

Proudhon and 1848

Unlike most of the principal actors in the early history of the Second Republic, Proudhon was not well known before 1848. He was an outsider. This is not to say that he was unknown. The publication of *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* in 1840, with its provocative "Property is theft!" had won him ample notoriety. He had also become an important presence in the culture of the Left, crossing swords on occasion with Victor Considerant and the young Marx. But in 1847 he was not close to enjoying the fame or the influence of a Lamartine, a Tocqueville, or a Ledru-Rollin. Thus the revolution of 1848 was in a personal sense hugely important for Proudhon. It drew him into a new life. It made him a representative of the people and an influential journalist. It made him the butt of attacks, but also gave him and his ideas a much wider audience than they had ever previously enjoyed. He became the scapegoat of the Right, the target of mockery by Thiers and by cartoonists of all persuasions. But in the course of 1848, and especially after the crushing of the June insurrection, he became the spokesman for "the people" betrayed by the revolution.

A bitter—though not consistent—critic of Louis Napoleon after his election as president, Proudhon was eventually convicted of crimes against the government, the constitution, and the President of the Republic. He then fled to Belgium, but returned to Paris only to be arrested on June 5, 1849. He spent most of the ensuing three years in prison. But thanks to prison reforms that, ironically, had been

introduced by Adolphe Thiers, he continued in prison to lead an active life, marrying, fathering a child, editing two newspapers, carrying on extensive relations with Alexander Herzen, and writing his “confessions” as well as two other important works. In these books Proudhon was to develop a powerful critique of the revolutionary government and the radical “jacobin” Left and he was to begin to situate himself with regard to the revolutionary tradition.

I

Of all the leading French radicals of the 1830s and '40s Proudhon was the only one with strong roots in the rural working class. He was the son of a cooper from Franche-Comté—a maker of wine casks and beer barrels who later worked as a brewer and tavern keeper. As a boy Proudhon worked by turns as a cow-herd and a cellar boy in a tavern run by his father, before being apprenticed at the age of 18 to a printer in Besançon. Although he attended the Collège de Besançon, an excellent secondary school by the standards of the time, Proudhon did not complete his studies there; and he was in many important respects self-taught. He learned Latin and at least some Greek and Hebrew while working as a compositor and proofreader, and his very considerable knowledge of theology seems to have come in large part from his work as a proofreader of ecclesiastical works. His great breakthrough as a provincial intellectual came at the age of 29 when he was awarded the Pension Suard, a three-year fellowship offered by the Académie de Besançon to promising young men of modest background. In his application for the

pension Proudhon described himself in terms that convey a sense of the pride he took in his modest origins.

Né et élevé au sein de la classe ouvrière, lui appartenant encore par le coeur et les affections, surtout par la communauté des souffrances et des vœux, ma plus grande joie, si j'obtenais les suffrages de l'Académie, serait de travailler sans relâche, par la philosophie et la science, avec toute l'énergie de ma volonté et toutes les puissances de mon esprit à l'amélioration physique, morale et intellectuelle de ceux que je me plais à nommer mes frères et mes compagnons.¹

He was always to remain proud of his working-class roots and to cherish an ideal image of the rural life he had known as a boy. Much in his mature thought can be seen as an effort to recapture that ideal.

Proudhon was the first French intellectual to call himself an “anarchist,” but more often he spoke of his “socialist” ideas, taking pleasure in the fact that his socialism had “received the baptism” of a conservative learned society. The Fourierist Victor Considerant had been his schoolmate at the Collège de Besançon, yet he never felt close to Considerant or to any of the other romantic socialists of his generation; and he proudly announced in 1849 that in his initial attempts to deepen his understanding of political economy and the problem of poverty, he had “never sought enlightenment from the socialist écoles” of the period.² Thus in working out his own views in the 1840s, he came to reject both the “Jacobin” or state socialism of a Louis Blanc and the communitarian socialism of the Fourierists. He believed that all attempts to impose social change from above were doomed to failure. It was

essential, he maintained, to return control of the productive process to the workers themselves and to create conditions in which individuals, acting freely on their own initiative, could organize their own collective life.

It was during the late 1830s and early '40s that Proudhon first worked out a sweeping indictment of the social order of his time. This was an order ruled and exploited, he believed, by a new "mercantile and landed aristocracy, a thousand times more rapacious than the old aristocracy of the nobility." During these years Proudhon worked as a partner in a small printing shop in Besançon. The business never flourished, and in 1843 he sold it, moving to Lyon to work as an agent for a shipping firm. At Lyon he apparently had close relations with some of the canuts, the silkweavers who had been at the forefront of the French workers' movement since the early 1830s. But Proudhon's work also took him frequently to Paris; and it was there in the mid-1840s that he made contact with a group of foreign exiles including several young German Left-Hegelians and "four or five Russian boyars." One of the Russians was Mikhail Bakunin, and among the Germans was an unknown radical exile, the 26-year-old Karl Marx.

Long afterwards Marx recalled all-night conversations during the course of which he "infected" Proudhon with Hegel's philosophy. And in the immediate aftermath of their initial meetings Marx effusively praised Proudhon as a trenchant critic of the institution of private property, whose work "presents for the first time the possibility of making political economy a true science."³ So impressed was Marx by Proudhon that in May 1846 he invited the Frenchman to serve as the Paris correspondent of an international Correspondence Committee designed to

coordinate communist theory and practice throughout Europe. Proudhon's cautious response shows that he already suspected that Marx would not share his libertarian and undogmatic views.

Let us work together, if you like, to discover the laws of society, the ways in which these laws are realized, and the process by which we can discover them. But for God's sake, when we have demolished all the *à priori* dogmas, let us not think of indoctrinating the people in our turn. . . . Let's have a good and honest polemic. Let's give the world an example of wise and farsighted tolerance, but simply because we are leaders of a movement let us not instigate a new intolerance. Let us not set ourselves up as the apostles of a new religion, even if it be the religion of logic and reason.⁴

Proudhon also made it clear that he did not believe that significant social change could be brought about by a revolutionary seizure of power.

Perhaps you still believe that no reform is now possible without a political takeover, without what used to be called a revolution. . . . I confess to you that my recent studies have made me completely reject this position. I believe that we do not need a takeover in order to succeed, and that as a consequence we should not specify [poser] *revolutionary* action as a means of social reform because actually this so-called means is simply an appeal to arbitrary force. . . I prefer to get rid of property little by little rather than giving it a new life by calling for a Saint Bartholmew's eve massacre of proprietors.⁵

Proudhon was to remain hostile to violent revolution until the end of his days, and this was just one of the points on which his early relationship with Marx foundered.

Proudhon's first foray into political journalism came in 1847 when he was approached by a group of radicals—including Théophile Thoré, Félix Pyat, Victor Pihès and Michel-Auguste Dupoty—who asked him to collaborate on the founding of a newspaper to be called *Le Peuple*. The first issue was to appear in December 1847, and Proudhon was so enthusiastic about the project that, even before sufficient capital had been raised, he left Lyon to settle in Paris. On October 24, 1847 he wrote a friend, describing what he hoped would come of this project.

Tu conçois qu'en me faisant journaliste, je ne vais pas mener ma barque à la façon des autres et faire une concurrence de paroles à mes futurs confrères de la presse parisienne. Qu'ils fasse leur métier comme ils l'entendent, qu'ils vendent des premiers-Paris, feuilletons-romans, de la méchante critique, des faits divers et des annonces: cela ne me regarde pas. Quand nous en serons là, nous verrons. Le journal *Le Peuple* sera le premier acte de la révolution économique, le plan de bataille du travail contre le capital, l'organe central de toutes les opérations de campagne que je vais commencer contre le régime propriétaire. De la critique je passe à l'action; et cette action débute par un journal.⁶

In the end nothing came of this journal. But this letter stands as a succinct statement of what Proudhon hoped to achieve through journalism.

II

Proudhon remained apart from the protest movements leading up to the February Revolution. He had no interest in the Banquet Campaign or, for that matter, in any of the reforms proposed by the Dynastic Opposition. He believed that the widening of the suffrage and the other purely political reforms envisaged by the opposition could only serve to distract attention from the need for radical economic and social reforms that would come to grips with the real problems of the emerging industrial society. Thus he was contemptuous of Barrot, Thiers and Tocqueville; and he wrote a friend in January 1848 that “Le plus grand bonheur qui pourrait arriver au peuple français, ce serait que cent députés de l’opposition fussent jetés à la Seine avec une meule au cou. Ils valent cent fois moins que les conservateurs, car ils ont de plus que ceux-ci l’hypocrisie.”⁷ As for Lamartine, Proudhon regarded him as a clown and wrote in his journal that Lamartine’s speech at Macon warning of a coming revolution was a “blague superbe”—a huge joke worthy of Daumier’s con-man Robert Macaire—and that projects of electoral reform were no more than “a new mystification.” In his view the widening of the suffrage would do nothing to create jobs or to feed the hungry, and political reform could only be “the effect and not the means” of more fundamental social reform.⁸

In an article published on the first anniversary of the February Revolution Proudhon wrote that “the fusillade of the rue des Capucines changed everything for me in an instant.”⁹ In fact, and even though he never believed that significant change could be imposed from above by legislative fiat, Proudhon was quick to identify

himself with the insurgents of February. On the morning of the 24th, the day after the killing of the twenty unarmed demonstrators on the rue des Capucines, he could write in his journal that the opposition had been crushed “and here we are back at the status quo for the next six months.”¹⁰ Toward noon of that day however, Proudhon walked across the Seine from his tiny apartment on the rue Mazarine to the offices of the radical journal *La Réforme*, near the Palais Royal. On the way he watched insurgents exchanging gunfire with government troops stationed at the entrance to the Louvre.

