

THE CENTENARY OF PROUDHON

His Life, His Character, His Spirit

Born in Besançon on January 15, 1809, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon died on January 19, 1865. He was only 56 years old. He died of exhaustion, his heart worn down by a fervent life as a fighter and creator amidst material hardships, exiles, and imprisonments that, until his final moments, left no respite for the first of the anarchists.

Proudhon's struggles are little known. He lived by his immense work, behind which the author disappeared. Yet, the man was worth the work; his behavior is a lesson in overcoming discouragement and not compromising the demands of a mission. And the work is worth what the man was worth, in his strict honesty, in his contradictions, which were also an honesty, that of a living thought that is not satisfied with a rigid theory.

The proudhonian contradictions are quivering facets, opposing theses and antitheses. Through this multiplicity of views, they are enriching and extremely significant in the rejection of the systemic spirit that is anarchism itself. Certainly, this conception of anarchism was not part of Proudhon's thought as an elaborated theory. It was implied by his dialectic.

The dominant feature of Proudhon's character was an extraordinary rigor, in conformity with an accepted morality, only the misuse of which he challenged. In my opinion, this excessive rigor limited his ethics in the realm of the psychological liberation of the individual. His conception of the family had something mystical, even dogmatic about it. He gained in strength what he lost in pagan euphoria. His life was that of a kind of monk, a secular and vigorously anticlerical monk, in a time when anticlericalism was a risky attitude. At the same time, he was deeply religious. He had a sense of the universal and a sense of the solidarity of all men, subject to a common destiny.

The respect he showed his parents, especially his mother, a simple cook who was a superior mother, seems to have been the determining factor in the irritating role family plays in his work.

In this respect, his disciples turned away from him. They only held it against him theoretically. In substance, everyone saw that it was from fidelity to the principles prevailing in his environment of good people that Proudhon drew his unwavering loyalty to his origins.



His father, Charles Proudhon, was a cooper. He took the initiative to open a brewery and brew the beer himself, which he sold at a fair price. This meant that he derived no profit from it other than the salary for his work. The young Proudhon was deeply affected by this unusual practice. It can be said that his entire economy was based on this notion of the just price. However, he and his family had no reason to be proud of it.

Father Proudhon hardly grew rich from this game. After leasing out his brewery, he became a farmer on the outskirts of Besançon, a modest peasant with only a single cow to his name. Thus, young Pierre-Joseph, after helping with the maintenance of the barrels, became a little cowherd.

But a friend of his father secured him a scholarship to the Royal College of Besançon. He pursued a brilliant career there, as his passion for knowledge plunged him into reading, interrupted only by the need to help dig potatoes. In 1828, his father lost an unbeatable lawsuit that ruined him. Poverty set in at home the very day young Proudhon was proclaimed a laureate of his college. This, too, marked him. The leitmotif of his work, the object of his passionate action, was the establishment of Justice, a Justice that was, in his eyes, the condition of Liberty.

Proudhon nevertheless developed his rhetoric, but, lacking the necessary funds for his enrollment, he had to give up his baccalaureate. It was then that he became a typographer, undertook his *tour de France*, and helped his parents, whom he would soon support until their death. Back in Besançon, he became a prote with a monthly salary of 100 francs, almost affluence at the time. Needless to say, this affluence was devoted to the purchase of books, and his short leisure time was absorbed by studies.

Unfortunately, in 1836, with two partners, he became the owner of a printing press, which, two years later, went bankrupt. For several years, Proudhon would bear the burden of this debt. However, his business would be over, and he would become the publicist Proudhon, the founder, before Marx, who would draw inspiration from him without citing him, of the idea of revolution based on history.

After finally passing his baccalaureate, he was able, thanks to this title, to obtain a three-year pension from the Academy of Besançon, which allowed him to settle in Paris, continue his studies, and begin his work. A work that would make the Besançon academicians regret their choice. It was at this moment that a significant event occurred regarding Proudhon's puritanism, his attitude toward women, and his Jansenist conception of love, of which he wrote: "The meaning of love is sacrifice and death."

