

Selected Aspects of Proudhon's Political Thought

Abstract - This short paper allows to get acquainted with the outstanding French intellectual, father of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The article is based on the presentation of selected aspects of Proudhon's political thought. The paper examines how Proudhon perceives the issue of property and whether he recognizes the legitimacy of the state as an entity ruling over society. This work also presents various political systems from Proudhon's perspective. The issues discussed in the work fall into the field of political sociology.

Keywords - Proudhon, State, Power, Revolution, Freedom, Property

Authority, government, power, state – each of these words means the same thing – a means of oppression and exploitation. Whoever lays a hand on me to govern me is a usurper and a tyrant – I regard them as my enemy, declared the 19th-century precursor of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, in his work *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*.

Proudhon was born on January 15, 1809, in Besançon and died on January 19, 1865, in Paris. He was a renowned French polemicist, journalist, economist, philosopher, politician, and sociologist. He remains the only revolutionary theorist of the 19th century to come from the working class. Moreover, he was the first person in history to directly identify with the concept of anarchism. His literary work significantly influenced the thoughts of figures such as Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin.

He is widely recognized by the general public for his first major publication from 1840, *What is Property?*¹, which addresses issues of property and its relationship to the state, workers, and anarchism. It was in this book that Proudhon penned his famous slogan, "Property is theft!" This book was also hailed by Marx as the "manifesto of the French proletariat," and through its content, it convinced Marx of the necessity of abolishing private property.

Today, we will explore the themes proposed by Proudhon regarding the limitation of authority and the methods he advocates for achieving this goal. We will also take a closer look at the nature of property, as paradoxically, its formation is closely correlated with the function of authority. The sense of freedom associated with the free management of a specific piece of land is often illusory and proves to be a construct of an entity that looms over us all.

¹ *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement*

Alienated Democracy

The modern state, which defines itself as a democracy, is devoid of its essence. Proudhon believed that democracies differ little from monarchist systems, as they both originate from the same entity: the state, which itself is a part of religion.²

In Proudhon's thought, humanity has expressed an instinct for justice from the beginning of its existence. Only religion managed to provide a ready-made system based on respect for law and human dignity. However, it could not achieve this without an element of coercion. To affirm its legitimacy, religion needed an institution that concentrated power in its hands: the state, the earthly representative of God.

The state is inextricably linked to theology; all its attributes and characteristics origin from this religious order.³ In the state, society is divided into owners and workers, decision-makers and executors. The state itself is divided between the executive and legislative powers. This manifestation of dichotomy reflects the religious dogma of the division of spirit and body, two complementary parts forming a whole. Proudhon stated that at the heart of our politics, we will always find theology.⁴

The legitimacy of monarchy was historically reinforced by portraying it as a divine institution, making the questioning of its governance form implausible for a long time. However, as modern dissent against this order intensified and fragile democracies began to take the political stage during turbulent times, a real shift in perceiving theology as the driving force of civilizational progress did not occur.

Democracy merely solidified the previously existing political order by further legitimizing state authority. Theoretically, democracy, in the minds of many, differs significantly from monarchy; it does not represent the position of a single person, a sovereign, but embodies the will of the people, with representativeness as its *raison d'être*.

² *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, p. 17

³ Presses Universitaires de France, Edouard Jourdain, *Proudhon*, 2009

⁴ *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, p. 176

According to Proudhon, all of this is a myth, an illusory construct designed to further oppress and control the unconscious masses.⁵ The general will, in reality, is a new theological concept, only disguised and secularized. With fervor, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon often quoted this passage from his publication *War and Peace: The entire value of universal suffrage, apart from military service, lies in this maxim, eagerly repeated by our tribunes, which has pure divine authority: Vox populi, vox Dei.*⁶

For this reason, monarchy and democracy represent the same power to Proudhon, deeply corrupted by the state-theological factor. Proudhon acknowledged that democracy is a laudable concept, almost utopian in nature. Yet, since any form of governance inherently involves individuals who seek power and obedience, an unchanging aspect of human nature, the principles of liberty, equality, and autonomy become so exaggerated and absolutized that they are stripped of their true meaning. What remains is mere abstraction, an idea used for political purposes to justify maintaining an order imposed by the few in the name of the many.

