

**Proudhon  
and  
German philosophy**

René BERTHIER

1**INTRODUCTION** **3****PROUDHON AND GERMAN PHILOSOPHY** **6**

PROUDHON AND MARX	11
PROUDHON, HEGEL AND MARX	13
THE METHOD IN THE <i>SYSTEM OF ECONOMIC CONTRADICTIONS</i>	23
MARX'S ANSWER: <i>POVERTY OF PHILOSOPHY</i>	30
STIRNER AND FEUERBACH	38
BACK TO <i>GERMAN IDEOLOGY</i>	42
MARX AND THE REFERENCE TO HEGEL	50
MARX'S VIEWPOINT IN 1858 AND 1865	56
ON HEGEL AND METHOD	70
FETISHISM OF METHOD	74
MARXISM AND SCIENCE	86
CONCLUSION	91

## Introduction

This text is the translation of the first part of a book published in French in 2009, *Études proudhoniennes, L'économie politique* (Éditions du Monde libertaire. This first part develops a thesis concerning Proudhon's methodological approach of economy I had started to study in an article, "La Question économique", published in a French anarchist magazine, *La Rue, revue culturelle et littéraire d'expression anarchiste*, n°33, 2<sup>nd</sup> term, 1983.

The reader will quickly realize I am not acquainted with philosophical vocabulary in English and that I am a poor translator. This translation has been made quite quickly and needs to be revised and improved, but I do hope the English reader will at least roughly understand what it is about in general terms.

The references which are mentioned are naturally French references. Many authors I quote are Marxist authors the English speaking reader has certainly never heard about and I didn't bother to find an English publication for there certainly are none.

Concerning Marx and Engels, I tried as much as possible to find the English version of their writings, which I found on the Internet. I simply mentioned the title of the book.

Concerning Proudhon, it seems the only book that has been translated is the *Système des contradictions économiques*, or System of Economic contradictions, available on the Internet. I mention this book either under the French or the English title.

The motivation for this translation is that I realized that the English speaking readers seem to have a very scarce knowledge of Proudhon, which is quite surprising for he laid the foundations of

anarchist doctrine. Although he can be associated with no anarchist organization, he developed most of the concepts which characterize the anarchist doctrine, as well as most of the concepts Marx uses in economy.

Not being particularly a “Proudhonian” myself, my intention is not to “rehabilitate” this author but to give credit for his contribution to the founding of anarchist doctrine.

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In order to understand what follows, it is necessary to have a certain number of definitions in mind, related to Hegel’s philosophy. Hegel’s approach consisted in posing concepts to which he gave an absolute character and an independent existence. So it seemed that he had wanted to create Reality from Abstraction, but there is a misunderstanding concerning Hegel’s method, in my view. The German philosopher had made a distinction between:

- The “development according to Time” (or “according to Nature”), such as it presents itself to the understanding: the real is first, thought is conditioned to it; and
- The “development according to the Concept”, such as it appears to reason: empiric reality is the effect of reason.

In the relationship existing between the two processes, Hegel chooses to give reality only to the second. He decides that only the development according to the concept, according to which the Real is deduced from the concept, is real. The development according to nature, for which the concept is second and reality first, is only an apparent process. The fact that the philosopher adopts an approach consisting in posing first Concepts and deducing the Real from them does not mean that he really believed that the concept, through a superior power such as God, or anything else, pre-exists the Real: it is only a *working hypothesis*. Hegel is only making a simulation – Proudhon will call it a “scaffolding”, whose elements (the concepts) allow him to define reality such as it is in its bareness, deprived of all the different accidental parasites that do not actually participate in its definition.

Proudhon will do exactly the same thing in his *Système des contradictions économiques*, published in 1846, the same year as Marx’s *German Ideology*. He does not take into account the

historical process but the logical process. He does not write the story of capitalism, he describes its mechanisms from a logical point of view. This approach is absolutely not original in philosophy. You can find it in Plato's philosophy of knowledge, in Aristotle. Closer to us, in Descartes or Rousseau. The concept of "social contract" in Rousseau does not result from a historical assessment: Rousseau never imagined that a group of men actually sat around a table to negotiate a "contract": it is only a hypothesis. Rousseau explains it very well: "One must not take for historical truth the researches which have been made concerning this subject, but only as hypothetical and conditioned reasonings more liable to enlighten the nature of things than to show their real origin" (Oeuvres complètes, La Pléiade, III, p. 139.)

Proudhon makes no real discovery; his genius consists in applying this method to political economy. He does what absolutely all thinkers did before him, confronted to the necessity to explain a complex phenomenon. All thinkers, except Marx. For in 1846 Marx had just developed in *German Ideology* his own method, a historical method. For fifteen years, he will try to achieve the explanation of the mechanisms of the capitalist system with this method, unsuccessfully, before resolving to use the commonplace method all thinkers had used before him, but that only Proudhon had used in political economy: the hypothetical-deductive method.

We can say that the so-called "historical materialism" had absolutely not been a progress in terms of understanding social phenomena, but an obstacle.

R.B.

## Proudhon and German philosophy

Proudhon had an early interest in German philosophy, for Kant first. In 1839 he read the *History of German philosophy* of Barchou de Penhoën. He found in Fichte, Schelling and Hegel several things that matched his views, but he was particularly attracted by Kant. At the end of that year he read the *Critique of Pure Reason* and became interested in Hegel. It has been said that the knowledge Proudhon had acquired of German philosophers was superficial, that he made only a superficial review of these thinkers, seeking in their work the confirmation to his own views. It is partly true, but in fact a close lecture of the precursor of anarchism shows that he was not as ignorant as it has been said.

Marx is probably largely responsible for this picture given of Proudhon, but his own knowledge of Hegel deserves being seriously reconsidered. If Proudhon's knowledge of these thinkers was limited by the absence of translations available in his time, the understanding he had remains quite outstanding. Most of the critiques of Proudhon have certainly not read Chapter XI of Volume II of the *System of Economic contradictions*: one finds there a stunning synthesis of the thought of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. At first, Proudhon was not attracted by Hegel. He criticized him for wanting to “build the history of the mind by reasoning, instead of following the line of observation”. He also said that “if this method can be good for teaching, for a science it is worthless”.

These two remarks are important for two reasons:

- At first, Proudhon agrees with Marx and formulates against Hegel the same criticism. Both men, in their early intellectual development, therefore criticize the philosopher for wanting to attain knowledge through the development according to the concept.

In 1840 Proudhon opposed the Hegelian method for the same reasons as Marx.

• Later, when writing the *Système des contradictions économiques*, Proudhon will realize that it is necessary to distinguish between the process of investigation and the process of exposure. This distinction, already clearly stated by Hegel in the Introduction to the Phenomenology, is ignored by Marx, who will not refer to it until around 1865. Proudhon, who addresses this issue as soon as 1846, is many years ahead of Marx: it is precisely on this point that Marx will attack Proudhon after the *System of Economical Contradictions* is published.

In the early 1840's there was an almost amusing competition between two German emigrants – Karl Grün<sup>1</sup> and Karl Marx – who absolutely wanted to teach Proudhon the basics of the Hegelian philosophy. Marx wrote about it, twenty years later: “During my stay in Paris in 1844, I came into personal contact with Proudhon.” He adds: “In the course of lengthy debates often lasting all night, I infected him very much to his detriment with Hegelianism, which, owing to his lack of German, he could not study properly.”

Karl Grün on his side also boasted of having trained Proudhon to Hegelianism, which drove Marx furious. Marx, wishing to warn his pupil against Grün, wrote that he was a “literary charlatan”. Everyone wanted to convert Proudhon. Marx hated Grün, fearing the influence he could exert on the Frenchman. He said: “As a teacher of German philosophy he also had the advantage over me that he himself understood nothing about it.” Proudhon, on his side, perfidiously observed that among the twenty German doctors of philosophy he knew, there were not two who got along with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Grün (1817-1877), German journalist, author in 1845 of “The social movement in France and in Belgium”. A member of the Left in the Prussian national assembly in 1848 and elected in 1849 at the Second Prussian Chamber. He was arrested of his “intellectual participation” the the Palatinate insurrection.

Proudhon gave credit for some time that Hegel's influence had been decisive in his evolution. He even suggested that the *Phenomenology* potentially contained his economic deductions which is, as we shall see, not as absurd as one might think. He repeated that his dialectics was "otherwise simple, clear, and fruitful" than that of the German philosopher. This belief was fueled by the declarations of the Germans themselves. Grün had awarded Proudhon the title of "French Feuerbach", which Proudhon was very proud of. Proudhon had assimilated, Grün said again, the best of German philosophy. At the same time, Marx was full of praise for the Frenchman, who was held up in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* as "the most logical and most penetrating the socialist writer". (NRZ Jan 7, 1843.)

The *Holy Family*, dating from 1845, also contains a vibrant praise of Proudhon who is acknowledged as the master of scientific socialism, the father of the theories of labor value and surplus value. The *German Ideology* (1846) refers to the dialectics of Proudhon as an "attempt to give a method by which independent thinking is replaced by the operation of thought".

When Proudhon lost his flattering status and became a "petty bourgeois" author, Marx declared that he himself had been responsible for the "sophistication" of Proudhon:

"To a certain extent I am also to blame for his 'SOPHISTICATION': as the English call the adulteration of commercial goods". (Letter to J. B. Schweizer, Jan. 24, 1865.)

All these flattering and perhaps exaggerated appraisals made by Grün and Marx in 1844-1845 had somehow destabilized Proudhon. So when he declared he would work to popularize metaphysics and put it into action, he claimed to use "the most profound dialectics, Hegel's", but added he was using there a process that was repugnant to him! In a letter to Bergman dated 19 January 1845, referring to the System of contradictions he was writing, Proudhon writes, somewhat candidly:



“I cannot yet judge the relationship that exists between my metaphysics and Hegel’s logic, for example, since I have never read Hegel, but I am convinced that this is his logic that I use in my next book.”

Recognizing that he had never read Hegel, Proudhon is here relatively reserved, but in 1848, he said that his “true masters” had been the Bible, Adam Smith and... Hegel. Marx responded derisively to the *Système des contradictions économiques*: Louis Blanc then wrote that Proudhon had become the laughing stock of the Berlin students. Proudhon ceased all references to Hegel. The German philosopher was not mentioned in the second edition of the book. Yet, despite his superficial knowledge of Hegel, Proudhon had perfectly understood the question posed in the *Phenomenology* concerning the “intelligible form of science”. The “science of observation” is certainly just the opposite of Hegel’s approach, but the latter did not intend to make a history book describing Experience: he intended to analyze the rational movement, revealing the logic of the evolution of consciousness. And it is precisely a similar path that Proudhon follows in the *System of contradictions*, which Marx fiercely criticized in 1846.

Bakunin participated in some way in the competition to introduce Proudhon to the philosophy of Hegel. In 1844, he was in Paris: he met Proudhon, saw Marx again. Mentioning this period, he acknowledged, in 1871, that Marx was far ahead of him: “I knew then nothing of political economy, I had not yet got rid of metaphysical abstractions, and my socialism was only instinctive<sup>1</sup>.” Bakunin and Marx saw each other often. Bakunin respected Marx for “his knowledge and for his passionate and serious dedication, although always mixed with personal vanity, to the cause of the proletariat”. The Russian liked Marx’s conversation, which was informative and witty, but unfortunately too often inspired by “petty hatred”. There never was a true friendship between them, their temperaments were too different.

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<sup>1</sup> “Rapports personnels avec Marx”, décembre 1871.

Bakunin and Marx must have realized the limitations of Proudhon in the understanding of German philosophy. Marx wrote in *Poverty of Philosophy* that “M. Proudhon has nothing of Hegel’s dialectics but the language”. Bakunin on his side could hardly appreciate Proudhon’s tendency to select in the writings of the authors he read the passages that were consistent with his own views. The Russian revolutionary will later vigorously fight eclecticism in Mazzini and Victor Cousin. Of Mazzini, he wrote: “He takes only fragments of thoughts and phrases that suit him, leaving aside those which are in conflict with him, without even wondering if, in the mind of the author, these apparently opposite fragments do not form a single organic thought<sup>1</sup>.”

There is no reason to believe that what he criticized in V. Cousin and Mazzini, he accepted in Proudhon. So if Bakunin availed himself of Proudhon, it is for other reasons, and with certain restrictions. We can also legitimately think he had Proudhon in mind when he regretted that “Romand thinkers” – that is to say in French-speaking – had failed to understand Hegel.

Fascinated by German philosophy, Proudhon intended to “teach the French public what dialectics was”. In Germany, he says, “writers all submit themselves to a known methodical form”, while in France, “one eternally quibbles indiscriminately without ever being able to agree. It is this need of discipline for reason that I thought I was the first inaugurated under the name of serial dialectics, to which Hegel had already given a particular constitution<sup>2</sup>.” He says he is convinced that it is the Hegel’s Logic he will use in his next book...<sup>3</sup>

Showing that Proudhon does not understand Hegelian dialectics does not lead us very far. The question is not to know whether Proudhon understood and used Hegel’s dialectics in the *Système des contradictions économiques*. That Proudhon had a glimpse of Hegel’s methodological developments through the oral teaching of Grün, Marx and Bakunin is possible but not determinant, for

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<sup>1</sup> Bakounine, *Œuvres*, Champ libre, I, 162.

<sup>2</sup> Lettre à Bergmann, 19 janvier 1845.

<sup>3</sup> Lettre à Bergmann, 19 janvier 1845.

anyway Hegel does nothing but propose his own approach to methodological questions that had been discussed for centuries by European philosophy. Our concern is that Marx obviously did not seem to know that.

## Proudhon and Marx

1846 was a turning point in the “debate” opposing Proudhon and Marx. Until then, the latter was full of praise for the former. Marx had never ceased to praise the “so penetrating work of Proudhon” and had described him as the “the most logical and most penetrating socialist writer”. To Engels, Proudhon’s *What Is Property?* was “the philosophical work in French for the Communists”. In January 1845, the *Holy Family* is published, signed jointly by Marx and Engels. Proudhon then represents the proletariat who has reached self-consciousness:

“But Proudhon makes a critical investigation – the first resolute, pitiless, and at the same time scientific investigation – of the foundation of political economy, private property. This is the great scientific progress he made, a progress which revolutionizes political economy and first makes a real science of political economy possible. Proudhon's treatise *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* is as important for modern political economy as Sieyès' work *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* for modern politics <sup>1</sup>.”

According to Georges Gurvitch, Marx attributes to Proudhon “a similar role to that played by Sieyès in the preparation of the French Revolution. According to him, what Sieyès said about the third

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748- 1836), churchman and constitutional theorist whose concept of popular sovereignty guided the National Assembly in its struggle against the monarchy and nobility during the opening months of the French Revolution. He later played a major role in organizing the coup d'état that brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power (1799). In his pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?* he asserted that the Third Estate really was the French nation.

estate, Proudhon expressed it for the proletariat: ‘What is the proletariat? Nothing. What does it want to become? Everything’. Is Marx right? Let us say it bluntly: yes, and more than he thought<sup>1</sup>.” We can not be clearer: Proudhon establishes the scientific basis for a critical analysis of capitalism. From Marx, the admission must be measured at fair value. Moreover, it is not Marx who invented the term “scientific socialism” but Proudhon in *What is Property?*. It was he who first established the opposition between scientific socialism and utopian socialism. The *System of Economical Contradictions*, trying to separate precisely knowledge of reality from yearning for a better future, is full of violent criticisms against utopian ideas on social matters.

Marx and Engels suddenly stopped praising Proudhon in 1846 after the publication of the *System of Economical Contradictions*. Already, in the *Holy Family*, there had been a doubt concerning Proudhon: according to Marx, he remained “from the standpoint of political economy”, an opinion that was not really a compliment: in the language of the time, “political economy” was the economic theory of the bourgeoisie. “The first criticism of any science necessarily finds itself under the influence of the premises of the science it is fighting against”, says Marx. It is in this sense that the work of Proudhon, *What is Property?*, is the critique of political economy “from the standpoint of political economy”. This is why the book is will be “outstripped by a criticism of political economy, including Proudhon's conception of political economy”<sup>2</sup>. Strangely, Marx will never consider the possibility that his own conceptions might be “outstripped”.

So now Proudhon is reduced to the level of a precursor, one who laid the groundwork for a criticism that has become “possible only after Proudhon's own work, just as Proudhon's criticism supposed the physiocrats' criticism of the mercantile system, Adam Smith's criticism of the physiocrats, Ricardo's criticism of Adam Smith and

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<sup>1</sup> “Proudhon et Marx”, in: *L'actualité de Proudhon*, colloque de novembre 1965, éditions de l'institut de sociologie, université libre de Bruxelles.

<sup>2</sup> *Holy Family*.

the works of Fourier and Saint Simon”<sup>1</sup>. Proudhon is then the last link in a chain of famous authors (Adam Smith, Ricardo, etc.); he is the one who struck the final blow to property; thanks to him, a real work of criticism will be made on a solid foundation, going beyond the conceptual framework of classical political economy; and obviously we can guess that it was Marx who was supposed to carry out this task. Precisely, Marx had announced in 1846, concerning a project he had on economics, that “the first volume, revised and proof-read, will be ready for printing in late November”. The publication of the *System of Economical Contradictions*, in which Proudhon invented, we shall see, a revolutionary approach to political economy, changed everything. For Proudhon had not confined himself to the role of precursor in which Marx had placed him after the publication of *What is Property?*; he had trampled on Marx’s garden.

Here is perhaps the explanation of Marx’s fury against the Frenchman.

## **Proudhon, Hegel and Marx**

Between Marx and Proudhon there is a curious movement on the question of method. Proudhon was self-educated, he ignored the German language and knew the work of Hegel by hearsay: he could not compete on that ground with leading academics such as Marx, Bakunin, Grün and others. According to Hegel, one could understand a phenomenon either by approaching it from its historical origins or from its conceptual genesis. But in fact, it is certainly not Proudhon’s knowledge of Hegel’s thought, however good it was, that led him to examine the question of the method of development and the method of exposure, or the problem of development according time and development according to the concept. Actually, these questions are quite common, and are already found in Rousseau, Descartes, and even in Plato. A

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<sup>1</sup> *Holy Family*.

researcher naturally raises these questions when he starts working<sup>1</sup>. This approach will appear – later, around 1860 – new to Marx because of his ignorance of the methodological problems of science, ignorance that we will specifically highlight.