When Ferdinand Flocon, the director of *La Réforme*, saw Proudhon, he shouted: “You, Proudhon, you’re a printer. I’ve just written a proclamation. Print it up for us.” Then Flocon read from his proclamation: “Citizens! Louis Philippe had you shot at just as Charles X did. Let him go the way of Charles X!” Without hesitating, Proudhon began to set the proclamation in type. “Vous occupez une poste révolutionnaire,” said Flocon, “nous comptons sur votre patriotisme!” “Soyez sûr,” answered Proudhon, “que je ne quitterai ma besogne qu’après l’avoir achevée!” He finished the job in five minutes. Thus by his own account Proudhon joined the ranks of the insurgents.¹¹

Later that day, as he walked across Paris, Proudhon made other gestures of sympathy with the insurgents. He broke through a barrier on the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, and at the Place de la Bourse he uprooted a tree, carried paving stones to a barricade, and recruited others to do the same. But from the beginning he had doubts and misgivings that he set down in his journal. The revolution was a “mess,” he wrote that evening, made by “a horde of lawyers and writers, each more ignorant

than the others. And they are going to contend for power. . . . Les Lamartine, les Quinet, Michelet, Considerant, les Montagnards, etc., etc. Tout le mysticisme, le Robespierisme, le Chauvinisme sont au pouvoir. They've made a revolution sans une idée. . . . Je n'ai rien a faire là dedans." Proudhon later wrote that he participated in the February Revolution not out of any great hope or deeply held conviction, but rather because he did not "want to abandon [his] comrades."¹²

During the first three months in the life of the Second Republic—the whole period of Lamartine's ascendancy—Proudhon remained on the sidelines, an observer and not an actor. He fulminated in his corner about the "sham" and the "humbuggery" of it all—about a "revolution fabricated from memories," about France as a "nation of play-actors,"¹³ about his exclusion by "les bavards de la Démocratie et du Socialisme,"¹⁴ and about the "detestable politics" of the Provisional Government which he accused of having compromised not only the tranquillity of the country but also "the future of the revolution."¹⁵ From the beginning Proudhon was particularly critical of the National Workshops which he described as "an experiment in so-called organization" in which almost nobody believed and which was tolerated by members of the provisional Government either as a stop-gap measure or as a means of compromising the very idea of social reform.¹⁶ Nor did he share the enthusiasm of democrats for universal (male) suffrage. He believed that illiterate and uneducated peasants would vote, for the most part, to return traditional elites. Thus his response to the decree of March 5 establishing universal suffrage was to write prophetically that "universal suffrage is counter-revolution."¹⁷

Proudhon did participate in the club movement. On March 21 he was inducted into the Club central révolutionnaire along with Barbès, Pihès, Arago, Thoré and Sobrier. The next evening he dined with several of the members, commenting wryly in his diary: "We agreed that Louis Blanc doesn't know what he is doing, but then we conceded that we don't know any more than he does."¹⁸

Proudhon also attended meetings of the Club de la Révolution and the Club des Clubs. But he was depressed by the shallowness and the zealotry of what passed for discussion in the clubs. On April 8, after an evening at the Club des Clubs, he inveighed in his *carnets* against the "idiocy" of the meeting. "It's laughable, it's pathetic, it's frightening. . . . They ranted, raved and floundered with an earnestness, a vivacity and an enthusiasm that makes one worry about the sanity of the public mind."¹⁹ Two days later he wrote his friend Gaudon, "Le fanatisme, en ce moment, passe toutes les bornes; j'ai vu, dans une réunion de 500 personnes, décider en cinq minutes avec des tonnerres d'applaudissements, les plus formidables questions de l'Economie politique. . . . J'ai entendu les motions les plus folles accueillies avec enthousiasme; puis les propositions puériles, ridicules, appuyées à l'unanimité." And he stressed the revolutionary orators' total lack of understanding of the challenge that confronted them. "La révolution de février est une *révolution économique*, c'est-à-dire ce qu'il y a de plus roturier, de plus bourgeois. Organiser le crédit et la circulation, augmenter la production, cela ne comporte plus le tempérament de '92. . . La République c'est le travail, l'atelier, le comptoir, le débouché, le ménage, les choses du monde les plus prosaïques et qui prêtent le moins à l'énergie révolutionnaire et aux grandes paroles. Les représentants de la République ne sont

pas, pour la plupart, de ce monde: on les prendrait pour une seconde incarnation de la race de '93."²⁰

Proudhon's two major preoccupations between February and June were his collaboration on a daily newspaper and the writing of what we might call a long "position paper" criticizing the leaders of the new republic and indicating the means by which they might come seriously to grips with the social question. The journal, which only began to appear regularly on April 1, was called *Le Représentant du Peuple. Journal des travailleurs*, and the first page was adorned with mottoes meant to recall the revolutionary pamphlet of the abbé Sieyès *What is the Third Estate?:*

What is the producer? Nothing. What should he be? Everything.

What is the capitalist? Everything. What should he be? Nothing.

The founder of the journal was the popular writer Jules Viard, and the other collaborators were modest individuals, the printer Louis Vasbenter, and the retired *bonnetier* Charles Fauvéty. Proudhon's first articles focussed particularly on the ineptitude and the "counter-revolutionary" acts of the Provisional Government—its failure to honor its promise to guarantee the right to work and the "bad faith" and the "absence of principles" evident in the attempt to postpone the date of the elections for the National Assembly once it became evident that the big winners were likely to be royalists.

The paper, "La Solution du problème social" appeared in *Le Représentant du peuple* in three installments between March 22 and April 7. In the first two installments Proudhon attempted to explain the rapid, and largely unforeseen, collapse of the July Monarchy and offered criticism of the social and economic

policies of the Provisional Government. In particular he attacked the National Workshops and argued against the state socialism of Louis Blanc, lumping together Jacobins and state socialists as simply perpetuating the regime of authority inherited from the past. Then, in his third installment, he attempted to write a program for the revolution of 1848. Confronted by a revolution which didn't know where it was going, Proudhon sought to give direction to this "revolution without ideas" by describing the major reform that he hoped to introduce: a system of free credit which would liberate workers and small property owners from dependence on existing authorities.

For the republicans the creation of a new political order was the key to social and economic change, but Proudhon believed in the primacy of the economic sphere. "C'est par le problème économique," he wrote, "que notre génération doit aborder le problème social." The social problem, as Proudhon understood it, was the problem of the material and mental impoverishment of the working class, and the root cause of this impoverishment was an economic system that made the vast majority of producers dependent on a small class of possessors of capital. What was needed was to free the producers from the grip of the traditional financial elites. And the way to do this was to give the producers access to capital through the creation of a People's Bank which would provide credit and loans for a very small charge, thus liberating workers and small property owners and enabling them to enjoy the whole product of their labor without part of it being taken by the capitalist.²¹ The bank would issue "exchange notes" which would circulate as money. These notes would represent commodities already produced and delivered (or

promised for delivery) by members of the bank. The notes would eventually be circulated universally and exchanged like cash in commercial transactions.²²

General elections for the Constituent Assembly were held on April 23, and despite his oft-expressed skepticism concerning political democracy and universal suffrage, Proudhon presented himself as a candidate. The new election law made it possible for candidates to stand in several circumscriptions, and Proudhon allowed his candidacy to go forward not only in Paris but also in Besançon, Lyon and Lille. He made a particular effort in Besançon, his birthplace, and tried to reassure voters there that his positions on property and religion were more moderate than the press made them out to be. In a letter to a political ally in Franche-Comté he recalled that his family was “known for its piety, its civic-mindedness, its respect for Franche-Comtoise traditions.” But then he made a candid admission: “It is in my nature always to contradict authority. I have in general great respect for clergymen and public functionaries; but I have always been rebellious toward the Church and toward government.”²³ On April 3 he sent out an open letter to the electors of the Doubs deploring the “street comedy” in Paris and arguing that the country could only be saved by an “integral reform of our economic institutions” in which the “classe travailleuse” and the “classe bourgeoise” would have to collaborate.²⁴

All of this was a good try. But Proudhon was not yet well known. Furthermore, he noted in his *carnets*, it was the curés who determined the outcome of elections in Franche-Comté, and in Paris everything depended on “rivalries and jealousies” among the radical leaders. In the end he was not surprised to lose badly in the provinces. But after the election he commented bitterly about the Parisian

results. “A Paris je dois le silence absolu gardé à mon endroit à la rancune des journalistes et des hommes d’Etat du gouvernement provisoire.”²⁵

