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The construction of Proudhonism within the IWMA

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Historiography has long accepted the view that the first Paris section of the International, between 1864 and 1867, commonly known as the Gravilliers group, from the name of street where they had their premises, was Proudhonian[1]. While in more recent decades, various studies have qualified or even rejected the idea altogether[2], it has still retained some currency down to our day in numerous writings which historians and activists have devoted to that historical period.[3] Indeed, such a reference to Proudhon by the members of the Paris section of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA) is evidenced in their writings as well as in their position-taking. But far from offering mere confirmation of their Proudhonism, this presence of Proudhon is rather a cause for surprise. First, if we bear in mind these organised workers' emphasis on the right to speak and act of their own behalf, we may need to think twice before looking upon their thinking as mere derivation from the thought of a full-time professional thinker who may well have been of working class extraction himself. Secondly, while we may accept the idea of workers drawing their inspiration from a particular author, be it Proudhon, Marx, or Bakunin, the choice of Proudhon still remains an enigma. Unlike what was the case with Saint-Simonians, Fourierists, or Cabetists, Proudhon hardly ever received the embrace of followers and disciples, or contributed to organising labour except for a few months in 1848.[4] How come then that the name of Proudhon became attached to the first Parisian section of the IWMA, be it at the time or in later historiography? Things become even more complicated if we look at the IWMA in the broader, more long-term historical context; the Paris section of the International was not the only heir to Proudhon, and partly through that same Parisian channel, this inheritance further extended to the whole of the

[1] See for instance Jules-Louis Puech's seminal work, *Le proudhonisme dans l'Association internationale des travailleurs* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1907). In his article of synthesis, born from a large scale collective research entreprise, Jacques Rougerie also considers the first period of the French section, up to the two Parisian court cases, as a "Proudhonian" period. Jacques Rougerie, « Les sections françaises de l'Association internationale des travailleurs », in *La première Internationale: l'institution, l'implantation, le rayonnement : [actes du Colloque international organisé à] Paris, 16-18 nov. 1964* (Paris: Éditions de Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1968), pp. 93–127. For a presentation of the historiography of the IWMA, see Daisy Eveline Devreese, « L'Association internationale des travailleurs : bilan de l'historiographie, perspectives de recherche », *Cahiers d'histoire de l'institut de recherches marxistes*, no. 37 (1989), pp. 9–31.

[2] 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*, no. 37 (1989), pp. 33–48; Julian P. W Archer, *The First International in France, 1864-1872: Its origins, theories, and impact* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997); Michel Cordillot, « Le fouriérisme dans la section parisienne de la Première Internationale (1865-1866) », in *Aux origines du socialisme moderne: la Première Internationale, la Commune de Paris, l'Exil, recherches et travaux* (Ivry-sur-Seine: Éd. de l'Atelier, 2010), pp. 19–32.

[3] See for example Mathieu Léonard's recent synthesis, *L'émancipation des travailleurs: une histoire de la Première Internationale* (Paris: la Fabrique éd, 2011).

[4] Rémi Gossez, *Les ouvriers de Paris. 1 : L'Organisation, 1848-1851* (Paris: Société d'histoire de la Révolution de 1848, 1968).

French labour movement, as a consequence of this section's pivotal role in the formation of revolutionary syndicalism.[5]

This contribution will not attempt to come up with a definitive assessment of the validity of the Proudhonian label: as in the controversies about the role of Proudhon in the emergence of revolutionary syndicalism, the opposite hypotheses of a direct "filiation" and of a simple "encounter" between Proudhonism and organised workers both prove unsatisfactory[6]. Instead, we will consider the question with the tools of the social history of ideas.[7] From this perspective, Proudhonism does not exist as a coherent system of thought apart from its social construction by those who refer to it. Contrary to the usual narratives of the First International that give a prominent role to constituted ideologies (Proudhonism, Marxism, Bakuninism), we will reassess the role of the IWMA debates in the construction process of one of these ideologies, Proudhonism. As a result, the question will not be to determine whether the workers of the Paris section of the IWMA were indeed Proudhonian, but rather to document the way they actually contributed to the construction of Proudhonism through their references to his work. This implies asking ourselves several questions: Who are the organised workers that refer to Proudhon? What practices do they have in mind when they quote him? What do they intend to achieve by doing so[8]? What image of Proudhon and Proudhonism they convey through their texts? Only through answering those questions will we be able to understand the role of the organised workers in the construction process of the reference to Proudhon, its origins, its deployment and its outcomes – a matter of critical importance to any understanding of the intellectual history of the organised French workers of the nineteenth century.

Who are the Proudhonians within the International?

The construction of Proudhonism as a distinctive ideology does not start with Proudhon himself[9]. The word "Proudhonian" seems to have been first used by the opponents to the positions of the workers of the French section of the IWMA. Its use was unambiguously pejorative as exemplified by those "Proudhonist jackasses" with which, in a letter dated 11

[5] Allow me to refer the reader to Samuel Hayat, « De l'anarchisme proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire : une transmission problématique », in Edouard Jourdain (ed.), *Proudhon et l'anarchisme*, Publications de la Société P.-J. Proudhon, 2012. See also Lucien Febvre, "Une question d'influence : Proudhon et le syndicalisme," *Revue de synthèse historique* 19, no. 56 (1909), pp. 179–93; Patrice Rolland, « À propos de Proudhon : une querelle des influences," *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques*, 1995, pp. 275–300.