In 1846, Marx had developed in *The German Ideology* a “materialist conception” of history. Let us note that at no time the term “historical materialism” appears in the text. This method, heir of Hegel’s “development according to time”, was in Marx’s view antithetical to the “development according to the concept” that Proudhon had followed the System of contradictions. But when he began writing the *Capital*, Marx explicitly acknowledged that the historical method had initially led to a dead end. So he had lost fifteen years before finding a satisfactory method, which had all the time been under his eyes.

During his stay in Paris, Bakunin tried to introduce Proudhon to the philosophy of Hegel. We must not however overestimate the results of this task or give it an exaggerated importance in Proudhon’s theoretical training. He referred to Hegel a while, then dropped the German philosopher. Marx identifies Hegel’s approach to the creation of abstract concepts to which he had given an absolute character and an independent existence. Hegel would have wanted to build the Real from the Abstract. It is not that simple. According to Hegel, the content of philosophy is the “idea in general”, it is “speculative knowledge”, pure thought that takes itself as an object.

Hegel does not say that idea is reality, he says that philosophy makes it possible to apprehend reality, which is not the same thing. In the Introduction to the “Small Logic”, Hegel says that “the content of philosophy is nothing else than that which occurs in the area of the living spirit to form the world, the outer world and inner world of consciousness, in other words, (...) the very content of philosophy is reality.” What philosophy deals with is reality. He also says in the Logic that “philosophy is what is most hostile to the

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<sup>1</sup> Marx says in the preface to *Capital* that in all sciences, “every beginning is difficult”.

abstract, it brings back to the concrete”. Philosophy is the reflexive process by which the mind grasps reality.

Unlike the “common consciousness”, philosophy attempts to show reality not through its transitional or transient events, but in its essentials. Consequently it “necessarily owns its starting point to experience”. Marx appears to have ignored all these reflections of Hegel, unlike Proudhon.

In Chapter XI of the *System of contradictions*, Proudhon notes that no-one before Hegel – whom he calls a “Titan of philosophy” – had “penetrated so deeply in the intimate laws of the being”; no one had “thrown such a bright light on the mysteries of reason”; but, he adds, “we soon perceived that the author could have built this same logic only by perpetually being in close contact with experience, taking from it its materials; that all his formulas followed observation, but never preceding it”. [Emphasis added.] This echoes – and it probably is no coincidence – Bakunin’s view about Hegel of whom the Russian revolutionary had a totally different reading than Marx. Bakunin interprets Hegel a) as a thinker who has analyzed the laws of human thought, and b) as a thinker who is located halfway between idealism and materialism. In any case, what Proudhon says of Hegel shows a remarkable understanding of the German philosopher, in spite of Marx’s sneering. The fact that Hegel adopts an approach consisting in first posing the concepts and second inferring the real does not mean he really thinks that the concept, through a higher power such as God, for example, pre-exists the real: it is only a working hypothesis.

Hegel does no more think that the concept is reality than Rousseau really believed that men had actually sat around a table to write a “social contract”. It is a hypothesis, a simulation in which concepts are the different elements that allow the author to define reality in its bareness, stripped of all accidental parasites that do not actually participate in its definition. That was the approach followed Proudhon, but one cannot be certain he owes it to Hegel. Instead of attempting an explanation of the functioning of the capitalist system by its historical genesis (the “development according to time” of Hegel), Proudhon will use a logical approach (the “development according to the concept”). So he will start from a “category” which

he considers central to the system – value –, from which he will “deduce” all the other categories that constitute the system<sup>1</sup>. Because he had adopted such an approach to the problem, that is to say, for having applied to political economy a method that Hegel applied to philosophy, Proudhon was accused by Marx of being an idealist and a Hegelian. But then this is only a method of exposition: neither Hegel nor Proudhon think that reality is made up of categories...

The Marxist vulgate imposed the idea of a utopian and idealistic Proudhon, the theorist of a kind of petty-bourgeois socialism. However, throughout his work one finds a harsh criticism of the utopian approach, and a constant concern to identify the laws that govern society. Proudhon intends to build a scientific corpus in order to give an economic explanation of social phenomena. “I affirm the reality of economics”, he says in the *System of economic contradictions*. But he adds: “I do not regard as a science the incoherent ensemble of theories to which the name political economy has been officially given for almost a hundred years, and which, in spite of the etymology of the name, is after all but the code, or immemorial routine, of property.”

“If, then social economy is still today rather an aspiration towards the future than a knowledge of reality, it must also be admitted that the elements of this study are all included in political economy.” (*Système des contradictions économiques*)

By these statements, Proudhon affirms the intelligibility of the social system, but he considers that the instruments that enable this intelligibility are not yet finalized. His project, which is to clarify the mechanisms of the “ownership system” is faced with a problem: how to proceed, what will be the mode of exposure of the mechanisms of this system. Should we, as advocated by Marx in a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Marx, preface to *Capital*: “...in bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labor — or value-form of the commodity — is the economic cell-form.”



letter to Annenkov dated 28 December 1846, “follow the real movement of history”, or find something else?

The capitalist system is a whole whose elements operate simultaneously, which prohibits the use of a chronological description. Proudhon's method will be to define a number of economic categories: value, the division of labor, machinery, competition, monopoly, etc., from which he will attempt to provide an image, a snapshot of the system. These categories, which develop in a logical, not chronological order, imply social relations driven by contradictions. The “ownership system”, opposing antagonist social classes, is based on the exploitation of man by man. Proudhon's emphasis is not so much to give a precise account as to propose a logical exposition of a system that carries within it the contradictions that no palliative can overcome.

The method he adopts in the *System of Economical Contradictions* does not attempt to describe the historical transformations of capitalism, from its beginnings to modern times (which as such poses a difficulty), but to interpret it in order to reveal its internal logic. The different categories of political economy are inter-related simultaneously, so Proudhon deliberately chooses to dismiss, without excluding it, their historical dimension to retain only their simultaneity. The total misunderstanding of Proudhon's approach is clear in the letter Marx wrote to Annenkov:

“Unable to follow the real course of history, Mr Proudhon provides a phantasmagoria which he has the presumption to present as a dialectical phantasmagoria. He no longer feels any need to speak of the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, for his history takes place in the nebulous realm of the imagination and soars high above time and place. In a word, it is Hegelian trash, it is not history, it is not profane history—history of mankind, but sacred history—history of ideas.” (Letter to Annenkov, Dec 28, 1846)

Marx blames Proudhon for his “total incomprehension of the historical development of mankind”. Proudhon “fails to see that economic categories are but abstractions of those real relations, that

they are truths only in so far as those relations continue to exist. Thus he falls into the error of bourgeois economists who regard those economic categories as eternal laws and not as historical laws which are laws only for a given historical development, a specific development of the productive forces”.

These criticisms are not justified, because Proudhon’s project is not to develop the history of the capitalist system – which does not prevent him, when necessary to his demonstration, to emphasize the historic character of the categories he analyses. These categories are not frozen in time since they are crossed with contradictions that will lead to the collapse of the “ownership regime”. The *System of Economical Contradictions* aims at dealing with the problem of the organization of these economic categories, “the generation of concepts”:

“...to organize within itself the production and distribution of wealth, -- society proceeds exactly as the mind does in the generation of concepts. First it posits a primary fact, acts upon a primary hypothesis, the division of labor, a veritable antinomy, the antagonistic results of which are evolved in social economy, just as the consequences might have been deduced in the mind: so that the industrial movement, following in all respects the deduction of ideas, is divided into a double current, one of useful effects, the other of subversive results, all equally necessary and legitimate products of the same law.” (*Système des contradictions économiques.*)

The question is, adds Proudhon, to follow “in our exposition this method of parallel development of the reality and of the idea”. But the method of Proudhon is not an analysis of the sequence of categories, it is a mode of exposure of a system whose terms are “inseparable and simultaneous”, therefore in constant interaction. Only a theory of the system can identify these relationships.

Proudhon considers that there is a general law of evolution of knowledge leading to the constitution of the sciences that will explain the social phenomena. It is therefore possible to establish economics as a science – which it wasn’t until now – and he defines

its method. Science will provide a reasoned explanation of the social order through a progressive development, of which Proudhon defines the historical stages:

- The human spirit rises to scientific knowledge starting from the research on the substance of things: this is the stage of religion, which permits only an instinctive and symbolic expression, and which does not enable to go beyond the ramblings of faith.

- Then comes the search for causes in an investigative effort that follows intuitive spontaneity: it is the stage of philosophy, which sinks into sterile deductions and ontological generalities without any consistency.

- Then comes science, which alone provides a clear and certain explanation of the social order, and which establishes a theory of society<sup>1</sup>. The scientific method sticks to the relationships, which alone are likely to be demonstrated.

In 1839 Proudhon had already asserted that existed a “social science that could lead to evidence, therefore object of demonstration, not of art or authority, that is to say arbitrary”. In 1846, in the first chapter of the *System of Economical Contradictions*, he reaffirms “the reality of an economic science”, “I affirm, on the other hand, the absolute certainty as well as the progressive nature of economic science, of all the sciences in my opinion the most comprehensive, the purest, the best supported by facts.” However, if the existence of economic laws, if the idea of an economical science are affirmed, that science is yet to be constituted. One must in no way confuse this science with the existing economic doctrines. Political economy is for the while nothing more than the “code of the immemorial routine of property” developed by Smith, Ricardo, Malthus and J.B. Say.

For the purpose of his demonstration, Proudhon opposes political economy and socialism, which “are contending for the government of the world”:

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *la Création de l'ordre*, ch. III “La Métaphysique”.

“Political economy is the collection of the observations thus far made in regard to the phenomena of the production and distribution of wealth; that is, in regard to the most common, most spontaneous, and therefore most genuine, forms of labor and exchange. The economists have classified these observations as far as they were able; they have described the phenomena, and ascertained their contingencies and relations; they have observed in them, in many cases, a quality of necessity which has given them the name of laws; and this ensemble of information, gathered from the simplest manifestations of society, constitutes political economy.” (*Système des contradictions économiques.*)

This definition gives an idea of the as yet little developed character of economic science. It is a sum of observations of facts, which economists have classified. It is only a description of phenomena. One cannot limit oneself to that to develop a theory of the system. Political economy is “the natural history of the most apparent and most universally accredited customs, traditions, practices, and methods of humanity in all that concerns the production and distribution of wealth”. This is nothing more than empirical knowledge. Socialism, meanwhile, says that the capitalist system “engenders oppression, misery, and crime” and “pushes on with all its might to a reformation of morals and institutions”. Proudhon said that political economy is “a false and sophistical hypothesis, devised to enable the few to exploit the many”. Political economy is “the physiology of wealth”, it is “but the organization of robbery and poverty” as case law is “a compilation of the rubrics of legal and official spoliation, – in a word, of property”.

“Considered in their relations, these two pretended sciences, political economy and law, form, in the opinion of socialism, the complete theory of iniquity and discord.” (*Système des contradictions économiques.*)

But socialism cannot be confused with science because it is more concerned to prescribe than to explain. Although its representatives refer exclusively to science, “a certain religiosity, utterly illiberal,

and an unscientific disdain for facts, are always the most obvious characteristics of their doctrines”.

“The socialists claim all of modern science, one and indivisible, but could not agree on either the content or on the boundaries, or the method of this science.” (*Système des contradictions économiques.*)

The question is therefore to know what a science of society can be. Science, Proudhon said, “is the logically arranged and systematic knowledge of that which is”. If we apply this notion to society, we will say: “Social science is the logically arranged and systematic knowledge, not of that which society has been, nor of that which it will be, but of that which it is in its whole life; that is, in the sum total of its successive manifestations”. (*Système des contradictions économiques*)

“Social science must include human order, not alone in such or such a period of duration, nor in a few of its elements; but in all its principles and in the totality of its existence: as if social evolution, spread throughout time and space, should find itself suddenly gathered and fixed in a picture which, exhibiting the series of the ages and the sequence of phenomena, revealed their connection and unity. Such must be the science of every living and progressive reality; such social science indisputably is.”

There is a clear separation between political economy and socialism. Political economy, “bourgeois” science, is based on the principle of ownership. Socialism proposes an alternative principle, association. Socialism means to thoroughly recreate the social economy and create new laws, new politics, new institutions and mores diametrically opposed to the old forms. “Thus the line of demarcation between socialism and political economy is fixed, and the hostility flagrant. Political economy tends toward the

glorification of selfishness; socialism favors the exaltation of communism”<sup>1</sup> – which, in Proudhon’s mind, is not better.

Following a sociological determinism, men’s actions are not simply the result of chance, but the product of their social environment. Human behavior, individually and collectively, is “a positive, real thing, not fantasy, therefore, it is subject to laws and may be subject to a science”<sup>2</sup>. As Marx did later, Proudhon thus affirms the existence of a social determinism similar to that governing natural phenomena: economy is seen as an exact and positive science.

“Political economy is the science of production and distribution of wealth. Now once given the object of a science, the field of observation, the method, and the constituency of this science must naturally be inferred<sup>3</sup>.”

The source of all wealth is labor – in that Proudhon does not stray from Adam Smith, but what interests him is labor considered from a general point of view, through the investigation of the laws of production and organization common to all activities. “All such things as labor, useful function, is political economy. Political economy embraces in its sphere the Government as well as trade and industry<sup>4</sup>.” Economics and politics are therefore inseparable. This science still has to be developed. Social science must be based on observation, its laws must not be invented but discovered. “Just as the physical sciences can not build a theory on pure notions, but require the observation of facts, so the science of justice and morals can not get out of a dialectical deduction of concepts: it must be released from the phenomenality these notions generate, as any physical law emerges from the series of phenomena which express

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<sup>1</sup> In the French text, Proudhon uses the word “communauté”, community.

<sup>2</sup> *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l’Église*, éd. Rivière, I<sup>re</sup> étude, T. I, p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> *De la Création de l’ordre dans l’humanité*, éd. Rivière, ch. IV, p. 292.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

it.” Proudhon does not seek “the formulas of law in the fantastic surveys of a psychological illusion”, he asks them “from the positive manifestations of mankind<sup>1</sup>”. So it is by no means a utopian approach.

Precisely, in the *System of Economical Contradictions*, Proudhon continually fulminates against the utopians: “Socialism, in deserting criticism to devote itself to declamation and utopia and in mingling with political and religious intrigues, has betrayed its mission and misunderstood the character of the century.” Proudhon attacks the social projects that are only intellectual constructions: “... UTOPIA, – that is, no-place, a chimera...” “...socialism relapses from criticism into utopia”. Proudhon criticized, we shall see, the economy for failing to emerge from the mass of observed facts to bring out its laws. Simple observation is not enough; the observed facts must be analyzed, scrutinized by reason. This debate raises the question of Proudhon’s references to the Hegelian method, then the rejection of this method. Marx himself, who had rejected Hegel for Feuerbach, came back to Hegel – this is at least the explanation he gives of the method of *Capital*. In our opinion, referring to Hegel was a real political issue for Marx, for he was anxious to present his work as a production of German philosophy. The casual reading of Hegel’s *Logic*, which is supposed to have brought him the revelation of the method in *Capital*, is not convincing. In some way, the fact that the copy of Hegel’s book had formerly belonged to Bakunin shows that Marxism and anarchism are somewhat related... if not in their political conclusions, at least in the genesis of their theory and their methodological approach.

## **The method in the *System of Economic Contradictions***

In 1846 is published Proudhon’s *System of Economical Contradictions*, better known by the subtitle, “Philosophy of

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<sup>1</sup> *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l’Église*, T I, p. 281.

Poverty”. In this book are developed a number of ideas that will make their way:

- It is possible to relate the economic contradictions of the capitalist system to its logical contradictions;
- The relationship inherent to economic reality can be identified with a rational logic;
- The laws of economic phenomena are conform to the laws of thought;
- Therefore, capitalism is a set of intelligible relations whose internal structure can be discovered in order to understand its true nature.

It is difficult today to understand the extent of these assumptions in the days when they were expressed. They constitute a real revolution in thought. Just as Hegel had said that there is a reason in history, Proudhon says now there is a reason in the economic system of capitalism and that it is possible to analyze its mechanisms. But the study of the socio-economic system imposes a new method. In fact, by studying the “economic society”, a term that does not refer to economic relationships but social relations, what Proudhon will actually do is analyze the system of social contradictions.

Today Proudhon's book is best known for what Marx said about it in the answer he wrote, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in which he displays his talent as a pamphleteer. Yet Proudhon raises in his book a methodological problem that will have a curious fate. He believes that one can deal with the capitalist system as a structured whole, regardless of its past and its history; therefore it is necessary to study the sequence of historical developments not according to their history, but as a systematic totality.

Proudhon affirms that a scientific analysis of capitalism requires an adequate method, which includes the movement of its contradictions. This is an important improvement over the empiricism of liberal economists. Proudhon's originality lies in the fact that he introduced the hypothetico-deductive method in political economy. Marx criticized the *System of Economic Contradictions* after it was published because it did not refer to the only possible



method: the study of the historical movement of the relationships of production. But Proudhon's choice is deliberate; he wants to show that the categories of the economic system are linked by a permanent contradiction. Proudhon puts temporarily aside their historical dimension, their evolution, and only considers their relationship in their contemporaneity

Proudhon had already questioned the method of political economy in *La Création de l'Ordre* (Creation of order), in 1843. This science, he says, has not yet been established. A huge mass of facts have been observed, analyzed, but since no method had been established, political economy lacked certainty. "It does not dare to step out of the description of the facts" : the mere description of a phenomenon is not enough to reveal its internal movement. Three years later in the *Système des contradictions économiques*, he will raise the question again: the "historical and descriptive method, successfully used as long as it dealt only with operating as reconnaissance, is now useless: after thousands of monographs and tables, we are not more advanced than in the days of Xenophon and Hesiod".

Proudhon therefore disputes the validity of the historical method to analyze social phenomena, while at the same time Marx wrote the *German Ideology*, a book in which are affirmed his materialistic conception of history, a conception that is totally antagonist with Proudhon's method in *Système des contradictions économiques*. A year later, a chapter of *Poverty of Philosophy* will harshly criticize the methodological point of view of Proudhon, and it is essentially on this chapter we will focus.

