The Issues and Terms of the Methodological Debate between Proudhon, Hegel, and Marx

René Berthier
31-10-2026

Both Proudhon and Marx grappled with the question of how to develop a scientific understanding of society and the capitalist system. The issue is not simply a matter of opposition between idealist and materialist philosophy. More fundamentally, the disagreement concerns how to think about the relationships between reality, concepts, history, and scientific knowledge. The central question is whether the workings of capitalism should be explained by tracing their historical origins or by theoretically reconstructing the logic of their mechanisms and contradictions.

As early as 1846, in *The System of Economic Contradictions*, Proudhon is said to have developed a hypothetico-deductive method for analysing capitalism as a structured whole. This method was initially subjected to severe criticism by Marx, before Marx himself later adopted a comparable approach in *Capital*.

I. The methodological problem: understanding reality through history or through concepts?

1. Hegel: two ways in which knowledge develops

The debate begins with Hegel's distinction between two forms of development:

- Development according to time or nature: this starts from empirical reality, which exists prior to thought and conditions the formation of concepts. It is the historical and descriptive approach.
- Development according to the concept: this starts from abstract categories, which are logically interconnected in order to reconstruct reality intellectually in terms of its essential determinations.

In the second approach, the researcher does not provide a chronological account of how a phenomenon came into being, but reconstructs its internal

logic. One point must nevertheless be made clear: Hegel does not claim that concepts materially create reality or exist independently of it. The use of concepts constitutes a *working hypothesis*, a kind of theoretical "scaffolding"—to use Proudhon's term—which makes it possible to grasp the essential structures of reality.

Thought must therefore not be confused with the reality it seeks to understand. Rather, it constructs a rational representation of that reality. Hegelian philosophy thus raises a decisive question: how can one move from the empirical observation of phenomena to an understanding of their rational intelligibility?

2. Proudhon: going beyond mere empirical observation

Proudhon encounters a similar difficulty when he seeks to establish political economy as a genuine science. He argues that classical economists have accumulated observations, described phenomena, and identified certain regularities, but have failed to develop a general theory of the economic system. The mere description of facts is not enough to explain the relationships that organise society.

In *The System of Economic Contradictions* (1846), he therefore seeks to move beyond empiricism by constructing a theoretical model of capitalism. His aim is not to recount the history of capitalism from its origins, but to understand how it operates as a coherent set of economic relationships. In particular, he seeks to show how the various economic categories—value, the division of labour, machinery, competition, and monopoly—are interconnected and generate contradictions.

Proudhon thus adopts an approach close to Hegel's development according to the concept, although this does not establish that his method derives directly from an in-depth reading of Hegel.[1] The first issue at stake

1 It is customary to say that Proudhon had a poor understanding of Hegel. I would take a much more nuanced view. It is in *The Creation of Order in Humanity* (*De la Création de l'ordre dans l'humanité*) that he develops his reflections on the construction of a science of society, the role of classifications and series, and the relationship between the actual order of things and the order conceived by the mind. The book dates from 1843, a time when Marx was still under the influence of the Young Hegelian movement and was not yet concerned with this kind of problem at all.

Several aspects are particularly interesting:

1. Chapter II, devoted to philosophy, in which Proudhon examines German philosophical systems and the question of knowledge.
2. Chapter III, devoted to metaphysics, particularly the sections on the series and on the possibility of a "serial dialectic". Here, Proudhon compares his own method with philosophical dialectics.

in the debate is therefore the status of abstraction: is it a necessary means of understanding reality, or does it risk becoming an intellectual construction detached from reality?

II. Proudhon and Marx: two opposing conceptions of the analysis of capitalism

1. Marx in 1846–1847: the primacy of historical explanation

The publication of *The System of Economic Contradictions* in 1846 marks an intellectual break between the two authors. In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx develops a materialist conception of history. To understand social phenomena, one must begin with the material conditions of existence, the relations of production, and their historical transformation. Economic categories are therefore not autonomous ideas: they are the theoretical expression of real social relations, which are themselves historically determined.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx accuses Proudhon of proceeding in the opposite way:

- Proudhon takes economic categories as his starting point.
- He arranges them according to a logical sequence.
- He seeks to derive the different forms of the system from these categories.
- But, according to Marx, he fails to show how the economic relations themselves are historically produced.

