

The Discreet Charm of the Petty Bourgeoisie: Marx, Proudhon, and the Critique of Political Economy

by
Ryan Breeden

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Declaration of Committee

Name:

Ryan Breedon

Degree:

Master of Arts

Thesis title:

**The Discreet Charm of the Petty Bourgeoisie:
Marx, Proudhon, and the Critique of Political
Economy**

Committee:

Chair: Thomas Kuehn

Associate Professor, History

Mark Leier

Supervisor

Professor, History

Roxanne Panchasi

Committee Member

Associate Professor, History

Stephen Collis

Examiner

Professor, English

Abstract

This thesis examines Marx and Engels's concept of the petty bourgeoisie and its application to the French socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Rather than treating the concept as purely derogatory, I show that for Marx and Engels, the petty bourgeoisie was crucial in their broader critique of political economy by embodying the contradiction between capital and labour. Because of their structural position between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie are economically, politically, and socially pulled in two separate directions—identifying with either the owners of property, with propertyless workers, or with both simultaneously. This analysis is then extended by investigating Marx's critique of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. I argue that for Marx, Proudhon was not wrong because he was a member of the petty bourgeoisie. Rather, Proudhon mirrored the contradiction between capital and labour by attempting to steer a middle course between liberal political economy and socialism. This meant that for Marx and Engels, Proudhon's theories were incapable of leading to a world beyond capitalism, a point that activists today may find useful.

Keywords: Marx and Engels; Proudhon; 1848; petty bourgeoisie; political economy; capitalism; socialism; communism

Dedication

For Mom, Dad, and Matt. Thank you for your constant love and support.

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Introduction

When Donald Trump was elected in November 2016, the world seemed to change. How could a blatantly corrupt and racist narcissist, who openly lied and deceived voters during his campaign, draw enough support to win the United States presidency? And it was not only America. Even though Trump may seem, especially to American sensibilities, a *sui generis* phenomenon, his vision and rhetoric have considerable resonance with a variety of other movements and figures across much of the world. Indeed, in the 2010s, “Trumpism,” to borrow a designation from the political economist Mark Blyth, appears to have gone global with the elections of comparable figures such Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the reelections of Narendra Modi in India and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, as well the growing popularity of parties such as Alternative for Germany, Italy’s Lega Nord, Vox in Spain, and movements such as Brexit.¹

While its definition is often slippery, nearly all accounts describe “Trumpism” as a form of reactionary populist politics in which “the people,” defined in narrowly ethnic and racialized terms, are positioned against a complex amalgam of “elite” interests such as traditional politicians, the mainstream media, “political correctness,” immigrants both legal and “illegal,” and other racialized groups, international trade agreements, and “globalists.” It is often linked to a particular kind of leadership style of “strongman rule” which promises to protect “the people” against outside forces, espouses a scepticism toward international cooperation and international institutions, and promises to return their nation to a previous status.

While there are a variety of explanations that attempt explain Trumpism’s success, one popular account, propagated by punditry, is that the deteriorating economic conditions, rising inequality, and increased economic anxiety among the traditional, blue-collar working class have given rise to reactionary and authoritarian ideas. In response to the collapse of high-paying, unionized manufacturing jobs as a

¹ Mark Blyth, “Global Trumpism,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-11-15/global-trumpism>. See also, Wolfgang Streeck, “Trump and the Trumpists,” *Inference: International Review of Science* 3, no. 1 (April 2017), <https://inference-review.com/article/trump-and-the-trumpists>.

consequence of decades of automation, immigration, or outsourcing, the argument goes, the working class fell prey to the boasting and bluster of outsider politicians. The main strength of this account is readily apparent. There is no question that workers in Western countries have suffered acutely over the past few decades. As the economist Branko Milanovic explains in his book *Global Inequality*, the biggest gains in real per capita income since the late 1980s have gone to the top one percent and the new Asian middle classes in China, India, and elsewhere, while working class Americans, Canadians, Europeans, and Japanese have been the biggest losers.²

It is certainly true, then, that workers are a part of global Trumpism; but they are not its largest source. Indeed, a far larger section of support for Trumpism is the same social base that has historically been associated with the rise of fascism, that is, the lower middle class or what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called the “petty bourgeoisie”—that class of small property owners located between the bourgeoisie or middle class proper and the proletariat or working class. In the case of Trump’s voting base, for example, it was primarily white, relatively affluent suburban voters who felt threatened both by various “elites” as well as a racialized and gendered cohort of “line jumpers.”³ Similarly, in Europe, the surge of support for “Trumpist” parties such as France’s Front National, the Danish People’s Party, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and the United Kingdom Independence Party, has been attributed not to unskilled and low-wage workers, but to small property owners and the self-employed. As Inglehart and Norris summarize, the core social base of such parties “remains among the petty bourgeoisie—typically small proprietors like self-employed plumbers, or family-owned small businesses, and mom-and-pop shop-keepers—not among the category of low-waged, unskilled manual workers.”⁴

² Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 11.

³ Exit polls from the Republican primaries, for example, showed that those who voted for Trump earned an average yearly income of \$72,000, well above the US median yearly income of \$56,000. See Christine Walley, “Trump’s Election and the ‘White Working Class’: What We Missed,” *American Ethnologist* 44 no. 2 (2017): 232. See also Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right—A Journey to the Heart of the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016).

⁴ Pippa Norris and Ronald F. Inglehart, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP16-026*, August, 2016, 4. See also Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 257-293. This is not to suggest, of

Historically, however, this lower middle stratum of property owners has just as readily been found on the political left. Indeed, the emergence of modern populist politics in the mid-to-late nineteenth century was a distinctly left wing phenomenon driven primarily by petty proprietors and peasants. The People's Party in United States, or the Populists, was formed by small farmers in the late-nineteenth century to fight against big business and for greater government involvement in the economy, while in Russia during the same period, the *Narodniks* put forth a peasant-based and revolutionary agrarian socialism that agitated against the Tsar. In nineteenth-century France, moreover, small shopkeepers and artisans' commitment to leftist politics was so extensive that this class was, in the words of Crossick and Haupt, "a core element in defining what the left actually was." The involvement of the petty bourgeoisie in labour and socialist movements also extended to Italy, Denmark, and even Germany.⁵ It is in this sense that the anthropologist James C. Scott has argued that it is "impossible to write the history of struggles for equality without [the petty bourgeoisie], and their passion for the independence of small property, near the centre of attention." Indeed, for Scott, the petty bourgeoisie, both historically and presently, "represent a precious zone of autonomy and freedom" from both capitalist and "state socialist" systems of hierarchy.⁶

What explains this political diversity historically? This thesis will seek to answer this question through an examination of perhaps the best-known analyst and critic of the petty bourgeoisie, Karl Marx. In particular, I will investigate Marx and Engels's critique of the petty bourgeoisie, how it is constituted, its history, and its politics, and how Marx applied this critique to whom he took to be the petty bourgeois *par excellence*, the

course, that such support is therefore *reducible* only to class. As Smith and Hanley note in reference to Trump, "the effects of class are complex...and...mediated, in the large majority of instances, through biases and other attitudes." David Norman Smith and Eric Hanley, "The Anger Games: Who Voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Election, and Why?," *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 197.

⁵ Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Shopkeepers, Master Artisans, and the Historian: The Petite Bourgeoisie in Comparative Focus," in *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Methuen, 1984), 15, 9, 5. See also Crossick and Haupt, *Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe, 1780-1914: Enterprise, family and independence* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Jonathan Morris, *The Political Economy of Shopkeeping in Milan, 1886-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁶ James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 96, 85.

“father of anarchism” Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.⁷ The strength of Marx’s analysis of the petty bourgeoisie is that it is rooted in a conception of class that is both relational and based on an objective set of criteria rather than subjective or arbitrary designations. For Marx, classes are not distinguished by income levels, education, culture or occupational prestige, but above all by the structure and relations of the overall production of society. At the most basic level, classes are constituted by 1) the ownership or possession of property and means of production, 2) control over labour and the labour process, and 3) control over the surplus produced. The relations engendered by these structural features produce conflicts between different subsets of populations or groups, called classes, which for Marx constituted the driving force behind historical change. The core of these conflicts concerns who performs labour and who benefits from this labour, and it is through these conflicts that individuals within a class become aware of their class interests. Thus, the petty bourgeoisie, for example, is not distinguished exclusively by its particular share of the income distribution or whether or not its members are college-educated or not, but by its ownership of property and its relative autonomy in production.

Yet, while nearly all Marxists would agree with these propositions, there is considerable disagreement among Marxists about how best to think about the petty bourgeoisie in relation to other classes, particularly in light of the growth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of the so-called “middle class(es)” of managers, civil servants, technicians, nurses, teachers, and so on. Combined with the failure of working class revolutions in developed capitalist countries, this rise of these highly heterogeneous groups has seemed to reverse the Marxist prediction of the growing polarization of society between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In response, Marxists have attempted to deal with both the politics of this intermediate strata and its social composition.

⁷ There is some debate about whether or not Proudhon was, in fact, an anarchist. Indeed, he has been variously described as an anarchist, a republican socialist, a petty bourgeois socialist, a neo-liberal, a liberal socialist, an anti-theist, a proto-fascist, and a reactionary moralist. For more on this typology, see K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 233n1, and Alan Ritter, *The Political Thought of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969) 3-26.

Following Erik Olin Wright, we can distinguish between four different approaches to the problem of the “middle class.”⁸ Some have denied that such a class exists, arguing instead that society really is composed of simply the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. According to this view, the petty bourgeoisie that Marx and Engels described has all but disappeared as capitalism has advanced, and those that appear to be outside of this schema are a classless social stratum.⁹ Others have suggested that a “middle class” composed of neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat does now exist and it is either a subset of a new class, typically a “new petty bourgeoisie” or a “new working class,” or an entirely new class in its own right, called the “new middle class” or the “professional managerial class.”¹⁰ All of these classes and subsets of classes are to be distinguished from the “traditional” or “old” petty bourgeoisie, which has disappeared. Still others, finally, have argued that the “middle class” is not really a new class *per se* but a set of “contradictory class locations” that lie on the spectrum between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and between the bourgeoisie and the “traditional” petty bourgeoisie.¹¹ While each of these approaches has generated considerable scholarly interest, these accounts are either more concerned with determining why a “middle class” has persisted in light of Marx’s supposed prognosis it would fall into the dustbin of history, or in articulating new conceptions of class based on Marx’s theoretical project. What this neglects is any detailed examination of what exactly Marx and Engels said about this intermediate strata. For Marx and Engels, a “middle class” as such was unlikely to disappear as capitalism developed. Indeed, while many passages, particularly those in the *Communist Manifesto*, seem to support the view of an inevitable polarization between an ever-diminishing bourgeoisie and an ever-increasing proletariat, Marx and Engels nonetheless recognized that in the most developed capitalist countries, a “middle class” or “middle classes” had not disappeared but had in fact increased in numbers. This included both the petty bourgeoisie as well as other intermediate class elements, for example, lawyers, doctors, and professors. While the “traditional” petty bourgeoisie of

⁸ Erik Olin Wright, “Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure,” *Politics & Society* 9, no. 3 (September 1, 1980): 323–70.

⁹ Anthony Cutler, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, and Athar Hussain, *Marx’s Capital and Capitalism Today*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

¹⁰ Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975); Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional and Managerial Class,” *Radical America*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1977): 7-32.

¹¹ This is Wright’s own position. See, Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1978).

artisans and shopkeepers had declined in importance, though by no means absolutely, they were replaced by a “new” petty bourgeoisie of managers, overseers, and other capitalist functionaries.¹² Moreover, Marx would later consider those usually described as “middle class”—clerks, salespeople, and other salaried workers—as kinds of wage-labourers who may or may not produce surplus value depending on whether they are involved in the production or circulation of commodities.¹³

Conversely, despite the immense literature of the last 150 years on Marx’s relationship to Proudhon, there has been comparatively little investigation of Marx’s main critique against Proudhon, namely, that he was a “petty bourgeois.”¹⁴ While nearly all works on Marx and Proudhon reference the charge, very few treat it as anything more than simply another example of Marx’s dismissive attitude towards fellow socialists. Paul Thomas’s *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*, for example, argues that although Proudhon was a petty bourgeois in certain respects—in his social background, for example—Marx’s shift from an analytic term that describes the petty bourgeoisie as having certain characteristics to a descriptive term that characterizes Proudhon as petty bourgeois is a form of “verbal trickery” that betrays Marx’s overall intent to denigrate Proudhon.¹⁵ Similarly, Paul Winters’s “Politics and Society in Marx and Proudhon,” which is perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the relationship between Marx and Proudhon to date, offers very little investigation of Marx’s concept of the petty bourgeoisie.¹⁶

¹² Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (London: Kommunistischer Arbeiterbildungsverein, February 1848), in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works* (hereafter MECW) 6, 509.

¹³ Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1 (Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1867), in MECW 27, 337; Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 3 (Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1894), in MECW 37, 289-293. For an exhaustive critique of the supposed disappearance of a “middle class” in Marx, see Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Volume II: The Politics of Social Classes* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 613-627. Draper also points out that Marx and Engels, somewhat confusingly, used the term “middle class” to refer to both the bourgeoisie itself in its historical role between the aristocracy and the lower orders, especially in their English-language writings, and as a broad grouping of all the intermediate class elements between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, without reference to a specific class.

