

## Introduction

When I told Edward Castleton that I intended to translate a few chapters of Pierre Ansart's *Sociologie de Proudhon*, he asked me: why not translate Proudhon? Basically he was right, but he was reasoning like an academic. Castleton is an American researcher and teacher of philosophy and history at the University of Franche-Comté in Besançon, Proudhon's hometown. He is one of the leading specialists on the author of *What Is Property?* and is the current president of the Société Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. His remark, however, ignored one fact: Proudhon, more than anyone else, needs his thought to be synthesized so that it is accessible to readers who cannot devote twenty years to reading his complete works. This is all the more true since he is often difficult to read, even for a French reader.

This is where Pierre Ansart comes in. *Sociologie de Proudhon* is the perfect tool to lead the reader through the arcana of the thought of an author I have come to consider as one of the greatest thinkers of the nineteenth century.

The critical analysis of Proudhon's immense work is not an easy task. In *Sociologie de Proudhon*, Ansart has fortunately avoided attempts to explain Proudhon's work. He has managed to highlight the essential points of Proudhonian thought without dismissing its contradictions. None of Proudhon's works can be considered as sociological in the strict sense of the word. That was not his intention, and it certainly was not Ansart's intention to "prove" that Proudhon was a sociologist in the sense that we understand it today. However, he does give a good account of Proudhon's desire to seek objective knowledge of society. Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* (1846) is an

investigation of the mechanisms of capitalist society that anticipates *Capital* by twenty years in terms of both the concepts employed and the method of exposition.<sup>1</sup>

*Sociologie de Proudhon*, published in 1967, was originally intended for students. The author's ambition was to make Proudhon's social thought known but probably also to remove all the excess from it in order to unveil the underlying thought. We can say that what most distinguishes Marx from Proudhon is that the former quite quickly found the structure around which he built his thought, whereas the latter was in a permanent state of research, which gives a seemingly contradictory character to his work. Proudhon's thought is constantly moving because each of his books is the result of circumstances. In order for it to appear in its unity, Ansart has made a synthesis that restores its essential structure, renders it intelligible and reveals to what extent socio-logical concerns can be found in Proudhonian thought, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Naturally, when one speaks of Proudhon one also thinks of Marx. The merit of *Sociologie de Proudhon* is that it addresses the conflict between the two men through the common sources from which they drew. This approach is often obscured by Marxist authors who do not want to recognize Proudhon's thought as having any normative value.

Significantly, a year before *Sociologie de Proudhon*, Henri Lefebvre, a "heterodox" Marxist, published *Sociologie de Marx* as part of the same series. In my opinion, Lefebvre's book is an indispensable complement to Ansart's. Both books, which were made accessible to French students at the time of the strikes of May–June 1968, had a real impact on the theoretical education of this generation.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See René Berthier, "Proudhon and the Problem of Method," *Monde Nouveau*, June 9, 2012, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article407>.

2. Henri Lefebvre (1901–91) was a French Marxist philosopher and sociologist best known for pioneering the critique of everyday life, for introducing the concepts of the right to the city and the production of social space, and for his work on dialectics, alienation, and criticism of Stalinism, existentialism, and structuralism.

The task undertaken by Ansart to reveal the common sources of the thought of Proudhon and Marx was taken up two years later with the publication of his doctoral thesis, *Marx et l'anarchisme : essai sur les sociologies de Saint-Simon, Proudhon et Marx* (Marx and Anarchism: Essay on the Sociologies of Saint-Simon, Proudhon and Marx).

Why “Marx and anarchism” when Saint-Simon and Proudhon occupy the same position?

Pierre Ansart attempts to find the sources of Marx’s theory of the state by comparing his writings with those of Proudhon and Saint-Simon. In doing so, he shows both how much Proudhon’s and Marx’s thought are indebted to Saint-Simon’s and how much Proudhon’s economic thought has influenced Marx. This is why *Sociologie de Proudhon* constitutes a necessary introduction to the reading of *Marx et l'anarchisme*.

