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Georges Gurvitch
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1965

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A member of the Confédération Générale du Travail (General Confederation of Labour) such as myself might wonder why this commemoration of Proudhon is taking place in Belgium and not in France. I know that a separate speech should highlight the intellectual ties that were forged between Proudhon and Belgium and the legacy that he left there, but I would not like to begin this speech without mentioning the role that Belgium played in his life.

Recall that Proudhon was twice sentenced to prison. The first time, on 28 March 1849, he took refuge in Belgium. But his anxious personality forced him to return earlier than he should have, and his unexpected return cost him 3 years in prison. While imprisoned in Sainte-Pélagie, he wrote several works. It must be said that political prisoners were better treated than they are now, and were let out once per week, and it was during this stay in Sainte-Pélagie that Proudhon got married and his first two daughters were born.

But it was after his second conviction that Belgium's role became much more important. Proudhon returned to seek asylum on publication of his famous book: *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* (1858). Learning from his first misfortunes

and expecting to be prosecuted, he immediately fled and remained in Belgium for 4 years, where he wrote, among others, a book of extreme importance: *War and Peace* (1861). As mentioned earlier today, this work created some problems, because his Belgian friends, who had not fully understood his intentions, believed that Proudhon was justifying war, whereas like a true sociologist, he was trying to show that war had different meanings, that there are many kinds of wars (wars between states, of course, but also wars between social classes) and that there are also wars that are ultimately nothing but competitions, whether free competition or competitions between economic groups in more or less equivalent circumstances. In any case, the fact is this: Proudhon stayed in Belgium for 4 years, from 1858 to 1862. He even waited more than a year after his amnesty before returning to France, because he had limited trust in Napoleon III. Unfortunately, he died just 3 years after his return.

But there are other ties between Proudhon and Belgium. I want to recall that one of the first syntheses attempted between Proudhon and Marx (of which there have been many and you are hearing a new one, or at least a draft of one, mine) was by a Belgian. On the one hand, César de Paepe strongly insisted on the opposition between possession and property; on the other hand, he introduced the idea of decentralising public services as a means of weakening the state while at the same time giving greater impetus to worker self-management.

I believe these three reasons are sufficient for a Frenchman to justify Proudhon's commemoration being celebrated in Belgium. Of course, this commemoration should have taken place in France, but right now, rather than Proudhon, France is worrying about the presidential elections, a new state of affairs since this is the first time that the President of the Republic will be elected by universal suffrage.

Having said that, I would like to turn to my proposal. I have entitled this speech: 'Proudhon and Marx', which may seem

paradoxical but which, as I will try to prove to you, it is not. I am, for my part, convinced that the overwhelming and reciprocal antipathy between Proudhon and Marx was based more on purely personal feelings than on their ideas. Though different, their two bodies of thought complemented one other, and I am convinced that a coherent conception of collectivism will be achieved only when a third thinker, equal to Marx and Proudhon, will overcome their mistakes and discover the common thread between them, giving rise to a third doctrine. But perhaps the person who will formulate the synthesis that I am foreseeing has yet to be born. I do not know any current social thinker of the stature of Proudhon or Marx.

Considering Marx's initial attitude towards Proudhon, his enthusiasm for Proudhon's early writings – an enthusiasm expressed in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, of which he was one of the editors – if we then open *The Holy Family*, a work written before Marx came to France, we see the persistence of an unreserved admiration. Marx does not just say, for example, that Proudhon is the only thinker who personifies proletarian thought, he also affirms that Proudhon has inspired a total upheaval in social economy. He attributed to him a similar role to that played by Sieyès in the preparation of the French Revolution. According to him, what Sieyès said about the Third Estate, Proudhon expressed for the proletariat: 'What is the proletariat? Nothing. What does it want to become? Everything'. Is Marx right? Let us say it bluntly: yes, and more than he thought. Indeed, in Proudhon's first and famous work, *What is Property?* (1840), by means of often superfluous and artificial legal analyses, we find the idea of *surplus value* explained and developed for the first time. To be precise, Proudhon explains that even if the capitalist pays each worker his due, there is something that he does not pay, something that increases the value of the products a hundred or a thousand times: the 'collective force'. While the 'individual force' acquired from the worker is paid, the 'collective force' is not.