¹⁴ For an excellent, if somewhat outdated, bibliography on the voluminous interpretive accounts of this conflict, see Robert L. Hoffmann, *Revolutionary Justice: The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 376ff. Cursory examinations of their relationship also appear in most general histories of socialist and anarchist thought.

¹⁵ Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 245-248.

¹⁶ Paul Winters, “Politics and Society in Marx and Proudhon,’ PhD. diss, University of Manchester, 1984.

This thesis therefore brings together the Marxist account of the petty bourgeoisie with Marx's critique of Proudhon to offer a more nuanced and detailed account of both. The first chapter serves as a brief biography of both Marx and Proudhon, and traces the correspondence between the two men from the fall of 1844 to their subsequent break in 1847. The second chapter offers an overview of Marx and Engels's analysis of the petty bourgeoisie. Drawing on the work of Weil, I show that for Marx and Engels's the petty bourgeoisie embodied the contradiction between capital and labour. The final chapter connects this analysis to Marx's critique of Proudhon. I argue that this term was not merely a political epithet to describe Proudhon's class position, but an attempt to locate peculiar aspects of Proudhon's thought. In particular, what Marx and Engels meant by this term, I argue, is that Proudhon's theories remained trapped within the very tenets of political economy that he so deeply criticized. Despite Marx's frequent references to Proudhon throughout the rest of his life, he never wavered from this fundamental critique.

Ultimately, the central aim of this thesis is to provide a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of Marx's critique of Proudhon, and to point towards the need to take seriously the question of the petty bourgeoisie and where the lines of conflict between different classes lay. These two goals, it seems to me, can help situate future political projects. Despite his sometimes pejorative tone, Marx nonetheless recognized the crucial importance of class divisions *and* class alliances. As Marx noted of Proudhon, he was "the scientific interpreter of the petty bourgeoisie, which is a real merit since the petty bourgeoisie will be an integral part of all the impending social revolutions."¹⁷ Although social revolution has lost its sense of imminence, it has not lost its sense of urgency. Even if the possibility of a post-capitalist society seems to be a distant, if unimaginable, hope, the recurrence of economic and political crises across the world, vast levels of inequality not seen for over a century, looming environmental destruction and collapse, and the fallout and devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, put the subject of an alternative to capitalism on the agenda of history again. Returning to Marx's critique of Proudhon once again offers important insights on what this alternative might be.

¹⁷ Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, December 28 1846, in *MECW* 38, 105.

Chapter 1. From first encounters to the break

Marx and Proudhon first came into contact in the fall of 1844 in Paris and met only briefly. Marx was nine years younger than the then thirty-five-year-old Proudhon, and he was keen to meet whom he took to be to the best of the French socialists.¹⁸ We know very little about the substance of their discussions, although Engels, writing in 1885, remarked that “the two of them had often spent whole nights discussing economic questions.”¹⁹ When Proudhon died in January 1865, moreover, Marx recalled that

during my stay in Paris in 1844 I came into personal contact with Proudhon. I mention this here because to a certain extent I am also to blame for his “SOPHISTICATION”: as the English call the adulteration of commercial goods. In the course of lengthy debates often lasting all night, I infected him very much to his detriment with Hegelianism, which, owing to his lack of German, he could not study properly. After my expulsion from Paris Herr Karl Grün continued what I had begun. As a teacher of German philosophy, he also had the advantage over me that he himself understood nothing about it.²⁰

This retrospective appraisal concealed the young Marx’s deep admiration of Proudhon. In November 1844, Marx was finishing his first book with Engels, and he devoted a part of this work to defending Proudhon against the criticisms of Edgar Bauer, a member of the Young Hegelians.²¹ For Marx, Proudhon was a link to both France’s revolutionary history, a common source of admiration among German radicals, and with the proletariat, whom increasingly drew Marx’s attention. In his first mention of Proudhon in an article for the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx praised him above other French socialists for his “sharp-witted work,” *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* of 1840.²² But despite Marx’s praise for Proudhon’s analysis, it was not unqualified. By 1844, he had begun to suggest that Proudhon remained trapped within the strictures of liberal political economy rather

¹⁸ David Gregory, “Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’ Knowledge of French Socialism in 1842-43,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 10, no. 1 (1983): 143–93.

¹⁹ Engels, “Marx and Rodbertus” [Preface to the First German Edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy*], *Die Neue Zeit* (January 1885), in MECW 26, 278.

²⁰ Marx, “On Proudhon” [Letter to J.B. Schweizer], *Der Social-Demokrat*, Nos. 16, 17 and 18, February 1, 3 and 5, 1865, in MECW 20, 30.

²¹ *The Holy Family*, written between September and November 1844, published in 1845, was a critique of the Young Hegelians. See, MECW 4, 23-51.

²² Marx, “Communism and the Augsburg *Allgemeine Zeitung*,” *Rheinische Zeitung* (October 16 1842), in MECW 1, 220.

than subjecting political economy itself to criticism, and he critiqued the latter's views on revolution.²³ Nonetheless, he remained cordial with Proudhon, and invited the latter to join him, Engels, and other European radicals as the French correspondent for a new Communist Correspondence Committee.

This invitation, however, cordial as it may have been, would mark the break between Marx and Proudhon. In his letter to Proudhon, on 5 May 1846, Marx assured the Frenchman that "far as France is concerned, we all of us believe that we could find no better correspondent than yourself. As you know, the English and Germans have hitherto estimated you more highly than have your own compatriots." The position, Marx explained, entailed facilitating communication between European socialists and communists for "when the moment for action comes." At the end of this rather flattering letter, a postscript co-signed by Philippe Gigot and Engels warned Proudhon about a former associate of Marx's, Karl Grün, who was described as a "literary swindler" and "a species of charlatan." More importantly, for Marx, Grün was

dangerous. He abuses the connection he has built up, thanks to his impertinence, with authors of renown in order to create a pedestal for himself and compromise them in the eyes of the German public. In his book on French socialists [Grün, *Die soziale Bewegung in Frankreich und Belgien*], he has the audacity to describe himself as tutor (*Privatdozent*, a German academic title) to Proudhon, claims to have revealed to him the important axioms of German science and makes fun of his writings. Beware of this parasite.²⁴

Proudhon, who was in Lyon at the time, replied on 17 May 1846, and his response is worth quoting at length. While agreeing with Marx that it would be fruitful for the two to work together to discover the "laws of society," he cautioned Marx against what he took to be the German's propensity for "*a priori* dogmatisms":

let us not in our turn dream of indoctrinating the people; let us not fall into the contradiction of your compatriot Martin Luther, who, having overthrown Catholic theology, immediately set about, with vigorous excommunication and anathema, the foundation of a Protestant theology. For the last three centuries Germany has been occupied only with undoing M. Luther's shoddy work; let us not leave humanity with the same mess as a result of our work. I applaud with all my heart your thought of bringing all opinions

²³ See Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (unpublished manuscript, April-August, 1844) in *MECW* 3, 241, 280, 314.

²⁴ Marx to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, May 5 1846, in *MECW* 38, 39-40

to light; let us carry on a good and loyal dispute; let us give the world an example of learned and far-sighted tolerance, but let us not, merely because we are at the head of a movement, make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance, let us not pose as the apostles of a new religion, even if it is the religion of logic, the religion of reason. Let us welcome and encourage all protests, let us condemn all exclusiveness, all mysticism; let us never regard a question as exhausted, and when we have used our last argument, let us start from the beginning, if necessary, with eloquence and irony. On that condition, I would be happy to join your association. Otherwise — no!²⁵

Proudhon also objected to Marx's revolutionary orientation:

I have also some observations to make on this phrase of your letter: *at the moment of action*. Perhaps you still retain the opinion that no reform is at present possible without a *coup de main*, without what was formerly called a revolution, and which is simply a jolt. That opinion, which I understand, which I excuse, and would gladly discuss, having shared it myself for a long time, my most recent studies, I confess, have made me abandon completely. I do not think we need that in order to succeed; and that consequently we must not take *revolutionary action* as a means of social reform, because that pretended means would simply be an appeal to force, to arbitrariness, in short, a contradiction. I thus frame the problem in this way: *to return to society, by an economic combination, of the wealth which was withdrawn from society by another economic combination*. In other words, turning Political Economy, the theory of Property, against Property, so as to engender what you German socialists call *community* and what I will limit myself for the moment to calling *liberty* or *equality*. But I think I know the means of solving this problem with only a short delay; I would therefore prefer to burn Property slowly, rather than give it new strength by making a St. Bartholomew's night of the proprietors.²⁶

As we will see, this response captured what Marx would critique as Proudhon's petty bourgeois vision, namely his idea to transform property relations through political economy itself rather than a revolutionary break with capitalism.

Regarding Marx's attack on Grün, Proudhon replied that he was mistaken about Grün's character, and that the latter's "literary swindling" should be seen as simply an exile's desperate attempt to procure a living for his wife and two children. "How else do you want him to make a living if not by modern ideas?" Proudhon asked. "I see here only misfortune and extreme necessity and I excuse the man." He added, moreover, that

²⁵ Proudhon to M. Marx, May 17 1846, in *Correspondance de P.-J. Proudhon, précédée d'une notice sur P.-J. Proudhon par J.-A. Langlois*, t.2, edited by A. Lacroix et cie (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1875), 198-199. All translations are my own.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 199-200.

Grün had even suggested that Proudhon cite Marx in his next book. Proudhon also took Grün's apparent lampooning in stride, remarking that "I know enough to have the right to be poked fun at myself on occasion." He concluded his reply by suggesting that Marx help promote Grün's German translation of his forthcoming book.²⁷

Taken as a whole, the implication of Proudhon's reply was a repudiation of the offer of collaboration because of Marx's sectarianism, an attitude exemplified by the latter's treatment of Grün. He would not join the Correspondence Committee unless debate and discussion remained open and good-natured. Marx's reaction is not known—but it can easily be imagined that he blamed Grün for turning Proudhon against him. The mention that Proudhon's new book would be appearing in German, moreover, likely agitated Marx, whose own work on political economy was not proceeding as smoothly as he had hoped—a situation which exacerbated his already fraught financial situation.²⁸ If the German proletariat was not to be further indoctrinated by Grün's interpretation of Proudhon, Marx would have to publish a quick response to Proudhon. In the meantime, Engels was dispatched to Paris in August 1846 to challenge Grün's "Proudhonian" influence among German itinerant workers and artisans,²⁹ while Marx awaited the publication of Proudhon's new book.

Proudhon's book, the two-volume, roughly 1000-paged *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère* (*System of Economic Contradictions, or the Philosophy of Poverty*) appeared in France in October 1846, while

²⁷ ibid., 200-201.

²⁸ Marx's book, entitled *A Critique of Economics and Politics*, was originally slated to be completed by the summer of 1845. In August 1846, Marx wrote to his publisher, the progressive Carl Leske, explaining why the book had not appeared, promising that he would have it completed by November (he only began working on it again in September). In February, 1847, Leske demanded that the contract be annulled and the advance he had given to Marx be returned. Part of the reason for this demand was that Leske learned that Proudhon's book might undercut the sales of Marx's book. See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 219; David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography*, 3rd. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1995 [1973]), 127.

²⁹ In fact, neither Engels nor Grün achieved much. Although Engels remarked that he had finally "triumph[ed] over Grün" among the German workers, he was so contemptuous of their lack of class consciousness that he concluded that nothing could be done for them. Grün, on the other hand, wrote to Proudhon in September expressing that his reputation in Paris had been ruined by Engels. See James F. Strassmeier, "Karl Grün: The Confrontation with Marx, 1844-1848," PhD. diss, Loyola University Chicago, 1969, 70-78.

Grün's German translation was due to appear in May the following year.³⁰ Proudhon hailed this work as his most important to date, but Marx and Engels were less sanguine.³¹ “[B]ad...It's not worth the 15 francs it costs,” wrote Engels.³² Marx agreed, finding “the book on the whole poor, if not very poor...Mr. Proudhon does not provide a false critique of political economy because his philosophy is absurd—he produces an absurd philosophy because he has not understood present social conditions in their *engrènement* [meshing].”³³ Marx began working on his reply in December and was finished by June 1847. The mockingly entitled *Misère de la philosophie (The Poverty of Philosophy)* would be the only book-length treatise directed against a single individual that Marx ever wrote. He reduced Proudhon to a “petty bourgeois” reformist and pedant who had completely failed to grasp liberal political economy, the philosophy of Hegel, and the theories of socialism. According to Marx, “Monsieur Proudhon flatters himself that he has criticized both economics and communism, but in reality he has remained far below either of them.”³⁴ Unable to move beyond moralistic formulas and assessments of capitalist society, Marx suggested, Proudhon could not acknowledge “the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society.” Marx concluded his reply with a quote from the novelist George Sand, nodding to Proudhon's opposition to revolutionary violence: “*Le combat ou la mort; la lutte sanguinaire ou le néant. C'est ainsi que la question est invinciblement posée* (Combat or death, bloody struggle or extinction. Thus the question is inexorably put).”³⁵

While Marx hoped his polemic would diminish interest in Proudhon among both French and German workers, it seems to have had little impact. Published in French—so that Proudhon could answer—in both Brussels and Paris, a total of only 800 copies were printed, and Marx had to pay for the publication himself. Nor does it seem to have had

³⁰ The book actually appeared in March. Proudhon later found Grün's interpretation of this work as somewhat lacking. See Proudhon to MM. Garner Frères, Concierge July 20 1848, in *Correspondance*, t.3, 27.

