

# Back to Materialism. Reflections on Marx's Conception of Labour, Praxis, Cooperatives and Libertarian Socialism

Bruno Frère<sup>1</sup> 

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2017

**Abstract** From Marx to Althusser, the materialist approach has tended to assume that individuals (that is, workers, proletarians and other social actors) unconsciously reproduce the social structures of capitalism that alienate them. It is assumed that individuals accept the conditions forced upon them and no longer seek to rebel against a world that substantially impoverishes their labour, their spirit and their creativity. In this paper, I suggest that by favouring Marx's concept of alienation almost exclusively, there is a considerable risk that materialist thought will take only a negative path and remain stuck in the very Hegelian idealism that it intends to surpass. Whilst I acknowledge Marx's significance to materialism, I argue that his stance should be combined with that of the anarchist and libertarian French thinker Proudhon. Proudhon presents a conception of the worker as more than just alienated. Workers can also cooperate and experience a reciprocity seemingly at odds with the character of capitalism. Under Proudhon's influence materialism takes a positive turn, enabling us to avoid falling into the utopianism that the theory of social economy employs to critique capitalism—a utopianism that renders its critique even less effective than that of Marx. Today, Proudhonian theory also allows us to envisage the end of capitalism without necessarily rejecting the very concept of work. It thus improves on theories of 'basic income', for example, which persist in seeing in work nothing but negativity.

**Keywords** Materialism · Nineteenth century · Proudhon · Marx · Libertarian socialism · Alienation · Labour · Emancipation · Cooperative theory · Social economy · Utopia · Basic income

## Introduction: the Alienated Man

From Engels to Althusser, materialism in its main variation—the Marxist approach—has defined materialist thought. Individuals—that is, social actors such as workers and

---

✉ Bruno Frère  
Bfrere@ulg.a.be

<sup>1</sup> FNRS, University of Liege, Quartier Agora Place des orateurs, 3 (B.31), 4000 Liège, Belgium



proletarians—unconsciously reproduce the social structures of capitalism that alienate them. They accept the conditions forced upon them and no longer seek to rebel against a world that substantially impoverishes their labour, their spirit and their creativity.

Marx was no doubt correct to point out, using the concept of alienation, the inhuman labouring conditions with which the nineteenth-century proletariat was, and many millions of workers still are, faced around the world. Should the worker-consumer be seen merely as a confused being who, to use Bourdieu's language, unconsciously reproduces the conditions of their domination? My intention here is not to put Marx in the dock, since he is an author whose materialism has remained uniquely insightful for over a century. But I would like to try and show that there is a considerable risk of materialism taking only a negative path if it almost exclusively favours the concept of alienation in Marx's work.

It is this essential insight of Marx's thinking that I would like to put into perspective by suggesting a new agenda for materialist thought which I would characterise, for now, as positive. This research agenda has already found its place in recent debates on twentieth-century critical and materialist theory (Frère 2015). A theoretical base should now be established drawing upon debates about the birth of materialism itself in the nineteenth century. The following pages attempt to do so by drawing upon the main theoretician of libertarian anarchism and Marx's rival in socialist theory, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

Less well known in the Anglo-Saxon world, Proudhon—an anarchist, 'associationist' and libertarian rather than a communist (Vincent 1984: 4)—was the first of French socialism's thinkers. His work, as extensive as that of Marx, was a great success among the European intelligentsia of the working class until his death in Paris in 1865, aged 56. The French workers who suggested the creation of the International Workers' Association (IWA) during a meeting in London in 1864 were even 'orthodox proudhonists', as Hoffman (1972: 329–335) and McKay (2011: 35–40) describe them. But after the publication of Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867) and the third congress of the IWA in September 1868 in Brussels—during which workers' representatives were still promoting Proudhon's mutualism (Ansart 1984: 77–78, 121–122)—it was the influence of Marx's collectivism theory that gradually became predominant everywhere other than in France (Vincent 1984: 232). Most commentators recognise how Proudhon's *What is Property?* (1840) had a profound and lasting influence on Marx before he made it one of the targets of his critiques. Once Marx began to critique Proudhon, he sometimes did so with much bad faith, even distorting Proudhon's French writings as he did in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, which he wrote in response to *The Philosophy of Poverty* (Proudhon 1847; Hauptmann 1947: 88–94; McKay, 2011: 65–79). Proudhon was 10 years older than Marx, and in the mid-nineteenth century, his fame was at its peak. Further historical research into the connections between the two theorists at the time suggests that Proudhon could not have expected this obscure 'German outlaw', as he called him, to become the figurehead of one of the most powerful political ideologies of the twentieth century (Vincent 1984; Hauptmann 1947, 1981). Proudhon ignored the young German's critiques, without suspecting that his libertarian and associationist socialism would 1 day be supplanted by ... Marxism.

Today, as communism has been defeated by capitalism, more and more authors are reviving Proudhon. They primarily do so either to develop utopian reflections based on alternative economic models, such as the very fashionable idea of the 'commons' (Dardot and Laval 2015), or to renew the discipline of international relations (IR), which has nonetheless always kept its distance from anarchism (Prichard 2013). In the Anglo-Saxon world, some significant intellectuals engage positively with the tradition of anarchist political theory Proudhon initiated (Graeber 2004,

Chomsky 2013). But very few study what was at the heart of his thought: his sociology of labour within cooperatives. Yet without this sociology, which places faith in the self-emancipatory capacities of social actors such as workers, no philosophy of the 'commons' is possible. And the notion of 'autonomy', so dear to contemporary anarchist theorists, loses its meaning.

To adequately assess the originality of this Proudhonian sociology, I will first study the meaning that Marx gave to the alienation/emancipation dialectic in his early works. As Ricoeur (1988) shows, Marx later developed a 'Scientific System' in which he tended to marginalise these concepts as if he had already said all there was to say about them. In doing so, he left emancipation defined only negatively as the destruction of alienation produced by capitalist firms. By developing the two paradoxes of his definition of work and alienated labour (with reference to Arendt's work in particular), I will show that Marx remains rooted in Hegelian idealism ('Marx, Left-Wing Hegelian', 'Marx's First Paradox of Labour' and 'Marx's Second Paradox and Negative Materialism' sections). His definition of work—focused negatively upon alienation—prevents us from considering popular alternatives to capitalism as emancipatory; according to this definition, emancipation can only be achieved in a post-revolutionary society.

The libertarian materialism of Proudhon, by contrast, seeks emancipation in the everyday life *praxis* of cooperative workers. My suggestion is that Proudhon's approach offers some new and powerful theoretical foundations for the theory of social economy. Until now, this theory has mainly focused on the economic study of cooperatives (Neamtan 2005; Defourny et al. 2009). Despite neglecting any real history of ideas, it has brought nineteenth-century utopias to the fore (Defourny 1992; Develtere 1994; Moulaert and Ailenei 2005), arguing that economic theory has to reconsider this tradition as a serious alternative to both neoliberalism and a moribund socialism that eventually turned social-liberal in Europe. We must acknowledge how important these heterodox works are within the ocean of orthodox economics. And as we will see, the criteria they use to define a cooperative are useful. But because their underlying aim is to overcome the contemporary opposition between neoliberalism and a state-governed economy by promoting a 'third way' or a 'third sector', they do not recognise how close the nineteenth-century utopian thinkers they quote as founders of their own economic theory were to Marx.

If, via the sociology of Proudhon, we study nineteenth-century utopian thought in its context, we can see that it is no less idealistic than the Marxist solution to alienation against which it is set by contemporary authors. This utopian thought even goes beyond Marx in developing a conception of science or knowledge that leads revolution towards a world in which work is solely spiritual or organised around a blueprint conceived in the mind of the socialist intellectual ('Proudhon and the Materiality of Workers' Praxis Against Utopia' and 'Praxis of Disalienation vs Disalienated Science' sections).

This discussion of utopianism, on the one hand, and of Marx's Hegelian idealism on the other, will raise the possibility of emancipation through labour that is not exclusively dependent on revolution. These reflections are at the heart of Proudhon's work. His thought is notable for the way in which it manages to see in a worker something other than a slaving animal deprived of subjectivity by capitalism, existing merely as a tool of production under heteronomous labour conditions. I will try to show that Proudhon was right to believe that labour can be autonomous and led by principles of reciprocity in opposition to those of modern capitalism. The role of theory, in Proudhon's view, should be to express and organise these principles, rather than condemn them as contaminated by the heteronomous norms of capitalism ('The Role of Theory' and 'The Principles of Reciprocity' sections).

This representation of work, which is systematically perceived as a degrading, dirty and demeaning activity, can also be found underpinning currently very fashionable theories of ‘basic income’. Showing why I disagree with the heirs of utopianism and some contemporary Marxists, such as basic income theorists (who see emancipation everywhere except in labour relations), I will conclude by reflecting on cooperative endeavours that incorporate attempts at autonomy here and now, within cooperatives that already exist, even if they are impure ([‘From Marx’s Critique of Cooperatives to Contemporary Condescendence’](#) section). Given that these actions are part of our present reality, materialism, if anything, may be considered positive—even if it is radically non-utopian, non-spiritualist and non-Hegelian, and even if it leaves both workers and theorists alike uncertain about how a world of cooperatives would work.

## Marx, Left-Wing Hegelian

As materialist as he was, the young Marx was more indebted to the intellectualist legacy of Hegel than he wished to admit (Méda 1995). According to Hegel, modernity as we know it (and thus the end of History) is characterised by the triumph of the spirit over matter. By being opposed to physical objects, or, as Hegel would have it, by ‘denying’ them (they are not ‘me’), the spirit transforms and assimilates them, turning them into a part of itself—into its own knowledge. Through his labour of assimilation, a man knows and masters nature with increasing success. According to the Hegelian approach, labour becomes the mediator between spirit and nature, enabling the first to dominate the second.

Thus, the chemist will, for example, turn a block of stone into diverse molecules. By doing so, he assimilates that stone into precise knowledge that will be part of him. Meanwhile, the archaeologist will turn the same stone into something else (a trace of an ancient civilization) in order to assimilate it into another form of knowledge that will be part of him. The end of history, or absolute knowledge, is nothing but this moment when the spirit has assumed everything that was outside itself under all forms of knowledge (as per our examples). Yet this amounts to the spirit knowing itself since all those objects of knowledge are now its abstractions, its components. Therefore, the history of man has a meaning, a purpose—in short, a teleology: the perfect coincidence of the spirit with itself. All that was external and unknown to it, even frightening (for example, lightning once attributed to the wrath of God) has become itself. Eventually, the known object is only a pretext for the spirit to discover itself by being enriched with new knowledge, which, along with the infinity of other knowledge, constitutes knowledge in its absolute form.

