⁹ At the end of his life, Proudhon recognized the necessity of the state, while continuing to emphasize that the delimitation of the state is a question of life and death for collective and individual liberty.⁴⁰ On this point, the foundation of what we call his “*anarchisme*,” Proudhon is radically distant from the liberal socialist tradition that, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, recognized the political necessity of government. But in spite of this disagreement, the fact remains that many of the ideas defended by Proudhon, and of which he was the only defender in the middle of the nineteenth century, have profoundly shaped liberal socialism.

These Proudhonian conceptions are found in almost all the authors of the liberal socialist tradition.⁴¹ They have inspired many attempts at the renewal of socialism. Eduard Bernstein, who launched the first theoretical discussion from within the heart of socialism, presented his “revision” of Marxism as a return to Proudhon and to Proudhonian realism. “*De là cette exclamation horrifiée de quelques marxistes à mon intention. Il ressuscite Proudhon! Je leur ai répondu que ce n’est pas moi, mais bien la réalité des choses qui fait revivre l’auteur de La Capacité politique de la classe ouvrière.*”⁴²

The idea of an emancipatory role for contracts and voluntary associations was analyzed by Renouvier. Socialism must, according to him, permit the greatest number access to a concrete liberty through the means of “*de libres associations intégrales, volontaires, avec des buts communs, fondées sur des contrats avec libertés et garanties formées en dehors de l’État, sans rien lui demander sans rien lui imposer.*”⁴³ Charles Andler took up the suggestion of an organization of social bodies separate from producer initiatives and praised the idea of contractual socialism.⁴⁴ Proudhonian horror at

collectivist and communist systems is found in all of the liberal strands of socialism. Fouillée took up this plea: the vice of these systems, he said

[C]'est l'atteinte aux droits intellectuels et moraux, qui ne peuvent eux-mêmes s'exercer que dans, et par, la liberté de la personne, de la conscience, du travail, de la propriété, enfin de l'échange sous la commune justice. . . . En fait, la personne n'est pas libre quand sa liberté n'aboutit pas à la propriété des choses, des instruments et des produits. Du jour où la collectivité populaire administrera toutes les choses, elle gouvernera aussi toutes les personnes.⁴⁵

When Proudhon declared that socialism is synthesis—the doctrine of universal conciliation⁴⁶ and when he emphasizes that he had preached conciliation in this way: “J’ai prêché la conciliation des classes, symboles de la synthèse des doctrines. . . . J’ai voulu fonder sur le terrain révolutionnaire un parti puissant par l’intelligence, la probité, les principes, qui absorbât tous les autres et opérât régulièrement, pacifiquement, à bref délai, toutes les réformes prévues et préparées,”⁴⁷ Jaurès echoes back that this was an alliance with the bourgeoisie: “Ils étaient de la bourgeoisie . . . , ils élargissaient la civilisation bourgeoise dans le sens de la justice sociale; ils faisaient la synthèse de la bourgeoisie et du prolétariat.”⁴⁸

The liberal socialist world view was unquestionably nourished by the tradition indigenous to French socialism that is Proudhonism. Though overshadowed by Marxism after 1880, Proudhonism’s influence remained significant in the syndicalist movement. This does not of course mean that liberal socialism should assume all the archaisms and inadequacies of Proudhonism, in particular its inability to theorize political representation or the necessity of a common elaboration of interests. The reference to Proudhon is a resource for liberal socialism, but it is not its fate.

Translated by Naomi J. Andrews

¹ Pierre Leroux could not tolerate the fact that Proudhon was radically opposed to the idea that the means of production should be given to all collectively; this is a principle of socialism, Leroux insists, and those who do not accept these principles are liberals in disguise. This comment is found in “Dialogue avec P.-J. Proudhon,” *La République* (Nov.–Dec. 1849), quoted in Pierre Leroux, *A la source perdue du socialisme français*, ed. Bruno Viard (Paris: Desclès de Brouwer, 1997), 456–60.

² See the polemic instigated by Proudhon with Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc starting in the December 1849 issues of *La Voix du peuple*.

³ Pierre Leroux, “De l’individualisme et du socialisme,” *Revue Encyclopédique* (spring 1834), quoted in Leroux, *A la source perdue du socialisme français*. On the English origins of the word *socialisme*, see Elie Halévy, *Histoire du socialisme européen* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 30–33.

⁴ Notes added in 1845 and 1850 to his essay *De l’individualisme et du socialisme*, first published in 1834, in which he introduced the neologism *socialisme*.

