

System of Economic Contradictions

Volume 2

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1846)

(Translated by Iain McKay)

Chapter XIV: Summary and Conclusion

It has been said of Newton, to express the immensity of his discoveries, that *he has revealed the abyss of human ignorance*.

There is no Newton here, and no one can claim in economics a part equal to that which posterity assigns to this great man in the science of the universe. But I dare to say that there is here more than Newton has ever guessed. The depth of the heavens does not equal the depth of our intelligence, within which wonderful systems move. It looks like a new, unknown region that exists outside space and time, like the heavenly realms and infernal abodes, and on which our eyes plunge, with silent admiration, as in a bottomless abyss.

Non secùs ac si quâ penitùs vi terra dehiscens

Infernas reseret sedes et regna recludat

Pallida, Dis invisâ, superque immane barathrum

Cernatur, trepidentque immisso lumine Manes.

Virgil. Aeneid. lib. viii.¹

Here the throng, collision, swing of eternal forces; there the mysteries of Providence are revealed, and the secrets of fate appear uncovered. It is the invisible making itself visible, the intangible rendered material, the idea becoming reality, and reality a thousand times more wonderful, more grandiose than the most fantastic utopias. So far we do not see, in its simple formula, the unity of that vast machine: the synthesis of these gigantic gears, in which the well-being and misery of generations are ground, and which are shaping a new creation, still evades us. But we already know that nothing that happens in social economy has a copy in nature; we are forced to constantly invent special names, to create a new language, for facts without analogues. It is a transcendent world, whose principles are superior to geometry and algebra, whose powers derive neither from attraction nor from any physical force, but which use geometry and algebra as subordinate instruments, and takes as material the very powers of nature; a world finally freed from the categories of time, space, generation, life and death, where everything seems both eternal and phenomenal, simultaneous and successive, limited and unlimited, ponderable and imponderable... What more can I say? It is even creation, caught, so to speak, in the act!

And this world, which appears to us as a fable, which inverts our judicial habits, and never ceases to deny our reason; this world which envelops us, penetrates us, agitates us, without us even seeing it in any other way than the mind's eye, touching it only by signs, this strange world is society, it is us!

Who has seen monopoly and competition, except by their effects, that is, by their signs? Who has felt credit and property? What is collective force, division of labour and value? And yet,

¹ "even as though some force tearing earth apart should unlock the infernal house, and disclose the pallid realms abhorred of heaven, and deep down the monstrous gulf be descried where the ghosts flutter in the streaming daylight." (Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil* [MacMillan and Co. Ltd: London, 1920], Translated by J. W. Mackail, Eighth Book, 178). (Editor)

what is stronger, more certain, more intelligible, more real than all that? Look in the distance at this carriage drawn by eight horses on a beaten field, and driven by a man dressed in a old smock: it is only a mass of matter, moved on four wheels by an animal form. You discover there, in appearance, only a phenomenon of mechanics, determined by a phenomenon of physiology, beyond which you perceive nothing more. Penetrate further: ask this man what he does, where he goes; by what thought, what title, he drives this vehicle. And presently he will show you a *letter*, his authority, his providence, as he himself is the providence of his equipment. You will read in this letter that he is a carter, that it is in this capacity that he carries out the *transportation* of a certain quantity of *merchandise*, so much according upon the *weight* and *distance*; that he must carry out his journey by such a *route* and within such a *time*, barely covering the *cost* of his *service*; that this service implies on the part of the carter the *responsibility* for the *losses* and *damages* that result from other causes than *force majeure* and an *inherent defect* of the objects; that the price of the vehicle includes or not includes *insurance* against unforeseen accidents, and a thousand other details which are the hazard of the law and the torment of jurists. This man, I say, in a piece of paper as big as the hand, will reveal to you an infinite order, an inconceivable mixture of empiricism and pure reason, and that all the genius of man, assisted by the experience of the universe, would have been powerless to discover, if man has not left individual existence to enter collective life.