As expressed by Hegel, the spirit, like a child, never ceases to go beyond its representations—which have lasted until the present moment—towards new ones that seem more propitious. ‘Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward’, as if it were in permanent gestation (Hegel 1977: 6). Human evolution tends towards the labour of the universal. Labour in its absolute fulfilment will take other forms than those it knew in the eighteenth century, which were still mainly manual and laborious. The life of the spirit will then develop in abstraction. And this development will become the only activity likely to be considered as labour: scientific, political, artistic, philosophical etc. The labour of material production will, for its part, be delegated to industry.

Marx incorporates the Hegelian idea of historical development. But he endeavours to demonstrate that if Hegel has: 'found the abstract, logical, speculative expression for the movement of history; [...] this historical process is not yet the real history of man—of man as a given subject' (Marx and Engels 2011: 104). As noted by Salem in his French introduction to the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx acknowledges that Hegel: 'has grasped the essence of human labour and showed that it transforms nature by shaping it to impose the human mark on it. With Hegel, Man masters nature, the subject penetrates its object' (Salem 1996: 39, author's translation). But this Hegelian man, far from referring to a suffering and hard-working material individual, remains the incarnation of spirit at a specific time in history labouring to make it evolve towards its own end. According to Marx, materialism will put an end to this illegitimate privilege that spirit still assumes over the body in Hegel's thought. It will do so by affirming that, through abstraction, such spirit is only assimilated to a completely transcendent divine identity, whereas men of flesh and bone are those who create history through their concrete activity. For Marx, this activity of creating history is no longer that of a conscience that knows itself, but exclusively that of individuals who, through their material constructions, humanise hostile and wild nature.

In sum, the main difference between these two philosophers is the way in which they conceptualise nature's domestication. For Hegel, this domestication is cognitive, since the informed spirit penetrates nature by denying it. According to Marx, it is achieved through each man's action, that is, his labour. As Marx wrote in his third manuscript: 'the only labor which Hegel knows and recognizes is abstractly mental labor' (Marx and Engels 2011: 108). By contrast, Marx wishes to consider all human production as labour. In each instance of production, the creative individual expresses himself and is acknowledged by others—rather like Picasso who demonstrates all his cubist and anti-franquist singularity through *Guernica*.

Marx points out the triple quality of labour: it transforms the natural world into a human world; it reveals me to myself; and finally, it reveals my sociability since the object that emerges from my labour reveals me to others (as in Picasso's *Guernica*). Thus construed, the exchange between men is no longer a mercantile exchange but a pure relation of expression, since each object becomes the image of its creator. Arendt concurs. With Marx, we see for the first time the idea of a completely 'socialized mankind' in which 'the distinction between labor and work would have completely disappeared, all work would have become labor; because all things would be understood, not in their worldly, objective quality, but as results of living labour power' (Arendt 1998: 89). Ultimately, for Marx, labour becomes 'the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man' (Arendt 1998: 101).

## Marx's First Paradox of Labour

If, in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, labour is positively identified with the expression and the fulfilment of the self, how can the same Marx adopt a critical perspective that challenges labour and advocates its drastic reduction a few years later in *Das Kapital* (see Marx 1977, chapter X: 340–416)? As Arendt writes: 'such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of the great authors they lead into the very center of their work' (Arendt 1998: 105). With Marx, the fundamental question is this: to what extent are the formerly valued labour and that whose reduction is advocated actually of the same nature? The answer can be guessed and is developed in Marx's theorisation of communism. The labour that must be reduced is obviously alienated industrial labour, even though it often

produces things that are essential to human life (whether agricultural or industrial production). Moving towards the eradication of this type of labour ensures that ‘the area of freedom supplants that of necessity’. Indeed, Marx adds, ‘the realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper’ (Marx 1981: 958–959). Once immediate physical needs have been satisfied, ‘the development of human powers as an end in itself begins’ (Marx 1981: 959).<sup>1</sup>

In order for men to communicate fully and freely through labour, all their biological needs must already have been satisfied so that, freed from their relation with nature, they can produce for purposes other than the satisfaction of these biological needs. A man freed from need and from all material and natural necessity becomes nothing more than an individual who dedicates himself to his social being and to interactivity with his fellows. Everyone’s purpose is therefore to take part in the evolution of human history through his productions.

But in the mid-nineteenth century, Marx recognised that, far from being a factor of emancipation, labour unfortunately seems to be completely alienated in the sense that its purpose is not personal development but self-enrichment. Whilst everyone is supposed to benefit from their labour and take pleasure in it by expressing themselves through it, labour in a capitalist society regresses and becomes only a way to support the most basic needs. ‘By degrading man’s free creative activity to the rank of means of livelihood, alienated labour turns his generic life into an instrument for his physical existence’ (Meda, 1995: 105, author’s translation). In other words, we no longer have a form of labour that allows self-manifestation but a mere means of survival. The purpose of labour is no longer the enjoyment that a man can know after having satisfied his needs, but the means of satisfaction itself. He becomes mere merchandise.

The worker confronts his own product as if it were an unknown product that does not correspond to him at all.<sup>2</sup> He trades it for a salary and he produces it for someone else who will pay for it.<sup>3</sup> The contradiction is to be found at the very heart of this double pole and the relation between man and object that it implies. Not only does the worker become alienated from production, to which he becomes a slave in order to subsist; he himself as a worker also becomes an object that the owner buys and will perform his labour only by necessity, alienated from the rest of his life. Alienated labour is nothing but that which Smith took all labour to be: labour defined as a burden, a sacrifice that we inflict upon ourselves in order to obtain goods and endlessly increase production. This is why Althusser observes that political economy is not at all the science of labour but the phenomenology of alienated labour—a science that will consider labour only through pain and production (Althusser 2005: 157–160). And for Marx, material

<sup>1</sup> Everyone knows this famous excerpt: “Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need while man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (Marx and Engels 2011: 54).

<sup>2</sup> “The object which labor produces—labor’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its *objectification*. In the condition dealt with by political economy this realization of labor appears as a loss of reality for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and object-bondage; appropriation as estrangement, *as alienation*” (Marx and Engels 2011: 50).

<sup>3</sup> In this way, the alienation, the estrangement, is manifest: “in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another” (Marx and Engels 2011: 89).

production must not exceed abundance. Once the latter is reached, material production proper must be stopped in order to enable everyone to create their own essence through labour.

Emancipation, then, implies the increase of free time and leisure thanks to which the worker finds their dignity and the possibility of developing free and genuine labour: labour that results in a work of art. Here, we find the connection Marx makes between free labour and artistic work as opposed to alienated labour, an opposition clearly conceptualised by Arendt in terms of *homo faber* and *animal laborens*.<sup>4</sup> Currently reduced to a state of *animal laborens*, man must endeavour to return to his state of *homo faber*, his status of creator and artist. According to Arendt, in this lies 'the hope that inspired Marx and the best men of various workers' movements—that free time will eventually emancipate men from necessity and make the *animal laborans* productive'. Nevertheless, for Arendt, this hope 'rests on the illusion of a mechanistic philosophy which assumes that labour power, like any other energy, can never be lost, so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish other, "higher", activities' (Arendt 1998: 133). Free time must be increased against the slavery of labour until the implosion of capitalism and the advent of communism because under communism man knows that labouring is not producing, it is (artistic) working.

## Marx's Second Paradox and Negative Materialism

Whereas we can clearly see how the expression-alienation paradox is only a subtle dialectic used by Marx to offer an original criticism of capitalism, another contradiction seems harder to resolve. In fact, despite this significant materialist watershed and the profound desire to reintroduce an immanent perspective, we may agree with Méda and Althusser that Marx remains closer to Hegel than he wishes to admit. Both share a fear of the naturally given, a refusal of man's animality, and an endorsement of technical evolution to domesticate untamed nature.

Marx certainly seeks to go beyond the Hegelian abstraction of the spirit towards concrete man. But in the ideal communist society that reconciles individual expression and collectivity—and does so exclusively through labour—does sociability itself not turn into something extremely abstract that occurs through signs? Whilst abundance is acquired through the machine and the communist management of wealth, production's ultimate purpose is to enable individuals to exchange mirrors of what they are. It is no longer about making objects whose purpose is to satisfy needs, but building abstractions in which society feels its own sociability. It is as if labour was only a pretext, a stage where individuals can collectively perform, each inclining towards what they essentially are and towards what they are socially, a place where the product is nothing but a support for something else.

Marx's latent Hegelianism is exposed by his distinction between two types of labour. On the one hand, labour aims at the satisfaction of our physical needs and must be minimised. It is what characterises capitalist societies in which each man is defined by his elementary and biological needs, which he is not given the opportunity to transcend. On the other hand, labour is promoted to the rank of means of self-emancipation that evolves within the ideal sphere of freedom detached from any material need, enabling the eradication of the first type of labour. In the end Marx, like Hegel, values 'leisure' labour, abstract labour, labour of the spirit that is

---

<sup>4</sup> *Homo faber* who makes literally "works upon" as distinguished from the *animal laborans* which labors and "mixes with" (Arendt 1998: 136).

in fact artwork—and he opposes this to material labour which, minimised as far as possible, enables the satisfaction of our natural needs. In Marx's conception, free labour has only enjoyable and non-binding objects. The rest must be taken care of by the machine, the automatic workshop whose advent he predicted by observing the many industrial technological innovations of his time (Marx 2014: ch1; Hauptmann 1981: 215–220). This developmental and expressive labour, which is both individual and social, is almost exclusively idealist and intellectualist: its purpose is the pure expression of the self to itself and to others; the material plays only a simple supporting role. Marx's conception of disalienated labour therefore seems to be about spirits that present themselves to others by communicating what they are through a game of mirrors between artworks. Nevertheless, such labour can only occur when socialism generates the ideal communist society through revolution—when the proletarian party takes up power, the reins of the state. Until then, nothing can be valued in the worker's activity. It is in that sense—close to the sense in which Chouraqui talks about Marx's negative universalism (Chouraqui 2015: 476)—that we can talk about negative materialism.

With Marx, it is as if theoretical activity solely and wholly consisted in the comprehensive rejection of this world. No matter the context in which he labours (factory, workshop, agriculture etc.), capitalism returns man to his animality and to a pure pathos of suffering. He is condemned to material production without ever having the possibility of expressing himself abstractly as a socialised being.

