

# Proudhon: A Sociology of Self-Management

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Proudhon is recognized today as the father of self-management<sup>1</sup> and the inspiration behind the various historical attempts to achieve a self-management regime.

In fact, his entire work — so diffident in form, but so rigorously one in substance — appears to the attentive observer as a prodigious effort to identify the foundations, elements, and method of a self-managed society.

All his critiques of alienation (whether capitalist, statist or mystical), like all his constructions (whether economic, political, philosophical or pedagogical) tend, in by the same powerful logic, to establish, outside of any so-called superior or transcendent authority, “the autonomy of society.”<sup>2</sup>

What Proudhon meant by “*autonomy* of society” was the latent power and the real possibility that this society possesses to organize and govern itself according to its own sociological laws — and this without any productive or political apparatus, external to it, dominating it by the arbitrariness of the preponderance of capital or the omnipotence of a state.

If Proudhon could not use the very recent term of self-management,<sup>3</sup> he was careful not to restrict his acceptance of an autonomous society “acting by itself” to the simple management of an enterprise by its personnel. He immediately gave to his conception the meaning of a social ensemble of autonomous groups that make themselves associated, both their economic functions of production and their political functions of relations.

Thus understood, this society, “organically autonomous,” is itself constituted “of a *faisceau* of autonomies,”<sup>4</sup> self-managing and self-administering, whose social life and survival require coordination but not hierarchization. We can therefore affirm as a premise that self-management will be confirmed as the essential characteristic of the liberal collectivism that constitutes the originality of Proudhonian socialism.

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<sup>1</sup> The term translated throughout as “self-management” is *autogestion*. — TRANSLATOR

<sup>2</sup> See our study “Socio-Economie de Proudhon,” cahiers of the I.S.E.A. April 1966, 137 p.) and *Proudhon, morceaux choisis* et présentés par J. Bancal, Gallimard (Collection Idées).

<sup>3</sup> Introduced in France in 1960 according to the *Dictionnaire Robert*.

<sup>4</sup> *Les démocrates assermentés*, p. 86, ch. XV, Edition Rivière.

But we must immediately specify that if this socialism can be described as self-managed, it is above all because its primary concern is to be scientific. Indeed, in the development of Proudhonian socialism, we discover, from Proudhon's first writing (*The Celebration of Sunday*, 1839) to the posthumous publications, a rigorous correlation between — the will to build a scientific socialism, — the affirmation of a science of society, — the negation of proprietary and state arbitrariness — and the organization of a self-managed society.

## I. — SOCIOLOGY OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

It was in his First Memoir in 1840, and thus clearly before Marx, that Proudhon proposed and anticipated the construction of a scientific socialism. “The sovereignty of the will,” he wrote, “gives way to the sovereignty of reason and will end up being destroyed in a *scientific socialism*.” (*Première Memoire*, Ed., Rivière, p. 339).

To build this scientific socialism, it must be based on “a science of society methodically discovered and rigorously applied.” Indeed, Proudhon affirmed in 1839: “There exists a science of society... a science that must not be invented but discovered” (*Célébration du Dimanche*, p. 39, Ed., Rivière). This “social science” is “an object of demonstration, not of art or authority, that is to say, of arbitrariness” (*Idem* p. 30). Its purpose is to study the relations between men in society and to identify, beyond any external constraint, the laws that actually govern them.

The creation of a true “social order” must not result from an arbitrary construction imposed first by force and justified *a posteriori* by the jurists, but from the application of sociological laws to the rational organization of the working society.

### Scientific socialism, social science and self-management

An authentic social law is in no way, as economic and political arbitrariness claims, “the expression of a will, even a general one,” but “a natural relation” between social elements “discovered and applied” (*Ibid.* p. 94).

Thus when several men “linked in solidarity by their nature and the mutuality of their contributions” form a society, “they do not oblige themselves,” because of their private will, “but they conform” to “a previously existing and previously unknown social law.” (*Deuxième Mémoire*, p. 39, Ed. Riv.).

It is the wills of men that must conform to the sociological law born of their relation. It is the sociological law that precedes its legal recognition and not fictitiously the reverse. Thus “the authority of a will is nothing without the authority of the law” social-scientifically discovered and applied. The authority of

a will outside of any sociological rule, engenders, whether individual or general, arbitrariness and alienation. In the same absolutist logic come together the oppressive authority of property and capital or “exploitation of man by man,” and the exclusive authority of the state and government personnel or “government of man by man.”

Consequently, the organization of a scientific socialism, the recognition of a social science, is summed up in this Proudhonian slogan: “no more authority in money or in the state” (*General Idea of the Revolution*) but “substitution of scientific law for the arbitrary will” of a man or a group (*Prem. Mém.* p. 341).

This substitution is in fact translated for Proudhon by the organization of a self-managed society. Formulated by a social science (itself released thanks to a self-observation of the laboring society, which becomes aware of the conditions of its free development), sociological laws allow the scientific realization of a self-managed society.

The “organic” constitution of the social world is revealed to the observer as being governed by two great structural laws: “*social realism*,” society is made up of real “collective beings,” of groups endowed with a truly autonomous existence — and “*social pluralism*,” it is the plurality of these groups which, by the association of their autonomies, constitutes the fabric and the social structure.

It is therefore the respect for realism and social pluralism that will inspire the construction of a self-managed society, and the flexible and evolving structures of a liberal collectivism. So far from being established as a definitive system, in the name of a dogmatized science, this self-managed construction will never appear definitive, but in perpetual becoming. Realism and social pluralism in fact result in a social development in perpetual mutation: men and groups are in a state of “permanent revolution” and are constantly transforming, through the new relations that they endlessly establish among themselves, this federated body of which they are the living cells.

From his *First Memoir*, the promoter of scientific socialism that Proudhon was warned against the social conservatism that the triumphant revolution could wrongly infer from a scientific construction. Self-managed society as “the science of society, like all the human sciences, will be forever unfinished. The depth and variety of the questions that it embraces is infinite... We have not yet passed the period of systems” (*Prem. Mém.* p. 317).

We are aware of the schematic and incomplete nature of such premises. In particular, deliberately drawing on developments taken from Proudhon's very first works, they take on an almost normative appearance through their condensation, excluding demonstrations and nuances. They are necessary, as such, to situate Proudhon's problematic and to insist on the links (scientific socialism, social science, critiques, self-management) that his prolixity often hides; they also allow

us to underline how, from the beginning of his work to his posthumous books, self-management appears as the culmination of his scientific socialism, his sociological position and his triple critique of capitalism, statism and dogmatism.

Before tackling the practical study of the structures of this self-managed society that Proudhon began to build, it is essential to establish, based on his notion of scientific socialism and his conception of a social science, what, according to Proudhon, *the sociology of self-management* is.

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“The problem of the proletariat is the constitution of a social science” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV). This sentence from the *Economic Contradictions* illustrates very clearly the Proudhonian conception of a scientific socialism. The emancipation of the proletariat and the collective organization of society, these fundamental objectives of all socialism, will not result, like a religious revelation or like utopian or pseudo-scientific socialism, from the application of a complete system coming out of the brain of an inspired revolutionary. They will result from the constitution of a social science, progressively discovered and applied, by society itself.

It is this society, a true collective being — composed of all the groups and autonomous individuals, and whose existence and own strength are manifested in labor, — that “produces reason and social experience.”

It is this laboring society, “real society” alienated by “official society” (*Carnets* 6-7, Nov. 1847), social power usurped by state and capitalist apparatuses (these immanent societal functions become transcendent social fictions) which, after having produced social reason and experience, will proceed “to the constitution of social science” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV).

Social science is nothing other than the description by society itself of its own laws, expressed by social reason, as social experience discovers them under the effect of social labor, which constantly reveals them.

It is “society that produces the laws and materials of its experience” (Proudhon, in the margin of his copy of Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy*.) We could therefore say very schematically that the constitution of a social science and its corollary, the construction of a scientific socialism, appear as the self-discovery and self-application by real society of the laws inherent in its development.

At the beginning of this process, the productive force of society is discovered: *social labor* — in the development of this process, the practice of society engaged in labor: *social experience* — and at its culmination, the active reflection of society on itself, *social reason*.

Consequently, we can understand that for Proudhon “social science” is in fact “the agreement of reason and social practice” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV), that is to say an *ideo-realization*, by society, of its own laws.