⁵ Proudhon is opposed to imperative, coercive, and negative forms of socialism. A similar attitude is found among followers of Fourier, in particular Victor Considerant in *Le socialisme devant le vieux monde, ou Le vivant devant les morts* (Paris: Librairie Phalanstérienne, 1848). A copy of the first edition of this book is in the Gimon Collection and includes *Jésus-Christ devant le conseil de*

guerre by Victor Meunier. See the evaluation of *fouriérisme* presented by Célestin Bouglé in *Socialisme français, du "Socialisme utopique" à la "Démocratie industrielle"* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1951), 111–38.

⁶ Many thinkers whom we would call “socialists” do not even claim to be socialists. Proudhon himself does not spare socialists from his criticism.

⁷ Élie Halévy, *L’Ere des tyrannies* (1938; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 213. This text dates back to 1936, a year before the death of Halévy. See also his *Histoire du socialisme européen* (1848) on the two tendencies of socialism, one leading to anarchism and the other to *étatisme*.

⁸ See Jean Jaurès, *Études socialistes*, ed. M. Rebérioux (Paris: Ressources, 1979), 151–271.

⁹ “Les socialistes, depuis Février, ont cessé d’être des rêveurs . . . le besoin de la situation, la misère des masses, la crise financière, les aspirations nouvelles qui se dégagent des multitudes, tout cela les a mis à l’ordre du jour et, en même temps, leur a comme révélé le sens politique qui leur faisait défaut” in “Les Socialistes et les politiques,” *Le Représentant du peuple* (27 April 1848).

¹⁰ Jean-Claude Dubos, *Victor Hugo et les Franc-Comtois* (Yens sur Morges, Switzerland: Editions Cabédita, 2002).

¹¹ Victor Hugo, “Avant l’exil,” in *Actes et Paroles*, (Paris: J. Hertz [1889–1900]), 1.

¹² Pierre-Joseph. Proudhon, *Qu’est-ce que la propriété? Ou Recherches sur le principe du droit et du gouvernement* (Paris: Chez J.-F. Brocard, 1840). The Gimon Collection holds a first edition.

¹³ Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère* (Paris: Guillaumin et Cie, 1846). A reprint was published by Slatkine in 1982.

¹⁴ *Lettre*, 18 May 1851, *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon*, 4 vols. (Paris: Librairie Internationale, A.L. Lacroix et Cie, 1875), 3:259.

¹⁶ Charles Renouvier, *Philosophie analytique de l’histoire*, 4 vols. (Paris: E. Leroux, 1896–1898), 4:624–625.

¹⁷ Michel Rocard, *Speech delivered at the Valence Congress*, 24 October 1981.

¹⁸ Proudhon, *Letter to Marx*, 17 May 1846, quoted in Pierre Hautmann, *Proudhon, sa vie et sa pensée (1809–1849)* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982), 627. Obviously, in 1846, Proudhon only knew a part of Marx’s work. Marx did not respond to this letter. A year later, in early June 1847, he published a violent critique of Proudhon’s work: *Misère de la philosophie, ou l’Anti-Proudhon*. This text is available in a modern edition that includes the annotations of P.-J. Proudhon: Karl Marx, *Misère de la philosophie, ou l’Anti-Proudhon* (Paris: A. Costes, 1950).

¹⁹ *Le Représentant du peuple* (16 April 1848).

²⁰ On the history of this trend, see a rare and exceptional volume of the Gimon Collection : François Villegardelle, *Histoire des idées sociales avant la Révolution française, ou Les socialistes modernes, devancés et dépassés par les anciens penseurs et philosophes, avec textes à l’appui* (Paris: Guarin, 1846).

²¹ Charles Andler, *La Civilisation socialiste* (Paris: Rivière, 1911), 41–44.

²² Jean Jaurès, “La Production socialiste,” *La Revue Socialiste* (May 1896), reprinted in Jean Jaurès, *Études socialistes* (Paris: Editions des cahiers socialistes, 1901), 392.

²³ Proudhon, *Carnets*, 3 vols.; *Carnet 6*, vol. 3 (Paris: Rivière, 1868), 21. See also: *Discours du citoyen Proudhon prononcé à l’Assemblée dans sa séance du 31 juillet 1848, en réponse au rapport du citoyen Thiers sur la proposition relative à l’impôt sur le revenu* (Paris: Librairie de la Révolution, Pilhes, 1848), where Proudhon argues that the *ateliers nationaux* are not a socialist accomplishment. The *Discours* is also bound with issues of *Le Représentant du peuple* toward the end of volume 1 of the Gimon Collection’s two-volume *recueil factice* on Proudhon.

