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## Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Socialist as Social Scientist\*

By AARON NOLAND

IF MENTION of the name Pierre-Joseph Proudhon elicits any sort of response from American students of the history of modern social science, probably this response will include one or more of the following: that Proudhon was the author of the arresting and provocative phrases "Property is Theft" and "God is Evil;" that he was the creator of a people's bank and other ill-fated fiscal reform projects in France during the halcyon days of the 1848 Revolution; that he was the "father" of modern anarcho-socialism or anarchism; and, lastly, that Proudhon was the author of a now rarely read *Philosophy of Poverty* (1846), remembered today because it occasioned Karl Marx's sarcastic and devastating reply: *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).

Chances are slight indeed that the name Proudhon would be linked with the early development of contemporary sociological theory, for, at first glance, what possible connection could there be between the Proudhon of "Property is Theft" and Proudhon the founder of anarcho-socialism on the one hand, and Proudhon the sociologist on the other? Yet early commentators on Proudhon called attention to the sociological theory implicit in his work,<sup>1</sup> while Georges Gurvitch, the late dean of sociologists at the Sorbonne, recently identified Proudhon as one of "les fondateurs français de la sociologie contemporaine" and a precursor of Emile Durkheim.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this paper, after presenting a biographical sketch of Proudhon, is to delineate his theory of society.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Bouglé, *La Sociologie de Proudhon* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1911); Jeanne Duprat, *Proudhon, Sociologue et Moraliste* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1929).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Gurvitch, *Les Fondateurs Français de la Sociologie Contemporaine* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1955). See also *idem*, *Pour le Centenaire de la Mort de Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1964), pp. 98-100; *idem*, *Proudhon, Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), pp. 31-46; Georges Guy-Grand, *Pour Connaître la Pensée de Proudhon* (Paris: Editions Bordas, 1947), pp. 128-9.

## I

PROUDHON WAS BORN on February 15, 1809, in a semi-rural suburb of Besançon (Doubs) of parents who were of peasant origin. His father was in turn a cooper and the operator of a small brewery; his mother worked as a common servant. Proudhon's father was not successful in business, and while still a child Proudhon experienced at firsthand some of the consequences of being poor. He occasionally was forced to go without meals, lacked the money to purchase school books, and suffered the humiliation of being looked down upon, if not pitied, by his more affluent classmates. Proudhon attended the local *collège* on a scholarship, but he was obliged to end his formal education and to go to work before taking the baccalauréat. For the rest of his life, however, Proudhon continued to study on his own—a true autodidact, reading deeply and widely, if not systematically, in such diverse subjects as philology, history, political economy, and theology, and mastering Hebrew and Latin.

At the age of eighteen Proudhon became an apprentice in the printing trade, working the then customary ten-hour day. In time he worked as a proofreader and compositor, and after making his *tour de France* as a journeyman compositor, he became a partner in a printing shop in his home town. Proudhon might well have spent his life in the printing trade and in pursuing his scholarly interests, perhaps ending his days as a moderately successful tradesman and unpretentious provincial intellectual. But the failure of his shop in 1838 forced him to seek his livelihood elsewhere, and until his death some twenty-seven years later, on January 19, 1865, Proudhon held a variety of positions in addition to working from time to time in the printing trade. He was a freelance writer, newspaper editor and publisher, bookkeeper, legal adviser, and business agent for an inland waterways shipping firm, and a deputy from Paris in the Constituent Assembly (1848–49). These pursuits brought Proudhon into intimate contact with a wide variety of individuals and social strata and provided him with a comprehensive, firsthand knowledge of French politics and of the profound social and economic developments of his time.

He dealt with businessmen in Paris, Lyons, Mulhouse, Châlon, and elsewhere; he mingled with radical working-class elements in these towns; he knew personally most of the leading French social reformers and socialists of his day, including Louis Blanc, Auguste Blanqui, Pierre Leroux, Victor Considérant, and Charles Delescluze. He numbered

among his friends and acquaintances Victor Hugo, Gustave Courbet, Jules Michelet, and Prince Jerome Bonaparte, as well as Michael Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, and Karl Marx—who was an early admirer of Proudhon, but who subsequently became his bitter critic and rival.<sup>3</sup> What Proudhon saw and heard and studied and thought about during these rich, full years provided him with the materials that went into the twenty-six volumes of *oeuvres complètes*, the twelve volumes of *oeuvres posthumes*, and the fourteen volumes of correspondence that bear his name.<sup>4</sup>

What were the central problems that occupied Proudhon's attention and, more specifically, the problems the solution to which led him to work out a "science of society"—Proudhon's words—and to set forth in his voluminous writings what he took to be the "true" theory of social organization and the "true" order of humanity?