In his youthful writings, Marx had already carried out this cold but probably accurate analysis of the Irish or English factory worker:

'Light, air, etc.—the simplest animal cleanliness—ceases to be a need for man. Dirt—this stagnation and putrefaction of man—the sewage of civilization (speaking quite literally)—comes to be the element of life for him. Utter, unnatural neglect, putrefied nature, comes to be his life-element. None of his senses exist any longer, and not only in his human fashion, but in an inhuman fashion, and therefore not even in animal fashion [...]. The savage and the animal have at least the need to hunt, to roam, etc.—the need of companionship. Machine labor is simplified in order to make a worker out of the human being still in the making, the completely immature human being, the child—while the worker has become a neglected child. The machine accommodates itself to the weakness of the human being in order to make the weak human being into a machine' (Marx and Engels 2011: 83).

Theoretical activity must do nothing other than lift the veil over this state of affairs.

What Marx seems to share with the conservative spirit of his time is the idea that the proletariat is unvarying, that *all* the alienated workers present vile and degraded human characteristics (Ansart 1984: 248–249). As he will write in his inaugural address to the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), it may be true that 'workers' emancipation must be the work of the workers themselves' (Marx [1867], 1964). But given what he says about the alienated worker and, by extension, the entire working class, we can hardly believe that the latter will ever rise up. This is what Marx's most lucid successors will clearly detect, notably those in the group *Socialism or Barbarism*, founded by Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis. For example, Lefort writes that Marx depicts the proletariat in such gloomy terms that we are entitled to wonder how the worker can aspire to consciousness of his conditions and his role as a leader of humanity. Capitalism has turned him into a machine and deprived him of 'any human nature, physically and morally' (Lefort 1979: 73, author's translation). From his youthful to his mature writings, Marx refuses to consider that the worker may escape the destitute condition of his class before the



revolution, and become at least a little emancipated. Whilst he affirmed in his youthful works that the worker tends to praxis (which at the time was synonymous with artistic work) through revolution, he will later give this up, concluding praxis to be too full of the defects of capitalism to be 'recyclable', and he will turn to another form of 'art': science.

This transition from Marx's youthful writings to his mature work is anything but insignificant. There is no doubt that the scientific political economy developed in Marx's mature works will be tremendously useful to the political struggle against capitalism, whose mechanisms it analyses in detail. But these works still obliterate what in Marx's youthful writings was about recognition, to paraphrase Honneth: recognition of a popular skill through emancipatory praxis and the critical return of the worker to his own life conditions within *this* society. And because in later works he never returns to his analysis of the potentially emancipatory dimension of praxis, which is condemned to be alienated by workers' life conditions, Marx leaves us with the feeling that the only solution possible is a negative revolution—one that abolishes this society and retrieves free and artistic work in some future society.

## **Proudhon and the Materiality of Workers' Praxis Against Utopia**

In his later work, then, it appears as if Marx had lost his belief in the critical potential of the working class and its own praxis. It was hard to prove him wrong. The workers who took part in the *Manifeste des soixante*<sup>5</sup> deplored the havoc that illiteracy and alcohol created in their ranks. Their text, however, brought something else to light: the worker's consciousness of persisting as a being who does not reduce himself to what capitalism has made of him. And this was sensed more clearly by Proudhon than by Marx.

In spite of this, even if he was not a communist Proudhon cannot be categorised in the second important tradition of nineteenth-century socialism either—that of the utopians. Indeed, he simply did not propose any utopia at all, even a 'concrete' one as was often believed—including by Marx himself (Wright 2010: 234–235).<sup>6</sup> The problem with utopian theories is in the end identical to that of Marxism. Their view complicates any theory of emancipation since they can only be based concretely upon an ideal future society that does not yet exist—one equivalent to the communist society in which, for Marxists, labour is disalienated. If Marx was indeed idealist in the sense that he projected emancipation onto a future society, he never described that future society concretely. It was not necessary to do so because whatever its institutional organisation, such a society would be ideal as long as it was a classless society—and social classes, in Marx's view, would have been destroyed by revolution. Utopian thinkers went further and fancied forms of community organisation totally dreamt up in their imaginations, even if they wanted to trial these forms first at the micro-level before imposing them through the power of the state. This was especially true of Cabet, Fourier and Saint-Simon, who provided some very detailed plans of the ideal cooperatives and the ideal community they intended to create. This constant reference to the utopian imagination continues to be problematic to this day, because it still inspires contemporary authors who situate themselves within

---

<sup>5</sup> This « *Manifeste des soixante ouvriers de la Seine* », through which they invited their peers to run for elections, was published in *L'opinion Nationale* on 17 February, 1864 and in *Le Temps* on 18 February. It can also be read in Proudhon's annex sections (1977, t.2: 420–429, Ansart 1969: 227; Hoffman 1972: 222–223; Prichard 2013: 150–151).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, A. Pessin, 2001, *L'imaginaire utopique aujourd'hui* (Paris, PUF) or in English: Parker M et al. (2007) *The Dictionary of Alternatives: Utopianism and Organization*. London: Zed Books.

the anarchist or socialist libertarian tradition, such as Graeber (2004: 20–21), or in the tradition of social economy (Defourmy 1992, Develtere 1994). But as the very first libertarian and anarchist socialist, Proudhon showed that utopianism asks workers not to believe, even partially, in what they already are and what they already create. On the contrary, utopia invites them to believe in something better, higher and always yet to be built.

In its attempt to renew materialism, this critique of utopia is similar to that of Holloway (2010: 209 and 236). But Holloway refers to material praxis, ‘rooted in doing’, without ever quoting Proudhon’s reflections on praxis (Holloway 2002: 23 and 155sq.). By contrast, other scholars—such as Erik Olin Wright—acknowledge Proudhon and the anarchist tradition’s focus on workers’ and consumers’ cooperatives, which at the time were building alternative institutions and deliberately fostering new forms of social relation that embodied emancipation in the present (Wright 2010: 324–329). But Wright considers these cooperatives to be the product of utopian ideals. Yet 150 years ago, Proudhon combined a materialist stance (focusing upon praxis) and a critique of utopianism without agreeing with that other materialist enemy of utopian authors, Marx. In particular he attacks the revolutionary conceptions that Cabet sets out in *Voyage en Icarie* (1848, Paris, *Bureau du populaire*), in which Cabet shows how to organise and construct what he sees as an ideal community of labour.<sup>7</sup> According to Proudhon:

‘Mr. Cabet does not conceive of social revolution as a possible effect of the development of institutions and of the cooperation of intellects [...]. Mr. Cabet will bring about reform through advice, through will, through the great mission of a hero, messiah and representative of the Icarians. Mr. Cabet certainly holds back from allowing new law to emerge from the discussions of an assembly regularly produced by popular election: it is too slow a means and would compromise everything. He needs a MAN. After having suppressed all individual wills, he gathers them in a supreme individuality which expresses collective thought as Aristotle’s motionless engine brings growth to all subaltern activities’ (Proudhon 1957: 68, author’s translation).

My hypothesis is that, having shared his reflections, notably concerning praxis, Proudhon would stray from Marx for the same reasons for which he refused to be classified among the utopians. Unlike Marx, Proudhon left the library and attempted to become deeply impregnated with workers’ experiences through sociological inquiry. Following the 1848 revolutions, Proudhon began to study the self-organisation of cooperative labour very closely. He was particularly fascinated by the cooperative workshops run by the Canuts, in which he carried out surveys and observations. In the detailed historical work that he dedicates to Proudhon’s life and the political context in which he produced his oeuvre, Vincent shows how these cooperative silk weavers’ workshops fascinated him. Indeed, this was the case for all socialism’s nineteenth-century thinkers, whether trade-unionist or cooperativist, such was their remarkable organisation, both economic and political.<sup>8</sup> During his longest stay in Lyon, (1843–1847), in the course of which he himself worked with the Gauthier

<sup>7</sup> Cabet is the only utopian socialist who tried to realise a utopian community of workers in Illinois, ‘The Icaria’. But the project collapsed after lasting for 5 years—from 1850 to 1855—because his authoritarianism was judged to be a threat to freedom. Some members tried to found other Icarian communities in Illinois or Iowa with more or less success (the last one collapsed in 1895). (See C. H. Johnson 1974 and L. J. Roberts 1991.)

<sup>8</sup> For a description and an analysis of Proudhon’s relationship to the Canuts during his stays in Lyon see Ansart (1970: 72–73, 101, 141–142, 239–243; 1984: 287–289; 2003: 45–61). For a history of the Canuts’ insurrectionary social movement in Lyon during the first half of the nineteenth century, see Rude (1977) who insists on their presence in Proudhon’s oeuvre from his first work to his last. Rude explains that Proudhon’s mutualist doctrine is the Lyonnaise philosophy of poverty (256); he also emphasises how authors like Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Stendhal and Marx himself were marked by events (221sq.).

printers, Proudhon had the opportunity to meet these Canuts. For nearly 15 years, they had organised a *Society of Mutual Duty*. Its purpose was to allow its workshops (1984: 161–164):

- To do without the ‘merchants’—who possessed the shops in which clothes were sold, if not the tools of silk production themselves—as well as their ‘customers’
- To financially protect Canut workers who found themselves unemployed, whose number had increased since the advent of the ‘July monarchy’ (of king Louis-Philippe) which would soon collapse following the 1848 revolutionary coup (and the advent of the ‘Second Republic’)
- To encourage solidarity between qualified workers (the ‘master weavers’) and workers on the way to being qualified against the ‘idle rich’ (*oisifs*), that is, those capitalists who appeared interested in buying up self-managed workshops so as to eliminate competition and secure monopolies on silk production. This solidarity was ensured by egalitarian remuneration, an anti-hierarchy and an anti-theism which clearly distinguished the Canut workshops from the companionships (*compagnonnages*) of the ancien régime

But although Vincent provides a very good description of how Proudhon developed his version of mutualism and his associative socialism under the immediate influence of Canut practices, I do not agree with how he likens Proudhon to other contemporary French thinkers. They all, he writes, ‘wished to provoke action which would bring into existence a better social order’, which is presumed to distinguish them from the classic utopians à la Thomas More, who dreamt up ‘those fantastic constructions which never pretended to parallel the real world’ (1984: 126). Vincent suggests that Proudhon, like other socialists, constructed a theoretical program for a future (associative) society. But this is not strictly true. As I suggested, Proudhon is profoundly different to Cabet and Fourier, for instance, since he does not fully plan the organisation of future associations as Cabet did with Icaria or Fourier with the phalanstery. Of course, his conception of the association is intended to be realised more fully in future society, in contrast to classical utopias. But the association he was talking about already existed in various places such as the Canut workshops, onto which he never tried to impose any systematic model—contrary to his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup>

