

# Black Flame & Proudhon

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The following text was written as a contribution to the *Revue d'études proudhoniennes* of the Société P.-J. Proudhon.

The “Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Society” is an association which was created in May 1982 with the aim of popularising and spreading the ideas of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s anti-authoritarian socialism and federalism, of studying and updating this thought in the light of recent achievements in the human and social sciences, as well as of contemporary problems, of being a place of exchange and confrontation – both on the French and international levels – between all those (researchers, teachers, activists, etc.) who accept economic, political and ideological pluralism as a rule.

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Proudhon is not well treated in the English-speaking and Latin American anarchist movement. Indeed, one current of the international libertarian movement disputes him the label of anarchist: the current that claims to be the legacy of the Organisational Platform drawn up by a group of Russian and Ukrainian anarchists in 1926, including Pyotr Arshinov and Nestor Makhno. This current, which defines itself as “platformist”, had a brief existence at the time of its creation and then fell into near oblivion, only to reappear at an international level in the wake of the events of May ‘68.

Another current close to platformism is known in Latin America as “especifismo”, a term which comes from the assertion that anarchists must organise themselves in a “specifically anarchist”

way and not diluted in mass organisations. These two currents are very close and it is difficult to distinguish them doctrinally.

What can well be considered a Bible of the “platformist” current was published in 2009 by two South Africans, Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt. It is a strong volume entitled *Black Flame*, published by AK Press. About this book, one could say four things, schematically:

- ◆ Its aim is to provide a global approach to international anarchism, insisting that it is not limited to Western Europe – a statement that is not disputable, but which evacuates the chronological anteriority of European anarchism as a political current.

- ◆ The authors lump together anarchism, revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, claiming that the latter two movements are merely “variants” of the former – an approach that precludes a historical and rational analysis of the specific characteristics of each of these currents.

- ◆ The third particularity of the two South Africans’ approach is that they have created the concept of “Broad Anarchist Tradition”, in which they include a heterogeneous group of movements and individuals that cannot be described as anarchists but which they authoritatively decide belong to this “tradition” – a process that allows them to “cast a wide net” and artificially amplify the field of action of anarchism as they conceive it. *Black Flame* thus proceeds to both exclude and forcibly integrate authors into the anarcho-sphere: “revolutionary syndicalists who identified themselves as Marxists, such as Connolly and De Leon, should be considered part of the general anarchist tradition, while figures such as Godwin, Proudhon, and Tolstoy should be excluded from that tradition.” (*Black Flame*, p. 149)

- ◆ Finally, taking as a reference the seven “sages” presented by Eltzbacher as “founding fathers” of anarchism, they proceed to exclude a number of them: Godwin, Tucker, Stirner, Tolstoy, and Proudhon. They therefore retain only Bakunin and Kropotkin. I would gladly abandon Tolstoy, Tucker and Stirner to the anarchist purgatory reserved for them in *Black Flame*, but Godwin would at least have deserved to be called a precursor.

Proudhon, on the other hand, has a special and ambiguous status – an ambiguity due less to Proudhon himself than to the very attitude of the authors of *Black Flame*.

### **Disaffection with Proudhon?**

In the post-May 68 period, the libertarian movement, noting its powerlessness to mobilise, went looking for organisational references in the Russian revolution. Proudhon did not offer the

references desired by radicalised militants, impatient and anxious for immediate action. It is paradoxical that Proudhon's relegation to anarchist purgatory is more or less contemporary with the time when Pierre Ansart began to publish.

If we add to this the fact that Pierre Ansart's works, which were so successful in France, were never published in English, we can understand the disaffection with Proudhon in the English-speaking world. It was following discussions with Australian activists who complained about the scarcity of English-language texts on Proudhon's work that I decided to translate two chapters of Pierre Ansart's *Sociologie de Proudhon*<sup>1</sup>, which were then uploaded to monde-nouveau.net. In addition, I wrote a study in English on Proudhon's theory of property<sup>2</sup>, in which I tried to show the internal coherence of his thinking on the issue despite apparently contradictory statements. These three documents – the two translations and the study – were posted online in November 2020 and have met with very encouraging success.

Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt often refer to Proudhon, sometimes in a contradictory and in any case very incomplete way. *Black Flame*'s bibliography is limited to a collection of selected texts by Proudhon<sup>3</sup> and a 96-page book about him written in 1934<sup>4</sup>. And there are some important absentees: the sociologists Georges Gurvitch, Pierre Ansart and Jean Bancal, who seem to me to be totally indispensable if one wants to talk seriously about Proudhon. In other words, Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt simply do not know Proudhon. I had mentioned this deficiency in an exchange of mails with Lucien van der Walt a few years ago, as well as Proudhon's methodological contribution to the analysis of the capitalist system<sup>5</sup>, but that was the end of it.

Brogan's book is not absolutely bad, but it reflects the preconceived ideas about Proudhon that were held in academic circles in the 1930s. Above all, it is particularly sad to see a book like *Black Flame*, intended to be a reference in the international libertarian movement, 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 progressed in English-language studies.

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1 "Sociology of Proudhon: Revolutionary Theory and Practice", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article818>

"Sociology of Proudhon: Anarchism and Sociology of the State", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article817>

2 <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article822>

3 Edwards, S. Ed., *Selected writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1969.

4 Brogan, D.W., *Proudhon*, London, H. Hamilton, 1934.

5 "Proudhon and the Problem of Method",

<http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article407>

While 23 works by Bakunin are mentioned in Brogan's bibliography – and rightly so – no works by Proudhon himself are included, while 5 texts by Lenin and 4 by Mao Tsetung are mentioned. All this seems to me to be a symptom of a real deficiency 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 preconceptions than on serious, well-argued approach.

### **Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism**

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

On page 14, we learn that “classical Marxism” has 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 claim that he is not an anarchist. However, I dispute that Kropotkin has anything to do with revolutionary syndicalism<sup>6</sup>.

A superficial reading of Proudhon can lead the reader to be astonished that a socialist thinker opposed to strikes can be claimed by revolutionary syndicalism. Yet there are many points in Proudhon on which revolutionary syndicalist militants agree: the separation of classes, the refusal of political action, the insistence on economic action.

The proximity between Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism is probably mainly explained by the fact that his thought was very closely linked to that of the labour movement of his time. Samuel Hayat, speaking of both Proudhon's contradictions and his link with the working class, writes: “What if Proudhon had expressed, even within his contradictions, a latency of the proletarian condition?”<sup>7</sup>

The question is whether this encounter was the result of chance, or whether there was an actual relationship. That the labour movement of his time influenced Proudhon should hardly be debatable: it is difficult to imagine a socialist thinker who would be impervious to his environment. The reverse, however, is worth

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6 See: René Berthier, “Was Kropotkin a revolutionary syndicalist?”, <http://www.monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article741>

7 Samuel Hayat, “De l'anarchisme proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire: une transmission problématique”. Article paru dans Edouard Jourdain (dir.), *Proudhon et l'anarchie*, Publications de la société P.-J. Proudhon, 2012.

examining. The militants of Proudhon's time, as well as those who contributed to found revolutionary syndicalism, read a lot<sup>8</sup>. A parallel can be drawn with William Godwin's book on political justice. This book was unaffordable for modest pockets. Readers therefore formed clubs whose dues paid for the book, which was made available to members. In France, groups of workers met to discuss Proudhon's theories, and even to question Proudhon himself. It is not surprising, therefore, that the French sections of the IWA claimed Proudhon as their own at the organisation's first congresses.

It is not surprising either that the activists who contributed to the creation of the CGT and the foundation of revolutionary syndicalism were familiar with Proudhon's work, especially as many of them came from the anarchist movement. In *L'anarchisme et les syndicats ouvriers*<sup>9</sup>, published in 1895, Fernand Pelloutier spoke of Proudhon's "masterly analysis" of taxation. Emile Pouget claimed to be a Proudhonist in his brochure *L'Action directe*: "Proudhon, [...] anticipating syndicalism, evoked the economic federalism which is being prepared and which surpasses, with all the superiority of life, the fruitless concepts of all politicianism..."