To Proudhon, as to almost all the sensitive and perceptive observers of the social scene in his generation, the crucial, decisive event in modern history was the French Revolution of 1789. This Revolution with all its ramifications was a watershed, a turning point of unparalleled importance in human history. It had swept away the absolute monarchy and the last remains of feudalism and had proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity as the sacred guiding principles for the ever-progressing march of humanity. In Proudhon's view, however, the French Revolution, "which appears so complete to us, was a pure negation, and it will appear to posterity as only the first act, the dawn of the great revolution which must occupy the nineteenth century." The task of the Revolution—itsself only a phase of the millennial, continuing revolution of mankind—"was to destroy and rebuild at the same time." It had to eliminate institutions and structures that no longer made sense or suited mankind, and it was obliged to sanction new social institutions. "Of these two things," Proudhon declared, "the Revolution, with great difficulty, accomplished only the first; the other was entirely forgotten." The fundamental task of the Revolution remained to be accomplished: to establish *order* in society and thus bring to fulfillment in every part of the social fabric the promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For biographical details on Proudhon, see George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, A Biography* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1956); Edouard Dolléans, *Proudhon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to these materials, the writer, in preparing this paper, made use of unpublished material by and on Proudhon housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Archives Nationales, and the Institut Français d'Histoire Sociale, all in Paris.

<sup>5</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire pour Servir à l'Histoire de la Révolution de Février* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1929), pp. 87–8; *idem*, *Idee Générale de*

The leadership of the French Revolution lacked, in Proudhon's view, a true understanding of the laws governing society in general and economics in particular; and as the leadership thought primarily in political terms, that is, in terms of constitutions and partisan politics, it re-established, on new principles, only political institutions. Thus the way was left open, with the growing impact of the industrial revolution, to the rise of new forms of social injustice and chaos. Writing in 1851, Proudhon affirmed that "the society which the Revolution of 1789 should have created does not yet exist. That which we have had for the past 60 years is but a factitious, superficial order, hardly concealing the most frightful chaos and demoralization." Since the French Revolution there had arisen, as a consequence of the failures of 1789 and "the disorder of industrial forces," a new "mercantile and landed aristocracy, a thousand times more rapacious than the old aristocracy of the nobility." In particular there was "a pronounced tendency in society toward pauperism"; and "in the place of a natural order," Proudhon declared, "we have an artificial order, in the shadow of which have developed parasitic interests, abnormal morals, monstrous ambitions, and prejudices that defy common sense—all of which today claim to be legitimate . . . and being unwilling either to abdicate or to modify their demands, place themselves in an antagonistic stance toward one another, and in a reactionary attitude *vis-à-vis* progress."<sup>6</sup>

## II

THIS, THEN, was the task of the nineteenth century: to establish natural order in society. But how was this to be accomplished? In Proudhon's own day there was a plethora of solutions offered. There were the Saint-Simonians and Fourierists of differing hues, Louis Blanc, Pierre Leroux, Etienne Cabet, and Constantin Pecqueur, to mention only some of the more prominent exponents of reform programs that aimed at the realization of a just and stable social order. As Proudhon put it: "Systems abound; schemes fall like rain."<sup>7</sup> But not one of these schemes or programs was adequate to the task for, in Proudhon's view, not one was anchored in a scientific understanding of the true nature of society,

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*la Révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1924), pp. 125-7, 128-32; *idem*, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise*, Vol. I (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1930), pp. 234-5, 274; *idem*, *La Justice poursuivie par l'Eglise* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946), p. 326.

<sup>6</sup> Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire*, p. 351; *idem*, *Idée Générale de la Révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, pp. 127, 128, 132, 151, 155.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

and its principle of order was not organic and immanent in the fabric of human society. All of these theorists were in some degree dogmatic, absolutist, and motivated by "the spirit of exclusion, of reaction."<sup>8</sup>

The problem, in Proudhon's view, was not to formulate a constitution for the social order on the basis of logic, or common sense, or personal wishes, or on the basis of generous sentiments such as fraternity or charity. The essence of the matter was not to *legislate* into existence the true order of society, but to *discover* what are—and, indeed, have always been—the fundamental principles of that order, principles and processes that were *organique*, *régulateur*, and *souverain*.<sup>9</sup> And the method by which Proudhon sought to discover these principles (and the endeavor was a central concern of every major work that came from his pen) was that of "interrogating the people,"<sup>10</sup> that is, by studying the history of civilization and observing how mankind from time immemorial evolved from its own "entrails," in answer to its needs, spontaneously, without conscious design, social institutions which embodied and made manifest the immanent principles of the natural order of society.<sup>11</sup> "The order of society," Proudhon wrote, "is not to be found in the arbitrary combinations of social reformers remote from all beaten paths and historical antecedents," for it was "in the examples and souvenirs of the past" that this order "constitutes itself piece by piece."<sup>12</sup>

As society was, in Proudhon's definition, "the sum total of human

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* See also Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques, ou Philosophie de la Misère*, Vol. II (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1923), pp. 253–4, 266–81, 351–2; Proudhon's unpublished "Carnet" (number eight), entry for April 26, 1850 (Bibliothèque Nationale, N.A.F. 14272).

<sup>9</sup> Proudhon, *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. I, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Proudhon, *Solution du Problème Social* (Paris: A. Lecroix, Verboeckhoven & C<sup>e</sup>, Editeurs, 1868), p. 18. "Le problème de la reconstitution sociale est posé, il faut le résoudre. Cette solution, nous ne l'apprendrons que du Peuple" (*ibid.*, p. 14). See also *idem*, *Idée Générale de la Révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, pp. 200, 286; *idem*, *Carnets de P.-J. Proudhon*, edited by Pierre Hautmann, Vol. II (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1961), pp. 137–8, 267–8.

