

How unkind it is to raise economic objections against a man who, unlike others, does not boast of his "studies of political economy," but has rather out of modesty managed to give the impression in all his works, that he has still to make his first studies in political economy.

Whereas private property is not a simple relation, or even an abstract concept, a principle, but consists in the totality of middle-class production relations--we are concerned here not with subordinate and decaying, but with existing, middle-class private property--whereas all these middle-class productive relations are class relations, a connection which is obvious to every pupil of Adam Smith or Ricardo--an alteration in these conditions can only be brought about by an alteration of these classes in their reciprocal connection, and an alteration in the position of classes is--a historical change, a product of the total social activity, the product of a specific "historical movement."

For example, in order to explain the abolition of middle-class property relations, modern historians would have to describe the movement in which the bourgeoisie progressed to the point where it had developed its conditions of life far enough to be able to abolish the whole of the feudal orders and the feudal mode of existence, and consequently the feudal relations of production within which these feudal orders had been producing. The abolition of feudal property relations and the foundation of modern middle-class society was therefore not the result of a certain action which proceeded from a particular theoretical principle pressed to its logical conclusion. The principles and theories which the writers of the bourgeoisie put forward during the latter's struggle with feudalism were rather nothing but the theoretical expression of the practical movement. How this expression was more or less Utopian, dogmatic, or doctrinaire, according as it related to a more or less developed phase of the real movement can be clearly traced.

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## PROUDHON

Just as the first critical moves in every science are necessarily entangled in the assumptions of the science which they are intending to combat, so Proudhon's work *Qu'est ce que la propriété?* is a criticism of political economy from the standpoint of political economy. Since the criticism of political economy forms the chief subject of interest, we need not here examine the legal section of the book, which criticizes law from the standpoint of law. Proudhon's book is therefore scientifically surpassed by the critical school of political economy, even of political economy as conceived by Proudhon. This work of criticism was only rendered possible by Proudhon himself, just as Proudhon's criticism had as its antecedents the criticism of the mercantile system by the physiocrats, that of the physiocrats by Adam Smith, that of Adam Smith by Ricardo, as well as the labours of Fourier and Saint-Simon.

All the developments of political economy have private property as their major premise. This fundamental assumption is regarded by it as an unassailable fact, which needs no demonstration, and about which it only chances to speak casually, as M. Say naïvely confesses.

Now Proudhon subjects private property, the basis of political economy, to a critical examination, which is in fact the first decisive, ruthless, and at the same time scientific analysis. This constitutes the great scientific progress which he made, a progress which revolutionized political economy, and first rendered possible a real science of political economy.

Proudhon's work *Qu'est ce que la propriété?* has the same significance for modern political economy as Siéyès' pamphlet: *Qu'est ce que le tiers état?* has for modern politics.

If Proudhon did not conceive the various forms of private property, as, for example, wages, trade, value, price, money, etc., as such, but used these forms of political economy as weapons against political economy, this was quite in accordance with his whole standpoint, as above described and historically justified.

Political economy, which accepts the relationships of private property as human and reasonable relationships, moves in a perpetual contradiction to its fundamental assumption, which is private property, a contradiction analogous to that of theology, which constantly gives a human interpretation to religious ideas, and thereby constantly violates its fundamental assumption, which is the supramundane character of religion. Thus in political economy wages appear at the outset as labour's proportionate share in the product. Wages and the profit of capital exist in the most friendly and apparently human relations, alternately assisting each other. Subsequently it transpired that they stand in the most hostile, in an inverted, relationship towards each other. In the beginning value is apparently determined on rational principles, by the costs of production of an article and by its social utility. Subsequently it transpires that value is a purely accidental determination, which does not need to have any connection at all either with the costs of production or with social utility. The magnitude of wages is in the beginning determined by a free contract between the free worker and the free capitalist. Subsequently it transpires that the worker is compelled to let it be determined, just as the capitalist is compelled to fix it as low as possible. Coercion takes the place of the freedom of the contracting parties. The same observation applies to trade and all the other relations of political economy. Political economists occasionally have an intimation of these contradictions, the development of which forms the principal content of their mutual wrangling. When, however, they become fully aware of them, they proceed to attack private property in one of its partial manifestations, as the falsifier of wages which are rational in themselves, that is, in the ideas they have formed about wages; or of value that is rational in itself, or of commerce that is rational in itself. Thus Adam Smith occasionally attacks the capitalists, Destutt de Tracy attacks the money-changers, Simonde de Sismondi attacks the factory system, Ricardo attacks landed property, and thus almost all political economists attack the non-industrial capitalists who regard property merely as consumable goods.

