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Author(s): J. Salwyn Schapiro

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# Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Harbinger of Fascism

J. SALWYN SCHAPIRO\*

AN original thinker, like a prophet, is without honor not only in his own country but also in his own time. This is especially true when the original thinker is an inharmonious genius at odds both with the orthodox upholders of the established order and with the other heretics who repudiate it. Only rarely, very rarely, does such a genius arise to confound the orthodox and to confuse the heterodox. He becomes the great misunderstood of his generation; and for this reason the true importance and real contribution of the inharmonious genius are not seen until future events reveal them. There is no better example in history of such a man than that of Rousseau, the great heretic of the eighteenth century, who was persecuted by the authorities and spurned by his fellow heretics, the philosophes. Proudhon, like Rousseau, was an inharmonious genius. In his day Proudhon was persecuted by the government as a revolutionist and was denounced by his fellow revolutionists, the liberals and socialists, who uneasily felt that, though he was with them, he was not of them. They were puzzled and disconcerted by "*ce socialiste original, mal compris de ses contemporains, fantastique, plein d'idées souvent d'une perspicacité incroyable.*"<sup>1</sup>

Pierre Joseph Proudhon was born in 1809, in Besançon, France. His father was a humble artisan, a cooper by trade, who could do little to educate his son. Even as a child Proudhon was obliged to help his family, which he did by working sometimes on a farm, sometimes in the local inn. An opportunity to get an education came to him when he was given a scholarship in the local college at Besançon. Despite his marked inclination for study, family needs compelled Proudhon to leave college before graduating. He learned the printer's trade which, for a time, was his regular vocation. Proudhon's passionate interest, however, was study, and the interruption of his education by poverty incensed the ardent young student. "Poverty is no crime; it is something worse," was his resentful thought. He began to question the social

\*The author is professor of history in the College of the City of New York. He desires to acknowledge the assistance given to him by Dr. Henry W. Ehrmann in doing the research for this article.

<sup>1</sup> Hendrik N. Boon, *Rêve et réalité dans l'oeuvre économique et sociale de Napoléon III* (La Haye, 1936), p. 54.

order which put so many difficulties in the way of a poor boy seeking an education. Paris beckoned the ambitious young provincial as, in the eighteenth century, it had beckoned that other ambitious young provincial, Diderot. At the age of thirty Proudhon came to Paris, where he began his career as a writer, supported in part by a small stipend granted to him by the college in Besançon. Poverty, however, drove him back to his native city, where he set himself up in the printing business. But the enterprise did not prosper, and he gave it up. In 1847 Proudhon returned to Paris to resume his career as a writer, which he followed all the rest of his life.

Proudhon was almost entirely a self-educated man. He sought to give himself the necessary preparation for becoming a writer on social subjects by omnivorous reading. As in the case of many another self-educated man Proudhon's reading was wide but unsystematic. It lacked the disciplined concentration and definite direction that characterizes scholarly study. Curiously enough he drew his inspiration not from the rich intellectual treasury of France but, as he said, from "the Bible first of all, then Adam Smith, and finally Hegel,"<sup>2</sup> an odd assortment of masters for anyone, especially for a French revolutionist.

In 1840 appeared Proudhon's first book, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété*, with its sensational answer, *La propriété, c'est le vol*. Both question and answer almost immediately gained for the author an audience in the France of his day that was seething with revolutionary theories of all kinds. So deep was the discontent with the regime of Louis Philippe that anyone who attacked the social order, from any angle or for any reason, was sure to get a hearing. Proudhon's reputation as a social philosopher was assured by the appearance, in 1846, of his *Système des contradictions économiques, ou philosophie de la misère*, in which he sought to find a solution of the social problem other than that presented by the socialists or by the classical economists.

When the Revolution of 1848 broke out in February, Proudhon threw himself into the movement with great ardor. He became the editor of a radical journal, *Le Représentat du peuple*, in which he wrote articles that attracted considerable attention.<sup>3</sup> Proudhon became a popular figure in Paris and was elected to the National Assembly as a radical deputy. Because of his famous catchword, "property is theft," he was expected to be on the socialist left, along with Ledru-Rollin and Louis Blanc. Instead, he astonished his associates by voting against the famous resolution proclaiming the "right to work." He

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon* (Paris, 1875), I, xxii; hereinafter cited as *Correspondance*.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Desjardins, *P.-J. Proudhon* (Paris, 1896), I, 120; Proudhon, *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du deux décembre* (Paris, 1936), p. 12.

also voted against the adoption of the constitution establishing the democratic Second Republic on the ground that he did not believe in constitutions.<sup>4</sup> His chief activity as a member of the assembly was the introduction of a bill to establish a system of free credit through a people's bank which was to supersede the Bank of France. In the debate that followed, Proudhon proved no match for his opponent, Adolphe Thiers, who ridiculed both the scheme and its author. The bill received only two votes, and Proudhon was howled down amid jeers and catcalls.

Proudhon's greatest activity was as a journalist and pamphleteer, not as a politician. He became notorious as a dissenter from the dissenters of his day: liberals, democrats, republicans, and socialists, especially the last. The socialists, Louis Blanc, Ledru-Rollin, Leroux, and Considérant, received the full measure of Proudhon's virulent invective. In 1849 he was arrested on the charge of writing violent articles against President Louis Napoleon and sentenced to prison for three years.<sup>5</sup> His prison cell served Proudhon as an opportunity for leisure of which he made good use by studying and by writing. It was while in prison that Proudhon, at the age of forty, was married. His wife was a simple working woman to whom he was deeply attached all his life.

A number of books, as well as a wife, emerged from Proudhon's prison cell. A volume appeared in 1852, *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du deux décembre*, that created a sensation. In this volume Proudhon hailed the overthrow of the Second Republic as a great step of progress and extolled Louis Napoleon as the hope of revolutionary France. The book roused a storm of bewildered criticism, consternation, and bafflement among the democrats and socialists of the day. During the period of the Second Empire, Proudhon was actively engaged in writing. Book after book and pamphlet after pamphlet poured from his busy pen. He attracted the hostile attention of the government when, in 1858, he attacked the church in his book, *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'église*. His arrest was ordered but he fled to Brussels, where he lived for three years. In 1862 Proudhon returned to France, where he died in 1865.

Proudhon wrote voluminously and has been written about voluminously.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Desjardins, I, 210; Edouard Droz, *P.-J. Proudhon* (Paris, 1909), p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> Proudhon, *Idee générale de la révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1923), p. 5; Droz, p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> The latest edition of his complete works is *Oeuvres complètes de P.-J. Proudhon* (14 vols., Paris, 1923-38), ed. by Célestin C. A. Bouglé and Henri Moysset. An older edition, and the one used in the present article unless otherwise indicated, is P. J. Proudhon, *Oeuvres complètes* (37 vols., Paris, 1866-83). A collection of miscellaneous notes, "Carnets de Proudhon," was published in *Grande Revue*, L-LI. Proudhon's correspondence, which is as interesting as it is voluminous, is to be found in *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon* (14 vols., Paris, 1875). The biographies of

His books had a wide audience and greatly influenced the labor movement in France.<sup>7</sup> Not a little of Proudhon's influence came from the polemical character of his writings, which appealed to the mood and spirit of social criticism, traditional in France. He developed a manner of writing that was vehemently critical in tone, vivid in language, trenchant in style, and devastating in character. Systems of thought, public policies, and famous reputations were demolished in a torrential verbal fury that left not a rack behind. Proudhon was profoundly convinced that he, and he alone of the many revolutionists of his day, was the complete and legitimate expression of the revolutionary movement in France.<sup>8</sup> In his own time, and since, he has been regarded by many as the uncompromising champion of human liberty in every aspect and under all circumstances.