<sup>11</sup> Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire*, p. 118; *idem*, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, p. 134. "La science sociale est la connaissance raisonnée et systématique, non pas de ce qu'a été la société, ni de ce qu'elle sera, mais de ce qu'elle EST dans tout sa vie, c'est-à-dire dans l'ensemble de ses manifestations successives: car c'est là seulement qu'il peut y avoir raison et système. La science sociale doit embrasser l'ordre humanitaire, non seulement dans telle ou telle période de sa durée, ni dans quelques-uns de ses éléments; mais dans tous ses principes et dans l'intégralité de son exigence: comme si l'évolution sociale, épandue dans le temps et l'espace, se trouvait tout à coup ramassée et fixée sur un tableau qui, montrant la série des âges et la suite des phénomènes, en découvrirait l'enchaînement et l'unité" (*ibid.*, p. 73, emphasis in text). "La science sociale est la science de l'évolution intellectuelle et institutionnelle de l'humanité" (Proudhon's unpublished "Carnet" [number eight], entry for May 1, 1850 [Bibliothèque Nationale, N.A.F. 14272]).

<sup>12</sup> Proudhon, *De la Création de l'Ordre dans l'Humanité, ou Principes d'Organisation Politique* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1927), pp. 381, 388.

relationships,"<sup>13</sup> the point of departure for an investigation into the nature of the social order must be man himself. To Proudhon, the nature of man partook of the nature of the universe itself, and since the universe was composed of contradictory, inharmonious, antinomious elements and forces, perpetually in a sort of quasi-Heraclitian state of flux, attracting and repelling one another in unceasing struggle, so man, too, was an "animal" composed of antinomies and contradictions, "an illogical being, made up at one and the same time of spirit and matter, spontaneity and reflection, an automation and a free being, angel and brute."<sup>14</sup> Hence the life of man was in large measure "a permanent war—war against his needs, against nature, against his fellow men, and consequently, war against himself."<sup>15</sup> In the primeval state of nature, as Proudhon envisioned it, man was a miserable being, "an ugly and ignoble creature" who "wallowed endlessly in misery and brutality."<sup>16</sup>

Yet if man is indeed an animal, he is, as Aristotle had noted, an animal of a particular kind: he is "a social animal," and it is "the social instinct" in man which served to redeem him from this Hobbesian state of nature. While on the one hand each individual was at war with his fellow men, he was on the other hand "moved by an internal attraction toward other individuals—moved by a secret sympathy" which he could not resist without denying "his own nature," for man's "social needs" were complex and imperative. And it was as a consequence of the "sympathetic attraction which causes men to associate," an attraction which was, like man's need to struggle, "blind and unruly," that a *society* was born.<sup>17</sup>

At this point in the history of mankind, with the creation of a so-

<sup>13</sup> Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?, ou Recherches sur le Principe du Droit et du Gouvernement* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1926), p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, pp. 371, 383, 396, 397; Vol. II, pp. 87, 290, 409. "La vie de l'homme est une solution d'antinomies sans fin . . . Un raccordement interminable avec l'infini: une harmonisation sans terme, ni pour l'individu, ni pour l'espèce" (Proudhon, *Carnets de P.-J. Proudhon*, Vol. I [1960], p. 212).

<sup>15</sup> Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, p. 219. "Oui, l'être humain est vicieux parce qu'il est illogique, parce que sa constitution n'est qu'un électionisme qui retient sans cesse en lutte les virtualités de l'être, indépendamment des contradictions de la société. La vie de l'homme n'est qu'une transaction continuelle entre le travail et la peine, l'amour et la jouissance, la justice et l'égoïsme . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 372). See Proudhon's unpublished "Carnet" (number nine), entry for December 4, 1851, wherein he speaks of the "ingrate et vile multitude, vile sans rémission, sans compensation" (Bibliothèque Nationale, N.A.F. 14273). See also the entries for December 6, 8, and 9, 1851.

<sup>16</sup> Proudhon's unpublished manuscript, "Le Cours d'Économie," Feuillelet XII, nos. 1-3, and Feuillelet XVIII, no. 13, quoted in Pierre Hauptmann's unpublished *thèse complémentaire*, "La Philosophie Sociale de P.-J. Proudhon," pp. 166-7 (Bibliothèque de l'Université de Paris [1961], W1961[5]).