Like Proudhon, Marx made a systematic critique of utopian socialism and political economy: they attacked the same opponents. Thus, Pierre Ansart wonders if “the vigor of Marx’s criticisms of Proudhon” is not due in part “to the similarity of their concerns, to their belonging to the same intellectual milieu in which the differences were all the more noticeable because they were small.” On this point, I do not share Ansart’s opinion. Proudhon and Marx undoubtedly had similar preoccupations, but there is nothing to say that they belonged to the same intellectual milieu.

The German intellectuals exiled in Paris tried desperately to win Proudhon over to them. Karl Marx and Karl Grün competed with each other for his good graces and to convert him to Hegelianism.

It has been said that Proudhon’s knowledge of the German philosophers was superficial, that he did not undertake a methodical study of any of these thinkers, seeking confirmation of his own views in their work rather than a deepening of their thought. Marx is undoubtedly largely responsible for this image of Proudhon, but his own knowledge of Hegel deserves to be seriously reexamined. Although Proudhon’s knowledge of these thinkers was limited by the lack of available translations in his

time, his understanding of them was remarkable. Most critics of the thinker from Besançon probably do not go so far as to read chapter II of volume 2 of the *System of Economic Contradictions*, which contains a breathtaking synthesis of the thought of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

The Frenchman and the two German intellectuals did not have an equal relationship. At that time, Proudhon was already famous, and Marx at least recognized him as a master. This state of grace did not last long, however, for as soon as the *System of Economic Contradictions* was published in 1846, their relationship deteriorated.

Proudhon came from the people, while Marx and Grün were academics. Proudhon was never fooled by the flattery of the two men.

Is Proudhon's socialism so opposed to Marxism? There is no doubt that both men attempted the same project: to create a science of the contradictions of capitalism, to show the historical necessity of its collapse. But to say that their *project of society* was the same would be, in my opinion, a profound mistake.

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Proudhon is a complex author even for a French reader. Of course, from a strictly academic point of view, it is obviously preferable to have a firsthand reading of his work. But the difficulty in reading Proudhon lies not only in his language and his way of reasoning but also in the fact that his thought seems contradictory. This contradictory character results from the fact that it is in permanent evolution. Here is a man who says at the beginning of his career that property is theft, and at the end of his career he tells us that property is freedom, maintaining that he has not changed his opinion. The twenty-three-year interval between these two propositions was devoted to trying to solve the mystery of this contradiction. In reality, it is not property itself that is theft. As the legitimate and sole owner of my toothbrush, I do not see myself as a thief. What Proudhon calls theft is the appropriation by the capitalist of the value produced by the combined and collective

labor of a group of workers, which is much greater than the value that would be produced by the same number of workers individually. This is where the theft lies, because the capitalist does not pay this surplus value to his employees and instead appropriates this *aubaine*, this unearned income.

In reality, the man who said that property was theft (an unfortunate and provocative expression that is still poorly understood today) considered the question of property to be secondary.

Proudhon actually thinks that individual property has lost its importance as an institution and that society now operates solely on the basis of circulation: "Society no longer lives, as it once did, on individual property; it lives on a more generic fact, it lives on circulation." This can be seen perfectly well: we know that the crisis of 1929 took on a catastrophic turn because international trade had practically ceased.

Few readers seem to have perceived that throughout his life, and despite the different approaches he would take to the problem, Proudhon tried to show (while appearing to defend it) that property is a historical exception, a transitory form, that it has existed only for short periods of history, and that its historical function is soon to be completed.

In one of his last works, *Theory of Property*, he explains that the manufacturer does not care about being "the owner of the house or flat in which he lives with his family, of the workshop in which he works, of the storehouse in which he keeps his raw materials, of the shop in which he displays his products, of the land on which his residence, workshop, storehouse and shop have been built." What interests him is the appropriation of surplus value.

Proudhon himself complained that he was not understood. It is true that the way he presented his thoughts did not simplify things.

Often carried away by his argumentative verve, he forgot to "stick to the facts," lost himself in long digressions, and neglected the realization that the reader did not need to know everything about the chain of ideas that led him to his proof. When he wants to challenge a point of view, Proudhon often spends many

pages developing the argument of the person he is opposing by pushing the latter's point of view to its extreme limits. The inattentive reader may end up believing that this is what Proudhon really thinks!