The separation of reason and social practice is for Proudhon the cause of all utopias, all failures, and all social retrogressions. All criticisms (like the simultaneous ones of integral materialism and fundamentalist spiritualism), and all these constructions (like that of his “ideo-realism”), will aim at the establishment or reestablishment of this agreement. Historical convulsions can appear as the fruit of two contradictory and complementary errors: a *scientific aristocratism* or government of scientists or those claiming to be such, characterized by the illusion of a man and a class of having the monopoly of science and social reason — and an *ideological demagogism* or government of the masses, characterized by the illusion that the people, this very actor of social practice, can, by elementary and anti-scientific procedures, express, without error, the social law inherent in it.

From the *Creation of Order* (1843), Proudhon violently criticized this double and same error in unequivocal terms: “whoever preaches universal suffrage as the sole principle of order and certainty is a liar and a charlatan. He deceives the people; sovereignty without science is blind. Whoever admits the reality of a social science and rejects political reform as useless is a liar and a charlatan: science without the sanction of the people is powerless. The science of a few commanding the will of the many compromises equality, popular sovereignty ignoring science attacks liberty.” (No. 552, p. 361. Ed. Lacroix).

It follows from this text — which is declamatory, without doubt, but how enlightening — that the crux of the problem of a scientific socialism, considered as the application of a social science progressively discovered and put into practice, will be to establish a democratic process that will allow the expression and implementation of social laws whose existence is necessarily prior to this process of recording (since social laws are born of labor and the very development of productive society, before any expression of individual wills.)

On all these points Proudhon is very explicit. Real order, the organization of a scientific socialism, results from the awareness by society of its own laws. “Order is produced in humanity by the knowledge that the collective being acquires of its own laws” (*Création de l’O.*, no. 548, p. 358).

Now what is this collective being, this “legislator” par excellence who must gradually erect a self-managed socialism? It is none other than the laboring society, “the undifferentiated worker describing his own laws, promulgating them, laws that the people, the great worker, discovers unceasingly.”

Thus these social laws, these true laws, do not result from the arbitrariness of a particular will or a general will, a simple summation of particular wills. They exist before any convention, they result from the labor that creates society and integrate

man into it. They are the corollaries of the functional laws that govern this labor that gives birth to them: division of labor and community of action. "According to the new science, man, whether he wants it or not, is part of the society which, prior to any convention, exists by the fact of the division of labor and by the unity of collective action." Whether it is a question of laws concerning "production" or 'administration" of the laboring society, these laws "result objectively from this double fact and are independent of the will of man" (*Création de l'O.*; nos. 572-573, pp. 376-377).

Consequently, as Proudhon will write in *The General Idea of the Revolution*, "our privilege is to recognize" these laws. "And our dignity, to obey them" (6th Study). But this obedience is, for individual and collective persons, a liberating obedience, a mastery of their own environment, since it is the recognition of a law that they have previously aroused as constituent and active elements of the laboring society, this "undifferentiated legislator," this collective worker immanent in each of them. So in a self-managed society, in a scientific socialism, where there will be coincidence between the official legal law and the real social law, this law will effectively become "the expression formulated by the national representation of the relations of labor and exchange that arise between men;" and the official society like the real society will be "the organism founded on the knowledge of this law."

There remains the essential problem of the official translation and the effective application of these laws, because "a legislative assembly," writes Proudhon, "rules on the facts; it does not produce them." (*Représentant du Peuple*, May 5, 1848, *Mélanges* I) and "the prescriptions of the code are a dead letter where they are in opposition to the facts or the social laws." (*Manuel d'un Spec.* Ed. Garnier p. 204).

This is the question that Proudhon would answer both through his complex organization of universal suffrage based on socioeconomic (enterprises, groups of enterprises, etc.) and socio-political (communes, regions, natural groups, etc.) bases and through the development of mutualist contract-laws resulting from a series of flexible and mobile collective agreements.

"The government of societies is science... and not art, that is to say, good pleasure and arbitrariness. Every society falls when it passes to ideologues." It loses "intelligence, spontaneity, life, as essential to society as to man" (*Contr. Econ.* Tome I p. 100 Ed. Lacroix).

Ideology hardens living society and its structures by absolutizing them into a "social system." The government of society "must be learned not in a hollow ideology, in the manner of the social contract, but in the relations of things." It is "in the analysis of economic facts," in the analysis of the laws of labor, in history and in the present economic reality that we will discover "the secrets of life in society." (*Contr. Econ.* Ch. I p. 61 Volume I).

“Socialism aspires to govern society by a positive science” (*Mélanges I, Peuple*, Nov. 4, 1848, p. 170). Coming from social work and focused on the pluralist reality of working society, determined by the discovery of the functional laws of labor and constituted by the agreement of practice and social reason, this || social science will have 4 fundamental characteristics:

It will present itself as a *social economy* and an *integration* of the social worker and the laboring society.

It will be based on *social realism* and *social pluralism*.

### 1) *THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AND THE LAWS OF SOCIAL LABOR*

This social science is characterized first of all as “a social economy.” Understood in the very broad sense of a science of the organization of laboring society and aiming at both the structure and the manifestations, the order and the development, the production and the relations of the laboring collectivity, it appears as the science of the society of labor and in labor.

#### A. — *A social economy: historical laborism and political economism*

Governed as such by the two correlative laws of labor (division and community of action) it is therefore in the structural sense of the term the *economy of society*, that is to say an economy that has literally become political.

It simultaneously encompasses in the same order of labor the organized society and its government, the productive order and the public order. Extended to all the manifestations of the laboring society, it includes both its economic functions of production, by which it exists, and its political functions of relation, by which it survives. It presents itself at once as a “productive economy” and socio-economy, and a “public economy” and socio-politics.

So Proudhon, from the *Creation of the Order*, in 1843, affirmed that true “political economy, I mean here the organization of labor, and the government of societies, constitutes a true science” of society (*Créât, de l’O.*; Ed. Lacroix, p. 323 ch. V). Because “political economy, enclosed, since Adam Smith in the restricted circle of production... still embraces the organization of labor and government, legislation and public instruction.” Moreover, it is in his eyes “the key to history, the theory of order” (*Idem*, ch. VI n° 543 p. 353).

It is from this fundamental conception that Proudhon will build what we have called his *historical laborism* and his *political economism*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See our study: “La socio-économie de Proudhon”, Cahiers de l’I.S.E.A., April 1966, 140 pages, and Proudhon, selected pieces presented by Jean Bancal, Idées, Gallimard.

“From the point of view of organization, the laws of the economy are the laws of history.” (*Créât, de l’O.* ch. V). It is not history that constitutes the key science. “The philosophy of history will only exist when the social problem has been resolved.” History is not strictly speaking “science,” but “testimony” (cf. ch. V no. 555).

It is economic science, redefined as the science of labor, that gives meaning to history. History appears to Proudhon as the permanent struggle of social labor, of the autonomous laboring society against a capitalist grip and a state empire that constantly threaten it with alienation by their absolutism and their ignorance of its organic pluralism. Thus “history is explained by political economy, this new science of social development” (*Créât, de l’O.* ch. V no. 502, p. 329). From then on, is history “the same thing as political economy considered from a certain point of view?” It is, in its slow births and rapid miscarriages, “the panorama of the order in creation,” of this “agricultural-industrial order,” always in the process of creating and undoing itself, under the pressure of labor and the “productive forces,” and the repeated stumbling block of the “forces of alienation” (*Ibid.* nos. 468 and 455).

Political economism is the direct corollary of his historical laborism. And, like it, it comes from the conception of a social economy defined as the social science par excellence. It is from it that all the originality of the functional structures of the organized self-managed society will flow. It is it that will allow us to grasp how Proudhon intends to subject the economic organization of labor and the political government of society to the same social laws, how he claims to encompass and surpass, in a similar organization, traditional economics and politics.

“In what way would economics,” he explained very clearly as early as 1843, “exclude government from its domain? We will see that the laws of the organization of labor are common to legislative and administrative functions, as well as to industry and agriculture, and that the progress of reforms in society is nothing other than the very determination of economic science” (*Creation of Order*, chap. V).

From the point of view of social economy (which considers the laws and effective functions of “real society” — and not the conventions and legal fictions of “official society”) — and from the point of view of a scientific socialism (which tends to make sociological laws and legislation coincide), “industrial laws... and political laws are absolutely the same” as to their nature (*Creation of Order*, n° 572, ch. VI). So, to “reform” our political system, Proudhon essentially advocates “the division, the specialization, coordination and responsibility of functions and powers in accordance with the laws of the economy” (*Creation of Order*, ch. VI, n° 551, p. 360).

The government of society is organized according to the laws of labor and the economy.



Consideration of the political problem and the economic problem as a single problem, similar laws to resolve them: this political economism would be a constant of Proudhonian thought. It was expressed from the first works, asserts itself during the short period when he polemically denied any existence of the State, and it would flourish in his testament of political capacity where he completed not a definitive self-managed construction, but the method by which a self-managed society is constantly built.

