

## 2. Dialectics and its object

Proudhon, politically opposed to conservatives, liberals, republicans, and communists, also wanted to analyse his opponents' theoretical positions (theology, statism, utopia) and put forward a way of thinking that explains and proves his conclusions. Hence, for him, the critical importance of an intellectual method to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism. His conclusions are understood only by reference to his framework of thought: dialectics.

### *Dialectics*

In this long investigation, whose steps can be followed from 1840 to 1848, he was aided by an impressive appetite for reading.

At the same time, he read the Bible, Fourier, Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians, Sismondi, Adam Smith, Ricardo, the French economists, and also translations or fragments of Kant, Leibniz, Fichte, Feuerbach, Strauss, Hegel, and many others. But he never devoured these diverse texts to obey one school, but always to define his own method, one that, in his view, could not be established by theologians, bourgeois intellectuals, or socialist utopians. Karl Grün, who dreamed of converting him to the school of Feuerbach, linked this independent spirit to his friend's Franc-Comtois origins:

"The French say that Germans are straightforward people. Plain, stubborn, rigid: this is also true of the Franc-Comtois Proudhon. I will please the German nationalists by speaking to them of this native of the highlands... and I will draw their attention to the pattern that Fourier, Considérant, Muiron, Proudhon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, all derive their origin from the foothills of the Jura. They are all stubborn, straightforward people."  
164/K. GRÜN, *Die soziale Bewegung...* [The Social Movement...], C.W. Leske, p. 40.

When he wrote his "First Memoir" on property in 1839–1840, Proudhon already had a precise intellectual method.

His theory of social conflict was also imposed on him during his experience as a printing worker, and then as an independent printer, where he would face all the difficulties of the worker and the artisan vis-à-vis the owners of capital. It was in this experience of work, bankruptcy, and paying interest and debt, that Proudhon theorised the relationship between capital and labour. In this experience, the Saint-Simonians' assertions on the exploitation of man by man in work and the analyses of Eugène Buret on the *Misère des classes laborieuses...* [Poverty of the Working Classes...] pointed the way for Proudhon to pursue the analysis of socio-economic conflict.

Reading Kant was an important moment in this development. Besides the theory of morality, to which he would often return, the critical and rationalist conception of problems confirmed his intuitions. He would also continue to update the Kantian lesson, not asking the classic question: What is God? What is Property or the State? but instead asking: Where does the idea of God come from? How is property created? Why do we believe in the myth of the State?

"For him, Kant is essentially a 'moralist', the greatest of the moralists, which is why he crowns him with so many garlands. From the *First Memoir*, Kant appears in Proudhon's works as the one who wanted to solve the 'problem of certainty', and thus the ultimate philosophical problem. However, in 1840, he found 'the metaphysics of Reid and Kant to be still farther removed from the truth than that of Aristotle'. But that did not stop him three years later, in *Creation*, from presenting himself as the successor of Kant, who came close to the 'series' without reaching it: 'the illustrious author of the Analytic' stopped too soon on his road, though he had had the intuition of unity in diversity and thus anticipated the 'serial law' through which the 'anxieties of scepticism' could finally

be overcome. It was Kant who revealed the 'law of antinomy' and the 'law of balance': he counts 'among the profoundest philosophers of modern times'. [...]

It was also Kant who, rather than asking himself the classic question *What is God?* had the brilliant idea of asking himself: *Why does it happen that I believe in God?* He thus ushered in a revolution comparable to that of Descartes, and deserved 'the greatest glory' possible. He is truly 'the one whom no philosopher has ever equalled, the immortal Kant'.

However, Kant could not free himself of the Absolute. After having eliminated it in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he returned to it in his *Practical Reason*. Nevertheless, what he sought, wanted, called for in the best of his thought, is a 'purely human', not transcendental, absolute – in short, the absolute that Proudhon calls Justice, and which is seated in the human conscience. Finally, like all the great philosophers, Kant was 'essentially a moralist', and while the immortal author of *Critique of Pure Reason* did not understand the high morality, necessity, divinity of war, which he considered detestable, it did not escape him that 'in the final analysis, the only certainty about human intelligence is that it derives from the conscience'."

165/P. HAUBTMANN, *Proudhon, Marx et la pensée allemande* [Proudhon, Marx and German Thought], Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, pp. 23–24.

Reading Kant also forced him to answer the problem of mental categories, the question of whether dialectics is the essence of the human mind, of reason, or whether it is an objective dimension of reality. Proudhon rejects such a dichotomy between rationalism and empiricism, and likewise between spiritualism and materialism. It seems essential him to recognise both the objectivity of what he called "real series", i.e. objective, ordered divisions and distinctions, and, on the other hand, "ideal series", i.e. the systems of relations which the mind learns from the real, but which are not just reflections of reality. By ideal series, the mind invents and reconstructs reality, and can combine relations that do not exist in reality.