However, neither Proudhon's undoubted sincerity nor his great courage are of themselves sufficient to accept him on his own valuation as the complete revolutionist of his nation and of his age. The reader of Proudhon is frequently baffled by a curious and strange contradiction: lucidity in language and obscurity in thought. The language that he uses in analyzing social forces and political ideas is clear to the point of sharpness, and yet the reader fails to get a comprehensive idea of Proudhonian principles and remedies. The one outstanding exception is Proudhon's proposal for a bank of exchange to promote his favorite scheme of free credit, which is clearly outlined. Was then Proudhon merely a destructive critic of other men's ideas with no ideas of his own? It would seem so were it not for sinister overtones that haunt

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Proudhon are: Karl Diehl, *P. J. Proudhon, Seine Lehre und sein Leben* (3 vols., Jena, 1888-96); Desjardins, *Proudhon* (2 vols., Paris, 1896); and Droz, *P.-J. Proudhon* (Paris, 1909). Books dealing with the various ideas of Proudhon are: Herbert Bourgin, *Proudhon* (Paris, 1901); Gaëtan Pirou, *Proudhonisme et syndicalisme révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1910); Aimé Berthod, *P.-J. Proudhon et la propriété* (Paris, 1910); Bouglé, *La Sociologie de Proudhon* (Paris, 1911); Bouglé, ed., *Proudhon et notre temps* (Paris, 1920) and *Proudhon* (Paris, 1930); Alfred G. Boulen, *Les Idées solidaristes de Proudhon* (Paris, 1912); Laurent Labrusse, *Conception proudhonienne du crédit gratuit* (Paris, 1919); Shi Yung Lu, *The Political Theories of P. J. Proudhon* (New York, 1922); Nicolas Bourgeois, *Proudhon, le fédéralisme et la paix* (Paris, 1926); Henry Cohen, ed., *Proudhon's Solution of the Social Problem* (New York, 1927); Jeanne Duprat, *Proudhon, sociologue et moraliste* (Paris, 1929); Pierre Bourgeau, *P. J. Proudhon et la critique de la démocratie* (Strasbourg, 1933); Denis W. Brogan, *Proudhon* (London, 1934); Jacques Chabrier, *L'Idée de la révolution d'après Proudhon* (Paris, 1935). Chapters and articles on Proudhon are to be found in Emile Faguet, *Politicians and Moralists of the Nineteenth Century*, tr. by Dorothy Galton (London, 1928); Max Nettlau, *Der Anarchismus von Proudhon zu Kropotkin* (Berlin, 1927); Georges Gurvitch, *L'Idée du droit social* (Paris, 1932); Silvio Gesell, *The Natural Economic Order, Money Part*, tr. by Philip Pye (San Antonio, Tex., 1934); Louis Dimier, *Les Maîtres de la Contre-Révolution* (Paris, 1917); Dorothy W. Douglass, "P. J. Proudhon: A Prophet of 1848," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXXIV-XXXV (1929); Dudley Dillard, "Keynes and Proudhon," *Journal of Economic History*, II (May, 1942).

<sup>7</sup> Bouglé, "La Résurrection de Proudhon," *Revue de Paris*, Sept. 15, 1910; W. Pickles, "Les Tendances proudhoniennes dans la France d'après guerre," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, XXIII (1936-37).

<sup>8</sup> *Correspondance*, VII, 36.

his pages of which the present-day reader soon becomes aware. Sometimes these overtones are heard faintly, sometimes with a loudness that is startling. It is these overtones that so puzzled his republican and socialist contemporaries and caused them to see in Proudhon a powerful destructive force which launched missiles at the citadel of privilege, but from an angle and in a direction different from their own. As a consequence they shied away from him as from a strange animal. Proudhon was himself conscious that he was out of harmony with his age. "My body is in the midst of the people," he declared, "but my thought is elsewhere. Owing to the trend of my ideas I have almost nothing in common with those of my contemporaries."<sup>9</sup> Proudhon's attitude toward the Revolution of 1848, which saw a confluence of so many revolutionary streams, strikingly illustrated his enigmatic position of being both a product and an opponent of the revolutionary thought of his time. "And then the Revolution, the Republic, and socialism, one supporting the other," he declared, "came with a bound. I saw them; I felt them; and I fled before this democratic and social monster. . . . An inexpressible terror froze my soul, obliterating my very thoughts. I denounced the conservatives who ridiculed the fury of their opponents. I denounced still more the revolutionists whom I beheld pulling up the foundations of society with incredible fury. . . . No one understood me."<sup>10</sup>

Proudhon was not the intellectual leader of a revolutionary party, as was Louis Blanc; nor was he the founder of a school, as was Saint-Simon. Yet ardent disciples came to him, attracted more by the violence of his attacks on the social order than by the clarity of his social thought. They heard their master's word but did not see his vision, for he himself saw it but darkly. In truth Proudhon was a revolutionist, not of his time but of ours; hence he deserves a re-evaluation in the light of the present.

Even an inharmonious genius does not arise in a vacuum. As a consequence of the industrial development in France, an aristocracy of money came into power with the Revolution of 1830. During the reign of Louis Philippe the wealthy bourgeois, factory owners and bankers, were in control of the government. Both the aristocrats and the workers were all but eliminated from the political scene through a propertied suffrage that was sufficiently extended to overwhelm the former and sufficiently restricted to exclude the latter. In the opinion of that profound observer and keen analyst, Alexis de Tocqueville, the triumph of the bourgeoisie in France "had been definite and so complete that all political power, every franchise, every prerogative and the whole government was confined and, as it were, heaped up

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 284.

<sup>10</sup> *Mélanges*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, XVIII, 6.

within narrow limits of this one class, to the statutory exclusion of all beneath them and the actual exclusion of all above. Not only did it thus alone rule society but it may be said to have formed it."<sup>11</sup>

Opposition to the aristocracy of money came from the lower ranks of the bourgeoisie and from the working class. The great lower middle class of France, chiefly shopkeepers and artisans, regarded with increasing uneasiness the organization of joint stock companies that established large factories and consolidated transportation facilities. Big property was looming up as a threat to the existence of small property. The worker-owners, so numerous in France, felt the pressure of competition from the machine industries that could easily and readily get capital from the banks to finance their expansion. Many worker-owners went to the wall or were reduced to the ranks of the workers in the factories.<sup>12</sup>

Even more bitter in its opposition to the rule of the aristocracy of money was the attitude of the working class. Post-Revolutionary France exhibited economic inequalities almost as glaring as those under the Old Regime.<sup>13</sup> The new revolutionary movement, known as socialism, aimed to destroy the bourgeois ruling class in the only way that it could be destroyed as a class, namely by abolishing property altogether.