### B. — *Social labor and its laws: Division and community of action*

Society is born from labor. "It is through labor that both wealth and society are generated." (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. II). Without labor, "society is nothing" (*Creation of Order*, no. 374, ch. IV). The laws of labor provide the laws for the organization of society. The movement of history is none other than the development of labor "in its organic manifestations, in revolutionary movements and forms of government" (*Creation of Order*, ch. VI). "Labor is the generating fact of political economy" (*Id.* ch. IV). "All knowledge said to be a priori comes from labor" (*Justice, Labor*). "Labor creates from nothing" (*Carnets*, April 8, 1845).

How is this primordial labor defined, which is at the origin of all Proudhonian doctrine and at the basis of self-managed society?

As "the intelligent action of men in society on matter with a planned goal of personal satisfaction" (*Creation of Order*, ch. IV). Labor, as Proudhon so strongly writes, "is intelligence and life realized." (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. IV). Labor is "social energy" par excellence, the specific force that creates and governs society. Neither a spiritual nor material reality, it is an ideo-realist force indissolubly encompassing in its creative process, matter and spirit, men and society. Developing its double law of "community of action" and "division," it appears correlatively as a *process of social integration*, and thus gives society its unity of action and its collective coherence — and as a *process of social differentiation*, generating in this same society the diversification of products and the specification of functions.

In a passage that should be quoted in full, Proudhon defines these fundamental functions of social work very clearly. "Labor, the field of observation of political economy, considered:

- 1° subjectively in the worker;
- 2° objectively in the material of production;
- 3° synthetically in the distinction of jobs and the distribution of products and wages;

4° historically in its scientific determinations. Labor is the plastic force of society... which determines the various phases of its growth, and consequently its entire organism” (*Creation of Order*, no. 546, ch. VI p. 354).

Why does labor reveal itself as the force that determines society and social development?

Because its first functional law is division: “the whole problem of social transformation is there.” For the division of labor necessarily calls for community of action: “divided, production takes place with the cooperation of several” (*Creation of Order*, ch. IV). Gradually, all production and all social producers are united.

But the community of action brought about by the diversification of functions for the production of a common product — whether considered within a company or in the whole of laboring society — gives rise to the creation of a “collective force.”

From the division of labor and the union of individual forces results the force superior to the simple summation of the individual forces of each worker taken in isolation. This “collective force” itself engenders a productive surplus, “a collective product that exceeds the addition of individual productions considered separately.” And it is the appropriation of this collective surplus by the capitalist who holds the instruments of production and exchange that constitutes “the capitalist prelibation” that Proudhon denounced in 1840 in his first memoir.

Thus, the division of labor and the collective force (or community of action) are “the two correlative faces of the same law.” “By the fact of the division of labor having become collective power,” workers are “in a relationship of mutual association, respectively in solidarity” (*Creation of Order*, ch. 14) and integrated into the working society. By the fact of the collective force, corollary of the division of labor, society manifests itself as a real collective being, having its own power different from the simple summation of the forces of the individuals who gave birth to it.

## 2) *SOCIAL INTEGRATION*

Division and collective force: from the double law of labor flow the social integration of workers and the laboring society and the pluralist reality of this society. It is in this integration of societary worker-laboring society, and in this pluralist reality that is induced by it, that resides, after its nature of social economy, the fundamental characteristic of a social science.

It is from this integration that will result the self-managed sociology that will animate Proudhon's scientific socialism.

### A) *Labor integration of man-society*

“According to the new science, man is an integral part of the society that exists by the fact of the division of labor and the unity of collective action.” (*Creation of Order*, no. 572, ch. 6). “An integral part of collective existence,” Proudhon repeats in *Justice* (First Study), it is only by abstraction that man can be considered in a state of isolation: “the individual is naturally immersed in society.” All of man's power “is in society and in the combination of universal effort” (*First Memoir*, ch. IV). Outside of society, man is “an exploitable material, a capitalized instrument” (*Idem*, Conclusions).

But if man is only a man through society, “society for its part is only sustained by the balance of the forces that compose it” (*First Memoir*, Conclusions, *Economic Contradictions*, ch. V). For “labor is one:” all these “divisions” do not express “true fractions” but “relations.” “From the moment that man labors, society is in him” (*Carnets*, March 11, 1846). From then on, too, “all heads are sacred, society exists only for their preservation” (*War and Peace*, Ed. Rivière, p. 158). “Personality and the supreme end” (in the margin of Proudhon's Bible). It is not a question of “killing individual freedom, but of socializing it” (*Economic Contradictions*, Volume I, p. 72).

In fact, the worker, considered in his “function,” and the collective worker, which is society as a whole, are in constant interrelation. Moreover, they are linked in an irrefutable interdependence. They cannot subsist without each other. They engender each other reciprocally and are subject to the same laws of labor. Through the division of labor (which gives rise, with the specialization of industries, to the specification of individual functions) — and through the collective force (which manifests the existence of a plurality of groups and a large pluralist community) — there acts in fact “the two correlative faces” of the same law. From then on, between the organization of the functions of individual workers and the organization of the working society, there exists a relationship as close as that which is discovered between the constituent organs and the organism which constitutes.

So, far from reserving to a psychotechnics or to an enclose in a sociotechnics the organization of the function of workers, — a social science (discovered as a sociology of self-management) must include a psychosociology bearing on the organization of individual functions. Even more, the consequences of the laws of the division of labor and of the community of action, make it possible to discover the sociological characteristics governing the organization of functions. And it is from these that we can infer, by a series of successive inductions and integrations, the sociological laws governing the organization of society.

## B) *Social organography and constitution*

“To organize labor is to find the series of workers, it is to construct the social series... to constitute society.” In any organism, the element is the organ, “in the social series, the organic unit is the worker, in more abstract language the junction” (*Creation of Order*, ch. VI, no. 413-415). The systematic and scientific study of the function,<sup>6</sup> based on the laws of labor, reveals the two great laws of the individual function: “specification and composition” (*Creation of Order*, no. 416 to 464, ch. IV).

The function must obey the law of specification: it must be “differentiated” in its field in relation to the set of common tasks and correspond to a distinct operation; it must be “specialized” in its action and correspond to a precise aptitude in relation to the other functions. This specification responds both to an economic imperative: “specialization” increases output, and to a psycho-social imperative: “differentiation” responds “to the personality of the worker who invincibly tends to differentiate himself, to become independent, to conquer his freedom and his character,” that is to say to conquer his autonomy. (*Creation of Order*, no. 434, ch. IV).

The function must at the same time obey the law of “composition.” To be “normal and useful,” producing intelligence and utility, the “decomposition” of work into functions must take place, not by “fragmentation and doubling,” and divide not “into its integral parcels” (Proudhon criticized before his time, “labor in pieces” under the name of “piecemeal labor”), but into its “constituent species.”

Any function must therefore present “an overall unity” and correspond, in relation to other operations, to a complete operation, “an industrial action” forming a whole in itself (if only “in the succession of time.”) It must simultaneously present a “variety in the details” and call upon, for the accomplishment of the overall task, several modes of action. This composition of the function corresponds to an economic imperative: “variety in unity” makes labor profitable by making it intelligible and renewable — and to a psycho-social imperative: the overall unity of work corresponds to a need for “unity, association and order” that the human spirit demands.

Thus, from this social microcosm that is the function and from the two laws of the function: specification (corollary of the division of labor) and composition (corollary of the unity of action,<sup>7</sup> the sociological laws that govern the social world

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<sup>6</sup> See our mémoire: *Proudhon: une conception humaine de l'économie*. Polycopié 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Proudhon considers the human being as a "rump" as a "composite of forces". It is from the play of individual forces that his liberty results. (Cf. Proudhon, *Morceaux choisis et présent par Jean bancal*, id. Gallimard.)

are already revealed. Specification translates the autonomy of society, composition its pluralist unity. In accordance with the entire inductive approach that characterizes his sociology of self-management, Proudhon starts from the first autonomous social cell, from the first free element constituting the social body: the laboring man considered in his function. And in this inductive approach, by a series of successive integrations, he will — going from the man-function to the functional group, from functional groups to large collectivities — arrive at the social constitution and the organization of the self-managing society considered as “a bundle of autonomies.”

Proudhon underlines this approach very precisely: “labor considered in its division will reveal to us the essential characteristics of the worker... of the useful and normal function. And from these fundamental conditions, we will arrive... by a sort of integration, at the organization of societies.” (*Creation of Order*, no. 415, ch. IV). Thus, Proudhon intends to rise from "social organography" (*Creation of Order*, no. 552) and the organization of functions to "social constitution" (Cf. *Confession of a Revolutionary*, ch. XIV) and to the organization of society. This whole will constitute “the organization of labor.”

