

# CONCERNING BLACK FLAME: SCHMIDT, VAN DER WALT & PROUDHON (PART 1)

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Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt often evoke Proudhon, sometimes in a contradictory way. But *Black Flame's* point of view on the man Kropotkin qualified as “the father of anarchism”<sup>1</sup> is, in my opinion, one of the main drawbacks of the book. *Black Flame's* bibliography is limited to a collection of selected texts by Proudhon<sup>2</sup> and to a 96 pages long book *about him* written in 1934<sup>3</sup>. I had mentioned this in an exchange of mails with Lucien years ago, as well as Proudhon's methodological contribution to the analysis of the capitalist system<sup>4</sup>, but things remained there. I can't help but think that such a process is not serious. Brogan's book is not absolutely bad, but it reflects a lot of the preconceived notions about Proudhon that one might have had about him in academic circles in the 1930s. Above all, it is particularly sad to see a book like *Black Flame*, destined to be a reference in the international libertarian movement and beyond, pay so little attention to contemporary bibliographical research on such an essential author. Since 1934, research on Proudhon's work has progressed somewhat and I am convinced that it has also made progress in English language studies<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Kropotkin, at the trial of the anarchists in Lyon in 1883.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, S. Ed. Selected writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Brogan, D.W., *Proudhon*, London, H. Hamilton, 1934.

<sup>4</sup> « Proudhon and the Problem of Method », <http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article407>

<sup>5</sup> • Pierre Ansart, « La présence du proudhonisme dans les sociologies contemporaines », *Mil neuf cent*. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle (Cahiers Georges Sorel) Année 1992 10 pp. 94-110.

• Pierre Ansart., *Sociologie de Proudhon*, Presses universitaires de France, 1967.

• Georges Gurvitch, *Dialectique et sociologie*. Edition Science Flammarion, chapitre sur Proudhon.

• Georges Gurvitch, *Proudhon, sa vie, son œuvre*, PUF, 1965.

• Sophie Chambost, *Proudhon et la norme, pensée juridique d'un anarchiste*, Presses universitaires de Rennes. 2004.

While 23 works by Bakunin are mentioned in the book's bibliography – and rightly so – no works by Proudhon are included, while 5 texts by Lenin and 4 by Mao Tsetung are mentioned. Although I do not qualify myself at all as “Proudhonian”, I find it distressing to note that none of Proudhon’s own writings are mentioned in the bibliography of the book. All this seems to me to be the symptom of an extraordinary weakness in the way the authors of *Black Flame* approach anarchist history and doctrine. Their opinions on Proudhon fluctuate and are based more on second-hand preconceived ideas than on serious and well-argued work.

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Proudhon is a complex author and it is preferable to have a first-hand reading of his work. He is a complex author even for a French reader. Marx’s language is extremely modern and accessible to the average reader. When you read Proudhon, you immediately know that he is a 19th century author by his turn of phrases and his way of thinking, and you easily fall into pitfalls. For example, when he refutes an author, he identifies himself with him, takes up his arguments – sometimes at length – and pursues to the limits of the logic of the author's arguments. In the end, if you are not attentive, you can easily get the impression that he agrees with the thought he refutes. I have seen this several times, including with renowned authors. I can imagine quite well how an English speaking reader who does not read French must feel.

W.D. Brogan writes very accurately that Proudhon “pushed, he asserted, a thesis to its ultimate conclusion, then rebuilt on a sound foundation what he had destroyed”. He “could not compete with Marx as a founder of a school” and was not a “system maker” as Marx was, and never built a “consistent body of doctrine”<sup>6</sup>. I'm not at all

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• Samuel Hayat, *Proudhon et le problème de la représentation politique autour de la révolution de 1848* (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Problem of Political Representation around the 1848 Revolution) (2004)

• Daniel Colson, *Proudhon et l'anarchie* – Atelier de Création libertaire, 2017

• Edward Castleton, Colloque Proudhon, « Proudhon, Révolution et Progrès », <https://webtv.parisnanterre.fr/videos/colloque-proudhon-edward-castleton-proudhon-revolution-et-progres-edouard-jourdain-radicalite-contre-extremisme-la-pensee-revolutionnaire-de-proudhon/>

• Edward Castleton, L'infréquentable Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Le Monde diplomatique*, janvier 2009.