There is an aspect of the social situation in France during the July Monarchy that is significant in the light of the present. The great mass of worker-owners, the petty bourgeois, were confronted by enemies on two fronts: consolidated capitalism that would preserve property rights by driving them out of business and revolutionary socialism that would establish economic equality by confiscating their property. The strong property sense of the petty bourgeois, nowhere so strong as in France, led him to regard the capitalist with dislike as a competitor and with envy as a rich member of his class. But his dislike and envy were tempered by a keen regard for the security of property rights which, in case of a crisis, would drive him to the side of the capitalist. Far different was the attitude of the petty bourgeois toward the worker. An overwhelming majority of the French workingmen were then employed in shops and in small factories; hence it was the small employer who was under constant pressure to make concessions to the workers' demands for better conditions. Behind demands for better wages and shorter hours the terrified bourgeois saw the specter of universal con-

<sup>11</sup> *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville*, tr. by Alexander T. de Mattos (New York, 1896), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Quentin-Bauchart, *La Crise sociale de 1848* (Paris, 1920), pp. 36 ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52 ff.; Charles Rist, "Durée du travail dans l'industrie française de 1820 à 1870," *Revue d'économie politique*, XI (1897).

fiscation, proclaimed by the revolutionary proletariat. From this inharmonious historic background emerged the much misunderstood, fantastic Proudhon, "*pleins d'idées souvent d'une perspicacité incroyable.*"

How to preserve property rights and, at the same time, abolish capitalism? How to safeguard the small property owner against his economic enemies: big business and revolutionary socialism? These were the questions that agitated Proudhon. Sometimes his answers were plain, even blunt, at other times they seemed hazy and far afield, but at all times they were suffused by a strange kind of revolutionary fervor that was both puzzling and exasperating.

*La propriété c'est le vol.* Nothing could be clearer, sharper, and more definite in its repudiation of the established social order than this famous dictum of Proudhon. Property had been declared a natural right by the French Revolution, and every regime in France since 1789 had maintained it unswervingly. With the rise of socialism after 1830, property had become the real issue between the contending forces in France, an issue that de Tocqueville had clearly foreseen and had acutely analyzed.<sup>14</sup> When Proudhon repudiated property so violently as to call it "theft," he was hailed then, as he is regarded today, as an extreme revolutionist. It is only by reading Proudhon carefully—and fully—that it is possible to understand what he meant by "property" and why he regarded it as "theft." A false impression of Proudhon's views on this, as well as on the other matters, is derived from such dicta.

According to Proudhon property was, in essence, a privilege to obtain rent, profit, and interest without any labor whatsoever. It reaped without sowing, consumed without producing, and enjoyed without exertion. It was the "worst usurer as well as the worst master and worst debtor."<sup>15</sup> There could be no justification for property on any ground—natural right, law, or occupation—because it created and maintained social inequality, the prime source of all human woe.<sup>16</sup> All efforts to abolish it had been in vain. The greatest of all changes in history, the French Revolution, did not abolish the rule of propertied classes; all that it did was to substitute the rule of bourgeois for that of aristocratic property owners. Therefore the revolution must go on until property is abolished altogether. Then, and then only, will mankind enjoy equality.

But the "satanic" institution of property, in origin vicious and antisocial, could be made into a powerful instrument with which to establish a free and

<sup>14</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1864-67), IX, 516-17.

<sup>15</sup> Proudhon, *Théorie de la propriété* (Paris, 1866), p. 169.

<sup>16</sup> *Qu'est-ce que la propriété*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, I, 34-35.



equal social order “by changing this angel of darkness into an angel of light.”<sup>17</sup> How? By substituting *possession populaire* for *propriété aristocratique*. Under the property system a man received an unearned income *sans main mettre*, because of his ownership of a wealth-producing estate or business. An unearned income, according to Proudhon, was the essence of privilege. Under a system of “possession” a man would earn his livelihood by actual labor on his farm or in his shop; he would, therefore, be entitled to what he had produced because it had been the product of his own labor.<sup>18</sup> To labor then should go the full product of its exertions. “Possession” was the private ownership of the instruments of production without the unearned property income received by the functionless *rentier*. By abolishing the abuses that had grown up around property, the essentials of the system of property rights could be maintained more firmly, more clearly, and more strongly.<sup>19</sup> It becomes plain that in his distinction between “property” and “possession” Proudhon aimed to justify property rights by universalizing property.

Proudhon denounced the property system as a *féodalité industrielle*, established by capitalism, that brought new injustices in the economic life of the world. Not even Marx was more bitter in his criticism of capitalism than was Proudhon, who asserted that the time was ripe for a new revolution which would overthrow the property system with its injustices and inequalities and establish an egalitarian system of possession. Since Proudhon was a native of France, the land of revolutionary traditions, and since he lived during the revolutionary period of 1848, it is important to note that, over and over again, he used the term “revolution” to mean a peaceful, though rapid, establishment of a new social order. He strongly opposed the revolutionary activities of the socialists, whom he ridiculed and denounced in unmeasured terms. There was no greater crime, in the opinion of Proudhon, than to incite class war at any and at all times.<sup>20</sup> Violent language, habitual with Proudhon, was, in a sense, used by him as a substitute for violent action to conceal the realities of his own program.

How was the peaceful revolution to take place whereby “the present system of oppression and of misery” would give way to a “system based on general well-being and liberty”? Proudhon’s answer was surprisingly definite. It was to be by means of a change in the financial system that would give

<sup>17</sup> *Théorie de la propriété*, pp. 208–10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15 ff.

<sup>19</sup> The best analysis of Proudhon’s view of property is to be found in Berthold, *P.-J. Proudhon et la propriété*.

<sup>20</sup> *Correspondance*, II, 200, 291; VI, 381. In a letter to Marx, Proudhon repudiated violent methods as no longer necessary to accomplish social changes. See *Les Confessions d’un révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1929), p. 435.

credit to anyone who asked for it. To grasp the significance of Proudhon's solution it is essential to keep in mind that his anticapitalism was not the same as that of the socialists who attacked capitalism primarily as a system of production. He launched his attack on capitalism as a system of exchange which functioned through the gold standard, the Bank of France, and the stock exchange. In his book *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse*, Proudhon singled out the stock exchange as capitalism at its peak and at its worst. Finance was the quintessence of privileged, monopolistic capitalism because it controlled the life blood of the entire economic system, namely credit. The close and vital connection of finance with industry and with land enabled the capitalist to exact profit and the landlord to exact rent. The entire system of capitalist exploitation, established through this connection, would topple over through what Proudhon called, a *révolution par le crédit*.