In fact, the personality of the individual worker in his function, and the trans-personal worker that is collective society, form a united and inseparable whole, in a constant relationship of reciprocity. “Do you want to know man? Study society. Do you want to know society? Study man. Man and society serve each other as subject and object.” Society is none other than “this collective and individual self... this self manifested by labor” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV, tome II, p. 182, Ed. Lacroix).

But if Proudhon starts from the function, social organ, to arrive at society, social organism, it is because he intends to prove that, contrary to integral individualism and fundamentalist universalism, one cannot, in order to establish this organization of society, either assimilate man to society, or make this society transcendent or superior to the men who give rise to it and remains immanent in them. Order for Proudhon, as Georges Gurvitch rightly pointed out, is “an autonomous and immanent order” in which all individual persons participate as indispensable elements of this activity (cf. *Idée du Droit Social*, Ed. Sirey, p. 339). The individual and the group cannot be separated from each other and engender each other reciprocally.

Thus, autonomy, that is to say respect for the personality and liberty of the working man, is the condition for the development of a progressive society, a self-managed society. The unitary totalitarianism of universalism makes man a simple unity subject to a higher collectivity and leads to “the decline of the personality” (Justice, 1st study) and to despotism. The “atomism” of individualism, under the pretext of liberating man, isolates him, abstracts him from society and makes him,

with a liberty rich in fictitious law and poor in power, the plaything of arbitrariness, of force. “This is how, starting from the extreme points, we arrive at tyranny” (*Pornocracy*, Ed. Lacroix, p. 121).

Only a liberal collectivism, a social personalism, based on the indissoluble reality of the collective being and the individual being, and on the pluralism of the social world, can allow this “substitution of scientific law for the will” of tyranny (*Prem. Mém.* p. 341), that is to say, the development of a self-managed socialism.

### 3) *SOCIAL REALISM*

The discovery of society as a real and autonomous collective being immanent to all workers — is therefore indissolubly linked in Proudhon to the discovery of the individual as a social person, as a free function, constitutive of society.

During the study of the laws of labor, “collective force” and the surplus born of the community of action in work appeared as the manifestation of a real society. The collective surplus, unduly attributed to capitalism, goes beyond the simple summation of individual efforts.<sup>8</sup> By the fact of the division of labor “become collective power” there is the creation of a real society, a *de facto* society, whose functional existence owes nothing to legal fictions.

“For the true economist, society is a living being endowed with its own intelligence and activity, governed by its own laws, whose existence is manifested not in a physical form, but by the concert of the intimate solidarity of all its members... The reality... the personality of the collective man is a phenomenon as certain as the personality and reality of the individual man.” (*Contr. Econ.* ch. II, Ed. Lacroix, volume I p. 100.)

A living collective being having its reality, its attributes, its laws; it is this consideration of society as a real collective being that constitutes Proudhon's social realism and installs him as the founder of sociology.

#### A. — *Reality and collective force*

“I believe it is possible to prove,” Proudhon asserts, “the positive reality, the laws of the social self or humanitarian group.” According to some, society is nothing other than a “juxtaposition of similar individuals” sacrificing part of their liberty in order to be able to remain juxtaposed in peace. This results in the “system of governmental arbitrariness,” society abdicating itself into the hands of a tyrant, or under the cover of social representation and popular suffrage between

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<sup>8</sup> We know Proudhon's parable: the Obelisk of Luxor erected in Place de la Concorde in 1 hour by 100 grenadiers, which no single man could have done in 100 hours.

that of a “government personnel.” “According to others, society is a pure fiction,” which logically leads to the same arbitrariness. “For me, according to the little information that economics and history provide on the subject, I regard society, the human group, as a being *sui generis* constituted by the fluidic relationship and the economic solidarity of all individuals” (*Philos. du Progrès*, 1st letter, p. 38 et seq., Ed. Lacroix).

This being has its “functions,” its “ideas,” its judgments, its “will.” To escape governmental arbitrariness (which usurps social power and denies the real autonomy of society), — to destroy capitalist arbitrariness (which usurps the collective surplus and this collective force which engenders it) — to build a scientific socialism, “the ordinary resources of the economy are no longer sufficient... It is no longer a question of accounts or accounting, we must enter into the psychology of societies” (*Theory of Taxation*, ch. II) to consider their existence, their attributes, their laws.

The real existence of the collective being, of this special world, which cannot be substantially separated from us, but “which envelops us, penetrates us, agitates us, without our being able to see it otherwise than on signs” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV) is noted in its physical form by the “relations” of cooperation and commutation, and “the intimate economic solidarity of all the members that compose it.” Like all existence, society has a unity: this unity is “a unity of composition” (*Philos. of Progress*, 1st letter.) The reality of society is manifested by these two principal attributes: collective force, collective reason (without forgetting the indispensable collective faith which will be discovered at the same time as the sense of social unity, *affectio societatis* and social morality).

Collective force, which results from social action, is defined, as we know, as the social force which exceeds the simple summation of individual forces considered in isolation. “Immense force resulting from the union and harmony of workers, from the convergence and simultaneity of their effort” (*Prem. Mém.* p. 215) — expression of social power and driving force of social practice and experience — it is this that explains “capitalist prelibation” and the Proudhonian theory of surplus value<sup>9</sup> (capitalism paying for individual forces and collecting the surplus born of collective force.) It is this collective force that brings about socialization, and this outside of any state diktat, of any nationalization; because the phenomenon of collective force and its consequence, the creation of collective surplus value, is not only a phenomenon that can be apprehended at the level of the enterprise, but a phenomenon concerning the general economy of the whole of society. From then

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<sup>9</sup> Proudhon does not exclude as an explanation of this surplus value the difference between the use value of labor power and its exchange value, but for him it is a complementary explanation (cf. *Deux. Mém.* pp. 190 ets. Ed. Rivière).

on, “all production is necessarily collective” and “all accumulated capital is social property” (*First Memoir*, chap. III, p. 216, Ed. Rivière).

### B) *Collective reason*

Collective reason or social reason is in fact a complex attribute of society. “Social spirit,” it presents itself in Proudhon through his various commentaries (cf. *Justice*, Ideas) as intelligence, judgment, the conscience and intelligence of society. It results from the complex play of social consultation. It is born, not from the summation of individual reasons communing in the same absolute and thus renouncing their autonomy without eliminating their native arbitrariness — but “from the contradictory and free relationships” which allow to “relativize the absolute of individual reasons.” By “the clash of opinions,” their struggle and their exchanges eliminate the respective “subjectivities” of individual reasons, and then “this relationship of things” is born, this objective reason which is social reason (cf. *War and Peace*, book I, ch. IV). Thus collective reason results “from the antagonism of particular reasons” and their composition by opposition, “as public power results from the concurrence of individual forces,” competing with each other (*Justice*, Ideas).

As economic force and the economic solidarity that results from it imprint their character on the economic organization of laboring society, collective reason and the social consultation that it supposes influence the political organization of this society (that is to say, according to Proudhon, its “political economy.”) Faithful in this to the constitution of social science, which is an agreement between reason and social practice, between reason and collective force, these two types of organization will be constituted in the same order of work, social order, liberal order and will be governed by the same sociological laws.

### 4) *SOCIAL PLURALISM AND ITS LAWS*

But if society constitutes a real collective being, as such autonomous and capable of governing itself, the grasp of this autonomous reality cannot exhaust social knowledge, any more than that of the autonomous reality of the men who secrete and compose it, any more than the indissolubility of these two realities. To explain the secret of social dynamism and coherence and to account for the reasons for the sclerosis and dissolutions of society, it is appropriate to observe society as a pluralist reality resulting not only from a plurality of free men, but from a plurality of collective beings.



### A) *Pluralistic society and the plurality of collective beings*

There exists a plurality of collective beings, of “collectivities that are realities as real as the individualities that constitute them” (*Pornocracy*, ch. V). At a first stage, starting from the citizen-individual considered in his social relationship, “the man and the woman form by their union an organism... very real” (*Idem*). It is the couple “forming by the contrast of its attributes a complex being, the social embryo” (*Justice*, Love and Marriage). The same is true “of the family, the city, the nation” (*Pornocracy*, ch. V.)

At another elementary stage, starting from this same citizen considered as a worker in his social function, the workshop-enterprise is formed, “the constitutive unit of society.” “The workshop implies a collective person... then come the relations from workshop to workshop” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. V). And by the grouping of individual forces and by “the relationship of groups,” entire nations take shape, “real beings” (*Justice*, The State). To engender themselves, “the humanitarian organism” (*Political Capacity*.) the great international “collective humanity” (*Justice*, Labor.)