[6] These two hypothese are described by Annie Kriegel, « Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire et Proudhon », in *L'Actualité de Proudhon. Colloque des 24 et 25 novembre 1965* (Bruxelles : Editions de l'Institut de sociologie de l'Université libre de Bruxelles, 1967), pp. 47-66.

[7] Frédérique Matonti, "Plaidoyer pour une histoire sociale des idées politiques," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* n° 59–4bis, no. 5 (March 1, 2013), pp. 85–104.

[8] Quentin Skinner, « Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas », *History and Theory*, vol. 8, n°1 (1969), pp. 3- 53.

[9] We know the famous phrase attributed to Proudhon when he heard that some people claimed to be Proudhonian: "They must be imbecile" ("*Ce doit être des imbéciles*"). Quoted by Pierre Haubtmann, *La Philosophie sociale de P.-J. Proudhon* (Grenoble : Presses universitaires de Grenoble), 1980, p. 13.

September 1867, Marx meant the members of the French section. [10] But here we have to draw a distinction between the French section and its spokesmen – Marx being in contact with only the latter. Indeed, as early as 1867, there was at least 30 or 40 sections in France; even if most of them were very small, totalising a few thousand members at most[11]. Marx certainly did not mean they were all Proudhonian; he must have had in mind the representatives of these sections, and more specifically the representatives of the Paris section – the most important and numerous in the first Congresses of the IWMA. However, to what extent can we confirm this Proudhonist label given by Marx to the Paris section? In order to answer this question, we have to give a brief description of the section's representatives.

The first circle, with whom Marx had the most contacts, was formed by the three Paris based corresponding secretaries of the London central council: Henri Tolain, Ernest Fribourg, and Charles Limousin (whom Eugène Varlin replaced after the Geneva Congress). Born in 1828 in Paris, Henri Tolain, a bronze engraver, was unquestionably their figurehead. He, unlike the three others, attended both the London meeting of 22 July 1863 in Saint James Hall and the Saint Martin's Hall meeting of 28 September 1864. He had been one of the co-authors of the *Manifeste des soixante* published in the 17 February 1864 issue of *L'Opinion nationale* to advocate putting up working class candidates and promote various social demands. Ernest Fribourg was an engraver and a decorator. He had not attended the Saint Martin's Hall meeting but still played a key role in the organizing and publicising of the debates within the section prior to the Geneva Congress, being particularly active in the short-lived papers of the section and later on in the drafting of the constitution of the association. Charles Limousin, born in 1840, was a print worker and had signed the *Manifeste des soixante*. In 1865, he had become de facto corresponding secretary in replacement of his own father, Antoine Limousin, one of the participants in the Saint Martin's Hall meeting and now unable to carry out his activities within the IWMA for reasons of poor health. While he did not participate in the Geneva Congress and then left the leadership of the International, he still played an important role organising and publicising the activities of the section, notably with the launching of the paper of the Paris section of the IWMA, *Tribune ouvrière.* Finally, Eugène Varlin, born in 1839 in Claye-Souilly (in the Seine-et-Marne department) was a bookbinder. He probably was the most advanced of them all with a long experience of strikes, mutualism, and cooperation, and was the spokesman for the minority which advocated, at the 1866 Geneva, the improvement of women's working conditions and universal compulsory education.[12]

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[10] « *Eseln von Proudhonisten* », Marx to Engels, 11 September 1867, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke. Band 31*, Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1965, p. 342. In his correspondance, Marx first refered to the Proudhonians as a group (« *die Proudhonclique* », *Ibid.*, p. 222) in his letter to Engels dated 7 June 1866, but only meaning students in this case. It is only at the Geneva Congress, as his letter to Ludwig Kugelmann dated 9 October 1866 makes clear, that Marx discovered that the Parisian delegates « had their heads stuffed full of the most vacuous Proudhonist clichés" (« *Die Herrn Pariser hatten die Köpfe voll mit den leersten Proudhonschen Phrasen* », *Ibid.*, p. 529) and that « Proudhon has done enormous harm » (« *Proudhon hat enormes Unheil angerichtet* », *Ibid.*, p. 530).

[11] Jacques Rougerie, « Les sections françaises de l'Association internationale des travailleurs », in *La première Internationale: l'institution, l'implantation, le rayonnement*, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-100.

[12] Michel Cordillot, *Eugène Varlin, chronique d'un espoir assassiné* (Paris: Editions ouvrières, 1991).

These four workers had in common the fact that they belonged to trades that did not affiliate them to the industrial proletariat, which was still embryonic in France at the time.[13] Young Charles Limousin was a print worker as well as a journalist. Varlin was poor and came from an agrarian background, but was employed in a fairly skilled occupation, and further was an outstanding autodidact. As for Fribourg and Tolain, they typically represented what has sometimes been characterised as the aristocracy of labour[14]. Chiseling and engraving were trades of precision of a largely artisanal nature, often well-paid and for which workers had gone through proper apprenticeships. This means that the leading figures of the Parisian section of the IWMA had rather specific profiles as educated craftsmen who had attended evening classes; not all of them belonged to the more prestigious trades, but in any case, they did not come from the ranks of the more proletarianised and often rural sectors of the working class.