"The series is natural when it is proper and specific to the object, when it arises from its nature and properties.

The series is artificial when it is transferred from the object which is proper to it another which is foreign to it. Most products of art and industry are artificial series. [...]

In nature, each series develops according to its proper object, without being combined or mixed up; then comes man who, having sovereignty over the earth [...], begins, by transposing the natural series, a second creation within creation itself."

166/*Création de l'ordre...* [Creation of Order...], pp. 176–177.

Proudhon explains that this acquisition of "ideal series", categories of understanding and logical structures, comes from action and in particular from labour. It is through action that man experiences the relations between things, corrects his ideas and invents new relations. Philosophy itself has been devised based on labour:

Philosophy is only a way of generalising and abstracting the results of our experience, that is, our work."

167/*Ibid.*, p. 119.

Thus, using Kantian philosophy in a very free and personal way, Proudhon read Feuerbach and Hegel with the same critical distance.

From Feuerbach, he takes the idea of alienation, essential to his analysis, but by transposing it to other objects, in particular to the critique of the State. While for Feuerbach the alienation to be analysed is that whereby man ascribes to God what properly belongs to him, for Proudhon it is specifically in the formation of Capital that this dispossession and alienation is reproduced. But he

distrusted what he called “Feuerbach’s metaphysics”, the humanism according to which humanity is the site of the sacred: he suspects this philosophy of recreating a new “mysticism”:

Certainly, if there is a prejudice, a mysticism, which now seems to me deceptive in a high degree, it is no longer Catholicism, which is disappearing, but rather this humanitarian philosophy, making man a holy and sacred being on the strength of a speculation too learned not to have something of the arbitrary in its composition; proclaiming him God; that is, essentially good and orderly in all his powers, in spite of the disheartening evidence which he continually gives of his doubtful morality.”

168/*Système des contradictions économiques...* [System of Economic Contradictions...], t. I, p. 395.

Human beings necessarily carry contradiction within themselves.

“When man, reconciled with himself, shall cease to look upon his neighbour and nature as hostile powers, then will he love and produce simply by the spontaneity of his energy; then it will be his passion to give, as it is today to acquire; and then will he seek in labour and devotion his only happiness, his supreme delight. Then, love becoming really and indivisibly the law of man, justice will thereafter be but an empty name, a painful souvenir of a period of violence and tears.

Certainly I do not overlook the fact of antagonism, or, as it will please you to call it, of religious alienation, any more than the necessity of reconciling man with himself; my whole philosophy is but a perpetuity of reconciliations. You admit that the divergence of our nature is the preliminary of society, or, let us rather say, the material of civilisation. This is precisely the fact, but, remember well, the indestructible fact of which I seek the meaning. Certainly we should be very near an understanding, if, instead of considering the dissidence and harmony of the human faculties as two distinct periods, clean-cut and consecutive in history, you would consent to view them with me simply as the two faces of our nature, ever adverse, ever in course of reconciliation, but never entirely reconciled. In a word, as individualism is the primordial fact of humanity, so association is its complementary term; but both are in incessant manifestation, and on earth justice is eternally the condition of love.

Thus the dogma of the fall is not simply the expression of a special and transitory state of human reason and morality: it is the spontaneous confession, in symbolic phrase, of this fact as astonishing as it is indestructible, the culpability, the inclination to evil, of our race. Curse upon me a sinner! cries on every hand and in every tongue the conscience of the human race. [...] Religion, in giving this idea concrete and dramatic form, has indeed gone behind history and beyond the limits of the world for that which is essential and immanent in our soul; this, on its part, was but an intellectual mirage; it was not mistaken as to the essentiality and permanence of the fact.”

169/*Ibid.*, p. 368.

Critical reflection on Hegel’s work was no less important. Although Proudhon could only read translations, as early as 1840 he noted his critical interest in Hegelian thought, in the definition of dialectics, and in the thesis of the identity of the categories of the real and the categories of the understanding, which he would revisit in his own version. However, from his first readings, he distrusts an intellectual construction that seems highly abstract and obeys only its own law.

“In particular, he criticises Hegel for being ‘like Fourier’ (*sic*); i.e., starting from ‘some true principles’ (he does not say which), and wanting to ‘construct the history of the mind by reasoning, instead of following the line of observation’: ‘the science of observation is the opposite of the Hegelian mind’. But while ‘this method may be good for teaching, for making a science it is worthless’. And it leads Hegel to ‘explain and legitimise by true axioms what is false and inexplicable, such as property!’

Hegel's system certainly implies a keen imagination, but 'how can one accept a supposed philosophy in which the thing we are talking about continually changes in nature, by turns substance, matter or mind, or modification, or faculty, or relation, or abstraction of our mind?'. Likewise, when Hegel speaks of 'the general spirit of humanity', is this not an 'abstraction'? This is the danger of general expressions, and overly 'metaphysical' languages. Moreover, Hegel saw that 'the categories of understanding must also be those of the world', which is even 'the substance of his philosophy', and this is to be congratulated; but 'he has not made any use of this discovery'.