This revolution, the greatest in history, was to be accomplished by the establishment of free credit, *crédit gratuit*.<sup>21</sup> A People's Bank (*Banque du Peuple*) was to be organized to take the place of the Bank of France. Unlike the latter, the former was to have no subscribed capital, no stockholders, no gold reserve. It was neither to pay nor to charge interest, except a nominal charge to cover overhead. All business transactions in the nation were to be centralized in the People's Bank, which was to be a bank of exchange and a market for all the products of the nation. It was to issue notes based neither on specie nor on land but on actual business values. The chief function of the bank would be to universalize the bill of exchange by facilitating the exchange of goods between producers and consumers through exchange notes instead of money.<sup>22</sup>

The dominating virtue of this scheme, according to Proudhon, was free credit in the form of exchange notes, universally accepted. With free credit a new economic order would arise, more free, more enterprising, more productive than capitalism. Private enterprise would remain, and competition, the vital force that animated all society, would continue to regulate market prices.<sup>23</sup> This greatest of all revolutions in history would be put through, according to Proudhon, "without confiscation, without bankruptcy, without an agrarian law, without common ownership, without state intervention, and without the abolition of inheritance."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> References to this scheme are to be found in most of Proudhon's writings. The best exposition is contained in his *Organisation du crédit* in *Oeuvres complètes*, VI, and in his *Résumé de la question sociale* (Paris, 1849). See also Cohen, ed., *Proudhon's Solution of the Social Problem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Organisation du crédit*, p. 115.

<sup>23</sup> *Système des contradictions économiques* (Paris, 1923), I, 249.

<sup>24</sup> Speech of Proudhon to the National Assembly, July 31, 1848, *Compte rendu des séances de l'Assemblée Nationale* (Paris, 1849), II, 772.

It is now clearly evident that the classless society of Proudhon's vision was entirely different from that of the socialists. Instead of the triumphant proletariat of the socialists it would be the triumphant middle class that would usher in the new order of economic equality. His method of bringing the classless society into existence was also strikingly different from that of the socialists of his time. It was through the socialization of finance by the peaceful *révolution par le crédit* in contrast to the socialist method of the socialization of the means of production and exchange by class war and the dictatorship of the proletariat. To renounce the principle of class war and to hold up the middle class as the hope of mankind roused all the furies in Marx, who had confidently condemned this class to utter extinction, to be ground out of existence by the upper and nether millstones of capital and labor. Nothing appeared more preposterous to Marx than the notion that the revolution of the future would be in the interest of the middle class. He poured a stream of ridicule on Proudhon as a philosopher who "wished to soar as a man of science above the bourgeoisie and the proletarians; he is only the petty bourgeois, tossed about constantly between capital and labor between political economy and communism."<sup>25</sup>

All working class movements of the day, such as trade unionism, universal suffrage, and socialism, encountered the uncompromising hostility of Proudhon. There was a menacing tone of bitterness in his vitriolic denunciation of these movements, not present in his attacks on capitalism. In his view the aspirations of the workingmen were a diversion from the real issue in France and a perversion of his vision of a classless society. He denounced trade unionism as a subversive movement directed against the public interest. The right to strike, asserted Proudhon, was a sinister power, wielded by the workers, that acted as a stimulus to their egoistic demand to rule the nation. It legalized class warfare to which he was unalterably opposed. He unleashed a furious, almost obscene, assault on what he contemptuously called the "political poverties," namely popular sovereignty, natural rights, constitutions, parliaments, universal manhood suffrage, and majority rule. Democracy was the most unstable of governments, continually oscillating between the absurd and the impossible. Its consequences were "the strangling of the public conscience, the suicide of popular sovereignty, and the apostasy of the Revolution."<sup>26</sup> Universal suffrage created the worst of all governments because it was "the idea of the state infinitely extended."<sup>27</sup> He, Proudhon, would under no circumstances devote any of his labor, of his time, or of his

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, tr. by Harry Quelch (London, 1900), p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> Desjardins, II, 214 ff. <sup>27</sup> *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, p. 185.

substance to defend such *enfantillage* as democratic government. As a theory popular sovereignty was just plain nonsense, and its application to government in the form of universal suffrage was “worn out childishness.”<sup>28</sup> Proudhon’s contempt and hatred of democracy overflowed all decent bounds, and he descended to a degree of disgusting vilification, reached only by the fascists of our day. “All this democracy disgusts me,” he wrote. “It wishes to be scratched where vermin causes itching, but it does not at all wish to be combed or to be deloused. What would I not give to sail into this mob with my clenched fists!”<sup>29</sup>

Proudhon’s opposition to democracy arose from his contempt of the common man. The great mass of people, in his opinion, consisted of puffed up bourgeois, miserable peasants, and stupid proletarians. He loved to embroider this theme with many verbal designs. The bourgeois were “greedy, cowardly, as much without generosity as without principles,” and they stole through speculation because they hated to work for a living. The peasant never felt the “beat of national honor in his heart. He believes that tyranny is good provided it keeps down the city folks. Instinctively he hates science, philosophy, art, and industry . . . and is ever ready to respond to the appeals of the clericals against liberty.” All that the worker desired was better wages, fewer hours of work, low cost of living, and high taxes for the rich. He had no vision of a new and better social order. “Corrupt, envious, and slanderous the worker mistakes hatred of employers for patriotism. He gets his greatest pleasure in witnessing the massacre of those who champion his cause.” His contempt for his fellow worker, his hatred of his employer, his love of pomp and show “always drive him to the side of authority.”<sup>30</sup>

All true progress, according to Proudhon, was accomplished, not directly by the masses, but by *des esprits d’élite*, who, openly or secretly, drove them in the right direction.<sup>31</sup> The masses were predisposed to autocratic rule, not to self-government. They needed a ruler as they needed a god. “For me,” Proudhon declared, “it is an economic truism that the class which is the most numerous and the most poor is by that very fact the most envious, the most immoral, and the most cowardly.”<sup>32</sup> Humanity did not consist of the mass of brutalized “bipeds” but of the small group of elite which had always been the ferment in history. He questioned whether humanity ever consisted of more than ten thousand persons.<sup>33</sup>

Proudhon’s diatribes against democracy arose from his repudiation of

<sup>28</sup> For Proudhon’s views on democracy, see Bourgeau, *P. J. Proudhon et la critique de la démocratie*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>29</sup> *Correspondance*, XI, 197.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 138–39; *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, XI, 404.

<sup>31</sup> *Correspondance*, V, 57–58.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 267.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 154–55.

what he called “political” government, whether absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, or democratic republic. Authority and subordination, so destructive of human individuality and personal freedom, were the fundamental principles of every state, “the unpaid prostitute of knaves, monks, and old soldiers.”<sup>34</sup> The state, under whatever form, was a conservative force; it could not, therefore, ameliorate social conditions just because it was the state. Proudhon went so far as openly to avow himself an anarchist and to praise anarchy as the condition of a mature society.<sup>35</sup>

What was “economic” government that, according to Proudhon, was to supplant the “political” government which he condemned so loudly, so persistently, and so profusely? He devoted a volume, *Du Principe fédératif*, to the explanation of the scheme; and references to it are to be found scattered through Proudhon’s writings. Nevertheless, it is difficult, very difficult, to get a clear idea of the scheme of economic government that Proudhon called “mutualism.” Generalizations, keen and brilliant, there are aplenty but nowhere a ground plan. Under mutualism there would be organized, in each industry, voluntary autonomous associations of producers with the object of exchanging commodities. Production was to be individual, not collective. Relations between individuals and associations would be based on voluntary contracts, not on coercive laws.<sup>36</sup> Competition between the voluntary, autonomous, economic associations, under mutualism, would function in a healthful manner, whereas, under capitalism, competition between individuals was destructive and chaotic. In these ways mutualism would prove superior to the individualism of the capitalists and to the collectivism of socialists.