How much does the preceding description apply to the twenty official members of the commission of the Paris section in 1865, among whom were the twelve Geneva delegates – a group we can consider as the second circle? Although the picture remains incomplete in a number of cases, the *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier* still helps form an idea of who these delegates were. Out of the twenty members, the birth dates of fifteen of them are known. They were between twenty four and forty nine years old at the time of the Geneva Congress (thirty three years old on average). Rather than very young men, they were young heads of household and settled men for most of them. Out of the thirteen members whose birth places are known, only three were born in Paris and one in the Paris region. Out of the nine others - if we go by modern administrative regions - four came from Rhônes Alpes, two from Centre, one from Bourgogne, one from Pas de Calais, and one from Champagne Ardenne (which, incidentally, goes to illustrates the considerable mobility of urban workers in the mid-nineteenth century). Nearly all of them were skilled trade workers. Next to these bronze workers and print workers though, one still finds one tanner, one shoemaker, one coach-builder, one mechanic, and even, one day-labourer, young Benoît Malon, born in 1841, who performed all kinds of unskilled jobs in spite of his primary education at the Catholic *petit séminaire*, and of the assistance he had received from his elder brother, a primary school teacher.

Quite obviously, these 'Proudhonian' workers were not exactly representative of French workers. First, there were no women among them while the latter formed a third of the population of industrial workers. Secondly, there was not a single countryman as a consequence of the urban location of the section, in spite of the fact that agriculture was by far the largest provider of employment. Ultimately, nearly all of them belonged to organised trade guilds, and understandably so since they had been chosen, at one stage or another, to represent their respective trades within the IWMA. But they did not form a separate, solely Parisian caste either. This second circle, which neither belonged to the bourgeoisie nor to the industrial proletariat in the contemporary sense, enables us to form a fairly accurate picture, if not of

[13] Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française: XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1986); Alain Dewerpe, *Le monde du travail en France, 1800-1950* (Paris: A. Colin, 1989); Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, 2 vols., 1992.

[14] For a discussion of this idea, see H. F. Moorhouse, "The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy", *Social History*, vol. 3, n° 1 (1978), pp. 61-82.

French workers themselves, at least of the urban labour movement, particularly in Paris where it was at the forefront of all the insurrections of the century, from the Revolution to 1830, 1848 and the Paris Commune.[15]

A cursory survey of these twenty biographies will draw attention to a few more important details. First, few of them participated (in any recorded way) in the 1848 revolution. Their ages and geographical origins certainly played a part, but in any case, this mere fact means that the hypothesis of a continuous link between the insurgents of June 1848 and the founders of the IAW cannot be maintained. Louis Debock, a typographer, and a protagonist of the February clashes, was clearly involved in these events, which was also the case of Henri Tolain, who was twenty and whose role in 1848 is more difficult to establish. Debock, an early collaborator to Charles Fauvety's and Jules Viard's *Représentant du Peuple*, along with the Mairet brothers, Georges Duchêne and Louis Vasbenter, was part of the delegation of print workers who had paid a visit to Proudhon on 26 February 1848 to ask him to contribute to their paper. Could this account for the diffusion of Proudhonism among them? Possibly. Another source worth considering is freemasonry. Like many other republicans and socialists, Proudhon was himself a freemason. And so was it the case for at least eight out of the twenty members of the commission of the French section of the IWMA – arguably a conservative figure since their biographies are far from complete for each of them. Finally, five members of the commission had actually signed the *Manifeste des soixante* and can be expected to have paid special attention to Proudhon's response to it in his *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, published after his death in 1865. Among these workers, only Debock and Zéphirin Camélinat[16] had kept regular and documented contacts with Proudhon. Even the leader of the Gravilliers, Tolain himself, was not close to Proudhon.

What does this too rapid survey of the spokespersons of the IWMA tell us about their alleged Proudhonism? It tells us that the Gravilliers were not Proudhonian then to the extent that they were not within Proudhon's sphere of influence or even close to him, and were not followers of the philosopher prior to the creation of the IWMA. They were not of the same generation as Proudhon (being thirty three years old on average), nor did they belong to the same circles, and they had no political experience in common with him. Therefore, according to the biographies of its members, including the first circle, the notion that this group may have been 'Proudhonian' requires some caution; they were no disciples of Proudhon, did not know him directly and (Debock excepted) had not taken part in the projects launched by Proudhon in 1848.

The 1866 *Mémoire des délégués français*: a Proudhonian document.

[15] Bernard H Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement, 1830-1914: The Socialism of Skilled Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); William Hamilton Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
[16] From his encounter with Charles Beslay in 1862. Michel Cordillot, « Camélinat-le-communard, de Mailly-La-Ville à l'exil outre-Manche », in Michel Cordillot (ed.), *Zéphirin Camélinat (1840-1932): une vie pour la sociale : actes du colloque historique organisé au Musée Saint-Germain à Auxerre le 11 octobre 2003 par Adiamos-89*, (Auxerre: Société des Sciences Historiques et Naturelles de l'Yonne, 2004), p. 20.