He loved a young girl and was loved by her. She would have been the printer's wife if Proudhon had remained a printer. Now a pensioner, he knew what his pension would be used for, he knew the perilous task he would devote himself to. He broke off his engagement even though it pained him and made the young girl suffer. He would later evoke this saddening episode in his *Sunday Celebration*. More precisely, eight years later, he wrote: "It is too much to desire justice and to love a woman."

Let us, for whom love is the most beautiful fulfillment of life, not be too hasty in casting stones at him. The possibility of the sacrifices that the activist for a cause will make may forbade him, in conscience, from binding a companion to this destiny. This is somewhat the vocation of priestly celibacy. On the contrary, it is permissible to conceive of a love accorded in one same vision of the world, realized in such a total union of two beings in one that sacrifice — if there must be sacrifice — is inseparable from this unity.

Proudhon could not place himself in this view, he who posited in fact that woman is not the equal of man, "but the living and sympathetic complement that completes the making of him a person." It was therefore he, the completed person, and not she. Since she was no less a sensitive being, we owe her some consideration. But how arbitrary such abstractions are! Instinctively, Proudhon refrained from linking his life to a woman who was cultured and little inclined to the role of complementary element.

Somewhat late in life, he married a modest factory worker, who proved to be an admirable companion. In the miseries of exile, in the repeated financial difficulties resulting from imprisonment, the seizure of newspapers, and the censorship of the works from which Proudhon drew his livelihood, it was often Madame Proudhon's needle that enabled the family to survive, this family which, with his elderly parents, included two young daughters.

There are moments in the biography of this militant couple whose narrative is poignant, for example, when Proudhon began to suffer the effects of his slow exhaustion and his wife, herself tired and ill, performed prodigious feats of tenacity in defending the lives of all.

In his own way, Proudhon knew how to love his wife and, above all, he devoted to her, as to his mother, a profound respect. For it was one of the Proudhonian paradoxes that this respect was dedicated to a being considered unequal, but not strictly inferior.

What was denied to this being in the ability to command was, in a way, restored to her in the greatness of service.

One might think that, nowadays, the esteem Proudhon showed for a companion would have broadened. We must not forget that it was only in the

second half of the 19th century that prehistory was born, that the study of primitive clans and the conditions of matriarchy began. It was in our century that Mendelian genetics was explored in depth, hormonal metabolism was discovered, and many other things relating to the differentiations of the sexes were discovered. At various points in his work, Proudhon returned to what he believed to be a fundamental truth: the family predates the State and even society. He could not have known that the primitive matriarchal clan was a family-society.



If I have dwelt more on Proudhon's character than I will on his work, it is because, I repeat, the man he was is little known; and secondly, it is not possible to analyze in one article some twenty titles of various works, not to mention the articles and correspondence. Thus, what matters to us today is the spirit of the work and what, in this spirit, remains useful and instructive.

Undoubtedly, the most important books are *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* (1858) and *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851). However, it is in one of his very first works: *What is Property?* (1840) that the principle of Proudhon's philosophy and spirit resides. Because of the famous phrase it contains, which everyone knows: "Property is theft," this book had a considerable impact. It unleashed anger and was almost prosecuted. But honest critics noted, without approving it, that it was admirably constructed and that its dialectic was, in substance, difficult to dispute. It was probably a pamphlet by the economics professor, Adolphe Blanqui, the brother of the "emmuré," that stopped the prosecution.

A study of this memoir and those that followed it, the fourth being the *Theory of Property* (1862), published after Proudhon's death, would, I believe, provide all the elements of his essential thought and also the contradictions he is accused of. I will say only a few words about this, in an attempt to uncover the essence of these contradictions, for which Proudhon himself gave us a beginning explanation when he wrote, in his letter to Adolphe Blanqui, that one must first expound the theory, in its absolute form, and that practice then follows slowly. In other words, experience does not always confirm, in the actual situation, what the theory demands. Honestly, Proudhon corrected or adapted without ever denying his postulates.