Here we have all of Marx's theory of *surplus value*. This theory was thus borrowed from Proudhon's first work. Marx could have said – he almost did say in his early works – that the concept of *surplus value* is a Proudhonian concept. But, since it was in the first volume of *Capital*, written 27 years later, that Marx examined the problem of *absolute surplus value* and *relative surplus value* in detail, you will not find any remarks of this sort.

There is more. Reading Proudhon's first book holds another surprise for us, because we learn with astonishment that it was not Marx, but Proudhon, who contrasted 'utopian socialism' with 'scientific socialism'. These terms were thus invented not by Marx, but by Proudhon. Is it a good idea? That is another question. Of course, Proudhon accused Marx of being a utopian socialist. He criticised him for not predicting the possibility of conflicts within realised socialism. For Marx, in realised socialism, when man and society are finally reconciled, there are no more conflicts and everything works for the good of the world. In Proudhon's eyes, this is the very sign of utopia! For him, there is no society in which all problems are resolved. New problems arise constantly, because society is constant creation, it is ongoing. Socialism is not a final stage: there is no end to history, there are only new problems to solve.

Conversely, for Marx – as he said and repeated dozens of times – Proudhon was the representative of utopian socialism par excellence. Why? Because Proudhon's socialism advocated self-management, so brilliantly explained today by Daniel Guérin. But self-management involves a variety of problems and, for Marx, socialism based on self-management was a form of utopian socialism. I therefore believe that the term 'scientific socialism', opposed to 'utopian socialism', is an unfortunate term. But, because it has been used often, perhaps too often, I want to point out that it comes not from Marx, but from Proudhon. And if the latter is guilty of something, it is

the fascism of organised capitalism or the fascism of fear. This threat can only be countered by a new collectivism, neither Marxist nor Proudhonian, but surpassing both. But this collectivism cannot be achieved without worker self-management, which is making progress. I therefore believe that Proudhon's merits are immense. They can be measured by his ongoing relevance both in the west and in the east. To be both threatening and attractive both to so-called western democracies and to popular democracies, is this not evidence that we have seen far and wide?

'temporarily' – I know the text very well – the base councils, on the grounds that they were preventing sufficient weapons from being produced. It should be noted that the USSR remained stuck in this paradox that it was the peasantry, who were nevertheless largely cast aside by the communist government, who benefited from economic democracy (kolkhoses, sovkhoses), while the proletariat, who officially dominated, had not yet achieved what the social revolution began with: worker self-management. In this area, Proudhon still retains great influence. It is hard to believe that Russia's development could be achieved without a return to worker self-management at the base and the participation of representatives of the base councils in planning bodies. The way to democratising the Russian revolution is paved and it is Proudhon who has the honour of having paved it.

Does this mean that Proudhon is infallible? He has been criticised very much here, and on the whole I agree with the criticisms that have been made. I could have even extended this speech to explain my own reservations. But *I am convinced, for my part, that no social doctrine that is concerned about both dedogmatising Marxism and correcting Proudhon by surpassing them both is possible without a synthesis of the thought of these enemy brothers*. For these enemy brothers are condemned to seeing their contributions melt into a third doctrine. And it seems to me that the day is not far off when a mind their equal will achieve this synthesis. Several have already been tried. I cited César de Paepe from Belgium. In France, a little later, Jaurès pursued a constant effort in the same direction. More attempts will certainly be made. Time favours worker self-management.

At the moment, it is my deep conviction that there is only one choice for the world: fascism or a decentralised collectivism. For organised capitalism, frightened by the worker movement, is becoming not only more and more technocratic, but fascistic. There are different species of fascism, including

surely that he promoted this term that should never have been used.