For Marx, it is therefore necessary to explain the genesis of social relations rather than simply organise their conceptual expressions. His criticism rests on a fundamental idea: economic categories are not eternal. They correspond to historically specific forms of production and cannot be understood independently of the conditions that give rise to them. Marx thus accuses Proudhon of turning economic categories into abstract principles, as though they existed independently of the social relations that produce them.

---

3. Chapter V, devoted to history, in which he seeks to understand the laws governing social development.

Reading this work reveals a genuine understanding of the problems raised by Hegel, but also a critical distance from his philosophy. Historical scholarship on the reception of Hegel in France also reminds us that Proudhon did not read German and was familiar with Hegel primarily through French introductions and commentaries.

He writes that Proudhon fails to follow “the historical movement” that gave rise to these relations.

2. Proudhon's methodological response: thinking of capitalism as a totality

Proudhon does not claim that economic categories create social reality. He uses them as intellectual instruments to reconstruct the coherence of the capitalist system. His problem is different from the one Marx seeks to address: capitalism constitutes a totality in which economic phenomena are simultaneous and interdependent. The division of labour, competition, monopoly, machinery, and property relations do not simply follow one another in time; they coexist and act upon one another. It is therefore difficult to account for this totality through a chronological description.

Proudhon proposes a different procedure: begin with a fundamental category, value, and then progressively reconstruct the relationships that structure the system. The aim is not to recount how each category emerged historically, but to understand why it occupies a particular place within the overall organisation of capitalism.

The approach involves three operations:

1. Establish an initial category, which serves as a starting hypothesis.
2. Deduce the categories related to it and construct a theoretical model of the system.
3. Demonstrate the coherence of the whole, particularly through the contradictions running through economic relationships.

This model constitutes an intellectual “scaffolding”: it makes it possible to grasp reality in terms of its essential determinations without claiming to replace reality itself. The value of this method lies in its ability to bring out the internal contradictions of capitalism. The division of labour, for example, simultaneously increases productivity and has negative effects on workers, particularly their subordination and exploitation. Contradictions are therefore not accidents external to the system; they are intrinsic to its very operation.

The disagreement between Marx and Proudhon thus concerns two distinct approaches: Marx gives priority to explaining the historical formation of economic relations, whereas Proudhon prioritises the logical reconstruction of their relationships within an already constituted system.

3. A decisive question: the method of investigation and the method of presentation

This is probably one of the most important aspects of the debate. Two scientific operations must be distinguished:

- The method of investigation: this concerns how the researcher studies the subject, gathers facts, observes phenomena, and identifies their determining factors.
- The method of presentation: this concerns how the researcher presents the results of the investigation and organises knowledge in order to make the subject intelligible.

These two methods are not necessarily identical. One may study the historical formation of an economic system and then present its mechanisms in a logical order that does not correspond to their chronological sequence. This is precisely what is essential to Proudhon's approach. He understands that economic mechanisms operate simultaneously, even though they must be presented successively in order to be understood. A theoretical order of presentation must therefore be constructed that conveys the coherence of the whole.

This distinction was already present in Hegel, notably in the Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit, but Marx would not have fully taken it into account until much later, around 1865. The methodological question therefore goes beyond the opposition between history and logic: it also concerns the relationship between the process through which reality is discovered and the process through which its scientific explanation is constructed.

III. Marx's return to an abstract and deductive method in *Capital*

1. Marx's change of method

Marx's approach evolved between *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and the writing of *Capital* (1867). In 1847, Marx criticises Proudhon for using abstract categories to reconstruct the economic system logically, rather than following its historical development. Yet in *Capital*, Marx himself adopts an approach based on abstraction. He explains that the capitalist mode of production must be studied by setting aside accidental elements that prevent its mechanisms from being grasped in their purest form. He compares this procedure to that of a physicist who observes phenomena under the most

favourable conditions for understanding them.