³¹ Proudhon to A.M. Ackermann, July 2 1846, in *Correspondance*, t.2, 206-209.

³² Engels to Marx, Middle of November-December, 1846, in *MECW* 38, 94.

³³ Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, December 28 1846, in *ibid.*, 95.

³⁴ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon* (Paris: A. Frank, 1847), in *MECW* 6, 178.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 212.

any effect among French socialists and workers.³⁶ The *Système*, on the other hand, was widely distributed in German, with a second translation appearing almost simultaneously alongside Grün's.³⁷ Ironically, Proudhon's book also received scant attention in France, something Proudhon lamented in his *Carnets*.³⁸ For his part, Proudhon did not publicly reply to Marx's polemic, an unusual occurrence given Proudhon's frequent polemics with rival French thinkers.³⁹ Proudhon did make a few private comments, however. In a letter written in September 1847, Proudhon expressed that the "libel" of "one Doctor Marx" was "a tissue of rudeness, slander, falsifications, [and] plagiarisms."⁴⁰ A few days later, he remarked that "Marx...is the tapeworm of socialism." In his own copy of the *Misère*, Proudhon made a number of marginal comments along similar lines. At one point, Proudhon comments: "what Marx's book really means is that he is sorry that everywhere I have thought the way *he* does, and said so before *he* did. Any determined reader can see that it is Marx who, having read me, regrets thinking like me. What a man!"⁴¹

Although Proudhon seemed to have largely forgotten about Marx after 1847, Marx and Engels did not, continuing their attack on Proudhon and Proudhonism for the rest of their lives. The *Communist Manifesto* (1848), for example, devoted special sections to denouncing Proudhon's "Conservative or Bourgeois Socialism" and Grün's "German or 'True' Socialism."⁴² Marx's interpretation of the coup of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852) was positioned as a direct challenge to Proudhon's "historical apology" *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'État du 2 décembre* (1852). The *Grundrisse* (1857-1858), Marx's draft of

³⁶ McLellan, *Karl Marx*, 126. Some of Marx's friends expressed confusion about his decision to publish in French.

³⁷ P.-J. Proudhon, *Die Widersprüche der National-Oekonomie oder die Philosophie der Not* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1847).

³⁸ Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 101.

³⁹ Various explanations for this silence, ranging from personal troubles to an unwillingness to acknowledge an obscure German author's work, can be found in Hoffman, *Revolutionary Justice*, 100.

⁴⁰ Proudhon to A.M. Guillaumin, 19 September, 1847, in *Correspondance*, t.2, 267-268. Proudhon also made a few private antisemitic remarks concerning Marx and the other German-Jewish intellectual emigres.

⁴¹ Quoted in Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 101.

⁴² Grün's name was explicitly appended to this latter variety of socialism by Engels in a footnote to the 1890 German edition. The German readers of 1848 likely needed no clarification about who their target was.

Capital, begins with a citation of Alfred Darimon, a follower of Proudhon, and the first chapter is almost entirely a critique of him, and Volume 1 of *Capital* itself (1867), has recently been reinterpreted as almost entirely a refutation of Proudhon.⁴³

Yet it was always with reference to his arguments in the *Poverty* that Marx attacked Proudhon, and where the accusation that Proudhon was a “petty bourgeois” was first put forth. As Marx’s first assessment of the *Système* in his 1846 letter to Pavel Annenkov put it:

Mr. Proudhon is, from top to toe, a philosopher, an economist of the petty bourgeoisie. In an advanced society and because of his situation, a petty bourgeois becomes a socialist on the one hand, and economist on the other, i.e. he is dazzled by the magnificence of the upper middle classes and feels compassion for the sufferings of the people.⁴⁴

Nearly twenty years later, in an obituary for Proudhon, Marx repeated his earlier negative judgment:

He wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeois and the proletarians; he is merely the petty bourgeois, continually tossed back and forth between capital and labor, political economy and communism.⁴⁵

What did Marx mean by this and why was this such an issue? In order to answer these questions, a brief overview of Marx and Engels’ use of the term is required. I will first summarize what Marx and Engels meant by the term “petty bourgeois” before seeing the way in which Marx applied this critique to Proudhon.

⁴³ David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (London; New York: Verso Books, 1993), 155; William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton University Press, 2018). See also Peter Hudis, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 150.

⁴⁴ Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, December 28 1846, *MECW* 38, 105.

⁴⁵ Marx, “On Proudhon” [Letter to J.B. Schweitzer], January 24 1865, *MECW* 20, 26.

Chapter 2. Evolution of a class concept

Like so many terms they employed, most of Marx and Engels analysis of the petty bourgeoisie is incomplete and loosely scattered throughout their writings. An early use of the term can be found in *The Holy Family* where Marx and Engels note the “petty-bourgeois respectability” of Le Chourineur, a character in Eugène Sue’s 1843 novel *Les Mystères de Paris*, although Marx does take note of “petty traders” as early as 1842.⁴⁶ The most famous mention comes from a passage from the *Communist Manifesto* where they speak of a class “fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie.”⁴⁷ From then on, until the appearance of Marx’s critique of political economy in 1867, both Marx and Engels continuously expanded and refined the concept as they sharpened their critique of capitalist society.

Yet while the term was frequently employed, Marx’s and Engels never defined “the petty bourgeoisie” any categorical way. The result is a loose collection of scattered mentions throughout their voluminous writings. Nonetheless, a basic definition can be proposed. Marx and Engels used the term in three distinct but related senses: as an economic or structural category within their critique of capitalist society; a historical and political category within their theory of societal transformation; and, finally, as an abusive shorthand. Economically, the petty bourgeoisie engage in small-scale or “petty” production and exchange. They make their living through their own labour with their own means of production and reproduction—tools, machinery, land, and so on—by producing goods and services for sale on the market. This last aspect distinguishes the petty bourgeoisie from the working class or proletariat, who are excluded from any ownership over productive resources and have nothing to sell but their labour-power. The petty bourgeoisie are thus relatively independent in the sphere of production and the marketplace, able to dispose freely both their goods and services, and their labour. Of course the petty bourgeoisie can be, and historically were, subject to many forms of

⁴⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism Against Bruno Bauer and Company* (Frankfurt am Main, 1845), in MECW 4, 164; Marx, “Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood,” *Rheinische Zeitung* No. 300, October 27, 1842, in MECW 1, 235. Marx and Engels may have picked up the term “petite bourgeois” during their period in Belgium where the term was more commonly used than in France. Haupt and Crossick, *Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe*, 136.

⁴⁷ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (London: *Kommunistischer Arbeiterbildungsverein*, February 1848), in MECW 6, 509.

pressure from outside, notably from banks, creditors, market fluctuations, government, and so on, but in their relation to the labour process they are “their own boss” and answer only to themselves and the necessities of their particular trade or business. On the other hand, the petty bourgeoisie are also distinguished in a fundamental way from the capitalist class and the big bourgeoisie, in that they, and frequently their families, must labour on what they own, and cannot simply live off the surplus value they appropriate from workers. This is so even if they supplement their own labour by hiring others seasonally or part-time.

What best characterizes the relationship of the petty bourgeoisie to the overall capitalist system, therefore, is one of relative economic autonomy. This characteristic is important because it locates the petty bourgeoisie both *inside* and *outside* capitalist social relations—as a contradictory class position between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Thus, the members of this class are constantly striving, on the one hand, to maximize their control of land and the other means of production and reproduction, to expand their capital and, potentially rise into the capitalist class. On the other hand, they are equally concerned to realize the full value of what they produce, and thus struggle as workers to retain whatever wealth they produce against forms of expropriation—taxation, interest, and so on—that rob them of what they see as their natural right to the product of their labour.⁴⁸ This duality makes them identify at one time with the capitalists, at others with the working class. As Marx puts it, this dual character means that the petty bourgeois

...is cut into two. As owner of the means of production he is capitalist; as worker he is his own wage-labourer. He therefore pays himself his wages

⁴⁸ Despite alluding to the rise of “new” petty bourgeois elements, Marx and Engels did not discuss in any great detail how this new class formation’s lack of ownership of the means of production was to be reconciled with their status as petty bourgeois. One possible explanation, suggested by Weil, is that the “new” petty bourgeoisie, while often formally wage-labourers with nothing to sell but their labour-power, nonetheless *internalize* the same capital-labour relation as the “traditional” petty bourgeoisie that Marx and Engels discussed. They do this, in the case of scientists and engineers, for example, by maintaining a relative autonomy over their working conditions, enjoying higher salaries which allows them to realize more of the value of their labour, and by embodying their skills into technologies that are used for capital accumulation. It also appears ideologically, in the sense of conceiving of such skills as their property or capital—analogous to the family farms of the traditional petty bourgeoisie—by being “invested” in the continuance of capitalist society, and by conceiving of themselves as above or outside class distinctions. Weil’s account, however, suffers from his rather restricted definition of the proletariat as manual labourers. See Robert Weil, “Contradictory Class Definitions: Petty Bourgeoisie and the ‘Classes’ of Erik Olin Wright,” *Critical Sociology* 21, no. 3 (October 1, 1995): 3–37.

as a capitalist and draws his profit from his capital, i.e. he exploits himself as wage labourer and pays himself in SURPLUS VALUE the tribute labour owes to capital. Perhaps he pays himself yet a third part as landowner (rent)...

...In the given case, the producer—the worker—is the owner, the proprietor of his means of production. They are therefore no more capital than he is a wage labourer vis-à-vis them. Nevertheless, they are considered to be capital, and he himself is split in two, so that *he* as capitalist employs himself as wage labourer.⁴⁹

The petty bourgeoisie, by embodying the capital-labour relation, are thus pulled in two directions simultaneously.

Marx and Engels traced the emergence of the petty bourgeoisie to the decline of “feudalism.” In the case of England, Marx noted that the transition from serfdom to a system of freeholding freed peasants from feudal relations and allowed the development of an economy based on relatively independent petty commodity production, with “private property based on the labour of its owner,” concentrated in both the countryside and in the rising urban centres.⁵⁰ The growth of trade and manufacture in the fourteenth century placed competitive pressures that squeezed these independent producers, with some falling into the proletariat while others were able to rise into the bourgeoisie. Beginning in the sixteenth century with the decline of guilds, which offered some measure of protection from market competition through setting prices, restricting output, and control over their particular trade, the petty bourgeoisie took on new forms the precise composition of which depended on the particular level of a nation’s socio-economic development. Thus, in less-developed countries, such as France and Germany, the petty bourgeoisie consisted primarily of artisans and rural independent

⁴⁹ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Berlin: Franz Duncker, 1859), in MECW 34, 141-143.

⁵⁰ There is some debate about whether or not Marx viewed this form petty or small-scale commodity production as constituting an actual historical mode of production, or whether it was merely a theoretical construct to conceptualize the transition from an economy in which production for use predominated to one in which production for exchange predominated, i.e. from pre-capitalist societies to capitalist society. Engels seems to have been the source of this controversy when in his editorial comments to Volume 3 of *Capital*, he described Marx's method in Volume 1 of *Capital* as beginning from a society in which the “simple production of commodities” that develops, both logically and historically, into capitalism. See, Engels, preface to *Capital*, Volume 33, MECW 37, 16, and Engels's “Supplement” in ibid, 883-887. For an overview of the debate, see Paresh Chattopadhyay, *Socialism and Commodity Production: Essay in Marx Revival* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 100-117.

peasants.⁵¹ In countries where “modern civilisation has developed” more fully, such as England, a newer petty bourgeoisie had emerged, a class of small, urban independent producers and merchants whose existence was constantly threatened through competition with large-scale industrial enterprises, and it is this newer formation that drew most of their attention. According to Marx and Engels, there was a historic, if uneven, tendency for many of the petty bourgeoisie’s occupations to decline with the development of capitalism, with smaller firms being pushed out of business via competition with larger firms. “The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class.”⁵²

In drawing this distinction between different scales of industrial enterprises, Marx and Engels here reflected a wider linguistic transition in Germany during the nineteenth century. The *Stadtburgers*, or burghers, of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had included master artisans as well as both large and small businessmen and merchants. Similarly, the term *Mittelstand*, or middle estate, had embraced members of the petty bourgeoisie like craftsmen and shopkeepers in addition to larger manufacturers. After 1850, however, the bourgeoisie grew closer to landowners and traditional elites, both in terms and wealth income, as well as culturally and politically, and the *Mittelstand* began to be restricted to the core petty bourgeois base of shopkeepers and artisans. This linguistic shift was by no means absolute—it applied largely to cities as opposed to small towns where such distinctions were blurred—but the new and narrower definition of *Mittelstand* reflected the emergence of a more distinct petty bourgeois class.⁵³

While these structural and historical factors were important in placing the petty bourgeoisie within the framework of capitalist development, Marx and Engels placed

⁵¹ Engels, “The Role of Force in History,” *Die Neue Zeit* (1895-1896), MECW 26, 499-500; See also Engels, “The Constitutional Question in Germany” (1847), in MECW 6, 71.

⁵² Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, MECW 6, 494. Other formulations also included among the petty bourgeoisie retired tradespeople, cafe and restaurant owners, wine merchants, and other small traders, both in rural and urban settings.