According to Proudhon, capitalism is a complex system of relationships driven by contradictions. Political economy has so far been unable to account for its overall operation, because it focused on a flawed methodology, descriptive and historical. However, when considering society at a given moment, we see that all its mechanisms are contemporary and work simultaneously. This raises a problem of mode of exposure: by which part of that whole will we begin? How can we highlight, successively, the mechanisms of that whole system that work simultaneously? This problem is well posed – if not solved – by Proudhon:

“The phases or economic categories are in their manifestations sometimes contemporary, sometimes inverted: hence the extreme difficulty experienced by economists of all times to systematize their ideas.” (*Système des contradictions économiques.*)

From here also comes the chaos of the works of great economists. However, economic theories have their “logical sequence and series in the understanding”. It is, says Proudhon, this order that he has discovered. If we want to expose the mechanisms of the system, we must first choose a moment, a “phase”; we must abstract this moment from the whole of which it is a part. But in doing so, we destroy the delicate network of relationships that binds this category to the whole. If we are not careful, we end up feeling that this category – value, division of labor, machinery, competition, etc. – has a life independent from the whole mechanism. But the method of exposition must show the coherence of the whole. To clarify the content of capitalism, Proudhon therefore does not advocate the historical method, he proposes an approach that proceeds by economic categories developed in a logical sequence, and that expresses the mode of organization, content, or the laws of the system.

The order of categories is not one in which they appear historically, it is one that makes a theoretical picture of the mechanism analyzed. The way these categories are related with each other constitutes the theory of the system and, in this sense, this method allows to expose the “structure of the whole” in its “pure essentiality”, as Hegel said. The structure of the whole, because the system is represented as a coherent entity, as a “scaffold” (Proudhon’s word) whose parts are logically held together; in its essentiality because what is constituted is not a descriptive and realistic model of reality but an ideal model (or theoretical model) produced by conscience. “Truth, Proudhon had already said in *La Création de l’Ordre* (Creation of Order), is not only reality, the nature of things falling under the knowledge of man, it is also, in some cases, a creation operated by the mind, at the image of nature.”

Proudhon says that his ambition is not to write the history of the capitalist system but a theory of the system which, as such, expresses its history. He intends to describe the system as it is today in its finished form, to reveal the articulation of its economic structures. To do so, he builds an abstract model:

“In absolute reason all these ideas (...) are equally simple and general. In fact we reach science only thanks to a kind of scaffolding of our ideas. But the truth in itself is independent of these dialectical figures, and free of the combinations of our mind.” (*Système des contradictions économiques*)

The truth is free of the combinations of our mind: this means that the theory of reality is not reality itself. Proudhon does not intend to develop a logic of concept but a logic of reality, contrary to what Marx suggested. Marx indeed feigns to believe that Proudhon's economic categories are inherited from Hegel's categories, that they are pure concepts of understanding, subjective elements of consciousness, but empty of content. But according to Proudhon they are in fact only phases, moments of the process to be grasped at some point to make it accessible to the understanding. They are no more independent of the “real relationships” than the stroke of the brush is independent of the painting. The method of the *Système des contradictions économiques* organizes the categories of political economy in an order that Proudhon defines as that of the succession of ideas, a logical-deductive order. The order of exposition of the categories reflects the order by which thought accesses to the content of the system.

The category of monopoly cannot be understood without first analyzing the category of competition, for example. So it is no coincidence that Proudhon's book (as well as the *Capital*, much later) starts with the category of value, which is the fundamental category by which the essential structure of capitalism will be unveiled. It is, says Proudhon, “the cornerstone of the economic structure.” The *Système des contradictions économiques* shows that all the scaffolding lies on the deduction of the economic categories from the initial category of value (and of surplus value). The theory

develops the relationship of these categories from an initial category. “The ratio, says Proudhon in 1858, this is ultimately what sums up all phenomenality, all reality, all power, all existence (...). So that wherever the mind understands a ratio, should experience discover nothing else, we must conclude from this ratio the presence of a force and hence of a reality <sup>1</sup>.”

The genesis of capitalism is not explained according to the order of time (historical method) but according to the order of the understanding (logical method) ; it is an ideal genesis, highlighting its internal movement. We can say in summary that the method of exposition of Proudhon:

1. – Considers an initial category (hypothesis) from which are deduced derived categories;
2. – Builds from these derived categories a “scaffold”, in other words a theoretical model of the system, a simulation;
3. – Highlights the overall coherence of the structure of the system.

This echoes the idea already developed in *La Création de l'Ordre* (Creation of Order) in 1843: diversity is in nature, synthesis is in the self. “For the self to determine itself, for it to think, to know itself, it must have sensations, intuitions, it needs a non-self whose impressions meet its own capacity. Thought is the synthesis of two antithetical forces, subjective unity and objective multiplicity.”

From the diversity existing in society, the thought builds a subjective unity which enables to define each economic category in a logical relationship with the others but also in a necessary relationship. Proudhon proceeds from the simplest to achieve the more complex and, on the way, reveals the internal contradictions of the system. The method of *System of Economic Contradictions*, following the logical sequence of concepts, is necessitated by the very nature and the objective content of what is analyzed. This is an approach that reveals the relationship between observed reality and

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<sup>1</sup> *De la Justice, l'État.*

the model that is built. The truth, the reality of the system is unveiled only after a theoretical journey toward this reality.

Proudhon seeks to establish the “constant conformity of economic phenomena with the pure law of thought, the equivalence of the real and of the ideal in human facts”. There is a circular movement that actually reflects the circularity of all rational thought. We can only know through a research that sheds light on the object. But this research is only possible if it fits the content of the object:

“The definition of philosophy implies in these terms:

“1. Someone who searches, observes, analyzes, synthesizes, whom we name the subject or the self;

“2. Something that is observed, analyzed, whose goal we search and called the object or the non-self<sup>1</sup>.”

The subject is active, the object is passive: “which means we are the architect of the idea and that the latter provides its matter”. Starting from the mode of exposure of knowledge, it was natural to come to a reflection on its nature. Concerning the theory of knowledge, Proudhon says:

“We distinguish, willingly or unwillingly, in knowledge, two modes: deduction and acquisition. With the first, the mind seems indeed to create everything it learns (...)

“By the second, on the contrary, the mind, constantly checked in its scientific progress, works only with a perpetual excitement, whose cause is unintentional and out of the full sovereignty of the self.” (*Système des contradictions économiques.*)

Summing up the debate between idealists and materialists who sought to “account for this phenomenon”, Proudhon asks: does knowledge come only from the self as say the followers of the first school, or is it only a modification of matter? Spiritualism, says Proudhon, denying the facts, succumbs to its own impotence, but

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<sup>1</sup> *De la Justice.*

facts crush materialism with their testimony; the more these systems work to establish themselves, the more they show their contradiction. Proudhon tries to avoid falling into dogmatic materialism as well as in idealism; so he seeks to explain the method of “parallel development of reality and idea”, the constant conformity of the economic phenomena with the pure laws of thought, the equivalence of the real and the ideal (*Système des contradictions économiques*).

Materialism – as defined by Proudhon – and idealism have failed in their one-sidedness, wanting to be a complete theory of knowledge from their unique perspective. Proudhon tries to avoid this impasse by showing the unity of these two contrary movements, which has been understood as a concession to idealism. This naturally leads to the problem of the nature of reality and truth. The real is the synthesis of many determinations, it appears as the result of thought, but since all ideas are “necessarily subsequent to the experience of things”<sup>1</sup>, the real is the real starting point: its criterion is provided by the adequacy of thought and purpose. Proudhon anticipates what Marx will say almost 30 years later in his 1873 Afterword of *Capital*: “The ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.”

### **Marx’s answer: *Poverty of Philosophy***

The perspective developed by Proudhon in 1846 was immediately followed by an extremely violent criticism of Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. The polemical character of this book and the bad faith expressed in many passages disqualifies it as a real analysis of Proudhon’s thought. It is only indicative of what Marx thought of Proudhon, without this opinion having any normative character. One thing is interesting about this book, but it has never been identified by Marxist writers, if not, as we shall see, through somewhat embarrassed allusions: in 1846 Marx hysterically

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<sup>1</sup> De la Justice.

criticizes Proudhon's method, while he eventually adheres to it fifteen years later.

Proudhon himself will always be convinced he used "Hegel's dialectics" in the *System of Economical Contradictions*. In one of his last books, *Theory of property*, he justifies a change in his approach to political economy, saying: "... I realized that the dialectics of Hegel, which I had, so to speak, followed on trust in my *System of Economic Contradictions*, was wrong..."

Marx passionately tries to discredit the inductive-deductive method used by Proudhon and accuses him of not following the "historical movement":

"Economists explain how production takes place in the above-mentioned relations, but what they do not explain is how these relations themselves are produced, that is, the historical movement which gave them birth. M. Proudhon, taking these relations for principles, categories, abstract thoughts, has merely to put into order these thoughts, which are to be found alphabetically arranged at the end of every treatise on political economy." (Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*.)

He accuses Proudhon of seeing only abstract categories, "spontaneous thoughts, independent of real relations":

"But the moment we cease to pursue the historical movement of production relations, of which the categories are but the theoretical expression, the moment we want to see in these categories no more than ideas, spontaneous thoughts, independent of real relations, we are forced to attribute the origin of these thoughts to the movement of pure reason. How does pure, eternal, impersonal reason give rise to these thoughts? How does it proceed in order to produce them?" (*Ibid.*)

In 1846-47, Marx is totally blind to any possibility of using the inductive-deductive method to expose in their essentiality the mechanisms of the capitalist system. He had completed a year earlier *The German Ideology* which Proudhon could not have

known since the book was published only in 1928. More than half of the book is dedicated to a highly virulent criticism of Stirner, whose developments on alienation substantially undermined Marx's views on Feuerbach and on humanism<sup>1</sup>.

The *German Ideology* is seen as Marx's first account of his (and Engels' who is the co-author) theses on "historical materialism" (although the expression is never to be found in Marx's writings). It is therefore a transitional book in which Marx and Engels proceed to an update regarding their positions concerning the question of method. The two men clearly intended to use this method to explain the mechanisms of capitalism, and Proudhon's *Système des contradictions économiques* was using a totally different approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I do not consider Stirner as an anarchist, it is necessary to insist on the determinant role he played in the constitution of marxism. Which, of course, marxists won't admit. In 1844, Marx's thought was totally influenced by Feuerbach and his humanism; he enthusiastically mentioned the "great discoveries" of the philosopher who had "given a philosophical foundation to socialism". At that time Marx totally adhered to Feuerbach's humanism. When he says in the *1844 Manuscripts* that "communism is not as such the aim of human development", he means that the aim is Man with a capital M, not the proletariat. At that time he thought philosophy was the truth of religion. Stirner vigorously criticized Feuerbach for not having destroyed the Sacred but only its surface. Philosophy has only taken away the sacred envelope of religion. Feuerbach's "generic man" is a new form of the Divine and reproduces Christian morals. The very moment Marx wanted to show that the suppression of philosophy is the actualization of philosophy, Stirner showed that it can only accomplish itself as theology. These ideas were developed in a book, *The Unique and its property*, published in 1845, and were a shock to Marx. Stirner's critique of Feuerbach was obviously an implicit critique of Marx. All that, for Marx, was unbearable. Which explains why he wrote *The German Ideology* a book mostly known as the first (and very concise and rudimentary) exposition of Marx's theory of history, but in which one can read (in the integral version at least) 300 pages of hysterical attacks against Stirner. After that, Marx gives up the idea of "generic man" and all these humanistic concepts. Nowadays, when an author wants to insist on the "humanistic" aspect of Maxism, he must dig in the early writings of Marx, before Stirner's cold shower.



Quite understandably, when at that very moment Proudhon's book is published, in which a completely different method is used, Marx is not willing to bring into question his own approach. On the contrary, he sees an opportunity to square things up once and for all with Proudhon:

“But the moment we cease to pursue the historical movement of production relations, of which the categories are but the theoretical expression, the moment we want to see in these categories no more than ideas, spontaneous thoughts, independent of real relations, we are forced to attribute the origin of these thoughts to the movement of pure reason.” (*Poverty of philosophy*.)

Proudhon had a copy of Marx's book and noted in the margin opposite this passage: “He is forced to, since in society everything is, whatever you say, contemporary.” The meaning of this comment is clear: the capitalist system is a whole; all mechanisms operate simultaneously. To analyze it, one is forced to choose a point in the process, a phase (or category), and then to proceed logically from the fundamental category, the simplest category, to the most complex. The problem lies precisely in the choice of the initial category from which the theoretical model is constructed. In a note of the Pléiade edition of the works of Marx, Maximilien Rubel finds “very obscure” Proudhon's remark on the simultaneous nature of the mechanisms of the system<sup>1</sup>. But when later Marx radically changed his approach and made an absolutely identical remark, years after Proudhon, the obscurity will not strike Mr. Rubel. So we can measure the progress made by Marx between *Poverty of Philosophy* and *Capital* when we compare his successive statements on the issue of abstraction advocated by Proudhon.

In Marx 1847 said:

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<sup>1</sup> La Pléiade, Economie I, p. 1554.

“If we abstract thus from every subject all the alleged accidents, animate or inanimate, men or things, we are right in saying that in the final abstraction, the only substance left is the logical category<sup>1</sup>.”

What Marx says is perfectly correct, but in 1847, it is a criticism, although he will, fifteen years later, advocate the same method which consists in abstracting, in the analysis of phenomena, the “accidents” which do not make the observation pertinent.

We have seen that Proudhon intended to build a theoretical model – literally a simulation, expressed by the term “scaffolding” – of the capitalist economy, not to provide a history, although historical events might be reminded. This model must be relevant, that is to say that it must be seen in the essentiality of its mechanisms, stripped of all irrelevant factors that can disturb the operation or make its reading opaque. In itself, this method is perfectly commonplace: it is at the basis of all scientific research. Proudhon’s genius is that he tried to apply it to political economy. Marx will adopt this method fifteen years later, but in 1847, he is not in position to do it. Thus, when Proudhon starts with the category of division of labor to explain exchange value, Marx blames him for not developing its historical genesis:

“M. Proudhon does not enter into these genealogical details. He merely places a sort of historical stamp upon the fact of exchange, by presenting it in the form of a motion, made by a third party, that exchange be established.” (*Poverty...*)

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<sup>1</sup> We can compare what Marx says in 1847 and what he says in 1867, *twenty years later*: “The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and most free from disturbing influence, or, wherever possible, he makes experiments under conditions that assure the occurrence of the phenomenon in its normality. In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode.” (Preface to *Capital*.)

Surprisingly, we read twenty years later in the preface to *Capital*, that abstraction is the only method that can serve as an instrument for the analysis of economic forms.

“In theory, however, we assume that the laws of capitalist development act in their purest form. In reality there is only an approximation, which becomes larger as the capitalist mode of production is more developed and less adulterated by survivals of former economic conditions <sup>1</sup>.”

Hegel had made the distinction between development according to nature, as it appears to the understanding (reality is first, thought is conditioned to it) and development according to the concept, as it appears to reason (empirical reality is the effect of reason). In the relation between the two processes, Hegel chooses to grant effectiveness only to the second. Is real only the development according to the concept (reality is deduced from and is a consequence of the concept). The development according to nature, for which the concept is second and the reality is first, is nothing but an apparent process.

Here we find the methodological debate opposing Marx and Proudhon in 1847. Marx seems to say that Proudhon adopts Hegel's idealist views. Proudhon, he says, “believes he can build the world by the movement of thought”. But Marx misinterprets Proudhon, who does not say that the world is produced by thought: he simply says that to make the world – or political economy – intelligible, one must use a method of exposition that does not follow the historical movement but that deduces the real from the concept. This confusion between process of thought and reality will be found later in a caricatured way in the writings of those Marxists who constantly refer to “dialectical materialism”. Forgetting, or ignoring that “dialectics” is a process of thought, a way of analyzing reality, not reality itself, they are convinced it is a real process. This will provide such assertions as: “The dialectics of history wants...” The “Dialectics of history”, whatever it means, does not “want”

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<sup>1</sup> *Capital*, III, 2<sup>o</sup> section, Pléiade II, p. 968,

anything, it is the person who is speaking of dialectics that wants dialectics to “want” something.

Worse, we will have “explanations” such as: water is the thesis, heat is the antithesis, steam is synthesis. The students of elementary courses on Marxism will therefore think that dialectics produce steam... The fetishism of “dialectics” is absent in Marx. In fact, when reduced to the essentials, all the Marxist twaddle after Marx on the issue is simply used to describe a process that evolves and changes, or phenomena that are interacting. They add “materialist” to make it seem more “scientific”. The character of false knowledge of dialectics is particularly striking in the concept of “dialectics of nature” developed by Engels. There is no “dialectics” in nature, at most can there be dialectics in the thought that thinks about nature. Dialectics is a mode of reasoning, it is a way to approach a problem, a mode of apprehension of a phenomenon, it is not the phenomenon itself.

Saying that the production of steam is the “dialectical” synthesis of heat and water does not explain anything about the actual, physical process of production of steam, it only reveals the turn of mind of the person who sees things like that. The “dialectical” interpretation of a phenomenon pertains to ideology, not science. Philippe Pelletier wrote, quite rightly, about dialectics: “If it is only a matter of ‘interaction’, well, let’s drop the pompous words and speak simply of interaction”<sup>1</sup>.

Abstraction is, in Proudhon, only a means to apprehend reality by the logical-deductive process, it is not reality itself. In a long and tedious passage of *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx adorns his anti-Proudhon attack with brilliant Hegelian formulations concerning method. He quotes this famous passage of Hegel’s *Logic* about method, “the absolute, unique, supreme, infinite force, which no object can resist”, and adds:

“So what is this absolute method? The abstraction of movement. What is the abstraction of movement? Movement in

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<sup>1</sup> “La pensée sociale d’Élisée Reclus, géographe anarchiste”, *Le Monde libertaire* n° 1085 - du 22 au 28 mai 1997.

abstract condition. What is movement in abstract condition? The purely logical formula of movement or the movement of pure reason. Wherein does the movement of pure reason consist? In posing itself, opposing itself, composing itself; in formulating itself as thesis, antithesis, synthesis; or, yet, in affirming itself, negating itself, and negating its negation. How does reason manage to affirm itself, to pose itself in a definite category? That is the business of reason itself and of its apologists.”