These were his first impressions of Hegel in 1840. As we can see, they are severe. Clearly, Hegel thus comes into his esteem far below Kant, Leibniz, and Fichte, to mention only them." 170/P. HAUBTMANN, *Proudhon, Marx et la pensée allemande*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, pp. 26–27.

Hegel is thus not conducting science, but philosophy. The distance between his dialectic and that of the Franc-Comtois thinker is indeed significant. Not only does Proudhon reduce this trinitarian scheme to being only one possible case of dialectical relations, never proposing to reduce human reality to this dialectic, but more importantly, he develops the most lively criticism against the notion of "synthesis". Indeed, he denies – and this refusal is of great significance to his whole political conception – that all dialectic culminates in a synthesis. He denies that terms in contradiction are necessarily sublated and resolved in a new system. On the contrary, he suspects this synthesis of being a destructive representation of movement, and possibly, in human reality, of being the moment of power, the moment of oppression in which a State intends to synthesise the opposites as it destroys them.

"*The antinomy does not resolve itself*; there is the fundamental vice of the whole Hegelian philosophy. The two terms of which they are composed *balance*, either among themselves, or with other antinomic terms." 171/*De la justice...*, t. II, p. 155.

Georges Gurvitch (professor of sociology at the Sorbonne, who devoted particularly relevant studies to Proudhon) highlights Proudhon's anti-Hegelianism:

"Let us first note that the general orientation of Proudhon's thought is exactly the opposite of Hegel's. The latter turns human society and history into a theodicy. Proudhon *exaggerates his militant atheism*. He proclaims: *God is evil!* and contrasts him with Prometheus, who makes his own history through properly human labour. Hegel 'eternalises' private property, which his dialectic sublates into living eternity. Proudhon considers private property to be the source of all abuses. It must disappear by being assigned to a federal subject, which transforms the very nature of property. In a short and striking phrase which became famous, Proudhon exclaims: '*Property is theft!*'. Hegel deifies the State and sees in it, as in the concept, the mystical vehicle of the absolute mind. Proudhon considers the State and private property – *dominium* and *imperium* – to be linked. He is *anti-statist* and affirms, after a period of hesitation, first that the social revolution will cause the State to disappear, and then that the State can be transformed if it is 'counterbalanced' and limited by an autonomous economic society based on 'industrial democracy'. And he proclaims, in another famous phrase: '*Government is anarchy*', which for him means that the sovereignty of State power will preferably be replaced with the 'sovereignty of social law' created by society.

Hegel remains dominated by the tradition of Roman law, while Proudhon, observing 'the perpetual plagiarism between individualism and statism' (ultimately between *dominium* and *imperium*), contrasts with Roman law a 'new law' asserting totalities immanent in the multiplicity of participants and thus advocating the statutory law of autonomous groups and the spontaneous law of economic society – the basis of industrial planning based on worker self-management.

So one will not be surprised by Proudhon's extreme hostility to the Hegelian dialectical method, which he criticises as much in its substance as in its applications. [...] 'The antinomic terms do not resolve any more than the opposite poles of an electric battery destroy each other. The problem consists of finding not their fusion, which would be their death, but their continuously unstable equilibrium, variable according to the very development of society'. (*Théorie de la propriété* [Theory of Property] p. 52). The unstable equilibrium between the two terms 'is not born of a third term, but of their reciprocal action'. The Hegelian formula is only a triad by the good pleasure or the error of the master, who counts three terms where there truly exists only two, and who has not seen that the antinomy does not resolve itself, but that it indicates an oscillation or antagonism susceptible only to equilibrium. By this point of view alone, the system of Hegel would be entirely remade'. (*De la justice*, Vol. I, pp. 28–29).

Hegel's synthesis 'suppressing' the thesis and antithesis (*aufheben*: this an error by the translators used by Proudhon, who also says 'absorbing') is *governmental*. It is, he adds with great finesse, 'anterior and superior to the terms it unites', and it is this, Proudhon notes, that leads Hegel 'to the prepotency of the state' and 'to the restoration of authority' (*La Pornocratie* [Pornocracy], Œuvres posthumes [Posthumous Works])."

172/G. GURVITCH, *Dialectique et sociologie* [Dialectics and Sociology], Flammarion, 1962, pp. 129–131.

The Proudhonian dialectic is thus highly original and undogmatic. It is an intellectual method based on proposition and counter-proposition, as Plato taught, and it prepares to perceive the antinomies of social reality (thus: monopoly and competition, in economics; authority and freedom, in social relations), to think less about terms than the relations between the terms, their conflicts and their transformation. It is not reducible to a simple and always identical model, but instead must invent diverse models of relations: antagonistic, conflicting, and complementary, corresponding to the diversity of real antinomies.

