

PROUDHON AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION OF 1848

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I

During the first half of the nineteenth century France furnished exceptionally fertile soil for the growth of theories of social and economic reform. Ideas were stimulated in part by the deep-seated social unrest and in part by the statutory guarantees of civil liberties, particularly during the period of the constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe (1830-1848) and the brief existence of the second republic (1848-1851).

During the forties, common opposition to the continued reign of the July monarchy provided a unity of purpose that disappeared after the revolution of February, 1848. To a considerable extent the dogmatic tone of the writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon¹ resulted from his desire to refute other contemporary proposals for social reform. His own personal position did not become clear to many persons until after the February revolution. He was known as the man who had written a book which took for its theme the proposition that "property is theft." He was branded an arch-revolutionary. Yet his behavior during 1848 seemed to contradict what he had said earlier about property's being theft, and he was accused of betraying the revolution. The latter charge was based largely on his opposition to Louis Blanc's "right to work" program. After a brief consideration of Proudhon's relations with other reformers prior to 1848, we shall turn to his

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¹ There are more than fifty volumes of Proudhon's writings: *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, Brussels: Lacroix, 1867-1876), 26 volumes; *Oeuvres posthume* (Paris, Brussels, Lacroix, 1866-1875), 8 volumes; *Oeuvres* (Paris: Marpon and Flammarion, 1876-1893), 3 volumes; *Correspondence* (Paris: Lacroix, 1875), 14 volumes. Proudhon's three most important writings on social reform appeared originally as pamphlets during 1848 and 1849 and have been incorporated in volume VI of *Oeuvres complètes*, *Solution du Problème Social*. The pamphlets are: (1) *Organisation du crédit et de la circulation et solution du problème social* (March 31, 1848), VI, 89-131, (2) *Banque d'échange* (April 25, June 18, 1848), VI, 147-258, and (3) *Banque du peuple* (January 31, 1849), VI, 259-284. A new edition of Proudhon's collected works was begun in 1923 and was still in progress at the outbreak of the war in 1939. All following references are to the earlier edition, unless otherwise indicated.

participation in the controversies of 1848, and especially to his opposition to Louis Blanc's "droit au travail" proposal.

II

The perspectives of Fourier and Proudhon, both of whom were natives of the same town, Besançon, were similar in many ways. Each expressed skepticism toward the importance of political action within the framework of existing society. Fourier's inclination toward anarchism was only slightly less than Proudhon's. Although the latter may have borrowed much from Fourier—he admitted six weeks' infatuation with Fourier's *The Industrial World*—it is probable that their similarities owed more to a common stimulus than to the fact that Proudhon had read some of Fourier's writings.

Proudhon's attitude toward socialist-communist working-class organizations is indicated by the lack of enthusiasm shown when Marx wrote from Brussels in 1846 asking him to serve as correspondent for an organization which was to be free from national limitations and useful "in time of action."² Proudhon answered Marx, but never corresponded with the committee set up to carry out the proposed project. In his reply³ he objected to Marx's manner of stating the social problem. Marx had used the expression "au moment de l'action," an expression which Proudhon found objectionable⁴ because he opposed revolutionary action as the means of social reform. He recommended the following precautions: "After we have destroyed all *a priori* dogmatisms, let us not think, in our turn, to indoctrinate the people—let us not, because we are at the head of the movement, make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance; let us not pose as apostles of a new religion, although this religion be the religion of logic, the religion of science."⁵

Although historical circumstances forced Proudhon to conclusions similar to those of some contemporaries, he always insisted that the issues be stated in terms of his own projected solution. Long before the overthrow of the Louis-Philippe regime in 1848, he had determined on his practical tactics of social reform. He was more eager to preserve, or regenerate, property in what he thought was its pure form than to promote the working class organization of the trade

² This letter of Marx to Proudhon appears in the new (1929) edition of Proudhon's *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, pp. 423-433.

³ Cf. Proudhon, *Correspondence*, I, 198-202.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199.

union type. He was an equalitarian, but not a collectivist. The meaning of the aphorism, "Property is theft," was not apparent to many of his contemporaries until the political revolution of 1848 enabled him to bring his program into the world of affairs as a legislative suggestion alongside those of others, who, though as much opposed as he to the financial oligarchy, had different suggestions for positive reform.

III

Economic crises occurred frequently in France during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The most severe were those of 1830, 1837-1839, and 1847-1848. In 1830 the crisis followed the July revolution, which placed Louis-Philippe on the throne. The one which began in 1837 was started by the American financial crisis. The crisis of 1847 began in England and spread to the Continent, where it did much to precipitate the revolutionary movement of 1848.⁶ In France the prostration of industry and commerce made the continued domination of "la haute bourgeoisie" intolerable to the petty bourgeoisie and to the workers.