This passage calls for several remarks:

- No thought, no theory can resist this question-and-answer machine-gunning, as noted by Kostas Papaioannou<sup>1</sup>. There is no well-argued refutation, only vituperations;
- While he tries to make a show of philosophy, Marx only gives us a hollow exercise in style;
- Above all, Marx gives credence to the idea that Proudhon places himself from the point of view of Hegel’s method (even Marx he also adds that he does it poorly). While he intends to refute Proudhon, Marx clearly takes his distances with Hegel.

Kostas Papaioannou, expressed strong reservations about Marx’s actual knowledge of Hegel; he writes that his developments on the German philosopher were only comments of the philosophy of Feuerbach. At the end of the logical-deductive process developed by Proudhon – but also by Hegel – the object which is analyzed appears in its totality, in its unity. The real can then seem to be the product of thought, it is only the product of thought that thinks the real.

A thought exists if there is something to think about, and in 1847 Marx does not seem to see that if reality actually is the cause, and thought the effect, the object is also subject to thought: the object is also the idea of an object, therefore in some way “produced” by thought. When in the Afterword of *Capital* (1873) Marx explains that the method of inquiry must “appropriate the material in detail”, “analyze its different forms of development”, “trace out their inner

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<sup>1</sup> *De Marx et du marxisme*, NRF-Gallimard, p. 165.

connection”, and adds that after this work is done, “it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction” he does nothing but assume a viewpoint he had criticized 26 years earlier...

Thought and reality are in turn condition and conditioned. Proudhon’s refusal to consider both idealism and materialism from a unique point of view is interpreted by Marx as an endorsement to idealism. However, to distinguish the objective from the subjective, reality from illusion, we ultimately have only one tool: thought, that is to say something eminently subjective. We know by induction that reality is prior to thought, but we also know that it is by inference that we know the reality, after the thought has selected the elements that constitute reality and those who do not.

## Stirner and Feuerbach

It seems however necessary to examine the critique Max Stirner made of Feuerbach. Indeed, it is Stirner, not Proudhon, who started – unintentionally, of course – the hostilities against Marx. This detour seems important because, in spite of what Emile Bottigelli says, we do not think that Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner had a negligible role in the evolution of Marx’s thought, although “the thought of Bruno Bauer is almost totally forgotten today and Max Stirner is an author of whom one occasionally talks about but that nobody reads.”<sup>1</sup> To speak with a minimum of pertinence of an author to whom Marx devotes 300 pages of controversy, it seems it is better to have read him...

In 1844 Feuerbach was the master thinker of Marx, Engels... and Bakunin ... and also indirectly of Proudhon. For a short time, Marx will speak with great enthusiasm of the great deeds, of the discoveries of the one who gave a “philosophical basis for socialism”.

“The unity of man with man, which is based on the real differences between men, the concept of the human species

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<sup>1</sup> Emile Bottigelli, *Genèse du socialisme scientifique*, Editions sociales, p. 171.

brought down from the heaven of abstraction to the real earth, what is this but the concept of *society*!”<sup>1</sup>

It was humanism that prevailed then in Marx's thought. We can read in the 1844 Manuscripts that “communism is not as such the goal of human development”, meaning that the goal is Man. Marx, with the post-Hegelians, believed that philosophy was the truth of religion: it was religion achieved into practice; in that he remained a follower of Feuerbach. Didn't Feuerbach say in particular that “modern philosophy results from theology – it is in itself nothing but the resolution and transformation of theology into philosophy”?<sup>2</sup> This enthusiasm, obvious in the 1844 Manuscripts and in the *Holy Family*, will feed Stirner with a substantive criticism against Feuerbach in a book published in 1845, *The Ego and His Own* – that is to say one year before the *System of economic contradictions*. So in a very short period, Marx will be seriously questioned twice.

Stirner blames Feuerbach for not having destroyed the sacred, but only its “heavenly dwelling” and having forced it “to move to us bag and baggage”<sup>3</sup>. According to Stirner, philosophy has done nothing but remove the sacred envelope of religion; he thinks also that it can grow and fulfill itself only as Theology. Feuerbach has built his system on a totally theological basis – “it also appears how thoroughly theological is the liberation that Feuerbach is laboring to give us” – , says Stirner, who adds that Feuerbach's “generic man” is a new form of the divine and that it reproduces Christian morality. This is a severe blow to the positions that Marx developed at the time.

Stirner comments:

“With the strength of despair Feuerbach clutches at the total substance of Christianity, not to throw it away, no, to drag it to

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Lettre à Feuerbach, 11 août 1844.

<sup>2</sup> *Manifestes philosophiques*, p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> *L'Unique et sa propriété*, Œuvres, Stock, p. 106

himself, to draw it, the long-yearned-for, ever-distant, out of its heaven with a last effort, and keep it by him forever. Is not that a clutch of the uttermost despair, a clutch for life or death, and is it not at the same time the Christian yearning and hungering for the other world?"

At the very moment when Marx tries to show that the abolition of philosophy is the achievement of philosophy, Stirner shows that "it is only as theology that [philosophy] can really live itself out, complete itself. The field of its battle to the death is in theology."

"To God, who is spirit, Feuerbach gives the name 'Our Essence'. Can we put up with this, that 'Our Essence' is brought into opposition to us – that we are split into an essential and an unessential self? Do we not therewith go back into the dreary misery of seeing ourselves banished out of ourselves?"

However, Man's generic being, the generic man borrowed from Feuerbach gave communism a philosophical foundation, thought Marx. This was a reality in becoming, the achieved essence of Man's alienated existence reconciled with the community. Stirner shows that this man is just another generic form of the divine, it only reproduces Christian morals; philosophy, he says again, is a lie: its role is socially religious. The situation became upsetting to Marx. Indeed, Stirner was getting more and more popular in German intellectual circles. After the *Unique*, he published *The Anticritique*, in which he ridiculed Feuerbach's argumentation whom Marx still regarded as his spokesman, but Stirner "grew favorably out of a confrontation with three mediocre polemicists who represented the elite of the German left", writes Daniel Joubert <sup>1</sup>.

"The influence of Stirner never ceased to expand: some Left Hegelians rallied and were telling everybody in Germany and France that communism was a religious illusion. From then on,

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<sup>1</sup> "Karl Marx contre Max Stirner" in *Max Stirner*, Cahiers de philosophie - L'Age d'homme, p. 188.



Marx will drop everything he was doing and endeavour to exculpate himself by breaking up with Feuerbach and presenting Stirner as a puppet.<sup>1</sup>

Stirner's criticism of Feuerbach will bear fruit. Marx radically changed his approach concerning communism, but not without first exorcising his demons by a long and thorough attack against Stirner in *German Ideology*.

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While Hegel's thought is a complex whole with its internal coherence, the successors of Hegel, wanting to stand out from the master, each took one aspect of his thought and developed it as the foundation of a whole. The reader may at first feel impressed by the radical language with which is wrapped the partial development of the disciple, but finally realizes that the master had often said the same thing, and better. Feuerbach emphasizes the idea that religion is a human creation, but Hegel had said it before him. Individualist anarchists who refer to Stirner might have been chagrined to learn that "it is only in the Christian principle that essentially the personal individual spirit acquires an infinite, absolute value."<sup>2</sup>

Stirner's "individualism" is nothing but a development of Hegel's self-consciousness. According to Hegel, self-consciousness now has "grasped the concept of its self", that is to say it has "seized the concept according to which it is reality in the certainty of itself". Self-awareness is no longer one of these "chimeras" belonging to the "first obsolete figures of spiritual self consciousness and have their truth only in presumption and speech", it is now "certain in itself and for itself of its reality". It no longer seeks to assert itself in opposition to the actual reality, "it has as object of its conscience the category as such", that is, says Hegel in a note, "the unity of self-consciousness and being". "Self-consciousness has for its own object the pure category itself, or it is the category become

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Leçons sur l'histoire de la philosophie*, Idées I, 168, note.

conscious of itself.” In other words the object of self-consciousness is itself. Which leads the philosopher to say:

“Self-consciousness has thus stripped itself of all opposition and of all of the conditioning of its operation; it is in all its freshness that it goes out of itself, not heading towards an Other, but toward itself. Since individuality is in itself the actual reality, the matter of action and the purpose of the operation lie in the operation itself. Accordingly, the operation has the appearance of the motion of a circle which freely in the void moves itself and in itself, which, unhindered, now expands and now restricts itself, and which, perfectly satisfied, plays only in itself and with itself.”

Let us note that in this quotation, Hegel does not mention the individual, but the *individuality*, which is precisely Stirner’s approach. The radical character of Stirner’s discourse can not hide the simple reproduction of Hegel’s thought. Indeed, the basis of Stirner’s thought is the questioning of all that is holy, source of enslavement; not only religion but also all idealizations: Good, Freedom, Love, etc. But in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel engages in a critique of sensitive certainty, which he opposes to rational knowledge. In his reasoning, he opposes the rigor of concept to romantic irrationalism. We find this astonishing sentence: “The beautiful, the sacred, the eternal, religion, love, are the baits required to awaken the desire to bite. Not the concept, but ecstasy; not the cold and progressive need for the thing, but the ignited enthusiasm must be the force that supports and spreads the wealth of the substance.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Back to German Ideology**

*German Ideology* was completed at the end of 1846. Mixed opinions concerning Proudhon can be found in the book, some favorable to Proudhon dating from before the negative answer the

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<sup>1</sup> *Phénoménologie de l’Esprit*, Aubier, p. 10.

Frenchman had made to a proposal of collaboration with Marx, and others, unfavorable, dating from after, or even reworked passages.

So Proudhon is either the incarnation of communism, or someone unable to get to the heart of a matter. In *German Ideology*, Proudhon is called into action against Stirner because he is rigorous, he bases himself on historical facts and shows “absolutely no sentimentality” (Saint Max, II<sup>1</sup>). But at the same time Marx explains that all the demonstrations of Proudhon are false. About *De la Creation de l'ordre dans l'humanité*, a book Proudhon wrote in 1843, Marx writes in *The German Ideology* that his serial dialectics are “an attempt to give a method to his thought”: Proudhon tries to “find a dialectic such as Hegel really gave it. So the parenthood with Hegel does actually exist...” etc. Strangely, after the *Système des contradictions économiques* was published, Marx will write that Proudhon didn't understand anything about Hegel's dialectics. The chapter of *German Ideology* where Marx asserts the dialectical proximity between Hegel and Proudhon, and *Poverty of Philosophy* where he explicitly says the contrary, were written in 1847, at a few weeks of interval! Such an attitude disqualifies whatever opinion Marx might have on any author.

However, Proudhon is far from being the main target of *German Ideology*.

Marx will react to Stirner's criticism against humanism by a violent attack against Stirner in a book that had not been published at the time, *German Ideology*. This book is a milestone in the evolution of Marx and Engels. It is a rather thick book in which the authors define for the first time the foundations of their materialist conception of history. Of this book, Marx said that he and Engels had intended to “settle accounts with [their] former philosophical conscience”. Referring to this period, Engels said in 1885 that Marx had already “drawn from these bases a materialist theory of history

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<sup>1</sup> *German Ideology*, “Saint Max”, II. French version: Édition La Pleiade, Oeuvres, Philosophie, p. 1260. But this opinion did not prevent Marx from writing the same year to Annenkov about Proudhon's “petty-bourgeois sentimentality”... (December 28, 1846.)

that was completed in its outlines, and we resumed our duty to develop in detail and in the most different directions our newly acquired way of seeing". (Engels, 1885 Preface to the re-edition of the "Revelations on the trial of the Koln communists".)

Indeed, the presentation of the new materialist theory of history is only a small part of the book, the rest is dedicated to a violent polemic against Bruno Bauer and especially against Max Stirner. Proudhon is mentioned only casually. This is an essentially polemical book, and if the authors meant to settle scores with their philosophical conscience, we can say that Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and especially Max Stirner played a determinant role in that philosophical consciousness.

The attacks against Stirner, called for the occasion "Saint Max", takes the most part of the book. The refutation, longer even than the "Unique", kept Marx busy for nine months and after that Marx mobilized his friends for one year to find a publisher. The stakes must have been important because Marx left his economic studies, of which one would think they were more urgent, to devote himself to the refutation of Bauer and Stirner. In a letter to Leske, in August 1846, he wrote:

"I had momentarily interrupted my work on economics. Indeed, it seemed to me very important to first publish a polemic against German philosophy and German socialism which follows, before turning to positive developments."

Later he pretended not to worry about the publication of the book. In 1859 he wrote:

"Basically, we wanted to examine our philosophical conscience. [...] We had achieved our main goal: a good understanding of ourselves. With good grace, we abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of mice.<sup>1</sup>"

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<sup>1</sup> La Pléiade, I, 274.

Marxist historians of Marxism, when referring to the *German Ideology*, usually just mention the polemic against Stirner and Bruno Bauer, without bothering to explain the contents of this controversy, nor in what way it was a step in the formation of Marx's thought. Emile Bottigelli writes, speaking of Stirner and Bauer:

“These writers exerted some influence on the environment in which Marx and Engels could make their voices heard. It was necessary that these intellectuals, whom the two founders of scientific socialism meant to convince of the truth of communism, be removed from the influence of philosophical speculation in which Bauer and his friends were dragging them<sup>1</sup>.”

We will not know more about the issue, for it is useless to go into detail, since the thought of the first is forgotten and that of the other is “the object of conversations between people who did not read him” – a most anti-scientific attitude... We will never know why Marx has worked so hard on this controversy against Stirner whom nobody reads. However, Stirner's criticism of humanism will bear fruit. Marx indeed will reject such concepts – total man, real humanism, generic being – whose idealism is too obvious. But he does not give up the essential part of Feuerbach's approach. He will only transfer from philosophy to science what Feuerbach had transferred from theology to philosophy: on this point we can say that Bakunin takes on Stirner's reflections, developing his critique of science as the new theology of the time. Yet it would be simplistic to assume that this conflict is in any way the expression of the opposition between Marxism and anarchism. Anarchism has nothing to do with it.

The genesis of the dispute between Marx and Stirner is interesting in at least one respect: it reveals that at one point Marx shared humanist views and that after Stirner's critique he rejected humanism. In other words, “Marxism” actually results as the consequence of Stirner's criticism of Marx's humanism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Genèse du socialisme scientifique*, p. 169-170.

Considering the fate the political regimes availing themselves of Marx have undergone, some Marxists today try to rehabilitate Marx by referring to texts prior to 1845, that is to say prior to *German Ideology*, so as to present his thought as a humanism. This is a misinterpretation, in any case a travesty of his thought. It is an attempt to reconstruct a proto-Marxism, a primitive Marxism which bears no relation to the real thought of the author of *Capital*.

Marx's explanation according to which *German Ideology* had been a "settling of scores with his former philosophical conscience" was taken without scrutiny by almost all Marxist authors who also have generally made no critical examination of Marx's argument against Stirner. Curious "settling of scores" with his philosophical conscience, in which the lowest polemics, insincerity and meanness look rather like an attempt to exorcise his own previous positions. The "refutation" Marx makes of Stirner consists of many filthy, personal attacks: "he was so intoxicated at the time that he rolled under the table"; Stirner married a "chaste seamstress"; he failed in the creamery trade; he missed his academic career, etc. Marx even gives the address of Stirner's favorite café and the name of the library he frequented: all things perfectly useless in the refutation of the ideas of a thinker.

But the future author of *Capital* forgets he was himself sentenced for drunkenness at the age of 17 and failed in his own academic ambitions. Franz Mehring, the Marxist historian, seems a bit disgusted when he speaks of Marx's book. It is, he says, an

"ultra-polemic, even more verbose than the *Holy Family* in its driest sections, and the oasis are much more scarce in this desert, even if they are not completely absent. When the authors show a dialectic penetration, it each time soon degenerates into hair splitting and quite petty quarrels about words<sup>1</sup>."

To sum up, Mehring says in elegant terms that *German Ideology* is even more boring than the *Holy Family*.

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Mehring, *Vie de Karl Marx* – édition établie par Gérard Bloch, éditions Pie, p. 401.

Stirner was not a minor character in the Hegelian Left, and his writings were not limited to the *Unique*. The value of his work was recognized by all, even his opponents, except Marx, of course, who never recognized the value of an opponent (and rarely recognized the value of anyone for that matter).

Stirner had written a report of Bruno Bauer's text, *The Trumpet of the Last Judgment*, that had not gone unnoticed; Stirner's articles were published in the *Rheinische Zeitung* (directed by Marx), they had been appreciated by many of the intellectuals of the time: "The False Principle of our Education", "Art and Religion", "The Anticritique". He had also published a study on "The Mysteries of Paris", before that of Marx included in the *Holy Family*. So it is not an anonymous writer who developed a critique of the communist system as an avatar of religious alienation, and who highlights the flaw of this system.

#### &&&Reprise

In July and August 1845, Marx spent a month and a half in England. He and Engels visited London and Manchester. He read a lot, on economy: free trade, banking history, gold, prices, the law of population, etc. Visiting slums, he discovered working class reality. He did not yet question humanism as such; on the contrary he intended to develop "real humanism".

Back in Brussels in early September, several months after the publication of the *Unique*, he is informed of the publication in Leipzig, in the same book, of a text written by Bruno Bauer, "Characteristics of Feuerbach", which is a response to the *Holy family*, and in which Marx is called a dogmatic, and a text by Stirner, "The Anticritique", a response to Moses Hess's "The Last Philosophers", but also an article by Szeliga. In short, the elite of the Hegelian Left. Marx, who did not want to be characterized as a "philosopher", is accused of being one. Stirner achieved there a great success among the German intelligentsia, and some Left Hegelians gave their support to his views – including Engels.

Until then, Marx had not grasped the importance of the *Unique* and had only vaguely intended to refute Stirner. He now understands that he cannot avoid settling accounts – with Stirner, but also with himself. Especially as Engels himself had nearly been converted to

Stirner. Indeed, on November 19, 1844, Engels wrote to his new friend a letter in which he says that Stirner, their former comrade of the *Doktorklub*, had just published a book that had caused quite a turmoil in the circle of Young Hegelians. Stirner is defined by Engels as “the most talented, independent and courageous member of the ‘Free Men’”. (*Die Freien*.)