Why describe them as Proudhonians then? Could this simply reflect a historical error or the result of Marx's malice? Probably not, and this for a simple reason: the reference to Proudhon was by no means the result of a labelling from the outside (assigned by Marx or by later historians). Rather, this reference, albeit an unexpected one, had been directly imported into the debates of IWMA by the Gravilliers in September 1866 at the time of the first IWMA Congress in Geneva. Eleven Parisian delegates, three from Lyon and one more sent by the Rouen workers, attended. The Paris delegates presented their *Mémoire* which they had collectively drafted earlier in August in response to the invitation by the General Council and to which the rest of the French delegates immediately associated themselves. It was on the occasion of this particular event, and most notably during the presentation and discussion of this document, that the thinking of the workers of the French section of the International found its intellectual contours.

The *Mémoire* is an extensive collective response to the list of items selected by the London Council. It went by the order of this agenda each time laying out the position of the Paris section of the IWMA and further pointing out, with reference to two of these items (education and women's work), that this position had received majority – rather than unanimous – support, while also reporting on the minority position. Now, interestingly, Proudhon is the only author which the *Mémoire* explicitly quoted as a reference on three occasions (one of Benjamin Constant's maxims is also quoted but without any further comment) and at some length, making it, justifiably to some, "the veritable charter of Proudhonism" from the outset.[17] The quotations were borrowed from *Idée générale de la révolution au XIXe siècle* (1851) and *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (1865), being two of Proudhon's deeply political and radical books (most notably so in the case of the former). *Capacité* had been chosen because this particular work was itself a direct response to the *Manifeste des soixante* which, among its signatories, counted five members of the first and second circles of the Paris section of the IWMA. As regards the references to *Idée générale*, they clearly suggest that at least some of the delegates were well versed in the works of Proudhon, beyond the latter's more recent or more successful writings, and the book was of critical importance to the Gravilliers' outlook.

How come they quote Proudhon, whereas we showed that they were not under the direct influence of Proudhon and its followers? Our hypothesis is that the authors of the *Mémoire* had turned to Proudhon in their search for the right wording of the defence of their own conception of the IWMA's role, as well as of the struggle and the contours of future society. Which then requires a different perspective altogether; rather than Proudhon merely influencing the members of the IWMA, it was they who sought to legitimise their position by actively resorting to Proudhon and his vocabulary. That some of the these texts partly came from a phase of Proudhon's work which Proudhon himself had come to regard as outdated appears to confirm this, as well as the fact that the Gravilliers were at the same time turning away from Proudhon's more important books of the later part of his works (*De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église*, and above all, *Du Principe fédératif*). What they were out to find, sometimes against the drift of the quoted texts, was a justification of their own positions,

[17] Jacques Rougerie, « Les sections françaises de l'Association internationale des travailleurs », in *La première Internationale: l'institution, l'implantation, le rayonnement*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

especially regarding two crucial items which had been constitutive of the French labour movement ever since the 1830s, i.e., the defence of cooperation and workers' autonomy.

The critique of the principle of association (in its communist version) and the promotion of an understanding of cooperation as freely chosen by individuals, together with a critique of the State in charge of the economy, are decisive dimensions of trade workers cooperative socialism.[18] To justify this position, they turned to Proudhon's more distinctly anarchistic *Idée générale de la révolution* which regarded direct government as the most advanced form of political exploitation, and the associative model as the last form of economic exploitation. *L'idée générale* is quoted twice. The first, lengthy quotation was invoked by the majority of the section to advocate the necessity to give the responsibility of education to families rather than the State.[19] The State itself is relentlessly indicted by the Gravilliers for its will to maintain a standing army, control education, and even its tax system whereby

> the army, courts of justice, the police, schools, hospitals, almshouses, houses of refuge and of correction, asylum rooms, nurseries and other charitable institutions, religion itself, are first paid for and maintained by the proletarian, and then directed against him; so that not only does the proletariat toils for the benefits of the caste that devours them, the caste of the capitalists, but also for that of the caste that flogs and benumbs them.[20]

Such a critique was of some considerable significance for the Gravilliers as it also formed the basis of their critique of state communism, thus foreshadowing the debates on the issue of the State which were to take place within the International. For the French delegates as much as for the Proudhon of the early 1850s, things were clear: communism and statism were one and the same thing. This was the thrust of their critique of association, which was very similar to Proudhon's in *L'idée générale*:

> As its founders themselves recognise, association was supposed to melt interests together, annihilate differences, and create absolute equality. But which law was to preside over such a fusion of wills? Was it the free contract? Certainly not since all reformers – Cabet, Owen, Fourier, Louis Blanc, etc… as much as Lycurgus himself– all started from the assumption that society is everything, solely enjoys rights of its own, whereas the individual only has duties.[21]

This critique of community is close to Proudhon's, even in the detail of its attacks against statist socialists like Louis Blanc or the utopianism of Cabet, Owen, and Fourier. Against such approaches, the Gravilliers advocated cooperation which "brings men together to exalt the strengths and initiatives of each[22]". This was a crucial issue for the French delegates: cooperation is fundamentally more just than association, since its extension, following the federalist method, increases workers' freedom whereas the extension of association reduces it.