There was to be a political aspect to mutualism, namely federalism. The various associations would form a hierarchy of federations, at the top of which would be two national federations, one of producers and another of consumers. Supreme authority would be vested in a council, chosen by the various associations, with power to regulate their common affairs, such as transportation, credit, insurance, defense, security, etc. The centralized, sovereign state, exercising coercive power over the people, would be replaced by a “cluster of sovereignties,” consisting of federations of autonomous economic associations. This new system would inaugurate what Proudhon called *le troisième monde*, the first truly classless society in history, which would succeed capitalism as the latter had succeeded feudalism. *Le troisième monde* would arise from the soil of capitalism, yet without any capitalistic evils, like the “lily which repudiates the onion from which it stems.”<sup>37</sup> Like

<sup>34</sup> *Idee générale de la révolution*, p. 344.

<sup>35</sup> *Mélanges*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, XIX, 19; *Idee générale de la révolution*, p. 199.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301–302.

<sup>37</sup> *La Guerre et la paix* (Paris, 1927), p. 191.

capitalism, the new order would maintain private enterprise, freedom of contract, competition, and private property. Unlike capitalism, it would not tolerate financial and industrial overlords with the attendant economic inequalities, class conflicts, and political tyrannies. All classes would fuse into one, *la classe moyenne*, and the great dream of a society of equals would at last be realized.

The unique aspect of Proudhon's blurred blueprint of *le troisième monde* was his outlawing of government from the social order. It caught the attention of those revolutionists in France, who, in the four short years from 1848 to 1852, had seen rapid and violent changes of government. When the Second Empire gave evidence of its ability to maintain itself against all opposition, whether royalist, republican, or socialist, certain elements among the revolutionists became convinced that stable government was synonymous with despotism. On the sudden collapse of the seemingly all-powerful empire at Sedan these revolutionists saw their opportunity of destroying despotism forever by abolishing government altogether. The voice of Proudhon rang loudly in the ears of the revolutionists of the Paris Commune, who aimed to destroy the central government of France and to establish, in its place, a federation of autonomous communes.<sup>38</sup>

However, nothing would have astounded and infuriated Proudhon more than being hailed as the inspiration of a bloody uprising by the revolutionary proletariat. This contemner of all government, this "anarchist" hailed the dictatorial Second Empire as the long promised, passionately hoped for, historical event that would usher in *le troisième monde*. After the *coup d'état* of December 2, Proudhon addressed Louis Napoleon in the following manner: "You are the revolution of the nineteenth century; you can not be anything else. Apart from this, Deux-Décembre would be only an historic accident without principle and without significance."<sup>39</sup> The true object of Deux-Décembre, according to Proudhon, was to inaugurate the social revolution which had proved too great a task for every government in France since the First Empire. There was only one possible program for Louis Napoleon to follow, and that was a revolutionary one.<sup>40</sup> In the light of his great mission the suppression of the socialists during the June Days and the overthrow of the Second Republic were not reactionary acts. On the contrary they prepared the way for the advent of the true revolution of which Louis Napoleon was

<sup>38</sup> Concerning the influence of Proudhon's ideas on the Paris Commune, see Bourgin, *Proudhon*, pp. 81 ff.; and Brogan, *Proudhon*, p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> *La Révolution sociale*, p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> *Correspondance*, IV, 281.

the leader.<sup>41</sup> "Let Deux-Décembre proclaim, frankly and loudly, that the reason for its advent was that it represented social revolution."<sup>42</sup>

Proudhon offered to collaborate with Louis Napoleon and to guide him in the new revolutionary course "for the glory of the country, for the well-being of the masses, and for the progress of mankind."<sup>43</sup> He counselled the republicans and the socialists to rally to the banner of Louis Napoleon, who was the champion of the masses despite the fact that he was regarded by the reactionaries as an agent of counterrevolution.<sup>44</sup> By supporting Louis Napoleon, republicans and socialists would become the leaders and moderators of the true revolution demanded by the proletariat, who desired not political slogans but economic renovation.<sup>45</sup>

Forcefully and repeatedly Proudhon drove home the idea that a social revolution could be accomplished only through the dictatorship of one man. Because of party divisions the revolution, so necessary to France, could not come from the deliberations of a popular assembly but from the dictatorship of one man, supported by the people.<sup>46</sup> The Revolution of 1848, Proudhon asserted, exposed the incompetence of the babblers and visionaries, and its suppression by the *coup d'état* cleared the way for the efficient, practical revolution of Louis Napoleon. He, not the socialists, was the true revolutionist. Did he not question all institutions: property, interest, income, privilege, constitutionalism, dynasty, church, army, school? Not by theories but by acts did Louis Napoleon show how fragile was the social structure and how weak were the principles that supported it.<sup>47</sup> The "anarchist" Proudhon, who so hated political government that he voted against the adoption of the democratic constitution of the Second Republic, now welcomed the constitution of the Second Empire that established the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon.

Like every other French thinker during the nineteenth century Proudhon was keenly aware of the problem of the two Frances, between which yawned the chasm of the French Revolution. His solution of the problem was the establishment of one party based on *la classe moyenne*. He poured scorn, wrathful, withering, and inexhaustible, on the many political parties during the Second Republic. Was this the product of the united, centralized France of which everyone was so proud?<sup>48</sup> Napoleon had sought to unite France by means of the poetry of war, but Louis Napoleon would improve on this method by using the "prose of economics." How? Proudhon's answer had a

<sup>41</sup> *La Révolution sociale*, p. 177.

<sup>44</sup> *La Révolution sociale*, pp. 284 ff.