At that time, Marx had completed the *Holy Family*, a book in which he wanted to be more Feuerbachian than Feuerbach. Marx and Engels then still adheres to humanism, but a humanism that no longer refers to Feuerbach’s abstract man but to the proletariat, the worker. Engels then aims at “reversing” the *Unique*, much as they later “reversed” Hegel’s dialectics, questioning the ambiguous aspects of Feuerbach’s humanism but keeping certain values and settling them on a firmer basis, on reality. Engels wants to “take the empirical man as foundation of man”, he wants to start “from the self, the empirical flesh and blood individual to raise progressively towards man”. He wrote to Marx:

“It is selfishness, disregarding any possible material hopes, that make us communists, and it is because of selfishness that we want to be men and not mere individuals.”<sup>1</sup>

Marx’s answer to these words has been lost, but we can understand from a letter Engels wrote to Marx on January 20, 1845, that the latter was strongly opposed to this approach. Embarrassed, Engels admits he got carried away: “I was still under the impression that had given me the book, but now that I closed it and that I could think about it more, I reached the same conclusions as you”...

It has been said that Stirner was the man of one book, which is unfair. He greatly contributed to the debates that animated the Left Hegelian milieu of his time. When the *Unique* was published in

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<sup>1</sup> Marx-Engels, Correspondance, T. I, Éditions sociales, pp. 340-348.

Engels – and maybe Stirner himself – were discovering an old approach. Bernard Mandeville, author of *La fable des abeilles* (1714) (The Fable of the bees), considers that selfishness is the constitutive element of societies.



1845, it caused a great impression – but it did not last. The book came at the worst moment and was completely out of place with regards the problems of the time: the young philosophers by that time had gone far beyond the interrogations of philosophy and were asking a question Stirner totally neglected: how to take action. The famous words of the “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845): “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, we must now transform it”, is perfectly commonplace for the time and for the circle of the Left Hegelians. Sometimes attributed to Marx, sometimes to Moses Hess, the philosophy of action had already been formulated in 1838 by Cieszkowski, for whom “action and social intervention will supplant true philosophy”<sup>1</sup>. It is this issue that is on the agenda on the eve of the 1848 revolution in Europe.

For it was assumed that Hegel's philosophy had reached the last stage of its evolution and that the problem now for the disciples of the philosopher was rather to determine what form and what content they were going to give to their action. While young intellectuals were talking about *praxis*, a term that was later to become fashionable, Stirner was still speculating on the “self”. History will settle the debate: three years after the publication of the *Unique* a revolution broke out that engulfed all of Europe, and from which Stirner kept completely aside. As for Marx, he will dedicate all his energy to promote among the German bourgeoisie a bourgeois democratic revolution; he will endeavor to temper the enthusiasm of the proletariat of which he will dissolve the party – the Communist League – and try to awaken the class consciousness of the... bourgeoisie. Marx's positions during the 1848 revolution in Germany will find their retribution in his exclusion from the first communist party in the history of the working class – a fact that is rarely mentioned in his official biographies<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Prolégomènes à l'historiosophie*, Champ libre.

<sup>2</sup> See: Fernando Claudin, *Marx et la Révolution de 1848*, éditions Maspéro, 1980.

## Marx and the reference to Hegel

It is usually considered that Hegel played a prominent part in shaping the structure and basic concepts of Marxism. Knowledge of Hegel, it is said, is essential to understand the Marxist theory of history. After Engels, it is customary to consider today that Marx had rejected Hegel's *system* but that he retained his *method* after he had "reversed" it. Nobody (except Bakunin, perhaps) seems to wonder whether method and system in that case are too interlinked to be separated. Our intention is obviously not to deny Hegel's influence but to try and look at it in its perspective.

On examination, we see that:

1. – In his early writings, Marx rejects Hegel, method and system together.

2. – Only later, in 1858, did Marx seem to "rediscover" Hegel when he writes to Engels that he has "accidentally" leafed through Hegel's *Logic*, of which he said that it had greatly helped him in to discover the method of elaboration of the theory of profit, but he does not explicitly adhere to Hegel's philosophy.

3. – In 1865, Marx makes another allusion to Hegel. His enthusiasm for Feuerbach has cooled down. He no longer praises the "sober philosophy of Feuerbach", as opposed to "Hegel's speculative inebriation": he now says that, "compared to Hegel, Feuerbach is very poor". In a letter to Engels (April 24, 1867), he admits that the "cult of Feuerbach" he used to show in the past was a bit ridiculous. He seems to take Hegel's side negatively, only because he realizes he is better than Feuerbach.

4. – In 1873, Marx mentions Hegel's philosophy again but only to defend it against those who accuse Hegel of being a "dead dog". He writes in the Afterword of *Capital*: "I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even here and there, in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him." Marx declared himself a disciple of Hegel only to dissociate himself from those who attacked the philosopher. The "coquetting" with Hegel's particular style rather

reveals that the reference to the philosopher remained quite superficial.

The real question seems to be that the reference to Hegel was an ideological stake aimed at linking Marxism to German philosophy, and justified the claims, which are commonly found in the writings of the founders of “scientific socialism”, concerning the superiority of the German proletariat, a direct heir of German philosophy. In his early texts, Marx considers Hegel’s *Logic*, to which he only makes a few allusions throughout his work, with disdain: it is a hoax. In the 40’s, when he writes his only philosophical texts, Marx had told his intention to engage in a “confrontation with Hegel’s dialectics and philosophy in general”, but in 1844 he is most of all busy praising the virtues of Feuerbach, of his discoveries and of his “real revolution in theory”.

Kostas Papaioannou’s thesis sheds an original light on the actual weight of Hegel’s influence on Marx. Here is a summary of his views:

- Marx’s thought is irrelevant to the problems of Hegelian ontology. In Marx there is no real criticism of the speculative philosophy of Hegel.
- The few brief references to Hegel’s *Logic* disseminated throughout Marx’s work “can in no way be regarded as a profession of faith”. Marx’s philosophical reflection in the 40’s was not about Hegel’s *Logic* but about his *Phenomenology* and “was intended to exalt the ‘discoveries’ of Feuerbach”.

In 1844, Feuerbach is the hero of Marx and Engels. The two men highly praise his merits for he has “demolished old dialectics and old philosophy”. It is to highlight the “great achievements” of Feuerbach that Marx criticizes Hegel’s speculative philosophy: the few pages he has written about it, says K. Papaioannou, were “much more commentaries of Feuerbach’s anti-Hegelianism than a direct criticism of the ontological doctrine of Hegel himself”. Papaioannou adds that there is a “wall of incomprehension and denial” between

Marx and the problems that Hegel had wanted to meet in his speculative philosophy. Marx only had a superficial, second hand knowledge of the *Science of Logic*. Pointing out a particularly obscure commentary of Hegel made by Marx in his 1844 manuscripts<sup>1</sup>, Papaioannou wrote:

“Who would recognize the *Logic* in this confused and almost illegible draft?”... “Should we add that these sentences

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<sup>1</sup> “The man estranged from himself is also the thinker estranged from his *essence* – that is, from the natural and human essence. His thoughts are therefore fixed mental forms dwelling outside nature and man. Hegel has locked up all these fixed mental forms together in his logic, interpreting each of them first as negation – that is, as an *alienation* of *human* thought – and then as negation of the negation – that is, as a superseding of this alienation, as a *real* expression of human thought. But as this still takes place within the confines of the estrangement, this negation of the negation is in part the restoring of these fixed forms in their estrangement; in part a stopping at the last act – the act of self-reference in alienation – as the true mode of being of these fixed mental forms; \* –

“[\* (This means that what Hegel does is to put in place of these fixed abstractions the act of abstraction which revolves in its own circle. We must therefore give him the credit for having indicated the source of all these inappropriate concepts which originally appertained to particular philosophers; for having brought them together; and for having created the entire compass of abstraction as the object of criticism, instead of some specific abstraction.) (Why Hegel separates thought from the *subject* we shall see later; at this stage it is already clear, however, that when man is not, his characteristic expression cannot be human either, and so neither could thought be grasped as an expression of man as a human and natural subject endowed with eyes, ears, etc., and living in society, in the world, and in nature.) – Note by Marx]

“– and in part, to the extent that this abstraction apprehends itself and experiences an infinite weariness with itself, there makes its appearance in Hegel, in the form of the resolution to recognise *nature* as the essential being and to go over to intuition, the abandonment of abstract thought – the abandonment of thought revolving solely within the orbit of thought, of thought *sans* eyes, *sans* teeth, *sans* ears, *sans* everything.”  
(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/hegel.htm>  
)

(Feuerbachian if there ever was) which are quoted with a most religious fervor, do not deserve to be taken seriously?"... "Generally, everything the young Marx said of Hegel's *Logic* bears too roughly the mark of Schelling for us to focus on it."

In conclusion, the author finally states that it is impossible to rely on texts such as the "1844 manuscripts" to make a critique of Marx's Hegelian philosophy, and that Marx had merely made a "spiritual parody" and a "questionable caricature" of the Hegelian method. We see that the question of the Hegelian sources of Marx's thought is worth asking, and that it can by no means be reduced to the simplistic assertions Engels proposes much later, in 1888, in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Let us add that the Hegelian gibberish Marx wrote in his 1844 manuscripts could in no way stand a comparison with the articles Bakunin published in the late 30's in Russian philosophical revues such as *Moskovskij Nabljudatel*.

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Marx declared that while he was working on the *Critique of Political Economy*, which was published in 1859, he had *incidentally* found – "by mere accident", so he says – Hegel's *Logic*. He wrote to Engels on January 16, 1858 that he leafed through the book, which greatly helped him find the method of exposition of his theory of profit:

"What was of great use to me as regards method of treatment was Hegel's *Logic* at which I had taken another look by mere accident."

And he adds:

"If ever the time comes when such work is again possible, I should very much like to write 2 or 3 sheets making accessible to the common reader the rational aspect of the method which Hegel not only discovered but also mystified."

It was a strange “coincidence” that put Marx in the presence of the *Logic* : Freiligrath, had “found and made me a present of several volumes of Hegel, originally the property of Bakunin”. Strangely, the man Marx later accused of being a “theoretical zero” had had not *one*, but “*several* volumes of Hegel”... Marxist authors mention the brilliant intuition and the so-called coincidence which miraculously places the method of exposition of the theory of profit as a consequence of Hegel’s *Logic*, and links it directly to German philosophy, but they usually forget to mention where the books came from, for it would contradict the usual Marxist assertions concerning Bakunin’s theoretical worthlessness.

We know that Bakunin thought very much of the *Logic* and of the *Phenomenology*. We know that, during a visit to his family in 1839 he had taken with him many books, including eleven volumes of the works of Hegel. These are probably the books he had brought with him to Berlin, which fell to Marx. Off course, Marx did not follow his plan to make available, in “2 or 3 sheets” (!!!) the thousand pages of the *Logic*...

The fortuitous character of the leafing through Hegel’s *Logic* is not really credible and it is unlikely that it had really served to find the method of exposition of the theory of profit. Marx had already been working on this for a long time and there is no doubt that even without this “coincidence” he would have found it anyway. Marx’s statement to Engels makes sense however if we consider his wish to assert an affiliation with German philosophy, and looks very much like an *ex post* explanation.

Besides, if Marx found in the *Logic* the inspiration for the logical-deductive method he developed in *Capital*, he might as well have found it in the *Phenomenology*, and one can wonder, since he was supposed to be a connoisseur of Hegel, why he needed a coincidence for the inspiration to come to him. The fact is that Marx never passed a PhD in philosophy but in law. His knowledge about philosophy, and Hegel particularly, was that of any Berliner intellectual of the time, but in no way academic. His doctoral thesis was about philosophy, but that was not uncommon at that time.

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*Phenomenology* intends to be a description of experience and to give this experience a systematic intelligence. There is a relationship between the descriptive and the intelligible element, the chronological and the logical element. This idea runs through the book and we have here very precisely the problem as it arises to Proudhon in 1847. Finally, one wonders if the desire felt by Marx to assert a reference to Hegel does not reflect the willingness to conceal the possibility of an identity of views with Proudhon, to which he had painstakingly reached. In other words, thanks to the so called "coincidence" that led him to leaf through Hegel's book, Marx realized that he could resort to logical-deductive method without having to refer to Proudhon.

The other hypothesis is that Marx refused to admit any other method than the historical method until he realized he could no longer avoid referring to the "categories" he had criticized in Proudhon. Hegel, previously criticized for his system, becomes now a reference for his method. This assumption, in any case, is consistent with the evolution of Marx's attitude in relation to Hegel and explains his discerning "method" and "system".

One can wonder, finally, about Marx's attitude with the French edition of *Capital*. He took care, says Maximilien Rubel, to withdraw all Hegelianisms in this edition, a decision which irritated Engels. One passage is particularly concerned in the 1873 Afterword of the French edition, precisely the one where Marx mentions the "mere accident". Obviously, if he tries to convince the German readers that he was inspired by the Hegelian method, he does not want the French readers to know it, probably because he had realized that those who had previously read the *System of Economic Contradictions* would have perceived the similarities between the two books and would not have swallowed the argument. The deleted passage is precisely the one where Marx openly declared himself a disciple of Hegel and where he acknowledges having "coquetted" here and there with his particular style.

We must understand the importance of methodological questions for Marx. That was what was supposed to give the communist

doctrine its scientific character. It is essential this method be a German contribution because it helps to justify that “the German proletariat is the theoretician of the European proletariat”<sup>1</sup>. This kind of statement is frequently found in the writings of Marx and Engels. Engels repeated in 1874 in the preface to *The Peasant War in Germany* that “if there had not previously been German philosophy, particularly that of Hegel, German scientific socialism – the only scientific socialism that has ever existed – would never have been founded”. It is this kind of statement that prompted Marx to rejoice that the French defeat in 1870 would transfer the center of gravity of the European labor movement from France to Germany, for the benefit of the German proletariat<sup>2</sup>.

### **Marx’s viewpoint in 1858 and 1865**

Ten years after his critique of Proudhon, Marx comes back to methodological issues but in radically different terms from those that he had developed in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. The change in focus is total. The *Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, prefigures the *Capital* which Marx will start writing a year later. This book was to give a halt to Proudhonian socialism. But curiously, Proudhon is mentioned only four times in the text, and only twice in reference to the reply Marx had made to the *Système des Contradictions Economiques*. The French author is only mildly attacked. In fact, Marx is concerned about a much bigger problem than Proudhonism: he is in a methodological stalemate. In *Poverty ...* (1847) he had stigmatized in scathing terms Proudhon’s refusal to resort to the historic movement. In the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1857), he re-examines the “method of political economy” (title of Chapter III). For ten years, except an uninteresting 20-page writing on free trade, Marx did not publish any economic work. Until 1852, he studied, gathered materials to begin writing his Economics, then stopped working at all.

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<sup>1</sup> “Gloses critiques”, 1844.

<sup>2</sup> See: Letter, Marx to Engels, July 20, 1870.



It is usually considered that material distress is the cause of the standstill in Marx's work. Without underestimating this factor – in other circumstances, material distress did not prevent Marx from working – it is more likely that he was blocked for lack of a satisfactory method, and he was unable to continue. The disillusioned remarks he sends to Engels about political economy, in a letter dated April 2, 1852, gives evidence of his dismay: “All this is beginning to annoy me. Basically, this science, from A. Smith and D. Ricardo, no longer made any progress, despite all particular and often highly sensitive researches to which one has been engaged.”<sup>1</sup>

This comment is practically a word to word echo to Proudhon's remarks concerning the innumerable monographs that finally don't explain anything: “Oh, monographs, histories! – we have been saturated with them since the days of Adam Smith and J. B. Say, and they are scarcely more than variations of these authors' words<sup>2</sup>.”

On December 18, 1857, Marx writes to Engels saying that he is doing a gigantic task and that he is eager to “get rid of this nightmare”. Marx is faced with the problem of the process of investigation on the one hand, the method of exposure of the other. How can it be possible to account for the mechanisms of capitalist political economy so as make them intelligible to the mind as a whole? Marx's trials and errors reflect his questioning. In the preface to the *Critique*, he says that he had deleted the Introduction because it “anticipated results not yet established”. He therefore recognizes that his method of exposition is not satisfactory. Proudhon, who had stressed that all categories of political economy are in action simultaneously, had correctly raised the question: by isolating one of these categories for analysis, do we not break the coherence of the system? Moreover, the existence of this category presupposes the existence of one or more others to which it is linked. In the General Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1857), Marx has not yet been successful in discovering a method of exposition both satisfactory to the series in the

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<sup>1</sup> Marx Engels, *Lettres sur le Capital*, Editions sociales, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Système des Contradictions Economiques*.

understanding, and consistent with the succession in time. The copious literature on the subject of successive amendments to the Plan of *Capital* shows that he was engaged in intense reflections on this subject. It is at this period that “by mere chance” he found the copy of Hegel’s *Logic* that had belonged to Bakunin.

On February 22, 1858, Marx wrote to Lassalle a letter in which he reveals that the situation is no longer blocked: “The work to which I am referring is *Critique of Political Economy*, or, if you like, the system of bourgeois economy critically presented. It is at once a presentation and, thereby, a critique of that system.” After fifteen years of study, he says: “I feel now that (...) I have come to be able to get to work.” The book will almost be finished at the end of the year, Marx wrote to Lassalle again, saying: “It is the result of fifteen years of research, thus the fruit of the best period of my life.” Marx also says that the book “presents for the first time, scientifically, an important point of view of social relations”. The *Critique of Political Economy* was published in early 1859. A letter from Marx to Weydemeyer reveals the political challenge posed by the book’s publication: “I hope to obtain for our party, a victory in the scientific field.”

In the Introduction, Marx asks: where should we start? “It is fashionable to preface economic works with a general part – and it is just this which appears under the heading ‘Production’...”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, “when examining a given country from the standpoint of political economy, we begin with its population, the division of the population into classes, town and country, the sea, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, prices, etc.” This is not the good approach, says Marx: “Closer consideration shows, however, that this is wrong”.

But the population is an abstraction if we leave aside the classes that compose it. Classes are a meaningless word if we do not consider wage labor and capital. These are nothing without exchange, division of labor, etc. We start from the concrete, the population, then by process of analysis we arrive at more and more

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

simple and abstract concepts. This method, says Marx, is wrong: it is “the historical one taken by political economy at its inception”.