Proudhon was obviously very strongly influenced by the labour movement of his time; he elaborated a general theory inspired by this influence; and this theory, much better than those of Victor Considérant, Louis Blanc and others, was recognised as their own by the proletarians of the time, a recognition which provided Proudhon with new subjects for reflection. It was a permanent movement between practice and theory.

According to Samuel Hayat's formula, the recognition of Proudhon's thought by French proletarians can be explained by the "structural homology between Proudhonism and the working class"<sup>10</sup>:

"The most convincing formalisation of this is to be found in Pierre Ansart<sup>11</sup>. As we have seen, according to him, Proudhon is not linked in an abstract way to the workers' movement. There is a structural homology between Proudhon's thought and certain social structures. The result of his research into the birth of Proudhonism is that a homology can be found between the actual model of the system of crafts and factories, in particular the Lyons silk factory, and Proudhon's

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<sup>8</sup> Gaetano Manfredonia, "Les lignées proudhoniennes dans l'anarchisme français", *Les Travaux de l'Atelier Proudhon*, n° 11, "Les anarchistes et Proudhon. Actes de la journée d'étude de la société P.-J. Proudhon, 19 octobre 1991", Paris, Atelier Proudhon – EHESS, p. 37-66. Voir ; A propos du Manifeste des Soixante.

<sup>9</sup> "Anarchism and Workers' unions".

<sup>10</sup> S. Hayat, *Loc. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pierre Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme*, PUF, 1970, p. 131.

project. This homology is coupled with a homology of practices with those of the mutualism of the Canuts”.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, the authors of *Black Flame* are unaware that the French revolutionary syndicalists claimed the heritage of Proudhon<sup>13</sup>, which may seem paradoxical given that the latter is systematically referred to, without critical examination, as being “opposed to strikes”. Which is, let’s be frank, disconcerting, and should arouse a minimum of curiosity in the reader.

### **Proudhon, not anarchist**

Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt write: “We reject the view that figures like (...) Proudhon, (...) are part of the Broad anarchist tradition” (p. 9).

The author of the *First Memoir on Property* and the *System of Economic Contradictions* is thus denied the status of anarchist in his own right, although he is not denied a certain role: indeed, *Black Flame* “examines the relationship between anarchism and other ideas, particularly the views of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), the classical Marxists, and economic liberalism.” (p. 8.) The implication is that if Proudhon influenced anarchism, it was not as an anarchist, since Schmidt and van der Walt reject the view that Proudhon is part of the broad anarchist tradition. And elsewhere they state that “anarchism was not Proudhonism” (p. 83). There is in *Black Flame* the almost obsessive assertion that Proudhon was not an anarchist. So we have anarchism on the one hand, and “other ideas” on the other, including those of Proudhon.

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12 S. Hayat, *loc. cit.*

13 On the links between Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism, see:

- Daniel Colson, “Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article765>

- Gaetano Manfredonia, “Les lignées proudhoniennes dans l’anarchisme français”, *Les Travaux de l’Atelier Proudhon*, n° 11.

- Miguel Chueca (éd.), *Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire, la Charte d’Amiens et l’autonomie ouvrière*, Paris, Éd.CNT-Région parisienne, 2009.

- Gaëtan Pirou, *Proudhonisme et syndicalisme révolutionnaire*, Paris, A. Rousseau, 1910.

- Samuel Hayat, “De l’anarchisme proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire: une transmission problématique”,

<https://www.academia.edu/2636763/>

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- Patrice Rolland, “Le retour à Proudhon, 1900-1920”, *Mil neuf cent*, vol. 10, n° 1, 1992, p. 5-29.

- Jacques Langlois, *Défense et actualité de Proudhon*, Paris, Payot, 1976.

- Annie Kriegel, “Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire et Proudhon”, in *Centre national d’étude des problèmes de sociologie et d’économie européennes. L’Actualité de Proudhon. Colloque des 24 et 25 novembre 1965*, Bruxelles, Éditions de l’Institut de sociologie de l’Université libre de Bruxelles, 1967, p. 62-63.

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 as such. Yet *Black Flame* devotes Chapter 3 to Proudhon (and Marx) and we read that “anarchism includes both Proudhonian politics and Marxian economics” (p. 83): the incoherence of the statement is not so much in the assertion that anarchism “includes” (?) Marxist economy (didn't Bakunin praise *Capital*?) than in the assertion that it “includes” “Proudhonian politics” even though Proudhonism is not anarchism!

All this is quite confusing.

Moreover, *Black Flame*'s statement suggests that anarchism has no economic thought, which evacuates the *System of Economic Contradictions* and all of Proudhon's economic thought, which Schmidt and van der Walt seem to ignore, not to mention the 7 volumes and some 2,000 pages of Christiaan Cornelissen's *General Treatise on Economic Science*<sup>14</sup>.

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 Proudhon and Marx”. One has the impression of going round in circles. What the reader understands from these statements is that the authors of *Black Flame* want to define anarchism from three non-anarchist sources, which is not very coherent.

I shall conclude with a quote from an article by Michaël Paraire on Proudhon, published on the Alternative Libertaire website:

“So, is Proudhon the founder or not of anarchism? Undoubtedly, from the point of view of ideas, he was the founder in the sense that an architect draws the plans of a house and lays its foundations, but we must recognise that he was also and above all the initiator and that the remainder of the anarchist house was built by others. Proudhon made the first move to clear the ground for anarchist theory. He is not an end but a beginning.”<sup>15</sup>

This comment perfectly summarises the role played by Proudhon in the formation of the anarchist movement.

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14 Christiaan Gerardus Cornelissen (1864–1942) was a Dutch syndicalist and economist. He wrote from 1903 to 1944 his *General Treatise on the economic science*. “

15 Michael Paraire, “Proudhon, fondateur de l'anarchisme?”, <http://www.alternativelibertaire.org/?Proudhon-fondateur-de-l-anarchisme#nh1>

## Proudhon and Tucker

Schmidt and van der Walt insistently associate Proudhon with Tucker, who is presented as his “disciple”. Both men defined 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”. Like Marxism, “Proudhonism provided many of the ingredients for the broader anarchist tradition – but that cannot truly be called anarchist”. Schmidt and van der Walt are prepared to consider some Marxists as part of the “broad anarchist tradition”, while figures like Godwin and Proudhon should be excluded from this tradition.<sup>16</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 at all individualist. I do not 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 its Property*, which would place him just as legitimately on the list of Stirner’s disciples. However, it is impossible to be a disciple of both Proudhon and Stirner<sup>17</sup>. It is simply impossible to envisage a theoretical link between these two thinkers; the perspective of *The Unique* is the opposite of that of Proudhon. Tucker published Stirner’s followers, and his main concern was to decide whether he agreed with the thesis of the proponents of natural law or that of the egoists – a very un-Proudhonian but quite individualistic approach. He ended up siding with Stirner.

If we follow the reasoning of Schmidt and van der Walt, we can therefore make the following observation:

- Proudhon’s mutualism and that of his “disciple” Tucker influenced anarchism and Marxism.
- Tucker, as a disciple of Proudhon, was an individualist anarchist.
- Proudhon was not an anarchist.

Here again the argument of the authors of *Black Flame* seems to me neither clear nor convincing.

## Disciple of Fourier?

What image do the authors of *Black Flame* have of Proudhon?

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<sup>16</sup> *Black Flame*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. René Berthier, *Lire Stirner*, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article291>). The book points out that Stirner fits perfectly into the tradition of post-Hegelianism, but refutes his status as an anarchist.