### ***Social dialectics***

Dialectics is not only a method of thinking but the very characteristic of social realities. As the socio-economic analysis set out in *System of Economic Contradictions* explains at length, social reality consists of numerous contradictions which social science must account for. Some of these contradictions are destined to be resolved in an equilibrium (thus "constituted value"); others must persist as they contribute to economic dynamism (thus the antinomy of monopoly and competition).

"Against the Hegelian dialectic, Proudhon opposes another: his own. It is not just an *antinomic, negative, antithetic dialectic*, rejecting all synthesis. It is a dialectical method aiming to seek *diversity in all its details*. But diversity in all its details can only be grasped by experience. In this sense, Proudhon's dialectical method approaches dialectical empiricism. [...]

Already in his first book, *The Celebration of Sunday*, Proudhon proclaims that his method is the *search for equilibrium in diversity*. So we must note all the actual diversities, and when they have been fully described, we must study the possibility of integrating the diversities found in groups and totalities, which are also numerous, but where diversities of the same kind could be balanced. This leads, on the one hand, to non-hierarchical totalities precluding any 'subordination of component elements', and, on the other, to a plurality of totalities among which balances may also be established.

This point of view is developed with greater precision in *The Creation of Order*. Proudhon speaks here of 'the intuition of diversities of *totalisations* in their division'. These diversities and 'totalisations' (the latter term is adopted by Sartre, who does not seem to know its origin) are irreducible. 'There is an independence of the diverse orders of series and the impossibility of a universal science... The multiplicity of points of view is essential', as is the multiplicity of associations

in social reality, and the plurality of social groups in which they are integrated. 'To resolve today's diversity into an identity is to abandon the question', as Schelling and Hegel did, writes Proudhon. [...]

The Proudhonian dialectic is further elaborated in the two volumes of *Economic Contradictions* (1846). Proudhon firstly makes an effort to make this dialectic as *realistic* as possible. The method of antinomies must be applied not only to doctrines and ideas, but even more so to the social realities which engender them and which are themselves in dialectical motion, which is especially shown in their economic manifestations." 173/*Ibid.*, pp. 131–134.

"[...] while in Nature the synthesis of opposites is contemporary with their opposition, in society the antithetic elements seem to appear at long intervals, and to reach solution only after long and tumultuous agitation. Thus there is no example – the idea even is inconceivable – of a valley without a hill, a left without a right, a north pole without a south pole, a stick with but one end, or two ends without a middle, etc. [...]

In society, on the contrary, as well as in the mind, so far from the idea reaching its complete realisation at a single bound, a sort of abyss separates, so to speak, the two antinomial positions, and even when these are recognised at last, we still do not see what the synthesis will be. The primitive concepts must be fertilised, so to speak, by burning controversy and passionate struggle; bloody battles will be the preliminaries of peace. At the present moment, Europe, weary of war and discussion, awaits a reconciling principle; and it is the vague perception of this situation which induces the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences to ask, 'What are the general facts which govern the relations of profits to wages and determine their oscillations?'; in other words, what are the most salient episodes and the most remarkable phases of the war between labour and capital?

If, then, I demonstrate that political economy, with all its contradictory hypotheses and equivocal conclusions, is nothing but an organisation of privilege and misery, I shall have proved thereby that it contains by implication the promise of an organisation of labour and equality, since, as has been said, every systematic contradiction is the announcement of a composition; further, I shall have fixed the bases of this composition. Then, indeed, to unfold the system of economical contradictions is to lay the foundations of universal association; to show how the products of collective labour come out of society is to explain how it will be possible to make them return to it; to exhibit the genesis of the problems of production and distribution is to prepare the way for their solution."

*Système des contradictions économiques...*, t. I, pp. 134–136.

"The world, society, and man are composed of irreducible elements, antithetical principles, and antagonistic forces."

174/*Théorie de l'impôt* [Theory of Taxation], p. 239.

This dialectical character of social reality, according to Proudhon, responds to the problem of the nature of social relations which are neither assimilable to a physical reality (materialism) nor reducible to logical systems (idealism). It would be one of Proudhon's obsessions to answer this question, to establish a theory that highlights the specificity of the social as opposed to other objects of thought. He proposes to call this theory "ideo-realistic". Social relationships are, in some way, real and ideal. The social relation is both a reality and a logic or, as Proudhon says, an "idea". By this, he means not that social dialectics are intellectual exchanges, but that social relations continuously carry an internal logic that is integral to them. In this sense, they are "dialectical" realities.

This specificity of the social has multiple consequences. It will be understood, for example, that representations, beliefs, and ideologies play important roles in history through particular mechanisms. It is in this sense that we must understand the pithy phrase about ideas: "The idea,

with its categories, is born from action and must return to action, under penalty of decline for the agent" (*De la justice*, 6th Study, t. III, p. 69).