The scientifically correct method is the one that considers the concrete as the “synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination. (...) the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete mental category...”

“...to consciousness, therefore, the evolution of categories appears as the actual process of production – which unfortunately is given an impulse from outside – whose result is the world; and this (which is however again a tautological expression) is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental fact, is indeed a product of thinking, of comprehension<sup>1</sup>.”

Should we add that the issue Marx addresses here is nothing new in European philosophy. Marx now discovers the necessity to call upon the use of *categories* such as exchange-value, etc., to explain the mechanisms of capitalism, and this discovery seems to excite him to the point of using the word 32 times in a relatively short text<sup>2</sup>. These categories can only exist as “an abstract, unilateral relation of an already existing concrete organic whole”. Although exchange-value “as a category leads an antediluvian existence” – that is, it has a *historical* existence – it is only through consciousness that it can be really understood, because this way “the evolution of categories appears as the actual process of production”:

“...This (...) is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental fact, is indeed a product of thinking, of comprehension; but it is by no means a product of

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<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.*

<sup>2</sup> In a relatively short text, the word is used 32 times.

the idea which evolves spontaneously and whose thinking proceeds outside and above perception and imagination, but is the result of the assimilation and transformation of perceptions and images into concepts. The totality as a conceptual entity seen by the intellect is a product of the thinking intellect which assimilates the world in the only way open to it<sup>1</sup>...”

Is it necessary to emphasize the spectacular reversal of Marx's standpoint? Ten years after the *Système des contradictions économiques*, where Marx very precisely attacked Proudhon for using categories, for considering the concrete totality as a conceptual totality, for considering that the concrete was a product of the idea which evolves spontaneously, etc., he now surprisingly advocates exactly what he had criticized Proudhon to do in 1847. It will have taken him over ten years to admit that to render intelligible a complex phenomenon, the best method was not necessarily to analyze the genesis of this phenomenon. Marx discovers that every economic category, such as exchange value, “cannot exist except as an abstract, unilateral relation of an already existing concrete organic whole”, what Proudhon had already expressed by saying that all categories were contemporary.

When Marx mocked Proudhon in *Poverty of Philosophy* because although he had understood “that men make cloth, linen, or silk materials in definite relations of production”, he had supposedly not understood that “these definite social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc.” and that “social relations are closely bound up with productive forces”, Proudhon had protested, noting on the margin of the book: “Lie: it is precisely what I say. Society produces the law and the matter of its experience.” In other words, society exists through its matter as concrete reality and through its laws as intelligible process. What does Marx say ten years after Proudhon, in the Introduction of 1857?

“When examining any historical or social science, so also in the case of the development of economic categories, is it always

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<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.*

necessary to remember that the subject, in this context contemporary bourgeois society, is presupposed both in reality and in the mind <sup>1</sup>...”

Once more, it is necessary to note that this is a question that has interested philosophy since the beginning, since Plato who says that we can know Reality only through the filter of our mind. In *Timaeus* he deals with the relation between the Ideas and the World. This interrogation has never left Occidental philosophy, so there is absolutely nothing original in Marx’s approach – no more than in Proudhon’s, by the way.

In 1847, Marx blamed the economic categories of being “as little eternal as the relations they express. They are historical and transitory processes”. What is his viewpoint ten years later? He announces that the first point of the plan of his study will include the determinations “which therefore appertain in some measure to all social formations” (“Introduction”.) And just before, after a long argument justifying his choice, he explains that...

“...It would be inexpedient and wrong therefore to present the economic categories successively in the order in which they have played the dominant role in history. On the contrary, their order of succession is determined by their mutual relation in modern bourgeois society and this is quite the reverse of what appears to be natural to them or in accordance with the sequence of historical development.” (*Ibid.*)

This is very precisely the idea that Marx had attacked in 1847 when Proudhon argued that “economic categories or phases are in their manifestation sometimes contemporary, sometimes inverted, and hence the extreme difficulty experienced by economists of all time to systematize their ideas”<sup>2</sup>. Marx had said in 1847 that in examining only one of these phases, Proudhon could not explain it without resorting to all the other relationships of society: it was not

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques*.

possible therefore to isolate one of these categories or phases and to study its logical connection with others. When Proudhon goes from one category to another – from value to division of labor, and then to mechanization, competition, etc., “he treats them as if they were new-born babes. He forgets that they are of the same age as the first”<sup>1</sup>. But Proudhon did not forget it at all, since he had specifically pointed it out in chapter IV of his book. He still denies this assertion of Marx in a marginal note: “I say precisely all that. Tell me how you would speak in turn of the objects of political economy ?”

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Clearly, in 1847, Marx perfectly understands the problem such as Proudhon outlines it, but he does not accept it. Therefore he is unable to solve this problem: all the mechanisms of political economy operate simultaneously, all the categories are contemporaneous, but it is impossible to expose them all simultaneously. We are obliged to display them in time: the pages of the book in which the categories are described cannot all be apprehended at the same time. One passage of Proudhon’s line of argument that arouses the strongest criticism of Marx is the one in which is developed the idea that “we reach science only by a sort of scaffolding of our ideas”. The term may not be pertinent but it expresses very well Proudhon’s idea: he wants to build a theoretical model of the system, we would call it today a *simulation*; he deliberately refuses to study the movement of history.

Proudhon adjourns the historical dimension of the economic categories he analyzes. However, this does not imply, in his mind, that these economic categories are seen as immutable and motionless; on the contrary he occasionally recalls the past evolution of the categories, he considers the trends of its future evolution; but these historical considerations are just an illustration that fits into the analysis without affecting the order of the categories.

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*.

In 1847 Marx was unable to admit the Proudhon's approach :

“When M. Proudhon spoke of the *serial relation in understanding*, of the *logical sequence of categories*, he declared positively that he did not want to give *history according to the order in time*, that is, in M. Proudhon's view, the historical sequence in which the categories have manifested themselves<sup>1</sup>.”

And Marx adds: “Thus for him everything happened in the pure ether of reason”; “now we have M. Proudhon reduced to saying that the order in which he gives the economic categories is no longer the order in which they engender one another.” There is a sentence missing in the English version<sup>2</sup>: “*In other words, it was the principle that made history, not history that made the principle.*” This last statement is clearly too controversial and contrary to the views of Proudhon, too clearly driven by bad faith to make it worthwhile refuting it. Proudhon notes on the margin of Marx's book: “Have I ever claimed that the principles are anything else than the intellectual representation, not the cause at the facts?” He could not be clearer: the order of exposure of the economic categories that Proudhon analyses is logical ; it is the order of succession of ideas.

Proudhon had therefore reached the idea that, for the sake of clarity, it was necessary to create a concept of “pure capitalism”, whose characteristics altogether constitute an ideal model, adequate and clear – which is never found in reality – so as to highlight the mechanisms of its functioning. He then analyzes the system not from the point of view of the historic succession, but from that of the sequence of logical categories that constitute it, because “in practice, all these things are inseparable and simultaneous”. However, the project to identify the logic of political economy does not lead to substitute abstract verbosity to reality. It is true that Proudhon's discourse is sometimes obscure, that he makes long digressions, that many proposals are awkward and, isolated from

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> *Poverty of Philosophy* was originally written in French.

their context (an exercise in which Marx was a master), they suggest an idealistic approach of social reality. But what Proudhon does deal with is the real contradictions of capitalism.

While in 1847 Marx criticizes the *Système des contradictions économiques* for giving ideal representations of the economic structure, for making abstract constructions, we see that the plan of Book I of *Capital* has some surprising similarities with the book Proudhon had published twenty years earlier. If Proudhon dedicates the “first period” of the constitution of the capitalist system to the division of labor, the hundred preceding pages introduce the problem by addressing the question of value, which Marx will also do twenty years later in *Capital*. Marx starts (First Section) by commodity, exchange-value, use-value, the form of value. Exchange value, said Marx in the *General introduction*, as a category, has an “antediluvian existence”. Yet he does not develop its historical genesis in *Capital*. He takes it as a constituted category.

The second section of *Capital* deals with the transformation of money into capital. After the chapter on value, Proudhon, shows that the division of labor is the source of capitalist appropriation in particular through increasing exploitation, which is dealt with by Marx in the third and fourth section, on the production of surplus value.

The sixth section of *Capital* on wages has its equivalent in Proudhon in Chapter IV on machinery, in which he shows that “the wage system is the direct consequence of the use of machinery”.

The process of accumulation of capital described by Marx in the seventh section, with its two important chapters on the transformation of surplus-value in capital and the general law of accumulation of capital, finds its equivalent in Chapters V and VI of Proudhon on competition and monopoly, which are precisely the mechanisms by which capital is concentrated on a large scale.

Of course, it is not possible to put an equal sign between the *System of economic contradictions* and the *Capital*. However, the movement of both books is the same: Proudhon in this area is undoubtedly the precursor of Marx. Few authors had noted the similarities between the two men regarding the *content* of their work, but the similarities in their *method of exposure*, it seems,



escaped most. As soon as 1846 Marx had yet fully understood what Proudhon wanted to do, since he clearly summarizes – without adhering – the perspective of its rival in his reply:

“In constructing the edifice of an ideological system by means of the categories of political economy, the limbs of the social system are dislocated. The different limbs of society are converted into so many separate societies, following one upon the other. How, indeed, could the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time, explain the structure of society, in which all relations coexist simultaneously and support one another <sup>1</sup>?”

Marx accurately describes Proudhon’s hypothetico-deductive method, which he will use twenty years later in *Capital*. This method, should we recall, is absolutely not a novelty, leads to a theoretical model of economic society rebuilt by categories after it has been somewhat disrupted by analysis. These economic categories are used in the process of exposure of economic theory. They have no life of their own. Proudhon (and Marx in *Capital*) develops a logic of reality, not a theory of concepts. Concepts, or categories, are only representations of reality.

Concerning Marx’s reaction, Proudhon thought he went to the heart of the matter when he noted on the margin of his copy of *Poverty of philosophy*: “The true meaning of the work of Marx is that he regrets that on every point I thought like him, and that I have said it before him. It is up to the reader to believe that it was Marx who, after having read me, is sorry he thinks like me!...” There might be a great deal of truth in this statement, but there is another explanation. Still strongly influenced by Feuerbach and left Hegelianism, Marx, we must remember, had written *The German Ideology* one year earlier, in which he developed his conception of history. The hypothetico-deductive method is then much too foreign to this German intellectual who had recently dismissed Hegelianism; he then could not give it any credit. Marx certainly had wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> *Poverty...*

write a book corresponding to the project Proudhon had achieved, but certainly not with the methodology of the *Système des contradictions économiques*.

But, contrary to what Marx might have said later, Hegel did not provide the key to the method of *Capital*; on the contrary it is his opposition to Hegel and the lack of knowledge of Hegel's developments on methodology that made him lose fifteen years. It is true that the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* develop the question of the chronological and logical sequence, but one should bear in mind that in 1847 Marx opposed Hegelian idealism and his method, and that he intended to establish the materialist method, which could only be historical.

It is *against* Hegel that Marx develops his thesis on "historical materialism" – an expression never to be found in Marx's writings – at the same time Proudhon developed a method that coincides with the approach of the introduction to the *Phenomenology*. In other words, in 1846, Marx's anti-Hegelianism prevented him from assimilating the problems exposed in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, just when Proudhon, who has not read the *Phenomenology*, assimilates this problem, but through other channels...

Twenty years after *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx completely sweeps away in *Capital* the criticisms he had made against Proudhon. He develops a mode of exposure in total opposition to the one he had advocated in *Poverty of Philosophy*, without ever, in fact, giving much precision. He has now found a mode of exposition that gives his book its unity, which ensures the understanding of the work and which constitutes it as a theory.

"Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected

as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction <sup>1</sup>.”

This passage, one of the few in which Marx gives an explanation on methodological issues, is presented by Marxists as a revolutionary innovation. One could easily use Marx's critique of Proudhon in *Poverty of Philosophy* to criticize the Afterword of *Capital*: it would be quite a sterile game. While throughout *Poverty...* Marx criticizes Proudhon because of his use of hypotheses to build a model, Marx now systematically uses this very approach in *Capital*, consisting in making assumptions which voluntarily limit the field of analysis so as to highlight the theoretical structure of the system.

From the basic hypothesis following which there are only two opposing social classes, for instance, Marx developed a series of deductions that will be used to expose the model. The reductive assumption of two antagonistic classes – and only two – is only used for demonstration purposes. Marx only builds a model (a “scaffolding” as Proudhon says), in which the relations between the capitalist class and the working class are reduced to the essentials. The question here is only to present the system as the “most typical form and most free from disturbing influence” (preface to *Capital*), which could disturb the clarity of exposition, to study capitalism in its pure abstract structure. It is no longer question of the “movement of history” Marx was mentioning in 1847, but of the essence of capitalism, its principle. In his other works society is of course not reduced to two classes: Marx did not, of course, think there were only two classes. Strangely, this reductive hypothesis has later founded the political action of some radical Marxist groups, which showed that they had not understood *Capital* at all...

The Proudhonian approach of capitalist society is much less economic than sociological. Beyond economy, Proudhon examines the reality of social relationship. The simplifying and controversial formula: “Property is theft” of course does not reflect the complexity of the genesis of capitalism, but it is used to point out

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<sup>1</sup> *Capital*, 1873 Afterword.

the reality of the relationship between two antagonist classes. Proudhon's *First Memoir on Property* ("What is Property?") had appeared as a revolutionary manifesto of the proletariat but also as an "absolute and altogether scientific" review of political economy:

"Proudhon puts an end to this unconsciousness once and for all. He takes the human semblance of the economic relations seriously and sharply opposes it to their inhuman reality<sup>1</sup>."

Proudhon had shown the conflicting and contradictory character of social relations within capitalism. His work provided a concrete critique of speculative dialectics, for the contradictions he analyzes are part of the social practice and reality of the bourgeois society. However, differences existed between the two men, that Proudhon had seen but of which Marx seemed unaware. Marx does not seem to have seen what Proudhon writes on anarchy. A common criticism of "vulgar communism" prevents Marx from seeing the passages in which Proudhon presents his critique of "community" and announces his theory of "economic association", notions which, by successive developments, eventually ended up under the form of the debate between political or economic association, Party or Union.

As Marx had initially overlooked the differences that had separated him from Proudhon, he now will neglect the points he has in common. "These extreme contradictions, says Pierre Ansart in *Marx et l'anarchisme*<sup>2</sup>, are intelligible only if one shows, beyond the formulas of the controversy, a common set of theories in which the differences are particularly acute."

To understand that Proudhon and Marx are in the same perspective, the confrontation of the *System of Economical Contradictions* and *Poverty of Philosophy*, who is the response, has absolutely no interest. We must confront Proudhon's work with *Capital*. Then Proudhon's book appears as an important moment in the evolution of Marx's thought, as the opportunity of a

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<sup>1</sup> *Holy Family*, ch. IV.

<sup>2</sup> *Marx et l'anarchisme, essai sur les sociologies de Saint-Simon, Proudhon et Marx*, PUF 1969.

methodological formulation, the discovery of an attempt which will provide a model for the draft of *Capital*. Proudhon opens a path, that of the structural analysis of the contradictions seen in their actual operation, the inductive-deductive method, which Kropotkin called, in *Modern science and anarchy* “the only scientific method”: “None of the discoveries of the nineteenth century – in mechanics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, anthropology – was made by the dialectical method. All were made by the inductive method, the only scientific method.”

If it is not in the detail of the mutual analysis that both authors are fundamentally opposed, one cannot deny that *Capital*, excluding moral indignations and philosophical digressions specific to Proudhon, shows a greater rigor of exposure. However, the main concepts exposed by Proudhon in the *System of contradictions* will be adopted by Marx, but they will be subject to critical reflection that will lead to new analyzes that Proudhon had not envisaged twenty years earlier.

Proudhon and Marx do not give the same importance to the conflicts inherent to capitalism. Much has been said for instance about Proudhon’s “opposition” to strikes and, as is often the case, much has been misunderstood. This interpretation of his thought is largely due to the comments Marx made of a text Proudhon wrote at the end of his life, *La Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Political capacity of the working classes). Marx had reported that Proudhon had been delighted at the repression of the miners of Rives-de-Gier who had been on strike. It is an outrageous lie. Proudhon simply wrote that *from the point of view of the legislation of the time*, the strike had been illegal and that the employers had been legally justified to repress it. Proudhon underlines, much to his regret, that “these coalition struggles between workers and masters (...) almost always end up favorably to the latter” and he does not deny that the workers were animated by a “sentiment or justice” and that they were right to complain. One must remember that under Napoleon III the repression of strikes consisted in the soldiers shooting at the workers and that Proudhon had been the witness of the massacre of workers during the revolution of June 1848, which had traumatized him. Marx never witnessed such scenes.

*La Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* is an answer to another text, “Le Manifeste des Soixante”, a manifest signed by 60 French workers demanding political reforms, legalization of strikes, the creation of trade unions, and workers candidacies for political elections. In his answer Proudhon shows his opposition to electoral tactics and expressed reservations concerning strikes. According to Proudhon, strikes, known as the “only way” for workers to defend themselves, are rather desperate actions than effective struggles adapted to needs. Pay rises occur in a system whose inherent laws cancel the effects. Economic struggles do not participate in the dynamics of the system. Strikes will not lead to a transformation of the conditions of living of the working class. Fundamentally, what Proudhon said was right, even if he missed an important point. But in no way is Proudhon *opposed* to strikes.

Proudhon, who has no experience of the proletariat organized as a class – any more than Marx, at the same period – misses an issue of which Bakunin will later be highly aware: if strikes do not affect fundamentally the working class condition, they are a powerful factor in revolutionary education. Marx doesn’t believe either that economic struggles might significantly alter the system, but they operate on two important points that Proudhon neglected: fixing the workday and maintaining wages at their natural price. Significantly, the French revolutionary syndicalists recognized in Proudhon one of their precursors. We can assume that they were smart enough to decide on whose side Proudhon was.