During the next few weeks Proudhon rapidly became better known. On April 23, election day, he published a “retentissant” article entitled “How Revolutions are Lost” criticizing the conduct of the Provisional Government and predicting an imminent catastrophe. On April 29, the day of the publication of the election results, he asserted that “la question sociale est ajournée” and that the bourgeoisie would “régler”, as they had in the past, the condition of workers. He laid the blame for this on “the men of February” and especially on Louis Blanc and Ladru-Rollin. The following day he denounced “the mystification of universal suffrage.” And on May 4, the eve of the first meeting of the National Assembly, he observed that France was no longer on the verge of civil war but rather that civil war had begun. It was no longer feared as a great evil; it was accepted as a necessity. “A la campagne comme à la ville, on fabrique de la poudre, on fond des balles, on apprête les armes. Les chefs donnent le mot d’ordre et lancent leurs manifestes. Vous n’entendez proférer de toutes parts que cette parole de mort: ‘Il faut en finir!’” And what was the cause of this discord? It was the elections, which had inspired, and deceived, great hopes. “Le suffrage universel,” concluded Proudhon, “a menti au Peuple.”²⁶

These articles were widely read—especially in the working class quarters of Paris. Louis Blanc later wrote that copies of the *Représentant du peuple* were “snatched up” by workers in the faubourgs, and Alfred Darimon described each of Proudhon’s articles as a “trumpet call” capable of “awakening the dullest mind.”²⁷ In just a few weeks Proudhon acquired a kind of notoriety and a following that he had

never previously possessed. Proof of this came during the *journée* of May 15. This was an abortive insurrection that Proudhon had opposed. But when the insurgents began to draw up lists of members of a new revolutionary government, Proudhon's name regularly appeared alongside those of Barbès, Louis Blanc, Ledru-Rollin and Pierre Leroux. And three weeks later, when bi-elections were held to fill eleven still-vacant seats in the Constituent Assembly, there was widespread support for Proudhon in Paris.

The list of candidates for the bi-elections of June 4 was strong—it included Victor Hugo, Adophe Thiers, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, General Charnigarnier, as well as radicals like Pierre Leroux and Marc Caussidière—and Proudhon's "campaign," such as it was, was in some ways inept. His "program," spelled out in three numbers of *Le Représentant du peuple*, consisted largely of a series of proposed decrees, not all of them consistent with each other. Nonetheless, he was elected, receiving 77,000 votes (just 9000 fewer than Hugo.) Why? Clearly his journalism had struck a chord. Thus on June 10 Proudhon entered the Palais-Bourbon, the seat of the Constituent Assembly, and took his place at the rear of the hall among the representatives of the Left. Barely two weeks later civil war broke out on the streets of Paris.

Given Proudhon's repeated denunciations of "the mystification of universal suffrage," one wonders why he was willing to stand for election in the first place. Probably his aim was to win support for the People's Bank. At any rate, from the start his experience as a legislator was disappointing to him. He conscientiously carried out his duties, attending meetings of the commission des finances to which

he was assigned. But he found the work isolating. "As soon as I set foot in the parl --- --," he wrote in the *Confessions*, "I ceased to be in touch with the masses" and "lost sight of the current of events." By his own account, he was so absorbed in the work of the Assembly that the June insurrection took him by surprise.

In the National Assembly the first response to the news that barricades were rising all over the eastern half of Paris was confusion and, in some cases, panic. Rumors of all sorts circulated. Some believed that the revolt had been fomented by foreign money; others saw in it the machinations of the agents of Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte; still others believed that Paris had been taken over by a secret organization of bandits seeking to pillage the wealthy quarters of the capital. In his diary Proudhon acknowledged the power of these myths over his own thinking; and a few weeks later he told his young friend Alfred Darimon that, like others, he had initially believed "that the movement was directed by political factions and soudoyé par l'étranger."²⁸ So absorbed had he been in the work of the Assembly that he had "perdu le sentiment net et la perception exacte des choses." In his *Confessions* Proudhon was blunter. In noting that the President of the Assembly, Antoine Sénard had accused him of cowardice during the June Days, Proudhon replied: "No, Monsieur Sénard, I did not behave like a coward. I've quite simply been an imbecile like you."²⁹

For three days, as Paris exploded, Proudhon walked all over the city, observing the struggle in the streets, trying to talk with combattants on both sides. More than once he was asked to identify himself to government troops and members of the National Guard. When he did so, he found that the mere mention of

his name was enough to shock people. Yet he spent as much time fraternizing with the forces of order as with the insurgents. He later recalled that when General Négrier was struck by an insurgent's shot just a few steps from where he was standing, he rushed to the general's aid and helped carry him to the makeshift hospital at the Hotel de Ville. "The dying general grasped my hand; overwhelmed by emotion, I threw myself into the arms of his young aide de camp who burst into tears."³⁰

Proudhon spent the morning of June 26 in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine between the Place de la Bastille and the Hôtel de Ville.

A 10 heures du matin j'étais place de la Bastille et la cannonade recommença. J'assistai à ce spectacle terrible et sublime. Bientôt un homme se présenta, un signe de paix à la main. La barricade fut prise. Je parcourus la rue Saint-Antoine à 11h du matin, interrogeant les bourgeois ; ils m'affirmèrent qu'il n'y avait pas plus de 4 à 500 insurgés derrière les barricades. La bourgeoisie n'y était pas, ni la plus grande partie des ouvriers.³¹

It was all over by noon. That afternoon in the National Assembly the president of the Assembly, Sénard, read out a message to the nation in which he expressed scorn for des doctrines sauvages où "la famille n'est qu'un nom et la propriété un vol." At these words, recalled a witness, "la salle entière a tourné ses regards vers le banc où siègea M. Proudhon."³² When it came time to vote on the message, the whole Assembly rose to express its approval. Proudhon alone remained seated.

Two days later Proudhon could write in his diary that mass arrests and summary executions were still going on at the Conciergerie and the Hôtel de Ville.

“They are shooting wounded and disarmed prisoners. They are spreading the most atrocious lies about the insurgents in order to provoke vengeance against them. Citizens are arrested in their homes. Then they are taken to the Pont d’Arcole and shot and thrown into the river.”³³ The same day in a long letter to his old friend Dr. Maguet, Proudhon wrote that the rebels had given up but were not defeated. “J’ai parcouru continuellement le théâtre du combat,” he went on, “grâce à mes insignes de représentant.” Several times he had encountered members of the National Guard; and when he had identified himself they had been shocked and even frightened. There had been “thousands” of arrests.

A decree of the National Assembly voted this evening turns [suspected insurgents] over to a Military Commission and threatens them with deportation across the ocean. The triumphant bourgeois are as fierce as tigers; toute la province afflue, s’imaginant qu’un déluge de forçats menaçait sérieusement la famille et la propriété. Les journaux, entretenant l’erreur sur la situation, sèment la calomnie et trompent le pays.³⁴

This was a movement that Tocqueville was to celebrate in his *Souvenirs* of 1848: men of all classes had buried their differences and hastened to Paris “to deliver the nation from oppression by the workers.”³⁵ Proudhon saw something very different: the descent on Paris of trainloads of “ferocious” provincials egged on by the mendacious reports of right-wing journalists.

Proudhon had long been opposed to violent revolution, and he did not support the June insurrection. He had also been outspoken in his criticism of Louis Blanc, the Luxembourg Commission, and the Provisional Government, which perhaps explains why the *Représentant du peuple* was not shut down in the aftermath of the June days, as were virtually all the other radical dailies. In any case Proudhon seized the opportunity to become a spokesman for the insurgents and for all the poor of Paris, whom he regarded as having been betrayed by the National Assembly. In a letter of July 2 to Charles Fauvéty, the political director of the *Représentant du Peuple*, he called for pity: “De grâce, Monsieur, ne répandez pas le sel et le vinaigre sur des plaies saignantes, ne portons pas le désespoir dans des consciences assombries don’t l’égarement a été déplorable, mais qui après tout ne sont pas criminelles.”³⁶ Then in an article published on July 6 he defended the insurgents against the “calumnies of the reaction,” and repeated the view that the workers were not to be blamed. “Il n’y a point de coupables,” he wrote, “il n’y a que des victimes.” But quickly his tone became more aggressive. The cause of the June insurrection, he wrote, was the poverty to which 100,000 households had been reduced in Paris alone, by unemployment. “When the French worker asks for work and you offer him charity instead, he rebels and shoots at you.” English, German and Spanish workers might accept charity, he added, “but I prefer the French worker, and I take pride in belonging to a proud race which refuses to accept dishonor.”³⁷

Proudhon then made a specific proposal. On July 8, a week before the day on which all Parisian renters were required to clear any outstanding debts to their landlords, Proudhon wrote a long article in the *Représentant du peuple* calling for a

moratorium on the payment of debts of renters.³⁸ This attack on a practice deemed almost sacred was seen as another Proudhonian attack on property and was enough to get the publication of the journal suspended. Proudhon then reformulated his proposal into a legislative bill and submitted it to the National Assembly's Finance Committee on which he served. The proposal was clumsily written and actually more a statement of principles than a *projet de loi*, and it might have died a natural death in committee had not Adolphe Thiers seen in it a way of reviving his own flagging political fortunes. By calling for a full discussion of Proudhon's proposal, Thiers, who had been marginalized after February, believed he could play the role of the defender of society against the menace of "socialism" (as personified by Proudhon). He could indeed.