"A social revolution, such as that of '89, which working-class democracy is continuing under our eyes, is a spontaneous transformation that takes place throughout the body politic. It is the substitution of one system for another, a new organism replacing one that is outworn. But this change does not take place in a matter of minutes [...].

A truly organic revolution [...] is not truly the work of anyone. It is an idea that is at first very rudimentary and that germinates like a seed; an idea that is at first in no way remarkable since it is based on popular wisdom, but one that, like the acorn buried in the earth, like the embryo in the egg, suddenly grows in a most unexpected fashion and fills the world with its institutions.

History is full of these examples. Nothing simpler at first than the Roman idea: a patriciate, a clientèle, property. The entire system of the Republic, its politics, its agitations, its history, arises from this. The same simplicity in the imperial idea: the patriciate definitively reduced to the level of the plebs; all powers gathered in the hands of an emperor, exploiting the world for the benefit of the people, and placed under the control of the Praetorians. From there came imperial hierarchy and centralisation. Christianity starts in the same way: the unity and universality of religion, based on the unity of God and the Empire; the intimate union of religion and morality; charity presented as an act of faith and duty; the presumed author of this idea declared Son of God and Redeemer: that is the whole Christian idea. In '89, the Revolution arose again entirely in *human rights*. By this right, the nation is sovereign, royalty is a function, nobility is abolished, religion is an *ad libitum* opinion. We know how the religion of Christ and human rights have developed in turn.

Thus is the working-class idea in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it would have no legitimacy, no authenticity, it would be nothing if it appeared under other conditions."

175/*Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* [Political Capacity of the Working Classes], p. 111.

This dialectical theory of social relations involves a particular conception of society. The focus is first and foremost on diversity, on the plurality of terms, subjects, and groups present. It is the antinomies, balances, and tensions between the various elements that ensure the movement, the dynamisms, the innovations. This observation would be fundamental in the anarchist and federalist proposals.

Moreover, this "fluidic" conception of social terms, which renders them all necessary for social vitality, condemns any "authoritarian", "absolutist", or "governmental" representation.

In Proudhon's eyes, the dialectical conception of the social, by making all the terms and their dynamic relationships the real sources of collective life, condemns oppressive structures, denounces alienation, and establishes an egalitarian conception.

Finally, this dialectic does not lead in any way to a diminution of the individual, to a negation of individual action and innovation. Indeed, Proudhon stubbornly resists any temptation to offer society a new transcendence opposed to individual initiatives. Just as the plurality of groups contributes to the vitality of the social, so do individual freedoms and, to an extent, tensions and compromises between people participating in social dynamism, provided they take place within a mutualist society.

It is not very surprising that this dialectic, inspired to some extent by German philosophy, but in fact disagreeing with each of its sources, has been poorly received and misunderstood.

Alexandre Herzen, who passionately followed the evolution of French socialism from Russia, wrote in 1845, on receiving the book *On the Creation of Order*:

"This book is an extraordinarily remarkable phenomenon. First, when reading Proudhon as Pierre Leroux and other philosophising Frenchmen, it must be recalled that we find in them strange ideas and ways of thinking, nonsense, illogicalities, etc. But we must force through behind this

clutter [...]. Proudhon rises resolutely to the heights of speculative thought. He rids himself in a bold and cutting manner of the categories of the understanding. He shows admirably the weakness of casuality and substantiality. He solves their antinomy by series; that is, by judgement that dissociates itself in its diverse moments and by dialectical reason that conceives synthesis as reality. There is a prodigious quantity of luminous ideas in this book.”

176/A. HERZEN, *Journal*, t. I, pp. 270–271, cited in P. Hauptmann, *Proudhon, Marx et la pensée allemande*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, p. 42.

Later, Herzen turned Proudhon into a “pure Hegelian”, and believed that Hegel “moulded Proudhon in his image”.

Marx also compared Proudhon to Hegel, but, unlike Herzen, concluded that Proudhon had not really understood the Hegelian dialectic. In 1865, recalling their long Parisian discussions, Marx tasked himself with teaching Hegelianism to Proudhon.

“During my stay in Paris, 1844, I entered into a personal relationship with Proudhon. I mention it here because I am somewhat to blame for his ‘sophistication’, as the English call the falsification of goods. During long, often overnight debates I infected him to his great harm with Hegelianism, which because of his ignorance of the German language he could not study in the usual way. What I began Herr Karl Grün continued after my expulsion from Paris. As a teacher of German philosophy he also had the advantage over me that he understood nothing of it himself.”

177/K. Marx to Schweitzer, *Misère de la philosophie* [Poverty of Philosophy], Costes, pp. 216–217.

And, indeed, despite his interest in Hegel, Proudhon still rebelled stubbornly against the Hegelian conception of the dialectic, which he reproached not only for its abstraction, but also for its conservative political conclusions. Hegel’s synthesis, aiming to transcend thesis and antithesis by absorbing them, is “governmental”; it leads to the “prepotency of the State”:

“Hegel agreed with Hobbes on government absolutism, on the omnipotence of the State, on the subordination of the individual. I do not know whether, for this piece of philosophy, Hegel retained a single partisan in Germany; but I can say that to speak so [...] is to dishonour philosophy.”