• Gaetano Manfredonia, « Lignées proudhoniennes dans l'Anarchisme français », Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle (Cahiers Georges Sorel) Année 1992 10 pp. 30-45

• Gaetano Manfredonia, *Anarchisme et changement social*, Atelier de Création libertaire, 2007.

• Thierry Menuelle, *Marx, lecteur de Proudhon*, 1993, Broché

• Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) - "L'anarchie, c'est l'ordre", radio broadcast, <https://www.franceculture.fr/personne-thierry-menuelle.html>

• Etc.

<sup>6</sup> D.W. Brogan, *Proudhon*, Hamish Hamilton, 1934, pp. 84-85

sure that Marx would have been happy to be granted the status of "school founder" and "system maker"...

## **Proudhon's Argumentative method**

The mode of exposition of his thought considerably handicaps the understanding of Proudhon's books. He is often carried away by his argumentative verve and forgets to "stick to the facts", gets lost in long interminable digressions and neglects that the reader does not need to know *everything* about the chain of ideas that led to his conclusion. In the middle of a demonstration, he thinks it is necessary to return to a point he had developed in another book several years earlier and asks his readers to have the patience to follow him on this path: "I warn them only that they owe me at least five minutes of attention..." (*Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*) — in fact much more than five minutes, most of the time.

There is rarely a fair balance between the argumentation and the assessment that it is not necessary to say *everything*. The reader often feels that Proudhon is nitpicking; it will particularly be the case in his developments against "workers' coalitions" in the *Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Political capacity of the working classes).

Proudhon often resorts to the demonstration by the absurd (*reducio ad absurdum*), a process in which he is a master. This technique is useful to show the inanity of a way of thinking which he opposes, but it does not help to clarify the exposition of his own doctrines.

Finally, his books are overloaded with his polemics with the authors of his time, to which the contemporary reader is indifferent; polemics in which he engages with an obvious delight but which, there again, greatly contribute to obscure the understanding of his thought.

This, added to the fact that Proudhon's language is often outdated, bombastic, explains why most of Proudhon's books are difficult to read, even for a French reader. One must make the effort to "enter" into his way of thinking. This is also why Proudhon has often complained of being misunderstood.

Reading Proudhon is a singular contrast to the mathematical clarity of Marx's writing. Yet there are authors, not least, such as George Gurvitch, or Pierre Ansart, who consider him the inventor of modern sociology.

We are bound to sort out what Proudhon said, but he has invented such inescapable notions for the anarchist movement that we cannot dismiss him: the separation of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie, the refusal to participate in bourgeois institutions (parliament), the notion of class organization, the collective management of the means of production, the concepts of surplus value, of decline of profit rates, of concentration of capital, etc., not to mention the use of the hypothetico-deductive method applied to political economy. And let's not forget that the First International was founded by *French Proudhonian workers* and English trade unionists.

## On “classical marxism”

In chapter 3 of their book, Schmidt and van der Walt write that they want to “set up a dialogue between anarchism, classical Marxism, and to a lesser extent, mutualism and economic liberalism”. Let's forget mutualism and economic liberalism for the while.

What is “classical Marxism”?

They do not give, prior to this chapter, a definition of what “classical Marxism” is, so I went through the 80 preceding pages to find out if there were any indications that would allow me to grasp the outline of this concept. On page 14, we learn that “classical Marxism” is Marx and Engels, a point on which I can only agree: Schmidt and van der Walt say that “If classical Marxism had Marx and Engels, anarchism and syndicalism were above all shaped by two towering figures, Bakunin and Kropotkin”. The fact that Proudhon does not appear among the “towering figures” is consistent with Schmidt and van der Walt's assertion that he is not an anarchist. However, I dispute that Kropotkin has anything to do with revolutionary syndicalism<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, the authors of *Black Flame* clearly do not know that the French syndicalists claimed Proudhon's legacy, but we'll leave that aside for the while.

Page 24, Schmidt and van der Walt clarify their point of view: classical Marxism is “also known as Bolshevism, and associated with Marx, Engels, Karl Kautsky, Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and others...” (*sic*). Who would “the others” be? Enver Hodja? How about Rosa Luxemburg? To the extent that their definition of Marxism includes almost all authors who call themselves “Marxists”, there is no longer any reason to talk about “classical Marxism”.