In the course of two full days' discussion within the committee (July 15 and 17), Thiers eviscerated Proudhon. On July 26, in presenting a derisive report on Proudhon's bill to the whole National Assembly, Thiers seized upon the opportunity to discredit not merely Proudhon and "the socialists" but the very concept of a right to work. The sole right that counts, he asserted, is the right to the ownership of property, and the right to work should never be allowed to call it into question. "Consolidez la propriété, rassurez-là, et, agissant alors avec la puissance et l'universalité de la nature, elle versera ses capitaux sur le travail unifié...."³⁹

Proudhon had the right to reply, and he did so five days later. His speech of July 31 was at once a defense of his *projet de loi*, a long and somewhat confused dissertation on taxes and credit, and a forceful attack on the Provisional Government for its failure to make good on its commitment to guarantee the right to

work. Proudhon was a halting speaker with a strong franc-comtois accent, and the initial response to his speech—especially to his economic dissertation—was laughter and ironic comment. When Proudhon tried to explain what he had really meant by the statement “Property is theft,” he only left his audience confused. And when he “gave notice” to property owners concerning their obligation to support the work of the revolution, citizen Dupin (of the Nièvre) paraphrased him ironically: “That’s very clear: ‘Your money or your life.’” But when Proudhon began to employ the language of class war, the laughter changed into anger and indignation.

Le citoyen Proudhon: Lorsque j’ai employé les deux pronoms *vous* et *nous*, il est évident que, dans ce moment-là, je m’identifiais, *moi*, avec le *prolétariat*, et que je vous identifiais, *vous*, avec la classe *bourgeoise*. [Nouvelles exclamations.]

Le citoyen Saint-Priest: C’est la guerre sociale!

Un membre: C’est le 23 juin à la tribune!

When, near the end of his speech, Proudhon was accused of sedition, he replied to an audience that was no longer laughing: “Don’t speak here of sedition. The seditious are those who, having no other right than force, refuse to recognize the rights of others.”⁴⁰

“Agitation bruyante et prolongée” was, according to *Le Moniteur*, the immediate response of the Assembly to Proudhon’s speech. This is not hard to believe. For he had offended everyone—the right with his attacks on property, and the left for his insistence that the revolutionaries themselves were to blame for having made promises that they could not keep. After an hour of noisy debate, the

Assembly decided to put to a vote a condemnation of Proudhon for “une attente odieuse aux principes de la morale publique” and also for having “calomnié” the February Revolution.⁴¹ When the vote was taken, 691 representatives favored the resolution and two opposed it. Those two were Proudhon himself, and a silkweaver from Lyon named Greppo.⁴²

Proudhon’s speech of July 31 was widely regarded as a disaster. For the bourgeoisie the speech consolidated Proudhon’s reputation as a menace to society. *L’Illustration* denounced the speech as a “disgusting appeal to the lowest and most brutal” appetites.⁴³ Even the majority of socialists and democrats regarded the speech as at best an embarrassment. When a greatly watered-down version of the right to work was included in the constitution for the Second Republic, Ferdinand Flocon, the same journalist whose proclamation Proudhon had set in type on February 24, told Proudhon bluntly: “It is you who have killed the right to work.” And in her *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* Marie d’Agoult could write that Thiers’ attack on Proudhon “fut jugé par l’opinion comme une dernière et définitive victoire du parti de l’ordre sur la révolution.”⁴⁴

Still Proudhon was not universally regarded as the loser in his duel with Thiers. The conservative Catholic Montalembert wrote in his diary that Proudhon exposed “avec une audace sans bornes, et un logique impitoyable, at même avec un remarquable bonheur d’expression, la théorie de la destruction de la propriété.”⁴⁵ And long afterwards Alexander Herzen recalled admiringly the stolid, earnest Proudhon’s challenge to the cynical roué Thiers:

Thiers, in rejecting Proudhon’s financial scheme, made an insinuation

about the moral depravity of the men who disseminated such doctrines. Proudhon mounted the tribune, and with his stooping figure and his menacing air of a stocky field-worker said to the smiling old creature: "Speak about finance, but not about morals. . . . If you persist, I shall not challenge you to a duel [but] to another sort of contest. Here from this tribune I shall tell the whole story of my life, fact by fact, and anyone may remind me if I forget or omit something. And then let my adversary tell the story of *his* life!"⁴⁶

Herzen went on to write that the smile was wiped from "the old creature's" face, and he sat silent and scowling as every eye in the Assembly was turned on him.⁴⁷

Many workers in the faubourgs Saint-Antoine and Saint-Jacques also admired Proudhon's courage in standing up to Thiers and the bourgeoisie. The day after his condemnation by the National Assembly Proudhon received a grateful letter from members of the Club de la Révolution thanking him for his "courageous and excellent" speech. "The pygmies who are howling around you," they wrote, will not prevent you from reaping the honors owed you by posterity.⁴⁸ The printed version of Proudhon's speech sold 60,000 copies. A month later, when *Le Peuple* replaced the *Représentant du peuple*, its circulation soared to 40,000. Even Karl Marx, who had become a bitter enemy of Proudhon, later described the speech as "an act of lofty manliness." In his conflict with Thiers, Marx wrote, "Proudhon took on the proportions of an antediluvian colossus." But Marx could not resist adding that the speech also displayed how little Proudhon understood of economics and politics.⁴⁹

One thing the speech did do for Proudhon was to give him a notoriety that no one on the Left had previously possessed. For some he was a figure of fun—ridiculed in cartoons, in the press, and on stage. Thus in a vaudeville set in the Garden of Eden he appeared in the guise of the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve and incited them to envy, revolt and evil.⁵⁰ For others he was “l’homme terreur”—a man whose ideas threatened the very foundations of society. As such he received anonymous letters threatening him with the wrath of God; pious women sent him relics and médailles bénites; prostitutes and convicts (or people claiming to be such) sent him obscene letters of congratulation. Petitions arrived at the National Assembly calling for his expulsion. The Spanish diplomat Donoso Cortès published an essay in a French Catholic journal announcing gravely that Proudhon was almost certainly possessed by a devil, and in the course of his demonstration he used language that Proudhon triumphantly compared to that used by “the Jesuits of Jerusalem” against Jesus.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, ladies came to the visitors’ gallery of the National Assembly for the express purpose of catching a glimpse of this monster; and Proudhon himself commented that they sometimes seemed disappointed that he didn’t actually have horns and claws.

Proudhon rather enjoyed his new-found notoriety. He preferred bad publicity to none at all. And he was actually amused when, in November, a play opened in Paris poking fun at him and the other socialists. Called “La Propriété c’est le vol, folie socialiste en trois actes et sept tableaux,” it featured a caricature of Proudhon as a bespectacled serpent.⁵² He was less happy about death threats and about articles attributing to him views that he did not hold. But his general reaction

to attacks was to make the best of them and to persevere. One gets a good sense of his reaction from a letter sent to a friend probably in August 1848.

Je vis dans le feu, comme la salamandre, et m'attends d'un jour à l'autre à être brûlé. Si je persiste néanmoins, c'est que je crois qu'un grand intérêt philosophique et social est ici engagé, et que l'audace et l'éclat étaient nécessaires pour poser devant le monde la question du travail et la révision entière de nos institutions. Les calomnies, les injures, la perfidie de nos adversaires, les persécutions, enfin, sont le fumier sur lequel croîtra et grandira le nouveau germe. . . . A ce titre, tu me pardonneras ma triste célébrité.⁵³

Eighteen months after the June Days and Proudhon's subsequent duel with Adolphe Thiers, Louis Blanc wrote an article from exile warning French democrats against "les doctrines néfastes du citoyen Proudhon." But before embarking on his critique, Blanc felt obliged to pay tribute to Proudhon's conduct in the aftermath of the June Days.

After June Proudhon was admirable. Decent people were appalled; calumny strode with its head high and its feet in blood; truth kept quiet and hid itself. The Republic seemed only to have enough strength to put on its mourning clothes. Proudhon, with a talent only equalled by his courage, relit the flame of generous sentiments. . . . He put imposture to shame, he made his journal a barrier to reaction, . . . he was, I repeat, admirable.⁵⁴

There was no love lost between Blanc and Proudhon, and Proudhon had often voiced his distaste for Blanc's Jacobin socialism. But Blanc was still generous enough

to give public recognition to Proudhon's courage and to the fact that Proudhon had found an audience in the artisans and skilled workers of the faubourgs who "arrachaient" the "feuilles intrépides qu'il lançait chaque matin . . . avec une ardeur mêlée de reconnaissance." Proudhon may have been isolated in the National Assembly, but he was the hero of the faubourgs Saint-Antoine and Saint-Jacques.