Beginning with the Irish potato famine and the mass liquidation of railroad shares by English speculators in 1843, the crisis was accentuated in France by poor cereal harvests in 1846.⁷ The price of wheat rose from 19 francs per hectolitre in 1845 to 29 francs per hectolitre in 1847. The price of potatoes, an increasingly important foodstuff for the French workers, also rose sharply.⁸ During the winter of 1847 perhaps a third of the population of Paris was dependent on public charity. Unemployed workers smashed machines. Proudhon, who was a printer by trade, witnessed at first hand the mechanical presses of the great printing houses being singled out as the special object of attack by the despairing but militant unemployed.

The acute stringency of credit for commerce and industry was made worse when the international crisis forced the Bank of France to raise its discount rate for the first time since 1820.⁹ In 1847 the number of bankruptcies and foreclosures was so great that the liberal journal *La Reforme* presented a program demanding that cheap credit

⁶ Henry Sée, *Monarchie censitaire*, p. 147.

⁷ Achille Viallate, *L'activité économique en France de la fin de XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris: M. Riviere, 1937), p. 128.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁹ Willard L. Thorp, *Business Annals* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1926), p. 185.

for small shopkeepers and artisans be furnished through the national government.

In a report to the *Bankers Magazine*, London, in March, 1847, on the "Present Crisis of the Bank of France," by the Paris representative whose opinions were characterized as being in accordance with the great majority of French capitalists and manufacturers, there appeared the following statements relative to the feeling toward the government and its financial embarrassment: "What can be expected of a ministry whose whole thoughts are directed towards the means of retaining the power by electoral bribery? . . . We are not to mention the follies of insane speculation in railways."¹⁰

The political overturn which came on February 24, 1848, accentuated the commercial crisis. The Paris bourse was closed from February 25 to March 7. At the outbreak of hostilities the gold reserve of the Bank of France, already very low, fell during the period February 24 to March 15, from 140 million francs to 59 million francs, exclusive of 63 millions in the provincial banks. Against this reserve were 264 million francs (of notes) in circulation, 45 millions owed to the government, and 81 millions in other obligations.¹¹ On March 11, three thousand business men met in the bourse building and threatened to discharge and lockout all their employees unless the newly established Provisional Government decreed a three months' delay in the payment of echeances.¹² On March 16, the Government, in financial desperation, passed the ill-fated "tax of 45 centimes" on peasant property, and alienated the potential loyalty of the peasants. By decrees of April 27 and May 2, the Bank of France was granted a monopoly of bank note issue for all of France.¹³

In these specific historical circumstances Proudhon, on March 31, 1848, presented, in a pamphlet entitled *Organisation du crédit et de la circulation et solution du problème social*,¹⁴ a proposal for a bank of exchange. In introducing his program he wrote:

"I no longer hesitate to propose that which speculative study of social economy shows me is most applicable to the situation in which we now find ourselves.

"Work is at a standstill—it must be resumed.

"Credit is dead—it must be resuscitated.

¹⁰ *Bankers Magazine*, London, VI (March, 1847), pp. 341-342.

¹¹ Louis Blanc, *Historical Revelations* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), p. 247.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

¹³ Viallate, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁴ *Oeuvres complètes*, VI, 89-131.

"Circulation is stopped—it must be reestablished.

"The market is closed—it must be reopened.

"Taxes never suffice—they must be abolished.

"Money hides itself—we must dispense with it.

"Or better still, since we should express ourselves in an absolute manner, for *what we are going to do today must serve for all time.*

"Double, triple, augment labor indefinitely, and in consequence the products of labor.

"Give credit so broad a base that no demand will exhaust it.

"Create a market that no amount of production can supply.

"Organize a full, regular circulation, which no accident can disturb.

"Instead of taxes, always increasing and always insufficient, abolish all taxes.

"Let all merchandise become current money and abolish the royalty of gold."¹⁵

These pronouncements indicate Proudhon's diagnosis. Unemployment develops because money is hoarded and credit is non-existent. When the monetary difficulty is overcome, the market can absorb all the products that can be produced. There is nothing said about wages, nor about property. The problem of securing full employment is viewed as one of "organizing exchange," *i.e.*, of increasing effective demand for goods. A full appreciation of Proudhon's position involves more than a statement of the program. He was posing it in opposition to other programs, and in particular against Louis Blanc's "organization du travail" plan.

Guarantee of the "right to work" (*le droit au travail*) in one form or another was the chief issue confronting France in February, 1848. The country was faced with the paradox of great unsatisfied needs and great unused productive resources. Producers were unable to sell products, and at the same time laborers were unable to find employment. Proudhon's explanation of the paradox was that private monopoly of public credit barred the free exchange of products. From his point of view he saw the solution in a reform of financial institutions, and especially in a change of the status of the Bank of France.