Moreover, he often resorts to *reductio ad absurdum*, a procedure in which he is a master, useful for showing the inanity of a line of reasoning to which he is opposed but no help in clarifying the exposition of his own theories. However, the greatest difficulty that today's reader must face is undoubtedly that of vocabulary. When he calls for "liberal, federal, decentralizing, republican, egalitarian, progressive, just" property, the word *liberal* should not be misunderstood. "Liberal" should be understood in the original sense of the word, as it has been preserved by the English language. When he speaks of socialism, it is a movement imbued with "a certain completely illiberal religiosity"; when he speaks of communism, it is absolutely not Marxism; when he speaks of "political economy," this term must be understood in the language of the time, as the economic theory of the bourgeoisie. To read Proudhon, one must therefore make the effort to enter his mode of thinking.

To complicate matters, Proudhon was an ardent polemicist and engaged in abundant debates with people who are now totally forgotten and on issues that are no longer of interest. The reader is therefore left with the choice of reading these tedious pages or skipping them without knowing whether there might have been something interesting to find after all.

At the end of his life, Proudhon stated twice that he had not changed his opinion on the substance of either the question of property or the critical analysis of capitalism. Thus, he says in his *Theory of Property* (1863): "Will, by chance, the theory of property that I am now publishing be considered a retraction? We shall see that it is nothing of the sort." He continues to say that property and theft are "two economic equivalents." As for the *System of Economic Contradictions* (published in 1846), a work that anticipates *Capital* in many respects, Proudhon declared in 1863 that he had reservations about the method used. "[But] since this reservation was made in the interest of pure logic, I maintain

everything I said in my *Contradictions*." Proudhon thus maintains the substance of his critique of property and the substance of his critique of the capitalist system. There is no reason not to follow him on these points, just as when he declared at the end of his life: "If I ever find myself a landowner, I will make sure that God and men, especially the poor, forgive me!" Proudhon did not like property, but he defended it. He was violently critical of competition but defended its principle. Why?

To answer these questions, perhaps it is necessary to recognize that Proudhon had a long-term strategic vision. From this perspective, one should not take the contradictory positions that Proudhon took at different periods of his life at face value and conclude that he simply changed his mind. One should instead understand how these different approaches are dialectically linked.

Concerning competition, Proudhon gives a striking description of the effects of competition on society and the extreme misery it causes among the people in the *System of Economic Contradictions*. He therefore knows perfectly well what is at stake. His relative defense of competition is the effect of his radical opposition to communism. But it is not the communism of Marx, of which he was unaware, but instead what was known as such at the time: doctrinaire and utopian French communism. In the years 1830–40, the main themes of what would become the anarchist movement appear as a reaction to the communist theories advocating the absolute preeminence of the community over the individual. Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Cabet are among the main ideologists of utopian socialism that the precursors of anarchism began to attack, countering with the idea that the individual and society develop in unison.

Communism was at that time a current full of good intentions and religiosity, which relied on the state to implement measures that were supposed to improve the situation of the working classes. Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* contains highly critical analyses of this utopian communism, a trend that had not yet broken away from the practices of the ancien régime regarding the management of poverty and the

poor, which consisted of confining the latter in highly supervised enclosures. The National Workshops of 1848, which Proudhon vigorously opposed, were a reminder of this period. The defense of the "community" by the communists appeared to the first "anarchists" as a restoration of the concentration camp system, applied to the poor.

Proudhon's recognition of a certain form of competition in society has its origin there, but it is also motivated by the sociological observation that it is impossible to eliminate all contradiction in society, that such an objective would be the death of society, and that a certain competitive spirit must be maintained in human relations. Here again Proudhon shows himself to be a true dialectician.