Thus every human group, family, workshop, can be regarded “as a social embryo” (*Justice*, The State). This plurality of collective beings, of “particular societies” (*First Memoir*, ch. V) is constituted not only by every “working group” but also by every “industrial, learned, artistic company,” “the club, the jury, the academies, schools, municipalities,” in fact “every meeting of men” associated with a common goal. And each of these groups has its autonomous reality, its force and its collective reason and composes, “within the great society” different particular societies in opposition and in composition.

Thus, the human group, “being *sui generis*,” is constituted by a series of successive integrations “by the relationship and solidarity of all individuals, whether of the locality or corporation, or of the nation, or of the entire species” (*Philosophy of Progress*, 1st letter.) Hence a complex world where problems abound: the problem of the plurality of “autonomies” first. Each group being free and autonomous, it is necessary — to respect the social development resulting from this plurality, to allow international and national freedom, — to respect all the other liberties that gave them currency: individual liberty, local liberty, professional liberty.

Which also raises the problem of the primary groups constituting the general communities. In the *Creation of Order*, the family is presented by Proudhon as “the element that constitutes the people, the nation, — the workshop” as “the unity that engenders the State” (*Creation of Order*, ch. III, n° 239).

In the *Economic Contradictions*, the workshop is considered “as the constitutive unit of society”. (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. V). This assimilation of

the State and society, which reserves the fate of the nation, will be clarified later, not without hesitation, by the broadening of the notion of working society, and by the distinction within it of the “production functions” and the “relational functions.”

A final problem is raised by the plurality of collective beings, and the pluralist constitution of general communities. It actually lies in the conjunction of the problems of autonomy and integration of groups and is none other than that of the relationships between general communities and particular communities. The subordination of the particular communities that it encompasses cannot be inferred in law from the extent of a general community, since its life and autonomy result indissolubly from the life of the men and autonomous groups that compose it. A general community is therefore never, whether it is a State or a society, “the dominant” of particular communities, but “their resultant” (*Theory of Taxation*, Ed. Lacroix, p. 69).

Social realism and the plurality of collective beings highlight the irreducible and autonomous personality not only of the laboring society itself, in relation to any state apparatus, not only of the workers, recognized in their social functions, but it underlines the inalienable personality of companies, professional groups, geographical or cultural groups. From a broader scope of its field of action, a community cannot therefore draw an absorbing hierarchical pretension with respect to the more restricted groups that constitute it. No more than from the role of constituent elements, one cannot induce a relationship of annihilating subordination with respect to the constituted groups. It is precisely the autonomous action of the people that allows the development and survival of the groups that it gives rise to, just as it is the existence and autonomous development of groups that allows the broader communities that they secrete to live or survive and to engender each other. We must therefore guard against any analogy between the organization of the social world and the human organism. “As an organism, society differs essentially from individual living beings, in whom the subordination of organs is the law.” What is “the social system”?: an equation, a “coordination,” and subsequently, “a collective power” (*Justice*, Ideas.)

### B) *The three laws of social pluralism*

- *Competitive antagonism,*
- *Balancing-justice,*
- *Integrative labor.*

How can we establish, when history constantly reveals constant subordinations and alienations, this non-hierarchical coordination that the autonomy and very

existence of social groups require? By knowledge, mastery, and methodical use of the laws inherent in social pluralism.

Without doubt, in the first place, pluralist society is governed by a specific law, a “serial” law, a functional process that gives it existence and unity: and this law is none other than integrative work. But in addition to this social energy that specifies and unifies it, to this submission to the laws of labor, the social world, just like “the human world and the physical world,” is governed, according to Proudhon, by two elementary antinomic laws: competitive “antagonism,” or “law of action-reaction” (*War and Peace*, General Conclusion) and reciprocal equilibration or “law of mutual equilibrium,” which Proudhon still very unfortunately calls “Justice.”

Acting within the very integrative process of labor that maintains in these associative “series,” the coherence of the social whole — these two antinomic laws develop into a real dialectical movement. The intelligence of this effective process, of this “real” logic of the social world will allow us to acquire mastery of it and to deduce from it an efficient method, a “formal” logic. This will be Proudhon's “serial dialectic.” It is this that schematizes the relations of the society in action and its elements will allow the control of these relations and the constitution of a self-managed order. Based on the impossibility of any synthesis and on the irreducibility of the two antinomic terms, it will aim to order the dialectical series by the specific action of work and by the dynamic balancing of the antinomic couples.<sup>10</sup>

The pluralist social order will thus appear at each social level as a dynamic tension between two antinomic laws that the integrating action of labor channels and organizes. Thus presented, schematically in their teachings and their formulations, the pluralist social laws identified by Proudhon seem to be the fruit of a systematism. This is not the case. Proudhon starts from the observation of the real working society.

Leaving aside legal fictions and ethical justifications, what spontaneous relations will this sociological observation reveal between people, groups, and general collectivities?

— relationships of struggle and *competition*: the law of antagonism and competition of forces appears as the first elementary law of life: law of creation, production, distribution.

— relationships of *reciprocity* and solidarity: the law of balance and mutuality appears as the second elementary law of life, law of participation, exchange, association.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Study cited: *Sociologie de Proudhon*, pp. 72 to 82.

### a) *Competitive Antagonism*

From then on, broadening his observation to extend it to the physical world and the human world, Proudhon comes to recognize in antagonism and in equilibration two antinomic laws common to the entire universe. And it is precisely the existence of these two antinomic laws that engenders, in Proudhon's eyes, the plurality from which life, movement and liberty are born. With all due respect to “the fanatics of unity” writes Proudhon, “the social world, like the physical world,<sup>11</sup> rests on a plurality of irreducible and antagonistic elements and it is from the contradiction of these elements that the life and movement of the universe result.” (*Theory of Property*, Conclusion). This pluralist antagonism reigns everywhere where there is creation, where there is existence: “the world, society, man himself are composed of irreducible elements, antithetical principles and antagonistic forces.” But from organism to plurality and from contradiction to independence, there is a continuous chain, a reciprocal deduction.

Real life requires plurality, antagonism, autonomy. “Whoever says organism, says complication, whoever says plurality, says contrariety, independence” (*Theory of Taxation*, ch. V). Thus “the world of society, like the world of nature, is established on forces, expansive, invasive and consequently opposed and antagonistic forces, such is the great law of creation.” (*War and Peace*, book V, ch. V).

The condition of life is action. And “action is a struggle,” a competition of man with himself and others, and of groups among themselves. This antagonism “generates the world of social transactions,” but before the transaction, there is struggle “and this always, at every moment of existence. The same causes want this antagonism to be eternal.” (*War and Peace*, Book 12, Ch. VI). “Antagonism, action-reaction, is the universal law of the world” (*Idem*, General Conclusion), the organic law of fundamental pluralism. Social development results from the productive competition of autonomous groups that are antagonistic and united, irreducible and associated, in opposition and in composition.

Wanting to eliminate this antagonism is impossible, all life requires the struggle of forces, all movement is the result of the tensions of antinomic forces, all collective and individual liberty is made possible only by the play of the opposing forces that make up society or man.

The social world appears to the observer as “an immense dialectical chain” (*Gen. Idea of the Rev.*). Any synthesis of the antinomic couple, this elementary link of antithetical pluralism is artificial or mortal. The “synthesis is governmental”

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<sup>11</sup> Proudhon's intuitions are curiously confirmed by the most recent discoveries of modern physics.

(*War and Peace*) and reactionary. It is a negation of individual and collective freedom. It leads to “the predominance of the State” over society and to “the subordination of the individual and groups.”

Born of an ideological dogmatism, resulting from an absolutizing “ideomania,” religious deviation of an intelligence detached from reality, the synthesis tends to impose in place and instead of complex facts, of pluralist unity — (the only realistic unity) — the totalitarian “one.” Disdaining the elementary creative process of the social world, it leads to plastering on living reality arbitrary structures that oppress it, kill it or make it explosive. From then on, antagonism, far from appearing as a transitory historical phenomenon (a class struggle is discovered in this perspective as a struggle of the pluralist working society against a governmental or capitalist synthesis that an oppressive minority tends to impose on it), antagonism is a permanent existential, physical, social, human phenomenon. Beyond classes, in society, it exists and will exist, at the level of any group, whether professional, geographical, cultural, etc.