Sometimes, therefore, the political economists invest economic conditions with a human semblance, that is, when they are attacking a particular abuse, but at other times, which is mostly the case, they interpret these conditions in their strict economic meaning, as distinguished from human conditions. They reel unconsciously in this contradiction.

Now Proudhon has made an end once for all of this unconsciousness. He took seriously the human semblance given to economic conditions and sharply confronted it with their inhuman reality. In all seriousness he accepted the human gloss which the political economists had put upon economic conditions, and sharply compared it with their inhuman reality. He demanded that these conditions should be in reality what they are in fancy. In other words, the ideas which have been formed of them should be abandoned and their veritable inhumanity should be acknowledged. He was therefore consistent in plainly representing private property in its most universal aspect to be the falsifier of economic relationships, and not this or that kind of private property, to a partial degree, as did most of the other political economists. He achieved everything that could be achieved by the criticism of political economy from the standpoint of political economy.

All political economy hitherto has taken as its starting-point the wealth which the movement of private property ostensibly creates for the nations, in order to reach its conclusions in support of private property.

Proudhon starts out from the reverse side, which is sophistically covered up in political economy, that is, from the poverty created by the movement of private property, in order to reach his conclusions, which are unfavourable to private property. The first criticism of private property was naturally prompted by the phenomenon which embodies its essence in the most striking and clamorous form, a form which directly violates human feeling--by the phenomenon of poverty.

The critics of Proudhon cannot deny that Proudhon also perceives an inner connection between the facts of poverty and of property, as he proposes to abolish property on account of this connection, in order to abolish poverty. Proudhon has done even more. He has demonstrated in detail how the movement of capital creates poverty. The critics of Proudhon, on the other hand, will not enter into such trivialities. They perceive only that poverty and private property are opposites: which is fairly obvious.

Proletariat and wealth are antitheses. As such they constitute a whole; both are manifestations of the world of private property. The question to be considered is the specific position which both occupy in the antithesis. To describe them as two sides of a whole is not a sufficient explanation. Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to preserve its own existence, and along with it that of its antithesis, the proletariat. Private property satisfied in itself is the positive side of the antithesis. The proletariat, on the other hand, is obliged, as proletariat, to abolish itself, and along with it private property, its conditioned antithesis, which makes it the proletariat.

It is a negative side of the antithesis, the internal source of unrest, the disintegrated and disintegrating proletariat.

The possessing class and the proletarian class represent the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels perfectly satisfied with this self-estrangement, knowing that in this estrangement resides its own power, and possesses therein the semblance of a human existence; the latter class feels itself to be destroyed by the estrangement, perceives therein its impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence.

Within the antithesis, therefore, the owner of private property is the conservative, and the proletarian is the destructive party. From the former proceeds the action of maintaining the antithesis, from the latter the action of destroying it. From the point of view of its national, economic movement, private property is, of course, continually being driven towards its own dissolution, but only by an unconscious development which is independent of it, and which exists against its will, and is limited by the nature of things; only, that is, by creating the proletariat as proletariat, poverty conscious of its own physical and spiritual poverty, and demoralized humanity conscious of its own demoralization and consequently striving against it.

The proletariat fulfils the judgment which private property by the creation of the proletariat suspends over itself, just as it fulfils the judgment which wage-labour suspends over itself in creating alien riches and its own condemnation. If the proletariat triumphs, it does not thereby become the absolute side of society, for it triumphs only by abolishing itself and its opposite. In this way both the proletariat and its conditioned opposite, private property, are done away with.

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## FRENCH MATERIALISM

The French Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and especially of French materialism, was not only a struggle against the existing political institutions and against the existing religion and theology, but equally an open and outspoken campaign against all metaphysics, especially that of Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibnitz. Metaphysics was confronted with philosophy, just as Feuerbach, in his first decisive stand against Hegel, opposed sober philosophy to drunken speculation. The metaphysics of the seventeenth century, which was driven from the field by the French Enlightenment, and especially by the French materialism, of the eighteenth century, experienced its victorious and opulent restoration in the German philosophy, and particularly in the speculative German philosophy, of the nineteenth century.

After Hegel had combined it in an ingenious manner with all subsequent metaphysics and with German idealism, and founded a universal realm of metaphysics, the attack on speculative metaphysics and on all metaphysics was once again synonymous, as in the eighteenth century, with an attack on theology. Metaphysics succumbed for good and all to materialism, which itself was now perfected by the work of speculation and coincided with humanism.

French and English socialism and communism represented the materialism which coincided with humanism in the practical sphere, just as Feuerbach represented it in the theoretical sphere.

There are two tendencies of French materialism, one of which derives its origin from Descartes and the other from Locke. The latter is pre-eminently an element in French culture and merges directly into socialism. The