178/*La Guerre et la Paix* [War and Peace], p. 52.

On the contrary, Grün compares Proudhon to Feuerbach, to the point of making him the “French Feuerbach”. Making Fourier the French Hegel, Grün wrote in 1845:

“[...] Fourier has found his Feuerbach. Nothing is more accurate than that comparison. Proudhon is the French Feuerbach, the practical Feuerbach, who does not wonder what the essence of Christianity is, but what the essence of property is. It is the same question, but considered from another aspect. The question is this: where does dependence and slavery in the world come from?

Feuerbach answers: from the fact that man has alienated his spiritual nature and made it the property of a transcendent Being.

Proudhon: from the fact that man is stripped of his being, his work, and the product of his work, and worships a superhuman god, the proprietor, by whose grace he lives.

What does Feuerbach want? To destroy the God of religion and the absolute Spirit of philosophy, in order to replace them with man.

What does Proudhon want? To abolish property and property rights, in order to honour the essence of human life, work.

Feuerbach finds himself before theologians and philosophers; Proudhon, jurists and economists.”

179/K. GRÜN, *Die soziale Bewegung...* [The Social Movement...], C.W. Leske, pp. 404–405.

But, as we have seen, while Proudhon was indeed enriched by reading Feuerbach as well as Hegel, he never stopped following his own path.

In France, conservatives and moderates, horrified by the Proudhonian critique, conversely made Proudhon a victim of the philosophy of Young Hegelians who dragged him into the swamps of atheism. This is the interpretation that the readers of *La Revue des deux mondes* [Review of the Two Worlds] could read in October 1848:

“Where then does this strange philosopher come from? What explains this monstrous mixture of good and evil? To which master to attach these despicable doctrines whose unknown physiognomy has caused us as much surprise as indignation? M. Proudhon is a keen mind who has lost himself; he has lost himself decisively in his own sophistry; he has distorted and mutilated his rare intelligence with weapons that are his own and that he has forged quite deliberately. Then, as his inflexible thinking sank into the fatal paths it had made itself, he found a philosophy to which many common errors were unwittingly joined; he joined this school, and, without being under its yoke, he nevertheless borrowed more than one theory from it and kept its recognisable imprint. This school is that of the Young Hegelians, unruly members of the Doctors Club who, sometimes continuing, sometimes disfiguring Hegel’s thought, ended up denying the absolute and proclaiming a religion of which you and I are the gods. It is this influence of the Young Hegelian school, these relations between German atheism and French socialism, that it has seemed useful to question.”  
180/SAINT-RENÉ TAILLANDIER, in *Revue des deux mondes*, XXIV, October 1848, p. 283.

The Neo-Hegelian school would thus be guilty of having passed onto Proudhon “its pernicious dialectic... its poisonous dialectic, its hateful logic...”

### ***The reality of the social***

One of the reasons why his contemporaries found it difficult to understand this dialectic is that Proudhon referred to a reality that was unfamiliar to them. They expected him to take a side in the problem of the existence of God, propose a new philosophy, or even build a new socialist theory. But none of these were his goals, and while he questions God and philosophy, it is in terms of another question relating to social realities.

Proudhon’s fundamental thesis is not only that social relations matter more than political structures, but that social exchanges and especially labour social relations have their own reality and dynamism.

“In every society I find the distinction between two kinds of constitution, one of which I call the *social* constitution and the other the *political* constitution; the first, native to humanity, liberal, necessary, the development of which consists above all in weakening and gradually eliminating the second, which is essentially factitious, restrictive and transitory. The social constitution is nothing but the equilibrium of interests founded upon free *Contract* and the organisation of *economic forces*, which are in general: *Labour, Division of Labour, Collective Force, Competition, Commerce*, etc.

The political constitution has Authority as its principle. Its forms are: Class Distinctions, Separation of Powers, Administrative Centralisation...”

181/*Confessions d’un révolutionnaire* [Confessions of a Revolutionary], p. 217.

Society is not an abstraction, but a collective Being with particular characteristics. The fact of “collective force” clearly confirms this “reality” of the social beyond the individuals of which it is composed, since, as Proudhon puts it, the mere act of grouping and organising people generates a power of its own:

"[...] let us suppose that individuals, in such numbers as one might wish, in whatever manner and to whatever end, group their forces: the resultant of these agglomerated forces, which must not be confused with their sum, constitutes the force or power of the group [...].

[...] A ship's crew, a limited partnership, an academy, an orchestra, an army, etc. [...] all these collectivities, more or less skilfully organised, contain power, a power which is synthetic and consequently specific to the group, superior in quality and energy to the sum of the elementary forces which compose it."