⁵³ See David Blackbourn, “Between resignation and volatility: the German petite bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century,” in *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans*, 35-61; Haupt and Crossick, *Petty Bourgeoisie in Europe*, 134-138.

more emphasis on the kind of mentality or ideology these factors generated.⁵⁴ Broadly, this entailed social and political demands that were generally for “independence” and “freedom” which were ideological expressions of the desire for economic autonomy and personal liberty unconstrained by the emerging system of industrial capitalism. There was a yearning for a simpler time in which familial—that is, patriarchal—and communal bonds were strong, and the pressures of “big business,” and “big government” were either completely absent or at the very least severely circumscribed, and in which production and exchange was organized in a small-scale, individualized fashion. Of course, such a time may not have actually existed, but the picture serves as an important reference in this kind of ideological vision.⁵⁵

Other classes too were not immune from this desire for autonomy. As early as 1844, Marx noted that all human beings desire some measure of security and individual autonomy. “A being only considers himself independent,” Marx suggests, “when he stands on his own feet; and he only stands on his own feet when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the grace of another regards himself as a dependent being.”⁵⁶ While universal, then, this desire was nonetheless modified by the individual’s particular class position. Thus, serfs, for example, who fled from their lordly obligations “were [only] doing what every class that is freeing itself from a fetter does.” The proletariat too, “like every human being, has the vocation of satisfying [its] needs” for, among other things, autonomy. But whereas the proletariat, Marx and Engels argued, would soon transition away from seeking to “restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages” in which ownership was equated with freedom, the petty bourgeoisie remained wedded to this proprietarian vision. Thus, as Marx would argue in the *Grundrisse*, artisans, for example, see their own freedom as the as the realisation of

⁵⁴ The two are of course related, but in no way is ideology to be understood as mechanistically or somehow automatically flowing from class structure. For an illuminating and brief analysis of the way Marx and Marxists have thought about class, see Salar Mohandesi, “Class Consciousness or Class Composition?,” *Science & Society* 77, no. 1 (2013): 72–97.

⁵⁵ Marx in fact seems to suggest that this individualistic conception of society is historically inaccurate: “The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole....It is not until the 18th century, in ‘bourgeois society,’ that the various forms of the social nexus confront the individual as merely a means towards his private ends, as external necessity.” *Grundrisse*, in MECW 28, 17-18.

⁵⁶ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” MECW 3, 304.

themselves as “the *worker as proprietor* or the *working proprietor*” who owns the instruments their particular trade, and can command a fair market price for their goods.⁵⁷

Yet combined with such profound heterogeneity within petty bourgeois occupations, as well as a high rate of social mobility, this emphasis on independence tended to restrict any form of class-consciousness comparable to the proletariat or bourgeoisie. This does not mean, however, that the petty bourgeoisie were absent in political struggle. Although in the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels seemed to ascribe to the petty bourgeoisie a lack of class consciousness, the pivotal role of this class in determining the outcomes of the Revolutions of 1848-1849 in both France and Germany altered their perspective. In describing Louis Bonaparte’s *coup d'état*, for example, Marx argued that the petty bourgeoisie, comprised predominately of shopkeepers, artisans, and above all the peasantry, and its social-democratic representatives asserted themselves in four distinct periods, beginning first with the February revolution of 1848 when it rebelled alongside the big bourgeoisie and the proletariat, declaring its social democratic program against the July Monarchy, followed by the June Days of 1848 when they acted with the big bourgeoisie to crush the proletariat uprising which threatened its limited property and class status. This latter reversal was partly driven by the Second Republic’s imposition of a new land tax which hit the peasantry the hardest. In February 1849, however, the petty bourgeoisie again joined the proletariat—for reasons again in part due to taxation as well rent collection—to form a coalition against the big bourgeoisie and Bonaparte, fighting a parliamentary struggle for social democracy as a means “not of doing away with two extremes, capital and wage labor, but of weakening their antagonism and transforming it into harmony.” Finally, in December 1852, feeling betrayed by the false promises of the big bourgeoisie and with no further hope in the capacity of the proletariat, the petty bourgeois fraction of the social democratic party overtook the proletarian elements and decided, to fully support Bonaparte.⁵⁸

The members of the petty bourgeoisie were thus fully capable of asserting themselves politically, but their structural antagonism pulled them into supporting which

⁵⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28, 423.

⁵⁸ Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire,” *Die Revolution*, 1852, in MECW 11, 183-197. Engels described a similar dynamic in Germany during its own revolutionary upsurge. Engels, “Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 1851-1852, in MECW 11, 3-91

social force was capable of best protecting their class interests. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that although Marx plainly saw the petty bourgeoisie as an ally of the counterrevolution against the proletariat in the *Brumaire*, this was by no means a natural or predestined result; indeed Marx would later criticize the nascent Social Democratic Party of Germany on precisely this point.⁵⁹ Rather, throughout his historical works, and particularly in the *Brumaire*, he sees sections of the petty bourgeoisie in alliance with the proletariat against the big bourgeoisie, however feebly and inadequately. Both of these classes are mutually oppressed under capitalism and short-term political goals necessitated class alliances, though, of course, with the proletariat forming its own independent organizations that push the petty bourgeoisie towards revolutionary aims. Indeed, this analysis was strikingly confirmed during the Paris Commune, where Marx noted that “for the first time in history the petty and *moyenne* middle class has openly rallied round the workmen’s Revolution, and proclaimed it as the only means of their own salvation and that of France!”⁶⁰

Its political vacillation, however, led Marx and Engels to often resort to abusive characterizations. While their initial characterizations of the petty bourgeoisie were more or less benign, the perceived betrayal of this class of peasants, shopkeepers, and artisans during 1848 shifted Marx and Engels’s use of the concept towards distinctly hostile ends. Thus, the petty bourgeois, Marx wrote in 1852, held “delusions” about modern society, seeing bourgeois rule “as the final product, the *non plus ultra* of history.” Protesting with “blood-curdling yelps” and “humanitarian airs,” they denied the existence of “not merely the class struggle but also the existence of classes.”⁶¹ Engels was even more forceful. The petty bourgeoisie were “invariably full of bluster and loud protestations,” and although capable of revolutionary sentiment this was only insofar as their existence as petty bourgeois was not threatened; they were, moreover,

faint-hearted, cautious and calculating as soon as the slightest danger approaches; aghast, alarmed and wavering as soon as the movement it provoked is seized upon and taken up seriously by other classes; treacherous to the whole movement for the sake of its petty bourgeois existence as soon as there is any question of a struggle with weapons in

⁵⁹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” *Die Neue Zeit*, Bd. 1, No. 18, 1890-91 [1875], in MECW 24, 88-89. See also Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, 308-316.

⁶⁰ Marx, “The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Workingmen’s Association,” (London, 1871), in MECW 22, 496.

⁶¹ Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, March 5 1852, in MECW 39, 58.

hand – and in the end, as a result of its indecisiveness, more often than not cheated and ill-treated as soon as the reactionary side has achieved victory.⁶²

While perhaps true in certain cases, these features—procrastination, ineptitude, cowardliness—in many ways betrayed the sensitivity in which Marx and Engels analyzed the petty bourgeoisie as a class. By reducing certain moral or psychological characteristics to class position, Marx and Engels fell into a kind of class determinism in which every feature of a particular individual was determined by their position in the economic structure, rather than class and class relations being “the general light tingeing all other colours and modifying them in their specific quality,” as Marx would later put it.⁶³

This pejorative designation was applied not only to classes as a whole, but also to particular individuals who may or may not have actually been a part of the class itself. Indeed, Marx and Engels described, among other figures, anarchist and proto-anarchists such as William Godwin and Max Stirner, political economists such as Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi, social reformers such as Eugène Buret and François Vidal, and radical republicans such as Alexandre Ledru-Rollin and Émile de Girardin all as petty bourgeois. Some of these figures were indeed petty bourgeois in social background, but many were not. Of all these figures, however, it was Proudhon, according to Marx and Engels, who best typified the petty bourgeoisie. It is to Proudhon that we now turn.

⁶² Engels, “The Campaign for the German Imperial Constitution,” *MECW* 10, 150.

⁶³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, *MECW* 28, 43.

Chapter 3. Petty bourgeois par excellence?

To begin, Proudhon was indeed of peasant origin.⁶⁴ He was born on January 15, 1809 in Besançon in the Franche-Comté region of France, a relatively poor suburb of small landowners, artisans and winegrowers. His grandparents were both peasants and his father was an unsuccessful brewer-tavern owner. Much of Proudhon's early life was spent in the countryside around Besançon, often tending the cows and performing other chores, and his later writings would reflect the strong love and admiration he retained for his rural upbringing.⁶⁵ In 1827, he began an apprenticeship at a Besançon printing shop, progressing to compositor and later proofreader. It was a trade that Proudhon would work at off and on for various firms—including his own, which failed—over the course of eleven years. Between 1843 and 1847, finally, Proudhon also worked for his friend Antoine Gauthier's shipping firm, where he did administrative and managerial work, while continuing his journalistic and literary career. This peasant background, combined with occupations in which wage-labour was mixed with managerial and supervisory work, would have placed Proudhon as a member of the socially unstable petty bourgeoisie, ever tending towards the proletariat.

Of course, Marx himself was no proletarian.⁶⁶ Although he no doubt, like Proudhon, experienced some of the pressures of proletarian existence, living much of his life in poverty, Marx was born into a relatively affluent family in the Prussian Rhineland. His father was a lawyer and Marx initially followed his father's occupation, enrolling in the Law Faculty at the University of Bonn. After switching to philosophy and changing universities, receiving his doctorate in April 1841, Marx began a career in journalism, with occasional stints as editor at various publications, which he would

⁶⁴ The following biographical details draw on George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956; Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987); Hyams, *Pierre-Joesph Proudhon*; and Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism*.

⁶⁵ See, for example, *De la Justice dans la révolution et dans l'Église* (1858), 403-406.

⁶⁶ Biographies of Marx numerous. The most useful accounts I have found are Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962); Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*; and Sven-Eric Liedman, *A World to Win: The Life and Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Verso, 2018). Biographies of Engels are less common, though for particularly insightful account see Tristram Hunt, *Marx's General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2009).

continue for much of his life alongside his economic research and political activism. Engels had an even more privileged upbringing. His father owned a successful cotton-textile mills in Barmen in Prussia, and Salford in England, and was a partner in the Ermel & Engels cotton plant in Manchester. In 1842, Engels went to Manchester to work in the offices of his father's firm, and it was job that Engels would do off and on for most of his life while helping fund Marx and his family. Engels also worked as a journalist, and even wrote a number of articles under Marx's name when the latter was too busy with his research.

Thus, it was not only, or not exclusively, one's economic position in the overall relations of capitalist production that Marx and Engels could have objected to in their disagreements with Proudhon. For, as was plainly obvious, there was no immediate or exclusive correspondence between the economic, political and ideological dimensions of social life. One could, at least in principle, be part of any class economically and still serve the ultimate cause of proletarian revolution and the struggle for a communist future through political activity or ideological agitation.⁶⁷ Indeed, the latter was what Marx and Engels devoted much of their practical lives to. Nor was their critique centred on Proudhon's focus on artisans and peasants as opposed to the industrial proletariat. For although Marx tended to doubt the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, he himself formulated his own theory of revolution at least in part based on his own encounters with German artisans in Paris, and consistently took them, along with other sections of the petty bourgeoisie, to be crucial strategic allies in revolutionary movements.⁶⁸

Rather, with Proudhon, their critique was largely based on what they took to be Proudhon's role as, to use a distinction from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, a "political and literary representative" of the way in which the petty bourgeoisie thinks of its own conditions. As Marx put it, referencing the social-democrats of the *Montagne*

Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives [of the petty bourgeoisie] are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic supporters of shopkeepers. In their education and individual position they may be as far part from them as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond

⁶⁷ See, for example, Marx and Engels' comment in the *Manifesto* about "the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole." MECW 6, 494. This raises the important issue of intellectuals and class.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, MECW 38, 95-106.

the limits that the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter in practice. This is, in general, the relationship between the political and literary representatives of a class and the class they represent.⁶⁹

In other words, just as the petty bourgeoisie's interests are structurally located between capital and labour, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, so Proudhon was thinking like a petty bourgeois by virtue of his theories reflecting and unconsciously supporting this unstable position. Proudhon was, according to Marx and Engels, not to be critiqued because he was a member of the petty bourgeoisie, but because his theories reflected a vision congruous with the particular mentality of the French petty bourgeois. Although he did not, as we shall see, speak exclusively to shopkeepers and artisans, Proudhon was nevertheless the "scientific interpreter of the French petty bourgeoisie." To be sure, this move from class position structuring class consciousness to one in which a particular class can be represented by someone from another class risked deflating the concept of class to an arbitrary set of characteristics that could easily open itself up to abuse. But as I argue in what follows, Marx had good reason to suggest Proudhon articulated the interests of the petty bourgeoisie in the *Système*.

What was it about the *Système* that Marx so objected to? First, Marx was struck by Proudhon's moralizing posture. While he was radically opposed to many aspects of capitalist society, Proudhon fervently defended certain values and institutions such as the patriarchal family, monogamy, motherhood, and limited property, that socialists often rejected outright. In *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* for example, Proudhon wrote that "The difference of the sexes places the same sort of separation as that of races places between animals. Thus far from advocating what is today called the emancipation of women, I would incline, rather, if it should come to this, to exclude women from society."⁷⁰ The *Système* extended this critique through lengthy attacks on other socialists. In particular, Proudhon condemned the growing influence of Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier's "immorality" in proposing a social community in which women would have full participation and in which the passions, including those concerning sex, could

⁶⁹ Marx, *Poverty*, MECW 6, 130-1.