“Proudhon, a self-taught French artisan of peasant stock, was somewhat 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.” (p. 37)

Proudhon’s father was a cooper, but his business was not going well and he tried to retire to the countryside and live on a small farm, which did not flourish either. To say, therefore, that he was of peasant stock is wrong.

To say that he was self taught is not entirely accurate either. He was awarded a scholarship to the college in Besançon where he undertook classical studies. He was forced to abandon his studies in the last year because the family’s situation was too precarious. So despite the fact that he had dropped out of school, he had acquired a level of education that was far above the average for the people of the time. This was especially true since he then worked in the printing industry, sometimes as a typographer and sometimes as a proofreader: these are professions that greatly promote the acquisition of knowledge. In 1837 he published an *Essay on General Grammar*.

In 1838 he obtained a scholarship: The academy of Besançon had put in competition a pension, for three years, for the benefit of a bachelor student in difficulty, so that he could continue his studies. While he was interested in linguistics (let us not forget his classical studies), he turned to economics. He took economics courses at the Faculty of Law and the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers<sup>18</sup>, and attended the Collège de France<sup>19</sup>.

In 1843, Proudhon settled in Lyon as an accountant in a navigation company on the Rhone and the Rhine that was run by one of his former fellow students. “

From 1843 to 1847, Proudhon worked in Lyon as an accountant and head of legal affairs for the Compagnie des bateaux de la Saône et du Rhône that was run by one of his former fellow students. He proved to be particularly competent in this job.

Let us not forget either that he wrote the *System of Economic Contradictions* in which he anticipates by twenty years both the method of exposition of Marx’s *Capital* and the categories to which Marx resorted. Finally, Proudhon wrote a work entitled *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* [Handbook for the stock market speculator] in which he made a critique, astonishing for its time, of financial

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18 The “Conservatoire national des arts et métiers” (Cnam) is a major French higher education and research institution founded in 1794

19 The “Collège de France”, formerly known as the Collège Royal, is a major teaching and research institution established by François I in 1530.

capitalism, and in which he developed the concept of “industrial feudality” which prefigured that of monopoly capitalism.

The monopoly is defined by Proudhon as the concentration of the means of production – machines and labour force – between a relatively small number of hands. The way to achieve this objective, in order to reduce production costs, is the introduction of advanced machinery, the operating cost of which will be lower than that of the labour force employed. All this is perfectly described in the *System of Economic Contradictions*, which Schmidt & van der Walt may not have read. Proudhon developed the concepts of surplus value, division of labour, concentration of capital, reduction of the rate of profit, cyclical crises, the role of mechanization, competition, monopoly, etc., concepts that were taken up and developed by Marx twenty years later in *Capital*<sup>20</sup>. The least we can expect from authors claiming to be anarchists is that they at least pay this tribute to Proudhon.

This notion of “industrial feudality” is described in a book that Proudhon wrote in 1856, *Le manuel du spéculateur à la Bourse*, published then in anonymous form<sup>21</sup>, in which he shows that he has perfectly understood the subtleties of speculation, and which remains surprisingly up-to-date. This book clearly shows that Proudhon’s perspective is not limited to a society in which there is only individual land ownership and small artisanal production. The speculative capitalism that Proudhon vigorously describes and criticizes resembles surprisingly well the one we know today.

The situation caused by the emergence of industrial feudalism will have to be resolved by a “revolution in the sense of sharing, what we have called Liquidation”, says Proudhon, and the regime that must succeed it is that of industrial democracy implemented by workers associations, or workers companies. They will be responsible for the management of large companies: this may be the origin of the title of “father of self-management” given to Proudhon; in reality, Proudhon is relatively unconcerned about how this management will be ensured. The importance he attaches to the establishment of national accounts and the assertion of the need for economic centralisation<sup>22</sup> (in fact economic planning) sufficiently show that it is rather the general organisation of the economy that interests him through the federalist system.

To say, as Schmidt-van der Walt did, that “Proudhon (...) did not understand large industry” (p. 84) is thus totally false.

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20 Cf. *Études proudhoniennes, L'économie politique*, éditions du Monde libertaire.

21 Marx’s first economic text of any significance, *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, appeared in 1857.

22 “centralisation of all economic forces; decentralisation of all political functions”, he wrote in his Notebooks.

To reduce Proudhon to a “self-taught artisan” of “peasant stock” is therefore particularly caricatural. This sort of statement is constantly repeated in the comments of authors who have generally not read Proudhon but who repeat Marx word for word.

To say that Proudhon was influenced by Fourier, who advocated equality of the sexes, sensual pleasures and communal living, would provoke a great deal of laughter at an anarchist meeting today. Proudhon hated “communism”, i.e. community life, and was a particularly austere character. As for his “feminism”, here is what he wrote in *La Pornocratie*: “The political equality of the two sexes, that is to say, the assimilation of women to men in public functions, is one of those sophisms that are repelled not only by logic, but also by human conscience and the nature of things.”<sup>23</sup>

Proudhon read Fourier when he was working at the Gauthier printing works in Besançon, and if Charles Fourier’s *Le Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire* (1829) was of any interest to him, he was in his twenties. Edward Castleton tells us that, having revised and typeset the proofs of Fourier’s book, Proudhon had been for six weeks “overwhelmed by its reading before recognising the folly of his enchantment”.<sup>24</sup> Schmidt and van der Walt are therefore perhaps going too far in saying that Proudhon was a disciple of Fourier.

The fact remains that in 1842, his third memoir on property is a riposte to the attacks of a supporter of Fourier. Proudhon directly attacks the school’s leader, Victor Considérant. His memoir is entitled *Avertissement aux propriétaires ou lettre à M. Considérant, rédacteur de “la Phalange” sur une défense de la propriété*<sup>25</sup>. It is therefore not necessary to have access to unpublished manuscripts of Proudhon to know his opposition to Fourier and his school.

Gaetano Manfredonia sheds some interesting light on this issue:

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23 In Proudhon’s defence, this book, which contains some particularly outrageous statements, was written in a very particular polemical context. It is manifested mainly by two facts: 1) A letter to a certain Mrs. d’Héricourt which is a demonstration of anger in a private matter and which Mrs. d’Héricourt, anxious to be publicized, had published against Proudhon’s will in a “people” newspaper of the time. b) A little book called *La Pornocratie*, which Proudhon refused to have published. Nevertheless, the book was published in 1875, ten years after his death, although he had *formally forbidden its publication*.

See Hervé Trinquier, [http://monde-nouveau.net/ecriture/?exec=article&id\\_article=672](http://monde-nouveau.net/ecriture/?exec=article&id_article=672)

24 Edward Castleton, “Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, critique des idées fouriéristes. Quelques observations préliminaires sur l’apport de ses manuscrits inédits”. <http://www.charlesfourier.fr/spip.php?article611>

25 “Warning to proprietors or letter to M. Considérant, editor of ‘la Phalange’ on a defence of property.”

“In the ‘father’ of anarchy, as in Marx, the concern to distance himself from the utopian tradition of his time is constant. His entire mutualist doctrine could even be easily qualified as anti-utopian insofar as it explicitly displays itself as a ‘realistic’ alternative to the artificial constructions proposed by other social reformers. Whether it is the Fourierist constructions or the other system-makers, followers of Cabet’s communism or of Louis Blanc’s association, what Proudhon reproaches them for in particular is their arbitrary character. That is to say, a conception of social change aimed at imposing on individuals ready-made ways of producing and living in society, without taking into account the real aspirations of the workers.”<sup>26</sup>

Far from adhering to Fourier’s theses, Proudhon criticised them for being based on preconceived ideas about human nature and society and for wanting to found an arbitrary and artificial social order. The *System of Economic Contradictions* is full of vituperations against utopianism.