As Vincent says himself: for Proudhon, “the association would provide the environment for the amelioration of objective conditions and for the education of workers. [Proudhon] went so far as to claim at one point that the association would bring to the world ‘le nouvel homme’. Indeed, in the workshop, such noble men already existed: Today, the genius of humanity is to be found in the workshop. It is there that we will find the heroes of the new republic; it is there

---

<sup>9</sup> Vincent seems not to have looked into Cabet’s or Fourier’s works in sufficient depth to see to what extent their associative systems were constructed entirely on the basis of their own imagination. Proudhon, he correctly says, based his theory ‘not on a system, but on observation’. He quotes Proudhon: ‘concerning a system, I do not have one, I do not want one. I formally reject the assumption. The system of humanity will not be known until the end of humanity... that which interests me is to identify its route, and if I am able, to mark it out’. Other French socialist thinkers such as Blanc, who described in detail how the ‘Ateliers Nationaux’ he created should operate, have a very sophisticated and theoretical definition of what an ‘association’ must be. Here, ‘association is so much a dogma, in the eyes of those who propose it as a revolutionary expedient, something finished, complete, absolute, unchangeable, that all they who have taken up thus this Utopia have ended without exception, in a system’ (Vincent 1984: 194 and 196). Proudhon, on the contrary, just wanted to bring together the ‘best potentialities’ he had already observed in workers’ practices in workshops such as ‘les ateliers canuts’—practices which are not doomed in pure fantasy (id.). Against Blanc, the state socialist, he argues for a bottom-up approach, a socialism from below as McKay calls it (2011: 20–28).

that the noble hearts, the great characters of the future century, repine while waiting the hour of deliverance” (Proudhon, quoted by Vincent 1984: 160).

Like Marx, Proudhon develops a theory of labour praxis as the true expression of man. But unlike Marx, he does not then reject it in a totally disalienated post-revolutionary future. The abstract activity of the spirit that displays itself in pieces of artwork must not be seen as a form of labour that would transcend industrial and ‘hard-working’ labour in a communist society. On the contrary, it is immediately present in the worker’s present life. And in this sense, other French socialists were utopians close to Marx: they only believed in *future* associations and cooperatives. The only difference between them and Marx was that they provided workers with precise plans to follow in order to become perfect disalienated workers, as Fourier did when he mapped the perfect organisation of a phalanstery.

### Praxis of Disalienation vs Disalienated Science

According to Proudhon, therefore, the intellectual’s task does not involve developing a negative materialist theory that helps individuals become aware of their labouring condition in order to escape from it and think, but consists in immersing themselves in this condition (Frère 2009; Frère and Reinecke 2011). This is what Noland saw when he wrote that the issue for Proudhon, anticipating Durkheim’s sociological method, was not to invent a constitution for a new social order based on allegedly new foundations—whether logical and rational or anchored in general sentiments such as fraternity or charity, which some utopians situated in ‘human nature’. For Proudhon, the goal of science was to discover in material working practices ‘principles and processes that were *organique, régulateur* and *souverain*. And the method by which Proudhon sought to discover these principles was that of interrogating people’ (Noland 1967: 317), as sociologists do. Indeed, it is because of this approach that Proudhon is presented by some commentators as the discipline’s genuine forerunner in place of Comte (Hall 1971: 4, 147).<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to Hegel, sociologists—or social scientists, as Proudhon calls them<sup>11</sup>—do not construct science through the spirit that transforms matter into substances and then into abstractions, but rather through observation (Manifeste des soixante 1977; Hauptmann, 181: 26–27; Ansart 1984: 217). They must ‘observe how the population connects to certain ideas rather than to others, how it generalizes them, how it develops them in its own way, how it turns them into institutions and customs that it traditionally follows, until they end up in the hands of legislators and upholders of the law who, when their time comes, turn them into articles of law and rules for courts’. As regards labour, Proudhon specifically foresees that ‘it will be the same for the idea of reciprocity’ within associations or cooperatives (Proudhon 1977: 70–71, author’s translation). As old as the state, ‘the organic power and the revolutionary impact of this idea [of reciprocity] has been foreseen by several speculative minds but it is only since 1848 that it has gained in importance’ (Proudhon 1977: 80–81, author’s translation). Far from the emerging factories that fascinated Marx, Proudhon was enthralled by the first forms of credit, health insurance and cooperatives that took shape in workshops and small

<sup>10</sup> For a study of the relationship between Proudhon and Comte at the time and an analysis of their epistolary exchanges, see Hauptmann (1980: 183–196). For an analysis of Comte’s materialism, which in part inspired Proudhon, see Prichard (2013: 83–165).

<sup>11</sup> Gurvitch has shown clearly how, as he got older, Proudhon ended up completely reducing philosophy to social science (1965: 16).

enterprises. He attempted to extract the original substrate out of these developments: reciprocity (Gardin 2006: 124–152).

The practice of reciprocity embodies par excellence what I would like to theorise as positive materialist theory. This is a sociological materialism rather than a (negative) historical materialism, whose absence in Proudhon's oeuvre Gurvitch (1965: 32) and Hauptmann (1947: 43; 1981: 163) are correct to point out.<sup>12</sup> Proudhon's materialism not only equates man's soul or spirit to his material being, as many have been all too happy to do since John Locke. It is also a materialism that understands man in terms of the contingency of his social life and of this life's strict sociological description, here and now.

The social life that Proudhon observes unfolding in the workshops is conditioned by an anthropological principle of common humanity (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Frère 2009, chap.2): 'Man, as a reason-endowed being, has the ability to feel dignity for other people, as for himself—to assert himself as an individual as well as a species. Justice is the product of this ability: it is the spontaneously felt and reciprocally ensured respect of human dignity' (Proudhon 1988: 423, author's translation<sup>13</sup>). This theory would make Proudhon one of the leaders of libertarian socialism, a project that he saw as fully coherent with the anarchist nature of his words. Men must organise themselves economically and politically by referring to this principle of reciprocity, rather than to any authority. The materialist task invariably has two dimensions, one positive and the other negative. One must highlight the alienation specific to the capitalist mode of production. And the other must emphasise practices of emancipation already initiated in the cooperative workshops' experiments in reciprocity.

The theory of reciprocity does not rest upon science in the manner of Marx's theory of alienation. In the mature works such as *Das Kapital*, this science, rather than praxis, becomes the basis of a critique of ideology. Like Mounier (1966: 91 and s.), Paul Ricoeur considers this 'scientific' Marx to be much less striking than the young Marx. The 'scientific' Marx loses interest in the 'real life' of 'real individuals', and his work consequently becomes susceptible to structuralist interpretation. It is this that leads Althusser to promote science over praxis, believing—with even more conviction than Marx—that praxis is contaminated by the ideology of capitalism (Ricoeur 1988: 134–135). Conversely, Proudhon sticks to praxis and generates the principle of reciprocity from proletarian life itself.

In this respect, one must not ignore Proudhon's similarity to the young Marx, given the importance both ascribe to praxis. However, no matter when he is writing, with or without Engels, aged 25 or 50, Marx takes a more negative critical path, taking aim at a deprived man returning to his animal condition. In spite of the exhortation in Marx's early writings to foreground workers' experiences, workers are always characterised by their shortcomings and their vulgarity. As productive forces within industrial factories, workers must be understood because they make history; but they are understood to do so as a class alienated by industrial capitalism. The purpose of materialist theory is to help that class evolve towards consciousness of its own condition, in the youthful writings, or towards science (which will supplant the role of consciousness) and the scientific criticism of ideology, in the mature works. Nevertheless, in his youthful writings Marx's attempt to support the emancipation of a partially confused working class is still firmly connected to praxis, and therefore to workers'

<sup>12</sup> But I also disagree with these authors, who go further and deny that there is any materialism at all in Proudhon, claiming instead that his work is either idealist (Gurvitch) or moralist (Hauptmann).

<sup>13</sup> Ansart 1984: 262–263.

associative and cooperative activities. But his criticism will lose this positive link as soon as it restricts itself to the critique of ideology.

## The Role of Theory

I have shown in previous sections that utopianism rests on intellectual plans for the organisation of work in the future and for an ideal society. In the same way the ‘old Marx’, even if he provided no plans, wanted a science that would lead revolution towards a world in which work would be purely spiritual—a pure expression of workers’ subjectivity and sociality. Young Marx would have said that pure artistic expression is contained in workers’ praxis within contemporary capitalist society, thus making an even stronger claim than Proudhon for manual labour (Rubin 1980: 32). But later he will turn away from this praxis on the grounds that it will be restricted until revolution releases its potential.

For Proudhon, materialist theory must *first* address the worker’s practice and find in it the principles of action that are able to generate structures of disalienation. In his text entitled *Philosophie populaire*,<sup>14</sup> which opens his imposing *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l’Eglise*,<sup>15</sup> Proudhon describes his project in these terms:

‘The people pray for their princes, for their magistrates, for their exploiters and parasites, they pray for their executioners, they pray for the very ones who should by rights pray for them. They pay the government, the courts, the police, the church, the nobility, the crown, the proprietor, the soldier. They pay for every move they make, pay to come and to go, to buy and to sell, to eat, drink and breathe, to warm themselves in the sun, to be born and to die, They even pay for the permission to labour. The people have never done anything but pray and pay: we believe that the time has come to make them PHILOSOPHIZE’ (Proudhon 1988: 7, author’s translation).

Paradoxically, at first we might believe that such a project is nothing less than Marxist. The deprived people must escape their miserable condition and aspire to philosophical science if they cherish the opportunity to break out of it. But Proudhon wants to prove something other than Marx’s perspective.