182/*De la justice...*, t. II, pp. 257–258.

To express this specific feature of the social, dialectics is a "wonderfully convenient" instrument to link the facts, to clarify the relations among hitherto isolated elements. Let us recall here the important letter already cited on p. 62:

"Without the need to follow Hegel in his fruitless attempt to build the world of realities with *a priori* pretensions of reason, one can boldly maintain, it seems to me, that its logic is wonderfully convenient for accounting for certain facts that we could previously only consider as the disadvantages, the abuses, the extremes of certain other facts."

183/To M. Tissot, 16 December 1846, *Corr.*, t. II, pp. 231–232.

Thus, the dialectic will teach to distinguish the multiplicity of elements that make up collective life; it will teach to bring out all the contradictions and antinomies, whose tensions, far from being a threat to social relations, are a guarantee of their vitality and freedom, provided they find their dynamic equilibrium.

"First, what is freedom?

Freedom is of two kinds: that of the barbarian, or even of the civilised man, is simple as long as it recognises no law other than *every man for himself*; compound, when its existence involves the concurrence of two or more freedoms.

From the barbaric perspective, freedom means isolation: it is freest when action is least limited by that of others. The existence of a single individual on the face of the globe would thus give the idea of the highest freedom possible. From the social perspective, freedom and solidarity are identical terms: the freedom of each finding in the freedom of others no longer a limit, as in the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen of 1793, but an auxiliary, the freest man is he who has the most relations with his fellows.

Because both ways of conceiving freedom are mutually exclusive, the result is that the freedom of the savage cannot be rationally and justly claimed by the man living in society: a choice must be made.

Two nations are separated by a stretch of water or a chain of mountains. They are respectively free, as long as they do not communicate with each other, but they are poor: this is simple freedom. They will be freer and richer if they exchange their goods: this is what I call compound freedom. As each of these two nations' particular activities become more extensive as they provide each other with more objects of consumption and work, their freedom also becomes greater: for freedom is action. Thus exchange creates relations between nations which, by uniting their freedoms, increase their extent: freedom grows, like force, by union, *Vis unita major* [force united is greater]. This basic fact reveals a whole system of new developments for freedom, a system in which the exchange of products is only the first step. [...]"

184/*Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, pp. 249–250.

This social reality has dialectics that are so general that they can be taken as permanent. In particular, labour is constantly being revamped: it is not organised, "it is being organised":

“Labour, we say, is being organised: that is, the process of organisation has been going on from the beginning of the world, and will continue till the end. Political economy teaches us the primary elements of this organisation; but socialism is right in asserting that, in its present form, the organisation is inadequate and transitory; and the whole mission of science is continually to ascertain, in view of the results obtained and the phenomena in course of development, what innovations can be immediately effected.”

185/*Système des contradictions économiques...*, t. I, p. 75.

In particular, this organisation of work is carried out through the numerous contracts that the producers agree and execute with each other. Through these contracts, individuals and enterprises make commitments according to their interests and economic constraints, without abandoning their initiative. From multiple reciprocal decisions an economic right thus emerges, a true social right radically opposed to political right. Of course, this social right is in progress; it is far from being realised in the regime of property, but it is taking shape through the numerous relations of production and commerce. This is the right that is realised in working-class association and which would become a “fundamental, [...] regulating principle” in mutualist democracy.

This set of analyses on *collective being*, on *collective force*, forms part of an intellectual lineage, from Saint-Simon to Marx and especially Durkheim, that has shaped the general principles of sociology. Indeed, from his first works, by making property a social relation between the capitalist and the producer of value, by explaining economic appropriation through the appropriation of “collective force”, Proudhon together with Saint-Simon ushered in a new science, not on the production and circulation of wealth, but on the social relations established in production and exchange.

So it is no surprise that Marx adopted, word for word, some of these Proudhonian analyses of “collective force” or of the “externalisation” of the State.

It is by tracing the general consequences of “cooperation” in *Capital* that Marx rediscovers Proudhon’s reasoning. The effect of cooperation, i.e. the gathering and organisation of many workers, is to create a “collective force”. And, in accordance with the Proudhonian analysis, the production of value corresponding to this force is realised only for the capitalist:

“When numerous labourers work together side by side, whether in one and the same process, or in different but connected processes, they are said to co-operate, or to work in co-operation.

Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of a regiment of infantry is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual cavalry or infantry soldiers taken separately, so the sum total of

the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workmen differs from the social force that is developed, when many hands take part simultaneously in one and the same undivided operation, such as raising a heavy weight, turning a winch, or removing an obstacle. In such cases the effect of the combined labour could either not be produced at all by isolated individual labour, or it could only be produced by a great expenditure of time, or on a very dwarfed scale. Not only have we here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of co-operation, but the creation of a new power, namely, the collective power of masses.”

186/K. MARX, *Le Capital*, Éditions Sociales, 1950, book I, 2, p. 19.