## Mutualism

It cannot be denied that the mutualist principle has deeply permeated the French working class, notably thanks to the involvement of many anarchists who were not necessarily Proudhonians, who did not think that mutualism would overthrow capitalism, but who thought (rightly) that they were helping to improve their own lot and that of their fellow workers.

Mutualism is one of the aspects of Proudhon’s thought that the authors of *Black Flame* reject most vigorously: “Proudhon’s ideas, often known as mutualism, were widely influential in socialist and popular circles between the 1840s and 1880s in Europe and the Americas”. Although Proudhon is not entitled to the label of “anarchist”, Schmidt and van der Walt admit that “the anarchists acknowledged Proudhon as a forebear and the mutualists as kindred spirits.”

It is surprising that Schmidt and van der Walt recognise that syndicalism can have the function of improving the condition of the workers, while waiting for better, but that they refuse this function to mutualism. However, mutual associations, i.e. organisations based on collective solidarity to which people belong by paying contributions and which provide a certain number of services, and over which the contributors have control through

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<sup>26</sup> “Gaetano Manfredonia”, “L’imaginaire utopique anarchiste au tournant du siècle” dans *Cahiers Jaurès* 2006/2 (N° 180), pages 27 à 44)

Cf. Également: “Gaetano Manfredonia, “Utopie”,  
<http://www.proudhon.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Utopie.pdf>

general assemblies, are found in all aspects of life. Mutual associations therefore have, *outside* the workplace, the same function as trade unions *within* the workplace, these two forms being complementary.

In fact, the problem that is posed is not: can we or cannot we change society gradually through punctual initiatives? But: when the revolution is clearly not for tomorrow morning, should we create institutions that make life more pleasant for the people? The problem is the same for action in the workplace and in the residential area.

In the great period of revolutionary syndicalism, many anarchist militants were involved in syndicalism because it was obvious that one did not get up every morning with the conviction that the revolution would be launched in the evening. In the same way, other anarchists or revolutionary syndicalists were involved in mutualism, i.e. in social institutions – mutual aid, health insurance, pension funds, etc. – which helped to improve the daily lot of the people. This was nothing more than a way to improve the daily lot of the workers. This was nothing more than the application of the principles that Bakunin had enunciated: propaganda by the deed, i.e. propaganda by example: creation of mutual aid, schools, libraries, cooperatives, etc.<sup>27</sup>

It was more a question of: “Since there is no immediate revolutionary perspective, should we do nothing and wait? Or shall we try to improve our condition?” The anarchist militants who engaged in mutualism were doing the same thing as those who engaged in syndicalism – indeed, they were often the same.

I don’t think anyone imagined that devoting themselves to mutualism would contribute to the collapse of capitalism; however, the existence of a large mutualist movement could provide a basis for the reorganisation of society after the revolution, assuming that such an eventuality could occur: the structures would be in place and many men and women would have concrete organisational experience in the sectors concerned. This Proudhonian pattern was realised in Spain, where anarchists had been saying for decades that organised workers had to prepare themselves to take over one day the organisation of society.

The point is not that Proudhon joined mutualism because he was a reformist; he joined it because he realised that it was a form of

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27 “The militants of the Spanish section of the IWA will interpret the call for ‘propaganda by deed’ in a perfectly ‘orthodox’ way, i.e. in the exact sense in which the term had been defined by the AIT. In application of their 1873 congress, they called for support for strikes, the creation of resistance funds, demonstrations, meetings, networks of consumer cooperatives, the creation of schools, libraries, educational centres, mutual societies and employment offices. The fact is that the Spanish section was the only one to retain the character of a mass organisation.” R. Berthier, *La fin de la Première Internationale*, Éditions du Monde libertaire, p. 285.

autonomous workers' organisation, because the creation of mutualist associations was an essential aspect of militant action in the same way as union action for better living conditions. It is only a question of circumstance whether mutualist associations and trade unions can one day be used to reorganise the society of tomorrow.

Mutualism was of primary importance in France because it was a determining factor on at least two points: a) the setting up of working class mutual aid bodies outside of all state and bourgeois influence; and consequently b) the proletariat's recognition of the absolute necessity of radically cutting ties with the bourgeoisie and organising itself autonomously.

### **Emma Goldman and the CGT**

There is an astonishing text by Emma Goldman<sup>28</sup> which is a testimony of what she saw of a stay in Paris in 1900, of her meeting with the revolutionary syndicalist movement and the CGT. One of the things that appeared to her to be essential was the existence of mutuals, the "mutual aid societies established by French revolutionary syndicalists". "Their goal, she adds, is above all to ensure the work for the unemployed, and to spread this spirit of mutual assistance based on the awareness of the identity of labor interests around the world."

Goldman describes many self-help activities set up by the CGT through mutuals, such as hosting workers travelling from place to place.

"Chief among these activities are the *mutualités*, or mutual aid societies, established by the French Syndicalists. Their object is, foremost, to secure work for unemployed members, and to further that spirit of mutual assistance which rests upon the consciousness of labor's identity of interests throughout the world."

There were employment offices in France run by sharks who overexploited workers. By threatening a general strike, the French syndicalists forced the government to abolish these offices, and now, "the workers' own "mutualités" have almost entirely superseded them, to the great economic and moral advantage of labor".

The Syndicalists also provided mutual aid to workers from France and elsewhere who were forced to travel:

"I have repeatedly witnessed, while at the headquarters of the *Confédération*, the cases of workingmen who

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<sup>28</sup> Emma Goldman, *Syndicalism, the modern Menace to Capitalism*, 1913, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article620>

came with their union cards from various parts of France, and even from other countries of Europe, and were supplied with meals and lodging, and encouraged by every evidence of brotherly spirit, and made to feel at home by their fellow workers of the *Confédération*. It is due, to a great extent, to these activities of the Syndicalists that the French government is forced to employ the army for strikebreaking, because few workers are willing to lend themselves for such service, thanks to the efforts and tactics of Syndicalism.”

In addition to these mutual aid activities, the syndicalists established cooperation between town and country, between the factory worker and the farmer, “the latter providing the workers with food supplies during strikes, or taking care of the strikers’ children”.

Finally, Emma Goldman highlights the enormous amount of education work “carried on systematically by evening classes on all vital subjects treated from an unbiased, libertarian standpoint – not the adulterated “knowledge” with which the minds are stuffed in our public schools”:

“The scope of the education is truly phenomenal, including sex hygiene, the care of women during pregnancy and confinement, the care of home and children, sanitation and general hygiene; in fact, every branch of human knowledge – science, history, art – receives thorough attention, together with the practical application in the established workingmen’s libraries, dispensaries, concerts and festivals, in which the greatest artists and literati of Paris consider it an honour to participate.”

There is, however, one idea that Goldman insists on, as she mentions it twice in her text, and it is that the function of syndicalism is to prepare workers to take control of their own affairs in a society freed from exploitation.

She shows that “Various forms of Syndicalist activity are designed to prepare the workers, even within present social and industrial conditions, for the life of a new and better society.”; to that end, she writes, “the masses are trained in the spirit of mutual aid and brotherhood, their initiative and self-reliance developed, and an *esprit de corps* maintained whose very soul is solidarity of purpose and the community of interests of the international proletariat.”

The second time she is more explicit:

“One of the most vital efforts of Syndicalism is to prepare the workers, *now*, for their rôle in a free society. Thus the Syndicalist organizations supply its members with textbooks on every trade and industry, of a character that is calculated to make the worker an adept in his chosen line, a master of his craft, for the purpose of familiarizing him with all the branches of his industry, so that when labour finally takes over production and distribution, the people will be fully prepared to manage successfully their own affairs.”