The high point of Proudhon's identification with the Paris artisans came in mid-August when he published in the *Représentant du peuple* a whole series of attacks on the government. On August 7 Cavaignac included the paper in a list of journals authorized to renew publication, and three days later Proudhon published an article denouncing measures taken against the liberty of clubs and of the press—notably the requirement that the publishers of all daily papers post caution money of 24,000 francs. Lamennais, who was forced by this requirement to shut down his paper *Le Peuple constituant*, responded with a famous article: "Today you need gold, a lot of gold, to have the right to speak. We are not rich enough. *Silence au pauvre!*"⁵⁵ Proudhon's response was to insist on the hypocrisy of government policy. "Le mensonge, la mauvaise foi, la bouffonnerie dans la loi! C'est ce qu'il était réservé à la démocratie de nous apprendre . . . 24,000 francs! Voilà pour nous le critérium du génie, de la vertu et du patriotisme!"⁵⁶

The next day, August 11, a long article by Proudhon entitled "Les Malthusiens" appeared in the *Représentant du peuple*. "The unpardonable crime of the French Revolution," wrote Proudhon, was to have protested against the Malthusian principles of the government, according to which mass poverty was a necessary consequence of economic development. According to the Malthusians

nothing could be done to end poverty, and those who claimed the contrary were “dangerous dreamers who deserved to be shot.” Proudhon was proud of this essay, which he described as a “thunderbolt” that had “great impact.” In fact, the 20,000 published copies of that issue quickly sold out, as did a much larger number of copies of a separate printing of the article.⁵⁷

On August 14 and 16 Proudhon published two articles attacking the moderate republicans of the daily newspaper *Le National*. The real “enemies of society and of the Republic,” he wrote, were not the socialists but rather the “gens du *National*” who refused to recognize the importance of the social question and were now selling out to the monarchists. In the next few days Proudhon published three more slashing attacks on the government and its supporters in the *Représentant du peuple*, only to see the paper seized each time, first for attacking property, then for stirring up class hatred, and finally for an article denouncing the “sottise” of the official government report on the June insurrection. On August 21 Proudhon wrote prophetically of the threats to the continued existence of republican government in France: “We are no longer living in a republic; we are in a period of transition. FRANCE WANTS A KING. It doesn’t matter if it is Henri V, Bonaparte, or Joinville, provided the chosen individual swears on the Bible to exterminate the socialists, the last Christians.”⁵⁸ That day the government shut down the *Représentant du peuple* for good.

Within two weeks, however, Proudhon managed to scrape together enough money to issue the prospectus of a second journal called simply *Le Peuple*. Many of the staff members of this “Journal de la République démocratique et sociale” were

hold-overs from its predecessor, but now Proudhon was entirely in control. Due to the difficulty of raising caution-money, *Le Peuple* was not published until November 1, and it only began to appear as a daily paper on November 23.⁵⁹ But with a press-run of 40,000 copies, it quickly took its place as the leading radical journal. Several prominent socialists—notably Etienne Cabet and Théophile Thoré—and some of the Montagnards initially made efforts to collaborate with Proudhon so as to present a united left-wing front; and in publishing his prospectus Proudhon himself referred to the new journal as “l’organe collectif de l’extrême gauche de l’Assemblée nationale.”⁶⁰ But the good relations between Proudhon and other radicals did not last long. There were personal conflicts and even a duel between Proudhon and the Montagnard Felix Pyat. And there were arguments about the right to work, which Proudhon identified with the organization of interest-free credit; about Proudhon’s refusal at times to follow the Montagnard line in votes in the National Assembly; and, above all, about the presidential elections in which the Montagnards supported Ledru-Rollin, whom Proudhon detested, while he wavered between the socialist Raspail and Cavaignac, whom the Montagnards never ceased regarding as “the butcher of June.”

Although Proudhon was one of only thirty representatives who had voted against the constitution, he had a lot to say about the presidential election in *Le Peuple*. From the beginning he was hostile both to the candidacy of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and to the principle of the presidency. On November 8 he published a long article arguing that in practice there was little difference in France between a king and a president, especially a popularly elected president. France was

“monarchical to the core,” and the popular election of a president would only serve to excite the French “craving for monarchy.” And Louis-Napoleon, who was neither a warrior nor a statesman but who possessed a name recognized in all of France, was well positioned to take advantage of this craving. Thus Proudhon called on him ironically to “prendre possession de cette race de tartuffes, de ce peuple de courtisans” who were the French. “Ils disent de toi que tu n’es qu’un crétin, un aventurier, un fou. . . Viens, te dis-je, tu es l’homme qu’il nous faut. . . Viens: les apostats de tous les règnes sont là qui t’attendent, prêts à te faire litière de leurs consciences comme de leurs femmes. . . Il manquait une gloire au nom des Bonaparte. Viens terminer nos discordes en prenant nos libertés!”⁶¹

Despite these sardonic expressions of contempt for the French, Proudhon was taken by surprise by the magnitude of Louis Napoleon’s victory. Until the very end, he believed that Cavaignac had a chance; and as Pierre Hautmann pointed out, in endorsing Raspail, who had no chance of winning, Proudhon was tacitly giving his support to Cavaignac.⁶² Still, on reflecting on the results, he had to concede that Louis Napoleon owed his victory not only to the support of the peasantry, but also to the detestation of Cavaignac on the part of urban workers all over France. During the week that followed the election, Proudhon attempted to put a good face on things by sketching out the argument that in order to hold power Louis Napoleon would eventually have to move to the left:

Bonaparte sera républicaine, républicain démocrate et socialiste, ou bien il tombera come Louis-Philippe, comme Lamartine, comme Cavaignac, sous le

ridicule ou le mépris. . . . Socialiste ou traître, il n’y a pas pour lui de milieu.
Attendons-le à l’oeuvre.⁶³

After the overthrow of the Republic by Louis-Napoleon on December 2, 1851, Proudhon was to work out this argument in detail in *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d’état*. But for the time being he had to live with the fact that Louis-Napoleon was “président de la réaction.”⁶⁴

Louis-Napoleon’s first act as President of the republic was to form a ministry which did not include a single republican. Its leader was the Orleanist politician Odilon Barrot, and its most prominent figure was the legitimist Count Alfred de Falloux. Proudhon recognized immediately that a struggle was bound to develop between Louis-Napoleon, whose imperial ambitions were never far below the surface, and the National Assembly, which had drafted the constitution and (in Proudhon’s words) “founded the democratic republic.” Although Proudhon himself had voted against the constitution, he now saw it as the only real barrier to counter-revolution and to the eventual restoration of either monarchical or imperial rule. Thus at the end of January in three issues of the *Le Peuple*—each of which was seized by the government—he accused Louis-Napoleon of conspiring with the Jesuits, the absolutists, and “with all the monarchical coteries,” to overthrow the Republic. His argument in a nutshell was that “toutes les forces, toutes les idées, toutes les espérances de la Révolution sont aujourd’hui concentrées dans l’Assemblée nationale” while “toutes les forces, toutes les idées, toutes les espérances de la Contre-Révolution sont réunies sur la tête de Louis Bonaparte.”⁶⁵

The first two of these articles served as the basis for the bringing of criminal charges against Proudhon, who was accused of inciting hatred of the government, the constitution, the citizens, and the President of the Republic. On February 14 the National Assembly voted to lift Proudhon's parliamentary immunity from prosecution; and six weeks later, on March 28, appearing before the Cour d'assises de la Seine, he was found guilty on all counts and sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of 3000 francs. He had expected to be found guilty, but he and many others were stunned by the severity of the sentence.

In February, while the charges against Proudhon were working their way through the French legal system, he wrote a friend that he would willingly serve a prison sentence of six months, but that if the sentence was more than two years he would prefer to go into exile. This is what he initially did. On March 30, having made a formal appeal of his sentence, Proudhon, who remained free until his appeal was heard, got on a train for Belgium. Travelling under a false name, and changing trains at Lille and Tourcoing, he walked into Belgium on April 1. A week later, however, he was back in France, where he remained in hiding until June 5.

Why did Proudhon return to France? He later claimed that it was essential for him to oversee the liquidation of his Banque du peuple, which had begun to fail even before charges were brought against him. But his own explanations were neither clear nor convincing. Clearly another reason was that he had decided to get married and there were arrangements to be made. Be that as it may, Proudhon was recognized by a police agent and arrested on the evening of June 5, 1848. He was to spend the next three years in prison, during which period he was to marry, father a

child, edit two more newspapers, and write three books. The most important of these books for our purposes is *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, which he began to write at the Conciergerie in July 1849, just a few weeks after his imprisonment.

IV

Proudhon wrote *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* in a kind of white heat. The book is over 300 pages long in most editions, and he wrote it in barely three months, finishing at Sainte-Pélagie in mid-October. Looking back on it a few years later, he wrote: "I was under the influence of one of those intuitions which come upon me at times and which make me speak with the vehemence of an oracle."⁶⁶ The writing is vigorous, argumentative, colloquial. There are enough lyric passages for Sainte-Beuve to call it it "le plus beau" of Proudhon's works. There are images, burlesque passages, and flights of fancy worthy of Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The book is full of pithy one-liners, many of them directed against democrats and socialists such as Louis Blanc ("le singe de Robespierre"), Ledru-Rollin, and Armand Marrast. Like Tocqueville, Proudhon is hardest on his putative allies; and like Tocqueville, he mocks phrase-makers and their literary pretensions. But while Proudhon insists that "l'homme de style doit céder la place à l'homme d'action" (379), he himself is always on the lookout for incisive formulas and well-turned phrases.