Although the mass support which had converted the disturbance of February into an overthrow of the monarchy, had come from the Paris proletariat, the provisional government which was set up was predominantly bourgeois in make-up. The only working-class representatives were Louis Blanc and the worker Albert. Proudhon criticized all the representatives of all the constituent parties which made up the compromise government. On the day after the revolution, he wrote of the incapacity of the men who had taken over the di-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

rection of affairs and said that he could already see the revolution disappearing in a flood of speeches.¹⁶

During the first few days after February 24, the working-class groups exerted strong pressure for a Ministry of Labor and Progress, whose function it should be to undertake the steps necessary to insure to all the "right to work." The demand for a labor ministry was compromised into a Labor Commission,¹⁷ with Blanc as chairman, charged with guaranteeing the "right to work" through an emergency program and with formulating provisions which would guarantee it permanently by incorporating a clause in the constitution of the Second Republic.¹⁸ The statement of Policy which was drawn by Blanc and decreed by the Provisional Government was worded in this way: "The Provisional Government engage themselves to guarantee labor to every citizen. They take it to be necessary for the workmen to associate with one another in order to reap the legitimate reward of their toil." ¹⁹

Blanc proposed to institute his plan for social workshops according to which independent groups of workmen would undertake cooperative production in certain agricultural and industrial enterprises. The state was to advance loans to be repaid with interest after a reasonable period. He anticipated that his plan would enable cooperative enterprise to demonstrate its superiority to private competitive industry, and by its success lead gradually to a socialization of all industry.²⁰

Proudhon was among the first to oppose Blanc's "droit au travail" policy, both in the form proposed by Blanc and as actually carried out.²¹ Blanc regarded Proudhon as the leader of the counter movement against his plan for guaranteeing work through labor organizations:

"The writer who figured at the head of the counter movement . . . was M. Proudhon. . . . That he began his career by publishing a book entitled 'Property is robbery' . . . is generally known; but what I suspect to be not so well known is that never was there a more unrelenting assailant, either of the Socialist leaders, or of all the principles on which Socialism rests than M. Proudhon. Before the Revolution, he had openly attacked the new ideas . . . but the Revo-

¹⁶ *Correspondence*, II, pp. 278-284.

¹⁷ Known as the Luxembourg Commission because its headquarters were in the Luxembourg Palace.

¹⁸ Blanc, *Historical Revelations*, ch. VI.

¹⁹ Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-125. See also Blanc's *Organisation du travail*, first published in 1840. English translation by U. P. Dickore, University of Cincinnati Studies, Series II, Vol. VII (1911), pp. 1-59.

²¹ Proudhon had opposed workshop organizations from the outset of his career. Cf. especially *What is Property*, Second Memoir, p. 303.

lution having exhibited their force, he bethought him of assuming the name, better to decry the thing, and whilst professing to be Socialist he set upon Socialism with unrelaxing rancour. By no paper in France, except the *Constitutionnel*, were the cooperative societies of workmen so much abused and calumniated as by the *Voix du Peuple*, whose editor was M. Proudhon."²²

The pattern of Proudhon's attacks on Blanc was to decry the loss of individual liberty which the former believed must accompany such a program, and then to propose his own plan as one capable of solving the unemployment problem while preserving all the advantages of individualism. "When you speak of organizing labor, it is as if you were to propose clawing out the eyes of liberty. . . . It is not an organization of labor that we need, . . . but rather the organization of credit."²³ Proudhon addressed letters to Blanc urging substitution of the bank of exchange for the "organisation du travail."²⁴

In a letter to Michel Chevalier, professor of political economy at the College of France, Proudhon denied that his ideas bore any relation to Blanc's.²⁵ In this same letter Proudhon rebuffed the *Constitutionnel* for labeling him a Communist.²⁶ Chevalier, writing in the *Journal des Debats*, had classed Proudhon with Blanc and Constantin Pecqueur²⁷ as a communist in the tradition of Baboeuf. In disavowing this kinship for his doctrine, Proudhon appealed to an interesting aspect of his economic theory. Pointing out that a generalization which is true when applied to individuals may not be true when applied to society as a whole, he postulated that low wages would impoverish the individual worker, but when applied to everyone, must increase the social wealth and welfare of the workers.²⁸ Proudhon's preoccupation with a money and credit program led him to the conclusion that the true interests of workers lay in lower and not higher money-wage rates. He repudiated the arguments for increasing money-wages in these words: "The worker, victim of socialist declamations and false political doctrines . . . demands better wages, and does not know that an increase in wages is the very cause of poverty."²⁹ Not only did Proudhon oppose increases in money-wage rates on the grounds that real-wage rates would decrease, but he also recommended revocation

²² Blanc, *Historical Revelations*, pp. 180-181.