Goldman’s text seems to me particularly interesting because it shows the total impregnation between syndicalism and mutualism, one being complementary to the other. It is perhaps useful to point out that what she describes does not only fall within the competence of the CGT itself, but also of the Labour exchanges, but the American anarchist was probably not in a position to differentiate, especially as these two structures were perfectly complementary.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the activity Goldman describes was particularly well adapted to the objective sought: indeed, if the preparation of workers, “now, for their role in a free society” (an idea which will be found in the Amiens Charter in 1906), could not be realised in France, the implementation of these practices had a spectacular success in Spain, before the movement was militarily crushed by the coalition of fascists and Stalinists and the indifference of the “democracies”.

Thus, if the authors of *Black Flame* are perfectly right to question the idea that mutualism alone will gradually lead to an emancipated society, by rejecting it out of hand without any critical examination, they isolate themselves from an essential current of ideas in the workers’ movement.

### **Anarchism and mutualism**

There are, according to the authors of *Black Flame*, three essential distinctions between anarchism and mutualism:

♦ “First, anarchists rejected private ownership of the means of production as incapable of meeting the needs of the peasantry and working class, while mutualists supported small landowners and envisioned private profits and private property in their market utopia.”

♦ According to *Black Flame*, anarchists insist on the need for revolutionary change, while mutualists deny it. The anarchists “rejected the mutualist notion that a non-capitalist sector could gradually and peacefully overthrow the existing order”.

Proudhon, we learn, “did not really like [*sic*] or understand large-scale industry, and was hostile to strikes, which isolated him from the emerging labour movement” (p. 84). Furthermore, he



favoured a gradualist solution of the social question: “Proudhon’s strategy for change was gradualist: he favoured the development of a non-capitalist sector, based on small individual proprietors as well as cooperatives that would undermine and then overwhelm capitalism.” (p. 37)

◆ The third and main difference between anarchism and mutualism, which, it should be remembered, would disqualify Proudhon as an anarchist, lies in the fact that “the mutualist tradition was geared toward the needs of small independent farmers and craftspeople.” (p. 85)

Actually, Proudhon never said that socialism could be achieved gradually through mutualist societies:

“...it is not enough for a few practitioners, moving from the apostolate to action, to call around them, in associations of mutual aid or cooperation, a few hundred zealots. The work of reform could drag on without producing any other result than to entertain the conservatives from time to time. [...]

“Would Workers’ Democracy, with its small and poor associations, with its subscriptions at five cents a week, with its ordinary means of persuasion and propaganda, imagine that it could accomplish one of those vast movements which regenerate societies and change the face of the globe in a few years? It would not even succeed in organising a general system of insurance and in replacing the fixed premium by mutuality. What would it be if it had to compete seriously with the Banque de France, the Crédit Mobilier, the Comptoir d’escompte, all those financial agglomerations whose capital, in cash, is counted in billions? (...)

“An unfortunate idea, in my opinion, of the phalansterian school, was to have thought that it would lead the world, if it were permitted only to pitch its tent and build a first model phalanstery. It was supposed that a first attempt, more or less successful, would lead to a second one, since, little by little, the populations snowballing, the thirty-seven thousand communes of France would be, one morning, metamorphosed into groups of harmony and phalanstery. In politics and social economy, epigenesis, as physiologists say, is a fundamentally false principle. To change the constitution of a people, we must act both on the whole and on every part of the body politic, we can not emphasise it too much.”<sup>29</sup>

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29 Proudhon, *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, 3<sup>e</sup> partie ch. 1.

It could not be made any clearer that there is no possibility of transforming society as a whole through gradual measures and the multiplication of associationist or cooperative initiatives: the entire "political body" must be mobilised. It is from Proudhon that Bakunin takes his criticism of the illusion that society can be transformed by the extension of cooperatives.

Gaetano Manfredonia, who has read Proudhon, writes in *Anarchisme et changement social* (Anarchism and Social Change):

"Proudhon does not believe that social change can take place through the force of example, by simple imitation, starting from a model experience which, little by little, would win over the majority. The idea that it is from the multiplication of such initiatives that salvation will come is alien to him."<sup>30</sup>

Proudhon and Bakunin have strictly the same point of view on the question<sup>31</sup>. We can see how incomplete and caricatured Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt's vision of Proudhon is. They bring together all the commonplaces of Marxist criticism.

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30 Éditions Atelier de création libertaire, p. 164.

31 See Bakunin:

"The worthy economists of the two opposing schools, that of the liberals and that of the scientific communists, who differ on all other points and agree on only one, have long since expressed the same conviction, based on real science, that is to say, on the rigorous study of the evolution of economic factors, the conviction that, given the present organisation of the public economy and of commodity production, as well as the growth, domination and concentration of capital which necessarily follow from it, workers' associations, no matter how hard they try, are not in a position to liberate Labour from the oppression of [Capital]; the conviction, I say, that workers' banks, fed only by the meagre and mostly impossible savings of the toiling masses, will never be able to compete with the powerful universal banks of the bourgeois oligarchy; and that because of the incessant increase of labour and hungry bellies, an increase which is more and more accelerated by the concentration of capital in fewer and fewer hands and by the resulting fatal transformation of the petty bourgeoisie, "and even of the middle class into a proletariat, the workers, if they do not want to die of hunger, the workers are obliged to compete more and more with each other, a competition pushed to the extreme, that is, to the very limit of what it costs to maintain and feed the individual; and that, consequently, all workers' associations of consumption, by lowering the prices of the necessities of life, inevitably lead to a reduction of wages, in other words, to a worsening of the condition of the workers. Finally, production associations are only possible in those branches of industry which are not monopolised by big capital, since no workers' association is able to compete practically with it in the field of market production. And since big capital, driven by immanent necessity, necessarily tends to get its hands on all branches of industry without exception, workers' associations are bound to suffer the same fate as that of the petty and middle bourgeoisie: general, inescapable misery, slavish submission to oligarchic capital, and the absorption of all petty and middle property into the big property of a few hundred wealthy people throughout Europe. (Bakunin, "L'Alliance Universelle de la Démocratie Sociale. Section russe. A la jeunesse russe." Mars 1870)

To say that private ownership of the means of production does not meet the needs of the peasantry and the working class can in no way sum up Proudhon's point of view. Indeed, while he encouraged workers' access to credit to buy their tools, he also explained that small-scale production characterised by a weak division of labour was subject to the fluctuations of the market, survived in precarious conditions and were bound to disappear over the long term. On the other hand, he explains that large-scale industry, where there is a great division of labour, should be taken in hand by what he calls "workers' companies". As for the peasantry, Proudhon understood, better than the Russian communists after 1917, that one does not make a revolution against the peasants and that it is necessary to envisage a strategy making it possible to pass gradually from private property to collective forms of work: a point of view which was perfectly understood by Bakunin, and taken up by the Spanish anarchists during the civil war.

To say that Proudhon "disliked" large-scale industry is a rather simplistic view of Proudhon's thinking; to say that he did not "understand" large-scale industry reveals great ignorance. Even though France in his time was 85% rural, as Proudhon himself explains, his *System of Economic Contradictions* reveals a great knowledge of the mechanisms of capitalism and develops concepts that would be taken up twenty years later in *Capital*. Moreover, his *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* is a masterly exposé of the functioning of financial capitalism. It seems obvious to me that the authors of *Black Flame* have no knowledge of this.

As for the hostility to strikes, it is a much more complex matter than that: Proudhon simply says that strikes will not fundamentally alter the working class condition – which Marx also said. When Proudhon writes that the miners of Rives-de-Giers are wrong to strike, he specifies that they are wrong "outwardly" [*en leur for extérieur*] that is to say from the point of view of the law in force, he does not say that they are wrong in the absolute: on the contrary, he says that they had good reasons to do so "inwardly" [*en leur for intérieur*]. Naturally, this subtlety is deliberately overlooked by biased or ignorant readers.

For a period of his life he deplored the strikes because he thought it would be possible to achieve an alliance between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie, but he eventually realised that this was impossible.