As with Marx, the paradox reveals Proudhon’s interest. Materialism is not on the side of disalienated labour. This is why making people think, according to Proudhon, is not to make them deny the object of their labour in order to affirm the centrality of a spirit that knows itself—as in a Hegelian approach. The intellectual, with his supposedly ‘deeper reflexive spirit’, does not have to ‘teach’ labourers in order to free them. And this is for the simple reason that labour as it exists in certain places *already* includes emancipation. Thomas may be the only commentator who so brilliantly pointed out the real reason for this difference—which runs deeper than any other—between Marx and Proudhon: ‘this is not only because Marx was concerned, unlike Proudhon, to emphasise the deleterious effects of the division of labour in capitalist society which [...] has distinguishing features which do nothing to lend labour itself any emancipatory potential [in present society]. Nor is it simply a matter of Marx’s theory of alienation in the labour process and its connection with

<sup>14</sup> *Popular Philosophy*

<sup>15</sup> *On Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*

his theory of value.<sup>16</sup> The difference ultimately resides in *how labour itself is conceptualised* by either theorist' (Thomas 1980: 245). Proudhon is ascribing constitutive power and 'affirmative quality to labour *per se*'. Marx('s) 'conception of productive labour does not involve the rehabilitation of the labouring class by means of work in anything like Proudhon's sense. The issue is an important one, since Proudhon's concept of autonomous working-class (*ouvriérist*) organization, based squarely on a belief in the redemptive and morally uplifting character of manual labour, stands out historically not by virtue of its incoherence but by virtue of its extraordinarily influential nature' (Thomas 1980: 244).<sup>17</sup>

This valuation of labour, even in a capitalist context, implies that the principles enunciated by philosophers must be nothing other than principles that people implement in their own life and labour, and which arise disalienated in their praxis. Following his long observations of Canut workshops, Proudhon writes that there is no:

'artisan who is not in a perfect state to understand what philosophy proposes, since there is not one who, in the exercise of his profession, does not make use of several means of justification, measure, evaluation and control. The worker has, to direct him in his labours, the yardstick, the scale, the square, the rule, the plumb, the level, the compass, standards, specimens, guides, a touchstone, etc. Seemingly, there is not a worker who cannot say the purpose of his labour, the ensemble of needs or ideas to which it is attached, what its application must be, what its conditions and qualities are, and consequently its importance in the general economy. Now, what the artisan does for his specialty, the philosopher seeks for the universality of things: his criterion, consequently, must be much more elementary, since it must be applied to all; his synthesis much broader, since it must embrace all. What then is the yardstick to which we must relate all our observations? In the second place, on what basis, according to what plan, in view of what end, will we raise the edifice of our knowledge, so that we can say what

<sup>16</sup> Marx reproaches Proudhon for his individualised definition of value. According to Proudhon, what the capitalist steals from the labourer is the *valeur constituée* (constituted value) of the object he has produced, which is measured by the time the labourer dedicated to producing it. Theft occurs because the wage the capitalist pays the worker is much lower than the value of this labour time, so the wage is not enough to allow the labourer to buy the object he has produced. For Marx, what is missing from Proudhon's theory of the *valeur constituée* is the fact that in a factory, an object's value must be measured according not just to the time taken by an individual labourer to produce it but to the "surplus-value" attached to this object. Surplus value derives from the fact that, thanks to the division of labour, the object is produced faster than if it had been produced by a single individual. By confusing an individual's "quantity of labour" with the real "value of labour" achieved when this individual forms part of a collective, Proudhon overlooks this social dimension of (added) value in capitalist firms (Thomas, 1980: 226–229). But did Proudhon really ignore this added value? Most commentators clearly express the view that he did not, judging that Marx borrowed the idea directly from Proudhon's first *Mémoire sur la propriété* (Hauptmann 1947: 35–37, Hoffman 1972: 63–64)—an idea which Proudhon subsequently expressed more eloquently in *Systems of Economical Contradictions* (Ansart 1967: 4–6) and in *De la justice et de la révolution dans l'église* (Ansart 1984: 131–132), and which Marx continued to ignore (McKay, 2011: 80). For their part Noland (1967: 320) and Hauptmann (1947: 35; 1981: 75) recall one of Proudhon's favourite examples: 200 workers erected the Luxor obelisk in Paris' Place de la Concorde in a single day, something that a single worker would not have been able to do in 200 days. This is why the value of the work of 200 men combined in a collective is superior to the sum of the value of each man's work taken individually.

<sup>17</sup> Ansart insists on this point too: Proudhon goes further than Marx. 'Marx takes up the traditional mode of thought that places work on the side of constraint and of the needs that weigh on man. Man's freedom would start beyond this world of necessity. Recognising the importance of leisure, Proudhon remains as close as possible to these craftsmen, to these artisan-workers, and to the revolutionary syndicalists who will see, in their work and in their professional knowledge, the mark of their own dignity' (1984: 246–249, 262).

Leibniz said of the world of which it must be the expression, that it is the best, the most faithful, the most perfect possible? The day when philosophy has responded to these two questions, we will not say that it is done (it has no limits) but it will be completely organized' (Proudhon 1988: 33–34, author's translation).

The philosopher's conceptual yardstick, which allows him to take the measure of things in the world of thought, is derived from his observations of the yardstick passed between workers in the course of their concrete work. The same is true of the plans according to which the workers organise themselves, which the philosopher copies in order to trace the links between his own ideas. In short, the philosopher must imitate the workers' practical reciprocity in the conceptual world. The yardstick passes through the hands of the experienced worker and their apprentices, and in their daily practices lies the recognition of a reciprocal common humanity as workers. In Proudhon's empirical works, in which he describes his sociological survey of workers' cooperatives, it is as if philosophy had to withdraw as soon as it has fulfilled its task (which is in the end a minor one). Its purpose is simply to point out the concepts contained in proletarian practice, which cooperative workers already express through the way they characterise their labour, handle their tools and pass on knowledge about their use. And all of these concepts have a critical task before them because they, as a whole, are opposed to alienated labour under bourgeois capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the idea of class has an essentially spontaneous aspect since it only emerges as a result of autonomous practice. This spontaneity does not imply that the idea of class is formulated mechanically with the extension of autonomous practice. Proudhon points out that the understanding of the present, and the projection that the idea implies, suggest a creativity through which the class develops its own critical materials and expresses its own reality in words.

The class must express itself through speaking and explain itself through reasoning; it must express and rationalise its own reality through a critical work of release that becomes a way of creating a non-capitalist theory (Ansart 1969: 227). The thinker, at best, emerges when there is a need to indicate that it is possible to juxtapose practices with their verbalization by workers. This synthesis is revolutionary, resulting in acts that are completely different from existing economic practices. The thinker summarises what has always been there. This is why there is nothing more alien to Proudhon's thought than the idea, very common among the ideologues of his time, that at the head of the workers' movement there needs to be a 'vanguard of the proletariat' or a party organisation. The movements' 'thinkers' are themselves workers, 'craftsmen', who cannot be distinguished in any way from their weaver or tailor colleagues, except insofar as they have had the opportunity to perfect certain physical competences such as the art of oratory or reading (Hoffman: 320–322).

<sup>18</sup> *De la capacité de la classe ouvrière* states that: 'The working classes have revealed their secret. We know that after they started to believe, for a moment, in 1848, in the ideas of common life, common labour, family State or servant State (that is to say, respectively, in Fourierian and Cabetian mistakes which consist either in believing that we can construct artificial and ideal communities or in believing in the fiction of a socialist-tutor State), they abandoned that utopia; and that on the other hand, they do not express themselves with less strength against the [bourgeois' anarchist economic] system and that their thought is focused on a unique, but also practicable, principle: the principle of reciprocity. This idea being exposed to the light of day, we do not need to question the working classes on their thoughts for the future' (Proudhon 1977: 94, author's translation). Hoffman saw this clearly: the utopians situated themselves and their communitarian utopias outside political reality whereas Proudhon, following the example of other socialists (like Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux), envisaged politics as a necessary and honourable activity through which we can implement the schemes by which we want to live (1972: 158). Proudhon did not believe the utopian assumption that a small community can be self-sufficient at all (1972: 287). He reiterates that for the utopian authors, the association becomes a veritable dogma (Bancal 1970, Vol. 1: 141).



## The Principles of Reciprocity

For Proudhon, the labour of a worker in a cooperative workshop based on reciprocity is an artistic gesture; the use of the yardstick or the scale is that of a partner who shares his instruments of production and those productions themselves with his fellow workers. This gesture is not the gesture of a pure Hegelian spirit. It is disalienating in itself even whilst it is material, laborious or even troublesome from time to time. It is so 'here and now', not in a post-revolutionary hereafter which will finally see the proletariat realise his true identity as *homo faber*. In Proudhon's anthropology man is, in his current labour (that is, in a hostile capitalist environment that his workshop must oppose), a producer of matter (object) and concept (reciprocity). Proudhon asks: 'labouring is praying, says an old proverb. Could we not also say: whoever labours, as long as he pays attention to his own labour, philosophises?' (Proudhon 1977: 14, author's translation). Disalienated labour or praxis produces pieces of work, Marx would write. It delivers the plans that enable one to think, adds Proudhon. This illustrates how, from the constraint of practical nature, a theoretical maxim emerges. 'The idea was generated by the action[s]' of a few. Action is a form of thinking: 'acting is always thinking'. And thinking, when one is suffering from strenuous labour and exploitation, spontaneously criticises what generates the conditions of exploitation in order to enforce its counterpart, that is, reciprocity. This general concept of reciprocity is embedded in the praxis of cooperative workers. And because it is apprehensible from this material labour itself, we can talk about a materialism that is radically different from a utopianism or an idealism. It is the expression of the synthesis of other concepts still materially embodied in the labour of activist cooperatives today, rather than in the utopia of leaders quoted by scholars (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Defourny et al. 2009). The cooperative embodies the following features (Neamtan 2005: 71–72):

- Its purpose is to serve members and the community, rather than profit (reciprocity of service)
- Self-management (reciprocity of power)
- Democratic decision-making: 1 person = 1 vote (reciprocity in decision-making)
- Collective ownership of capital and the means of production (reciprocity of property)
- Primacy of people and work over capital in the distribution of income (reciprocity of profit)

Today some criteria are added to these (Frère 2013) such as:

- Job rotation (reciprocity of work)
- Equal pay (financial reciprocity)

Collective ownership, job rotation, self-management, mutual training and services provided exclusively for 'members' of the cooperative<sup>19</sup>: it should be borne in mind that, from a socialist libertarian point of view, these concepts still need to be philosophically developed and promoted politically against private property, labour marketisation, capitalist shareholding etc.

---

<sup>19</sup> 'Members' of the cooperative may be members of the local community participating in the project and workers.

Reading through this list of features, one recalls the description of the Canut workshops provided earlier by Vincent. The economist and jurist Jean Bancal has identified the extent to which Proudhon was a theorist of self-management *avant la lettre* who placed the question of the organisation of work at the centre of political economy.<sup>20</sup> According to Proudhon, a worker must necessarily be a member of the enterprise in which he works, which must be collective property (1970, Vol 1: 71 and 92). Work should be divided within the enterprise, but tasks must only be shared according to the aspirations (manual or intellectual) of each worker and above all must be done for equivalent wages (1970 Vol 1: 33, Vol 1: 103). Like Vincent (1984: 142), Ansart adds that the candidates for a particular post should be selected by vote and subject to revocability rules, especially for management tasks. In addition, as for the Canuts, workers must all receive an encyclopaedic training from their peers and a polyvalent apprenticeship to avoid any parcelling out of tasks. This is both so that they can replace each other and also to ensure that everyone has a good understanding of the enterprise's operation (1969: 260–262; 1970: 57 and 87; 1984: 310–314). In this demand for polyvalence, Hauptmann sees evidence of Proudhon's experience of holding several different posts in the Gauthier brothers' firm (worker, master printer and even lawyer), contrary to Marx, the pure intellectual with the temperament of a prophet (Marx 1981: 219).