And, likewise, whatever the numerous differences concerning the analysis of the relations between the State and civil society, Marx finds exactly the same conclusions as Proudhon, in particular in the example of the French State:

“This executive power, with its huge bureaucratic and military organisation, with its extensive and artificial state machinery, a horde of half a million officials in addition to an army of another half a million, this frightful body of parasites wound like a caul about the body of French society and clogging its every pore, was constituted during the absolute monarchy...

Napoleon perfected this state machinery. The Legitimist monarchy and the July monarchy added nothing but a greater division of labour, growing in the same measure as the division of labour within bourgeois society created new groups of interests, and, therefore, new material for State administration. Every common interest was straightway severed from society, counterposed to it as a higher, general interest, snatched from the activity of society's members themselves and made an object of government activity, whether it was a bridge, a schoolhouse and the communal property of a village community, or the railways, the national wealth and the national universities of France... All revolutions perfected this machine instead of breaking it.”

187/K. MARX, *Le 18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte* [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte], Éditions Sociales, 1969, pp. 124–125.

Proudhon constantly spoke about this historical dialectic between popular forces and the sclerotic State:

“If there is anything of a nature to cause sovereigns to reflect, it is that, more or less impassible spectators of human calamities, they are, by the very constitution of society and the nature of their power, absolutely powerless to cure the sufferings of their subjects; they are even prohibited from paying any attention to them. Every question of labour and wages, say with one accord the economic and representative theorists, must remain outside of the attributes of power. From the height of the glorious sphere where religion has placed them, thrones, dominations, principalities, powers, and all the heavenly host view the torment of society, beyond the reach of its stress; but their power does not extend over the winds and floods. Kings can do nothing for the salvation of mortals. And, in truth, these theorists are right: the prince is established to maintain, not to revolutionise; to protect reality, not to bring about utopia. He represents one of the antagonistic principles: hence, if he were to establish harmony, he would eliminate himself, which on his part would be sovereignly unconstitutional and absurd. But as, in spite of theories, the progress of ideas is incessantly changing the external form of institutions in such a way as to render continually necessary exactly that which the legislator neither desires nor foresees – so that, for instance, questions of taxation become questions of distribution; those of public utility, questions of national labour and industrial organisation; those of finance, operations of credit; and those of international law, questions of customs duties and markets – it stands as demonstrated that the prince, who, according to theory, should never interfere with things which nevertheless, without theory's foreknowledge, are daily and irresistibly becoming matters of government, is and can be henceforth, like Divinity from which he emanates, whatever may be said, only an hypothesis, a fiction.

And finally, as it is impossible that the prince and the interests which it is his mission to defend should consent to diminish and disappear before emergent principles and new rights posited, it follows that progress, after being accomplished in the mind insensibly, is realised in society by leaps, and that force, in spite of the calumny of which it is the object, is the necessary condition of reforms. Every society in which the power of insurrection is suppressed is a society dead to progress: there is no truth of history better proven. [...]

Everywhere, the social compact has united power and conspired against life, it being impossible for the legislator either to see that he was working against his own ends or to proceed otherwise.

Monarchs and representatives, pitiable actors in parliamentary comedies, this in the last analysis is what you are: talismans against the future! Every year brings you the grievances of the people; and when you are asked for the remedy, your wisdom covers its face! Is it necessary to support privilege; that is, that consecration of the right of the strongest which created you and

which is changing every day? Promptly, at the slightest nod of your head, a numerous army starts up, runs to arms, and forms in line of battle. And when the people complain that, in spite of their labour and precisely because of their labour, misery devours them, when society asks you for life, you recite acts of mercy! [...] Ah! I tell you, we possess the secret of your mission: you exist only to prevent us from living.”

188/*Système des contradictions économiques...*, t. I, pp. 166–167.

Proudhon’s general principle concerning the reality of the social is expressed, in various forms, by all the great theorists of sociology. Durkheim made it one of the main principles of the sociological approach. Thus, he repeats:

“[...] society is not the mere sum of individuals, but the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics. Undoubtedly no collective entity can be produced if there are no individual consciousnesses: this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. In addition, these consciousnesses must be associated and combined, but combined in a certain way. It is from this combination that social life arises and consequently it is this combination which explains it. By aggregating together, by interpenetrating, by fusing together, individuals give birth to a being, psychical if you will, but one which constitutes a psychical individuality of a new kind... The group thinks, feels and acts entirely differently from the way its members would if they were isolated.”

189/DURKHEIM, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* [The Rules of Sociological Method], P.U.F., 11<sup>th</sup> edition, 1949, ch. 5, p. 103.

George Gurvitch rightly named Proudhon one of the founders of sociology. Beyond the general principles on which he bases himself, Proudhon brings many considerations to the various fields of sociology: sociology of work, social classes, religions, and ideologies. In a field as specific as the sociology of social law, Proudhon opened up a direction of thought whose fertility is far from being exhausted today.