This enumeration of authors presented as “classical” Marxists is alarming. If we take Marx and Engels as a starting point to define “classical” Marxism (it is the least we can do), Kautsky should figure prominently among these classical — I am tempted to say: “orthodox” — Marxists... But we should add Riazanov, who is never mentioned in *Black Flame*, and who is the one who established Marxism as orthodoxy. These two commentators of Marx tried to stay as close as possible to the founders' thought (or to what they thought the founder's thought was). On the other hand, to describe Lenin as a “classical” Marxist is quite questionable: he distorted Marxism in an unlikely way. His entire strategy in the Russian revolution was to do the opposite of what Marx advocated and trying to convince his comrades that it was Marxism. The *real Marxists* of the time were the Mensheviks. Lenin was only a populist of the Blanquist type with a Marxist wording. As for Trotsky, he could be described as a “classical” Marxist in his Menshevik period. I'm not talking about Stalin, there's nothing Marxist about him. Same thing for Mao. It is regrettable that Schmidt and van der Walt did not stick to the “classical” Marxism of Marx and Engels...

The more we progress in *Black Flame's* reading, the more vague and inclusive the definition of “classical Marxism” becomes. For we learn that besides Marxism as a form of “political socialism”, there is also “libertarian” Marxism, whose representatives would be the theorists of council communism.

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<sup>7</sup> See: René Berthier, « Was Kropotkin a revolutionary syndicalist? », <http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article741>

On page 25 of *Black Flame*. Schmidt and van der Walt write: “Classical Marxism from the beginning was a form of political socialism, but it is crucial to note that there were also libertarian Marxists. These included the Council communists Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek, and Otto Ruhle, who held views close to syndicalism and were openly hostile to Bolshevism.” Schmidt and van der Walt simply forget to say that they were “openly hostile” to anarchism as well. All these Council communists were ferociously hostile to anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism.

The problem is that “libertarian Marxism” is a recent concept unknown from Marx’s time (he would have been horrified by it), and it is abusive to say that the Council communist’s views were close to revolutionary syndicalism. Adding the theorists of Council communism to the long eclectic list of “classical Marxists” that Schmidt and van der Walt proposes only reinforces the approximative nature of their approach. I had always thought that “Libertarian Marxism” was a concept invented by Daniel Guérin <sup>8</sup>.

Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek, Otto Ruhle but also Helmut Wagner, whom Schmidt and van der Walt don't mention, made a remarkable critical analysis of Bolshevism, which the Russian anarcho-syndicalists had done for the most part ten years before them <sup>9</sup>, but outside the very short periods during which workers councils actually existed (a few months) — periods that provided the argument for the development of a “councilist” doctrine — the categorical opposition of this current to both parliamentarism and trade unionism, as well as its opposition to the creation of permanent bodies of struggle, deprived it of any possibility of action and existence outside the revolutionary periods.

Concerning the enumeration of “classical Marxists” submitted to us by Schmidt and van der Walt, we could say the same thing as what they say of the “Seven Sages” qualified as anarchists: “they cannot be taken as representative of a single doctrine, unless that doctrine is defined at a general level that obscures the radical differences between these thinkers” (p. 40). In fact the authors of *Black Flame* do with “classical Marxism” the same thing they do with the “broad anarchist tradition”: they create a mish mash into which they dump many concepts that have little or no connection with each other.

## **Black Flame’s vision of Proudhon**

### **Proudhon was not an anarchist**

The authors of *Black Flame* write that their book is “an attempt to define anarchism within the framework of classical Marxism, economic liberalism, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Guérin, *Pour un marxisme libertaire*, Paris, Laffont, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> See: Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and workers' control: the state and counter-revolution*, <https://libcom.org/library/the-bolsheviks-and-workers-control-solidarity-group>.

ideas of P. J. Proudhon”<sup>10</sup>. Their book “examines the relationship between anarchism and other ideas, particularly the views of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), the classical Marxists, and economic liberalism.” Whatever they mean, one might think that anarchism would be influenced by, or at the intersection of the doctrines mentioned. This seems paradoxical with their *rejection* of “the view that characters such as (...) Proudhon (...) are part of the Broad Anarchist tradition”<sup>11</sup>. And elsewhere they write; “anarchism was not Proudhonism”. There is in *Black Flame* the almost obsessive assertion that Proudhon was not an anarchist.