It is well known that Marx and Proudhon parted ways with completely opposing perspectives, although they also had several common points. Proudhon's theory of reciprocity, formalised after his sociological surveys and his meetings with cooperatives, leads him to see man's material labour as the birthplace of socialism, disalienation, emancipation, democracy and philosophical reflection. Unlike Hegel, the spirit does not deny matter. It emerges from it and remains intrinsically blended into it. Provided that this labour is freely orientated and decreed in a cooperative workshop—as opposed to a factory where workers must submit to their bosses—it may not be alienated but may instead become a vector of subjective realisation. The equation that makes critical theory the a priori product of manual labour and the drive to self-organisation motivates Proudhon to turn the cooperative (or the 'association' or the 'workshop', depending on the texts) into the cradle of autonomy, in place of a scientific critical theory a posteriori. But this was inconceivable for Marx, according to whom Proudhon was a nostalgist who, in an era of industrialization, sought to: 'bring us back to the companion, at most to the master, workman of the Middle Ages' (Marx 2014:157).<sup>21</sup> Revolution must be more demanding because it cannot accept that workers' humanity is occasionally expressed within cooperatives, rather than fully expressed in a (utopian) post-revolutionary industrial society.

<sup>20</sup> Even if one might regret that Bancal, as if trying to avoid deeper philosophical and sociological reflection, too often succumbs to the ease of galvanising Proudhon's thought by presenting it as a dialectic that overcomes 'traditional oppositions'. According to Bancal, Proudhon supports a solidary or participative 'productive competition' (1970, Vol 1: 46–47, 106–109), a synthesis of idealism and materialism (Vol 2: 141). He transcends the individualism-holism split, socialises individual liberty (Vol 1: 68–9, 182), invents a liberal collectivism, a socialist liberalism, a decentralising communism (Vol 1: 143–144) a liberal centralisation (Vol 1: 218), a non-capitalist liberalism (Vol 1: 250). He unites the individual 'me' and the collective 'me' (Vol 1: 216) etc.

<sup>21</sup> Ansart, who died recently and was perhaps the foremost French expert on Proudhon, recognises that Proudhon refuses to provide heavy industry as an economic model for his revolution (1970, p. 49). For his part, Hoffman recognises that Proudhon, contrary to Marx, did not at all foresee to what extent the standardisation of work and its industrialisation would go on increasing (1972: 24–25 and 316–317).

Scholars who try to show that Marx never really broke with his own Proudhonian and anarchist influences underline how Marx strongly criticised the idea of the state as the idea of private property (which, like Proudhon, he distinguishes from individual property or possession).<sup>22</sup> They are right to say that Marx was opposed to the state socialism of Lassalle. Marx did not agree with the idea of abolishing the capitalist economy by way of the state since 'his goal was to abolish the political state itself'. 'Precisely because modern private ownership was that which was awarded by the absolutist state in exchange for paying taxes, private ownership is equal to state ownership. So it is a total fallacy to abolish private property by means of state ownership. The abolition of private property must be an abolition of the state itself. To Marx, communism came to signify the establishment of a new kind of individual property and this was because he considered communism as being equal to an association of producers' cooperatives' (Karatani 2003: 166–167). Like Proudhon, Marx did not object to property in general; he objected to earning income without working. Unearned profit is the profit of the capitalist (property), which captures the added value of the labourers' collective power whilst these labourers just receive wages paid for their individual work.

Proponents of an 'anarchist Marx' are right to say that his goal was also to abolish the political state itself and that Marxists, after Marx, were wrong to think that the first step towards communism was the planned economy.<sup>23</sup> They have neglected both producers' cooperatives (or cooperatives of production) and consumers' cooperatives (or cooperative stores) in whose establishment Marx himself saw 'the association of free and equal producers', the cradle of 'possible communism'. This is why he thought so highly of the Paris Commune, realised by Proudhonist leaders.<sup>24</sup> But these proponents are also obliged to notice that for Marx the failure of the Commune was already inscribed in the capitalist context in which it arose: 'when the extracapitalist production systems have to compete with capitalist enterprises, they are forced either to adopt the organizational principle of corporations for the sake of improving production or lose and disappear' (Karatani 2003: 184). That is why Marx, contrary to Proudhon, thought that it was not possible to dissolve capital and the state through workers' associations; this would only happen through workers' political struggle towards revolution. Meanwhile for Proudhon, spontaneous economic revolution brought about by the cooperatives' actions will automatically transform the political structure of

<sup>22</sup> Ansart does not say that Marx was a kind of anarchist (as Karatani and Thomas did). Rather, he hypothesised the existence of a kind of third Marx, selectively a libertarian and sociologist, who appears throughout both his younger and more mature works. This Marx appears, for example, every time that he speaks about the Paris commune and again in the *Civil War in France* (1969: 453, 479, 485, 533; 1984: 118–119, 276–277, 380–381). Marx shares with Proudhon the same economic analysis with the same conclusion: capitalism must and will necessarily collapse and science has to contribute to the parallel reinforcement of the social class that is able to reject it. He also shares with Proudhon the same conception of private property as theft and the same attempt to define value by work (1969: 381–386). In addition, Marx and Proudhon share common roots in Saint-Simonianism, expressed particularly clearly in their common desire to eliminate politicians and state power (even that of a democratic state), and they both assign the role of national economic production to a federal association of producers' cooperatives. This is why, according to Ansart, even after 1871 and the Paris Commune, Marx confirms that anarchy remains the proletarian movement's objective: a society in which there is no more state, only communes run by their members, and in which federal 'government' is just an administrative government with no political functions (1969: 425–454). The difference between the two thinkers was the methodology they recommended to hasten the end of capitalism.

<sup>23</sup> As Karatani shows, Engels played a crucial role in the assimilation of 'Marxism', 'state centrism' and "bureaucratic control of economic process" by deliberately altering several passages of *Das Kapital* that he had responsibility for editing (2003: 179).

<sup>24</sup> But Marx remained silent about the extent to which the Commune was mostly made up of Proudhonians (Gurvitch, 1965: 65; Hoffman 1972: 335–338; Mc Kay 2011: 40–44).

society (Ansart 1969: 228–325). This is because as workshops combine, sharing work and its benefits among themselves, whole regions will progress towards political self-determination. Thus, ‘the workshop tends to make government disappear’ (Ansart 1969: 256).

Marx rejected the idea of such a spontaneous economic revolution. If Marx had begun to criticise Proudhon (from the *Poverty of Philosophy* onwards), this was partly because Proudhon did not want to contribute to communist propaganda. But it was also because ‘Proudhon was rather negative towards the idea of political revolution wherein the working class seizes power, and he contended that the expansion of a free associative exchange system—say producers’ cooperatives and exchange banks<sup>25</sup> without interest—would replace the state and capitalist economy. Marx argued that so long as classes and class opposition last, it is impossible to reduce politics to economy, the liberation of the working class should be made through political revolution’ (Karatani 2003:175).<sup>26</sup>

The tone became tougher with time. Soon *Das Kapital* would utterly reject the cooperative rather than simply criticising its weakness and the erratic aspect of its disalienated realisations, which are unable to: ‘stop the geometrical progress of monopoly, to emancipate the masses and to lighten the burden of their misery’. Of course, the German thinker still accepted that the cooperative or the association may constitute a model for the future of socialism. But as long as the conquest of political power—guided by the critical scientific theory embodied by the party<sup>27</sup>—does not take place, the cooperative remains ballasted by capitalist labour methods. This capitalist form of cooperation ‘presupposes from the outset the free wage-labourer who sells his labour-power to capital [...]. Capitalist cooperation does not appear as a particular historical form of cooperation, instead, cooperation itself appears as a historical form peculiar to, and specifically distinguishing, the capitalist process of production’ (Marx 1977: 452–453).

Even if the cooperatives that already existed (those of the Paris Commune’s leaders, or those in England described by Owen) foreshadowed the possibility of emancipation, the capitalist context immediately alienated them and their labourers. They embodied the possibility of emancipation but only as a kind of unrealized power, just like the labourer’s praxis (see ‘Marx’s Second Paradox and Negative Materialism’ section). Both would only really be liberated once the political revolution occurred and ushered in a society in which cooperatives could create a peaceful global association without any kind of state.

This slight philosophical disagreement about revolution between Proudhon and Marx had strong organisational consequences for the IWA. With its doubt about the cooperative

<sup>25</sup> For comments about this type of exchange or “Banque du peuple”, see Hoffman 1972: 123–128; Vincent 1984: 171–175; McKay, 2011: 13–18; Ansart 1967: 58–62; 1969: 322–323; 1970: 107–108; 1984: 304–306). About the Bank of Exchange: Proudhon [1848] 2011. About the Bank of the People: Proudhon [1849] 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Marx writes in his ‘Instructions for Delegates to the Geneva Congress of the Socialist International’: ‘The cooperative system will never transform capitalistic society. To convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and cooperative labour, general social changes are wanted, changes of the general conditions of society, never to be realised save by the transfer of the organised forces of society, viz., the state power, from capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves’ (quoted by Karatani 2003: 176).

<sup>27</sup> If, as we will see, we cannot contrast Marx and Proudhon based on their conception of the State (both wanted to destroy it along with capitalism) as is sometimes done, Marx nonetheless thought that before capitalism collapsed it was important to build an organisational political form, a labourers’ party that would lead towards general confrontation (Ansart 1967, 211–212; 1969: 500–504). Proudhon was totally against this conception of revolution via the organisation of a centralised party. As he would write in *De la capacité*, ... political theory cannot be provided to the working classes by a party composed of intellectuals because this theory is itself formulated by spontaneous praxis in the workshops (1969: 227; 1977: 105–110). Self-organised workshops, rather than the constitution of a party to fight against bourgeois parties, should be the proletarians’ first aim, even if such a party would probably arise anyway as a consequence.

movement's capacity to reverse capitalism from inside, *Das Kapital*, published in 1867, fell like a bombshell onto the IWA. Even if the First International (1864) had broadly consisted of workers' associations marked by Proudhon's influence, these associations progressively disappeared from the scene. On the occasion of the Second International in 1889, Marx's triumph was total and the workers' cooperatives were no longer represented (Desroche 1976: 87). Thus, cooperatives and associations (for example, mutual companies, credit unions and consumer cooperatives) slowly broke away from the labour movement and eventually gathered under the flag of a rather depoliticised 'social economy' or 'third sector'.