<sup>17</sup> Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?*, pp. 300-1, 303.

ciety, the entire existential status and destiny of man were, in Proudhon's view, fundamentally and irrevocably transformed. To be sure, society bore the marks of its origin and reflected the character of its constituent elements. It was a tissue of contradictions, antinomies, and an arena of unceasing struggle and change.<sup>18</sup> To Proudhon, however, a society was not just the sum total of the individuals composing it: it was an entity *sui generis*, possessing characteristics and sources of energy that were quite distinct from those of an individual; and yet a society was just as *real*, just as much a vital entity as a human being. A society was "a living being, endowed with an intelligence and activity appropriate to itself, governed by special laws that observation alone can discover and whose existence is manifested not in a physical form, but through the intimate, coordinated solidarity of all its members." To use Proudhon's metaphors, society was "*un homme collectif, une personne collective*," and "intelligence, spontaneity, development, and life—all that constitutes in the highest degree the reality of being—are as essential to society as to man."<sup>19</sup> A note of caution is called for here. Although Proudhon sometimes characterized society as an organism, as indicated above, he did not in any way conceive of society as an omnipotent, omnipresent entity that made use of individuals to realize its own distinct purposes and goals. In Proudhon's view man was naturally destined for society, and, as will be indicated, the latter was the essential environment for the unfolding and realization of purely human, individual goals.

The creation of society altered the existential status of man and determined the line of his development by bringing into being new forms of energy, energies which Proudhon called collective force (*force collective*), collective reason (*raison collective*), and collective conscience (*conscience collective*). An examination of these notions takes us to the heart of Proudhon's sociology.

"What distinguishes man from the animals," Proudhon declared, "is work, the intelligent action of an individual on matter."<sup>20</sup> That

<sup>18</sup> Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. II, p. 409; *idem*, *Philosophie du Progrès* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946), pp. 42, 49–50. "La Société est une harmonie d'oppositions et de contrastes, qui, se désengrenant par moments, produisent, au lieu d'harmonie, trouble et confusion. Pourquoi ce dérangement? parce que la nature entière est une vaste harmonie, en perpétuelle création, mais dont les parties se produisent *successivement*, luttent entre elles avant de s'accorder" (Proudhon, *Carnets de P.-J. Proudhon*, Vol. I, p. 39, emphasis in text). See also *ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 242, 243.

<sup>19</sup> Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, pp. 123–4, 130. See also *idem*, *Les Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire*, pp. 177, 182; *idem*, *Idée Générale de la Révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, p. 300.

<sup>20</sup> Proudhon, *De la Création de l'Ordre dans l'Humanité*, p. 329. See also *idem*, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. II, pp. 361–2.



man must work in order to live was not, in Proudhon's view, an eternal punishment inflicted on mankind by an offended deity, as described in the Old Testament. On the contrary, work was the central activity of man, "an emission of the spirit," the deepest expression of his nature, the source of his ultimate moral values, the basis of his education, "the mother of philosophy and science," and the source of his earthly happiness. In sum, work was "the principle of life and intelligence."<sup>21</sup>

If the need to work is inherent in man for material and spiritual reasons, the forms that work takes differ in the course of human history. In the primeval state of nature labor was simple in form and organization, with each individual or family taking care of his or its own needs. With the coming into existence of society, however, a new force—the collective force—came into being, and this force modified the form in which human labor was carried out. Proudhon maintained that when a group of individuals work together, "an immense power" resulted "from the harmony and union of the workers, and from the convergence and simultaneousness (*la simultanéité*) of their efforts."

Proudhon gives the following example: two hundred grenadiers, working only a few hours, stood the obelisk of Luxor upon its base in Paris. "Do you suppose," he asked, "that one man, working two hundred days, could have accomplished the same task?" This same collective force comes into play whenever land is prepared for cultivation, or a house is built, or a factory is set in operation—"all of these are obelisks to erect, mountains to move."<sup>22</sup> Now the difference between the work performed by all the individual forces and that which results from the combination of individuals, or the collective force, is the common property of the society for it is in a real sense the product, in Proudhon's view, not of the efforts of isolated individuals, but of socially structured work.

Moreover, when work became, with the creation of society, collective in character, the principle of the division of labor, so central in the theory of classical economists like Adam Smith and his successors, came into operation. This development, in turn, was an important determinant in the structuring of society. To Proudhon, the division of

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 200; Vol. II, pp. 361, 362; Proudhon, *De la Création de l'Ordre dans l'Humanité*, pp. 297, 338–40; *idem*, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III (1933), pp. 15, 81. "Par le travail, bien plus que par la guerre, l'homme a manifesté sa vaillance; par le travail, bien plus que par la piété, marche la Justice; et si quelque jour notre agissante espèce parvient à la félicité, ce sera encore par le travail" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

<sup>22</sup> Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?*, p. 215. See also *ibid.*, pp. 217–8; *idem*, *Idée Générale de la Révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, p. 161.

labor was itself "founded on the *speciality of vocations*" (*spécialité des vocations*), and its operation in society tended to promote the increasingly greater dependency of individuals upon one another and thus to make the intricate web of human relations ever more complicated.