⁷⁰ Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? Ou recherches sur le principe du droit et du gouvernement* (Paris, 1840), in *Oeuvres complètes*, t.1, edited by A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Cie. (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1867), 213-214.

be liberated. Claiming that the concept of “community” was anathema to the monogamous family, Proudhon argued that women’s proper role was in the latter. The “choices” facing women were crudely put as either “*menagère ou courtesan*”—“housewife or prostitute.”⁷¹ But for Proudhon there was no choice. The family household unit was the basis of society. It was from the home and familial life that a man was able to embody his definitive characteristics, and where a woman was able to acquire what she always desired, namely, “property, workshop, [and] work for its own sake.” Proudhon again put the choice in stark terms: those who wanted to do away with this familial relation were risking no less than the destruction of society:

Remove the household, remove this stone from the hearth, centre of attraction for the spouses, and only couples remain, there are no more families. See, in the big cities, the working classes fall little by little, by the instability of the domicile, the inanity of the household and the lack of property, into debauchery and concubinage! Beings who have nothing, who hold on to nothing and live from day to day, being unable to guarantee anything, have nothing to do with getting married again: it is better not to commit at all than to commit for no reason. The working class is therefore doomed to infamy: this is what the right of the lord expressed in the Middle Ages, and among the Romans the prohibition of marriage to the proletarians.⁷²

As K. Steven Vincent notes, Proudhon was “always conservative—even puritanical—in his personal moral behaviour and he harboured a strong distaste for bohemians and ‘bohemian habits.’”⁷³

Marx could not have failed to notice this aspect of Proudhon, but his own life suggested an ambivalence about the more radical Saint-Simonian and Fourierist critiques of bourgeois norms and values—he was, after all, happily married and was accustomed to a certain bourgeois lifestyle.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, he was largely appreciative of Fourier’s idea of a complete liberation from existing society and, through Engels, grew a greater respect for Fourier’s rebuke of bourgeois existence as hypocritical, pallid, and

⁷¹ Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère*, t. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie L., 1846), in *Œuvres complètes de P.-J. Proudhon*, t.5, 279.

⁷² ibid, 198-200.

⁷³ Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 117.

⁷⁴ For a critical account of Marx’s views on the family see, Heather A. Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

tedious.⁷⁵ While Proudhon was certainly right, Marx noted, to dislike “sentimental socialist day-dreams,” he merely put forth in reply his own “petty bourgeois sentimentality”; this amounted to replacing Fourier’s profound insight about the historical character of familial and personal relations with a set of “presumptuous platitudes” about the home and conjugal love.⁷⁶ Proudhon, moreover, made no real attempt to justify his positions or “seriously” criticize the moral libertarianism of the Fourierists, the Saint-Simonians, or the Icarians. There was thus, Marx correctly concluded, a quasi-religious and bourgeois character behind Proudhon’s doctrine which was expressed in his moral attitudes and which mirrored those of the petty bourgeoisie.⁷⁷

This duality in Proudhon’s moral framework mirrored that of his economic analysis, which attempted to find a synthesis between liberalism and socialism. The first chapter of the *Système* outlined this synthesis in general terms: political economy and tradition, on the one hand, against socialism and utopia, on the other. By “political economy,” Proudhon meant the liberal economists who validated and even praised capitalist society, and he focused in particular on the work of Jérôme-Adolphe Blanqui, Michel Chevalier, Charles Dunoyer, and Pellegrino Rossi. “Socialism,” by contrast, meant the ideas of those vehement critics of society and economics who proposed the principle of “association” as an alternative social system, namely Louis Blanc and Philippe Buchez, but also earlier thinkers such as Fourier and Étienne Cabet. Thus, Proudhon argued,

the line of demarcation between socialism and political economy is decided, and the hostility flagrant.”

Political economy inclines to the consecration of selfishness; socialism leans towards the exaltation of communism [*communauté*].

Economists...are optimistic with regards to the accomplished facts; the socialists with regards to the facts to be accomplished.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ See Engels, “Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith,” (June, 1847), 102, “Principles of Communism,” (October-November, 1847), 354, and Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (London: *Kommunistischer Arbeiterbildungsverein*, February 1848), 501-502, both in MECW 6. See also Gregory, “Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’ Knowledge of French Socialism.”

⁷⁶ Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, in MECW 38, 104.

⁷⁷ ibid, 103-104.

⁷⁸ Proudhon, *Système*, t. I, in *Oeuvres complètes*, t.4, 38-39.

Proudhon opposed both of these views. Political economists were wrong in their Panglossian treatment of contemporary society as something fixed and eternal, and the socialists were wrong in neglecting present socioeconomic conditions in their visions of a new social order. As Proudhon put it,

[t]he error of socialism has so far been to perpetuate religious reverie in embarking on a fantastic future, instead of grasping the reality that crushes it; as the mistake of the economists is to see in every accomplished fact a proscription against any hypothesis of change.⁷⁹

It was from this antinomy that Proudhon proposed to examine and reconcile the claims of both the political economists and the socialists, and to thereby put forth a vision of a new socioeconomic order. Each of the *Système*'s fourteen chapters examined a particular concept drawn from political economy—value, division of labour, machinery, etc.—that represented the organizing principle of distinct socioeconomic order since the Middle Ages. For Proudhon, the task was to reconcile the oppositional stances of economists and socialists on each of these principles, and to thereby discern an evolutionary pattern to economic development.⁸⁰ This was a philosophical method more derived from his reading Kant and the Young Hegelians as opposed to Hegel himself, although Proudhon's friend J.-A. Langlois did later recall that Proudhon cited Hegel as one of the “true masters who awoke fruitful ideas” in him alongside Adam Smith and the Bible.⁸¹

More concretely, Proudhon based his reconciliation on a reformulation of liberal political economy's labour theory of value. “Value,” he said, was the most important principle of political economy, “the cornerstone of the economic edifice” from which all other principles derived. There were according to Proudhon, three aspects of value: value in use, or “in itself,” value in exchange or “of opinion,” and synthetic, or constituted value, the “totality” of value. Yet despite its importance, political economists failed to understand the nature of the contradiction between useful value and exchangeable value, or to attempt any synthesis of the two. While Adam Smith had approximated the idea of synthetic value with his theory of natural price, and Jean-Baptiste Say had noted

⁷⁹ ibid., 103.

⁸⁰ ibid., 171-236.

⁸¹ Conversation with Proudhon reported by J.-A. Langlois, “P.-J. Proudhon: Sa vie et son œuvre,” in Proudhon, *Correspondance*, t.1, xxii. According to K. Steven Vincent, however, there is little evidence Proudhon actually read Hegel; Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 93-5, 97.

a certain antinomy between useful and exchangeable value, only Proudhon had appropriately grasped the unity of the three aspects. The result was that value in use and value in exchange were both “inseparable,” since “there is nothing useful that cannot be exchanged, nothing exchangeable if it be not useful” and “in perpetual struggle,” since supply and demand were never balanced. This contradictory relation, according to Proudhon, produced all the problems of contemporary capitalism—poverty, crises, etc.—and only through the constitution of value could these be problems be eliminated.⁸²

In “constituting” value, Proudhon meant accounting for a commodity’s true, and therefore stable and certain value. This was ultimately based on a commodity’s cost in terms of the amount of labour expended to produce it, including machinery and raw materials, which had to be built, maintained, extracted, or grown by human beings. Political economists, according to Proudhon, such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo had accepted this “fact” but had failed to appreciate that because each commodity was a product of labour, every product could, in principle, exchange for every other. In capitalist society, however, only one commodity had its value constituted in this way, namely, money in terms gold or silver specie. That is, only money was socially recognized, above all by the *Banque de France*, according to its true costs. For Proudhon, this feature of money made it readily exchangeable in way that other commodities lacked due to the inclusion of interest as a component of price. Indeed, this increase over cost-price in exchange was the governing idea behind Proudhon’s earlier critique of property as non-labour income in *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*⁸³ If this “privilege” of money could be extended to every commodity, all commercial transactions would be free and fair, supply would equal demand, and there would be no exploitation as each producer would exchange their products at prices regulated by the amount of labour they put in. This did not mean, according to Proudhon, the abolition of money as the socialists and communists wanted, but its generalization.

This was not an immediate process, however. For value, and thus prices, to ultimately reflect labour-time, competition between producers was required to regulate exchange. For Proudhon, competition was useful for two main reasons. First,

⁸² ibid, 69.

⁸³ Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*, xv.

competition generated increased production efficiencies, and helped spur the development and adoption of new technologies which further increased material abundance. Second, it was only through competition that market prices can accurately reflect the value of products. By competing with each other, producers would be prevented from misrepresenting the true cost of their products and compelled to cut costs to their utmost limit.⁸⁴ If competition was eliminated, as many French socialists desired, society would not see an alleviation of social misery, but dramatic decreases in production. For Proudhon, although labour—"as the highest manifestation of life, intelligence, and freedom"—contained within it its own reward, it could never completely be severed from selfish motives, for some possibility of personal gain, broadly defined:

Man comes out of his idleness only when need disturbs him; and the surest way of extinguishing his genius is to free him from all solicitude, to rob him of the potential of profit and the social distinction which results from it, by creating around him peace everywhere, peace always.⁸⁵

Proudhon went on to suggest that it was the liberty of French industry following the Revolution that was largely responsible for the growth and prosperity of the French economy, and for the increasing prosperity of the French people. He even commended the economist and statesmen Anne Robert Jacques Turgot for attempting to eliminate the trade "corporations" or guilds of the Old Regime which enjoyed a privileged position in the French economy that hindered free competition.⁸⁶ Dating back centuries, these organizations, established and granted legal protections by the King, had restricted entry to various trades on the condition that workers engage in lengthy apprenticeships and had strict rules on the techniques employed in production.⁸⁷

Such praise, however, was qualified. Free competition was not a panacea. Proudhon abhorred the doctrines of political economists who unambiguously

⁸⁴ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 181-182.

⁸⁵ ibid., 188. Proudhon here did not mean "profit" in terms of monetary reward, though he often conflated the two.

⁸⁶ ibid., 184. While Turgot's initial effort was ultimately unsuccessful, corporations were legally abolished in 1791, though they illegal and informal corporations and the "corporate idiom" would persist and take on renewed importance during the 1848 revolution; See Sewell, *Work and Revolution*, 86-91.

⁸⁷ Sewell, *Work and Revolution*, 25-40.

championed competition because the misery it brought to the large sections of the French population was abundantly clear:

Competition, with its homicidal instinct, robs a whole class of workers of bread, and sees only an improvement, a saving....It changes the natural zones of production to the detriment of a whole people, and it claims to have done nothing but utilize the advantages of its climate. Competition disrupts all notions of equity and justice; it increases the real costs of production by unnecessarily multiplying the capital invested, provokes in turn the high cost of products and their debasement, corrupts the public conscience by putting the game in the place of law, maintains everywhere terror and mistrust.⁸⁸

If competition, then, was both required for production and “homicidal,” what was Proudhon’s solution? It was certainly not, as one might assume given Proudhon’s socialist leanings, the elimination of competition. For all its evils, competition was necessary to promote technological innovations and increase production. It prevented workers from becoming indolent and provided the basis for just prices. Proudhon provided the example of the French tobacco industry, which was controlled by the French government. Just as the trade corporations’ strict controls over production limited the ability of prices to reflect cost-price or labour-time, so under this state monopoly, tobacco prices could not accurately be determined nor, he suspected, would production costs be reduced.⁸⁹ Competition, instead, required “a superior principle which socializes and defines it.”⁹⁰ This reconciliation of the antimonistic positions between the political economists and the socialists had to be situated, Proudhon argued, in the organization of labour:

The remedy for competition, in [the economists’] opinion, is to make competition universal. But for competition to be universal, all must be provided the means to compete; it is necessary to destroy or modify the predominance of capital over labour, to change the relations of master to workman, to solve, in a word, the antinomy of division and that of machinery; it is necessary to ORGANIZE LABOUR.⁹¹

What Proudhon meant by this was the association of workers in organizations that were based, not on an abstract ideal of community or society, as he took the

⁸⁸ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 193.

⁸⁹ ibid, 186.

⁹⁰ ibid., 209.

⁹¹ ibid. 196, capitalization in original.

socialist to be proposing, but on the workshop—"the constitutive unit of society."⁹² Within these groupings, each worker would have an active role that would change the traditional relationship between employer and employed, and thereby eliminate the parasitic role of "property" in exploiting workers. Competition would thereby be allowed to fulfill its potential as the ultimate regulator of constituted value. This was a noted theme throughout Proudhon's work, and the *Système* in particular.⁹³ Worker associations—not the "Principle of Association"—were the only mechanism to allow competition to guarantee equal exchange between producers and for "all the economic contradictions...to be resolved."⁹⁴

Crucially, this vision was not to be achieved through any of the traditional means available and appealed to by the workers themselves, namely, strikes and trade unions. Indeed, Proudhon's study of political economy convinced him that the strikes of French worker associations in the 1830s and early 1840s, such as the Lyon silk-weavers struggles for higher piece-rates, were counter-productive: first, by disrupting production, the strikers hindered their employer's business sales, which in turn, led to layoffs or wage decreases; and second, higher wages were "impossible" because if wages increased, capitalists would increase prices and thus real wages would remain the same. He therefore argued that there were legitimate economic reasons that strikes were illegal in France. Moreover, certain industry's wages, such as those of the "brutal, insolent, selfish, and cowardly" Lyon dockworkers, were already too high and needed to be reduced. Some workers had accepted these hard economic truths, realizing their employers had been constrained by market forces, but the sooner the rest of the working class realized this the better off they would be.⁹⁵ Finally, legislative reforms to reduce working hours were also anathema because they reduced output, with Proudhon sharply

⁹² ibid., 208.