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[18] Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement, 1830-1914*.
[19] *Mémoire des délégués français au Congrès de Genève*, in E. Fribourg, *L'Association internationale des travailleurs*, Paris, Le Chevalier, 1871, pp. 60-62.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 72-73.

To justify this, they resorted to a second, shorter quotation from *L'idée générale*, to illustrate the section entitled: "Cooperation distinguished from association". It defines contract thus:

> The contract therefore is essentially reciprocal: it imposes no obligation upon the parties, except that which results from their personal promise of reciprocal delivery: it is not subject to any external authority: it alone forms the law between the parties: it awaits their initiative for its execution.[23]

The authors of the *Mémoire* based their justification of cooperation and contract, as organising principles of future society, on Proudhon. This figure of the worker as an individual entering contracts with other individuals, taking part in a mutualist and federative process while still retaining his freedom at the same time, constitutes the very specificity of the IWMA French delegates' thinking.

While it is correct to say that this critique was very similar to Proudhon's, that its promoters had derived their anti-statism from him remains rather uncertain. Anti-statism already was a crucial feature of French working class culture, stemming from the corporative tradition with its emphasis on the autonomy of the trades vis-à-vis the State, and above all, reinforced by the failure of the experience of the revolution of 1848.[24] Proudhon's interpretation of the failure of the revolution of 1848 and the anti-state conclusions he drew from it in his *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* and in *L'idée générale de la revolution*, were not actually breaking away from the experience of organised workers (who generally withdrew from political activity after June), but it still represented a departure from the views of a Louis Blanc whose influence was all but vanishing in the wake of the June insurrection, even among the former delegates to the 1848 Luxembourg Commission. Proudhon's position, which he restated in his 1865 *Capacité* was echoing the experience of the working class, and *this* - rather any prior ascendancy he would have had over the Gravilliers - was the reason for its appeal.

The second element that was central to the Gravilliers' outlook and which may explain their usage of Proudhon, was the importance they gave to working class autonomy as a mode of organisation and of struggle. This rested on the idea of the primacy of the economic over the political as spelled out in a passage from *Capacité*, quoted at the end of the memorial's preamble:

> Before it legislates, administers, erects palaces and temples, goes to war, Society labours, tills, sails, trades, exploits lands and seas. Before crowning kings and instituting dynasties, the people start families, celebrate marriages, build cities, and so forth[25].

Why turn to Proudhon for justification when the position was so widely accepted by socialists and within the labour movement? The point was to underpin the conclusion which both Proudhon and the Gravilliers derived from it and which distinguished them from the other

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[23] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. J.B. Robinson [1923], New York, Haskell House Publishers, 1969, pp. 113-114

[24] Rémi Gossez, *Les ouvriers de Paris*, *op. cit.*

[25] *Mémoire*, *op. cit.* p. 54. La citation est tirée de Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, Paris, E. Dentu, 1865, p. 205.

sections: the necessity of working class autonomy and the primacy of social struggle. They argued that although the International was open to everyone, delegates must come from the ranks of the manual workers only, and the economy must be the IWMA's sole terrain of intervention. This was a major object of controversy within the IWMA, and as such, it defined the very singularity of the positions of the Parisian section. But was this a specifically Proudhonian idea? There are reasons to doubt it: this had been an issue of critical importance for the French labour movement itself, in its formative process since the 1830s. The founding workers documents of the year 1848 reflected that state of affairs, namely, the statutes of the Central Committee of the workers of the Seine Department, themselves an emanation of the Luxembourg Commission which laid down the principle of distinct working class candidatures, and then the *Manifeste des délégués des corporations (ayant siégé au Luxembourg) aux ouvriers du département de la Seine*, which defined the workers' task: the autonomous organisation of economic relations ahead of State intervention.[26] These various documents insisted on workers autonomy while no significant relations whatsoever existed between most of the Luxembourg delegates and Proudhon (with a few exceptions, as in the case of typographer Georges Duchêne, for instance). Proudhon took up this idea, particularly in *Capacité*, but once again, this conception of working class militancy was already there in the tradition of trade workers, and owed nothing to Proudhon. Among the internationalists, Charles Limousin was one of its distinct exponents (although more of a Fourierist than a Proudhonist), in his "Inaugural address" in *La Tribune ouvrière. Sciences – arts – industrie – littérature*, an ephemeral publication of the Paris section of the IWMA, sold for five centimes a copy.[27] In *La Tribune*, Limousin advocated the necessity of working class autonomy in matters of intellectual judgement for "amidst the intellectual movement of our time, we can no longer be content with publications merely aimed at workers; some of it must now come from them".[28] The strategy of working class autonomy was already developed, then, by the French labour movement, irrespective of Proudhon's views.