But antagonism, elementary force of the social world, law of action-reaction, is a brute force. Its springing allows life, movement, liberty, creation, the autonomy of groups. But its excesses lead to death, war, alienation, the subordination of societies. When it dominates the law of mutual equilibration, its antithetical complement and it “explodes” out of the “series” of work, integrating and associative energy — the antagonism degenerates “into a melee of sterile oppositions, into an aimless boiling...” and “the collective organism becomes corrupted” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV).

Consequently, the creative oppositions, the productive competitions, the mutual “compositions,” are changed into unproductive contradictions, these subversions of social development, into alienating hierarchies, these cancers of historical societies, and into warlike conflagrations, this self-destruction of humanity. Unleashed by misunderstanding and ignorance, or even by the denial, by society, of its own laws — falsely exalted by a mystique of violence or falsely compressed by an irenic mysticism — the irreducible antagonism of social pluralism must be understood by “a social science” and channeled by a socialism based on the autonomy of groups, — a socialism scientifically using the permanent movement of the competition of forces.

In the social world, — thanks to a serial dialectic erected as a method of social development — the indestructible antagonism must be consciously “balanced” by the law of mutual equilibration, and be methodically oriented in the natural series of a work (disalienated from any capitalist or state influence.) This is how “the subversions” of the antagonism will be reoriented, “transformed.” For, according to Proudhon, in a disalienated and scientifically organized world, “the forces in man and in society must balance each other and not annihilate each other” (*War and*

*Peace*, ch. VII, book II). “In a well-organized society, the forces struggle for a moment only to recognize, control, confirm, and classify each other. So any antagonism in which the forces, instead of balancing each other, destroy each other is a subversion” (*Idem*, ch. II, book IV).

Thus, antagonism, recognized as “the law of humanity of nature” does not reside essentially, as has been believed, “in a pugilism, a hand-to-hand fight, it can just as well be a fight of industry and progress” (*War and Peace*, ch. II, book IV), a productive competition. Consequently, the scientific path of a self-managed socialism is traced: “Organize humanitarian antagonism” into “an emulative peace where the forces, by fighting each other, reproduce themselves” (*Idem*, Concl.). Because “to ensure peace,” it is necessary to “keep social energies in perpetual struggle” (*Justice*, Ideas.) Antagonism does not have as its goal “pure and simple destruction... an unproductive consumption of men and wealth.” Socially “its goal is the production of a dynamic order,” of social development. (*Idem*, ch. V, liv. V). “In this respect, labor offers antagonism” its true “field of operation.” Through labor, and through its conjunction with the law of mutual equilibrium, antagonism become productive competition, peaceful coexistence, organized competition, “is always the struggle or competition of forces,” but “not the bloody and armed struggle, but the struggle of industry.” (*Ibid.*, General Conclusions.)

#### b) *Mutual equilibration*

It is the observation of the very movement of humanitarian antagonism that highlights its antithetical corollary, “its counter-law:” the law of mutual equilibration. In Proudhon’s eyes, as we have seen, “what makes society possible,” what makes possible the living plurality of naturally autonomous groups, “is the same thing that makes liberty possible, the opposition of powers” (*Justice*, Conscience and Liberty). Sociologically, it is a question of knowing whether “all these spontaneities of which creation is composed, agree with each other or combat each other” or whether in fact they combat and oppose each other only to measure each other and enter into composition.

For Proudhon, a lucid social observer, history and social science demonstrate that a dynamic “order,” a living order, an order of liberty can only be “an effect of equilibrium between antagonistic forces” (*Justice*, Conscience and Liberty), “an equilibrium that is constantly unstable, constantly variable, according to the very development of societies” (*Theory of Property*, ch. I). There is “an organizing force in conflict” (*Justice*, Ideas).

Primordial antagonism is not only a source of life, movement and liberty — a risk of death, war and alienation, it detects, it allows, it calls for, it prepares in its very movement the balancing, the action of its antithetic, the law of mutual

equilibrium. “Everything is opposition, balance, equilibrium in the universe” (*Philosophy of Progress*, ch. XIV). “In its oscillatory march,” society itself “is gradually established by a kind of equilibration” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV, cf. *Carnets* 4, Sept. 1846). And this fact reveals the antinomic coupling of the law and its counter-law, of antagonism and equilibrium. There is “equilibration” because “opposition” and “equilibrium” because “equilibration;” consequently “the antinomy” is “not only the principle of movement,” but “the reason for equilibrium” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XIV). “Preliminary of society,” “material of civilization,” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. VIII) humanitarian antagonism manifests the life and autonomy of social plurality and its component elements. But at the same time as it underlines their competition-contest and their competitive interdependence, antagonism appears as the prerequisite of equilibrium, of balancing.

Thus, the opposition of forces is a condition of a real balance (there is no composition except by opposition) and mutual (who says competition says competition). The very observation of all existence reveals this law of balance and this possibility of balancing that antagonism calls for and prepares. “Without balance, as without movement, there is no existence” (Phil, on Progress).

Just as life “supposes contradiction,” so it calls for, “second law of Creation and humanity,” mutual balance, “reciprocity” (*Solution of the Social Problem*). “The law of antagonism,” first “universal law of nature and humanity,” is “corollary of the law of justice<sup>12</sup> or balance” (*War and Peace*.)

What is the law of balance-justice, according to Proudhon? this “fundamental law of the world, of nature and of society”? (Letter to Chaudey, January 15, 1859), this law foreign to any legal or metaphysical content, whose unfortunate name has given rise to many misinterpretations? It is “the balance between forces.” Proudhon's balance-justice is not “a simple relationship of an abstract conception, a fiction of the understanding or an act of faith of the conscience;” it is a “real law,” “real thing.” It is based, “it rests on forces... free forces” (*Th. de la Prop.*, ch. VI, p. 142, Ed. Lacroix). The law of mutual equilibration is not “a law foreign to the facts.” It is “immanent and adequate to the facts” and to the antagonistic social reality. It is within the “social antinomies” of antagonistic pluralism that the observer “grasps a law of equilibrium and from this law of equilibrium... makes a practical principle,

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<sup>12</sup> We have said how much this term “justice” used by Proudhon with a primarily sociological meaning had led to ambiguities by the legal, ethical, even metaphysical resonances that it entails. We will prefer the term equilibrium or equilibration that he uses to emphasize its active content. We will sometimes add the adjective “mutual” to emphasize that for Proudhon “the balance born from the reciprocal action of the opposing terms of the antinomy” (*Pornocracy*, ch. V) and that “mutuality” is for him “the formula” of social balance.

a general truth for society.” Here as everywhere, “the fact and the idea” of equilibrium “are truly inseparable.” (*Justice, The State*).

Common law of fundamental pluralism, immanent to the social world and to man, the law of equilibration and mutual equilibrium is revealed to the observer as the organizing law of the social pluralism of which antagonism and labor are, respectively, the driving law and the integrating law. Balancing process, it is prepared by the antagonistic movement of antinomic forces (no balance without opposition) and progressively released by the dynamic movement of integrating work (no balance without association of forces). Balanced “balancing” of social pluralism, march of social development, it is not this static and fixed notion of a narrow legalism. Law of organization of fundamental pluralism “it does not push to immobility, on the contrary, it ensures eternal renewal through the economy of forces” (*Justice, Revolutionary Program*). It is this that makes it possible to “balance” the autonomist antagonism that the integration of work makes creative, and to disalienate the laboring society, prey to subversive subordinations.

But social humanity, “reflective and free, does not know its entire law,” this law which is nevertheless immanent to it. “It must try... hence its impatience and hence the progress of laws and morals resulting from the comings and goings of revolutions” (*Justice, The State*). The social world must educate its own sociological laws. From then on, history reveals itself as “the education of humanity” (*Justice, Education*), both by its negations and “the reduction to absurdity of the errors of humanity” (*Second Memoir*), as by its affirmations — and as the progressive revelation by social labor “of the laws of the creation of Order” (*Creation of Order*, ch. V). In fact, a social science and a scientific socialism aim to organize this organic education of society.

Consequently, society is called not to ignore antagonism, but to understand it, to use it productively within labor. Beyond the deviations of liberty and the mystifications of the imagination, the laboring society must learn to know its law of mutual equilibration, and to erect it into social practice and revolutionary practice. Recognizing “balance” at the level of all these manifestations, — submitting to it and applying it, while fighting against the source of all social retrogradations, absolutizing ideomania. They will be, among other things, the rules of this militant sociology that Proudhon elaborates as a doctrine of self-management.

How can we effectively apprehend the law of balancing in the social universe? As “the product of the increasingly exact determination of social relations observed in economic objectivity” (*Justice, 9th study*).