⁹³ Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 154-155.

⁹⁴ Proudhon, *Système*, t.2, 42.

⁹⁵ ibid., 268. Proudhon maintained these views for the rest of his life, adding that the focus on wage increases leads workers to act like capitalists, i.e. on the basis of greed and egoism as opposed to justice and right. See for example, *De la Capacité Politique* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1865), in *Œuvres posthumes de P.-J. Proudhon*, t.2, edited by A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Cie. (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1868), 223.

criticizing the English Factory Acts and the Guizot government's restriction of child labour.⁹⁶

Rather, Proudhon argued that such organizations could only be created by the workers themselves via monetary and credit institutions that would gradually outcompete private capitalist enterprises. Workers—perhaps with some help from progressive sections of the bourgeoisie—would set up savings and lending banks that would operate on a non-profit basis to gradually lower and eventually eliminate interest. Such organizations could also be used to extend credit to workers to help them buy the necessary capital equipment to set up their own associations. Workers would be issued bills of exchange that represented commodities with the purpose of facilitating the exchange of products for products without the intermediary of money backed by gold. This was an idea he had been envisioning since at least 1845, and although the *Système* was somewhat silent on the issue, by 1847 he had begun to view the reform of credit and exchange as the key transformational issue under which others topics were subsumed.⁹⁷ During the 1848 revolutions, moreover, Proudhon proposed that the *Banque de France* be redesigned along these lines, and set up his own, short-lived *Banque du peuple* in 1849. How this was to be reconciled with Proudhon's praise of liberty, free competition and rejection of centralization, however, was left unsaid.

Although the *Système* was therefore discussing topics well in line with Marx's own interests, for he too sought a new science of society that would draw on political economy in order to find new theoretical foundations for a post-capitalist society, he rejected Proudhon's appropriation of liberal political economy for socialist ends. Proudhon had brought nothing new to the *content* of political economy, and the only thing that distinguished him from the likes of Smith or Say was that extraordinary method in which he employed them. He accepted their theories as given, transhistorical phenomena, which although were somewhat contradictory, could be arranged in such a way that would reveal the pattern of economic development and point the way towards a synthesis between liberalism and socialism. By treating economic theory and economic history in this way, Marx argued, Proudhon had turned political economy into a kind of

⁹⁶ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 164.

⁹⁷ Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 269; 348-349.

applied metaphysics that “had newly blossomed forth in an intellect of pure reason.”⁹⁸ Conversely, Proudhon had also made the error of other socialists in “seeing in poverty nothing but poverty,” that is, he had not determined the precise process by which the poverty of workers led to the growth of capital.⁹⁹

Marx demonstrated this through a thorough critique of Proudhon’s theory of value. First, Marx pointed out that labour itself was a commodity with an exchange-value expressed in wages, and wages fluctuated due to a variety of factors, including supply and demand for labour, the costs of basic necessities such as food and shelter, and the competition between workers; Proudhon had confused the distinction between the value of labour as a commodity and the value of a commodity produced by labour.¹⁰⁰ Here Marx had not yet made the distinction between concrete labour, i.e. the specific activity of labouring, and abstract labour, i.e. labour in general, but he nonetheless intuited the idea that what is exchanged in the market is not commodities representing the actual labour-time they took to produce, but the social average, or what Marx later called the socially-necessary labour-time. For example, if power looms reduce the amount of time it takes to produce a given amount of cloth by half over hand looms, then producers still using hand looms would find that the value of the cloth they produce had fallen by half, not because it takes them less time to produce cloth but because the power loom has reduced the amount of labour time that is socially necessary. More importantly, however, Proudhon’s desire to have every product serve as ready money once again ignored market forces. The value of money was not only determined by its cost price but also by the fluctuations in supply and demand for money and goods. If Proudhon’s “labour-notes” were employed, their value would simply fluctuate according to the vagaries of the market, and thus the “true proportion” would never be attained.¹⁰¹

Second, contrary to Proudhon’s belief, market competition offered no guarantee that what workers produce would find buyers. Marx’s approach was essentially historical. At best, the market regulated the amount of output through a constant process of fluctuations above and below previous proportions “in societies founded on individual

⁹⁸ Marx, *Poverty*, in MECW 6, 164-165.

⁹⁹ ibid, 178.

¹⁰⁰ ibid, 143-144, 160.

¹⁰¹ ibid, 145-51.

exchange.” Proudhon had simply ignored market forces and focused exclusively on costs. Thus, Marx concludes, “There is no ready-made constituted ‘proportional relation,’ but only a constituting movement.” Third, free competition was not “a decree of fate, a necessity of the human soul” but rather, in the case of France, the result of the actual development of human beings in their productive relations in the eighteenth century, namely the abolition of corporations, guilds and fraternal societies.¹⁰² While Medieval Europe was marked by intense political and military conflict, economic conflict between buyers or sellers, was largely absent because the structure of society was not based entirely upon market exchange and commodity production. Peasants and serfs did not compete with each other for work and feudal lords did not compete with each other as owners of capital. Because Proudhon abstracted from historical analysis, he was forced to rely on “doctrinaire” *a priori* arguments. This was essentially a development of the liberal economist Sismondi, and if Proudhon was simply following Sismondi, he was open to the same criticism that others had levelled at Sismondi: that he wanted to return to a pre-capitalist economy.¹⁰³ Finally, Proudhon’s theory of constituted value and the balance of supply and demand was not a new form of social organization, but one that had historical antecedents where production was organized on a small-scale. In such a system supply did indeed tend to equal demand, but with the rise of modern large-scale industry, free trade and market competition, Marx argues, “this true proportion had come to an end, and production is compelled to pass inevitable in continuous...vicissitudes of prosperity, depression, crisis, stagnation, renewed prosperity, and so on.”¹⁰⁴

Marx here mixed comments that were both fair and unfair. While Proudhon certainly put more emphasis on the constitution of value, he did not entirely neglect supply and demand, writing, for example, that “if labour cannot find its reward in its own product, far from being encouraged, it should be abandoned as soon as possible.”¹⁰⁵ As McKay notes, Proudhon here explicitly recognized that not everything that is produced will necessarily find a buyer. Indeed, this is why he stressed the necessity of competition

¹⁰² ibid, 215.

¹⁰³ ibid, 135-137.

¹⁰⁴ ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 190.

to ensure that labour would “find its reward.”¹⁰⁶ McKay also argues that Proudhon did not advocate labour-notes à la Bray, where labour-time would serve as the direct measure of market prices. Rather, for Proudhon both “price and quantity would be negotiated between producers and consumers and in this manner – aided by competition – prices would eventually fall to their cost price (labour plus materials) and the amount demanded supplied.”¹⁰⁷ Marx was likely wrong in his charge here, but he could have just as easily argued this competitive “negotiation” is precisely how capitalism operates, where nominally equal but structurally unequal commodity owners meet in the market and exchange their products according to the labour-time it took to produce them. What Proudhon has simply done is propose that the market conceived by liberal political economy should accord in fact to what it promises in theory.

Proudhon, of course, argued that workers should be able to realize the full value of their labour in exchange by reuniting workers with their means of production. Indeed, in the conclusion to the *Système* he favourably quotes Adam Smith’s famous passage on “that early and rude state of society,” where

Before the appropriation of land and the accumulation of capital, the entire product of labor belonged to the worker. There was neither owner nor master with whom he had to share. If this state had continued, the wages of labor would have increased with all this increase in productive power, to which division gives rise. Produced by lesser quantities of labor, they would have been acquired by ever lesser quantities.¹⁰⁸

Although such a society “is impracticable in the regime of property,” Proudhon continued, it was nonetheless possible to attain if workers were able to regain control over the means of production and divide them amongst themselves equally. Marx did not directly argue this was evidence of a petty bourgeois vision, but we can plausibly note that this was precisely the idealized past of individualized commodity exchange that Marx and Engels noted in their critique of the petty bourgeoisie, a past that was in part responsible for the growth and expansion of capitalism. As Marx noted in his attack on the German-American communist Hermann Kriege’s plan for redistributing all land so

¹⁰⁶ Iain McKay, “Proudhon’s Constituted Value and the Myth of Labour Notes,” *Anarchist Studies* 25, no. 1 (2017): 38-39.

¹⁰⁷ ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁸ Proudhon, *Système*, t.2, 409. The quote is from Book I, Chapter 8 of *The Wealth of Nations*, although Proudhon slightly modifies and compresses Smith’s argument in his quotation.

that each farmer could have a plot of land to sustain themselves and mutually exchange their produce, written during the same period as his critique of the *Système*, “when this juncture has been reached, it will soon become apparent that one ‘farmer,’ even though he has no capital, will,” Marx wrote, “simply by his work and the greater initial productivity of his 160 acres, reduce his neighbour to the status of his *farm labourer*. And is it not then immaterial whether ‘the land’ or the produce of the land [quoting Kriege] ‘falls into the hands of rapacious speculators?’”¹⁰⁹ In other words, neither Kriege nor Proudhon had appreciated the role of market competition in engendering capitalist relations, and instead relied on an idealized conception of commodity exchange. To be sure, if such a society were enacted it would, at least initially, not be a capitalist society, as McKay stresses, but it would be an anachronistic one that contained the seeds of capitalism’s reemergence.¹¹⁰

A more important point, however, concerned Proudhon’s account of the role of modern industry. Proudhon began his developmental sketch by outlining the emergence of the division of labour and the destructive effects this had on workers. After summarizing the advantages which liberal economists such as Smith and Say had seen in economic specialization, he examined the other, negative side: the dehumanizing effects of “*le travail parcellaire*” (fragmented labour) on workers so deeply condemned by the socialists. He saw this fragmentation as pre-dating the emergence of mechanization, and even suggested—somewhat paradoxically—that mechanization was the antithesis of the division of labour because machines recombined the separated processes of production into one technological whole. This offered the possibility—unlikely to be realized under capitalist social relations—of not only cheaper goods and higher living standards, but also the freedom of the worker from the stultifying and repetitive nature of fragmented labour.¹¹¹

Marx could have accepted some of this account. He too saw in machines and technological development both the dehumanization of the worker and the possibility for a world freed from the perennial problem of scarcity granted by the productive possibilities of machine manufacture. But he objected strongly to the abstract-ahistorical

¹⁰⁹ Marx and Engels, “Circular Against Kriege,” April-May 1846, in *MECW* 6, 42-43.

¹¹⁰ McKay, “Proudhon’s Constituted Value,” 56-57.

¹¹¹ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 171-198.

style in which Proudhon presented these developments. The *real* division of labour, Marx argued, was not the broader division of a production task into small component parts, as Proudhon contended, but had come first with the division between town and country and the division between physical and mental labour, a division that was constantly changing as history progressed. With the onset of the industrial revolution, for example, the application of steam-power to production was the crucial mechanism by which the artisan was supplanted in certain branches of industry and turned into a mere appendage of a machine. Mechanization, properly so-called, was thus largely the product of specific eighteenth century developments, and from this time the division of labour and the growth of mechanized factories proceeded in a mutually self-reinforcing process.¹¹²

Proudhon had neglected the very real differences between hand-powered machine-tools used by many artisans and the intricate steam-powered machines employed in the British textile industry beginning in the 1760s. Here Proudhon was likely limited by France's slower economic transformation. The Parisian and Lyonnais silk industries were only partially mechanized, leading Proudhon to think of large-scale mechanized industry as a simple expansion of artisan production. Whereas Proudhon hoped that this expansion would allow the artisan to produce a wide variety of goods, Marx expected machines to displace artisanal production altogether or at least subsume it into the wider circuit of capital accumulation. In this respect, Marx was to be proved largely correct, although the decline of the artisan was a lengthier process than he anticipated.

Proudhon, Marx thus asserted, had put forth a "petty bourgeois ideal" of the worker-artisan owning his own tools and materials, producing for himself and his community; his only modification was the limited integration of modern technology into the workshop and by grouping workers together into cooperatives to ensure they had enough capital to cover any technological costs that might arise. Here Marx and Engels's historical account of the petty bourgeoisie's development comes to the fore. For Marx, the worker-artisan with some technological additions was not a solution to the problem of industrialization; while Proudhon did not reject machines outright, criticizing

¹¹² Marx, *Poverty*, MECW 6, 165-79.