Since democracy is incapable of concretizing these concepts, it differs little from monarchy, where the concentration of power and the separation of the state from society are omnipresent. For this reason, democracy must be opposed, just as 19th-century French revolutionaries opposed monarchy. The French Revolution was justified, but the phenomenon of alienation of its postulates by the new ruling class necessitates that the revolution must continue. Corrupt power must be reduced to a minimum.⁷

Proudhon also questioned the notion of pure, absolute power of the people. This aligns with the thought of a more widely known French political theorist, Alexis de Tocqueville. Proudhon argued that the omnipotent will of the people absorbs the strength of individuals and social groups, thereby destroying all minority opinions that oppose it. Under such a system, dissenting individuals must admit their error and conform to prevailing norms. Even in an ostensibly democratic system, these individuals are stigmatized. Recognition of difference is unacceptable, which results in a degenerate ruling authority that, therefore, ought not to exist.

⁵ Armelle Le Bras-Chopard, *Proudhon, Louis Blanc et Pierre Leroux : polémique sur la question de l'État*

⁶ *La Guerre et la Paix* v.1, p. 49: "Toute la valeur du suffrage universel, abstraction faite du service militaire, repose sur cette maxime, complaisamment répétée par nos tribuns, et qui est de pur droit divin : *Vox populi, vox Dei*"

⁷ *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, v. 1, p. 366

According to Proudhon, power in a democracy, if not controlled and significantly reduced, can create new tools that strengthen it, which outwardly appear to serve justice. One such tool is universal suffrage. Originally, its purpose was to reflect the sovereignty of the people. However, this is merely an illusion, as the people are viewed as a mass of atomized individuals, devoid of rights beyond submitting to the verdict of the ballot box. In his notes published as *Confessions of a Revolutionary*⁸, Proudhon remarked:

How can universal suffrage be an expression of thought, of the true thought of the people, when the people are divided by the inequality of fate into subordinate classes, voting out of servility or hatred; when the same people, held on a leash by authorities, cannot, despite their sovereignty, express themselves on any matter?

For Proudhon, universal suffrage is thus more an expression of the sovereignty of the masses than of the people. Rule by the masses, however, is not democracy; it is a creation devoid of reflection, violent, and prone to manipulation from above. Such power, according to Proudhon, should not only be limited but should not exist at all. In this, he aligns with thinkers like Tocqueville and Clausewitz, who viewed the faceless mass as the most ruthless form of tyranny imaginable.

Paradoxically, despite Proudhon's clear disdain for aristocratic or monarchical power, he acknowledged that these systems did not compare to the harm that a false democracy could create. In these traditional systems, the *Behemoth* would be subdued by the *Leviathan*, as Thomas Hobbes might have put it. In contrast, within a false democracy, uncontrolled chaos would replace lawful order.

⁸ *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, p. 184-185

Property and Power

When discussing Proudhon, one cannot avoid his emblematic critique of property, encapsulated in the famous phrase: *La propriété, c'est le vol*, Property is theft. This statement remains widely recognized, even by those unfamiliar with its author.

For many, property is not immediately associated with the concept of power or as an attribute of the state. It might seem that property belongs solely to the private domain and that its sanctity and inviolability are fundamental legal principles. Proudhon, however, contended that this assumption is entirely misguided.

Property is inherently tied to the essence of power, indeed, power relies on property as its foundation, serving as the source of social and political institutions. No regime can endure without the support of property owners. In the property-based electoral systems of Proudhon's era, ownership determined access to the right to vote.

Property is harmful because it is a root cause of social inequality. Yet, according to Proudhon, it is not the mere existence of property that constitutes theft but rather the process of appropriating its benefits.⁹ In a system dominated by a powerful capitalist and state-backed authority, the owner profits from the labor of their workers while contributing nothing beyond their capital. The owner reaps the most rewards, even though they paradoxically do no work themselves.

This dynamic enables property to perpetuate exploitation. The owner uses the profits earned from others' labor to expand their property and further exploit the workforce. They reinvest their ill-gotten gains to open new factories, scale up operations, and intensify the exploitation of workers. The resulting profits grow even larger, fueling an endless cycle of capital accumulation.