As the collective force increased in society in direct relation to the growth of society itself, so the division of labor, wherein each individual attained greater proficiency in more and more restricted areas of work, also increased; and as the *functions* in the economy of society became increasingly differentiated, the *capacities* of individual workers also followed suit. To be sure, certain functions demand greater intelligence and skills than others, and it is true that to perform these functions society requires the services of individuals of superior mind and talent. But far from this distinction in capacities being the justification for a social hierarchy with different degrees of deference shown individuals filling different functions, Proudhon contended that while functions and capacities certainly differed, "all functions are equal to each other, just as workers who perform the same functions are equal to each other," and from the hierarchy of functions he deduced "the equality of fortunes." All functions being necessary to the ongoing life of a society, all those fulfilling these functions adequately, differences in capacity notwithstanding, "are entitled to the same reward."<sup>23</sup>

### III

IS THERE, THEN, no difference in the treatment due a physician and, say, a factory worker, and is the former to be treated on the same level as any other producer? In response to this query Proudhon invoked his notion of the collective force: "Just as the creation of every instrument of production is the result of a collective force, so also a man's talent and knowledge are the product of universal intelligence and of a general science slowly accumulated by a number of masters, and through the aid of many inferior industries."

Hence, when the physician had paid for his education—for his courses and supplies—he had not paid in full for his talent. "The man of talent has contributed to the production in himself of a useful instrument. He has, on that account, a share in its possession; he is not its proprietor. There exist side by side in him a free worker and an accumulated social capital; as a worker, he is charged with the use of the instrument, with overseeing the functioning of a machine which is his own capacity. As

<sup>23</sup> Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?*, pp. 227–8. See also *ibid.*, pp. 225–6, 239–41; *idem*, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, p. 265.

capital, he is not his own master; he uses himself, not for his own benefit, but for that of others."<sup>24</sup> This argument, *mutatis mutandis*, applied with equal force to the artist, *savant*, and poet.<sup>25</sup>

The upshot of Proudhon's notion of collective force is that the society which is structured on its functioning is characterized by mutual dependence and relations among the individuals composing it, that there is a reciprocity of obligations linking man to his fellows, and that the power of the individual "lies in association and in the intelligent combination of universal effort."<sup>26</sup>

It is not within the proper scope of this paper to spell out the implications of this notion of collective force for Proudhon's anarcho-socialism: some are already apparent. It suffices to note that as a consequence of this notion, Proudhon's image of society is one of an intricate, increasingly more complex web or network of contracts or agreements between free and equal individuals—free because each person decides on his own volition to enter into relations with his fellow man and equal because all who work are mutually dependent on one another and all are indebted to society for the use each makes of the legacy created by the collective force.

Just as this collective force came into being with the creation of the

<sup>24</sup> Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?*, pp. 235–6. "La rareté du génie n'a point été, dans les intentions du Créateur, un motif pour que la société fût à genoux devant l'homme doué de facultés éminentes, mais un moyen providentiel pour que chaque fonction fût remplie au plus grand avantage de tous. Le talent est une création de la société bien plus qu'un don de la nature; c'est un capital accumulé, dont celui qui le reçoit n'est que le dépositaire. Sans la société, sans l'éducation qu'elle donne et ses secours puissants, le plus beau naturel resterait, dans le genre même qui doit faire sa gloire, au-dessous des plus médiocres capacités. Plus vaste est le savoir d'un mortel, plus belle son imagination, plus fécond son talent, plus coûteuse aussi son éducation a été, in brillants et plus nombreux furent ses devanciers et ses modèles, plus grande est sa dette. Le laboureur produit au sortir du berceau et jusqu'au bord de la tombe: les fruits de l'art et de la science sont tardifs et rares, souvent l'arbre périt avant qu'il mûrisse. La société, en cultivant le talent, fait un sacrifice à l'espérance" (*ibid.*, p. 278).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236–7; *idem*, *Les Majorats Littéraires* (Paris: A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & C<sup>o</sup>, Editeurs, 1868), pp. 10–56 *passim*, 95, 120–4.

<sup>26</sup> Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?*, p. 239. See also Proudhon's unpublished manuscript, "Le Cours d'Economie," Feuillet XIII, nos. 5 and 6; Feuillet XVII, nos. 37 and 45; Feuillet XV, no. 19; Feuillet hors série III, no. 18, in Hauptmann, "La Philosophie Sociale de P.-J. Proudhon," pp. 167–8. "La société est un groupe; elle existe d'une double et réelle existence, et comme unité collective, et comme pluralité d'individus. Son action est à la fois composite et individuelle; sa pensée est collective aussi et individualisée. Tout ce qui se produit au sein de la société dérive à la fois de cette double origine. Sans doute le fait de la collectivité n'est pas une raison suffisante pour que nous nous mettions en communisme; mais, réciproquement, le fait de l'individualité n'est pas non plus une raison de méconnaître les droits et les intérêts généraux. C'est dans la répartition et dans l'équilibre des forces collectives et individuelles que consiste la science du gouvernement, la politique et la justice" (Proudhon, *Les Majorats Littéraires*, p. 95).

first human groups, or societies, so, too, the collective reason (or public reason, as Proudhon sometimes calls it) and the collective conscience as conceived by Proudhon owe their existence to society. Because these two forces are so closely intertwined in Proudhon's thought and tend to blend in with one another, it seems appropriate, for the sake of clarity, to deal with them together. The collective reason and conscience, two aspects of the same entity, are intimately related to the collective force—"they have their origin in the same collectivities"—and just as the confluence of individual forces produced an entity "different in quality from the forces that composed it and superior to their sum," in like manner, Proudhon asserted, "the conflict of individual opinions engendered a reason different in quality and superior in power to the sum of all the particular reasons which by their contradiction produced it."<sup>27</sup>