Concerning property, Proudhon again has an approach that is sociological, not doctrinaire. Unlike Marx, he understood that not only the peasantry but also the proletariat were attached to the notion of property. The people's feeling of fierce attachment to property is mostly due to fear of the unknown, fear of the precariousness of existence, and the individual's desire to secure a decent life for themselves and their family. Whichever way one looks at the question of property in Proudhon—"theft" or "freedom"—he starts from the fact that there is a large middle social stratum that is attached to property and is not willing to give up this idea easily. Property is an institution that is a symptom of human weakness. It is an irrational feeling that cannot be ignored if society is to be changed.

In particular, Proudhon understood that you cannot have a social revolution without the peasantry when they represent the overwhelming majority of the population. "Land ownership in France concerns two-thirds of the inhabitants," he wrote in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. Proudhon's problem seems to be to find ways of attracting the peasantry to progressive reforms of the status of property without colliding with it head on. This is undoubtedly the key to his theories on property and the thread that links his first positions (e.g., property is theft) with those he would develop at the end of his life (e.g., property is freedom).



In *Theory of Property*, the very work in which he seems to rehabilitate property, Proudhon specifies that it is a question of “transformed, humanized property, purified of the right of aubaine.”

It is hard to imagine a capitalist entrepreneur adhering to a system in which he would not have the possibility of exploiting the labor power of others. Whatever the complexity of the Proudhonian approach and the dialectical contortions he resorts to, this should be kept in mind. In *Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, his last work, he writes that despite the restrictions he was able to make on property, outside of which “it remains usurpatory and odious,” it still “retains something egoistic” (to which he adds, “which is always unsympathetic to me”). This reflection is important because it was delivered at the end of his life in a text that was published after his death, and thus it reveals his point of view at a time when, in principle, he had completed his final thoughts on the matter.

For those of us who were students in 1968 and in the years that followed, Ansart was able to reveal Proudhon’s thought on a very important point and one that had an important impact in practice: the theory of knowledge.

It is necessary to understand the context. In almost all intellectual spheres of society, Marxism dominated at that time, particularly Leninism, which was a distortion of Marxism as interpreted by the followers of Lenin and Trotsky—a reinterpretation that would probably have horrified Marx himself. The young Trotskyists and Maoists who came out of the universities to the working class were convinced that revolutionary theory could only come to the workers through bourgeois intellectuals. This thesis was constantly repeated, as if those who uttered it wanted to convince themselves of its veracity.

By giving us access to Proudhon’s thought on this and other questions, Ansart has encouraged us to look at the direct source, Proudhon himself. He has revealed to us a more complex, more subtle, and more convincing thought than the caricatured ramblings that Lenin had actually copied word for word from Kautsky.

But, peculiarly, Ansart allowed us to realize how close Proudhon was to Marx on the theory of knowledge, the real Marx, not the Marx of his self-proclaimed interpreters. Marx would probably have said of Lenin what he said of his son-in-law Paul Lafargue, who had written a particularly boring book in which he claimed to explain Marx's economic thought: "[If this is Marxism,] I am not a Marxist."<sup>3</sup>

Ansart explains that, according to Proudhon, the task of the revolutionary theorist is "to participate in the revolutionary act through a labor of theoretical clarification":

*In The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, he expresses the relation of working-class practice to the revolutionary idea dialectically, stressing that practice implies a theory, a law of action, of which the working class becomes conscious by means of theoretical clarification. It is not a question for the working class of waiting for a truth to come to it from the theorist's mouth, but of extracting from itself its hidden meaning and imposing it by political struggle. The role of theoreticians must therefore not be overestimated: their work merely participates in a movement that goes beyond them.

If practice is an idea, adds Ansart, "we must say conversely that speech, theoretical clarification, is a form of action."

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I would like to end this introduction to Pierre Ansart's book—which is really just a somewhat unorganized digression about Proudhon—by saying a few words about the question of strikes, which may not be very important in the hushed debates among academics but which has a very strong emotional impact in the

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3. Paul Lafargue, *Le Déterminisme économique de Karl Marx* [The Economic Determinism of Karl Marx] (Paris: V. Giard and E. Brière, 1909).

discussions among militants. Proudhon's opposition to strikes is often used as a decisive argument to cut short any debate.