Balance-justice presents itself above all as a socio-economic relationship, an objectified social relationship. If the law of balancing, as a “reduction to equilibrium of the forces in struggle” (Letters to Langlois, December 30, 1861)



manifests itself in the physical world, as “balance”... concrete relationship “of forces,” — it is grasped primordially in society as “an objectified socio-economic relationship:” — It is from this social grasp that the law of balancing is revealed to man and to the collective being, where it remains immanent, as an ideo-realist relationship. It then takes, according to the faculties in which it manifests itself, different names: “equation” or relationship of equality in the understanding — “justice” properly speaking or relationship of reciprocity in consciousness — “ideal” or abstract harmonic relationship in the imagination (*Justice*, Popular Philosophy). Doubtless the concurrence of the faculties in which it is revealed can, through a realistic education, develop, in men and groups, the intelligence of the law of balancing, and contribute to its full manifestation in society. But the very liberty of individual or collective beings (this faculty of playing on the plurality of reality) — and their imagination (this possibility of magnifying reality or of deceiving themselves with artifices) allow “this social evil,” this thwarting, by individual and collective persons of their own law of balancing. The objectification, more and more precise, more and more scientific of the law of balancing, seized as a socio-economic relationship is the only way to consolidate in society this law of balancing constantly ignored by idealization and absolutizing “ideomania.”

It is through social work “considered synthetically in the laws of production and consumption” (*Creation of Order*, ch. IV) that the “law of equilibrium that manifests itself everywhere in the economy and whose accidental or voluntary violation is the principle of misery” is objectified (*Justice*, Goods).

— Labor considered “objectively in the product” will allow the establishment of an economic accounting of society, of a fair material balance of capital and final goods, eliminating all “non-value,” all capitalist prelibation.

— Labor considered “subjectively in the individual and collective worker” will allow the establishment of a social “organization,” of an economic sociology, that is to say of a fair social balance of functions and products, eliminating all bureaucratic prelibation.

— Labor considered “synthetically in this double perspective” will allow the development of a “social right,” mobile of an economic right effectively translating in the course of social development, the law of social equilibration (*Creation of Order*, ch. IV).

It is therefore the establishment of a socio-economy based on labor and considered under the triple aspect of an accounting, a sociology and a socio-economic law that will allow, in society, this objectification of the law of mutual equilibration. “A constituent part of social science” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. II), it gives to this “social economy,” as Proudhon understands it, its basis and its

scientific articulation. It also appears, within the pluralist society as the very science of social equilibrium.

c) *Integrative labor: social practice and education*

The sociology of self-management in Proudhon starts from work as a *creative process* of society and the “axis” of the social economy. It develops through the observation of work as an *integrating process* of social plurality. It finally leads to labor considered as an *educational process*, that is to say as a social practice and revolutionary practice.

The “law of social balancing” — this Proudhonian “justice” — remains, as we have seen, a latent tendency in the individual man, a social actor, and an embryonic law in the elementary group, a social cell. It is through social experience, through the antagonistic confrontation of individual and collective experiences within labor, that it is revealed and gradually strengthened. It is through and in the social economy, the science of labor, that this law is concretely realized and appears to man and to the groups constituting the laboring society as their own law. It is through social reason, of which labor (which gives rise to it by generating society and the relativization of individual and collective reasons) will be the educational process, that the law of balancing will be able to impose itself as a social and moral practice. It is through social reason and labor that the law of balancing will be able to triumph, in individual and collective consciences, over the tendency of absolutizing “idealism,” “balance” the antagonism, and make the organic pluralism of society, an organizing pluralism, a revolutionary practice. Promoter of the revolution and author of his own emancipation, because initiator of the social experience and educator of social reason: such is ultimately the permanent role that history, like economics, assumes in labor, the progenitor of society.

For Proudhon, as we have seen, “the laws of political economy,” the laws of labor, “are the laws of history.” It is “from the point of view of labor... that we have to study history... After having observed the influence of labor on society in terms of production... it is appropriate to follow its organic manifestations in revolutionary movements and forms of government.” (*Creation of Order*, ch. V). It is “from this point of view that the social system and all that it contains, cults, wars, commerce, science and art, etc... is determined and really constituted.” (*Ibid.* 1843).

In what we have called “his historical laborism,” Proudhon considers history as “the movement of society under the action of economic laws” and historical crises as “social disturbances brought about by the violation” of these laws. Labor is revealed there as the struggle of the laboring society for its pluralist autonomy. Labor is revealed there as the promoter of revolutions. And Proudhon then

considers the latter as “the successive manifestations of justice in history,” the violent emergence of a law of social balancing, constantly ignored and constantly affirmed. At certain times, under the effect of the ignorance of the antagonism and the contempt for the law of balancing, the explosion of social forces occurs and makes the dialectical process engendered by the three laws of pluralist society insurrectional. But in fact, balancing-justice, identified with the revolution (and considered no longer as an external explosion, but as an internal and continuous movement) is “permanently in history” (Toast to the Revolution).

Why, however, does history, like economics, reveal both the manifestations and the constant violations of this law of balancing? Social progress is revealed to the scientific observer as the conjunction of an antinomic movement (the “oscillatory” march of society, a “swinging” born of the opposition of antinomic couples, resulting from the sum of their tensions), which gives strength to the dialectical process and a serial movement which gives form to this process (thanks to the series of integrating operations resulting from work). How does this social progress so often degenerate into social retrogrades? The answer to these questions is none other than the theory of “social” and moral evil, according to Proudhon, and the practice of its elimination by a labor education. Social evil, which becomes moral evil in the individual, resides in the ignorance of the organic pluralism of society, a pluralism that nevertheless constantly “teaches” the organizing pluralism of labor.

The individual man (who forgets himself as a social actor), and the social masses (who think of themselves as a juxtaposition of individual reasons and not as the matrix of an experience and a social reason), yield to the natural tendency of the individual to absolutize as soon as he separates himself from reality. The man who forgets himself as a social actor and the mass of men who do not grasp themselves as collective beings — by the fact of the conjunction of their liberty (this possibility of playing on the plurality of reality or of making fun of it) and their imagination, (this faculty of magnifying reality or of deceiving themselves with artifices) — have the power to infringe on their fundamental law and to deny pluralism, their own structure. Ideological and religious deviation, they absolutize the relative — totalize diversity — decree one, plurality. “Ideo-mania” and “idealism,” mysticism in the individual — “mythology” and “popular idealism” in the masses — sign of personal and social “idolatry,” this social and moral evil thus results in the ignorance of the fundamental pluralism of society and its laws, and in the erection into absolutes, of “political and social idealities,” like alienating capital and the subordinate state.

From then on, the “economic functions” and “political functions” of the laboring society become, through idealization, alienating powers that are judged superior to it. They are exercised as such by a “prince” or a “feudalism,” an

economic oligarchy or “government personnel,” a technocracy or a bureaucracy, adorned, one with the myth of economic efficiency, the other with the fiction of popular sovereignty. Individual imagination, like popular imagination, has the ideal as its function, that is to say the faculty of magnifying reality through idealization. If it applies itself and constantly returns to social reality, if it educates itself permanently through labor, if it helps through its power of idealization to a better knowledge of the laws of social pluralism, society progresses. Integrative labor can “serialize” without hindrance, in its productive process, the dialectical movement of the chains of antinomies. It can positively direct the force generated by the “balancing” of competitive antagonism and mutual balancing. It can develop, magnified by an imaginative freedom in touch with reality, its free and creative function.

If this imaginative liberty cuts itself off from the plurality of reality (which nevertheless makes it possible) and is not constantly recycled by labor pluralism, it hinders all development. It ignores the laws of social pluralism. It prevents a realistic organization of social functions based on the autonomy and coordination of groups and individuals. It imposes the fiction of a unitarism, and of a social totalitarianism. It ends by erecting a single law of fundamental pluralism (antagonism or balancing) as a unique or superior principle, in the subordination, in the alienation of groups and individuals.

Auxiliary of reality, the ideal serves progress. Emancipated from reality, it gives rise to retrogression. “Every society progresses through work and through idealized justice (balance). Every society retrogrades through the preponderance of the idea... idealism” (*Justice, Progress and Decadence*). Abstract idealism is the fruit of “idolatry,” this tendency of an imaginative liberty to ignore the plurality of a reality by absolutizing a part of this reality into false gods. The “split” of social reality and idealization, among social actors, is for Proudhon “the principle of all retrogradations” observed in history and in the economy. Strictly speaking “there is no theory of progress,” as progress exists by the sole fact that man “has knowledge of his own laws, that he is intelligent and free... that his industry like his science is unlimited. There is only one theory of retrogradation.” (*Justice, Progress and Decadence*).