²³ *Oeuvres complètes*, VI, pp. 91-93.

²⁴ *Correspondence*, II, pp. 305-308, April 8, 1848.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 321, 325.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

²⁷ Author of *Théorie nouvelle d'économie sociale et politique* (Paris, 1848), and a member of Blanc's Labor Commission.

²⁸ *Correspondence*, II, 323.

²⁹ *Oeuvres complètes*, VI, 98-99.

of the Provisional Government's law which limited the working day to ten hours.

The anti-labor elements in the Provisional Government were sufficiently strong to sabotage Blanc's social workshop program. Instead of a system of *social* workshops, *national* workshops were established. These were nothing more than temporary make-work projects carried on in Paris, until June, 1848, when their abandonment was instrumental in causing a workers' insurrection.

In June, 1848, Proudhon was elected to the Constituent National Assembly, whose main function it was to draw up a constitution for the newly established Second Republic. The first draft of the constitution had been made before the insurrection by the workers discharged from the national workshops. On July 31 Proudhon appeared before the National Assembly with a proposal to change the "droit au travail" section by adding a clause whose effect would have been to eliminate the direct guarantee of the "right to work," substituting a "right to credit" guarantee. To the labor clause he proposed that the following he added: "Society assures and maintains the division of property by the organization of exchange."³⁰ Proudhon characterized a direct guarantee of the right to work as an action against society and against property, which, he said, could lead only to communism.

In contrast to the grounds on which Proudhon opposed the "droit au travail," John Stuart Mill found no objection other than the Malthusian principle of population. "From the point of view of everyone who disregards the principle of population," Mill wrote, "the 'droit au travail' is the most manifest of moral truths, the most imperative of political obligations."³¹

Neither in 1848 nor at any other time in his career did Proudhon identify himself with the organized labor movement as such. It was his firm conviction that the interests of workers would be best served through credit reform. All his life he opposed strikes and workers combinations. "A workers' strike," he said, "is illegal and it is not only the penal code that says so, it is the economic system, the necessity of the established order. . . . That workers should undertake . . . combination . . . is something society cannot permit."³² In 1864 when a law granting workmen the liberty of union and strike was

³⁰ *Oeuvres complètes*, VII, 195.

³¹ John Stuart Mill, "The French Revolution of 1848 and its Assailants," *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, LI (April, 1849), p. 32.

³² Cited by Marx in *Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), p. 143.

passed, he condemned it as anti-juristic, anti-economic and contrary to all order.³³ His previously mentioned opposition to increased wages and decreased working hours was reiterated on subsequent occasions.³⁴

In the fall of 1848 during the campaign for election of the first president of the newly established republic, Proudhon was accused of betrayal of the revolution. On an occasion when he was asked to preside at a political banquet, he declined, and in his stead suggested Ledru-Rollin³⁵ in the hope of drawing the extreme left of the Assembly into a democratic-socialist front to support Ledru as a presidential candidate. There followed a series of events culminating in a duel between Proudhon and Felix Pyat, a member of the National Assembly, who had distinguished himself by an elaborate speech in defense of the "droit au travail."

Others who misunderstood Proudhon joined in accusations of "treachery" to the revolution. Proudhon's behavior during 1848 seemed to many to contradict his proposition that "property is theft." In order to explain his behavior it is essential to see and understand the implications of his attack upon capitalism, limited as it was to an attack upon financial capitalism. Proudhon did not intend that people should give up the right of ownership—or what he called "possession"—in the instruments of production. He did, however, wish to take away all non-labor income. He saw no inconsistency in this position, as his critics did. His positive program called for financial reforms rather than the promotion of trade unionism. He believed that his program would abolish the monopolistic restrictions to credit expansion while leaving intact the private possession of all types of property.

³³ *Capacité politique des classes ouvrières, Oeuvres posthumes*, V, 335.

³⁴ Proudhon's last work, *Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, has been used to identify Proudhon as an important forerunner of modern labor movements. It is important to understand the type of labor movement for which he has been important. In this volume Proudhon advocates a system of independent labor representation. J. H. Harley, "Proudhon and the Labour Movement," *The Socialist Review*, London, III (1909), pp. 273-282, attempts to show that Proudhon's views underwent a great change between 1848 and 1864. His views undoubtedly changed considerably during these later years of his life, and it was via writings of this later period that his greatest influence on the International Society of Working Men was felt. What is important for our analysis is that Proudhon never gave his support to trade unionism in the way that Marx did. Proudhon's primary emphasis on credit and exchange reform, and his opposition to strikes was still present in his later writings.

³⁵ Ledru is known as the "father of universal suffrage." Cf. Alvin R. Calvin, *Ledru-Rollin and the Second Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924).