What was the public for which Proudhon was writing? The work is easy to read and Proudhon avoids philosophical language. He told Herzen that he would

not find in the *Confessions* “la verve barbare que vous a enseignée la philosophie allemande,” adding that he was “writing for the French.”⁶⁷ Nonetheless and judging from the text, it is clear that no single audience is targeted. At times Proudhon addresses the reader as an adversary to be browbeaten or cajoled into agreement. At other times he addresses his allies in the working class, giving advice, for example, to the June insurgents concerning the trap into which they have fallen.⁶⁸ At still other moments his audience is clearly bourgeois; and at one point he speaks directly to Adolphe Thiers, mocking him for his failure “to be finished with” socialism. Hyperbole and exaggeration are constants in Proudhon’s writing, but for all the extravagance, and at times the verbal violence, of his language, his message is almost always moderate. He is, according to Daniel Halévy’s pertinent expression, “un modéré qui parle fort” et dont “la véhémence du verbe se joue à la surface de sa pensée.”⁶⁹

The *Confessions* is in some respects a highly enigmatic work, and the uncertainty starts with its title. In the first place it is not at all obvious what Proudhon is confessing and to whom. The book begins with an epigraph, a verse from *Deuteronomy* (32:40), that is more a proud affirmation than a confession of sin or error. “I lift up my hand to heaven, and say: ‘I live forever,’” the Latin passage reads in the King James English translation. But Proudhon mysteriously translates it as: “I will lift up my hand to heaven, and I will say: “My IDEA is immortal.”

The book does include a chapter on “the idea” by which Proudhon was obsessed throughout the Second Republic: the idea that the solution of the social question lies in the creation of a People’s Bank which would provide credit without

interest to artisans, peasants, and small landowners. But apart from that, and from a brief political “profession of faith,” the book consists largely of a history of the first sixteen months of the Republic—a personal history during the course of which, Proudhon tells us, “I describe my dreams.” But the history of his dreams—which Proudhon also calls his “*méditations socialistes*”—is accompanied by the narration of his “*actes politiques*,” and together they add up to “the history of a thinker caught up in spite of himself in the somnambulisme of his nation.” What does Proudhon mean by “the somnambulism of the nation”? This is probably a reference to what he calls “*l’illusion gouvernemental*”—the illusion that the introduction of a democratic government elected by universal (male) suffrage could possibly lead to radical social change. Proudhon who after all was elected to the National Assembly, seems to be confessing here that he himself was for a time caught up in the illusion that political change—the replacement of the July Monarchy by a democratic republic—could lead to a solution to the social question.

Proudhon’s history begins in a provocative manner with an ironic celebration of the July Monarchy in which he announces that his aim is to “avenge” Louis Philippe for all the abuse inflicted on him and to show him to have been “*l’instrument le plus actif et le plus intelligent de la Révolution.*”⁷⁰ As Edward Castleton has shown in his fascinating study of Proudhon’s unpublished manuscripts, this chapter is actually a reworking—with minimal changes—of a text written in the spring of 1847. In the earlier text Proudhon’s praise for the corruption of the July Monarchy was part of a broad critique of the movement for electoral reform that culminated with the banquet campaign and the February

Revolution. In that manuscript Proudhon pays tribute to Louis Philippe as “the hero of corruption” and “the Napoleon of our decadence” whose achievement was to discredit political and religious ideals and to demonstrate that “la vertu sans l’argent n’est qu’un meuble inutile.”⁷¹

But what does Proudhon’s celebration of Louis Philippe and the July Monarchy mean in the post-revolutionary context? Its meaning is actually not all that different. Proudhon argues in the *Confessions* that the July Monarchy had “accomplished *the work of dissolution*” initiated by the French Revolution. “A la foi monarchique, à l’autorité de l’Eglise, on avait substitué le culte des intérêts [et] la religion de la propriété.”⁷² Thus the mission of Louis Philippe—the mission that had been given him by what Proudhon calls the “pact” of 1830—“a été de faire prédominer l’idée bourgeoise”—to “propager la morale de l’intérêt, d’inoculer à toutes les classes l’indifférence politique et religieuse,” and thus—“par la ruine des partis et par la dépravation des consciences”—de “creuser les fondements d’une société nouvelle.”⁷³

For Proudhon the revolution of 1848 was “the workers’ revolution”; the Provisional Government was “the workers’ government”; and “the birth certificate of the Republic” was the decree guaranteeing the right to work.⁷⁴ But this leads Proudhon to pose a series of questions. “What is a workers’ *government*? Can labor govern or be governed? What do labor and power have in common?” Proudhon claims that these are new questions, and that they have no easy answer. The reality is that “the people” could not conceive of exercising power on their own. Thus when power “fell into their laborious hands,” they immediately returned it to a certain

number of respectable individuals who were charged by them to found a Republic and to resolve, along with the political problem, the social problem, the problem of the proletariat.” “We will give you three months,” said the people. “We will put three months of poverty in the service of the Republic.” For Proudhon this cry was “sublime in its naïveté.” “Antiquity and the Revolution of ’92 offered nothing to compare with this cry wrenched from the guts of the people of February.”⁷⁵

In fact the Provisional Government, according to Proudhon, was a “government without an idea” or a common goal. It was a mixture of conservatives, doctrinaires, Jacobins and socialists, each speaking their own language,⁷⁶ and it had done nothing during its three months in power. Why? For Proudhon the answer is clear. The reason for the inaction of the Provisional Government is that they *were* a government. In times of revolution the first and last concern of governments was to maintain their own power. Initiative was repugnant to them. For eighteen years democrats and socialists had been repeating the same mantra: “Social revolution is the goal; political revolution is the means.” But after February, writes Proudhon, they should have realized a truth that even Adolphe Thiers could understand: “government is not made to give work to the worker.”⁷⁷

Proudhon’s narration of the period from February to June is organized, like most histories of the period, around a series of accounts of the principal *journées*—March 17, April 16, May 15. But in the course of his narrative Proudhon insists on two themes: 1) the preoccupation of the members of the Provisional Government with maintaining their own power, and 2) the incapacity of the government to face up to the question of the right to work. Thus in discussing the *journée* of March 17,

which culminated in the postponement of the elections, Proudhon stresses the importance of Louis Blanc's call for the Provisional Government to assume dictatorial power. "Once they acquire power," he writes, "all men are alike. It's always the same zeal for authority, the same distrust of the people, the same fanaticism of order."⁷⁸ Thus also, in his discussion of the *journée* of April 16, Proudhon insists on the propensity of the democratic leaders to assume that social change would necessarily follow from change in political institutions. "Toutes les erreurs, tous les mécomptes de la démocratie," writes Proudhon, "proviennent de ce que le peuple, ou plutôt les chefs des bandes insurrectionnelles, après avoir brisé le trône et chassé le dynaste, ont cru révolutionner la société parce qu'ils révolutionnaient le personnel monarchique."⁷⁹

Proudhon's narrative is cut in two by the June Days. Addressing the insurgents directly, he tells them that--although the "victims of an odious manque de foi"--they were wrong to "give way to indignation and rage." "Votre erreur fut d'exiger du pouvoir l'accomplissement d'une promesse qu'il ne pouvoir tenir: votre tort de vous insurger contre la représentation nationale et le gouvernement de la République." And for the first time, he makes his own confession: "Pour moi, le souvenir des journées de juin pèsera éternellement comme un remords par mon coeur." He explains that he was completely unprepared for the insurrection, having been absorbed in the work of the National Assembly to which he was elected just two weeks earlier.

In a fascinating autobiographical chapter entitled simply "Qui suis-je?" Proudhon then describes the transformation that he underwent after June. During

the first four months of the Republic, he tells us, he was no more than a spectator. But using the seemingly irresistible theatrical metaphor, he explains that after the crushing of the June insurrection, he knew that he had to leave his place in the audience to “entrer en scène,” to go on stage. “Il fallait s’établir dans l’opposition, rejeter le pouvoir sur la défensive, agrandir le champ de bataille, simplifier, en la généralisant, la question sociale; étonner l’ennemi par l’audace des propositions, agir désormais sur le peuple plutôt que sur ses représentants.” Un parti n’aurait pas pu se prêter à cette tactique. “Elle exigeait une individualité résolue, excentrique même, une âme trempée pour la protestation et la négation. Orgueil ou vertige,” écrit Proudhon, “je cru que mon tour était venu. . . . Et de ma banquette de spectateur, je me précipitai, nouvel acteur, sur le théâtre.”⁸⁰

What this meant was to carry on the struggle against the Party of Order singlehandedly—taunting, provoking, attacking the government, playing the fool when necessary, and never letting those in power lose sight of the fact that they had not “finished with” the poor and the hungry. And again Proudhon uses theatrical imagery to create a context for his new role: “Les démocrates, séduits par les souvenirs de notre glorieuse révolution, ont voulu recommencer en 1848 le drame de 1789: pendant qu’ils jouent la comédie, tâchons de faire de l’histoire.”⁸¹

The theatrical metaphor—the image of the revolution as a staged play—is central to much of the writing on 1848. In Tocqueville’s *Souvenirs* the February Revolution is repeatedly represented as bad theater—as “une mauvaise tragédie jouée par des histrions de province.”⁸² And in Marx’ *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 1848 is depicted as a farcical replay of the great revolution of 1789 in

which each class plays its role. But none of these other writers invokes the metaphor of the theater in order to speak of himself and his own role.

