The Plurality of Times in Socialist Thought (1820–1870)

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Abstract: The founders of socialism all envisaged the advent of a historic rupture, a revolution heralding the beginning of a new world rich in unprecedented temporal rhythms. But their conceptions of these new social times diverge in major ways. Saint-Simon, Eugène Buret, and Constantin Pecqueur see Europe's past as a time punctuated by the succession of social systems and analyse the temporality inherent in the development of industry. Fourier rejects this conception as suspect because it preserves the notion of continuity between the past and the future. In this debate, Marx's position is similar to that of the Saint-Simonians, but he considerably refines the analysis of temporalities proper to capitalism, the working class and, especially, revolutions, where he distinguishes multiple conflicting rhythms. Proudhon turns the discussion in a mutualist and federalist direction, seeing a plurality of times and warning of the risk of reducing practice to a single temporal hegemony.

A comparative rereading of the founders of socialism, from Saint-Simon to Marx, can be carried out from two perspectives. From a historical point of view, we may rightly underline their participation in a social movement of critique and revolt against the established order. From this perspective, we will be tempted to emphasise their convergences and shared problematics. Conversely, a more careful examination of the texts leads us to highlight the divergences and the often explicit oppositions between these theorists, and to question the very existence of a shared problematic.

Examining temporalities as these theorists interpreted them leads us to reconsider these parallels and to refine our answers considerably. They are all faced with the problem of time since they affirm the advent of a historic rupture, a revolution that will mark the end of one period and the beginning of a new world with rhythms very different to those of the "aging" world. This question of revolutionary rupture imposes a series of analyses on the preliminaries and premises of transformation, its warning signs and precursory practices, and on the social experiments considered "ahead" of their time and which may reveal future temporal practices. But the most intellectually brave thinkers have also proposed a construction of past times, distinguishing not

only periods and phases, but also, as we will try to show, perceiving different social rhythms such as phenomena of repetition, permanence, temporal acceleration and urgency. In Marx's writings on history, we find dazzling phrases on this divergence of social times, opening up a whole problematic of social times and their plurality.

Similarly, those who dared to think about the aftermath of the revolution, from Fourier to Proudhon, offer numerous reflections on the new social rhythms that future society would put in place. And it is perhaps here, in the domain of the imaginary, that the deepest differences emerge among these authors, clearly revealing individual sensibilities.

Indeed, in posing this question of temporalities, we should expect to reveal nuances and divergences between these authors that are numerous but situated somewhere other than where they are generally perceived.

Saint-Simon's work may serve as an introduction to this question, since he was undoubtedly the most explicit with respect to distinguishing and constructing social times. His swift challenge against de Bonald aims to denounce the monarchical illusion of the timelessness of social systems. The Viscount de Bonald's theories that the true social system's sacred hierarchy can only be obscured by time, but must, after revolutionary transgressions, reappear in its eternity or disappear in chaos, are for Saint-Simon "extravagant". Establishing the "Science of Man" or the "Science of Societies" will mean accounting for time and regarding changes in social systems as facts, as the very subject of this new science[1].

For Saint-Simon, the history of Europe is not a time of continuity, nor a succession of stages as Condorcet suggested, but a time punctuated by the succession of social systems. From the 10th to the 18th century, the feudal, military and religious system was formed and sustained, geared towards defence and war. After the collapse of this first system, the so-called "industrial system" was formed, geared towards production and consumption and fundamentally opposed to feudalism[2]. Between these two systems, no compromise is possible, and the Restoration period was merely a time of "transition", a time of conflict and contradiction that can be analysed essentially in terms of a juxtaposition of two opposing systems.

The history of the feudal system can be summarised as an age-old aggravation of a contradiction between two temporalities. This system is characterised by a stable balance between two forces and two classes: the nobility and the clergy. This balance, which lasted for nearly eight centuries, ensured the repetition of oppression. On the contrary, within this static system itself, the dynamic of production developed, creating a temporality of change: an accumulation of new properties, an increase in technical progress, and an expansion of trade and industry. While the power structure proclaims tradition and permanence, industry creates the time of change or, we might say, imposes its temporality[3].

