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Saint-Simonism and Proudhonism
1918

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Two Resurrections

Saint-Simonism and Proudhonism

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Seemingly abandoned in favour of foreign doctrines, old French socialist thought nonetheless continued to shape the mindset of the working class and its activists. In recent years, we have seen it re-emerge, more or less consciously, but with unmistakable clarity.

It falls to the author of *The Sociology of Proudhon*[1] and of a forthcoming volume that will lead us *Among the Socialist Prophets*[2] to specify for the readers of *New Europe*[3] the signs by which this resurrection of the doctrines of '48 may be recognised.

Anyone who combines a curiosity about present realities with some knowledge of the classical systems of social philosophy cannot help but seek a connection between these two domains. Among the doctrines constructed by our great socialist innovators, do not some correspond directly to the economic facts we are witnessing today? Could their resurrected ideas not serve as focal points for co-ordinating the many transformations spontaneously taking shape before our eyes? Principles capable of being revived to organise

[1] **Translator's Note:** Bouglé published *La Sociologie de Proudhon* in 1911.
[2] **Translator's Note:** *Chez les prophètes socialistes* (1918).
[3] **Translator's Note:** *L'Europe nouvelle* (1918–1940).

social life may, it seems, be found on the side of Saint-Simonism, and others on the side of Proudhonism – the one complementing or correcting the other.

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Charles Rist recently wrote in the *Political Economy Review*:[4] 'What we need is neo-Saint-Simonism.' Merely wishful thinking? There is something more in the words of the economist-historian. He knows that facts are preparing the resurgence he envisions: by the very force of things – by the necessities of war – there is already, now more than ever, Saint-Simonism in the air.

Indeed, it is one of the paradoxes of the present hour: the war, which they detested more than anything in the world, has dragged these great pacifists behind its chariot, reopening the paths to their programme.

They believed in peace – a peace rendered almost inevitable by the very progress of industry. They had not foreseen that a nation would arise to synthesise two elements that they regarded as irreducibly hostile to one another: militarism and industrialism. Through this unexpected synthesis, the stage was set for a formidable explosion, potent enough to shatter the faith of the Saint-Simonians.

Yet if they were profoundly mistaken on this point, how often were they the first to speak the language that is becoming commonplace today? Their industrialism stands opposed to what they called constitutionalism. And their socialism gives priority to the concern for production.

This means that two problems lose their primacy in their eyes: that of forms of government, and that of the arrangements of distribution. Many minds today, coming from very different horizons, would agree that we have allowed ourselves to be overly fixated on these two sets of problems. 'Less politics' – to embrace this watch-

[4] **Translator's Note:** *Revue d'économie politique* (1887–).

word is to recall, in keeping with the Saint-Simonian tradition, that what matters above all is the development of the nation's resources.

To carry this task through, to prepare what Herriot calls the economic reorganisation of the nation, it is essential to attach less importance to the doctrinal formulas that could still divide parties yesterday. In our struggle with nature, we must preserve something of the *union sacrée* that resistance to the enemy imposed upon us. Could we not, asked Audibert[5] recently, found a party above all parties – a productivist party?

Productivist – this new word designates less a birth than a rebirth: the rebirth of the mindset of the forefathers of productivism. Lysis[6] repeats to us in every key: 'Intensify production: distribution will take care of itself. That is the true formula of the new democracy.' And to establish his thesis, he gladly denounces what he calls the French error. He overlooks only one point: the idea he is taking up is a French idea formulated long ago. The ground he is rediscovering is venerable French soil.

To transform the nation into a vast workshop, and, so that man may be less exploited by man, to focus first on better exploiting the globe – that is indeed, in the eyes of the Saint-Simonians, the ideal that takes precedence over all else. Their thought would progress by stages from liberalism to socialism. Yet their socialism would always remain, as one of their finest historians, Élie Halévy, tells us, a socialism of production.

To achieve this ideal, several of the methods extolled by the Saint-Simonians coincide precisely with those imposed upon us by the necessities of war.

The State has had to intervene in almost everything, though not without changing its ways. To the delight of Maxime Leroy, a ju-

[5] **Translator's Note:** Marcel Audibert (1883–1967) was a French journalist, jurist, and writer.

[6] **Translator's Note:** Eugène Letailleur (1869–1927), who wrote under the pseudonym Lysis, was a financial journalist and essayist who critiqued the concentration of French banking oligarchies and published in *L'Humanité*.

rist eager to welcome new developments, administrative action has assumed unprecedented forms. Faced with dwindling imports and multiplying needs, it became necessary to purchase for the nation, to allocate foodstuffs among provinces and raw materials among factories.

These were immense and complex tasks that could not possibly be carried through without the collaboration of experienced practitioners. Thus industrialists, merchants, bankers, and engineers were brought into regional committees, interministerial offices, and government councils. This was what Maxime Leroy calls 'the administrative ascent of the producers'. Yet is not this ascent precisely what the author of the *Letters from an Inhabitant of Geneva* demanded? In the various 'Chambers' whose establishment he proposed in order to make politics truly industrial – chambers of invention, examination, and execution – he saw a means of securing political influence for those who had proven their economic competence. He carved out steps for the ascent of expertise.

However, it is not merely the consultation of industrial competences that gives an original character to the renewal efforts we are witnessing. The movement is broader: it is a movement of general convergence, a sort of universal syndicalisation. Willingly or not, no one can pull in their own separate direction any longer. The State itself, on account of the requests it addresses to allied nations, is obliged to remind the owners of factories, trading houses, and banks that operating in scattered formation is no longer viable.