Along with the references to Proudhon with the aim to justify working class cooperation and autonomy, the issues over which the Gravilliers *did not* refer to Proudhon are just as equally revealing. Two positions in particular – critical of the employment of women and of strikes - have been generally accepted as Proudhonian ones while being argued without any actual mention of the philosopher. Concerning women, Proudhon stands out as an exception among the socialists of his time; his virulent opposition to the political emancipation of women sets him apart from the Saint-Simonians and the Fourierists. He devoted a study to it in his major work, *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église*, first published in 1858.[29] This is where he argued that women are inferior to men, not only physically, but also morally as well as intellectually, their only specific quality being their

[26] *Journal des travailleurs*, 8 juin 1848.
[27] Michel Cordillot has documented « the existence of organic links between the Fourierist movement and the IWMA » through this publication coordinated by two Fourierists, Charles Limousin, its editor, and Antoine Bourdon, its editorial secretary, and Adolphe Clémence whose house also served as the paper's offices. Cordillot, "Le fouriérisme dans la section parisienne de la Première Internationale (1865-1866)," 23.
[28] *La Tribune ouvrière*, 4 juin 1865.
[29] He also wrote a particularly virulent study against women, *La pornocratie, ou Les femmes dans les temps modernes*, published ten years after his death, and which the Gravilliers could not be aware of on that account.

beauty.[30] The approach propounded by the majority of the Gravilliers was more moderate (while over this same issue, Bourdon and Varlin formed a minority in favour of public education). They did not separate the issue of women's employment from that of education; it being necessary to reject education by the State (they did base that part of the argument on Proudhon's writings) it follows that families must be given responsibility for the schooling of children, which in turns requires the full involvement of mothers. They did insist, however, that there was no question of preventing women from working, and that if they did work, then they must receive equal pay for equal work, which was rather far from being the case with women representing a third of the workers but being paid about half men's wages on average.[31] Now, this suggests that the majority of the Gravilliers' opposition to women's employment had little to do with metaphysical considerations about the inferiority of women in the first place, and rested on practical concerns: women's employment was accused to drive down wages. This is evidenced by the long tradition of clear hostility to women's employment that prevailed in certain trades. A case in point was the typographers' strike of March 1862, directed against women's employment, joined by future internationalist Louis Debock, and which led to a court case in May 1862. The defence of the accused based itself on the notion that typography "is not a job for women" and that "nature has assigned to each sex its particular functions", but immediately to turn to the economic motive, namely, that "the boss who resorts to the work of a woman only does so to cut his cost price; in other words, the introduction of women employed in the printing trade as compositors is a means to drive down wages".[32] This issue of wages was central to Louis Debock's testimony which retraced the history of the project to feminise printing, in connection with another issue, that of mechanisation. He accused bosses of attempting to punish their demands for wage rises "with the introduction of composing machines and female compositors who would be cheaper than the machines themselves"[33]. The critique against women's employment by the majority of the Gravilliers then appears to be rooted in a history which was altogether different from the history of Proudhon's both radical and theoretical misogyny. As such, assuming that their position must have been informed by a reference to Proudhonism may be misleading.

In some respects, the problem is the same regarding the issue of strikes, but for different reasons. The Parisian members of the International expressed their views on strikes in their *Memorial*. They argued that strikes and unemployment mirror each other in the sense that strike action generates identical and negative consequences on production and therefore on the workers living conditions. Strikes and unemployment alike are "disturbances" with a common origin in "the anarchy now prevailing in the relationships between capital and labour"[34], or, in what they saw as the seizure of labour by capital. To avoid both unemployment and strikes, it is necessary to transform the relationships between capital and labour, "make reciprocity the basis of exchange", reform apprenticeships, and draw up

[30] François Fourn, « Femme » in C. Gaillard et G. Navet (dir.), *Dictionnaire Proudhon*, Bruxelles, Aden, 2011, p. 304.
[31] Gérard Noiriel, *Les Ouvriers dans la société française: XIXe-XXe siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, p. 28.
[32] Armand Lévy, *Mémoire pour les ouvriers typographes*, Paris, Librairie Poulet-Malassis, 1862, p. 6.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[34] *Mémoire des délégués français*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

statistics.[35] There undeniably was a critique of strikes going on, which certainly distinguished the Gravilliers from the second Parisian section of the International, and of course, from the revolutionary syndicalism that was still to come. But here again, interpreting this as a manifestation of Proudhonism would be an exaggeration. Admittedly, in the last chapter of *Capacité politique*, Proudhon attacked what he called "workers' coalitions"[36] and refused to recognise the existence of a "right of coalition"[37]. In certain respects, his argument much resembles the views which the Gravilliers were to express a year later; he saw the necessity of these coalitions as a consequence of "economic anarchy" [38] that must be replaced by association and mutuality - the causes of strikes disappearing in the process. Eventually, on this occasion more than on any other one in this book, he appeals directly to "workers' Democracy", to organised workers, the writers of the *Manifeste des soixante* being the first among them, and therefore, to at least some of the Gravilliers themselves. Such a direct appeal, in the book which the Gravilliers probably knew best, plausibly suggests that the latter may have been familiar with Proudhon's position, regardless of the fact that their argument has no reference to him.[39] But reading this position as originating in Proudhon can only be the result of some optical illusion. First, we need to observe that the symmetry established in the delegates' *Memorial* between unemployment and strikes was not of their own choosing: they were responding to the invitation of the General Council which had formulated the question thus: "n°2 workers' societies, their past, present, and future; of unemployment, strikes, and how to address them; of primary and vocational education."[40] Right from the beginning, then, in the very wording of the questions contained in the General Council's invitation, that is, strikes were presented as a problem for which a solution must be found, as well as for unemployment. This is a crucial point which itself reveals a wider misunderstanding concerning "Proudhonists"; in 1866, defiance towards strikes was not specific to the French section of the International but rather, a widely shared position among the political leadership, even within the General Council.[41] From this point of view, Proudhon was no different from the other socialists and working class activists; strikes in general, and defensive strikes in particular, may be regarded as a necessity, but they appear nowhere on the strategic agenda, neither as a favoured means of struggle, nor, of course, as a means of emancipation, and the idea of a "general strike" simply did not exist. Subsequently, the Gravilliers' or Proudhon's critiques against strikes were not a specific development at that stage. It was only in retrospect that the opponents to their positions turn them into the emblem of archaism, or of a petty-bourgeois attitude. And in actual practice, the members of the Paris section did participate in