In short, Schmidt & van der Walt want to define anarchism within a framework (classical Marxism, economic liberalism and Proudhon's ideas) without any reference to an anarchist thinker – since Proudhon is not considered anarchist. Still, *Black Flame* dedicates chapter 3 to Proudhon (and Marx) and we read that “anarchism includes both Proudhonian politics and the Marxist economy” – which suggests that anarchism has no economic thinking, that it is entirely indebted to Marxism on this point. So anarchism strangely “includes Proudhonian politics” but rejects Proudhon as an anarchist thinker... And elsewhere, Schmidt & van der Walt say that the “broad anarchist tradition” has been “profoundly influenced by both Proudhon and Marx”<sup>12</sup>. All this seems a little confusing to me, because between classical Marxism, economic liberalism and Proudhon's ideas, we are looking in vain for an anarchist author, since Proudhon is not supposed to be one...

What the reader understands from these statements is that the authors of *Black Flame* want to define anarchism from three sources that are not anarchist, which is not very consistent.

## The “Unique”

It is possible that as early as 1845 Proudhon heard about Stirner's book from Karl Grün, who was trying to introduce him to German philosophy. Proudhon mentions Stirner in his Notebooks, where he defines him as “representing the religion of the individual self”, which is not in Proudhon's view a very favourable opinion. Proudhon also talks about him in the drafts The of an Economics Course that will never be published. (See Pierre Hauptmann, *La philosophie sociale de P.-J. Proudhon*, Grenoble: PUG, 1980, p. 116-117.)

Stirner, on the other hand, often refers to Proudhon. He cites two of his books, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*, published in 1840, and *La Création de l'ordre*, published in 1843. It is not at all certain that he had a first-hand knowledge of them, however. Without dwelling on the details of the relationship between Stirner and Proudhon, let

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<sup>10</sup> « ...it is an attempt to define anarchism within the framework of classical Marxism, economic liberalism, and the ideas of P. J. Proudhon. »

<sup>11</sup> « We reject the view that figures like William Godwin (1756–1836), Max Stirner (1806–1856), Proudhon, Benjamin Tucker (1854–1939), and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) are part of the [Broad Anarchist tradition](#). »

<sup>12</sup> « [The Broad anarchist tradition](#) was profoundly influenced by both Proudhon and Marx, but its outlook went far beyond the ideas and aims of both. » *Black Flame*, p. 9.

us say in summary that the former reproaches the latter for perpetuating the hierarchy. But there is also a radical disagreement on the issue of ownership.

“Just as the author of the *Unique and His Property* accuses Feuerbach of concealing the original Self in favour of an abstract Man, so he reproaches Proudhon for sacrificing the individual on the altar of a no less abstract and imaginary Society<sup>13</sup>.”

In any case, *The Unique* is an outright attack on Proudhon

## Tucker & Stirner

Schmidt and van der Walt insistently associate Proudhon and Tucker, presented as his “disciple”. The two men would define themselves by mutualism and as such would have greatly influenced anarchism, but also Marxism: “Proudhon and his disciple Tucker represented an approach, mutualism, that influenced anarchism profoundly—along with Marxism, Proudhonism provided many ingredients for the Broad anarchist tradition—but that cannot truly be called anarchist.” Schmidt and van der Walt are ready to consider some Marxists as part of the “Broad Anarchist tradition”, “while figures like Godwin, Proudhon, and Tolstoy should be excluded from that tradition”<sup>14</sup>.

According to Schmidt and van der Walt, Tucker was the “leading American apostle of Proudhon's doctrines,” which he called “individualist anarchism” – a surprising statement for a man whose doctrine was not individualistic at all. I don't see how Benjamin Tucker can be described as a disciple of Proudhon. It is true that Tucker translated *What is property?* but he also translated *The Unique and His Property*, which would place him just as legitimately on Stirner's list of disciples. However, it is impossible to be both a disciple of Proudhon and Stirner<sup>15</sup>. To consider a theoretical link between these two thinkers is simply impossible; the perspective of *The Unique* is the opposite of Proudhon's. Tucker, on the other hand, is undoubtedly an individualist, which Proudhon is absolutely not. Tucker published Stirner's disciples, and his main concern was to decide whether he agreed with the thesis of the supporters of Natural law or that of the Selfish — a very un-proudhonian but quite individualistic approach. He eventually sided with Stirner.