Things began to get worse between Proudhon and Marx when they met in Paris and felt overwhelming antipathy for each other. The result was that Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* (1846), which was subtitled *The Philosophy of Poverty*, inspired Marx's only work written in French: *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). In this book, Marx criticised Proudhon for being an idealist and accused him of not understanding Hegel, the Hegel that Marx had revealed to him. It must be stressed that these allegations are false. A man who denounces idealism on almost every page should not be accused of ideomania. Proudhon tirelessly hunts *ideomania* down, from Plato to Leibniz and in many more recent thinkers. How could someone who hates ideomania so much be idealistic?

You immediately sense that something is wrong, that Marx is being unfair to Proudhon. Let me quote this extract from a letter where Proudhon writes about *The Poverty of Philosophy*: 'A tissue of crudities, slanders, falsifications and plagiarism'. Moreover, he notes in his own copy of *Poverty*: 'The true meaning of Marx's work is that he regrets that I have thought like him everywhere and that I was the first to say it'. Proudhon says (and I must rule in his favour): 'Have I ever said that principles are anything other than the intellectual representation, not the generative cause, of facts?'

Let us recognise that Marx was very skilful here, because by attacking Proudhon and judging him with extreme severity, he was aiming at a different man through him, and that man was called Hegel. Ultimately, it is not Proudhon, but Hegel that *The Poverty of Philosophy* stands against. It is quite paradoxical to see Marx assert that Proudhon never understood Hegel, while in this very book, it is Marx himself who attacks and discredits Hegel with such exceptional vigour.

What actually remains of the complaints against Proudhon? Marx claims that Proudhon has a dialectical mind only in the sense that he constantly seeks contradiction and therefore gets stuck in contradictions. But this forgets that, aside from the Hegelian dialectic, there are other interpretations of the dialectic. Showing that Proudhon had a dialectical mind, that he understood the dialectic in a hundred different ways, where anti-nomy was not always essential, but where equally dialectical complementarities and balances appeared – did this not show that Proudhon, far from discrediting the dialectic, multiplied its methods? In sum, when you read Marx attentively, you see that he charges Proudhon with all the sins of the dialectic, without recognising that at the same time Proudhon initiated its new directions. The very directions that have won out today and link the dialectic to an ever-renewed empiricism.

The Revolution of 1848 came. Marx, as usual, was not expecting it. Events, it is true, almost always surprise those who profess to predict them. The *Communist Manifesto* came late: it appeared in London in March, while the Revolution broke out in February in Paris. Moreover, the *Communist Manifesto* found no more of a real audience in France than the *Poverty of Philosophy*. Translated far too late, it passed unnoticed in the midst of the general tumult.

Meanwhile, from 1847 Proudhon attacked *Le Représentant du peuple*, the government and Louis Blanc on a daily basis. We have talked about Louis Blanc here, but we have forgotten to mention that it was Louis Blanc who organised the ‘National Workshops’ and it was their failure that provoked the workers’ insurrection. During the workers’ insurrection in June 1848, Proudhon, who had just been elected to the National Assembly, gave a famous speech, a speech that caused a scandal and earned him the hostility of all his colleagues. He is the only one who took a stand in favour of the workers, in terms such that Marx himself, in the obituary he devoted to Proudhon, recognised that ‘it was an act of great courage’. Indeed, you all know