Proudhon's views on strikes *never* isolated him from the labour movement: he had a considerable celebrity among workers in his time. Moreover, the revolutionary syndicalists did not hesitate to

claim him as their own.<sup>32</sup> This is another example of the ignorance of the authors of *Black Flame*.

### Gradualism

To say that Proudhon advocated “a peaceful overturn” of the existing order through mutualism is a rather reductive way of expressing his thought. Above all, Schmidt and van der Walt make an analysis based on their presuppositions (ideological approach), without considering how Proudhonian mutualism constituted, at the time, a break with the socialism of his time (historical approach). For Proudhon, mutualism was an alternative to the impasse of state socialism (from above) and cooperative socialism (from below), which he declared unrealistic.

Proudhon refused to propose a system which the workers would only have to apply passively: “The people alone, operating on themselves without intermediaries, can complete the economic revolution founded in February. The people alone can save civilisation and advance mankind”, he wrote in 1848 in his *Toast to the Revolution*.

Also false is *Black Flame*’s assertion that Proudhon’s thought does not incorporate the principle of class struggle: it is hard to imagine that the author of a work entitled *The System of Economic Contradictions or Philosophy of Misery* could not place himself from the point of view of the opposition between the classes.

“The struggle between classes, the antagonism of their interests, the way in which these interests coalesce, determine the political regime, consequently the choice of government, its innumerable varieties and its even more innumerable variations.”<sup>33</sup>

Two years before the publication of the *Manifesto*, Proudhon had published his *System of Economic Contradictions*, the title of which is self-explanatory. It should be said, however, that Proudhon does not limit the history of humanity to the simplistic idea that it is the history of class struggle. By the concept of “economic society” he meant the relations of production and the division of society into antagonistic classes – he spoke of the “*war of labour and capital*” – but also the political and ideological phenomena which, together with economic determinations, form an inseparable whole.

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<sup>32</sup> See: Philippe Soulez, “Proudhon et les théoriciens du syndicalisme révolutionnaire”, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40689654>

<sup>33</sup> Proudhon, *Du principe fédératif*, Librairie internationale, 1868, p. 31.) (Version digitalisée : [https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Proudhon\\_-\\_Du\\_Principe\\_f%C3%A9d%C3%A9ratif/Texte\\_complet](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Proudhon_-_Du_Principe_f%C3%A9d%C3%A9ratif/Texte_complet))

Two things made a deep impression on Proudhon during the revolution of 1848.

a) The appalling repression by the “democratic” government against the workers during the June insurrection. This repression traumatised Proudhon and greatly contributed to defining his views on revolutionary violence.

b) The total powerlessness of the representative regime to change the condition of the working class. Democracy in fact brought the bourgeoisie to power and they used the government against the people, against the working class.

Proudhon was therefore led to envisage a strategy which, without ruling out the possibility of a violent revolution, attempted to limit its most disastrous effects. In fact, Proudhon’s perspective is a kind of radical reformism. He wants to bring about important changes, but not by a general upheaval, overnight. He does not want to make “a Saint Bartholomew’s Day of owners”<sup>34</sup>, he wrote to Marx on 17 May 1846. In fact Proudhon’s point of view is not very different from that proposed by Marx in the *Manifesto*, who does not envisage a “Saint Bartholomew’s Day” of landlords either, but intends to resort to “despotic encroachments” on the right of ownership after the conquest of power by elections. Communist militants who are too eager to reproach Proudhon for his “reformism” should think twice.

There is no doubt that Proudhon, who witnessed the massacres of the 1848 revolution, would have preferred an amicable settlement of the social question, but he also adds that if the bourgeois are not reasonable, they will have to face violence. Thus he writes in *General Idea of Revolution*: “We are still masters of proceeding with all the prudence, all the moderation that will be deemed useful; later, our destiny may no longer depend on our free will”. This clearly means that it is possible to negotiate now, but that later it might not be possible. “Between repayment by annuities and confiscation, there may be many terms”, but if a solution is not found, “it will no longer be the right to work, nor the right to surplus value that the peasants and workers will invoke: it will be *the right to war and reprisals*”<sup>35</sup> [my emphasis].

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34 A reference to the massacre of Protestants in Paris on St. Bartholomew’s Day, August 24, 1572, which was prolonged for several days in the capital and then spread to more than twenty provincial towns in the following weeks and even months.

35 *Idee générale de la révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, éd. Fresnes-Antony, p. 166-169 .

## The Proudhonians and the International

The criticisms made of Proudhon by Marxists, but also by some anarchists, often apply less to Proudhon than to the men who claimed to be his followers. The criticism of Proudhon's mutualism is mostly confused with the criticism of the mutualism of his alleged "disciples", who often develop positions that are not found in the "master". Besides, these "disciples" constituted an extremely heterogeneous group whose choices after the end of the International were not necessarily consistent with its objectives.

"Some of them did not occupy a leading role after 1867; of those who remained, a part remained attached to mutualism, another part joined the anti-authoritarian collectivists. Most of them actively participated in the Commune (Camélinat, Debock, Laplanche, Limousin, Malon, Varlin), some of them kept their distance (Chemalé, Fournaise), others went so far as to take sides against it (Fribourg, Tolain, Murat, Héligon). As we can see, the Proudhonian moment does not mean that the French workers of the IWA were converted to Proudhon's thought. Simply that they had found in it a resource, at the time of the foundation of the International, for thinking about their situation and formulating their projects."<sup>36</sup>

If Bakunin clearly recognises the filiation with his elder, this filiation cannot hide the points on which he is in opposition with him. But above all, he distinguishes between oppositions with Proudhon himself and those with his successors. Thus, at the **Basel** congress of the IWA (1869), the delegates had been divided during the debate on the collectivisation of the soil. The Proudhonians were against it, and Bakunin writes about it in a fragment of *The Knuto-German Empire*:

"Of this individual liberty, which a small number of Parisian workers led astray, some by the later works of Proudhon, others the propaganda of the positivist school, had the great mistake, in my opinion, of defending at the last congress of the International; of this hypocritical, exclusive, oppressive liberty, bourgeois in a word, we do not want."<sup>37</sup>

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36 Samuel Hayat, "Les proudhoniens de la Première Internationale", <https://www.proudhon.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Qui-est-proudhonien-1-1.pdf>

37 Bakunin, *L'Empire Knuto-Germanique*, éd. Champ libre, VIII, 449.

The freedom of which Bakunin speaks here is that founded on individual, hereditary, juridical property, which is “the individual privilege of an exploiting minority.” Elsewhere, Bakunin will still speak, in connection with this same congress, of the “bourgeois socialists, co-operators, socialists of the school of Proudhon”. And, in fact, the Bakuninians of the International will ally themselves with the Marxists on this question, against the Proudhonians.

If Bakunin occasionally expresses reservations about Proudhon, he does not, however, at any time confuse him with his disciples, whom he occasionally describes as a “so-called Proudhonian coterie”<sup>38</sup> – those who, like Tolain and Langlois, have gone over to the Versailles and exploited the memory of Proudhon for the benefit of their bourgeois tendencies, “so that today the name of Proudhon serves in France as a flag for a school which the author of the First Memorandum on Property would certainly not recognise as his own”.<sup>39</sup>

Bakunin decidedly disliked the Proudhonians, in particular Gustave Chaudey, towards whom he is ferocious. Chaudey, the executor of Proudhon’s will, had acquired a real influence among the latter’s disciples:

“... his influence on a small workers’ coterie which had formed in the last years of Proudhon’s life, around this great thinker, great revolutionary theorist, formidable in rational negation, but a pitiful organiser and man of action – this influence, I say, which Chaudey inherited from Proudhon and which he shared with the melodramatic and ebullient citizen Anglois [Langlois], formerly an international, but now seated next to Tolain on the benches of the Versailles Assembly, has never constituted a power. Besides, all this so-called Proudhonian coterie was a stillborn. (...) Chaudey’s actions could only be those of a bourgeois, that is, of a reactionary, because he was from head to toe a bourgeois, nothing but a bourgeois. He had all the prejudices, the instincts, all the hatred against the egalitarian aspirations of the proletariat. He was a bourgeois bird who had unduly adorned himself with socialist feathers.”<sup>40</sup>

Let us remember that Proudhon died in 1865, that *Political Capacity* dates from 1864 and that its author did not have the possibility of measuring the stake constituted by the creation, this

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38 Editions Champ libre, vol. I, p. 241.