The second half of Proudhon's narrative describes his efforts to "relever le moral des travailleurs, venger l'insurrection de juin des calomnies de la réaction," and to "poser avec un redoublement d'énergie, avec une sorte de terrorisme, la question social." Here he describes his oratorical duel with Thiers, his efforts at launching his credit bank, and his role in the building of a democratic-socialist alliance. He boasts that by the end of July he had acquired a reputation as "*l'homme terreur.*"

J'ai été prêché, joué, chansonné, placardé, biographié, caricaturé, blamé, outragé, maudit; J'ai été signalé au mépris et à la haine, livré à la justice par mes collègues, accusé, condamné par ceux qui m'avait donnee mandat, suspect à mes amis politiques, espionnee par mes collaborateurs, dénoncé par mes adhérents, renié par mes coreligionnaires.⁸³

And Proudhon continues in the same vein for several pages, comparing himself explicitly to Job and implicitly to Jesus Christ. He has chosen his role, and he plays it with enthusiasm.

The two great political events of the last months of 1848 were the adoption of the constitution of November 4 and the election of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte as president of the Second rRpublic. In the *Confessions* Proudhon gives a detailed account of his position on each of these developments. He explains that he voted against the constitution first and foremost because it *was* a constitution. "To vote for the constitution of 1848 in which social guarantees are considered as an emanation

of authority “ would have been to “recant” his socialist beliefs, Proudhon asserts.⁸⁴ As for Louis Napoleon Bonaparte Proudhon did not support his candidacy. After some initial uncertainty and after an inconclusive face-to-face meeting with the future president on September 26, Proudhon finally gave his support to Raspail.

But the important question for Proudhon was the question of the *meaning* of Louis Napoleon’s massive victory. In the end Proudhon came to believe that “la France a nommé Louis Bonaparte Président de la République parce qu’elle est fatiguée des partis, parce que tous les partis sont morts [et] parce qu’avec les partis le pouvoir lui-même est mort.” Proudhon believed that Louis Napoleon would soon be forced to make a choice between the party of order and the revolution, and that he would embrace the revolution, adopting policies favorable to the working class. [Why?] But this optimistic take on Louis Napoleon’s election did not prevent Proudhon from attacking the president regularly in his journals. And as we know, one of these attacks led to his arrest and imprisonment for three years.

Proudhon’s narrative concludes with a chapter on the *journée* of June 13, 1849. This *journée* began with a demonstration organized by Ledru-Rollin to protest the French military intervention against the Roman Republic. Although the demonstration was peaceful, Ledru-Rollin had threatened armed resistance to the government, which gave Louis Napoleon a pretext to crush the demonstration and send its leaders into exile. In his chapter Proudhon insists on the need for democrats and socialists to present themselves to the nation as a party of order respectful of the constitution.⁸⁵ But Ledru-Rollin’s conduct had been equivocal. Proudhon concedes that, had he not been arrested five days earlier, he would have joined the

protest of his "co-religionnaires politiques" on June 13. But as things worked out, the demonstration was "inopportune, impolitique [and] mal conduite."⁸⁶

According to Proudhon, the protest of June 13 was the last gasp of the Jacobin tradition. Ressuscitated in 1830, Jacobinism was "ambitieux sans intelligence [and] violent sans héroïsme," and it "perished de consommation et d'inanité."⁸⁷ And its decease was part of a more comprehensive collapse. "Du même coup, le socialisme mystique, théologique et transcendental, s'est évanoui comme un fantôme." In other words, the failures of the Left in 1848 and 1849 demonstrated the collapse not only of the "governmental utopia" of Louis Blanc but also of the communitarian tradition, which Proudhon describes as "l'utopie phalanstérienne, icarienne, et saint-simonienne."⁸⁸

What remained? For Proudhon what remained after the collapse of the other ideologies of the Left was a libertarian socialist tradition in which the initiative came from the people and not from the government. In his conclusion Proudhon sketches rapidly the main elements of this libertarian socialist tradition for which liberty is both a principle of creation and a principle of criticism, an enemy of all dogmatism, and a force which "produit tout dans le monde, même ce qu'elle y vient détruire aujourd'hui, religions, gouvernements, noblesse, propriété." (see Guy-Grand, 64) And in a final lyric peroration Proudhon ends his book with an extraordinary celebration of irony in which the ironic spirit or sensibility is described as the "vraie liberté."

Many of Proudhon's readers, including some of his greatest admirers, have been mystified by the conclusion of his *Confessions* with its paean to irony. What,

they have asked, is such a passage doing among Proudhon's "méditations socialistes"? No one doubts its eloquence. But what does it *mean*? How does it relate to the rest of the book? I would say that it relates in two ways. First, Proudhon sees the ironic—and for him Voltairean—spirit as a necessary antidote to the flood of sentimental idealism that came to suffuse socialist thought in the run-up to 1848. Here, it is not by accident that he links Fourierists, Icarians, and the Saint-Simonian doctrine as the expression of a single utopia. For him they are *all* infected by the romantic and idealist malady. But no less important than this is the fact that the ironic and critical spirit is a central element in Proudhon's vision of a free society. "Ironie, vraie liberté."

In the end, all the emphasis in Proudhon's *Confessions* is on criticism. He criticizes the Provisional Government, the Party of Order, the républicains de la veille and the républicains du lendemain, the "Jacobin" socialists (Louis Blanc) and the "metaphysical" socialists (Pierre Leroux), representative government and universal suffrage (that "marchepied du despotisme") and "les bavards" of all shapes, sizes, and political affiliations. Even in his most unambiguously celebratory mode, Proudhon is celebrating the critical spirit.

On some specific points there is a remarkable parallel between Proudhon's *Confessions* and the better known writings of Marx and Tocqueville on the revolution of 1848. All three were at one in their contempt for the revolutionary leaders—both the members of the Provisional Government and the more radical democrats and socialists. All three write that one of the great weaknesses of the radicalism of the 'forty-eighters was their fixation on the first French Revolution and

their inability to think their way beyond the traditions, practices and ideologies of 1789-1794. All three make a vital distinction between the facile eloquence of the democrats and socialists and the desperate strivings of the working class. But one distinguishing feature of Proudhon's account of the revolution of 1848 is that it is also explicitly autobiographical. The *Confessions* is an account of the process by which Proudhon became the spokesman for the people betrayed by the revolution. It is an account of both the making of a revolutionary and the unmaking of a revolution.

In framing his analysis—in describing both the course of the revolution and his own personal development—Proudhon adopts and makes his own the metaphor of the theater. As we have seen, his account is very close to Marx's depiction of 1848 as a farcical replay of 1789 and to Tocqueville's representation of the February Revolution as a "bad tragedy performed by inept provincials." But the difference is that, as the play goes poorly, Proudhon himself is finally induced to leap on stage and to become an actor in the play. Thus the central thread in the second half of Proudhon's narrative is his description of his own efforts to lift the spirits of the workers, to defend the June insurgents from the calumnies of the reaction, and to pose "with a sort of terrorism" the social question.

At the very outset Proudhon had announced that the February Revolution was a revolution "without an idea." What he meant by this was that while democrats and republicans had been repeating ad nauseam that "La révolution sociale est le but, la révolution politique est le moyen," they had not a clue about how to attain their goal once the political revolution had taken place. Proudhon had attempted in

his *Solution du problème social* to describe the course of action that should be followed by the revolutionary leaders. But they had not listened. Thus he had taken it upon himself to demonstrate by his actions as well as his words what needed to be done. And in moving from history to autobiography—in linking his analysis of the collapse of the revolution to a discussion of his own growth as a revolutionary—he was inviting his readers to take heart and to recognize that while revolutions could not be made by fiat, they could and would begin with skepticism and ironic distance with regard to authority. Thus he asks his readers to share in his appreciation of a sentiment which, so he modestly claims, has delivered him from “l’ambition du pouvoir, de la servitude des partis, du respect de la nature, du pédantisme de la science, de l’admiration des grands personnages, des mystifications de la politique, du fanatisme des réformateurs, de la superstition de ce grand univers et de l’adoration de moi-même.”⁸⁹

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- ¹ Proudhon to MM. de l'Académie de Besançon, *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon*, 14 vols. (Paris: Lacroix, 1875), May 31, 1837, I, 24ff.
- ² P.-J. Proudhon, *Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire*, ed. Daniel Halévy (Paris: Rivière, 1929), 173.
- ³ *The Holy Family*, cited in Hauptmann, *Marx et Proudhon*, 33. Also McLellan, 133.
- ⁴ Proudhon to Marx, May 17, 1846, *Correspondance* II, 198-199.
- ⁵ Proudhon to Marx, May 17, 1846, *Correspondance* II, 199-200.
- ⁶ Proudhon to Bergmann, October 24, 1847, *Correspondance* II, 272.
- ⁷ Proudhon to Maurice, January 22, 1848, *Correspondance*, II, 277. January 14, 1848.
- ⁸ *Carnets de P.-J. Proudhon*, ed. Pierre Hauptmann, 4 vols. (Paris: Rivière, 1960-1974), II, 157 (July 1847) and 229 (October 1847).
- ⁹ *Le Peuple* cited in Halévy, *Mariage*, 103, and intro. to *Confessions*, 19.
- ¹⁰ *Carnets* II, 369 (February 24, 1848).
- ¹¹ Proudhon to Maurice, February 25, 1848, *Correspondance*, II, 281.
- ¹² *Carnets* II, 369, and *Carnets*, III, 10 (February 24, 1848).
- ¹³ *Carnets*, III, 12 (February 24, 1848).
- ¹⁴ *Carnets*, III, 39 (fin mars).
- ¹⁵ *Lettre aux électeurs du Doubs* in *Correspondance* II, 303.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Article in *Le Représentant du Peuple*, 29 April 1848, reprinted in *Mélanges* I, 15: "Un des premiers actes du gouvernement provisoire, celui don't il s'est applaudi le plus, est l'application du suffrage universel. Le jour même où le le décret était promulgué, nous écrivions ces propres paroles, qui pouvaient alors passer pour un paradoxe": "Le suffrage universel est la contre-révolution." Cited in Hauptmann, 837.
- ¹⁸ *Carnets*, III, 36 (22 mars).