The revolution to come will therefore be a rupture, since it will mark the end of temporary chaos and the advent of a society unprecedented in history: industrial society. Nevertheless, it will also include elements of continuity since it will realise the creative temporality that the industrial class harbours[4].

[1] Saint-Simon, *Mémoire sur la science de l'homme* [Memoir on the Science of Man] (1813), Paris, Éd. Anthropos, 1966, t. V.

[2] Saint-Simon, *Du système industriel* [On the Industrial System] (1820–1822), Éd. Anthropos, t. III.

[3] Saint-Simon, *L'Industrie* [Industry] (1816–1818), Éd. Anthropos, t. I and II

[4] Saint-Simon, *L'Organisateur* [The Organiser] (1819–1820), Éd. Anthropos, t. II.

Between 1820 and 1840, observers often compared Fourier to Saint-Simon, regarding them both as "reformers", to use the expression of the 1840s. And even today, the hazy category of "utopian socialism" continues to confuse them with each other. However, Fourier's conception of time has no relation to Saint-Simon's[5].

For Fourier, there is strictly speaking no cumulative or progressive time in "civilisation". So-called civilisation is based on barbarism, hypocrisy, and permanent repression of desires. It is not supported by a chronologically identifiable movement of separation: it is, and has always been, violence and repression[6].

There is thus indeed a rupture between civilisation and "The New Industrial and Societary World", but in an entirely different sense than Saint-Simon thought. There is no continuity of a temporality that the revolution would confirm, but a radical, absolute rupture[7] between repeated repression and the world of the Phalanstery, founded on harmony of the passions. It is thus not a question of calling on the industrialist class to gain conscience of its capacities, but rather of waiting for the founding act, a voluntary act of creating the new community.

This founding act will inaugurate a new temporality consisting not of a movement towards future liberations, but of delights in action. These delights will change and take on new forms, but the satisfaction of pleasures will be fulfilled as soon as the passionate community is established. Perfection will be achieved in the moment of celebration and in its reiteration.

Fourier focuses his thought on the invention of new temporal rhythms in daily life. Conscious of the alienations of work in "civilisation" and faithful to his theory of the passions, he builds temporalities likely to be "attractive" such as, for example, short sessions of "attractive work". The day should be built as a series of harmonious rhythms: brief, changing rhythms of work, rhythms of rest, and subtle rhythms of waits, desires and encounters. These rhythms are essentially repetitive but correspond to the musicality of desires in a life where the time of individual desire and social time completely overlapped.

As early as the 1840s, two schools were thus totally opposed in their conceptions of time.

Charles Fourier and Etienne Cabet[8] thought in terms of absolute rupture, of the establishment of an entirely different world inaugurating other temporalities. They did not expect this rupture to redirect a development that would continue at a later stage, but rather to create new rhythms that must be invented and put into action. Like Fourier, Etienne Cabet constructed timetables and daily schedules that would reconcile individual hopes with those of the renewed community.

Conversely, Saint-Simon, Constantin Pecqueur[9] and Eugène Buret[10] considered the forces of long history that impose their temporality and carry the need for revolution. For Saint-Simon, it is the fundamental temporality of work belonging to the "industrialist" class. For Constantin Pecqueur, it is more precisely the progressive development of "productive forces", which engenders revolutionary movement and will bring about a tightly regulated and State-controlled society.

[5] Charles Fourier, *Pièges et charlatanisme des deux sectes : Saint-Simon et Owen, qui promettent l'association et le progrès…* [The Snares and Charlatanism of the Two Sects of Saint-Simon and Owen, which Promise Association and Progress] (1831), Paris, Bossange père.

[6] Charles Fourier, *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales* [The Theory of the Four Movements and of the General Destinies] (1808), Paris, Éd. Anthropos, 1966, t. I.

[7] pp. 1–26.

[8] Étienne Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie* [Travels in Icaria], Paris, J. Mallet, 2nd ed., 1842.

[9] Constantin Pecqueur, *Economie sociale* [The Social Economy], Paris, Desessart, 1839, 2 vol.

[10] Eugène Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France* [On the Poverty of the Working Classes in England and France], Paris, Paulin, 1840, 2 vol.