What was, specifically, the relation between the reason of the individual and the collective reason, and in what manner was the latter "different in quality and superior in power" to the former? Proudhon contended that in the individual reason there was always a mixture of "passionate, egotistical, and transcendental elements—in a word absolutist elements."<sup>28</sup> By the word absolute (Latin: *absolutum*) Proudhon meant "(1) that which is free of all shackles, impediments, limits or laws: power that is absolute, *maître absolu*; (2) that which is free of all phenomenality (*phénoménalité*), attribute, or mode, consequently the *en soi* of all existence; (3) that which depends on nothing else, existence absolute, absolute cause or first cause; and (4) that which is perfect in itself, free of all stains, vice, or faults: pure or ideal beauty, absolute justice or sacredness." In brief, "absolute is the synonym for the unconditioned, independent, indefinite, unlimited, and integral." As such the absolute is "one of the necessary forms of thought" and a "category of the understanding."<sup>29</sup>

Because the absolute in human reason seeks to grasp the inner nature of things, the things in themselves (*l'en soi des choses*), it is the cause "of our errors" and the "source of all the deceptions, illusions, lies, conjurations, superstitions, utopias, frauds, and mystifications of which we are the victims." This is so because while the absolute is a category of the understanding and "imposes itself as a postulate or hypothesis in our logic," it was nevertheless true "that this absolute can in no case

<sup>27</sup> Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, pp. 268, 270.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 183.

become the *direct* object of our study and reflection," since it is not given the human mind to penetrate into the inner nature of phenomena, the thing in itself, but to deal only with "the relations of things" (*les rapports des choses*) or "the reason of things" (*la raison des choses*).<sup>30</sup>

Driven by "the tyranny of the absolute," an "absolutism innate in his being," man, as history disclosed, has tended constantly, "in his conduct, to raise himself above all law" and "to change the relations between things, to modify their reality." Incessantly, the individual reason has "modified and tortured the facts" in order to bend them to its own absolutist conceit.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it was also the élan provided by the absolute that led early man, in "that poetic age of the heart and reason," to appease his deep need for order and meaning in the universe and in society by creating spontaneously religions and mythologies and then deriving from the absolutist character of a divine being, a god, the sanction and authority for his moral codes, his metaphysical systems, his governments and States, and his stratified, hierarchical social structures. "The idea of God," Proudhon asserted, "is the model and the foundation of the principle of authority."<sup>32</sup>

#### IV

AS LONG AS EACH INDIVIDUAL reasoned alone "the tendency of each particular reason towards absolutism encountered neither resistance nor check." With the creation of social groups, of collectivities, the absolutisms of disparate individuals confronted one another. "Before a human being like himself, absolute like himself," Proudhon declared, "the absolutism of the individual was drawn up short—or to put it another way, the two absolutes destroyed one another, leaving as a residue of their respective reasons only the relations of things, *à propos* of which they struggled." For just as only a diamond can make an incision on a diamond, so, too, "only a free absolute is capable of balancing another

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 169, 183, 185, 248; *idem*, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, pp. 52-3. "Je ne nie pas l'absolu en tant que conception de l'entendement, servant d'*x* pour marquer l'*aliquid* inaccessible qui soutient le phénomène; je le nie en tant qu'objet de science, et comme tel ne pouvant servir de point de départ à aucune connaissance légitime. . . . J'admets l'absolu en métaphysique; j'admets par conséquent Dieu, mais en métaphysique aussi, à la condition qu'il ne sorte pas de l'absolu; je le nie partout ailleurs, dans la science expérimentale, rationnelle, dans la physique, dans la psychologie, dans l'éthique, et surtout dans l'éthique" (Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, p. 183). See also *idem*, *Mélanges: Articles de Journaux, 1848-1852* (Paris: A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Co, Editeurs, 1869), Vol. II, pp. 163-9.

<sup>31</sup> Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, p. 173.

<sup>32</sup> Proudhon, *De la Création de l'Ordre dans l'Humanité*, pp. 125-6, 46, 52, 81; *idem*, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, pp. 52-4, 346-7; *idem*, *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?*, pp. 140-1.

free absolute, to neutralize and eliminate it in such a manner that as a consequence of their reciprocal annulment (*leur annulation réciproque*) there remains from the encounter only the objective reality which each one had tended to distort for his own profit, if not wipe out entirely."

The proverb has it that from the clash of ideas comes illumination: Proudhon modified the proverb in saying that "it is from mutual contradiction that the spirit is purged of all ultra-phenomenal elements; it is the negation that a free absolute makes of its antagonist which produces, in moral sciences, adequate, sufficient ideas, free of all egotistical and transcendental dross—ideas, in a word, that conform to reality and to social reason." The collective reason is the legacy of the resultants of these clashes of absolute reasons which take place within the context of collectivities.