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- ¹⁹ *Carnets*, III, 47-48 (8 avril au soir).
- ²⁰ P to Gaudon, April 10, 1848, *Correspondance* VI, 370, cited in Hauptmann, 842.
- ²¹ Proudhon's supporters and his critics often spoke of him as promising interest-free loans to workers. In fact his scheme called for a small charge by the bank (in the form of a discount on the notes issued) to cover administrative costs.
- ²² Robert L. Hoffman, *Revolutionary Justice: The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 125.
- ²³ Proudhon to Abram, March 31 (not May 31), 1848, in *Correspondance* II, 333.
- ²⁴ "Aux électeurs du Doubs," April 3, 1848, *Correspondance* II, 299-305.
- ²⁵ *Carnets* III, 50, 54 (April 17 and April 29, 1848).
- ²⁶ "Comment les Révolutions se perdent," *Représentant du peuple*," April 23, 1848; "La Réaction," *Représentant du peuple*," April 29, 1848; "La Mystification du suffrage universel," *Représentant du peuple*, April 30, 1848; "Aux patriotes," *Représentant du peuple*, May 4, 1848; Pierre Hauptmann, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, sa vie et sa pensée (1809-1865)* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1882), 864-867.
- ²⁷ Louis Blanc, Alfred Darimon, *A Travers une révolution (1847-1855)*, (Pareis: Dentu, 1884), 38; Hauptmann, 871-872. The press run of the *Représentant du peuple*, which was about 4-5000 copies at the end of April rose to 8000 by mid-May. See Proudhon to Victor Gauthier, April 30 and May 13, 1848, *Correspondance inédite de P.-J. Proudhon*, III (Tokyo: Hon-No-Tomoisha, 1997), cited in Edward Castleton, "Révolutionnaire de la veille, Révolution du lendemain: Proudhon et les ironies du futur passé de 1848," 99.
- ²⁸ Darimon, *A Travers une révolution*, 53.
- ²⁹ *Confessions*, 169.
- ³⁰ *Confessions*, 205 and Darimon, 54. [Hauptmann, 901-902]Not an exact quote. On the reprisals see excellent quote *Corr* II, 337, P to Maguet, 28 juin 1848, in Dolléans and Puech, p. 55.
- ³¹ Déposition de Proudhon devant la Commission d'Enquête, reprinted in *Journal des débats*, August 19, 1846, p. 6, cited in Hauptmann, 899. cited in D and P, p.53.
- ³² *Ere nouvelle (29 juin 1848)*, cited in intro, p. 23, *Mariage*, p. 162, Hauptmann,896.

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- ³³ *Carnets*, III, 66-67 (28 juin).
- ³⁴ Proudhon to Maguet, June 28, 1848, *Correspondance*, II, 337-338.
- ³⁵ Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, in *OC*, XII, 178.
- ³⁶ See *Mariage*, 164.
- ³⁷ *Représentant du peuple*, July 6, 1848. [Hauptmann, 906.]
- ³⁸ "Le 15 juillet," *Représentant du peuple*, 96, July 8, 1848.
- ³⁹ Thiers cited in Thomas Bouchet, *Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée. Politiques du discours et droit au travail dans la France de 1848* (Montréal: Nota Bene, 2007), 135.
- ⁴⁰ *Le Moniteur* cited in Halévy, "Introduction" to Proudhon, *Confessions*, 34.
- ⁴¹ Bouchet, p. 35; also Dolléans and Puech, p. 58n.
- ⁴² Note explaining why the Left votes against Proudhon. See Vincent, p. 185.
- ⁴³ *L'Illustration*, August 5, 1849.
- ⁴⁴ Flocon cited in *Confessions*, p. 120, and d'Agoult cited Bouchet, p. 135.
- ⁴⁵ Charles de Montalembert, *Journal intime inédit*, ed. by Louis LeGuillou and Nicole Roger-Taillade, IV (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), 565.
- ⁴⁶ Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts. The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, 4 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1968), II, 810. Translation revised.
- ⁴⁷ Hyams, 137. See original.
- ⁴⁸ Members of the bureau of the Club de la Révolution to Proudhon, August 1, 1849. Bibliothèque d'étude et de conservation, Besançon, Ms 2976 f.30, cited in Chambost, *Proudhon*, 107.
- ⁴⁹ Marx, cited in Herzen, II, 1017. Go to Russian ed. for full citation. Marx, 1865 article in *Sozial-Demokrat*, quoted in Hauptmann, 922 and 1051.
- ⁵⁰ Halévy, intro to *Confessions*, 37.
- ⁵¹ In *Confessions*, 203n.
- ⁵² Darimon, *A Travers une révolution*, 123-127.

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- ⁵³ *Correspondance*, II, 355, in Daniel Halévy, "Introduction" to Proudhon, *Confessions*, 37.
- ⁵⁴ Louis Blanc, *Le Nouveau monde*, 6 (December 15, 1849). [Cited in Chambost, 103, and Hauptmann, 1051.]
- ⁵⁵ Lamennais, "Silence au pauvre," *Peuple constituant*, August , 1848, in Suffel, ed., *1848: La Révolution racontée par ceux qui l'ont vue*, (Paris: Myrte, 1848), 522-523.
- ⁵⁶ Proudhon, *Représentant du peuple*, 98, August 10, 1848, in Hauptmann, 943.
- ⁵⁷ Proudhon, "Les Malthusiens," *Représentant du peuple*, August 11, 1848. Hauptmann (*Proudhon*, 945) gives the figure of 300,000 copies for the press-run of the *tiré à part*.
- ⁵⁸ *Représentant du peuple*, August 21, 1848.
- ⁵⁹ The prospectus or "Manifeste du Peuple" appeared on September 2, 1848, but it was only on November 23 that *Le Peuple* became a daily paper. The reason for the delay was that caution money had to be raised—12,000 francs for a weekly and 24,000 francs for a daily paper. Hauptmann, 950-951.
- ⁶⁰ Proudhon to Abram, September 23, 1848, *Correspondance* II, 347. [Hauptmann, 952.]
- ⁶¹ "La Présidence," *Le Peuple*, 3, November 8, 1848.
- ⁶² Hauptmann, *Proudhon*,
- ⁶³ *Le Peuple*, December 15, 1848.
- ⁶⁴ "Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte," *Le Peuple*, 31, December 18, 1848.
- ⁶⁵ "Le Président de la République est responsable," *Le Peuple*, 70, January 27, 1849. The other articles were "La Guerre," *Le Peuple*, 69, January 26, 1849, and "Première campagne de Louis Bonaparte," *Le Peuple*, 74, January 31, 1848. All three of these issues were seized, and the first two formed the basis of the criminal charges brought against Proudhon. Actually the first article, "La Guerre," was written in large part by one of Proudhon's colleagues, probably Alfred Darimon, but when charges were brought, Proudhon took full responsibility for it.
- ⁶⁶ Proudhon cited in Lubac, *The Un-Marxian Socialist: A Study of Proudhon* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948), 39.
- ⁶⁷ Raoul Labry, *Herzen et Proudhon* (Paris: Bossard, 1928), 96.
- ⁶⁸ *Confessions*, 167.

⁶⁹ Halévy, introduction to Proudhon, *Confessions*, 5.

⁷⁰ *Confessions*, 97.

⁷¹ Edward Castleton, "Révolutionnaire de la veille, Révolution du lendemain: Proudhon et les ironies du futur passé de 1848," unpublished paper, esp. pp. 6-7, 23-24. See also Castleton's earlier unpublished paper "Aux origines de l'ontologie sociale proudhonienne: L'apport des manuscrits inédits."

⁷² *Confessions*, 96.

⁷³ *Confessions*, 99.

⁷⁴ *Confessions*, 108.

⁷⁵ *Confessions*, 110.

⁷⁶ *Confessions*, 114.

⁷⁷ *Confessions*, 111.

⁷⁸ *Confessions*, 122.

⁷⁹ *Confessions*, 135.

⁸⁰ *Confessions*, 171.

⁸¹ *Confessions*, 170.

⁸² *Souvenirs de Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Luc Monnier (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 64.

⁸³ *Confessions*, 202.

⁸⁴ *Confessions*, 228.

⁸⁵ *Confessions*, 319.

⁸⁶ *Confessions*, 330.

⁸⁷ *Confessions*, 333.

⁸⁸ *Confessions*, 334.

⁸⁹ *Confessions*, 341.