## On Hegel and method

Method, says Hegel in his *Phenomenology*, is nothing but the structure of the whole exposed in its pure essentiality. Hegel's intention, explained in the preface of the book, is to show how philosophy should be accomplished as a science. Our time is a time of gestation and transition to a new period, a new world is emerging, the Spirit is in the work of its own transformation. For the while, “the system of representations relating to the philosophical method belongs to a culture now gone” (*Logic*). Later, in 1827, in the preface to the *Encyclopedia*, he recalls his goal: to achieve

“scientific knowledge of the truth”, and he says that only method can lead to knowledge and keep the mind on the path leading to it. The question of method appears therefore as extremely important to the philosopher. The problem at stake is how to acquire knowledge, and how to expose it? This question will also appear fundamental to Proudhon and Marx when they will try to explain the mechanisms of political economy. We also know the importance that the “Marxist method” has taken to the communist movement to which it has become an article of faith.

The elements of the debate on method between Proudhon and Marx are therefore already embedded in Hegel's work: not only in his *Logic* but also in the *Phenomenology*. When in 1847 Marx attacked Proudhon's method, he seems to ignore totally the problem as Hegel had exposed it. It is surprising that this German intellectual had not taken advantage of Hegel's methodological reflections. Indeed, the *Phenomenology* reveals the author's questionings as to how to give an intelligible form to science:

- First we find Hegel's intention to describe the experience of consciousness, which leads to develop a philosophy of history following the order of chronological succession. But Hegel does not seek to make sense of events in the order of their historical succession. *Phenomenology* is not a philosophy of history.

- Secondly there is the attempt to show the evolution of consciousness by analyzing the movement of reason in a logical order.

Hegel wants to reject none of these processes:

1. The development according to nature shows the concept as something mediated, as a result by which we go from one reality to another by movement, by an action. Here the mediated concept is opposed to immediate knowledge, which is subjective faith.

2. But to affirm the principle of idealism – and this is precisely the viewpoint from which Hegel places himself – it is necessary to get rid of the development according to nature (or time). The concept has no condition nor assumption outside of it, it is the

unconditioned, the absolute. We are thus faced with two conflicting requirements: the choice of Hegel is to reduce the development according nature to the level of an apparent process and to promote the development according to the concept to that of a real process. However, Hegel does not reject the process according to nature. *Phenomenology* asserts on the contrary a connection between the descriptive and the intelligible aspect, between historical necessity and logical necessity. The historical understanding of the concept and the conceptual understanding of historical reality are inseparable.

Strangely, none of the commentators of Marx wondered why, for ten years, from *Poverty of Philosophy* to the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx was literally stopped in his work. No one either has questioned the blatant contradiction between what Marx says in 1847 in *Poverty of Philosophy* and the indications he gives on method in the 1857 Introduction, in the preface to *Capital* and in the 1873 Afterword. Above all, nobody sees a relationship between Marx's blank period of over ten years and his deliberate refusal to use the inductive-deductive method Proudhon had used.

In 1847, Marx tries to discredit his opponent, having previously highly praised him. He wants to demonstrate that Proudhon is an idealist:

- Objectivity is a condition for knowledge to have a content; since there is no thought if there isn't first an object to think about, the object is also the condition of thought;

- Reality actually is the cause, and thought the effect; but what is thought is also a product of thought. What initially was the cause becomes effect and vice versa. Thought and reality are alternately condition and conditioned.

Reality is prior to thought and independent of it, but we can recognize reality only through a process from which it emerges as the result of a selection made by thought. Reality and Idea, says



Proudhon, follow a “parallel development”<sup>1</sup>, they determine each other. Of course, the Real is first, but it must be acknowledged as such by thought.

“The most eminent philosophers began to search with incredible ardor the compatibility between perception and reality, the subjective and the objective, the noumenon and the phenomenon, the ones absorbing the object in the subject and idealizing the world, which, this way, was the dream of the mind; the others, externalizing, materializing, pantheizing the Self, or rather identifying the Self and the non-Self, the subjective and the objective, in a higher unity ... transforming the world, Man, thought, into a sort of evolution of this absolute<sup>2</sup>.”

When he asserts that spiritualism, by denying the facts, succumbed to its own impotence, while materialism is crushed by the testimony of facts, Proudhon wants to show that the Real cannot be apprehended by a unilateral process. Marx did not say anything else in the *General Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1857: we also remember that Proudhon had argued that the mind seemed to create everything he apprehended by the deductive method. The passage in which Marx defines the nature of the concrete is situated after an analysis of the two methods of political economy, according to the historical process and through the logical process.

Proudhon had observed that an immense quantity of facts had been observed, that everything had been analysed but that political economy was deprived of certainty because it had not reached a proper method. Proudhon adds:

“The historical and descriptive method, successfully employed so long as the work was one of examination only, is henceforth useless: after thousands of monographs and tables, we

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<sup>1</sup> *Système des contradictions économiques.*

<sup>2</sup> Proudhon, *La Création de l'ordre*, p. 261.

are no further advanced than in the age of Xenophon and Hesiod. The Phenicians, the Greeks, the Italians, labored in their day as we do in ours: they invested their money, paid their laborers, extended their domains, made their expeditions and recoveries, kept their books, speculated, dabbled in stocks, and ruined themselves according to all the rules of economic art; knowing as well as ourselves how to gain monopolies and fleece the consumer and laborer <sup>1</sup>.”

The first remark we can make is that this is the same discourse as that of Marx, but it is made 10 years earlier.

The second remark is that Proudhon does absolutely not exclude history in itself from his reflections.

This “first course”, which Marx rejects, “attenuates meaningful images to abstract definitions”; the second “leads from abstract definitions by way of reasoning to the reproduction of the concrete situation” <sup>2</sup>.

“The second method shows that ‘economic systems were evolved which from simple concepts, such as labour, division of labour, demand, exchange-value, advanced to categories like State, international exchange and world market. The latter is obviously the correct scientific method.’ (Introduction.)

## Fetishism of method

The reversal of perspective, it is needless to say, is complete. It is simply a return to the method which Marx had previously criticized. This page of the *General Introduction* is a landmark in the evolution of Marx's positions on method:

“For example, the simplest economic category, e.g., exchange-value, presupposes population, a population moreover which produces under definite conditions, as well as a distinct

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<sup>1</sup> *Système des contradictions économiques.*

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.

kind of family, or community, or State, etc. Exchange-value cannot exist except as an abstract, unilateral relation of an already existing concrete organic whole. But exchange-value as a category leads an antediluvian existence. Thus to consciousness – and this comprises philosophical consciousness – which regards the comprehending mind as the real man, and hence the comprehended world as such as the only real world; to consciousness, therefore, the evolution of categories appears as the actual process of production – which unfortunately is given an impulse from outside – whose result is the world; and this (which is however again a tautological expression) is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental fact, is indeed a product of thinking, of comprehension; but it is by no means a product of the idea which evolves spontaneously and whose thinking proceeds outside and above perception and imagination, but is the result of the assimilation and transformation of perceptions and images into concepts. The totality as a conceptual entity seen by the intellect is a product of the thinking intellect which assimilates the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the artistic, religious and practically intelligent assimilation of this world. The concrete subject remains outside the intellect and independent of it – that is so long as the intellect adopts a purely speculative, purely theoretical attitude. The subject, society, must always be envisaged therefore as the pre-condition of comprehension even when the theoretical method is employed.”

We will see that the “epistemological swing” operated by Marx has not been unnoticed by Marxist authors and that it has created a sort of uneasiness which led them most of the time to somewhat evasive arguments: they all tried to show that Marx never gave up the “dialectical method”. Lucio Colletti for instance said of this passage: “The essential data which interest us are all contained in this page. Like any true thinker, Marx recognizes the irreplaceable role of logical-deductive process”<sup>1</sup>. Should the reader implicitly

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Marxisme et Hegel*, Champ libre, p. 123.

understand that before this acknowledgement Marx was not an “true thinker”? Colletti does not ask the question: why did it take Marx so long to recognize the logical-deductive process?

Many authors take note of this recognition. Some, like Preobrazhensky, will really seem embarrassed, but none will note that this is a radical change of course following more than ten years of silence during which nothing was produced in the economic field. Colletti considers this as a natural evolution of Marx's thought – which is indeed the case – but does not indicate that this evolution contradicts his earlier positions. Of course Proudhon is never mentioned. It is generally accepted that the use of the logical-deductive process is a “discovery” made by Marx, but everybody seems to ignore that this process is perfectly common in sciences. Proudhon's genius was simply to apply it to political economy.

When, after 1857, Marx modifies his methodological approach and converts to the inductive-deductive method, it is impossible to believe that he did not have in memory his polemic with Proudhon. It is difficult to give an explanation to a ten-year paralysis in Marx, but it is probably fair to say that his visceral anti-Proudhonism is for something. This is not an epistemological break but an epistemological obstacle.

The fact is that method is an important issue because it is what gives Marxism its “scientific” character. Althusser for instance, explains in *Pour Marx* that the practice of Marxist leaders “is not spontaneous but organized on the basis of the scientific theory of historical materialism”. A Marxist leader is a sort of concentrate of historical materialism. Unfortunately, the term “historical materialism” is not used by Marx to describe his method. A systematic review of a significant sample of his works shows that this term never appears. However, it is found in the writings of authors who wrote introductions or presentations of Marx's works. Strangely the expression is not found in some of Engels' significant works such as *Anti-Dühring*. It nevertheless appears in the preface to the 1892 English edition of the text. At that time, Marx was dead.

The terms “dialectical materialism” and “materialist dialectics” never appear in Marx. “Dialectical materialism” is a typically Stalinist term. It is not our object to propose a genesis of the use of

“historical materialism”, “dialectical materialism” and “materialistic dialectics” but it is evident that they are apocryphal creations attributed to Marx without examination. Marx would in any case probably have been opposed to the use of the term “dialectical materialism”, which is a contradiction in terms and has no more sense than the expression “spiritualist materialism”. Marx had stressed that the Real is only the product of thought that thinks the real – a quite commonplace finding at the time. With “dialectical materialism”, Thought thinks the real and creates it.

Although Marx's texts on issues of method are few, the fetishism of method is one of the characteristics of the movement that claims to follow him. This fetishism reaches its peak in Lucaks' assertion according to whom historical materialism is the “most important weapon” of the proletariat who “receives its sharpest weapon from the hands of true science”, *ie*, precisely, historical materialism<sup>1</sup>.

Generations of activists have accepted without question this mode of reasoning inherited from the scientific optimism of the nineteenth century. It was thought that science was opening an era of indefinite progress, which would inevitably lead to the emancipation of Mankind. In asserting the primacy of science over philosophy, Marxism was only expressing the historical trend of bourgeois society of his time. In his course on history of philosophy, Hegel said that “every philosophy is the philosophy of its time”, that it is “a link in the chain of spiritual developments, and can therefore satisfy only the interests of its time”. To Marx and Engels, science takes over philosophy.

This idea also falls to the point; it marks a halt. Marx could not ignore this passage from Hegel on the temporary nature of philosophy as an expression of general trends of a period. This threat also weighed on Marxism. By decreeing the end of philosophy and by giving Marxism the value of a science, Marx thought he responded in advance to this objection. Escaping the status of philosophy, Marx's thought also avoids that awful determinism according to which a philosophy can only satisfy the interests of its time. One could certainly argue that scientific

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<sup>1</sup> *Histoire et conscience de classe.*

theories themselves are transient, that they are doomed to be supplanted by other theories based on different assumptions, but Marxism is not intended to be a scientific theory, it is a science, the supreme science, one might say. To many marxists, it is the philosopher's stone.

But one could also argue that if Marxism is a science, its assumptions should be universally accepted, at least by those who accept its basic presuppositions, which is obviously far from the case. Since science takes over philosophy, then, in the words of Engels, it is no longer question to "imagine sequences in one's mind, but to discover the facts". The new science does not lose time on speculations, it reveals the real movement of society. It achieves universality. Since it is the science of reality, it does not have to be exceeded for it is of all time. It explains society in the past, present and future. This leads to Lenin's surprising assertions

"From this Marxist philosophy, which is cast from a single piece of steel, you cannot eliminate one basic premise, one essential part, without departing from objective truth, without falling a prey to a bourgeois-reactionary falsehood<sup>1</sup>."

Engels believed that the dialectical method developed by Marx and the method used in the natural sciences was the same. He could rely on some of Marx's reflections, particularly in the preface to *Capital*, where he says: "My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history..." etc. It is doubtful, however, that the historian or the sociologist work the same way as the biologist or the physicist. Bakunin will deny it categorically, objecting on the one hand that in the sciences of society one cannot make experiments, and secondly that we can never capture all the parameters that determine an event or a social fact. One can only give general trends.

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<sup>1</sup> Lénine, *Matérialisme et empiriocriticisme*, éditions du Progrès, p. 461. (How Bogdanov Corrects and "Develops" Marx)

The scientific and dogmatic rigidity of some Marxist authors concerning the scientific nature of the method inherited from the master shrugs off the fact that an investigative method can give very different results when the parameters are many and complex, as it is precisely the case when analyzing social phenomena that can not, as Marx says, use “neither microscopes nor chemical reagents” (preface to *Capital* 1867). A scientific method of analysis or investigation is expected to lead to consistent, and obvious results. To consider the multiplicity of Marxist chapels this is obviously not the case.

Many authors have noted that the path Marx had followed to achieve the method of exposition of *Capital* has been difficult. Many of them address the issue with some uneasiness. Preobrazhensky for example, strongly reaffirms in the first chapter of *The New Economic*: “Is it not obvious that we must study our economy by letting ourselves be guided by the Marxist method?” But he seems confused by the “differences of application of the method of dialectical materialism due to the concrete matter of the study.”

“In order to grasp the fundamental dialectical law of development of capitalist economy and its overall balance, it is first necessary to rise above all the phenomena of concrete capitalism that prevent us from understanding this form and this movement in their purest aspect <sup>1</sup>.”

The Bolshevik leader poses the problem as Marx had. The need to “construct a concept of pure capitalism”, in other words, the use of abstraction, of “simulation” – precisely what Proudhon had done – is not “the most characteristic difference” between what Preobrazhensky called the “universal sociological method” of Marx and the method of his political economy. So there would be a method for the study of society and another for the study of economics: Where then is historical materialism?

The difference appears when Marx analyzes this “pure capitalism”, using an “analytical- abstract method adapted to the

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<sup>1</sup> Preobrajenski, *La Nouvelle économique*, p. 87, EDI.

specific matter of the study”. After a somewhat confusing attempt to explain this method, which he sees that this is not the “usual materialistic dialectics” (*sic*), Preobrazhensky circumvents the difficulty by calling it “abstract analytical dialectical method” (*sic*)! Dialectics has been saved! At no time, of course, is highlighted the contradiction between building a concept of “pure” capitalism, that is to say, a theoretical model, and Marx's critique of that same method in *The Poverty of philosophy*. One can point out the contradiction in Preobrazhensky: if the method is adapted to the particularities of the matter to study – which is a perfectly conceivable point of view – you must not speak of “universal method”.

Maurice Godelier is one of the authors who deals the most thoroughly and clearly about the problem of method in *Capital*. Marx, he says in *Rationalité et irrationalité en économie* (Rationality and Irrationality in Economics), implements the categories of the capitalist economy and develops them in a certain order, which expresses both the content of the system and its organization, *ie* its laws. The chapter on the structures of the method of *Capital* repeats and explains the passages of the *General Introduction* of 1857, of the *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, of the 1867 preface to *Capital* and the Afterword of 1873. Godelier endeavours in particular to explain the use made by Marx of economic categories that are the foundation of the hypothetico-deductive method by which the latter will be able to explain the laws of the system. At no time however Godelier reported a possible contradiction between *Capital* and *Poverty of Philosophy* on the question of the method of exposure. This book is in fact not even mentioned in the chapter in which this issue is addressed.

Maximilien Rubel also addresses the method of *Capital*, and stresses that Marx “remains strangely quiet about his methodological choices”. Lassalle, he said, was the only one to get clarifications, “limited it is true”, about the “methodological principles that led Marx to establish the series of six sections in an order of historical, logical and dialectical succession”<sup>1</sup>. Marx

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<sup>1</sup> *Marx critique du marxisme*, Payot, p. 371.



follows a precise methodological rule “that leads him to proceed from a given order of concepts”. Rubel adds that the plan of the *Economy* can not be separated from the method discovered fifteen years earlier (referring to to the *German Ideology*), nor from Marx’s recent researches.

Let us note however that it is paradoxical to consider an “order of historical, logical and dialectical sequence”. It is one, or the other. *Capital* – and the *System of Economical Contradictions* fifteen years earlier – show that the order of logical succession has nothing to do with the order of historical sequence, and that dialectics does not have much to do with the work that Marx published in 1867. The “method discovered fifteen years ago” in Rubel’s words, is nothing but the never named “historical materialism”. Rubel seems to realize there is a difference of approach between *Poverty of Philosophy* and *Capital* but, instead of developing the matter, he merely asserts that the recent discovery of Marx cannot be separated from his earlier researches.

Something bothers Rubel: he indeed attempts to show that Marx, in his evolution, had developed a plan in six parts, of which only one has been written, and which included a book on State. The book that Marx has not written was to establish its author as a theorist of anarchism (*sic*). This plan was based on specific methodological positions which Marx could not have questioned, says Rubel, without questioning his projected book on the State. How indeed could Marx have “made a change in his plan without informing his readers of this decision and of the methodological reasons that made it necessary? The plan and method having been selected and released at the same time, the potential discovery of a new method of exposure would have forced him to abandon the scheme in two triads. Can anyone seriously imagine Marx operating such a disruption without explaining clearly the reasons?”

It might be objected at first to Maximilien Rubel that there is a contradiction in his own reasoning: first he says that Marx is secretive about his methodological choices, and then he claims that Marx never would have changed the plan without informing his readers. In fact there is a heated debate between several schools, one which asserts that Marx would have, at some point, changed his

plan, with several sub-schools differing on when this change occurred, and a school that claims the unity in time of the plan of the Economics.

As for the reasons that might have led Marx not to reveal any change in his plan, we can imagine at least one: because he has changed his method, and he did not want to insist too much on this issue. The substance of the debate is, indeed, that the change of plan is linked to a change in method: what Preobrazhensky had vaguely sensed, Rubel did not even see. Marx himself is also extremely laconic about his method, since he does not even name it. At no time he speaks of “dialectical materialism” – a term coined by Engels – or even “historical materialism”. He simply mentions “the materialist foundation” of his method, which is a commonplace, or even his “dialectical method” as opposed to that of Hegel. To describe this method, Preobrazhensky speaks of “abstract analytical dialectical method”, which doesn’t mean anything, no more than Rubel’s order of “historical, logical and dialectical” succession.