tion of Proudhonian ideas, both among Russian intellectuals and among Russian workers’ unions. For my part, it was not in France, but in Russia, that I became a Proudhonian, and I came to France to deepen my knowledge of Proudhon. I therefore bear a direct personal testimony. The first Russian soviets were organised by Proudhonians, the Proudhonians who came from the left-wing elements of the Socialist Revolutionary Party or the left-wing of Russian social democracy. It was not from Marx that they could take the idea of revolution by the base soviets, because it was an essentially, exclusively, Proudhonian idea. As I am one of the organisers of the Russian soviets of 1917, I can speak with full knowledge of the facts. I remember the first soviets organised in the Putilov factory before the communists came to power, and I testify that those who organised them, like those who organised themselves, were imbued with Proudhonian ideas. At such a time, Lenin could not avoid this influence. Believe me, Sorel did not need to act as an intermediary! It was a direct Proudhonian influence that rose from Russia’s revolutionary milieu. In his first speeches, Lenin proclaimed that social planning and revolution were possible only on the basis of direct representation of workers at the base. And I can even tell you a secret: the Communist Party’s second programme, the second programme voted on before the Communists came to power, the absolutely untraceable second programme – you can search all over Russia, you can search all the bookstores in France, but unless you were able to buy it in May 1917, you will not find it – the second programme, of which I do not know if all copies were burned or eliminated; what I can tell you is that it reproduced Lenin’s very words as the main points: no revolution, no collective planning is possible without the direct participation of the base soviets and their representatives. As you can see, the whole idea of worker self-management lies there. This did not prevent Trotsky and Stalin, who were friends at the time, from forcing Lenin’s hand during the war against the ‘white guards’ and to make him suppress

aration of the working class, boycotting the bourgeois political government, can quickly dominate the bourgeois class. In other words, he expects a social revolution in the very near future. He dictated the last sentences of this political will, *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, a few weeks, a few days before his death. It is easy to guess that what he foresees, what he sees coming, is the Commune. Indeed, most communards were Proudhonians. We know that Proudhon's friends played a decisive role in the Commune. We must also recall that the French section of the International Workingmen's Association, organised by Marx in 1864, was, between the death of Proudhon and the Commune, exclusively in the hands of the Proudhonians: there were only two Marxists before the Commune. At that time, Marx advised the French workers to be cautious, while the Proudhonians called the French working class to revolution. I do not mean to say that if one favours patience, like Marx, or an immediate revolution, like the Proudhonians, one side is always wrong and the other is always right. I simply want to emphasise that it is unfair to the Proudhonians to claim that Proudhon represented the bourgeoisie's fear, when in reality he had a much more revolutionary spirit than Marx.

Revolutionary syndicalism has been mentioned here. I agree strongly with Mrs Kriegel – but in my opinion, without Proudhon there would have been no revolutionary syndicalism. Revolutionary syndicalism is a product of Proudhonism, and could not have existed without Proudhonism. Mrs Kriegel also spoke of the failure of revolutionary syndicalism during the 1914 war. But she focused on the French perspective. France, however, is not the only country where the problems of revolutionary syndicalism have arisen. I am thinking in particular of another country, of which I am a native, Russia, where these problems took shape as early as 1905 with the creation of the first workers' councils. They arose a second time under Kerensky's provisional government, then a third time under the Soviet government, and I can attest to the extraordinary penetra-

the result of this speech: the censure that the National Assembly inflicted on Proudhon, by 691 votes to 2, one of these two votes being Proudhon's. He had found only one supporter! In any case, he had unanimous support against him, and Marx paid tribute to him.

From Marx's point of view, if there are hesitations in Proudhon's thinking, they are found especially in *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851), in *The Social Revolution Demonstrated by the Coup d'Etat of December 2* (1852) and in *The Philosophy of Progress* (1853). One can make a very precise criticism of these three books, all written in prison. Obsessed by the weakness of the proletariat and struck by its failure to defend itself better than it had in 1848, Proudhon called for an alliance or entente between the middle class and the proletariat. These are the texts where this alliance is mentioned which first gave Marx, then Marxists, a pretext to see Proudhon as a representative of the petite bourgeoisie. They thus ignored a fundamental point: these are the works of a man so cruelly disappointed that at some point, overestimating the strength of the bourgeoisie, he hesitated and believed that without the help of the middle class, the proletariat would never be able to succeed.