39 Editions Champ libre, vol.VI, lxvii.

40 Bakunin, “The International Alliance of Social Revolutionaries,” 1873.

same year, of the First International – an International founded by a group of *French Proudhonians* and English trade unionists.

A Brazilian anarchist historian, Felipe Corrêa, who is close to the platformist current but who does not share *Black Flame's* prejudice against Proudhon, suggests that Proudhon's name is not attached to any organisation, unlike Bakunin. This insightful observation suggests that from Proudhon to Bakunin (and we know what the latter owes to the former), a step was taken towards the evolution of anarchism from a theory to an organised movement. The foundation of anarchism as a self-conscious movement, towards the end of the IWA, resulted from this initial event, after a number of ups and downs and questionings.

The Proudhonian mutualists in the International may have been wrong to have misunderstood Proudhon, but they were above all the depositaries of a complex thinking that was totally unsuitable for fueling congressional debates. They were right to object, during the debates within the IWA on land ownership, that there were no peasants among the delegates and that it would perhaps have been advisable to take their opinion before making a decision. For Proudhon's positions on this question took into account the ideological prejudices of the peasantry on property, but also envisaged progressive measures for moving towards associative forms of organisation of agricultural production.

It was largely on the basis of Proudhon's positions that the agrarian collectivisations were carried out in Spain during the Civil War! And how can we not think of Proudhon when we remember the small landowners who were not forced to collectivise but who ended up joining the collectives because they realised that they benefited from mutual aid and collective equipment?

“Another example should complete our conviction of the role of Proudhon's thought, that of the Spanish Revolution (1936-1939), whose entire constructive work, the agrarian collectivisation in Aragon, the Levant, Castile, and the industrial collectivisation in Catalonia, its entire federative, mutualist functioning, is rooted in Proudhonian thought, enriched, of course, by that of Bakunin, Kropotkin and the experience of social struggles in that country. But the terms used by Proudhon in *Solution of the Social Problem* (1848) clearly appear in the collectivisation decrees: ‘exchange office’, ‘work voucher’, ‘abolition of money’, ‘abolition of rents’, ‘statistical control of production’... Similarly, the tolerance shown by the revolutionaries in their collectivisation undertaking towards small individualist peasants or certain small traders (those who were not suspected of supporting fascism) bears witness to the



positive influence of Proudhonian thought. It was because they had read Proudhon that the Spanish revolutionaries were able to avoid the catastrophe of an authoritarian implementation of the collectivisation of land, industry, communications and services, in contrast to what was done in Soviet Russia.”<sup>41</sup>.

It is undeniable that Bakunin owes a lot to Proudhon, but Bakunin himself probably never had the opportunity to take the time to reflect calmly on a monumental and often paradoxical work, whose internal logic was not immediately apparent.

Proudhon’s views on property, for example, were complex: after condemning it, he gave the impression of rehabilitating it at the end of his life, but this is not the case, and to understand him one has to take the trouble to “enter” into his mode of reasoning, which the Bakuninists did not have the time, nor perhaps the capacity, to do.

But this remark also applies to the activists who claimed to be his followers and who defended in the congresses of the International the principle of private property: their actual affiliation with Proudhon is questionable. The fact remains that their argument on the question of private property at the **Brussels** Congress<sup>42</sup> in 1868 deserves to be examined.

There had been an evolution within the “Proudhonian” and mutualist group in the International. At the Geneva and Lausanne Congresses, they had condemned strikes and trade unions; in **Brussels** in 1868, they have now changed their point of view. The context has changed considerably. While, during the first years, the IWA had been humming, from 1866 onwards social struggles intensified and a vast movement of strikes spread throughout Europe. Strikes, which until then had a fortuitous character, became real class battles.

An extraordinary international solidarity movement was organized through the International channel; workers thus gained practical experience of solidarity that often came to them from abroad. With each intervention of the army, the moderates lost ground, and progressively the International became more radical; this radicalisation, it should be pointed out, was not the result of an ideological debate but of the experience of both struggles and the practice of international solidarity in the field.

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41 Michael Paraire, “Proudhon, fondateur de l’anarchisme?”, <http://www.alternativelibertaire.org/?Proudhon-fondateur-de-l-anarchisme#nh1>

42 Voir les débats sur la propriété au congrès de Bruxelles de l’AIT, septembre 1868 :

[http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Congres\\_de\\_Bruxelles.pdf](http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Congres_de_Bruxelles.pdf)

It was no longer a question of transforming existing society through reforms but of ensuring the victory of socialism through social revolution. In **Brussels**, however, the Proudhonians had not changed their view concerning private property. However, the resolution on collective ownership was passed by a large majority, which shows that many Proudhonians voted for it.

### The Debate in Brussels

A careful reading of the debate on ownership at the IWA **Brussels** Congress in 1868 shows that things are not as simple as the authors of *Black Flame* seem to think. We see that what the Proudhonian mutualists feared in collective ownership was the control of the State. But as they said, defending collective property did not mean that they accepted what they called the “current organization”: indeed, property as it existed was described as “oppressive”: “On the contrary, we ask to change its conditions and to generalize its effects”. The idea was that the more dispersed property was, the less “oppressive” it was: “By defending individual property, we do not think we are accepting any solidarity with the current organisation; today property is privileged and oppressive” says Tolain<sup>43</sup>.

Whereas in Proudhon’s vision small-scale production coexisted with large-scale industrial production but was destined to disappear, the vision of the mutualists who claimed to be his followers remained confined to a society based on generalised small-scale enterprise. A candid view that leaves out the whole sector of industrial production that requires the use of a large mass of workers and materials. It should be remembered that the *System of Economic Contradictions* had perfectly described the mechanism of capital concentration and its effects.

One cannot help but think of the tragic fall in productivity in collectivised agriculture under the Russian revolution.

The supporters of collective property, in particular César De Paepe, had no difficulty in sweeping aside the arguments of the mutualists of the IWA, in a remarkably intelligent intervention, but it seems to me that there was not such a great distance between property dispersed among everyone and collective property: all that was needed was a little time and pedagogy, combined with the hard experience of reality, to make the mutualists switch to the collectivist camp: *this is precisely what many Proudhonians eventually did*.

Moreover, the mutualists were not unrestrained supporters of private property in all areas. They recognised the collective ownership of public services: “canals, mines, railways, etc.”

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43 IWA, Brussels Congress, Discussion on the question of property, [http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Congres\\_de\\_Bruxelles.pdf](http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Congres_de_Bruxelles.pdf),

As far as agriculture was concerned, the mutualists' ideas were not always wrong; in any case they would have deserved to be discussed. It is said that large-scale farming would produce more through collective ownership: this is not certain, says Tolain:

“The cultivator may find by co-operation the means of buying the tool and working the land, while retaining his right to the piece of land which belongs to him, and, determined by his particular interest, he will work more and provide a more abundant production than he would give for the service of the community.”

There is a real debate, that deserves to be taken up, between the interest of intensive agriculture on small or medium surfaces and extensive agriculture on large surfaces. This debate became more important as soon as an ecological approach to agricultural production began to be taken.