Sismondi on precisely this point,¹¹³ he had simply taken the step to propose to the worker, in a mocking reference to Smith, that “he make not only the twelfth part of a pin, but successively all twelve parts of it.”¹¹⁴ In short, Proudhon’s ideal was inapplicable to the highly mechanized, steam-power factories that Marx and Engels saw continually expanding in Britain. Moreover, he had failed to see the main “revolutionary” potential of this modern system of production: by drastically increasing productivity and thus reducing the number of hours needed to produce goods and services, the modern factory made possible the “free development” of human beings which the division of labour and industrialization, as Proudhon himself noted, had destroyed. Proudhon, convinced that artisan labour was the best source of intellectual development, had rejected the liberating potential of modern technology. Marx, by contrast, believed that modern technology, by dramatically reducing labour-time, could provide human beings the freedom to pursue whatever interests they might have. For the first time in human history, labour would be freed from necessity and compulsion, and human beings could finally realize their own potentialities. This, according to Marx, was the truly “revolutionary” side of modern industry.¹¹⁵

Undoubtedly, Proudhon’s vision would have spoken to the mass of French workers, petty bourgeois, and peasants. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, most of the world’s working population was engaged in small-scale forms of agricultural, artisanal, and industrial production. The large-scale factories and workshops that permeated branches of industry, observed by Marx and Engels most acutely in Manchester and the rest of Britain, were largely absent in the rest of Europe, and France in particular, where the pattern of economic concentration was far more diffuse and

¹¹³ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 164.

¹¹⁴ Marx, *Poverty*, MECW 6, 190.

¹¹⁵ ibid. Engels made this same point as late as 1872. “But this best possible world of Proudhon [in which artisan production was restored] has already been nipped in the bud and trodden underfoot by the advance of industrial development[...]And it is precisely this industrial revolution which has raised the productive power of human labour to such a high level that—for the first time in the history of mankind—the possibility exists, given a rational division of labour among all, of producing not only enough for the plentiful consumption of all members of society and for an abundant reserve fund, but also of leaving each individual sufficient leisure so that what is really worth preserving in historically inherited culture—science, art, forms of intercourse, etc.—may not only be preserved but converted from a monopoly of the ruling class into the common property of the whole of society, and may be further developed.” Engels, *The Housing Question, Der Volksstaat*, May 1872 to January 1873, in MECW 23, 324-325.

smaller in scale.¹¹⁶ As Pierre Ansart has argued, there was a close homology between Proudhon's emphasis on artisanal labour and France's economic structure. For Ansart, the pluralism of the artisanal/small scale mode of production and the pluralism that entailed Proudhon's mutualist vision were one and the same.¹¹⁷ In the middle of the nineteenth century, artisanal industry accounted for more than two-thirds of France's nonagricultural workforce and for more than two-thirds of its industrial revenues. Such prominence, however, was not synonymous with prosperity, for many artisanal industries were increasingly threatened by mechanization and, even more common, by concentration of ownership, increasing division of labour, and the general strengthening of commercialization. Many artisans faced declining real wages and recurring crises of unemployment, especially during the July Monarchy.¹¹⁸ Thus a vision which spoke to these squeezed producers, which offered them a return to a way of life that had often been passed down through generations, was undoubtedly appealing.

Marx could have accepted this artisanal, associational socialism if it had simply been put forth as the first specific form of the working class movement in France in its broader development towards communism. Precisely because France was a predominately an artisan-based economy with a large rural population, it was natural that working class organizations would orient themselves—both theoretically and practically—towards agrarian-artisan programs that tried to recapture some form of independence that either they or their parents had previously enjoyed. McKay is certainly right when he notes that “incorporating the aspirations of *all* workers in his society” was “an extremely sensible position [for Proudhon] to take.”¹¹⁹ These aspirations, moreover, as Scott has emphasized, persisted among the working class throughout the late nineteenth century and continues until this day.¹²⁰ But this neglected

¹¹⁶ Roger Price, *An Economic History of Modern France, 1730-1914* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981 [1975]), 93-95; See also, François Crouzet, “The Historiography of French Economic Growth in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Economic History Review* 56, no. 2 (2003): 215–42.

¹¹⁷ Pierre Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme: esquisse d'une explication sociologique du prudhonisme* (Paris: PUF, 1970).

¹¹⁸ Bernard Moss, “Parisian Producers’ Associations (1830-51): The Socialism of Skilled Workers,” in *Revolution and Reaction*, ed. R. Price (London: Croon Helm, 1975), pp. 73-86; Christopher Johnson, “Economic Change and Artisan Discontent: The Tailors’ History, 1800-1848,” in *Revolution and Reaction*, ed. Price, pp. 87-114; John Merriman, ed., *Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth Century Europe* (New York: Holmes & Mirer, 1979).

¹¹⁹ McKay, introduction to *Property is Theft!*, 11.

¹²⁰ Scott, *Two Cheers*, 93.

the very real material differences that Marx pointed to between propertyless workers and small property owners, and that such a lost Eden of independent artisan production was not going to return. Moreover, Proudhon, did not stop there. As Marx noted in his critique of Krieger, “he declares what is after all a still subordinate form of movement of real specific people to be a matter for mankind in general, presents it, against his better knowledge, as the ultimate, supreme goal of all movement in general, and thereby transforms the specific aims of the movement into sheer, extravagant nonsense.”¹²¹ In other words, both Krieger and Proudhon derived a general vision from the historically-specific circumstances in their respective countries that was unable to grasp the wider historical transformations of the global economy.

In short, both Marx and Proudhon saw the *Système* as a kind of “third way” between liberalism and socialism, the difference between them being that while Proudhon saw it as presenting the future, Marx saw it as a utopian mirage. Why was it a mirage? Because, Marx argued, Proudhon ignored, or at the very least did not fully grasp, the fundamental and irreconcilable class conflict at the heart of capitalist society. Indeed, what is striking about the *Système* is the way Proudhon both recognizes the core inequality in capitalist society between those who own the means of production and those who do not, but nonetheless believe that this inequality could be rectified without class struggle. Thus, on the one hand, Proudhon could write that without access to the means of production, “millions of men have sold their arms and disposed of their freedom,” and were forced to labour under the control of “tyrants” to produce products they did not control. “Do we know what it is like to earn a wage?” Proudhon rhetorically asked, “To work under a master, guarded against his prejudices as much and more than of his command; whose dignity consists above all in wanting, *sic volo, sic jubeo* [Thus I will, thus I command], and never explaining himself...to have no thoughts of your own, to constantly study the thoughts of others, to know of no stimulus except your daily bread, and the fear of losing a job.”¹²² Yet on the other hand, Proudhon could just as easily assert, as he did privately in 1847, that he was someone “sincerely attached to the industrious and progressive bourgeoisie” and that “The people is everyone, we do not recognize the bourgeoisie, a classification dangerous, undiplomatic, injurious to the

¹²¹ Marx and Engels, “Circular,” MECW 6, 42-43.

¹²² Proudhon, *Système* t.1, 243; t.2, 231.

people itself, and fit only to defend some paradoxical claim about the people.”¹²³ This was not a more encompassing vision of social transformation, but one which elided class differences and class antagonism, and appealed to the petty bourgeoisie’s middling position.

To be sure, Marx recognized that Proudhon was arguing for dramatic social changes. Proudhon wanted control of the means of production to be returned to the workers themselves, but in a way that was far too limited and self-defeating —in other words, he desired a synthesis between two incompatible socioeconomic systems which would supposedly equilibrate their contradictions. For Marx, this was a chimera. Not only was Proudhon’s theory economically incoherent, he was seeking a “formula” which would ameliorate social conflict without abandoning private ownership of the means of production and individual exchange; such a program could never be achieved precisely because these were at the root of capitalist society. This was, in Marx’s judgement, just as absurd as those such as Royer-Collard and Guizot who defended the July Monarchy—an unstable and antagonistic compromise between the demands of a representative government and those of an absolute monarchy, which Louis Philippe attempted to mediate through the “*juste milieu*.”¹²⁴

Proudhon was thus reflecting petty bourgeois ideology in part because of his moral conservativism, and in part because of his refusal to definitively break with capitalist social relations. A third reason was that Proudhon’s humanitarian and almost philanthropic approach to political economy, one pioneered in nineteenth-century France by Pelegrino Rossi and Jérôme-Adolphe Blanqui, who defended capitalism while deplored its effects, thus demonstrating that they had not understood the intrinsic connection between the misery, poverty, unemployment, and crises, on the one hand, and the immense increase in wealth, on the other. Proudhon was therefore neither radical, in the etymological sense of that word in that he did not get to the roots of capitalist society, nor revolutionary in that he did not wish to completely overthrow the existing order.

¹²³ Quoted in Edward Castleton, “The Many Revolutions of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon,” in *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, edited by Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 46.

¹²⁴ Marx to Annenkov, *MECW* 38, 104.

This was perhaps best articulated by Proudhon's frequent appeals to justice. For Proudhon justice was an imminent principle in the world which he took to be the virtue needed for humanity's regeneration and the ultimate basis for future social progress. "Justice is the central star which governs society, the pole around which the political world revolves, the principle and regulator of all transactions. Nothing takes place between men save in the name of right, nothing without the invocation of justice."¹²⁵ What Proudhon meant by justice was a kind of Rousseauian conception of civic virtue, defined as "the recognition of the equality between another's personality and our own."¹²⁶ Human beings were driven by desires—for independence and for praise, for example—which, unless properly channelled, would have disastrous social consequences. Indeed, it was these desires, Proudhon argued, that were part of the reason for the emergence of inequality. Without justice, society would perish; without some governing principle, society would be reduced to a Hobbesian war between the private desires of isolated egoistic individuals. In criticizing other socialists and communists, Proudhon rhetorically asked "How can you fail to understand that the fraternity can only be established by justice; that it is justice alone, the condition, means, and law of liberty and fraternity, which must be the object of our study, and which we must pursue relentlessly, down to the smallest details, definition and formula?"¹²⁷ Only through a synthesis between liberty and fraternity would true freedom and independence reign; only then would "justice" emerge triumphant.

For Proudhon, this notion of justice was intimately connected to his conception of property as theft. Property was defined as any income derived without labour: "What is it, then, to practice justice? It is to give equal wealth to each, on condition of equal labour."¹²⁸ Proudhon therefore argued that exploitation was not the result of property as such, but of monopoly—a long held and fairly common idea that gained prominence in France and Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹²⁹ It was the financial and banking sector as well the landowners, the unproductive and parasitic "oisifs" (idlers), and not necessarily the working capitalists, that were the problem. This

¹²⁵ quoted in Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography*, 46.

¹²⁶ Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*, 200.

¹²⁷ Proudhon, *Système*, t.1, 206.

¹²⁸ Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*, 203.

¹²⁹ See Crossick and Haupt, *Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe*, 201-205.

was made explicit by Proudhon in 1852 when he argued that that the *classe moyenne* (middle class) was just as much entitled to the product of its labour as was the working class. Indeed, for Proudhon the social revolution of the nineteenth century consisted in the unity of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat into the *classe moyenne*, “the extremes into the means; and thereby to ensure that all, without exception, had in equal proportion, capital, labour, market, freedom, and affluence. In this consists the great operation of the century, and the object, still so little understood, of socialism.”¹³⁰ Thus, his conception of mutualism entailed the redistribution of control over the means of production to end monopoly, facilitate free exchange, and allow workers to realize the full value of their labour. By so doing, he contended, true justice would emerge.

Marx would later attack this notion by observing that while rhetorically powerful, Proudhon’s conception of property as theft was incoherent. The expression “Property is theft!” presupposed and therefore naturalized the existence of property, since theft by definition cannot occur without some prior framework of legal ownership.¹³¹ Marx here was borrowing, without acknowledgement, an argument made by Max Stirner, who, ironically, was also charged with representing petty bourgeois positions. In *Ego and Its Own*, Stirner wrote: “Is the concept of ‘theft’ at all possible unless one allows validity to the concept ‘property’? How can one steal if property is not already extant? What belongs to no one cannot be *stolen*; the water that one draws out of the sea he does *not steal*. Accordingly, property is not theft, but a theft becomes possible only through property.”¹³² Moreover, by treating all property as theft, Proudhon was unable to account for the specificities of the various forms of property, both conceptually and historically. What were the differences between, for example, feudal landed property as opposed to capitalist landed property, or between interest or profit?¹³³

This conceptual blurring would ultimately lead Proudhon down the wrong path of treating property as unjust and that “true” justice could be realized through commodity

¹³⁰ Proudhon. *La révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du 2 décembre* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1852), in *Œuvres complètes*, t.7, 26.

¹³¹ Marx, “On Proudhon” [Letter to J.B. Schweizer], *MECW* 20, 28.

¹³² Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (1844; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 223.

¹³³ Incidentally, Scott also does not distinguish between the various forms of property by treating all historical smallholding populations, from the birth of civilization down to the present, as evidence of petty bourgeois dreams. See Scott, *Two Cheers*, 88-90.

exchange. Marx attacked this notion by comparing Proudhon to the Anglo-American Chartist and socialist John Francis Bray. For Marx, Bray too typified the petty bourgeois and indeed bourgeois illusion that “individual exchange can exist without any antagonism of classes....Individual exchange, as the bourgeois conceives it, is far from resembling individual exchange as it is practised. Mr. Bray turns the illusion of the respectable bourgeois into an ideal he would like to attain. In a purified individual exchange, freed from all the elements of antagonism he finds in it, he sees an ‘equalitarian’ relation which he would like society to adopt generally.”¹³⁴ As Marx would later argue, this fundamentally mischaracterized the nature of capitalist exchange. When the worker sells their labour-power to the capitalist for an amount of money, both parties receive the same amount of value in exchange. The worker now owns an amount of value equivalent to their maintenance as a worker—food, shelter, clothing, and housing, for example—and the capitalist owns a commodity equivalent to the money paid. No one is cheated here, and both are free to use their new commodities as they wish. But because labour-power is capable of producing more value than it itself costs, the capitalist is able to acquire more value than initially was exchanged. As Marx would note, “this circumstance is, without doubt, a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injury [*Unrecht*] to the seller.”¹³⁵ Nothing about this process violated Proudhon’s notions of “constituted value” and “proportional relations.” Proudhon had thus made the mistake of all “good-natured bourgeois and philanthropic economists have taken pleasure in expressing [the] pious wish” of just market exchanges.¹³⁶ As an economist, then, he remained trapped within the “bourgeois horizon,” and had failed to found a new socialist political economy.