But he already overcame this moment of weakness in the *Stock Market Speculator's Manual*. The title may be surprising, and we must say why. Proudhon explained it himself: it was a second-hand work, a work imposed by the need to feed his family. He had to live; a publisher introduced himself and asked Proudhon, who was considered by his contemporaries to be a great economist, to offer his advice to the stock market speculators. Proudhon complied, but did not want to jeopardise his name and the work appeared anonymously in 1854. Only in the third edition (1857), after adding an introduction and a conclusion that did not appear in previous editions, did Proudhon agree to sign his name to the book.

The introduction and conclusion are essential – at least I consider them to be – because, for the first time, several stages, several phases of capitalism are defined: first *industrial anarchy*, that is, free competition; then *industrial feudalism*, a term that Proudhon did not invent but was, as he very honestly acknowledges, borrowed from Fourier who had used it in a very different sense. According to Proudhon, ‘industrial feudalism’ corresponds to the appearance of trusts and cartels, at the beginning of organised capitalism, of which Proudhon would not see the complete realisation. He argues that ‘industrial feudalism’ is only a phase of capitalism that cannot last, but that pushes in two directions: towards *industrial empire*, and then *industrial democracy*. ‘Industrial empire’ is a very accurate description of what happened under Napoleon III, because Napoleon III was nothing other than the head of the trusts and cartels. Proudhon speaks with justified hostility of the Saint-Simonian ‘bankocrats and industrial despots’ who, forming the Emperor’s entourage, were entrusted with carrying out immense works and established big industry in France. He predicts that the ‘industrial empire’ will not hold, that it cannot last. He believes that we will go directly from ‘industrial empire’ to ‘industrial democracy’, and this is where his optimism comes in. He makes events flow far more quickly than they do in reality, and, speeding through the various stages of capitalism, he predicts the triumph of ‘industrial democracy’, one of the essential elements of which is worker self-management. Obviously, this is going a bit too fast. In any case, the great merit of the third edition of the *Stock Market Speculator’s Manual* is the definition of the different phases of capitalism. And, from another perspective, it is also the premonition of the not only Caesarean, but fascistic or even openly fascist aspect of organised capitalism that had already started to become frightened of the labour movement.

We have spoken here about Proudhon’s frequent reservations about strikes or, as he said, ‘coalitions’. I would note that

if he was against strikes, against ‘coalitions’, it was only because he thought the times were not ripe enough. And I will cite a text to you to support my comments, a passage in the second volume of *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* where Proudhon declares: ‘If the bosses agree, if the companies merge, the public authorities can do even less about it because power promotes and encourages the centralisation of capitalist interests. But if the workers, who feel *the right* bequeathed to them by the Revolution, protest and *strike*, *their only means of having their claims recognised*, they are punished, transported without mercy, deported to Cayenne and Lambessa’ (p. 77). You can see that already, in 1858, Proudhon’s attitude towards strikes is not at all that for which he is usually criticised.

For my part, I believe that Proudhon’s most important work on political doctrine is his last book, which he completed at his deathbed: *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* (1865), which remains, of all his works, the one that is closest to Marxism. Not only does Proudhon draw a clear distinction between the economic and political capacity of the working class, but he goes much further, so far that it surely lies much further to the left than today’s Marxists. Indeed, he asks why, since the bourgeoisie had the right to separate themselves from the working class, the working class would not have the right to separate themselves ‘consciously’ from the bourgeoisie? He calls for a policy of boycotting all political institutions, not because they are political institutions but because they are bourgeois institutions. He therefore preaches a radical policy of ‘separation’, which is an absolutely revolutionary policy. Going much further than all the Marxist theorists, he appeals to the proletarian class for permanent war until victory.

As always, one can reproach Proudhon for his unrepentant optimism here. He claims that the bourgeoisie is virtually dead, that it is just a rabble without any moral and political ideas, and that it only remains thanks to its economic interests; that, under these conditions, a revolutionary practice of total sep-