In contrast, the worker, according to Proudhon, earns significantly less despite working harder. Their wages often go entirely toward basic necessities and consumable goods, leaving no room for savings. While the owner grows ever wealthier, the worker remains trapped in the same factory for the rest of their life, without the possibility of emancipation from this unequal system.

⁹ Anne-Sophie Chambost, *À propos de Proudhon : de la propriété-vol à la propriété-liberté*, 2022

The fundamental contradiction of capitalism lies in the private appropriation of collective power, creating an opposition between capital and labor. The wages paid by the owner as compensation for the individual efforts of each worker overlook the collective nature of production. The surplus generated by this collective labor is not remunerated.¹⁰ Thus, theft does not reside in property itself but in the undue appropriation it enables, the fruits of the workers' collective labor, whose value exceeds the sum of individual efforts.

In essence, property is not theft. However, since it leads to exploitation and the appropriation of benefits, its existence becomes unjustifiable. Therefore, power rooted in a purely capitalist system should not merely be restricted but eradicated from society altogether. *Neither labor, nor natural law, nor statute, profession, or personality justifies property*¹¹, Proudhon argued in his most renowned work, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement* (What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government). Property, far from being justified, also creates a false sense of freedom. In truth, this illusion of privacy and autonomy is constructed by the state. The state partitions, protects, and claims land as its own, compelling us to participate in its governance system.

The “fruit” that the system offers is unsatisfying because it originates from the very force that robs us of freedom. How can property create liberty when this liberty is born of oppression? The state, in its supposed generosity, grants us the right to property. However, such a right should not even exist because state power should be so limited that it cannot dictate our rights and duties in the first place.

Additionally, the state not only creates the illusion of freedom by offering property as a reward for our labor but also retains the power to violate this property at any time. Under the guise of serving the public interest, the state can seize or transform property for the supposed good of society. Yet, because decision-makers within state apparatuses are often disconnected from the population, they not only harm individuals' manipulated sense of freedom but also act to the detriment of their environment.

¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹ “Ni le travail, ni le droit naturel, pas plus la loi, l'occupation ou la personnalité ne justifient la propriété”

Critiquing property inherently challenges the legitimacy of government and institutions, both of which are inseparably tied to the concept of authority.¹² In the censitary system of post-revolutionary France, property served as the foundation of power and access to rights. However, for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, property without abuse ceases to be theft. Paradoxically, it becomes freedom because property, reinterpreted as possession, transforms into a guarantee of liberty and individualism.¹³

*For a citizen to be someone in the state, it is not enough that they are free in their person; their individuality must also rest, like the personality of the state, on a portion of material resources they fully control, just as the state exercises power over the public domain. This condition is fulfilled by property.*¹⁴

Here, Proudhon does not contradict himself but rather evolves his understanding. He distinguishes between property as exploitation and property as possession. The latter becomes a counterbalance to the state, embodying a revolutionary force capable of resisting authority.¹⁵ Property, in this sense, paradoxically becomes synonymous with freedom:

La propriété, c'est la liberté (Property is freedom).

This duality reveals a nuanced perspective: property can simultaneously represent theft and freedom. The earlier critique of property as theft aligned with Proudhon's anarchistic rejection of state power and authority, emphasizing liberation from oppression. Yet, this initial anarchism was more destructive than constructive, as in later years, in which this direct correlation between property and freedom emerged. This evolution highlights the complexity of Proudhon's thought: while property tied to authority is inherently unjust, property redefined as possession can become the very instrument of individual emancipation and societal balance.

¹² P.-J. Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement*, p. 131

¹³ Elżbieta Podgórska, *Ekonomia i wychowanie jako fundamenty nowego ładu społecznego. Abramowski wobec myśli społecznej Proudhona*, 2006

¹⁴ "Pour que le citoyen soit quelque chose dans l'État, il ne suffit pas qu'il soit libre de sa personne ; il faut que sa personnalité s'appuie, comme celle de l'État, sur une portion de matière qu'il possède en toute souveraineté, comme l'État à la souveraineté du domaine public. Cette condition est remplie par la propriété", P.-J. Proudhon, *Théorie de la Propriété*, p. 138

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 168

Revolution as an Ode to Freedom

According to Proudhon, authority must be curtailed through revolution, ultimately leading to the complete elimination of the most critical element of power: statehood. Two ideas appear central to Proudhon's concept of revolution: mutuality and progress.