"Opposing absolute to absolute in such a manner as to annul at all points this unintelligible element, and only considering as real and legitimate the product of antagonistic ends, the collective reason arrives at synthetic ideas, very different, often even the inverse, of the conclusions of the *moi individuel*."<sup>33</sup> Thus the distinction between individual reason and collective reason is clear: "the former is essentially absolutist, the latter antipathetic to all absolutism," and while the ideas that characterize individual reason are absolute entities, those of the collective reason are synthetic, an equation or equilibrium of elements, a harmony of unresolvable opposites.<sup>34</sup>

The collective reason achieves this not at the cost of individualism and individual reason: on the contrary, the collective reason necessarily presupposed the latter. As Proudhon put it: "Men, citizens, workers—this collective reason, truly practical and juridical, says to us—remain

<sup>33</sup> Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, pp. 250, 251, 253.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 250–2, 253, 254–6. The following quotation makes clear the central role of "the law of equilibrium" in Proudhon's thought: "Nous croyons que, comme l'espace où tourbillonnent les mondes est infini; le temps infini, la matière, jetée dans l'espace infini, également infinie; par conséquent, la puissance de la nature et la capacité de mouvement infinies: de même, sans pour cela, que le principe et la loi de l'univers changent, la création est virtuellement infinie, dans son étendue, dans sa durée et dans ses formes. Sous cette condition inévitable de l'infinité, qui incombe à la création, l'hypothèse d'un achèvement, d'une consommation finale, est contradictoire. L'univers ne tend pas à l'immobilisme; son mouvement est perpétuel, parce que lui-même, l'univers, est infini. La loi d'équilibre qui y préside ne le pousse pas à l'uniformité, à l'immobilisme; elle en assure au contraire l'éternel renouvellement par l'économie des forces, qui sont infines. Que si telle est la véritable constitution de l'univers, il faut admettre que telle est aussi celle de l'Humanité. . . . Nous sommes emportés avec l'univers dans une métamorphose incessante, qui s'accomplit d'autant plus sûrement et plus glorieusement que nous y développons nous-mêmes plus d'intelligence et de moralité" (*ibid.*, Vol. I, 232–3).

what you are, each of you; conserve, develop your personality; defend your interests and produce your thought; cultivate this individual reason whose exorbitant tyranny makes so much trouble for you; discuss and debate with one another, reserving always the respect that . . . intelligent beings owe one another. Reform and reproach yourselves: respect only the decrees of your common reason, whose judgments can only be yours, freed as it is of this absolute without which you would only be shadows."

The very impersonality of the collective reason demands "as a principle, the greatest contradiction; as an organ, the greatest possible multiplicity." Hence, the collective reason could not come into being without unrestricted controversy among free individuals<sup>35</sup> grouped in natural collectivities formed on the basis of real human needs and desires—numerous and varied groupings such as the workshop, mill, mine, and farm; schools and academies; organizations of artists and *savants*; local, regional, and national assemblies; and clubs, juries, etc.<sup>36</sup>

It was Proudhon's contention that throughout the history of mankind the collective reason and conscience, increasing in scope and strength as the number of collectivities multiplied, has been, with increasing acceleration, eliminating the absolute in every sphere of life, disclosing man himself as the maker of his social institutions, his innate sense of justice as the governing force in his relations with fellow men,<sup>37</sup> and progress as the infallible law of civilization.

<sup>35</sup> "L'individualité est pour moi le critérium de l'ordre social. Plus l'individualité est libre, indépendante, initiatrice, dans la société, plus la société est bonne; au contraire, plus l'individualité est subordonnée, absorbée, plus la société est mauvaise. En deux mots, le problème social étant d'accorder la liberté de l'espèce avec la liberté de l'individu; ces deux libertés étant solidaires et inséparables, il en résulte pour moi, que comme nous pouvons beaucoup mieux juger de ce qui gêne l'individu que de ce qui convient à la société, c'est la *liberté individuelle* qui doit nous servir de drapeau et de règle." *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon* (Paris: A. Lacroix et C<sup>o</sup>, Editeurs, 1875), Vol. IV, p. 375, emphasis in text. See also Proudhon, *Système des Contradictions Économiques*, Vol. I, p. 368.

<sup>36</sup> Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, pp. 253, 270. See also *ibid.*, pp. 261-9; Vol. II, pp. 257-9.

<sup>37</sup> To Proudhon, justice was the "idée princesse," the force which assures the progress of man and society: "La Justice est pour nous l'axe de la société, la raison première et dernière de l'univers." "L'homme, en vertu de la raison dont il est doué, a la faculté de sentir sa dignité dans la personne de son semblable comme dans sa propre personne, de s'affirmer tout à la fois comme individu et comme espèce. La Justice est le produit de cette faculté: c'est le respect, spontanément éprouvé et réciproquement garanti, de la dignité humaine, en quelque personne et dans quelque circonstance qu'elle se trouve compromise, et à quelque risque que nous expose sa défense. . . . Ainsi conçue la Justice, rendant toutes les conditions équivalentes et solidaires, identifiant l'homme et l'humanité, est virtuellement adéquate à la béatitude, principe et fin de la destinée de l'homme. . . . De l'identité de la raison chez tous les hommes, et du sentiment de respect qui les porte à maintenir à tout prix leur dignité mutuelle, résulte l'égalité devant la Justice" (emphasis in text). Justice is immanent in man: "La Justice est l'efflorescence de notre âme. . . . La Justice est humaine, tout humaine, rien qu'humaine. . . . La Justice a son siège dans l'humanité, elle est progressive et indéfectible dans l'humanité. . . . La Justice prend