This has resulted in great misunderstandings, abuses as well, such as those of the monarchists referring to Proudhonian views, which is perfectly possible if one picks out the sentences of a thesis while deliberately ignoring the antithesis. The first to be mistaken was Karl Marx, who initially declared that the thesis of *What is Property?* had the same importance for political economy as Siéyès's

“What is the Third Estate?” had for politics, an opinion he disavowed after Proudhon's death, as a professor from Besançon, Edouard Droz, rightly noted as early as 1909.

This was because it was initially believed that the negation of property implied communism. The opposite was true. It was property as it existed in practice, that is, the opportunity for the idle to extract excessive profits from labor, that was theft, not possession. But Proudhon considered that having found his famous formula was worth immortality. On the other hand, he considered collective property, the community necessarily managed by a power, to be the worst of evils. He said and repeated on every occasion that community is the first kind of servitude because it is not only the proprietor of goods, but also of people and their wills.



In truth, he never ceased to consider that personal property, that of the field and that of the workshop — the latter conceived as a cooperative — was necessary for production and freedom. However, he wanted, through a lease agreement, for it to be redistributable. It was possession more than ownership. Later, he turned against the idea of possession precisely because both the land and the owner would have depended on the community, and therefore on the powers that be. It was his passion for justice and freedom that brought him back to property, the guarantor of freedom according to his views.

In this, he was blinded by his moralism and his conception of the sacrosanct family. He wanted “the family and hereditary principle to be made more and more inviolable.” Literally, he would have ceased to be an anarchist here if he had not indicated, contradictorily, to the notion of inheritance, that property must be capable of being divided up.

In fact, if we had the space to analyze what remains of the best of Proudhon, that is, the economic and social relationships regulated by contracts, not only between individuals, but also and above all between associations of producers, between these associations and federations, the latter not ruling but administering, we would see that Proudhon's property must and cannot yield any profit other than the value of effort. This is exactly the property of the instrument of labor. And this labor is free because it is only commanded, at the level of the federations, by the needs determined by statistics.

Contracts, statistics! Do not these two words have a resonance that is of our century? Perhaps not as much remains of Marx as Lenin had to rethink. There also remain, in Proudhon's complex work, other things that are of all time: a philosophy of the human condition that must be sought in the texts.

There is no organized, synthesized body of doctrine from Proudhon's hand, and the abundance of his dialectic is the cause of misunderstandings. Marx boasted of having perverted it by imbuing it with Hegelianism. This is not inaccurate. Too often, Proudhon expounded a thesis that was not his own as if it were his own. He waited too long to expound the antithesis, which he sometimes abbreviated, since he had said elsewhere what he thought of it. But precisely, for those who are not biased, what a wealth of ideas one appropriates by lending oneself to the game of dialectics.

So much wealth, and I only have a few lines left! How can one express his taste for order in the revolution, which he would have liked to be peaceful, his rejection of the uncertain feeling of fraternity as a social value and what, on the other hand, justice may owe to the principle of reciprocity?

How can we explain the most ambiguous of his books, *War and Peace*, where an apology for war as it should be in principle to found right, which it is not, concludes with a condemnation of war? Pauperism is the cause of wars. We must attack pauperism. Let's agree that Proudhon made the wrong choice in saying this.

How can we reconcile a rule that states: "Live on little by working hard and constantly learning," and which was his own rule, with the justification of a certain need for luxury?

This economist, this sociologist before his time, was and is, above all, for anarchists, a very great humanist. He dissected Christianity with the passion of a man for whom the meaning of a religion should be universalism and not prophecy. It is from him that I will borrow a conclusion which situates him while defining a high anarchism: "To realize on earth the reign of the spirit."

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