Consequently, we understand the primordial importance that Proudhon intends to give to labor as an educational process. Source of society, integrating by its laws the pluralist reality, labor and its analysis teaches this pluralism and its laws. Thus labor appears as “the universal mode of teaching” and the source of all knowledge, of all ideas as of all philosophy. Laborist “ideo-realism,” philosophical foundation of all Proudhonian doctrine, will be the doctrine of this teaching. “Polytechnic” and self-training education will be the practice and the basis of any self-managed society.

“Intelligent action of men in society on matter with a planned goal of personal satisfaction,” work by nature and definition is an ideo-realist process. Matter and intelligence, man and society are, by the very development of labor, put into permanent functional relations, integrated into a vital dialectic, indissolubly included in this creative process in which “things” appear as “the types of ideas,” and ideas as “an impression of reality on the understanding.” (*Creation of Order*, no. 590).

With this ideo-realist theory, Proudhon intends to “refute” fundamentalist idealism: “the ideal is given or rather suggested by the real, not the real p || ar the ideal” (*Justice, Progress and Decadence*), and prove that “as far as society is concerned, materialism” is “absurd” (*Theory of Property*, conclusion). In fact, for Proudhon, this “distinction of schools,” into “spiritual” and “material” is “meaningless” and he mocks those philosophies of abstraction which, with an “incredible ardor,” “idealize the world” or “materialize the self.” (*Philosophy of Progress*, first letter, and *Creation of Order*, Chapter III). Considering in itself an element of the plurality of the real, these philosophies erect it into an absolute and, forgetting to consider this real as the “relation” of the plurality of its constituent elements, as a relativization, they end up in mysticism. “Mysticism of intelligence,” denying the “facts” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XI), spiritualism leads “to the decay of the flesh” (*Justice, Labor*), and through contempt for the material to material exploitation. “Crushed by the facts” (*Economic Contradictions*, ch. XI), which show the being free to fail the law that determines it, “materialism... mysticism of matter” (*Justice, Goods*) leads to “the decay of the spirit” (*Justice, work*), and through contempt for the spiritual, to a mystical subordination. Whether they are of spiritualist or materialist origin, “it is the nature of mystical ideas to subjugate the understanding... to chain the will, to regulate actions, to absorb all interests into an anonymous interest,” (*Justice, Goods*) instead of considering ideas and facts indissolubly as “the creation of society by itself” (*Theory of Property*, conclusion).

So, far from seeking to deepen, in a “metaphysics,” the superiority in itself of the material or the spiritual, it is for Proudhon, to consider, as an elementary link of social and human reality, the very existence of an indissoluble spiritual-material relation. “This method” will allow us to escape a double unrealism: on the one hand, “material facts prove only according to the measure of the Idea that they represent,” that is to say, as we shall see, the real relationship of this material fact with the whole of social reality (the fact of a failure, of a popular insurrection, does not prove the falsity of the revolutionary “idea” that animates it). On the other hand, the idea proves nothing in itself, “apart from its external manifestation” and the counter-test of the reality from which it comes (the pure idea has no social or personal truth in the eyes of science). (*Economic Contradictions*, ch IV). Every

idea (even “the abstract idea, born of the forced analysis of labor”), has its source in a real relation revealed by an action and thus perceived in the understanding. Labor, the intelligent action of men in society on matter, appears as the revealer *par excellence*. It is “by observing facts” that the idea-relation is nourished and developed; by disregarding facts, it degenerates through “ideomania” and becomes “ideality” without consistency, a source of intellectual, moral and practical decline (Cf. *Justice*, Progress and Decadence and *Creation of Order*, ch. II).

“Every idea is born from action and must return to action under penalty of decline for the agent,” which “means that all *a priori* knowledge has come out of labor and must serve as an instrument for labor... which means that philosophy and science must enter industry under penalty of degradation for humanity.” (*Justice*, Labor). For “philosophy is only a way of generalizing and abstracting the results of our experience, that is to say, of our labor” (*War and Peace*, Book I, Chapter II), and Industry, like Art, is only “the handling of serial realities,” the transposition with the help of labor of “natural series” into “artificial series.” From then on, in turn, by remaining “a tracing of the real series” and a decal of a real relationship, the idea, “ideal series” can become — thanks to the free effort of a personal or collective intelligence, faithful to reality and constantly returning to it — “a complement of creation,” a continued creation, “a creation accomplished by the mind in the image of nature” (*Creation of Order*, ch. III, nos. 359 and 490, cf. nos. 441 and 596).

Ultimately, neither the entity “spirit” nor the entity “matter” accounts for a pluralistic reality whose elements are made up of antinomic couples and associated series. Only “a relation” and the chain of relations integrated into series can put us “in the presence” of reality (*Justice*, The State). Only a philosophy of work, defined as a self-education of society in and through labor, will make it possible to maintain, in a functional relation and in integrating series, the informing and transformable reality, and the informed and transforming idea that comes from it. Only this self-education will make it possible the escape, through this labor realism, from the false spiritualism-materialism dilemma, — labor, serial action, real relation of matter and spirit, functional interrelation of the subjective and the objective, discovering itself, then by its development as “the direct creation of society by itself” (*Theory of Property*, conclusions). Thus, all the sociology of self-management elaborated by Proudhon is ultimately based on a labor pedagogy. It is this that will allow social pluralism and its laws to become social practice, moral practice,<sup>13</sup> revolutionary practice.

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<sup>13</sup> For Proudhon “morality is of social essence,” it results with the aesthetics of the reality of collective relations. It is a revelation of its own laws that society makes to the individual.

Integration of education into the organization of labor, — direct management of education by workers and by economic society, — junction of apprenticeship and the “schooling” of the school and the workshop, — “polytechnic” and lifelong training, — use of active methods, — respect for the specificity of vocations within social plurality, — combined action on social structures and on mental structures, on individual and collective mentalities, — instruction finally conceived simultaneously as mastery of bodies, promotion of intelligence, formation of characters and creation of morals: such is Proudhon's labor program. Through this labor program, Proudhon intends to eliminate “the division of society into two categories, that of the spiritual, made for command, and that of the carnal, devoted to work and obedience” (*Justice*, Labor, ch. II). He intends that education should not become, after having been the intellectual justification of a class society, the camouflaged failure of a classless society where the school would resurrect the caste and the aristocracy of talents. He intends that labor pluralism, revealing the organic pluralism of social reality, should become organizing pluralism and the practice of self-management.

Thus, finally, the self-education of the laboring society appears for Proudhon to be the keystone of any self-management regime. “Education is the most important function of society” (*Justice*, Education). “Democracy is demopedia” (*Carnets*) and “no revolution will be fruitful if public instruction, recreated, does not become its crowning achievement” (*Creation of Order*, ch. V).

The organization of education is both “the condition of equality and the condition of progress.”

“The university organization, the image of society itself, is the seal of equality. It is what connects the two poles of this vast organism: power and youth, and which gives society its form.” (*Ibid.*).

But the organization of education must escape the influence of the “consular power” and the “executive power.” It knows how to be autonomous. Proudhon, “this great socialist, at the same time as a great liberal,” as Jaurès himself called him, during a parliamentary debate on education, called, as early as 1843, for the constitution of an autonomous “teaching power.” “The only man who understood in his time the importance of education” (Tolstoy), he calls in fact, in addition to a complete reform of our “education of the Middle Ages,” the creation of a “teaching power” which “includes in its attributions the education of youth,” understood in the broadest sense, which “recruits itself and governs itself as a republic” (*Creation of the Order*, ch. V) encompassing “all schools of art, science, and trades, at all levels, centralized” in an autonomous University, it is “democratized” and “involves in the administration of colleges and in teaching, the entire body of professors.” (*Ibid.*).

But we understand, adds Proudhon, in his testament *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* that workers' associations are called upon to play an important role here. Placed in relation to the system of public education, they become both centers of production and centers of teaching. (*Political Capacity of the Working Classes.*)

Made possible thanks to a labor self-education, it is in the “permanent and methodical development of the physical, intellectual and moral faculties” of individuals and groups that resides “the emancipation of workers,” of the working society and their real possibility of self-management and self-administration.

“Outside of that, there is only lies and verbiage” (*Justice, Labor*). Outside that, no true promotion, no “democracy of consciences and intelligences,” no effective capacity for rights without exercise, fictions without functions and self-management attempts spasming into disorders and aborting into autocracy.

*(to be continued.)*<sup>14</sup>

Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur, last revised February 13, 2025.

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<sup>14</sup> We will publish in our next issue the second part of Jean Bancal's study which related to the *practice of self-management, according to Proudhon.*