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[36] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, *op. cit.*, p. 403.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 421.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 414.
[39] We should note here, although this takes us beyond the limits of the present discussion, that Proudhon was not fundamentally opposed to strikes. In *Capacité*, he was responding to the 1864 law on coalitions in which he saw a trap laid by Napoleon III. Meanwhile, in earlier writings (*Contradictions économiques*, and, *De la justice*) where he also dealt with the subject, workers' coalitions were always interpreted as the result of employers' coalitions, and he further denounced the unequal treatment by the State of the two types of coalition (which was among the motives for which Proudhon was sued, following the publication of *De la justice*).
[40] *Mémoire des délégués français*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
[41] See Jan Dhondt's comments in the synthesis report of *La première Internationale: l'institution, l'implantation, le rayonnement*, *op. cit.*, pp. 478-480.

strikes. Along with the March 1862 typographers' strike mentioned earlier, there is also the example of Eugène Varlin's role during the bookbinders' strike of 1864-1865.[42] Finally, after the Geneva Congress, the 1867 bronze workers' strike, led by Tolain among others, became the occasion to activate the resources of international solidarity for the first time, and as such represented a decisive moment in the history of the IWMA in France.[43] The Gravilliers' opposition to strikes, therefore, was not particularly Proudhonist, or ever specific to the French within the IWMA, and more importantly, it being an opposition to strikes as a privileged mode of militancy, the possibility to resort to strikes was still available whenever necessary.

What should we conclude from all this? Proudhon was unquestionably the major author of reference for the delegates of the Paris section of the International. He was only quoted, however, in support of two ideas, i.e. workers' autonomy and cooperation, which had their origins in the workers' experience from which Proudhon himself had inherited; he brought articulacy to it, but did not invent it. Meanwhile, the critique against the employment of women and against strikes did not use quotations from Proudhon and did not say anything about the influence of the thinker. Hence, the mostly strategic nature of the reference to Proudhon for the Gravilliers, and arguably, for their opponents as well, Marx being foremost among them, who then could explain that ideas of cooperation and workers' autonomy merely signaled the harmful influence of the petty bourgeois socialist Proudhon. In that sense, the Proudhonism of the Paris section of the IWMA *is* a construction and can only be properly understood in the wider context of the construction process of the IWMA.

The effects of Proudhonism on the IWMA

Should we infer from this that the IWMA was free of all Proudhonism, since Proudhonism, rather than the consequence of a direct influence, resulted from an outside labelling as well as from various strategic borrowings? The answer is far from being a straightforward one. It is not by mere accident that the thought of Proudhon came to be so used by the Gravilliers; the fact is that Proudhon himself had been influenced by trade workers projects, as Pierre Ansart has shown, and in particular by the mutualism of the Canut Lyonnais silk workers, before exercising his own influence, in 1848, on the way these projects were shaped.[44] To talk of Proudhonism about the Parisian members of the IWMA is not mistaken as long as Proudhonism, rather than being taken to mean anything like the passive absorption of Proudhon's ideas by the Gravilliers, is understood to refer to a convergence and an interaction between Proudhon himself (as a thinker and a figure in political and social life) and some of the workers, and Parisian ones in particular. Besides, if Proudhon was invoked in support of their convictions, the reference to Proudhon was itself generative of effects within the IWMA, and by that same token, within the international labour movement. Three of these effects

[42] Michel Cordillot, *Eugène Varlin, chronique d'un espoir assassiné*, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-38.
[43] Michel Cordillot, « La section française de l'Internationale et les grèves de 1867 », in *Aux origines du socialisme moderne*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-55.
[44] Pierre Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme : esquisse d'une explication sociologique du proudhonisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970).

appear to be of particular significance and may become part of the research agenda concerning the influence of Proudhonism within the IWMA.

The first of them concerns the construction of Proudhonism as an ideology. The Gravilliers' selective presentation of it conferred to Proudhon's thought a coherence and features which did not necessarily reflect the more salient aspects of his works. Hence the image of a workerist, anarchist, cooperativist, anti-strikes Proudhon, which emerged mostly from the ongoing controversies within the IWMA around the issues of, respectively, the role of non-workers in the organisation of the state, the property of the means of production, and the strategy of emancipation. In a way, the Gravilliers "made" Proudhon rather than the reverse; it is *they* who invented a certain image of Proudhon. The Gravilliers' Proudhonism first marked the history of the IWMA by turning Proudhon into one of the canonical authors of the labour movement and of international socialism, and by making him instrumental to the definition and charting of the various positions both within the organisation itself and across the terrain of politics and trade unionism.