Proudhon's reservations concerning the usefulness of strikes are complex and cannot be summed up as "Proudhon was against strikes." The apparent paradox between his stance on strikes and the fact that the French revolutionary syndicalists claimed him is analyzed in Daniel Colson's "Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire."<sup>4</sup>

How can a socialist thinker who is described as "opposed to strikes" be claimed by revolutionary syndicalist militants? This raises a first question: was Proudhon really opposed to strikes? As is often the case with the absurdities that circulate about the anarchist movement, it is Marx who is the source. Thus, when Marx reports that Proudhon was pleased that the miners of Rives-de-Gier had been repressed after going on strike, he is simply showing that he had read *Political Capacity of the Working Classes* only superficially (in fact, the quotation supposedly drawn from this work comes from the *System of Economic Contradictions*).<sup>5</sup> Proudhon simply says that from the point of view of the law at the time, the strike was illegal and that repression was, for the same reasons, legal. He is therefore not pleased that the miners were repressed. Proudhon underlines, moreover: "The working masses, whose noble aspirations I serve here as well as I can, [are] still, alas, only an inorganic multitude; the worker has not placed himself on the same level as the master." Here he refers to article 1781 of the civil code, which states that in a lawsuit, the word of the boss is worth more than that of his workers; a situation of which he, of course, does not approve.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the "working masses" are an "inorganic multitude" means for Proudhon that they do not

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4. Daniel Colson, "Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire" [Proudhon and Revolutionary Syndicalism], <http://libertaire.free.fr/DColson20.html>.

5. Marx, "Political Indifferentism," 1873, Marxists Internet Archive, Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/01/indifferentism.htm>.

6. See "À propos du Manifeste des Soixante," *Monde Nouveau*, [monde-nouveau.net](http://monde-nouveau.net).

have a collective consciousness and that they have not organized themselves.

Proudhon also points out that “these struggles of coalitions between workers and masters . . . almost always end to the advantage of the latter and to the detriment of the former.”<sup>7</sup> He does not dispute that the strikers act “under the impulse of a feeling of justice” (“that I do not deny,” he says). What he intends to show is a contradiction: “[in striking, the workers,] I recognize it expressly, *were not wrong*, internally, to complain” (my emphasis) but at that time “[they] exceeded, externally, their right.” This contradiction is always resolved in favor of the employers: “it is found, much more odiously, in the favor generally granted to the latter [employers], and the repression which is the ordinary privilege of the others [workers].” This is expressed in Proudhon’s convoluted way, but I don’t think this passage needs to be deciphered.

Marx refers to a passage in *Political Capacity* in which Proudhon writes that “the authority that shot the miners of Rives-de-Gier was in an unfortunate situation” but had to “sacrifice its children to save the Republic.” Naturally, what Proudhon is explaining here is the point of view of the state, without approving it. The French revolutionary syndicalists, obviously more intelligent than Marx, understood this perfectly. Proudhon says of strikes that they cannot fundamentally change the state of society (which Marx also says, by the way). This is a point on which the revolutionary syndicalists agree with Proudhon. And on many other points: the separation of classes, the refusal of parliamentary activity, the insistence on economic action, federalism, and more. The proximity between Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism is probably explained mostly by the fact that his thought is very closely linked to the thought of the workers’ movement of his time.

The question is whether this closeness between Proudhon and the labor movement was a matter of chance or whether there was an actual kinship. That the labor movement of his

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7. *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* [The Political Capacity of the Working Classes] (Paris: E. Dentu, 1865), 412.

time influenced Proudhon should hardly be open to debate: it is difficult to imagine a socialist thinker being impervious to his environment. Anarchist militants read a lot.<sup>8</sup> In France, groups of workers met to discuss Proudhon's theories and even to question Proudhon. One of these readers, Tolain, was even one of the founders of the International Workingmen's Association, although Proudhon did not share his views on workers' candidacies.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the French sections of the IWA claimed Proudhon as their own during the organization's first congresses.