He writes, in particular:

> "In theory, however, we assume that the laws of capitalist development operate in their purest form."

This method therefore consists in constructing a theoretical object that makes it possible to understand the fundamental mechanisms of capitalism, independently of the particular circumstances that might obscure their observation. This approach echoes the one Proudhon had adopted twenty years earlier.

2. Similarities between *The System of Economic Contradictions* and *Capital*

There are significant similarities in the structure of the two works. This does not, of course, mean that the two works are identical or that they develop precisely the same economic analyses. Rather, their theoretical progression displays certain parallels: both begin with fundamental categories and move towards an overall understanding of the mechanisms of capitalism.

Marx begins *Capital* with an analysis of the commodity, use-value, and exchange-value. He does not begin by recounting the historical emergence of the commodity; instead, he takes an already established economic category and analyses its internal determinations. Yet this is precisely what Marx had criticised Proudhon for doing in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Marx ultimately adopted a method of presentation close to the one he had previously opposed.

3. Marx's renewed engagement with Hegel

This methodological change is accompanied by a return to Hegel. Having criticised Hegelian philosophy and moved closer to Feuerbach, Marx reintroduces certain elements of Hegelian dialectics into his reflections on political economy. Thus, in the 1873 Afterword to *Capital*, he acknowledges that his method is directly inspired by Hegel's dialectic, while claiming to reverse its idealist principle. For Marx, the ideal is nothing other than the material world as reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought.

A convergence can therefore be observed between Proudhon's and Marx's approaches: both construct a theoretical representation of capitalism on the basis of abstract categories in order to identify its essential relationships. In fact, Marx may have found it difficult to acknowledge this

methodological proximity to Proudhon and may have preferred to trace his approach back to Hegel. It should nevertheless be emphasised that this interpretation is a hypothesis, not an established historical fact accepted by all scholars.

IV. The philosophical and scientific issues at stake in the debate

Beyond the polemic between the two authors, three major issues emerge.

1. The relationship between reality and thought

The first issue concerns knowledge: how can thought account for social reality? Hegel holds that philosophy must move beyond the immediate appearance of things in order to grasp their rationality. Proudhon seeks to bring experience and intellectual construction together. He rejects both an idealism that would make thought the source of all reality and a dogmatic materialism that would reduce knowledge to the passive reception of facts. He advocates a method based on the "parallel development of reality and the idea".

Marx, for his part, argues that categories of thought must be understood in terms of the material and historical relations of which they are the expression. However, in his conception of the method employed in *Capital*, he too acknowledges the necessity of abstraction and intellectual reconstruction.

2. The relationship between history and logic

The second issue concerns the role of history in scientific explanation. For Marx, social phenomena must be understood in relation to their historical origins. Economic categories are historically determined and cannot be regarded as eternal laws. For Proudhon, logical analysis does not exclude the historical dimension. It temporarily sets it aside in order to understand the relationships that simultaneously organise the system.

The difference therefore lies less in whether history is acknowledged than in the role assigned to it in the analysis.

- Marx gives priority to the historical movement that produces social relations.
- Proudhon gives priority to the logical movement through which their interconnection can be understood.
- Hegel provides the conceptual tools for thinking through these two forms of development.

3. The possibility of a science of society

The third issue concerns the establishment of political economy as a science. Proudhon refuses to equate economic science with existing economic doctrines. He criticises both:

- Classical political economy, which describes economic phenomena without managing to account for all the contradictions of the system of property.
- Utopian socialism, which puts forward projects for social transformation without sufficiently explaining the actual mechanisms of society.

He seeks to construct a science that explains society as it actually functions. Social science must therefore identify the relationships, laws, and contradictions that organise collective life. On this point, Proudhon shares a fundamental concern with Marx: to move beyond the empirical description of society in order to understand the mechanisms governing its functioning and transformation.