Proudhon rejects a society based on individualism, hence the idea of mutuality. This concept encompasses two key elements dear to Proudhon: mutual equality among members and, most importantly, the creation of a social network that integrates individuals without merging them into a homogeneous whole. On one hand, he dismisses liberal individualism, which fosters unjust methods of appropriation and distribution of goods; on the other, he rejects communism, which would impose a dictatorship of the masses, stifling individual freedom.¹⁶ Mutuality ("mutualité") forms the foundation for a future social structure and guarantees a post-revolutionary order that will bring freedom to humanity.

Every society is founded, reformed, or transformed by an idea [...] In the past, [...] the idea of paternity established ancient aristocracies and monarchies. [...] But to establish this new social unity, we need a principle that is necessary, universal, absolute, immanent, prior to and superior to any social constitution. [...] We find this principle in the idea of mutuality, Proudhon wrote in his work *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*.¹⁷

To achieve this, as Ansart commented while interpreting Proudhon, one must first cease organizing political reform and instead subordinate capital to labor by starting from the economy. This would avoid the vertical and antagonistic relationship that subjugates human labor to the control of capital.¹⁸ In the new order, devoid of hierarchical authority such as the decision-maker-executor relationship, landowners who do not work their land and, worse, hire others to cultivate it, cannot expect to retain their property. In contrast, small enterprises should have no more than a dozen

¹⁶ Olivier Bloch, *L'idée de révolution : quelle place lui faire au XXI^e siècle ?*, 2009

¹⁷ P. J. Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, Œuvres complètes, v. III, p. 132: "Toute société se forme, se réforme ou se transforme à l'aide d'une idée [...] dans le passé [...], l'idée de paternité fondait les anciennes aristocraties et monarchies. [...] Mais pour fonder cette nouvelle unité sociale, il faut un principe nécessaire, universel, absolu, immanent, antérieur et supérieur à toute constitution sociale. [...] Ce principe nous le trouvons dans l'idée de *mutualité*"

¹⁸ Pierre Ansart, *Proudhon. Textes et débats*, Paris, Librairie générale française, 1984

employees to ensure that workers fully own their enterprise, implying worker control over the means of production.

Proudhon did not stop there: he also envisioned a confederation that would unite global markets. In 1863, he contemplated forming a confederal Europe with a budget, various agencies, a court of justice, and a common market.¹⁹ This organization could only come to life through the will of citizens over time, where collective will becomes crucial as contracts between independent entities replace legal frameworks in a society without state authority. Through this method, state functions would be realized within a framework of various cooperating associations. Such contracts should be based on equality and respect for differing opinions, as economics becomes the driving force of social change.

Proudhon also believed that taxing interest and rent was a form of exploitation that oppressed lower classes. However, he did not advocate for their legal abolition, asserting instead that these forms of exploitation would naturally disappear when workers organized credit and labor themselves.²⁰

The second concept serving the revolution is progress, to which Proudhon assigned a fundamental role in his reflections. Progress guides the philosopher and historically directs humanity's journey. Echoes of this notion appear in his work *Confessions of a Revolutionary: A philosopher cannot discover the truth intuitively. He needs a guide; and what guide can there be if not the law of development?*²¹ By establishing the law of three states, similar to Auguste Comte, Proudhon argued that the *intellectual evolution of humanity follows the law of progress, moving from Religion through Philosophy to Science*²². In this work, in which the revolution also consisted in leaving behind old philosophical and theological dogmas and re-immersing in economic sciences, Proudhon relied on the concept of order.