Similarly, it is not surprising that the militants who helped create the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and who founded revolutionary syndicalism were familiar with Proudhon's work, especially since many of them came from the anarchist movement. In "L'anarchisme et les syndicats ouvriers," published in 1895, Fernand Pelloutier speaks of Proudhon's "masterly analysis" of taxation. Émile Pouget claims to be a Proudhonist in his brochure *L'Action directe*: "Proudhon, . . . anticipating syndicalism, evoked the economic federalism that is being prepared and that surpasses, with all the superiority of life, the sterile notions of the whole political set-up."

One could argue endlessly about whether it was Proudhon who influenced the workers' movement of his time or the other way around. Such a question is of no interest whatsoever because it comes down to the chicken-and-egg argument. It is obvious that Proudhon was very strongly influenced by the workers' movement of his time, that he elaborated a general theory inspired by this influence, and that his theory, much better than those of Victor Considérant, Louis Blanc, and others, was recognized by the proletarians of the time, a recognition that provided Proudhon with new subjects for reflection. It is a permanent movement between practice and theory.

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8. Gaetano Manfredonia, "Les lignées proudhoniennes dans l'anarchisme français" [The Lineages of Proudhon in French Anarchism], *Les travaux de l'Atelier Proudhon*, no. 11.

9. Compare "Le Manifeste des Soixante" and "A propos du Manifeste des Soixante", *Monde Nouveau*, monde-nouveau.net.

A young researcher, Samuel Hayat, explains the recognition of Proudhon's thought by the proletariat by "the structural homology between Proudhonism and the working class."<sup>10</sup> The most convincing formalization of this is due to Pierre Ansart. As we have seen, according to him, Proudhon is not linked in an abstract way with the workers' movement. There is a structural homology between Proudhon's thought and certain social structures. . . . This homology is coupled with a homology of practices with those of the mutualism of the Lyon silk workers."<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to what some authors assert, Proudhon's stance on strikes did not in any way "isolate him from the nascent workers' movement."<sup>12</sup> This opposition to partial strikes, considered useless and counterproductive, was shared by the whole anarchist movement and then by the revolutionary syndicalist movement, which had recognized Proudhon as a precursor! This is a paradox that the French CGT itself underlined at its fifth congress, in 1900, by voting in favor of a resolution that is perfectly in line with Proudhon: "We do not believe that we should encourage partial strikes, which we consider harmful even if they give appreciable results, because they never compensate for the sacrifices made, and the results they may give are powerless to modify the social problem."<sup>13</sup>

In "Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire," Daniel Colson addresses the reasons why "the revolutionary syndicalists

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10. Samuel Hayat, "De l'anarchisme Proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire : une transmission problématique" [From Proudhonian Anarchism to Revolutionary Syndicalism: A Problematic Transmission], [http://www.academia.edu/2636763/De\\_lanarchisme\\_Proudhonien\\_au\\_syndicalisme\\_r%C3%A9volutionnaire\\_une\\_transmission\\_prob%C3%A9matique](http://www.academia.edu/2636763/De_lanarchisme_Proudhonien_au_syndicalisme_r%C3%A9volutionnaire_une_transmission_prob%C3%A9matique).

11. Ibid. Compare Pierre Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme* [Birth of Anarchism] (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970), 131.

12. Michael Schmidt and Lucien Van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009).

13. XIe congrès national corporatif (*Ve de la CGT*) tenu à la Bourse du Travail de Paris en septembre 1900 [11th National Syndicalist Congress (5th of the CGT) held at the Paris Bourse du Travail in September 1900].

were able to recognize themselves in Proudhon even though the proposals of the two could diverge so much”: “We underestimate or we completely misunderstand *the extraordinary practical and theoretical intelligence of the workers’ movements of the time*” (my emphasis).<sup>14</sup> The revolutionary syndicalists, led by Pelloutier, were well aware that the advantages obtained by the strikes were going to be canceled out by the system, and they obviously did not blame Proudhon for not having understood that, in spite of this, the strikes served as a training ground for the working class—or as “revolutionary gymnastics,” as Pouget said—something that Bakunin had understood perfectly well.

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14. Daniel Colson, “Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire” [Proudhon and Revolutionary Syndicalism], <http://libertaire.free.fr/DColson20.html>.