Finally, for Eugène Buret, it is the aggressive industrialisation that dissolves the contributions of the past, breaks down the craftsmanship of days gone by, corrodes the solidarity between masters and craftsmen, and transforms labour into goods. Consequently, for this Saint-Simonian, there are in some way two times that unfold: one of wealth and material progress for the capitalists, and another of increased poverty and deprivation for a growing number of workers. According to Buret's 1840 book *On the Poverty of the Working Classes in England and France*, this dual, contradictory time will inevitably lead to a tearing of the social fabric, civil war and the collapse of this social system.

It is certainly to this second school (which we might call historicist, were this term not full of ambiguity) that Marx's work belongs, especially after 1844–45. In the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, we find Saint-Simon's lesson rethought by the young Saint-Simonians, and the broad outlines of these representations of social times which would then be constantly analysed.

For Marx, as for Saint-Simon, historical time is not a uniform continuity, but it is instead punctuated by social systems which correspond to successive social modes of production. The primitive community, the Asian mode of production, feudalism and capitalism are distinct, successive systems, social totalities of varying duration that have formed the content of historical time. In this long series of modes of production, capitalism has the distinct originality of generating a specific temporality. Indeed, all the previous systems, with their own peculiarities, had in common the production of stability and balance over the very long term. Thus feudalism, through transformations caused by events, maintained the same structure of personal dependency and the same hierarchy of orders over several centuries, proclaiming its permanence through its corresponding ideology.

Within this very feudal stability, capitalism has spawned an entirely new temporality marked precisely by instability and technical, economic and social change. As the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* says, the capitalist bourgeoisie introduced change into the feudal stability and developed its own temporality, imposing a "constant revolutionising", an "uninterrupted disturbance", an "agitation", and an "everlasting uncertainty"[11]. Its time is one of rapid change, of permanent revolution: the social relations that it builds "become antiquated before they can ossify"[12].

As we know, this accelerated time rushes towards its own destruction. And all of Marx's work can be reread as a reflection on this cataclysmic time which leads to climax and catastrophe by deepening social contradictions. But a more careful analysis of economic conflicts, class struggles, and the dramatic progression of revolutions and civil wars leads to distinguishing between different temporalities that may come to terms or enter into conflict. At the very least, we must distinguish between capitalist time, working-class time, and revolutionary time.

The time of the capitalist mode of production is the one on which Marx is most emphatic. He even compares it to the time of the stars, whose rhythm and revolutions can be predicted[13]. The

[11] Marx and Engels, *Manifeste du Parti communiste* [The Communist Manifesto] (1848), Paris, UGE, 1962, p. 24.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] "But, with the inevitability of a natural process, capitalist production brings forth its own negation." *Capital*, Book I, Paris, Éd. Sociales, 1950, t. III, p. 205.

system is, in fact, driven by a set of internal necessities: the competition between capitalists necessarily entails a reduction of necessary labour time, pressure on wages, and an increase in wage workers. Undoubtedly, the decline in the profit rate is less a law than a tendency, but whatever efforts are made to maintain the capitalist mode of production, it carries its own temporality which leads to its self-destruction. Capital, which only steals time, extracting profit by extorting workers' time, marches blindly toward its death.

In this deepening of contradictions and repetitive series of crises, a more hidden temporality can be seen, that of the working class which is composed not only of the continuity of suffering and personal failures, but also of struggles, strikes, and the transformation of economic struggles into political struggle. A pithy sentence in 1847 brings together the dynamics of this temporality, which extends from the "agglomeration" of the workers to their revolutionary struggle[14], but experience would show that this temporality does not have this rapid pace but is instead interrupted by periods of slowdown and dormancy; however, each crisis unleashes this potential force and enables its movement to be resumed.

It is during revolutions that Marx emphasises the existence of the plurality of social times even more clearly. Revolutionary time is accelerated not only on the surface and by the rapid succession of political events, but because in a matter of weeks revolution can achieve changes that would normally require decades, if not centuries. In 1848–49, "the different classes of French society had to count their epochs of development in weeks when they had previously counted them in half-centuries."[15] Peculiar temporalities such as those of these revolutions throw society out of its normal time, cause classes to live at a breathless pace, and justify militant preparations for the opening of such an acceleration.