²⁴ Proudhon, *De la création de l’ordre dans l’humanité* (Paris: Prevôt, 1843), §13.

²⁵ *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon*, 3:96.

²⁶ Proudhon, *Des réformes à opérer dans l’exploitation des chemins de fer, et des conséquences qui peuvent en résulter, soit pour l’augmentation du revenu des companies, soit pour*

l'abaissement des prix de transport, l'organisation de l'industrie voiturière, et la constitution économique de la société (Paris: Garnier frères, 1855), v, §5.

²⁷ Proudhon, *Du Principe fédératif et de la nécessité de reconstituer le parti de la révolution* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1863), vii, note.

²⁸ Leroux, *Discours devant les représentants du peuple*, 30 August 1848.

²⁹ The *ateliers nationaux* were supposed to give a concrete form to the concept of the right to work. In fact, these *ateliers* were rapidly turned into charity workshops, and their suppression caused the bloodbaths of June, 1848. The Luxembourg Commission was created on 29 February 1848. Established in the senate, it constituted the first *États-Généraux du Travail*, sponsored several reforms, and created a legal framework for *contrats de travail*. It was dissolved after the June upheavals.

³⁰ Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire, pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de février* (Paris: Au bureau du journal *La Voix du Peuple*, 1849). The copy described here belongs to the Gimon collection.

³¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a commonly lamented perception that workers were “industry serfs” and that, at a time of political democracy, “monarchy was almost absolute in the atelier.” See Anthime Corbon, *Le secret du peuple de Paris* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1863), 123.

³² Proudhon, *De la capacité politique de la classe ouvrière*, in P.-J. Proudhon *Oeuvres complètes*. 23 vols. (Paris: M. Rivière, 1923–74), 3: Chapter 5.

³³ For further reference, this history has been studied in two works by Pierre Rosanvallon: *Le Peuple introuvable. Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 65–99, 124–134, 219–53; and *La Démocratie inachevée. Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 338–54.

³⁴ Philippe-Joseph-Benjamin Buchez, “Economie politique,” *Journal des sciences morales et politiques* (17 December 1831): 37. This article, which asserted the notion of a “capital social inaliénable,” was the founding text of the movement of *cooperatives de production*, even though this expression only appears under the Second Empire. The Council established the legal frame of cooperative economy.

³⁵ Proudhon, “Troisième étude: Du Principe d’association,” in *Idée générale de la révolution*, Proudhon, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2.

³⁶ Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de février* (Paris: Au bureau de la journal *La voix du peuple*, 1849).

³⁷ Eugène Fournière, *L'Idéalisme social* (Paris: Alcan, 1898), 227–28, 133.

³⁸ Georges Navet, “Le Cercle Proudhon, 1911–1914, entre le syndicalisme révolutionnaire et l’Action française,” *Les Travaux de l’atelier Proudhon*, (Paris: École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1986), 6.

³⁹ P.-J. Proudhon, *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l’église* (“*Petit catéchisme politique*”) (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1858).

⁴⁰ Proudhon, *Du Principe fédératif* (1863).

⁴¹ Patrice Rolland, “Le retour à Proudhon 1900–1920,” *Mil neuf cent: Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* (October 1992): 144.

⁴² Eduard Bernstein, *Socialisme théorique et social-démocratie pratique* (Paris: Stock, 1900).

⁴³ Charles Renouvier and Louis Prat, *La nouvelle Monadologie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1899), 391.

⁴⁴ Charles Andler, foreword to Jules L. Puech, *Le Proudhonisme dans l’Association Internationale de Travailleurs* (Paris: Alcan, 1907), xvi.

⁴⁵ Alfred Fouillée, *La démocratie politique et sociale en France* (Paris: Alcan, 1910), 207.

⁴⁶ Proudhon, *Audience de la Cour d’Assises de la Seine du 28 mars 1849* (Paris: Imprimerie du Boulé, n.d.), 7. This text is in the last of three additional short works printed with N. F. A. Madier de Montjau, *Procès des citoyens Proudhon et Duchêne* (Paris: Imprimerie de Boulé, 1849), a

work bound as the sixth item in Vol. 1 of *Réforme économique: Banque d'échange* (the Gimon Collection's *recueil factice* on Proudhon).

⁴⁷ *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon*, 4:261

⁴⁸ Jaurès, *L'Armée nouvelle* (1913; reprint, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1992), 425, 428, 429.