Owing to the shortage of available freight as well as the tightening of credit, agreements must be reached today on the quantities to import or export, just as agreements will have to be reached tomorrow on the order of priority for restocking and reconstruction. Whether intended or not, the war has taught the business world solidarity. And it is perhaps on this point that the war has advanced us furthest in the direction of Saint-Simonism.

Set back on their feet – to clash once more as in the past, or to collaborate by mutually limiting one another? In short, are we about to witness a renewed duel, or a marriage of convenience?

Must the reorganisation of industry, the need for which everyone feels, be carried out from above, in the Saint-Simonian manner, or could it make ample room for aspirations from below, as Proudhon would have wished?

A weighty question, as one may surmise. The observer will be able to answer it, perhaps, in a few years' time…

For that was indeed their obsession: to organise. Let us not allow it to be believed that the formula was invented by Ostwald.[7] The Saint-Simonians, nearly a century ago, reiterated this theme in every possible way. When the Péreire brothers worked to consolidate credit institutions as well as railway companies, they were merely putting into practice, for their part, an idea dear to their school. 'The true object of political economy', proclaimed Enfantin, 'is the combination of efforts.' To achieve this combination, which aims to curb the drawbacks of anarchic competition, there must also be an understanding among bankers, who act as the generals of industry, and whose banks ought to serve as 'representative chambers of workers, constantly occupied in procuring for them the materials of production at the lowest possible price'.

From this we see that many of the 'reforms' demanded today as dictated by circumstances are precisely those heralded and prepared for by those great social innovators, the Saint-Simonians. Post-war France could, without demeaning itself, return to their school.

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Yet something essential is lacking in this school, something of which it would perhaps be dangerous to divest ourselves: and that is nothing less than the democratic spirit.

The disciples of the gentleman-messiah may become socialists; they will never become democrats again. They go to the people, but always with the ulterior motive of leading them. The sentiment they preach most complacently is not merely confidence in expertise, but reverence for superiors. They thus remain, as was said at the time, hierarchs. That the people might wish to act for themselves, or even merely to criticise and oversee, is an idea they find

[7] **Translator's Note:** Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932) was a German chemist and philosopher who received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1909 and popularised the 'energetic imperative' of industrial organisation.

difficult to accept, whereas the abuses of power in which experts might indulge concern them very little.

And it is undoubtedly here that Saint-Simonian tendencies could be usefully supplemented or corrected by Proudhonian tendencies. For recalling the rights of the people and the 'capacity' of the working class, no one equals the former typographer turned economist. Born of the people, he remained of the people; he was a democrat as naturally as one breathes.

I am well aware that shortly before the war an attempt was made to conscript his fierce shade into the camp of the anti-democrats.[8] Few intellectual appropriations have been more paradoxical than that one. What Proudhon rejected at any price was the promotion of statism in the name of democracy, the strengthening of authoritarian institutions. That is why he waged such vehement war against a Louis Blanc. Yet he was the first to prepare what he called, before Sidney and Beatrice Webb, industrial democracy. He maintained that in order to establish a truly stable order – stable because egalitarian – control exercised by the producers in economic life remains indispensable. And by producers he meant not the captains of industry, but the industrial army, the mass of workers. They alone can bring into harmony 'the Marianne of the fields and the Sociale of the cities'.

They will therefore act by common accord upon the rates of exchange. They will restore to the products of labour their true value, liberating them from the tolls levied by financial speculation (*agio*) in all its forms. They will finally place credit at the disposal of the worker. If the socialism of the Saint-Simonians is a socialism of production, that of Proudhon is a socialism of exchange. And it is first and foremost through a reorganisation of the People's Banks that he expects to save the world. Yet it goes without saying

[8] **Translator's Note:** Alluding to the *Cercle Proudhon* (founded in December 1911), a group of monarchists from *Action Française* and dissident syndicalists who attempted to appropriate Proudhon for anti-democratic nationalism.

that the workers' associations (*compagnies ouvrières*) he calls for, destined to form an egalitarian agro-industrial federation, could not act upon the rates of exchange without first acting upon the conditions of production.

And that is why not only cooperatives, but trade unions as well, can claim the Proudhonian tradition as their own. Whoever believes that the primary condition for the renewal of economic life is the participation of the workers themselves in management is Proudhonian in spirit.

'Maximum production for maximum wages in the minimum of time' – that is our programme, declared Jouhaux in a session that has already become famous. Albert Thomas, for his part, in *Workers' and Social Information*,[9] summed up the thinking of today's workers in the following formula: 'everything that is production is ours'. Both formula and programme are certainly calculated to delight the neo-Saint-Simonians. Yet for this fine plan to be realised in all its parts, would it suffice to place our trust in 'superiors'? Would it not be useful to suggest to them – or even necessary to impose upon them – measures that prevent industry, as has happened before, from forgetting the human being for the sake of things? Which amounts to saying that we must call Proudhon to the rescue…

Indeed, those who propose to renew syndicalist doctrines by taking into account the very experiences of the war – the editors of *The Clearing*,[10] for instance – make no mistake: they unfailingly return to the idea of a revival of Proudhon…

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Thus, alongside Saint-Simonism, Proudhonism is being resurrected before our eyes – both seemingly set back on their feet in an unexpected manner by the great upheaval.

[9] **Translator's Note:** *L'Information ouvrière et sociale* (1918–1920).

[10] **Translator's Note:** *La Clairière* (1917–1919), a syndicalist fortnightly review.