Two types of revolutions and rhythms could be distinguished: one of bourgeois revolutions, such as those of the 17th century, which "storm [...] quickly from success to success", where "ecstasy is the order of the day"[16] – a feverish, relentless pace that quickly leads to a "climax", after which society returns to a calmer, relaxed pace.

Proletarian revolutions, such as those of the 19th century, unfold at a completely different pace. "On the other hand, proletarian revolutions [...] constantly criticise themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew [...]"[17] – a peculiar rhythm, profoundly different from that of bourgeois revolutions; a syncopated rhythm, marked by stops and starts, but nevertheless sustained by a constant theme. In this discontinuous temporality, there are therefore stops, silences, but also true "backward steps", returns to the "starting point" and, as it were, to a past.

These rhythmic discontinuities can be explained in part by the fact that different social classes and institutions do not follow the same temporalities. And revolutionary conflicts can be explained to some extent in terms of conflicts between social times. Marx gives two convincing examples: the peasant class and the French State.

From the first lines of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx recalls that modern society does not live at the same pace, that the different social classes do not share the same temporalities, that the past is not dead and that it can be updated and recalled at the very moment when the revolu-

[14] *Misère de la philosophie* [The Poverty of Philosophy] (1847), Paris, Costes, 1950, pp. 208–209.

[15] *Les Luttes de classes en France* [The Class Struggles in France] (1850), Paris, Éd. Sociales, 1967, p. 108.

[16] *Le 18 Brumaire de Louis-Bonaparte* [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon] (1852), Paris, Éd. Sociales, 1969, p. 19.

[17] *Ibid.*

tionary actors are involved in the most pressing activity. Different combinations of the past, the present and the future are therefore possible. When the Jacobins acted in the belief that they were living Roman ideals, they found the means to carry out their present task in this past. But when the people of '48 evoked the spectre of the Revolution of '89, they became trapped in the past, escaping their present. In order to achieve its goal, a proletarian revolution should bring into the present not the past, but the poetry of the future[18].

Between 1848 and 1852, the French small-holding peasants were double carriers of the past in the present. The failure of the Revolution and the coming to power of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte can be explained in part by this presence of the past. According to the analysis suggested by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the small-holding peasants remained much more connected to nature than to industrial life. They belonged, strictly speaking, to another time, to the daily time of nature with its rhythms and its permanence. And they expected their masters to "protect them from the other classes and send them rain and sunshine from above[19]." But they were also carriers of another, political past rich in illusions: the First Empire, whose memory they preserved and magnified as the moment of their own glory, is undoubtedly an illusion, but one that was alive and present, causing them to see Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's candidacy as the promise of the return of their past splendour.

We can understand that tradition also weighs on the present history if we analyse how these pasts are composed and form part of the immediate present.

The apparatus of the State (the bureaucratic military complex) offers another example of these clashes between temporalities in a revolutionary period. Marx comes back to this point three times, each time more emphatically, in *The Class Struggles in France*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France*: this "immense bureaucratic and military organisation" has its own temporality which is not that of the bourgeois class and even less so that of the working class. This is a very long history which began before the absolute monarchy, ceaselessly and unbroken, and which every regime has strengthened and expanded. No political revolution has been able to break the destructive course of this machine. If we can speak of a temporality of an edifice so overwhelming and ill-suited for life, it would be of a temporality determined to deny time – in other words, death time.

By calling the Paris Commune of 1870–71 the "finally discovered political form allowing the economical emancipation of labour to be carried out"[20], Marx emphasises the rupture between a vast history based in all respects on necessity – the history of the State machine – and this novel act which arose from the workers' initiative and breaks its course. At the same time, it is the rise not exactly of another temporality, of work, but rather the plural rise of the communes with their autonomous initiatives: a brief experiment that, for a moment, broke the State's deathly time.

On many points, these pages by Marx on the Paris Commune adopted Proudhon's analyses and appeals, though not without nuances and divergences.