V. Comparative synthesis: the three methodological conceptions

The methodological differences between Hegel, Proudhon, and Marx

Hegel, Proudhon, and Marx do not begin from the same point when analysing social and economic reality. In Hegel, reflection is grounded in the relationship between concept and experience. The aim is to understand how reality develops according to a rational logic—in other words, to grasp its movement through the development of the concept.

Proudhon adopts a different approach. He begins by observing economic phenomena, but does not confine himself to describing them. He formulates theoretical hypotheses that enable him to reconstruct the relationships between the various economic categories. His method is therefore hypothetico-deductive: he seeks to understand how these categories are interconnected and mutually determine one another. To do so, he temporarily sets aside their historical sequence in order to study how they operate within a single system. His aim is to grasp capitalism as a whole and the contradictions that run through it.

Marx, for his part, insists on the need to begin with material conditions and social relations. In his view, economic categories are not merely abstract concepts: they express historically determined social relations. It is

therefore necessary first to understand how these relations came into being and how they have changed over the course of history. The analysis can then proceed through abstraction and theoretical reconstruction in order to bring to light the laws and contradictions specific to the capitalist mode of production.

The essential difference between these three approaches thus lies in how they connect concept, observation, and history. Hegel seeks to grasp the rationality of reality through the development of the concept; Proudhon theoretically reconstructs the relationships and contradictions of the economic system by temporarily abstracting from their chronology; Marx seeks to relate economic categories to their historical origins and to the material social relations they express. These approaches share the aim of going beyond the mere description of phenomena, but differ in the role they assign to history and to abstraction in the analysis.

Conclusion: a debate about the conditions for scientific knowledge of society

The relationship between Proudhon, Hegel, and Marx should be reconsidered in terms of the methodological question, rather than solely in terms of their political and ideological differences. Hegel raises the problem of the intelligibility of reality by distinguishing between historical development and conceptual development. Proudhon transfers this question to the field of political economy: he seeks to understand capitalism as a system of interdependent and contradictory relationships, constructing a theoretical model on the basis of economic categories. Marx, for his part, initially gives priority to the historical explanation of relations of production and severely criticises Proudhon's method, before himself turning, in Capital, to abstraction and the logical reconstruction of the capitalist system.

It thus appears that Proudhon anticipated a methodological question that Marx would only resolve much later: how can one theoretically reconstruct the logic of a social system whose elements operate simultaneously? The value of this comparison lies in showing that scientific knowledge of society cannot be reduced either to the description of facts or to their chronological reconstruction alone. It requires a process of abstraction, conceptualisation, and reconstruction of the relationships that constitute social reality.

It should not, however, be concluded that Proudhon's and Marx's methods are identical: their conceptions of history, dialectics, and social relations remain different. Their methodological proximity concerns primarily the way in which they construct a theoretical account of the capitalist system.

Table of Contents

The Issues and Terms of the Methodological Debate between Proudhon, Hegel, and Marx....1
I. The methodological problem: understanding reality through history or through concepts?....1
1. Hegel: two ways in which knowledge develops....1
2. Proudhon: going beyond mere empirical observation....2
II. Proudhon and Marx: two opposing conceptions of the analysis of capitalism. 3
1. Marx in 1846–1847: the primacy of historical explanation....3
2. Proudhon's methodological response: thinking of capitalism as a totality..4
3. A decisive question: the method of investigation and the method of presentation....5
III. Marx's return to an abstract and deductive method in *Capital*....6
1. Marx's change of method....6
2. Similarities between *The System of Economic Contradictions* and *Capital* 6
3. Marx's renewed engagement with Hegel....7
IV. The philosophical and scientific issues at stake in the debate....7
1. The relationship between reality and thought....7
2. The relationship between history and logic....8
3. The possibility of a science of society....8
V. Comparative synthesis: the three methodological conceptions....9
The methodological differences between Hegel, Proudhon, and Marx....9
Conclusion: a debate about the conditions for scientific knowledge of society..10