## From Marx's Critique of Cooperatives to Contemporary Condescendence

From a theoretical point of view, even Marx's most distant successors agreed with him when workers' cooperatives began to resurrect the practice of self-management after 1968. We may, for example, recall Gorz. It is certainly possible for workers:

'to self-manage workshops or to self-determine working conditions or to co-determine the design of machines and the definition of tasks. Yet as a whole these remain no less determined in a heteronomous way by the social process of production or, in other words, by society insofar as it is itself a giant machine. Workers' control (erroneously 'qualified'<sup>28</sup> as workers' self-management) amounts in reality to self-determining the modalities of what has already been heteronomously determined: the workers will share and define tasks within the framework of an already existing social division of labour' (Gorz 1982: 9).

For a worker, labour can only constitute a loss of their own reality and an objectification of their creations. Following Marx, Gorz argued in favour of free time and a leisure society. The material labour required to satisfy our physical needs in such a society is limited to its simplest expression in order to free up time for humanity to work on itself, as it were, which is essential to its pure social expression (Gorz 1988).

This argument is espoused by most of those authors who, following Gorz 20 years ago, support the idea of a universal basic income. From the outset the valorisation of work is seen as a valorisation of suffering. 'Work, no matter how degrading or low-paid or inconvenient, is deemed an ultimate good' (Gorz 1997: 97). Our societies inherit from our Christian past the idea that any remuneration requires suffering and work. Today, 'whether for a religious or secular goal, suffering is thought to constitute a necessary rite of passage. People must endure through work before they can receive wages, they must prove their worthiness before the eyes of capital. This thinking has an obvious theological basis—where suffering is thought to be not only meaningful, but in fact the very condition of meaning. A life without suffering is seen as frivolous and meaningless (...). We should reject this logic today and recognize that we have moved beyond the need to ground meaning in suffering. Work and the suffering that accompanies it should not be glorified' (Srnicsek and Williams 2015: 125. on this topic, also see Van Parijs and Vanderbrocht 2017).

In these conceptions that advocate a universal basic income, labour is reduced to manual labour, which is only ever denigrated. To the contemporary reader, this seems a somewhat

---

<sup>28</sup> Here, we have changed the translation. In his French text, Gorz uses the term 'qualifié' (*Adieux au prolétariat*, Paris, Galilée, 1980: 19), which is over-translated in the English version to become 'equated'.

hedonistic gesture, particularly at a time when an ever-increasing number of unemployed people suffer from their unemployment and many—in the USA, for example—suffer from the lack of a minimum wage and from income parity. Like Proudhon, I want to suggest here that manual labour can be both emancipatory and pleasant, and cannot systematically be reduced to suffering. And if it sometimes causes pain, this is no reason to mock those who take pride in it.

In a materialist and libertarian project, unemployed people must not return to the factory but rather to autonomous labour. Proudhon believed that instances of self-determination can emerge, especially within a capitalist context which is undermined from the inside. Alienated labour truly does exist on a massive scale. And it contains very little emancipatory potential. But it is mainly to be found in mass industry where there is a boss and shareholders, and where the workers do not own the means of production. If we examine the experiences of their comrades outside mass industry, however, we see that the outlines of disalienated labour exist and that they currently exist in the cooperative. In this respect, Proudhon remains more faithful to the materialist project than Marx. The working class is what it is, with its cooperative wealth, its deep poverty, and its lack of both divine transcendence and the apparent godsend of an uncertain revolution. The question becomes: how do we exhume all the emancipatory content of the working class and its material conditions of life? The answer should be by undertaking a sociology of this class' initiatives.

From a classical Marxist position, we judge with condescension unemployed or intermittent workers who remain proud of the work they do for firms that deign to engage them using invariably precarious and unstable short-term or subsidised contracts. Proudhon's materialism has enabled intellectuals and social movements alike to trust this class of excluded contemporaries, rather than to condemn it as alienated. This is because it can sometimes surprise us—as it has within the increasing number of Brazilian factories bought and self-managed by their workers (Frère 2013). Proudhon also provides fresh lucidity. He offers us a positive anthropological condition, even if it is impure. Society's future form will be shaped by men whom classically 'Marxist' perspectives would have rapidly returned to their desire for cars, televisions, consumerist leanings and their alienation of all kinds. Erik Olin Wright notes rightly that associational democracy, the social economy and some other 'pathways of social empowerment' give us no guarantees about the innate goodness of people who endorse these activities (2010: 368–369). But because Wright does not undertake a history of the idea of cooperative and popular economic experiments, already theorised by Proudhon, he calls them 'utopias' without seeing clearly how Proudhon put this term in the same idealist dock as communism.

To Proudhon, there is no teleology, linear evolution or end of history as is the case with Hegel and Marx (Bancal 1970, Vol 2: 75; Hall 1971: 147). Proudhon was neither definitively an idealist nor a humanist nor a utopian. If one reads between the lines—beyond the moral values that can sometimes appear transcendent (justice, human dignity, mutualisation etc.)—one realises that he is in fact a very realist materialist, a pure thinker of facticity, of immanence and contingency. Prichard correctly observes as much in his recent essays on political theory (2013: 92–93)—though he does not see to what extent this 'immanentism' owes less to Proudhon's interest in international relations than to his analyses of cooperative work.

'In order to avoid imposing conceptions of the good life on others, progress needs to be reconceptualised as the process of opening up to anarchy, rather than an end point to which we should aim (...). Neither position is given in the structure of history itself, nor will a transcendent principle of political order ever be found' (Prichard, 213: 160). The defining characteristics of mutualism that Proudhon believes in (self-management, collective ownership etc.) apply here and now. He believes them neither to be universal nor natural nor eternal. But

they have value for him, in his sociohistorical context, and he takes it upon himself to mobilise them politically against those who do not adhere to them, without knowing if they will ever structure a truly anarchist political order.

Proudhon would have said that men make their history, but that they must also accept that they make history without a pre-established meaning. He thus comes to a conclusion not far from those of Marx and Raymond Aron. They compose this history mutually from what they are and do here and now in their cooperatives, assemblies or associations. They turn away from man as an abstraction, from the pure spirit that will supposedly be presented by a form of labour promised to appear on the inaccessible communist horizon. Far from non-capitalist purity which can only exist as an idea, they give back dignity to the *animal laborens*, refusing to believe that he can be distinguished from the *homo faber*.

By returning pride to the worker (even after they have spent 30 years welding car bodies for Renault), Proudhon enables us to conceive of an experimental libertarianism that is emancipatory just because it exists and is *something other* than capitalism. Supporters of universal basic income and Holloway advocate experimental libertarianism for the same reason (2002, 2010)—but they do so without referring either to Proudhon or to the libertarian socialist movement. It is maybe because of this that Holloway reduces labour to abstract labour—that is, alienated labour—and suggests that ‘doing’ (or *praxis*) is automatically something that is done outside labour (2010: 203sq.). Of course, Holloway recognises that something like autonomous action can exist here and now. But like Gorz and Williams, he thinks that it only exists outside labour, which is always heteronomous. The ‘on-going emancipation’ is somewhere other than in labour. Gorz used to finish his books by advocating a ‘policy of time’ that would reduce (always alienated) labour to free up our time for family life, culture, and study (1982: 126–144; 1988: 233–250; 1997: 152–161). Today, Holloway sees ‘doing’ in places where ‘labour’ is criticised as (abstract) labour: workers’ struggles in private factories, Seattle, Chiapas, Occupy Wall Street, Black Blocs, the anti G-8 Summit etc. (2002: 155–165; 2010: 253–262). And whatever this ‘doing’ is, it cannot be understood as another form of work. Even if we agree with their critique of labour under capitalism, does it mean that we have to condemn labour in itself? Though Holloway reverses the sense and the value of ‘abstract labour’ that for Marxists was the emancipated work of the future, his stance in fact adheres to the Hegelian intellectualism of the ‘old Marx’. Emancipation must be seen somewhere other than in the material production of an economy that is still ‘dirty’. *Homo faber* is an artist who does not labour. He just thinks and uses his time for artwork and theoretical-cultural activities.

In the book he dedicates to Proudhon and Courbet’s common vision of the social world, Rubin clearly shows how the two friends shared the same extensive conception of the workshop as the place of artistic expression common to the artist and the manual worker: ‘workshop’ for Proudhon and Courbet ‘meant any workshop, including not only that of the painter but of any master craftsman, artisan, or even group of factory workers’ (Rubin 1980: 8). Whatever the profession, from woodcraft in the town to small-scale farming in the countryside, each specialism possessed its own aesthetic apex ‘from which the worker may dominate and contemplate the entirety of the social edifice, making himself its center and its monitor (...). All the actions, the movements, the speech, the thoughts, the products, the affections of man possess this artistic character. But it is practice that reveals this art, it is work that develops it.’ (Proudhon quoted in French by Rubin 1980: 116 and 117, author’s translation).

Rubin sees in this aesthetic apex a valuation of the ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘physical labour’ that separates Proudhon from the materialism of Marx (Rubin 1980: 53 and 149). To my mind, the inverse is true. Proudhon places manual and intellectual activity on an equal footing; both can

become art if they are developed by work. Whatever form this work takes, its outcome is thus artistic and, to a certain extent, it is true, spiritual (see the quotations in ‘The Role of Theory’ section). But for Proudhon, spirit remains firmly attached to matter because it emanates from it—and it does so thanks to work that takes place in the present, not in a future society that is the product of fantasy. It is this that distinguishes Proudhon’s view from Marx’s. Proudhon assigns an artistic value to all types of work, which have profound emancipatory effects here and now, in society such as it is. All types of work give form to matter, on which they are entirely dependent. This is true both in the case of the intellectual who writes a book and in the case of Courbet who paints a painting. And it is at least as true amid the grime of manual work in a factory, in spite of this carrying a greater risk of alienation than any other type of work. ‘Proudhon steadfastly refused to characterize work negatively, even under capitalist conditions’ (Thomas 1980: 179). And he restored prestige to manual labour in a way that no one else had done up to that point (Hoffman 1972: 301). Marx, by contrast, casts emancipated work into the beyond of a revolution that will see the birth of the abstract man-artist, a creator of pure and exclusively intellectual works free from any physical matter. Abstract work, a vector of signs through which the worker will express his sociability in communist society, remains Hegelian work. Proudhon, by contrast, puts a definitive end to Hegelian intellectualism and to its comfortable certainties—something all materialist and political philosophies today should perhaps remember.