Those who refuse the idea of change of plan theorize the continuity of method. Those who speak of modification of plan consider the possibility of an evolution in his method, without much insisting, and try to “save the essentials”.

Henryk Grossmann is the main supporter of the “changing of plan” school. He says that Marx, in 1863, rejected the method according to the principle of “matter” and adopted the method according to the principle of “knowledge”, which is a way of saying, with a vaguely Hegelian terminology, that Marx does not apply the “historical materialism” but the inductive-deductive method<sup>1</sup>.

Roman Rosdolsky, a Ukrainian Marxist activist, agrees with Grossmann’s thesis on the modification of plan, but does not accept the reasons given by him. Closely analyzing the draft of *Capital*, he focuses on the reasons which have led Marx to change many times

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Le changement du plan structurel du Capital et ses causes*, 1929, in German ; and *Marx, l’économie politique classique et le problème de la dynamique*, Champ libre, where some allusions are made concerning this topic.

the plan and method of elaboration of his work. He writes in particular:

“... if, in *Capital*, the influence of Hegel seems at first sight to appear only in some notes, the Draft must be characterized in its entirety as a reference to Hegel and his Logic – as radical as the ‘materialistic overthrow’ of Hegel might be<sup>1</sup>.”

That is to say that, from the draft to *Capital*, two different methods are used, although Rosdolsky remains very secretive about the scope that this modification may have.

Pierre Naville is one of the few authors who mention Proudhon in this debate on method. As a good Marxist he naturally affirms Proudhon’s incompetence in terms of Hegelian philosophy. Implicitly, this means that Hegel’s philosophy was a necessary step to achieve a clear understanding of socialism, but Naville remarks that the introduction of dialectics, of the movement of contradictions made by Proudhon was a “very new phenomenon in political economy”. In other words Proudhon was right, but he was wrong to be right.

It should however be noted that if Proudhon was for a while fond of Hegel, it only lasted a short time. The innovative nature of Proudhon’s contribution did not consist in introducing dialectics in political economy, but the inductive-deductive method. Unfortunately, Naville only slightly touches upon this important question of method, and then endeavors to show Proudhon’s formal mistakes. However, he says:

“Labor, property, profit etc., therefore appear as contradictory concepts, that is to say relations, which could vary only under the effects of a movement of practical, concrete resolution, of an operation absorbing previous oppositions<sup>2</sup>.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rosdolsky, *Genèse du Capital chez Karl Marx*, préface de 1867, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Naville, *Le Nouveau Léviathan*, t. I, p. 311, Anthropos.

The rest of Naville's text consists in a compared comment of Marx's critics of Proudhon's method and of Proudhon's annotations in the margins of Marx's book. The formal remarks Naville makes are sometimes justified; however we might regret that in his chapter on "Dialectical method and economic categories", Naville speaks neither of method nor of economic categories, and that he does not deal with the element which is the real innovation of Proudhon's book, the use of the hypothetico-deductive method to the study of political economy.

Naville has obviously no difficulty in challenging the "dialectics" of Proudhon – although he does not always do it convincingly. He is certainly right to criticize Proudhon for not making the distinction between division of labor in the workshop and social division of labor, but at the same time, Marx did not make that distinction either. Moreover, if he is also right to note that Proudhon had hitherto never read Marx, we must also remember that the final form of Marx's economic theory of capitalism had not yet been developed at the time when Marx read the *System of economic contradictions*. It is therefore wholly inadequate to oppose Proudhon's arguments in 1846 to the developments in Marx's theory twenty years later.

Indeed, it is only ten years after *Poverty of Philosophy* that Marx uses such basic concepts as the distinction between variable capital and constant capital; the representation of the value of a commodity as the sum of constant capital, of variable capital and surplus value; the distinction between absolute surplus value and relative surplus value; and, most importantly, the essential distinction between labor and labor work force. This distinction, in fact – which Marx did not make in 1846 – is truly the definitive break between bourgeois theory and socialist theory, and it is precisely absent from a text in which Marx attacked Proudhon as a "petty bourgeois theoretician" !

We can also mention a book written by Henri Denis, *Logique hégélienne et systèmes économiques* (Hegelian Logic and economic systems)<sup>1</sup>, in which the author analyzes the methodological variations and trials and errors of Marx's economic thought. The main stages he isolates are roughly the same as those given in this

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<sup>1</sup> PUF, 1984.

study, particularly the 1857-1858 stage: Hegel's inspiration; admittance of being in an impasse. H. Denis wonders if Marx is "conscious of having given up being guided in his analysis by Hegelian dialectics or, if you will, that he decided with a perfect view of the consequences that results, to abandon the Hegelian developments contained in the *Grundrisse*? This seems unlikely"<sup>1</sup>.

A little further, he writes:

"If in fact Marx gave up at the end of 1858 the so exciting attempt he made in the *Grundrisse* to deal in Hegelian terms of the nature of value and capital, it is almost certainly because it conflicted (without his perfectly realizing it) with historical materialism ..."<sup>2</sup>

1878: new reference to Hegel, dialectics is again abandoned. "But then again, the attempt that Marx led to present a dialectical analysis of the life of capital is doomed to failure. And it does not seem excessive to say that he will now explicitly recognize its failure"<sup>3</sup>.

We shall end by mentioning an interesting debate among experts on the influence of Hegelian dialectics in Marx. In *Le Matérialisme dialectique* (Dialectical Materialism), Henri Lefebvre argues that we must wait until 1858 to discover the first non-pejorative mention of Hegelian dialectics<sup>4</sup>. Merleau-Ponty instead states that "Marx starts with dialectical thinking: it is entirely within the principle according to which one can not destroy philosophy without achieving it."<sup>5</sup>

So we can record the extreme confusion existing on the question of Marx's method, largely due to the fact that Marx himself never clearly explained it. Authors who have studied this issue seem

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Pp. 63-64.

<sup>5</sup> *Les aventures de la dialectique*, Gallimard, p. 84.

unable to agree, which, for a supposedly “scientific” doctrine, is a serious handicap in terms of credibility. This leads naturally to the conclusion that the only way to resolve this contradiction is to consider that the solutions provided by the various authors who have studied this problem are only the reflection of the political stake posed to them by their own interpretation of the Marxist method.

## Marxism and Science

One must keep in mind that the Marx who, in 1846, responds to the *System of Economical Contradictions* of Proudhon is not the mature Marx. He is someone who is trying to apply a “scientific” method to the study of society and especially to its economic functioning. But Marx believed he had found this method, and he just exposed it in *The German Ideology*. It will take him years to realize the inadequacy of this method to the object of the work he undertakes. One can only speculate on the reasons for the delay: the awareness of this inadequacy is probably the reason why the manuscript of *The German Ideology* was left to the “gnawing criticism of mice”, according to the expression of Engels, and has not been published.

According to Georges Sorel, “the term of scientific socialism, commonly adopted in Germany for the doctrines of social democracy, has greatly contributed to confusion in the studies done on the work of Marx”<sup>1</sup>. But it wasn’t Marx who coined the term: it was already used by Proudhon in 1840 in his First memoir on property, *What is Property?*

Georges Sorel wrote in 1910 in his introduction to Arturo Labriola’s *Karl Marx*:

“We must add that in socialist literature there is a recurring idea according to which Marxism is a materialism, that is to say knowledge organized in a manner similar to that of natural

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<sup>1</sup> Préface à la traduction française, par Edouard Berth, du *Karl Marx* d’Arturo Labriola, éd. Rivière, 1910.

science. We have therefore been led to believe that Marx had built his theories with concerns similar to those encountered by the contemporary scientist. It is a fundamental error that will not be allowed to be committed after the criticism Labriola presents us.

“When I tried in 1898 to find out the sources that were used by Marx, I was struck to see that the references of the *Capital* show surprising gaps in the knowledge of the author. He had read leading economists with minute attention, many English books devoted to English history, but on France, on the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, he really knew but little.

“Although he has repeatedly argued that to understand the social relations of an era, one must refer to processes used in production, his technological studies had remained singularly rudimentary. (...)”<sup>1</sup>

“When we start from the fact that Marx was not penetrated with the scientific spirit of the nineteenth century, it becomes easy to understand why his work has given rise to such contradictory judgments.”

One can indeed wonder about the actual level of scientific knowledge that Marx had in relation to his time. In *Capital*, for example, he explains that the social relations of a period reflect the processes used in production, the relationships of production. One can read in the writings of Marx that “the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist”<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, the hand-mill does not date from the Middle Ages but from the Antiquity: it does not characterize a society with the feudal lord, but that with the slave

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<sup>1</sup> Marx seems to confirm Sorel’s opinion in a letter he wrote to Engels (October 13, 1851): “Incidentally, during my recent visits to the library, which I continue to frequent, I have been delving mainly into technology, the history thereof, and agronomy, so that I can form at least some sort of an opinion of the stuff.” But the letter also shows that Marx was working hard to fill the gaps...

<sup>2</sup> La Pléiade, vol. I, p. 79.

owner. The disappearance of slavery and the transition to feudal society is linked to the appearance of the water mill <sup>1</sup>.

Let us consider another example. When describing the evils caused by overwork, Marx explains in *Capital* (in 1867) that a uniform and continuous work weakens the “tension and the centrifugal force of the spirits” (*die Spann und der Schwungkraft Lebensgeister*). Such a vocabulary, in 1867, shows that Marx is far behind the knowledge of his time, and shocks in a work that intends to be scientific. The French scientist Claude Bernard had published two years earlier his *Introduction to the study of the experimental method*, and fourteen years before his *Recherches*, and it is assumed that the energy of the body is powered by the combustion of sugar, the same way the steam engine runs on coal. No doubt, if Marx had known this he would not have failed to note the analogy.

Contrary to popular belief, Marx did not pass a doctorate in philosophy: he had been enrolled in a law school in Berlin since 1836, but the subject of his doctoral thesis was philosophical. He presented his thesis at Jena in 1841, on the “Difference of the philosophy of nature in Democritus and Epicurus”, and his degree was conferred *in absentia*, that is to say in his absence.

It is symptomatic that the sympathies of Marx in this thesis are to Epicurus, while it is Democritus who undeniably is the scientific mind: the former is surprised at nothing, does not seek knowledge by science but by the *ataraxia*, by philosophy; he does not question the testimony of the senses. The Greek word *ataraxia* is, for the Epicureans, just what nirvana is for Buddhists, an absolute tranquility of the soul.

The sun, according to Epicurus, is about two feet in diameter because it is as great as it seems, while Democritus, well versed in geometry, knows it is great because it is far. Democritus traveled the world collecting experiences, knowledge, observations, he learned from the Persians, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Indians, while Epicurus

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<sup>1</sup> In 1888, Engels read again the *German Ideology* and realized to what point their “knowledge in history and in economic history was still deficient” (Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Etudes philosophiques*, préface, Editions sociales, p. 14).



leaves only his garden at Athens to get two or three times in Ionia to visit friends. Democritus seeks the reality behind the appearance: "It is only in opinion, he says, that hot and cold exist; for there are only atoms and the void". Although the subject of the thesis deals with the philosophers of ancient Greece, it concerns the philosophy of nature, that is to say, physics. But when one reads this thesis, one finds no evidence it has been written in the nineteenth century. The way Marx discusses the atomic system of the ancient Greeks brings his work much closer to the old medieval scholasticism than to contemporary discoveries, at a period when scientists are making enormous steps. Atomistics had been in ancient Greece only a conjecture, but in the decades that preceded the writing of Marx's thesis, it had become a genuine science.

Dulong and Petit could now weigh atoms, if they could not see them. Avogadro is able to determine the relative amount of molecules contained in a bottle of gas relatively to another.

Knowledge of the outside of the atom has made considerable progress between 1800 and 1840, and Prout, an Englishman, made in 1815 an incursion into the interior of the atom, since he noted that the atomic weights of various bodies are multiples of those of hydrogen, which led him to conceive the principle of the *unity of matter*: again, there is *no doubt* that if Marx had been aware of this theory, he would have referred to it. Let us suppose that a century after Marx's thesis a student wrote a PhD a thesis on the ancient atomists: is it conceivable that he should not at least say *something* about contemporary research and make some remarks on the relationship between matter and energy? Just to show he knows? <sup>1</sup> Apparently, the echo of contemporary research has failed to reach the law school in Berlin. Marx spent his formative years in an

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<sup>1</sup> Among the scientists that have marked the XIXth century, let us mention Dalton, Proust, Dulong, Petit, Avogadro, Ampère, Faraday, Berthollet, Gay-Lussac, Bladgen, J-B. Dumas, Prout, Berzélius. The only German we could mention is Humboldt (for whom Bakunin had a great respect) but who is not of German training since he had worked five years with Gay-Lussac.

environment that had not been touched by the scientific spirit of the nineteenth century.

Yet the word “science” is constantly referred to in German universities. The philosopher Hegel had written *The Science of Logic*. But the word “science” did not have the same meaning it has today. At the end of his first year of law, Marx wrote to his father about philosophy of law : “...I realized, once again, that I could not make it without philosophy. So I threw myself into the arms of this science in peace, and I wrote a new fundamental metaphysical system”<sup>1</sup>. It is not a misuse of the word. In another passage of the same letter, he says: “What drives Democritus off is on the one hand the desire to learn, which leaves him neither cease nor rest, and on the other hand the failure to find satisfaction in real science, that is to say, philosophy.”

So true science is *philosophy*. What about “scientific socialism”, then?

Conversely, when young Marx refers to science in the sense we understand it today, he uses another expression: we learn that since philosophy had not satisfied Democritus, he “threw himself into the arms of positive knowledge”... In the Middle Ages science is the knowledge of the scriptures. In the eighteenth century in France, are called “philosophical” the researches in astronomy, physics, etc. which are, today, “scientific” matters. Conversely, in the early decades of the nineteenth century in Germany, was called “science” the knowledge of philosophical systems: is qualified as “scientific” the application of one of these systems to observed facts or to the conclusions that has been drawn from positive investigation. And we imagine that facts had better not contradict philosophical systems.

These details explain the notion of “scientific socialism” used by Marx and Engels. Actually, the term was “invented” by Proudhon in 1840, but in another context. The expression used by Marx and Engels is not linked with French socialism: it is a notion directly inherited from German philosophy. Marx and Engel’s “scientific socialism” is the application of philosophical methods to the study

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<sup>1</sup> Lettre du 10 novembre 1837.

of social phenomena, much more than a scientific approach in the sense that it has today. Thus, when Marx and Engels criticize a work of economics, they attribute to the critique of the philosophy of the author (Proudhon or Dühring) a disproportionate place. Because if there is a flaw in the philosophical system (and there is always one, if you look closely) the work is no longer “scientific”.

The debate about Marx’s method doesn’t turn around the empirical perception of our senses and I don’t think the example of the empty space between the atoms that constitute the wood with which the table is made is really relevant to explain how Marx came to the method he uses in *Capital*. That there is in society a “surface” and “depth beneath the surface” is unquestionable, but for our purpose this is not the question.

There is in French a very abundant literature about the genesis of the method in *Capital*. Most of these books are written by Marxists and they are of great interest, but unsatisfactory because they all show a certain uneasiness. Most of these authors seem conscious that there is something wrong, and they don’t know what, and they make great efforts to rehabilitate dialectics against all odds, because in fact the method Marx uses in *Capital* is the inductive-deductive method, the only scientific method – which *precisely* defines the book as a scientific approach to political economy. A fact that Bakunin had perfectly understood.

## Conclusion

Proudhon is quite difficult to read even to a French reader. His style appears today old-fashioned, very “19<sup>th</sup> century”, which is not the case with Marx, at least in the French translations. Proudhon is often taken away by his argumentative eloquence, he makes constant and long digressions and forgets to stick to facts. He does not take into account that the reader does not need to know *all* the chain of ideas that led him to a conclusion. In the middle of a demonstration, he thinks it necessary to come back to a point he had developed in another book several years earlier and asks his reader to be patient enough to follow him: “I warn them that they only owe me at least five minutes of attention...” (*Capacité politique*)

The reader often has the impression Proudhon is a “hair-splitter” and he isn’t wrong. Besides, when Proudhon wants to dispute someone’s viewpoint, he dedicates long pages to develop that person’s ideas, placing himself from the point of view of this person. An inattentive reader can easily come to think that the opinion Proudhon develops is his. He often uses what we call in French the “raisonnement par l’absurde”, the reasoning by the absurd (*reductio ad absurdum* in latin), an argumentative technique in which he is a master. All this does not contribute to clarify the exposition of his doctrine...

It is absolutely wrong to say that Proudhon did not understand large-scale industry.

He could not have written his *Système des contradictions économiques* if he hadn’t had in mind large scale industry. However, this book is largely a premonition, because limited companies, which created the legal structure that enabled the development of large scale companies, were to be created in France in the 1860’s under Napoleon III.

Besides, he wrote a book, *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* (Manual of the Speculator at the Stock Exchange) a fantastic description of financial speculation which is still actual today. In this book he invented the expression “industrial feudalism” (féodalité industrielle) to refer to the big industrial monopolies <sup>1</sup>.

The question of property in Proudhon is extremely complex, because at that time it was excessively difficult to develop a socialist program concerning land property in a society in which 85 or 90% of the population were rural. His opinion has been misunderstood because he was motivated by tactical considerations. You couldn’t face millions of small land-owners and tell them: you must collectivize your land. He tried to explain small land owners that capitalism itself was depriving them of the land, but in no case he advocated state ownership of the land: he advocated municipal ownership.

On many questions, Proudhon’s opinion has been simplified, caricatured to the point it was no longer recognizable.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. [http://monde-nouveau.net/ecriture/?exec=articles&id\\_article=227](http://monde-nouveau.net/ecriture/?exec=articles&id_article=227)

But one thing should be recalled:

- He is the first author who affirmed that social contradictions are the consequence of the private property of the means of production;
- The appropriation of the means of production by the capitalists condemns the workers to the wage system;
- Surplus value defines what can be considered as capitalist theft;
- Work is the only creator of value;
- Profit is a portion of work that has been appropriated by the capitalist;
- The end of exploitation can only be achieved by the destruction of capitalism;
- The State is the organization of the defense of the interests of the capitalists.