"It is this collective reason, which is at the same time theoretical and practical, that has in the past three centuries begun to dominate the world and to propel civilization along the avenue of progress. It is this reason which has made the idea of religious tolerance prevail, created public law and the rights of peoples, laid the foundations for the confederation of Europe, and established the equality of all men. . . ." <sup>38</sup> Similarly, the increasingly dominant rôle in history of the collective reason and conscience—"une force organisatrice" <sup>39</sup>—assured the eventual triumph in society of rationality over instinct, of "reflection over spontaneity" <sup>40</sup>; and, finally, what is most relevant in terms of this paper, because a most significant aspect of this increasing rationality in society was the formation of an objective body of knowledge concerning the laws that govern society itself, the collective reason promoted order in humanity, for to Proudhon "order produces itself in humanity by the knowledge that it acquires of its laws." <sup>41</sup>

IT IS NOW QUITE CLEAR that to Proudhon the true science of society consisted of the objective study of the behavior of the collective forces described above. These forces, coming into existence with the formation of society itself, determined the character and development of all social institutions and accounted for whatever progress mankind has made. Working through the agency of individuals gathered in collectivities of various sorts, these forces in the course of history disclosed

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différents noms, selon les facultés auxquelles elle s'adresse. Dans l'ordre de la conscience, le plus élevé de tous, elle est la JUSTICE proprement dite, règle de nos *droits* et de nos *devoirs*; dans l'ordre de l'intelligence, logique, mathématique, etc., elle est *égalité* ou *équation*; dans la sphère de l'imagination, elle a nom *idéal*; dans la nature, c'est *équilibre*" (emphasis in text). Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. I, pp. 215, 324, 423, 426, 323, 329, 324, 217. See also *ibid.*, pp. 314-5, 328, 433; Vol III, pp. 345-7, 513-6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 269. "La première loi de l'humanité, ainsi que de tous les êtres organisés et vivants, est le progrès. Le progrès consiste pour la société, à produire, à chaque moment de son existence, une idée qui embrasse, généralise et résume ses idées antérieures, idées que par conséquent elle reproduit sans cesse, mais enrichies d'un élément nouveau et rendues sous un plus haute formule. Et comme, dans la société, l'idée est toujours précédée ou suivie du fait qui la concrète et l'expose; comme l'idée est la même chose que le fait; il s'ensuit que le progrès s'accomplit et dans les idées, et dans les institutions, et dans la pratique. . . . Le progrès est continue: cela ressort de la notion même du progrès. Mais le progrès n'est point uniforme; il a ses époques critiques, dans lesquelles le mouvement se trouve tout à coup accru d'une manière inaccoutumée. . . . Les époques d'accélération du mouvement social ont reçu le nom de *révolutions*, non qu'elles aient, à proprement parler, rien de plus révolutionnaire que les autres, mais parce que le mouvement étant alors plus sensible, plus senti, le vulgaire s'imagine avoir tourné, tandis qu'en réalité il n'a fait que se précipiter, en suivant toujours la même direction." (Proudhon, *Mélanges*, pp. 12-4, emphasis in text).

<sup>39</sup> Proudhon, *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Vol. III, p. 256.

<sup>40</sup> Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un Révolutionnaire*, p. 182.

<sup>41</sup> Proudhon, *De la Création de l'Ordre dans l'Humanité*, p. 425.



the laws that govern society and the order of social relations that was natural to humanity.

The collective forces revealed that society is an equilibrium of opposing, antinomious elements; that social change occurs when the balance between these elements is disturbed; and that the new equilibrium is established when changes in the contending elements are embodied in new or modified institutions. This process of equilibrium/disequilibrium accounts for progress in society, and as new collectivities are constantly coming into being in the course of time and, hence, new equilibriums established, this process will continue without end.

And since it is the operation of the collective forces which produces the order of society, that order—and with it the science of society—will not be revealed in its entirety until the end of human history. The science of society, or sociology, was to Proudhon a continuing revelation, but a revelation that was purely secular in character.

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### *The Fragmentation of Local Government*

MANY OF OUR STATE and local governments have not responded in full—or in some cases even in part—to the changing times. Even though many of their most pressing problems—air and water pollution, traffic control, urban transportation, police and fire protection, education—are area-wide or regional in nature, often there is no single government unit to handle these problems—or even coordination among the many smaller units that attempt to handle them. The average metropolitan area has 87 different units of government, and some cities such as Chicago and New York have well over 1000. One recent study has shown that the nation's 200 metropolitan areas are now governed by more than 18,000 governmental units. In addition there are more than 3000 counties, about 17,000 townships, and almost 50,000 special districts—including school, road, park, and fire fighting districts. All together there are 80,000 local governments in the United States doing a job that one source estimates could be done effectively by 16,000 units. [From an address.]

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