## Conclusion

The libertarian materialist theory I have summarised in this paper—through the history of ideas such as ‘emancipation’, ‘work’, ‘cooperative’, and ‘utopia’—starts from what exists and what is, inevitably, *inside* capitalism and *inside* a form of labour that is sometimes very prosaic labour based in cooperatives. In every case, it is still first of all material labour and not spiritual or artistic work. But that does not mean that it automatically makes workers into objects or market products.

As in the era of Proudhon, because all cooperative practices will inevitably be infected by market economics (and because their true realisation might therefore be compromised), contemporary radical left intellectuals sometimes distance themselves from alternative initiatives. We may therefore find them eschewing schemes such as community-supported agriculture, new citizen credit unions, self-managed workshops—and more generally the social and solidarity economy (Frère 2013). It is not difficult to reveal the depth to which capitalism contaminates all our material lives to the point where not a single human life is left untouched (we are all consumers etc.). However, it is more onerous to see, against the same background, what evades capitalism within those same material lives. And yet, as Proudhon shows us, there is much of great value that *does* evade capitalism: we must do without the framework of massive and inevitable alienation that allows only the thinker to teach his radical and theoretical critique of society in its entirety from his ivory tower with a megaphone bought at Walmart (and made by semi-slaves in China)—to combine the purity of the gesture with the purity of his spirit.

Of course, new cooperatives always run the risk of being infected by capitalist principles (private property, competition etc.). But they at least try something rather than just ‘calling for change’ or waiting for new heteronomous jobs within factories. Of course, labour in a community-supported agricultural cooperative can be hard and painful. But it is precisely this type of strenuous labour that must underpin the future of a positive materialism—a positive materialism that attempts to express this type of labour’s principles: reciprocity, self-management,



collective ownership, equal pay etc. And we need not believe that such labour will result in a significant and foreseeable historical development in order to support its proliferation.

What we find in Proudhon are sociohistorical foundations capable of establishing a materialism that does without the latent Hegelianist intellectualism found in most of the materialist tradition today, as well as in theories of universal basic income and in the renewal of utopianism in contemporary social economy. In order to bestow an actual theoretical component upon this 'positive' materialism, we now need to establish how contemporary conceptual suggestions (Frère 2015; Fox and Alldred 2017 for example) enrich and strengthen it. The agenda remains open.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose detailed knowledge of Proudhon proved to be invaluable and whose suggestions helped to improve the text significantly. I would also like thank Josh Booth in particular: Josh helped me in turning my thoughts into palatable English, and his expertise in social theory was remarkable.

## References

- Althusser, L. (2005) *For Marx*. Trans. by Ben Brewster, London: Verso.
- Ansart, P. (1967). *Sociologie de Proudhon*. Paris: PUF.
- Ansart, P. (1969). *Marx et l'anarchisme, Essai sur les sociologies de Saint Simon, Proudhon et Marx*. Paris: PUF.
- Ansart, P. (1970). *Naissance de l'anarchisme*. Paris: PUF.
- Ansart, P. (1984). *Proudhon. Textes et débats*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche.
- Ansart, P. (2003). Proudhon et les Canuts lyonnais. In M. Pucciarelli & A. Pessin (Eds.), *Lyon & l'esprit proudhonien* (pp. 45–62). Lyon: L'atelier de création libertaire.
- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bancal, J. (1970). *Proudhon. Pluralisme et autogestion*. Paris: Aubier Montaigne.
- Boltanski, L & L Thévenot. (2006). *On Justification*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (2013). *On Anarchism*. New York, London: The New Press.
- Chouraqui, F. (2015) A principle of universal strife: Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty's Critiques of Marxist Universalism, 1953–1956. In *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 76 (3): 467–490.
- Dardot, P., & Laval, C. (2015). *Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXI<sup>e</sup> Siècle*. Paris: La découverte.
- Defourny, J. (1992) Origins, forms and roles of a third major sector. In J. Defourny & J. L. Monzon Campos (Eds.), *Economie sociale—the third sector*. Brussel. De Boeck: 27–49.
- Defourny, J., Develtere, P., Fonteneau, B., & Nyssens, M. (2009). *The worldwide making of the social economy. Innovations and changes*. Leuven: Acco.
- Desroche, H. (1976). *Le projet coopératif*. Paris: Les éditions ouvrières.
- Develtere, P. (1994). *Co-operation and development*. Leuven: Acco.
- Fox, N., & Alldred, P. (2017). *Sociology and the new materialism*. London: Sage.
- Frère, B. (2009). *Le nouvel esprit solidaire*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Frère, B. (2013). The solidarity economy: emancipatory action to challenge politics. In R. Jozan, T. Voiturier, & S. Sundar (Eds.), *Reducing inequalities, a sustainable development challenge* (pp. 235–249). New Delhi: TERI press.
- Frère, B. (Ed.). (2015). *Le tournant de la théorie critique*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Frère, B; Reinecke, J (2011) Libertarian socialism and solidarity economy. In *dialogues in critical management studies*, 1: 117–127.
- Gardin, L. (2006). *Les initiatives solidaires*. Ramonville Saint-Agne: Erès.
- Gorz, A. (1982) *Farewell to the working class*. Trans. by Mike Sonenscher, Cambridge: South End Press.
- Gorz, A. (1988) *Métamorphose du travail, Quête du sens. Critique de la raison économique*. Paris: Galilée.
- Gorz, A. (1997). *Misère du présent, Richesse du possible*. Paris: Galilée.
- Graeber, D. (2004). *Fragment of an anarchist anthropology*. Cambridge: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Gurvitch, G. (1965). *Proudhon. Sa vie, son oeuvre*. Paris: PUF.
- Hall, M. (1971). *The sociology of Pierre Joseph Proudhon*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Hauptmann, P. (1947). *Marx et Proudhon: Leurs Rapports Personnels* (pp. 1844–1847). Lyon: Economie et Humanisme.

- Haubtmann, P. (1980). *La philosophie sociale de P.J. Proudhon*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Haubtmann, P. (1981). *Proudhon, Marx et la pensée allemande*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Hegel, GWF (1977) *Phenomenology of spirit*. Trans. By Arnlod V. Miller, Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Hoffman, R.-L. (1972). *Revolutionary justice. The social and political theory of P.J. Proudhon*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Holloway, J. (2002). *Change the world without taking power*. London: Pluto Press.
- Holloway, J. (2010). *Crack capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Johnson, C. H. (1974). *Utopian communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839–1851*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Karatani, K. (2003). *Transcritique. On Kant and Marx*. London: The MIT Press.
- Lefort, C. (1979). L'expérience prolétarienne. In *Lefort C Eléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie* (pp. 71–97). Paris: Gallimard.
- Marx, K [1867] 1964 Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen's Association. In *The general council of the first international*. Moscow, Progress Publishers: 265–270.
- Marx, K (1977) *Capital. A critique of political economy*, vol 1. Trans. by Ben Fowkes, New York: Vintage Books.
- Marx, K (1981) *Capital, vol.3*. Trans. by David Fernbach, London: Pelican Books – New Left Review.
- Marx, K (2014) *The poverty of philosophy*. Trans. By Harry Quelch, Mansfield Center : Martino Publishing.
- Marx, K; Engels, F (2011) *Economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844*. Trans. by Martin Milligan, Blacksburg: Wilder.
- Mc Kay, I. (2011). *Property is theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon anthology*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Méda, D. (1995). *Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Moulaert, F; Ailenei, O (2005) Social economy, third sector and solidarity relations: a conceptual synthesis from history to present. In *Urban Studies*, 42(11), 2037–2053.
- Mounier, E. (1966). Court traité de la mythique de gauche. In *Mounier E Communisme, anarchie et personnalisme* (pp. 9–56). Paris: Seuil.
- Neamtan, N (2005) The social economy: finding a way between the market and the state. In *policy options*, 71, 71–76.
- Noland, A (1967) Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: socialist as social scientist. In *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 26(3), 313–328.
- Parker, M., Fournier, V., & Reedy, R. (2007). *The dictionary of alternatives: utopianism and organization*. London: Zed Books.
- Prichard, A. (2013). *Justice, order and anarchy. The international political theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*. London: Routledge.
- Proudhon, P-J [1848] 2011 Organisation of credit and circulation and the solution of the social problem. In Ian McKay (Ed.), *Property is theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon anthology*. Oakland, AK Press: 282–293.
- Proudhon, P-J [1849] 2011 Bank of the people. In Ian Mc Kay (Ed.), *Property is theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon anthology*. Oakland, AK Press: 383–393.
- Proudhon, P-J (1847) *The misery of philosophy*. Trans. Benjamin R. Tucker. Available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/proudhon/philosophy/>. Accessed 24 Oct 2014.
- Proudhon, P-J (1840) *What is property?* Trans. Benjamin R. Tucker. Available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/proudhon/property/>. Accessed 24 Oct 2014.
- Proudhon, P.-J. (1957). *Manuel du spéculateur à la Bourse*. Paris: Garnier.
- Proudhon, P.-J. (1977). *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Vol. 1-2). Paris: Editions du monde libertaire.
- Proudhon P-J (1988) *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'Eglise*. Paris: Fayard.
- Ricoeur, P. (1988). *Lectures on ideology and utopia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Roberts, L. J (1991) Etienne Cabet and his Voyage en Icarie. In *utopian studies*, 2 (1–2): 77–95.
- Rubin, J. H. (1980). *Realism and social vision in Courbet and Proudhon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rude, F. (1977). *C'est nous les canuts*. Paris: Maspéro.
- Salem, J (1996) Introduction aux manuscrits de 1844. In Marx K Manuscrits de 1844. French trans. Jean-Pierre Gougeon. Paris: GF-Flammarion.
- Les Soixantes (1977b/1977a) Manifeste des soixante ouvriers de la Seine. In *Proudhon P-J De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières, vol. 2*. Paris : Éditions du Monde libertaire: pp. 420–429
- Smicek, N., & Williams, A. (2015). *Inventing the future. Postcapitalism and a world without work*. London, Verso.
- Thomas, P. (1980). *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*. London: Routledge.
- Van Parijs, P., & Vanderbroght, Y. (2017). *Basic income. A radical proposal for a free society and a sane economy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Vincent, R.-S. (1984). *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the rise of French republican socialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, E.O. (2010). *Envisioning real Utopias*. London, New york: Verso.