<sup>46</sup> *La Révolution sociale*, p. 215.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>45</sup> *Idée générale de la révolution*, p. 121.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>48</sup> *Correspondance*, V, 154.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267-68.

sinister significance. It was possible and desirable, he argued, that one party should swallow all the other parties. This one party must represent the interests of *la classe moyenne* and those of the proletariat, fused into a national interest. Deux-Décembre alone could do it because it represented social revolution. To Louis Napoleon had come the great opportunity to take this great step.<sup>49</sup>

Proudhon was doomed to suffer great disappointment in his ardent hopes of Deux-Décembre. In an interview with Louis Napoleon in 1848, he had proposed to the latter his scheme of free credit to inaugurate peacefully the great social revolution. After Louis Napoleon became emperor, Proudhon insistently urged him to adopt his scheme in order to fulfill the great revolutionary promise of Deux-Décembre. But the emperor paid no heed whatever to Proudhon's exaltation of him as the greatest revolutionist of all times, or to his scheme of *révolution par le crédit*. Chagrined at his failure to convert Louis Napoleon, Proudhon became very hostile to the Second Empire. Had the emperor betrayed the social revolution? Had he, instead, headed the industrial revolution of the capitalists and the bankers? Proudhon's passionate resentment at what he considered a betrayal of the greatest mission in history led him to conclude bitterly, yet correctly, that the Second Empire was a bourgeois government with a romantic, Napoleonic façade.<sup>50</sup> The great advance of industry and finance that was taking place with the active encouragement of the government was, in Proudhon's view, a retrograde movement to exploit the French people. What was the government doing for the masses and for his favorite class, *la classe moyenne*? Nothing, he replied. As the Second Empire became more liberal in its political and more capitalistic in its economic policies, Proudhon became more bitter in his hostility to Louis Napoleon. "After handing over our souls to the Jesuits," he complained, "the Emperor hands over our patrimony to the Jews."<sup>51</sup> Public opinion under the Second Empire, Proudhon asserted, was dominated by Jews, Saint-Simonians, liberals, Jesuits, and bohemians. Especially influential were the Jews, "who dominated the press and controlled the government."<sup>52</sup>

More than once was the note of anti-Semitism sounded by Proudhon. During the supreme hour of European liberalism, the Revolution of 1848, he had denounced the Jews as the bulwark of *la féodalité capitaliste*, hence the enemies of the people at all times. "The Jews, again the Jews, always the Jews!" he exclaimed. "Under the Republic, as under Louis Philippe, and as under Louis XIV we have always been at the mercy of the Jews."<sup>53</sup> Proudhon

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268–69.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, XI, 354; XII, 65.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82; *Correspondance*, V, 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Mélanges*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, XVII, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 242.



identified capitalists with bankers, and the latter with Jews, and he regarded all three as an unholy trinity indissolubly united in exploiting *la classe moyenne* and in defending reaction in France. "One group of counterrevolutionists," he declared, "consists of the monied elements, industrialists, merchants, and bankers, who are responsible for all the tyrannies perpetrated by reaction. These elements recognize the Jews as their leaders."<sup>54</sup> Proudhon had the tendency, inevitable in the anti-Semite, to see in the Jews the prime source of the nation's misfortunes, and to associate them with persons and groups that he hated. He denounced Jews along with "Saint-Simonians, pimps, brutal drunkards, and contemptible pedants."<sup>55</sup>

Anti-Semitism, always and everywhere, the acid test of racialism, with its division of mankind into creative and sterile races, led Proudhon to regard the Negro as the lowest in the racial hierarchy. During the American Civil War he favored the South, which, he insisted, was not entirely wrong in maintaining slavery. The Negroes, according to Proudhon, were an inferior race, an example of the existence of inequality among the races of mankind. Not those who desired to emancipate them were the true friends of the Negroes but those "who wish to keep them in servitude, yea to exploit them, but nevertheless to assure them of a livelihood, to raise their standard gradually through labor, and to increase their numbers through marriage."<sup>56</sup>

What astounded Proudhon's contemporaries, even more than his support of the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon or his anti-Semitic outbursts or his defense of Negro slavery, was his glorification of war. Hatred of war and longing for universal peace has been an almost universal characteristic of all modern revolutionary thinkers—the philosophes in the eighteenth, the democrats in the nineteenth, and the socialists in the twentieth century. The contradictions between the revolutionist Proudhon and the revolutionary thought of his day became even more puzzling, even more strange, when Proudhon appeared as a glorifier of war for its own sake. His book *La Guerre et la paix*, which appeared in 1861, was a hymn to war, intoned in a more passionate key than anything produced by the fascists of our time. "This book," remarks Henri Moysset, editor of the volume, "arises from the very well-spring of Proudhonism; ordered and fully completed by the pressure of events, it is truly the product of the intellectual soil and moral climate in which the spirit of Proudhon grew and matured."<sup>57</sup>

"Hail to war!" exclaimed Proudhon. "It is only through war that man was able to rise from the lowest depths to his present dignity and worth. Over

<sup>54</sup> *Résumé de la question sociale*, p. 36.

<sup>55</sup> *Correspondance*, XII, 55.

<sup>56</sup> *La Guerre et la paix*, p. 179.

<sup>57</sup> Moysset, intro. to *ibid.*, p. lvi.

the body of a fallen foe he has the first vision of glory and immortality. . . . Death is the crowning of life, and how can an intelligent, free, moral creature like man end his life more nobly than on the battlefield?"<sup>58</sup> War was the revelation of religion, of justice, and of the ideal in human relations. Man was "above all else a warrior animal. . . . It is through war that his sublime nature becomes manifest. It is war alone that makes heroes and demigods."<sup>59</sup>

In the view of Proudhon war was not a social evil that would be eradicated in the course of human progress. He was convinced that war was an instinct inherent in the very nature of man and was itself the prime source of human progress. Therefore it would last as long as man existed and as long as moral and social values prevailed in human society.<sup>60</sup> Universal and perpetual peace would mean the end of all progress. What would become of literature, of poetry, and of art if what was inconceivable actually happened, namely the abolition of war? What would become of justice, of freedom? Of the independent, free, autonomous nations? Everything would degenerate in a world at peace, and life would become a *siesta éternelle*.<sup>61</sup> As war was the beneficent, though terrible, cause of human progress, its very origin was divine. The conscience that produced religion and justice also produced war. The fervor and enthusiasm that inspired lawgivers and prophets also inspired the warrior heroes.<sup>62</sup> War was the only possible method of establishing justice on earth. As every nation sincerely believed that its cause was just, war was the only way of settling disputes between nations. And the victor always represented the justice of mankind. The profoundest sentiment, felt by the masses of mankind, was that there were "mysterious bonds" that united might and right. Because of this sentiment a nation, no matter how low she fell, would never perish as long as she kept burning in her heart "the just and regenerating flame of the right to make war."<sup>63</sup>

Almost every page of *La Guerre et la paix* contains a glorification of war as an ideal and as an institution. Repetition reaches almost the point of hysteria. To dismiss Proudhon as an irresponsible writer with an irrepressible gift for polemics would hardly do justice to one of the most influential social philosophers of the nineteenth century. His hysterical praise of war, like his ardent championship of the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon, like his unwavering support of the middle class, was an integral part of his social philosophy.

Almost always the militarist has been hostile to the emancipation of women. Women could not be warriors but they could be wives and mothers of warriors. Hence to relegate women to domestic duties was the best way

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> *Mélanges*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, XIX, 65.