Proudhon had been less affirmative than Saint-Simon and Marx on the possibility of distinguishing social systems and modes of production, and of detecting a continuous evolution lead-

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[20] *La Guerre civile en France* [The Civil War in France] (1871), Paris, Éd. Sociales, 1953, p. 45.

ing to the irrepressible need for social revolution. In the historical timelines he outlines in *Justice*, it seems possible to him to highlight more complex fluctuations between periods of relative emancipation and periods of severe repression. Similarly, in capitalism's "system of economic contradictions", while he perceives a general process leading to a deepening of contradictions like his communist and socialist contemporaries, he puts even greater emphasis on the existence of repetitive rhythms. For him, economic contradictions are expressed by repeated fluctuations: for example, because of the suffering it produces, increased competition is followed by increased economic centralisation, by "monopoly", and then, because of new failures, by a return to competition[21]. Economic time is therefore not an evolutionary development; it also consists of cycles linked to the systems of contradictions.

The coming of the social revolution is therefore not as certain as some suppose. The risk of economic and social decline cannot be entirely ruled out. Likewise, we cannot rule out the risk of establishing a regime of economic and political centralisation that would prolong capitalist tendencies to expropriation. Such a despotic regime, reducing all working-class initiative, would in a way impose the atemporal inertia of the State on social temporalities.

The liberation of working-class initiative would aim at the liberation of these multiple temporalities. Indeed, Proudhon constantly denounces attempts to impose a single temporality on producers, whether it is that of collective property, the despotic State or religious fanaticism. On the contrary, the peasant's time is not the craftsman's time, nor is it the time of the worker in a self-managed business. No matter how socialised the farmer's property may be, the farmer will continue to maintain a close relationship with the seasonal rhythms of nature[22]. Conversely, craftsmen, small entrepreneurs and the most mobile and inventive must know the changes, possible failures and recoveries specific to an economic level of unforeseen events and initiatives.

The self-managed business or, in Proudhon's vocabulary, the *working company*, might have its own temporality in the sense that it would be created at a chosen time, and would then have to build, develop, or in the event of failure, disappear. But the individual worker would also have to manage their time and working life within this collectivity. Instead of receiving their life and work schedule from an owner, they would be a full member of this working community, participate in decisions, change positions, and get training according to their wishes and the possibilities within the community[23].

Federalism, understood at all levels, from the organisation of communes and businesses to the organisation of nations, would mean precisely this liberation of the multiple temporalities and their dynamic configuration. Agricultural, industrial and political federalism, guaranteeing the emancipation of these plural freedoms, would also aim to liberate the temporalities of the communes, working communities, provinces and regions. The question is not of stifling social rhythms in the straitjacket of the centralised State, but of harmonising, socialising and federating them.

In closing these too brief remarks, we may also ask what living in their century meant for these different theorists, and whether there is any relationship between their representations of

[21] P.-J. Proudhon, *Le Système des contradictions économiques* (1846), Paris, M. Rivière, 1923.
[22] *Idée générale de la Révolution* (1851), Paris, M. Rivière, 1923, p. 280.
[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 281–282.

time and their own lives. Without answering such a difficult question, we may venture a few remarks by way of conjecture.

All these writers experienced the passage of time intensely, reacting furiously to the conflicts and suffering they witnessed; they clung closely to the times of their social world, following its pattern of waiting or restlessness. They awaited other times, but in their own ways.

Marx, who strongly felt the variability of times – of economic life, of revolutions – spent long periods alone in speculation. Between the great phases of revolutionary action, he believed that another life was developing, which was hidden from most people's eyes and demanded to be understood: slow, scientific analysis. On the contrary, in 1848–49 Marx lived at a different pace: the rapid pace of revolution and fragile hopes. These periods of political action required another type of writing, that of the *Manifesto* and the third address in 1871: short, vivid, full of motion and emotion.

Proudhon's life followed the same pattern of impatient waiting, albeit with greater anxiety and sometimes even discouragement, as if the revolutionary timescale was less certain. In the face of these uncertainties, this revolutionary intellectual rejected long speculative retreats. He also rejected overly scholarly analyses, as if they always risked becoming a goal in themselves and distracting from action.

Meanwhile, Fourier, convinced that the course of events did not affect the ongoing absurdity of civilisation, waited in solitude for the coming of the new times, of which his writings would mark the beginning.

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