As for Stirner, I wrote that I did not consider him an anarchist and I explained why: in short, because a political doctrine is held to a minimum of coherence and must respect the principle of non-contradiction: it cannot affirm one thing and its opposite, namely that man can only be fulfilled in society (Bakunin, Proudhon), and that society prevents man from fulfilling himself (Stirner). But I also said that “Stirner's thought does not deserve (...) to be dismissed at a stroke”:

“Stirner warned his contemporaries against the veneration of idols, even where they are least expected; he showed that institutions freeze,

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<sup>13</sup> "Proudhon and German Radicalism", Henri Arvon, *Annales*, 1951 6-2 pp. 194-201.

<sup>14</sup> *Black Flame*, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. René Berthier, *Lire Stirner*, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article291>).

enslave us to codes. (...) By suggesting that there is a society only for and by the individual — while Proudhon and Bakunin assert that the individual can only exist in society — Stirner proposes a theme of reflection that should be meditated upon by all supporters of the allegedly altruistic ideologies that led to the concentration camp horror. However, the zealots of the doctrine of the one who devoted 300 pages to refuting Stirner<sup>16</sup> will fall into all the traps denounced by the Unique: the cult of personality, the reason of State, the cult of the Party, the transformation of doctrine into religion<sup>17</sup>.”

## Proudhon utopian?

Proudhon was also “influenced by the early nineteenth-century “utopian” socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837), who advocated cooperative labour, communal ownership and living, sensual pleasure, and gender equality.” Concerning “sensual pleasure” and “gender equality”, I must say that Schmidt and van der Walt miss the point completely.

Proudhon naturally knew the utopian socialists of his time: no serious author could ignore them. At that time, the only alternatives proposed to the proletariat were the social doctrines of the Church or a doctrinaire and utopian state socialism. Precisely, Anarchism as a modern political doctrine developed from two sources that will enrich each other: Proudhon's criticism of French doctrinal and utopian communism; Bakunin's criticism of German philosophy.

Before Karl Marx seized the term, communism was a current steeped in good intentions and religiosity, which turned into utopia and 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 vigorous and highly critical analyses of this utopian communism, which was a trend that had not yet broken with the practices of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century regarding the management of poverty and the poor, and which consisted in parking them in highly supervised precincts. The 1848 National Workshops, to which Proudhon strongly opposed, were a reminder of this period. The defence of the “community” by the communists appeared to the first “anarchists”, as a rehabilitation of the concentration system applied to the poor. To a very large extent, among the first anarchists, criticism of utopianism and communism were merged.

Proudhon was very firmly opposed to the “societal utopias” abounding in communist sects that proposed to “organize happiness”, as he says, without taking facts into account:

“Instead of seeking justice in the relationship of facts, they take it in their sensitivity; calling justice everything that seems to them to be love

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<sup>16</sup> Marx, of course.

<sup>17</sup> R. Berthier, *Lire Stirner*;

[http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/lire\\_stirner\\_-\\_23-07-2011.pdf](http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/lire_stirner_-_23-07-2011.pdf)

of neighbour, and constantly confusing things of reason with those of feeling. Why, then, should we constantly involve fraternity, charity, devotion and God in matters of economics? Utopians find it easier to talk about these big words than to seriously study social facts<sup>18?</sup>”

The *System of Economic Contradictions*, striving precisely to dissociate the knowledge of the today’s reality from the desire for n unrealistic future, is permeated by violent criticisms against Utopian conceptions in social matters. The Marxist vulgate imposed the idea of a utopian and idealistic Proudhon, the theoretician of a kind of petty-bourgeois socialism. But criticism of the utopian approach is constantly recurring in his work, as well as the desire to identify the laws that govern society and the concern to build a scientific corpus through the economic explanation of the social.

Proudhon constantly pesters against the utopians in the *System of Economic Contradictions*: “Socialism, by deserting criticism to indulge in declamation and utopia, by mixing with political and religious intrigues, has betrayed its mission and ignored the character of the century”. Proudhon attacks social projects that are only intellectual constructions when “...socialism falls from criticism to utopia”.

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**To be followed: “Proudhon and Law”**

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<sup>18</sup> *System of economic contradictions*, I, 225.

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