The second effect of the reference to Proudhon was the adoption, beyond the group of the Gravilliers, of a Proudhonian vocabulary. Mutualism had not been invented by Proudhon and was a working class practice first started by the Canuts Lyonnais silk workers, which Proudhon was trying to conceptualise. A similar approach was attempted in his *Capacité* with reference to the practices of workers' associations which had developed since the revolution of 1848. His formulations, however, influenced the vocabulary of the labour movement through the diffusion, for example, of the idea of federation, later taken up by the Bakuninists to unify the following three main ideas: the IWMA must be organised along federative lines, against the authority of a General Council which would extend its remit beyond its initial function as mere liaison committee; its sections must seek to federate the different trade corporations with the implicit aim to achieve an autonomous and federative organisation of economic activity; to the federative principle – which is the only true principle- is opposed political government, the intrinsically authoritarian governmental principle, that is. The ideas of federalism and mutualism were not only means to actually name already existing states of affairs; they performatively operated the integration of different ideas which already had currency among some workers, albeit in disconnected form, and then subsequently, the transmission of these ideas now tied together into an intrinsically cohered whole. In that respect, the Proudhonian terminology had an impact on the IWMA, beyond the Gravilliers themselves and their initial intentions regarding their reference to Proudhon.

Finally, the third effect of the reference to Proudhon was about agenda-setting[45] and the programmatic definition of certain priorities. With their *Memorial*, the Parisian workers meant to answer the questions of the General Council, that is, a list of ten questions concerning the aims and means of the IWMA, to which were added a variety of other issues: employment (women's and children's, notably), unemployment, strikes, association, education, relationships with capital, competition, the army, and religion. The Gravilliers responded with care, but inserted an idea – mobilising Proudhon for the purpose – that was rapidly to become the object of one of the fundamental controversies of the IWMA, i.e.,

[45] Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The agenda-setting function of mass media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972), pp. 176–87.

property. Such a question was obviously nothing new to the General Council, and certainly not for Marx himself. Nevertheless, the question of the definition of the regime of property, beyond the mere opposition between public and private property, or between bourgeois property and communism as discussed in the *Communist Manifesto*, was unquestionably introduced by the Gravilliers in their discussion –largely based on Proudhon – of the distinction between association and cooperation. The question of property was evoked neither in the constitution of the IWMA nor in the positions of the General Council prior to the Lausanne Congress. Now, Proudhon did not directly influence the workers of Paris, but his very own way of formulating problems, his interest in the question of the legal regime of property, his insistence on the role to be given to the antinomy between property and community, all were crucially important to the debates to come.

In conclusion, what can we say of Proudhonism within the International? First, it is necessary to question the very term itself. There is no Proudhonism that can be compared to Marxism, or Bakuninism (problematic terms themselves) insofar as we are dealing with a Proudhonism without Proudhon. Generally speaking, the Gravilliers were not Proudhonist if by this is meant a closeness to Proudhon during his lifetime (this was only the case of Louis Debock and Zephirin Camélinat), or even a direct influence of the Besançon thinker. But Proudhon was these workers' central reference when it came to bolstering their ideas, and this for a strong reason; Proudhon as well as they, forged those ideas out of the same materials, inherited from earlier workers' organisations and from the revolutionary experience of 1848, Proudhon himself having had a certain influence on the diffusion among workers of an anti-statist interpretation of the consequence of this revolution for working class strategy. The Gravilliers did not turn to Proudhon to mine for ideas – they did not need him to think – but what they did find there was an echo to their own ideas and they used his writings as so many weapons in the controversies that were appearing within the IWMA. There also was a symbolic dimension to this connection; after the insurrection of June 1848, Proudhon enjoyed great credit among organised workers, for coming out in support of the June insurgents, for the speech he delivered in Parliament on 31 July 1848 and during which he spoke on behalf of the proletariat and raised the social question, or for his role (albeit a transient one) in the attempts at the unification of the labour movement from the fall of 1848 onwards. The reference to Proudhon, therefore, does not reveal itself through some recognition of an assumed influence of his thought on Parisian activists. These interactions, however, were not without generating effects on the IWMA, and then on the wider labour movement: Proudhon became one of their references (through which adherence or rejection could be expressed), some of his vocabulary became part of their equipment, and some themes of his thought, and in particular the developments on property, all became critical points within the agenda of the IWMA, from their earlier status as marginal concerns altogether.

As for the members of the Parisian section themselves, their personal trajectories in the wake of the experience of the foundation of the International clearly reveal the considerable diversity of their opinions, and therefore the tactical nature of the Proudhonian label. Some of them were no longer in leading positions after 1867. Among the remaining ones, some still favoured mutualism while others joined the anti-authoritarian collectivists. Most of them actively participated in the Commune (Camélinat, Debock, Laplanche,

Limousin, Malon, Varlin, Murat), some did not get involved (Chemalé, Fournaise), and others went as far as taking sides against it (Fribourg, Héligon, and even Tolain – although despite he stood against the form of the Commune, he did not reject its principles, and then became a staunch supporter of amnesty). Quite obviously, the reference to Proudhon did not commit anyone to adopting a doctrine. This may have been one of the reasons for its weakness within the IWMA, as well as one of the secrets of its resilience.[46]

Translated by Thierry Labica

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