¹⁹ *Fédéralisme, identités nationales et critique des frontières naturelles, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) géographe des "États-Unis d'Europe"*, Federico Ferretti and Edward Castleton, 2016

²⁰ Presses Universitaires de France, *Un inédit de Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 2010

²¹ *Les confessions d'un révolutionnaire, Œuvres complètes*, v. VII, p. 177: "Le philosophe est incapable de découvrir par intuition la vérité. Il lui faut un guide ; or quel peut être ce guide, sinon la loi du développement"

²² *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité, Œuvres complètes*, v. V, p. 42-43: "l'évolution intellectuelle de l'humanité suit la loi du progrès qui va de la Religion en passant par la philosophie jusqu'à la science"

The State as a Fictional Entity

Society, according to Proudhon, is understood as a living organism, in contrast to the State. The inherent law of things dictates that order follows progress, or rather, that progress adheres to a certain order. It is not without reason that he declared anarchy to be order without authority. Indeed, governments and the laws emanating from them are inherently superficial and fictitious because they do not reflect the workings of living forces. Instead, they represent a reaction from a mythologized absolute whose interest lies in severing collective beings from their capabilities to impose a subjective, false order. The State is a fiction, and political authority is illegitimate.

To illustrate this, we can cite one of Proudhon's most significant statements from his book *Idée générale sur la Révolution au XIXe siècle*, which serves as an almost anarchist synthesis of government criticism:

To be governed is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, legislated upon, regulated, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, assessed, evaluated, censured, commanded by beings who have neither the right nor the knowledge nor the virtue to do so. To be governed means every transaction, movement, or action is noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, authorized, admonished, restrained, reformed, corrected, and arrested. Under the guise of public welfare, one is taxed, drained, exploited, monopolized, oppressed, cheated, robbed; then, at the first sign of resistance, repressed, fined, vilified, harassed, pursued, beaten, disarmed, throttled, imprisoned, judged, condemned, deported, executed, mocked, ridiculed, insulted, dishonored. Such is government; such is its justice, such is its morality.

However, he also sees the existence of natural groups in which we find organic power, therefore just if it is controlled.²³ Therefore, he sought to demonstrate the normative and decision-making power of territorial groups (communes, departments, regions, nations) and functional groups (enterprises, public services) as essential for urban life. By centralizing and separating functions,

²³ *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, p. 68-69.

Proudhon intends to melt the mechanical into the organic, so that society strives for a plural rather than a fictitious unity.

Natural groups and collective entities, reclaiming their right to establish norms and compose order through confronting their perspectives, fight and associate while adhering to both their rights and the principles of social justice. This, Proudhon argued, is the goal of revolution, the emancipation of humanity from an alienated production system and a fictional political entity to achieve freedom and justice in a diverse, non-oppressive, and less authoritarian social organism.

Proudhon's theory was revolutionary, but his revolution did not signify violent uprising or civil war. Instead, it envisioned a peaceful, gradual transformation driven from the grassroots, far from centers of power. This transformation was intricately tied to morality and demanded the highest ethical standards from those seeking change. His call for individual autonomy, voluntary cooperation, and social justice left a lasting impact on political thought and continues to inspire those seeking to reshape the world toward greater freedom, equality, and solidarity. In today's world, where individuals are constantly monitored, where society increasingly conforms to uniformity, and dissent against prevailing worldviews is marginalized and devalued, it is unsurprising that anarchism is gradually regaining the appeal and interest it lost more than half a century ago.

Bibliography:

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, 1851

P-J Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement*, 1849

P-J Proudhon, *Théorie de la propriété*, 1862

P-J Proudhon, *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité, Œuvres complètes*, 1843

Presses Universitaires de France, Edouard Jourdain, *Proudhon*, 2009

Fédéralisme, identités nationales et critique des frontières naturelles, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) géographe des "États-Unis d'Europe", Federico Ferretti and Edward Castleton, 2016

Presses Universitaires de France, *Un inédit de Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 2010

Armelle Le Bras-Chopard, *Proudhon, Louis Blanc et Pierre Leroux : polémique sur la question de l'État*, 1993

Anne-Sophie Chambost, *À propos de Proudhon : de la propriété-vol à la propriété-liberté*, 2022

Olivier Bloch, *L'idée de révolution : quelle place lui faire au XXIe siècle ?*, 2009

Pierre Ansart, *Proudhon. Textes et débats*, Paris, Librairie générale française, 1984

Elżbieta Podgórska, *Ekonomia i wychowanie jako fundamenty nowego ładu społecznego. Abramowski wobec myśli społecznej Proudhona*, 2006