<sup>60</sup> *La Guerre et la paix*, pp. 55 ff.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 91.

of insuring a strong, virile nation. Moreover, woman's subordination to man and her inferior status in government and in society was the militarist pattern of command and obedience, applied to the very foundation of the social order, namely the family. In Proudhon's day George Sand, in France, and John Stuart Mill, in England, sounded the faint beginnings of the movement to emancipate women by granting them equal rights with men. Woman's rights encountered the furious opposition of Proudhon. "I regard as baneful and stupid," he declared, "all our dreams of emancipating woman. I deny her every political right and every initiative. For woman liberty and well-being lie solely in marriage, in motherhood, in domestic duties, in the fidelity of her spouse, in chastity, and in seclusion."<sup>64</sup>

What can be the explanation of the astonishing phenomena of the "complete revolutionist" being, at the same time, the complete militarist, the defender of slavery, the passionate hater of democracy and of socialism, and the bitter opponent of working class movements and of the emancipation of woman? The search for intellectual paternity sometimes leads to strange and disconcerting discoveries. Both by his disciples and by his detractors Proudhon has been given a high place as the father of anarchosyndicalism. To assert that both groups are mistaken involves a drastic re-evaluation of the ideas of this enigmatic thinker and of their significance in modern history.

According to authoritative syndicalist writers, notably Hubert Lagardelle, Proudhon was the inspirer of the anarchosyndicalist movement that came prominently to the fore in France during the quarter century before the first World War.<sup>65</sup> Proudhon's repudiation of both capitalism and socialism, his flouting of political government, and his scheme of free, autonomous economic groups became the fundamental theories of anarchosyndicalism. A resolution, adopted by the great federation of French trade unions, the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, incorporated in its famous charter of Amiens, sounded a distinctively Proudhonian note in its espousal of syndicalist policies. It demanded the establishment of a new social order, "based not on authority but on exchange, not on domination but on reciprocity, not on sovereignty but on freedom of contract."<sup>66</sup>

It is true that Proudhon's vague ideas concerning the future "mutualist" society influenced the equally vague ideas of the syndicalists concerning the future organization of society. Concretely and definitely, however, syndicalism was a revolutionary labor movement that depended on trade unions, general strikes, and class violence to bring about a social revolution. Proudhon was

<sup>64</sup> *Correspondance*, IV, 377.

<sup>65</sup> Pirou, *Proudhonisme et syndicalisme révolutionnaire*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> See Bouglé, ed., *Proudhon et notre temps*, p. 3.

certainly not a champion of organized labor. Concretely and definitely he opposed trade unions, strikes, and violent class conflicts.

There still persists the legend of the "anarchist" Proudhon. He did, it is true, repudiate the state and all political government whatsoever, which gave him the specious reputation of being the "father" of anarchy. In discussing the social and political issues of his day Proudhon did not at all apply his anarchist views. They seemed to form no part of his vigorous attacks on the ideas of his opponents, whether left or right. His hatred of socialism, which Proudhon regarded as the worst of all social poisons, drove him to advocate anarchy as its very opposite. What he really saw in anarchy was not a solution of social problems but an antidote to socialism. It is important to note that the historically important contribution of Proudhon to social thought was not his repudiation of the state but his new version of the class struggle in western Europe. As the champion of the cause of the middle class, in opposition both to capitalists and to workingmen, Proudhon's anarchism evaporates with furious abruptness. His advocacy of personal dictatorship and his laudation of militarism can hardly be equalled in the reactionary writings of his or of our day.

It is equally surprising that the royalists in France have claimed Proudhon as one of the "masters of counterrevolution." What especially attracted them to Proudhon was his vitriolic denunciation of Jacobinism and of socialism. In the office of the royalist journal, *Action française*, there hung on the wall a picture of the "complete revolutionist."<sup>67</sup> In his book *Les Maîtres de la Contre-Révolution*, the royalist writer, Louis Dimier, declared that Proudhon had a comprehensive philosophy of counterrevolution only in outline; in parts it was fully completed.<sup>68</sup> Though Proudhon gave to himself and to his contemporaries the impression of being a revolutionist, in reality, asserted Dimier, his ideas had the essence of conservatism. Therefore, the "revolution" of Proudhon could be more correctly described as "reaction." Proudhon was truly himself as a counterrevolutionist in those of his observations that were most striking and most penetrating.<sup>69</sup> The well-known anti-Semite, Edouard Drumont, hailed Proudhon as one who had a clear understanding, in his day, of the nature of masonic and cosmopolitan, *i.e.*, Jewish, conspiracies. By his sense of what was politically useful to France and "by his instinctive horror of cosmopolitanism, he was the first of the nationalists."<sup>70</sup> The Nestor of French royalism, Charles Maurras, praised Proudhon for his

<sup>67</sup> Bouglé, *La Sociologie de Proudhon*, intro., p. viii.

<sup>68</sup> Dimier, *Les Maîtres de la Contre-Révolution*, p. 282.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 239, 241-51.

<sup>70</sup> "Le Centenaire de Proudhon," *La Grande revue*, LIII (1909), 140.

pitiless exposure of democracy and democrats and of liberalism and liberals. As a nationalist, he asserted, Proudhon wrote in the spirit of the ancient monarchy that had done so much to advance the interest of France.<sup>71</sup>

However, Proudhon was not a reactionary, despite the claims of the royalists. Nothing in his writings or in his life indicates that he desired to re-establish the Old Regime in France or that he had any sympathy with the reactionary ideas of de Maistre and de Bonald. The royalists, like the syndicalists, mistook their man. Before the first World War anyone in France who opposed democratic ideas, parliamentary government, trade unions, and socialism was rated as a counterrevolutionist. That may have been true of others but not of Proudhon.

It was indeed an inharmonious age that produced Proudhon. The period in French history, 1830–1852, saw the revival of an old hope, that of fulfilling the democratic promise of the French Revolution, and the appearance of a new hope, that of creating a socialist commonwealth. Ideological conflicts had a great importance in France because of the tendency of radical ideas, in that land, to jump from the pages of a book into the melee of a barricade. Proudhon was a product of this revolutionary period in that he was one of those who voiced its discontents. In this sense he was a minor revolutionary figure, much less important than his fellow revolutionists, Louis Blanc, Blanqui, and Lamartine. Far more significant, however, was the fact that Proudhon was a prophet of future discontents, which gives him a greater position in history than that of his revolutionary contemporaries. The true significance of his writings can be seen only in the light of the political and social movement of our day known as fascism. It would be a great error to regard fascism as a counterrevolutionary movement, directed against the communists, as was that of the reactionaries against the liberals during the first half of the nineteenth century. Fascism is something unique in modern history in that it is a *revolutionary* movement of the middle class, directed, on the one hand, against the great banks and the consolidations of big business and, on the other hand, against the socialist demands of the working class. It repudiates democracy as a political system in which bankers, capitalists, and socialists find free scope for their activities and favors a dictatorship that will eliminate these elements from the life of the nation. Fascism proclaims a body of doctrines which are not entirely new; there are no “revelations” in history. With what ideas in Europe’s past could they be related? With what great thinkers could they be associated?