Surprisingly, it can be said that Proudhon was an unsung precursor. Indeed, in the *Manuel du spéculateur à la Bourse* (Speculator's manual for the stock market), he makes an incredible diagnosis of the effects of the domination of "industrial feudalism", some of whose points are surprisingly topical, in particular this one: he explains that the domination of finance over agriculture will lead to the impoverishment of the soil: Indeed, products are drawn from the soil, but the soil receives nothing in return: “Nothing that the earth produces returns to it; everything is removed, transported within the cities for consumption which, from the point of view of agriculture, can be considered non-reproducible”. The use of chemical fertilisers can only “delay an inevitable ruin by a few years”. Proudhon concludes: “When nature loses its balance, it drags down the populations.”

The debates during the congresses of the IWA show that the positions of the Proudhonian mutualists were not absolutely rigid: Longuet explains that property is not a principal fact of society because now “it no longer really exists” since it is dominated by the phenomenon of exchange:

“There is no longer, as in the beginning, an owner who wallows in his land and whose family follows one another for several generations. This has been replaced by credit, exchange, freedom and movement.”

Longuet adds: “to what extent does our way of seeing things exclude large-scale cultivation?” and he invites the congress not to take any immediate resolution: “for we cannot rule before we have made a serious enquiry among the agricultural population; and this

question, so serious, so important, whose solution is not possible today, be, reserved for another congress.” Which seems quite reasonable, after all.

In fact, he cared little about the question of ownership and was quite willing to let the peasants have the illusion of ownership as long as associative structures were put in place to work the land. He knew that, in the long run, ownership would cease to be a problem.

If Bakunin and his comrades had had a better knowledge of Proudhon’s thought, they could have found a form of alliance with the Proudhonians, avoiding an alliance with the Marxists.

### **1848: Proudhon at the Constituent Assembly**

In 1848 Proudhon was elected to the Constituent Assembly which was to draft a constitution for the Republic. This experience was decisive because he realized that democracy – that is to say elections – had in fact brought the bourgeoisie to power, and that any modification of the social order was impossible by this means.

At the same time, let us recall, Marx had dissolved the first communist party in history (the League of Communists), thinking it was not useful, and advocated the support of the proletariat to the demands of the German liberal bourgeoisie . It was based on his vision of history, imbued with the model of the French revolution, according to which it was necessary that the bourgeoisie first access to power before giving it to the working class.

Of the double trauma he suffered during the revolution of 1848 (extreme violence of the democratic state against the workers, impotence of the representative regime), Proudhon draws the lesson that the electoral strategy is inoperative. He reaches the conclusion that one must radically change perspective, place oneself in a totally different logic. From now on, it will no longer be citizens who will have to appoint representatives; Sovereignty will no longer be exercised in parliaments but in productive institutions where the associated workers will organize themselves.

This must be borne in mind in order to understand Proudhon’s opposition to “worker candidacies” in the *Political capacity of the working classes*: He says that the workers must organize themselves differently, and elsewhere. Workers must organize themselves on the basis of their role in the production process in their own class organizations. Thus we understand why this man, who is caricatured as “opposed to strikes”, has been recognized as one of their own by revolutionary syndicalists – which Schmidt & van der Walt seem to ignore.

The workers who organised themselves in the labour exchanges from the 1890s and a little later in the CGT, founded in 1895, had

perfectly understood the general significance of Proudhon's political thought:

- 1) Social contradictions are a consequence of the ownership ownership of the means of production;
- 2) Capitalism, by monopolising the means of production, condemns the proletariat to wage labour;
- 3) The appropriation of the surplus value defines what Proudhon calls capitalist theft;
- 4) Labour is the only creator of value;
- 5) Profit is an unpaid part of labour appropriated by the capitalist;
- 6) The end of exploitation is the destruction of capitalism;
- 7) The state is the organisation which defends the interests of the bourgeoisie;
- 8) The capitalist regime, by generating a rupture in society, thus condemns itself historically.

This is a far cry from the somewhat reductive view that Schmidt & van der Walt give us of Proudhon's thought.

In *Theory of Property*, Proudhon makes it very clear that he has always opposed the appropriation of the surplus value by the owners of the means of production. He masterfully demonstrates that the question of ownership is *ultimately secondary*: the manufacturer, he says, doesn't care if he doesn't own his business, his tools, his house, etc: what interests him is to be able to appropriate the surplus value, i.e. the value of the combined labour of the workers who work in the business.

“Does the manufacturer need, in order to be industrially and commercially free [*i.e. free to appropriate the surplus value*] to own the house or apartment he lives in with his family, the workshop in which he works, the store where he keeps his raw materials, the shop where he displays his products, the land on which the house, workshop, store and shop were built? In no way.”<sup>44</sup>

What the manufacturer is interested in is the appropriation of the value produced by the collective work of the workers who produce in the factory <sup>45</sup>. This brings the question of ownership back to its proper place: for Proudhon the question of ownership is not decisive! It is not important, it is a far outdated affair.

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44 Proudhon, *Théorie de la propriété*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

45 See : René Berthier : *Études proudhoniennes : la propriété*, Éditions du Monde libertaire.

Schmidt-van der Walt rightly say that “most farmers lived on rented land or were deeply in debt; they were not in a position to start a viable non-capitalist sector, not to mention one that could overthrow the existing order”. Precisely, as I believe I have shown above, Proudhon did not envisage “starting a viable non-capitalist sector”; he thought that the solution to the social problem could only be global. However, he did not advocate expropriating the peasantry to force them to create agrarian communities: this would have been a fatal mistake, as Bakunin shows in his “Letters to a Frenchman” written during the Franco-Prussian war.

The strategy he recommended at the time was totally consistent with the Proudhonian vision. Bakunin thought that the rallying of the peasantry to the revolution was essential as a success of the revolution. To those who objected that peasants were strong supporters of individual property, he replied that it was necessary “to establish a revolutionary line of conduct that would turn the difficulty around and that would not only prevent the peasants’ individualism from pushing them into the camp of reaction, but that would on the contrary use it to make the revolution prevail”.<sup>46</sup>

“Apart from this means that I propose, there is only one: urban terrorism against the countryside (...). Those who use a similar means will kill the revolution.”<sup>47</sup>

It is obvious that when one skims over Proudhon’s work at high speed as the authors of *Black Flame* have probably done, one does not perceive the complexity of his thought and sticks to the old refrains mostly from Marxist literature about a “petty bourgeois Proudhon supporter of private property”.

## Conclusion

Why should we be interested in a book written by two South Africans in English and not translated into French,<sup>48</sup> whose stated aim is to “challenge many commonly held views about anarchism and syndicalism, re-examining the ideas of the Broad anarchist tradition, and synthesising a global history of the movement.”? It is understandable that Proudhon is not the main concern of these two authors. However, insofar as they also intend to *redefine anarchism*, and consequently to examine the relevance of a certain number of ideas but also the legitimacy of certain authors to claim to be part of the movement, their book conveys an alarming

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<sup>46</sup> Bakunin, “Lettre à un Français”, septembre 1870, éditions Champ libre, VII, p. 118.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, VII, 116.

<sup>48</sup> For the record, this text is a contribution made within the framework of the French “P.J. Proudhon Society”.

discourse on anarchism, amplified by its impact in the English-speaking and Latin American world. This impact is not negligible.

The only way to counter this development would be to leave our Franco-French compartmentalization and to carry out at the international level a coordinated action of diffusion of the thought of Proudhon in all its diversity.

## CONTENTS

Disaffection with Proudhon?.....	2
Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism.....	4
Proudhon, not anarchist.....	6
Proudhon and Tucker.....	7
Disciple of Fourier?.....	8
Mutualism.....	12
Emma Goldman and the CGT.....	14
Anarchism and mutualism.....	16
Gradualism.....	19
The Proudhonians and the International.....	21
The Debate in Brussels.....	25
1848: Proudhon at the Constituent Assembly.....	27
Conclusion.....	30