For Marx, then, Proudhon’s mutualist project was less a solution to the problems of capitalism, such as poverty, unemployment, and recurrent economic crises, than an attempt to have “the correct balance, allegedly distinct from the happy medium.” This analysis, while appearing reductive, precisely captured the contradictions of the petty bourgeoisie. Just as the petty bourgeoisie was torn between both capitalist and worker

¹³⁴ Marx, *Poverty*, MECW 6, 138, 142. See also, Marx, *Capital*, vol.1, MECW 35, 95-96, n.

¹³⁵ Marx, *Capital*, vol.1, MECW 35, 204. Roberts argues that although Proudhon is not mentioned by name, the whole argument of Marx in Chapters 6 and 7 of Volume 1 of *Capital* is directed against the idea that capitalist exploitation of labour-power realizes Proudhon’s criteria of justice. Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 134-135.

¹³⁶ Marx, *Poverty*, MECW, 6, 136.

simultaneously, so Proudhon had tried to steer a middle course between capitalism and socialism that could equilibrate these two antagonistic social systems. He thus saw in every economic category “the good side and the bad side, the advantages and the drawbacks,” and his “solution” was to simply keep the good and remove the bad. By accepting a number of the principles that regulate capitalist society—market exchange, competition, commodity production, etc.—and arguing that the benefits from how these principles operated under capitalism could be maintained and channeled in a socialist society, Proudhon fundamentally misunderstood both liberal political economy and socialism.

This did not mean, however, that Marx thought political economy was therefore useless. After all, he spent the majority of his life studying the subject, and never argued that the categories of political economy were inaccurate or wrong. Nor did Marx deny that Proudhon was proposing fairly substantial changes in the existing socioeconomic order. Both Marx and Proudhon emphasized that the liberation of the working class, despite the differences in how the two may have defined it, must be undertaken by the working class itself. Proudhon was not at all disposed to or supportive of small scale traders or shopkeepers and by the end of his life he had all but given up hope in the revolutionary potential of the *classe moyenne*, even if, like Marx, he still firmly believed their real interests lay in allying themselves with the workers. Rather, the fundamental issue with Proudhon’s fusion of capitalist concepts to socialist ideas is that they were not a real repudiation of capitalism. Proudhon remained, as Marx noted, unable to rise “above the bourgeois horizon” with his uncritical adoption of political economy. But political economy as a discipline emerged to explain the economic relations of capitalist society and, Marx argued, would therefore rise and fall with capitalism itself. The proletariat, to be successful, would both have to liberate itself from the exploitation inherent in capitalist society *and* from the ideas that such a society engenders. Such an account, while historically accurate, is of course unfalsifiable, depending as it does on a yet-unfulfilled objective. But it does go some way to explain what Marx objected to in Proudhon’s appropriation of political economy for socialist ends, and why he took this to be emblematic of a petty bourgeois approach.

Proudhon’s vision of an artisanal-based socialism has largely receded as artisanal production declined over the course of the twentieth century, while worker-owned cooperatives as well as mutual banks and credit unions extending low-interest

loans to workers, far from presaging a revolutionary transformation of society, have proved to be remarkably compatible with capitalist production and the logic of the market. They have not been able to, as Proudhon expected, outcompete and overtake capitalist enterprises, and today occupy only marginal positions in the global economy. Similar projects with “Proudhonian” overtones such as local exchange trading systems (LETS) and urban agriculture, have likewise proved limited pursuits, often facing the same market constraints as larger capitalist firms, including cost-cutting, wage controls, centralization,¹³⁷ while the abolition of gold-backed money, as McKay admits, has not had the dramatic implications that Proudhon believed it would.¹³⁸ Indeed, if anything, capitalism has intensified its global reach since the introduction of fiat currencies, and income derived from non-labour sources has skyrocketed.¹³⁹

This does not mean, however, that such practices or reforms should be rejected. Engaging in projects of mutual aid and democratic self-management offer new ways of living outside of established governmental institutions and economic relations, and, as both Marx and Proudhon acknowledged, prefigure what a post-capitalist society free of both economic and political domination could look like. Yet they are unable, in and of themselves, to radically transform society. As Marx noted of the growing cooperative movement in the middle of the 1860s, by “becoming their own capitalists,” worker cooperatives did “represent within the old form the first sprouts of the new,” but they nonetheless “naturally reproduce, and must reproduce, everywhere in their actual organisation all the shortcomings of the prevailing system.”¹⁴⁰ Cooperatives, in other words, still remained within an individualist, market-oriented framework. The task for social movements is to connect these projects of democratic self-management to broader social and political programs that continually push the boundaries of capitalist rule in all its forms.

¹³⁷ For a thorough, if pugnacious, critique of these “localist” projects, see Greg Sharzer, *No Local: Why Small-Scale Alternatives Won’t Change the World* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012).

¹³⁸ Iain McKay, introduction to *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Reader* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011), 15-16.

¹³⁹ Milanovic, *Global Inequality*, 107. This has also been accompanied, as Milanovic shows, by capital owners themselves receiving higher incomes from labour.

¹⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, MECW 37, 438.

Conclusion

In 1870, Mikhail Bakunin offered the following comparison of Marx and Proudhon:

Proudhon was a perpetual contradiction: a vigorous genius, a revolutionary thinker arguing against idealistic phantoms, and yet never able to surmount them himself.... Marx as a thinker is on the right path. He has established the principle that juridical evolution in history is not the cause but the effect of economic development, and this is a great and fruitful concept. Though he did not originate it—it was to a greater or lesser extent formulated before him by many others—to Marx belongs the credit for solidly establishing it as the basis for an economic system....¹⁴¹

It was this “perpetual contradiction” that Marx pointed to in his description of Proudhon’s thought—one that mirrored his and Engels’s analysis of the petty bourgeoisie’s structural location between capital and labour. Yet while the designation accurately characterized certain features of Proudhon’s thought, it quickly expanded to encompass a variety of non-Marxist perspectives. In Marx and Engels own lifetime this was articulated above all against the more radical “followers” of Proudhon among the French and Belgian sections of the First International, who were denounced and marginalized as petty bourgeois “Proudhonists,” and, in the hands of subsequent Marxists, the term almost entirely collapsed into a political epithet that was used against numerous political adversaries, above all anarchists.¹⁴² Perhaps the best example of this is the term’s application to anarchism. Even Lenin, who otherwise hewed closer to Marx and Engels’s original theoretical project than most other Marxists, was not above writing of the counter-revolutionary “petty-bourgeois anarchist elements” that threatened to corrupt the proletariat and Bolshevik control—a designation that was to continue to circulate among Communist parties throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴³ This was, as we

¹⁴¹ Quoted by James Guillaume, “Michael Bakunin: A Biographical Sketch,” in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 26.

¹⁴² Bernard H. Moss, “La Première Internationale, la coopération et le mouvement ouvrier à Paris (1865–1871): Le mythe du proudhonisme,” *Cahiers d’histoire de l’institut de recherches marxistes*, 37 (1989): 33–48; Julian P. W Archer, *The First International in France, 1864–1872: Its origins, theories, and impact* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1997); Samuel Hayat, “The Construction of Proudhonism within the IWMA,” in “Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth”: *The First International in a Global Perspective*, edited by Fabrice Bensimon, Quentin Deluermoz, and Jeanne Moisand, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2018): 313–331.

¹⁴³ V.I. Lenin, “Report on the Political Work of the Central Committee of the RCP (B) on Tenth Congress of the RCP (B),” (March 8, 1921), in *Lenin and the Making of the Soviet State: A Brief*

have seen, an aspect of Marx and Engels's original critique of the petty bourgeoisie; the term was, after all, not semi-proletariat, but petty bourgeoisie which therefore drew an explicit connection with the proletariat's class enemy. Indeed, as Hoffman puts it,

Marxists could better have denounced [Proudhon] and anarchism as uselessly obsolete because it was based on premises relevant only to pre-industrial society. Instead, they condemned by association with the bourgeois enemy. In so doing they failed to appraise adequately the true temper of many of the workers they sought to organize into a revolutionary movement.¹⁴⁴

Whether or not anarchism is "uselessly obsolete," Hoffman here captures a crucial point. The autonomy promised by the ownership of property was a real goal of many workers. Both Proudhon and Marx recognized this proprietarian ethos, even if they ultimately disagreed about what to do about it. For Proudhon, this vision was to be directly appealed to and for society to be constructed around a series of small-scale worker cooperatives; for Marx, it was to be overcome—and indeed was being overcome—through the abolition of an individual conception of property to one in which society as a whole would control and regulate its production on a common plan.

In many respects, the promise that property holds for working people still holds strong today. The valorization of the "small-business owner" in popular discourse, for example, speaks to this desire for a world outside of the low-wage, repetitive and dehumanizing aspects of much of contemporary working class life. It can, however, lead to individualist and even reactionary politics. Through the ideal of individual home ownership, for example, workers and petty bourgeois alike can be drawn into a politics of NIMBYism where any social provisions or state support that might undercut rising property values is fiercely resisted. Such commitments, as Engels noted in his critique of the German "Proudhonist" Arthur Mülberger, tend also to saddle workers with onerous mortgage debt by financial institutions, further restricting the ability of workers to engage in forms of class struggle by tying them to their particular employers, thus largely defeating the ideal of independence altogether, buttressing the existing capitalist social order, and appealing to petty bourgeois ideals.¹⁴⁵ Capitalists too can exploit this desire

History with Documents, edited by Jeffrey Brooks and Georgiy Chernyavskiy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 113.

¹⁴⁴ Hoffmann, *Revolutionary Justice*, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Engels, The Housing Question (Leipzig: Der Volkstaat, 1872), in MECW 23, 317-336.

for individual autonomy by presenting *de facto* workers as “independent entrepreneurs” in order to transfer their financial and legal liabilities and risks to the workers themselves.

As we have seen, however, Marx and Engels were not opposed to collaboration with the petty bourgeoisie, and explicitly argued that the proletariat would not succeed in any revolutionary movement without them. The petty bourgeoisie’s—and by extension its “middle class” analogue’s—intensely contradictory class position means that the existing balance of class forces is always less stable than it looks. Despite the surge of “global Trumpism” in the 2010s and the reactionary character of large sections of the petty bourgeoisie, new waves of political and ideological struggle can precipitate new processes of class formation that drive the petty bourgeoisie and other middle strata towards more radical and egalitarian ends. Even within a relatively privileged and contradictory social base, class formation and avenues for class collaboration remain important sites for social struggle. The task for organizers and the political left, more generally, then, is to build forms of solidarity and practice that speak to this unstable class.

Even when they succeed, however, as for instance when the petty bourgeoisie rallied around the proletariat in the Paris Commune of 1871, their victories can be easily undone, and fall once again under the sway of “grotesque mediocrities” like Trump. Indeed, this was perhaps the main lesson that Marx and Engels learned from the failures of 1848 and Louis Napoleon’s *coup d’etat*. Rather than being an inevitable outcome of prior social development or the masses’ instinctive desire for despotism, as Proudhon argued,¹⁴⁶ for Marx and Engels the popularity of such figures arose from the contingencies engendered by class struggle and the agglomeration of “old memories, personal enmities, fears and hopes, prejudices and illusions, sympathies and antipathies, convictions, articles of faith and principles.” The shifting political dynamics, weaknesses, and fractures within both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat allowed Bonaparte to present himself as above the existing parties, the only person capable of restoring the glory of the nation and the people. This was particularly appealing to the petty bourgeoisie, above all consisting of small-holding peasants. In the context of a declining social order, Bonaparte was able to appear to the more conservative rural

¹⁴⁶ Proudhon, *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d’État du 2 décembre* (Paris, Garnier: Frères, 1852), in *Œuvres complètes*, t. 7, 41-42; See also Proudhon’s notebook comments quoted in Castleton, “The Many Revolutions,” 64-69.

masses “as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above,” thus capitalizing on the contradictions inherent in petty bourgeois existence.¹⁴⁷ The parallels to Trump and Trump-like figures, while necessarily imperfect, nonetheless seem clear.¹⁴⁸

And this is why organizing among the petty bourgeoisie must always orient itself towards proletarian leadership: to build relationships with such workers and to enter into coalitions under their control. The goal, as Marx and Engels argued, is not to make workers into petty bourgeois property owners, nor to appeal to an antiquated and often mythic past, but to abolish the relations that enable such distinctions in the first place. Rather the aim of any emancipatory socialist movement is to finally bring about the conditions in which “real history” can begin, to bring an end to “the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms of classes generally...[and] In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Marx, “Brumaire,” MECW 11, 128, 187-188.

¹⁴⁸ Thus Dylan Riley, for example, argues that Trump is best understood as a form of neo-Bonapartist patrimonialism. See Dylan Riley, “American Brumaire?,” *New Left Review* 103 (January/February 2017): 21-32, and Riley, “What is Trump?,” *New Left Review* 114 (November/December 2018): 5:31.

¹⁴⁹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6, 506.

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