It is the thesis of this article that the great French polemist, Proudhon,

<sup>71</sup> Charles Maurras, *Dictionnaire politique et critique* (Paris, 1933), IV, 220 ff.

was a harbinger of fascist ideas. Otherwise his views would be as bewildering to us as they were to his contemporaries. To them his writings had a revolutionary trend but in an unfamiliar direction and a violence of language that yet clothed an anxious conservatism. They baffled reactionaries, liberals, and socialists alike. Proudhon was a revolutionist in that he repudiated established political and economic institutions and in that he proclaimed a new social order, inspired by a new ideology. Yet his bent of mind was conservative. His intense devotion to the institution of the family, his never-failing championship of the interests of the middle class, and his advocacy of the inheritance of property reveal his essentially conservative outlook. The mental configuration of Proudhon, with its strange contrasts, produced an attitude toward social and political problems that is understandable only in the light of present discontents. His attacks on the capitalist system were similar in manner, in direction, and in objective to those made familiar today by fascist writings. He it was who first sounded the fascist note of a *revolutionary* repudiation of democracy and of socialism. These were the overtones of fascism so frequently heard in Proudhon's writings.

Proudhon was the intellectual spokesman of the French middle class, so numerous and yet so timorous. Like the fascists of our time, and unlike the Marxists of any time, he realized that there was a powerful class interest, apart from capitalists and workingmen and hostile to both. With the upswing of modern industry and with the growth of socialism the middle classes were in constant fear of losing their little farms, their little shops, their little savings, either through confiscation by the revolutionary proletariat or through competition of powerful capitalists who would grind them into poverty or out of existence. Fear, especially, of socialist confiscation continued in France all during the nineteenth century, and even later, down to the second World War. The taunt that Marx threw at Proudhon that he was a champion of the petty bourgeois, interested in the survival of this class, was true. But the contemptuous tone that Marx used showed that he had no understanding of the power and revolutionary possibilities of the middle class. This error of Marx became an article of faith to his disciples. The contemptuous disregard of the middle class by the Marxist Social Democrats and Communists, during the period between the two World Wars, was to have fatal consequences in the triumph of fascism, the revolutionary creed of the middle class.

In stressing banking and Jewish bankers for his line of attack against the established order, Proudhon betrayed an almost unerring sign of fascist anti-

capitalism. That banking was “predatory,” not productive, capitalism, and that it characterized the economic activity of the Jews were the emphatic appeals of the Nazis to the impoverished middle class in their crusade to abolish “interest slavery.” “In singling out predatory capital national socialism treads in the footsteps of Proudhon, who, in his *Idée générale de la révolution au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle* demanded the liquidation of the Banque de France and its transformation into an institution of public utility.”<sup>72</sup> In Proudhon’s day his scheme of free credit was regarded by revolutionists as a tiny and sickly mouse that emerged from the enormous mountain of his devastating attacks on the capitalist system. In the light of fascism it was an important and significant weapon with which to attack capitalism in the interest of the middle class.

Proudhon’s hostility to labor, whether organized industrially in trade unions or politically in socialist parties, had a fascist edge. The vehemence of his denunciation of working-class movements arose from his bitter hostility to labor *as a separate class interest*. During the middle of the nineteenth century most French workers were employed in small shops; hence class consciousness on their part was less a challenge to the capitalists than to *la classe moyenne*, whose interests Proudhon had so much at heart. He was indeed concerned with the welfare of the workers but only when they were willing to merge their interests with those of the middle class in the war against capitalism.

It was again Proudhon who proclaimed the novel idea that a dictatorship, to be successful under modern conditions, must have a popular basis and a revolutionary social program. This conception of dictatorship became distinctively fascist. Proudhon’s was the only revolutionary voice that hailed the dictatorship of Louis Napoleon as a continuation of the French Revolution in the economic sphere. It caught the attention of many anxious minds in France who were seeking a stable, united France without resorting to Legitimist reaction, bourgeois class rule, or socialist terrorism. The new class conflict, that between bourgeois and workingmen, which culminated in the June Days of 1848 created a social crisis in France similar to that in Italy and in Germany after the first World War. The emergence of a “savior of society” in the person of Louis Napoleon may be compared to the emergence of Mussolini and Hitler, who also claimed to have saved society from the revolutionary onslaught of the communists. The significance of Proudhon, in the crisis of 1848, was his self-appointed role of intellectual cicerone to Louis Napoleon, a role difficult to play a century before it could be appreciated.

<sup>72</sup> Franz Neumann, *Behemoth* (New York, 1942), p. 320.

That explains why he was rejected, both by those whom he sought to guide and by those who had regarded him as a fellow revolutionist.

There is no hint of the totalitarian corporative state in Proudhon's writings. The economic condition of France, in his day, was such that a totalitarian state of the fascist type was inconceivable, even by the bold social imagination of Proudhon. There existed no large working class, no concentrated industries that could be organized into state controlled "corporations." What was conceivable was a dictatorship, based on a mass of small property owners who desired a strong state to protect them against their class enemies and to make their interests those of the nation. That is why Proudhon, the spokesman of this class, supported the *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon. That is why he proclaimed the latter to be chosen of history and implored him to carry out his mission as a social revolutionist. That is why he supported dictatorial government against *toute la gente candidate*.

Fascist writers both in Germany and in France have not been slow to recognize Proudhon as the intellectual forerunner of fascism. One of these writers, Willibald Schulze, hailed him as the *Wegweiser* of the Third Reich because he repudiated democracy, capitalism, and socialism. Of all the social philosophers of former times, he asserted, Proudhon was nearest to National Socialism in that he upheld the principle of private enterprise and was, at the same time, opposed to profit and to interest.<sup>73</sup> Proudhon, asserted another Nazi writer, Karl Heinz Bremer, saw the necessity of popularizing a social idea that was antiliberal in order to give a social significance to the Second Empire. What Louis Napoleon needed was an ideology that expressed the relationship of the workers to the Second Empire, which only Proudhon could supply. But the emperor rejected him because he desired the rapid success of his regime. Instead, he catered to the banking interests and to the Jews, as a consequence of which Louis Napoleon failed to solve the social problem within the framework of national and *völkisch* ideas.<sup>74</sup>

A significant article, contrasting Marx and Proudhon appeared in a Paris fascist journal, devoted to French collaboration with Nazi Germany. "Marx, the revolutionary disciple of Hegel," it declared, "placed a violent contradiction at the basis of society, a contradiction which could be dissolved only by levelling and by violence. Proudhon, being infinitely more conformable to the spirit of France, was well aware of individual values. He, therefore, found a way to resolve the economic contradictions of society. According to Marx it is the individual who is rotten; but, according to

<sup>73</sup> Willibald Schulze, "Was Proudhon Anarchist," *Deutschlands Erneuerung*, XXIII (1939).

<sup>74</sup> Karl Heinz Bremer, "Der sozialistische Kaiser," *Die Tat*, XXX (1938), 160 ff.



Proudhon, it is wealth. Proudhon welcomed into his fraternal 'people,' the middle class, who are the brains of the body social, a class that Marx would have stood up against a wall to be shot down."<sup>75</sup>

In the powerful polemist of the mid-nineteenth century it is now possible to discern a harbinger of the great world evil of fascism. An irritating enigma to his own generation, his teachings misunderstood as anarchy by his disciples, Proudhon's place in intellectual history is destined to have a new and greater importance. It will come with the re-evaluation of the nineteenth century, as the prelude to the world revolution that is now called the second World War.

<sup>75</sup> *Les nouveaux temps* (Paris, May 2-3, 1943).