Indeed, these ideas of work, value, exchange, traffic, responsibility, property, solidarity, association, etc., where are the archetypes? who provided the exemplars? what is this world half material, half intelligible; half necessity, half fiction? What is this force, called work, which carries us along with ever greater certainty that we believe we are more free? Which of our joys and torments does this collective life, which burns us with an inextinguishable flame, cause? As long as we live, we are, without our being aware of it, and according to the extent of our faculties and the speciality of our industry, the thinking springs, thinking wheels, thinking gears, thinking weights, etc., of an immense machine that thinks and goes by itself. Science, we said, is based on the accord of reason and experience; but it creates neither one nor the other. And here, on the contrary, a science appears to us, in which nothing is given to us, *a priori*, neither by experience nor by reason; a science in which humanity draws everything from itself, noumenon² and phenomena, universals and categories, facts and ideas; a science, finally, which instead of simply consisting, like any other science, of a reasoned description of reality, is the very creation of reality and reason!

Thus the author of economic reason is man; the creator of economic matter is man; the architect of the economic system is again man. After having produced reason and social experience, humanity proceeds to the construction of social science in the same way as for the construction of the natural sciences; it brings together in agreement the reason and the experience it has given itself, and by the most inconceivable marvel, when everything in it takes after utopia, principles and actions, it only comes to know itself by excluding utopia.

Socialism is right in protesting against political economy and saying to it: You are nothing but a routine that does not understand itself. And political economy is right to say to socialism: you are only a utopia without reality or possible application. But both denying in turn, socialism the experience of humanity, political economy the reason of humanity, both lack the essential conditions of human truth.

Social science is the agreement of reason and social practice. Now, this science, of which our masters have only seen rare sparks, will be given to our century to contemplate it in its sublime splendour and harmony!

² In Kantian philosophy, a thing as it is in itself, as distinct from a thing as it is knowable by the senses through phenomenal attributes. (Editor)

But what am I doing? Alas! It is a question, at this moment when quackery and prejudice share the world, of raising our hopes. It is not incredulity that we have to fight, it is presumption. Let us start by noting that social science is not finished, that it is still in a state of vague premonition.

“Malthus,” says his excellent biographer, M. Charles Comte, “had the profound conviction that there exists in political economy principles which are true only insofar as they are contained within certain limits; he saw the main difficulties of the science in the frequent combination of complicated causes, in the action and reaction of effects and causes with each other, and in the necessity of setting limits or making exception for many important proposals.”

This is what Malthus thought of political economy, and the work we have published at this moment is only a demonstration of his idea. To this testimony we add another just as worthy of belief. In one of the final sessions of the Academy of Moral Sciences, M. Dunoyer, as a truly superior man, who does not allow himself to be dazzled either by the interest of a clique, nor by the disdain that inspires ignorant opponents, made the same confession with as much candour and nobility as Malthus.

“Political economy, which has a number of certain principles, which rests on a considerable mass of exact facts and well deduced observations, nevertheless seems far from being a set science. There is no complete agreement on the extent of the field in which its research should be extended, nor on the fundamental object which it must suggest. It is not suitable for all the work it embraces, nor the means to which the power of its work is linked, nor the precise meaning to be attached to most of the words that form its vocabulary. The science, rich in truths of detail, leaves a great deal to be desired as a whole, and as a science it still seems far from being constituted.”

M. Rossi goes further than M. Dunoyer: he formulated his judgement in the form of a reprimand addressed to the modern representatives of the science.

“Every thought of method now seemed abandoned in economics,” he cries, “and yet there is no science without method.” (*Compte-rendu par M. Rossi du cours de M. Whateley [Report by M. Rossi of M. Whateley’s course]*)

Messrs. Blanqui, Wolowski, Chevalier, everyone who has glanced every so briefly on the economy of societies speaks the same. And the writer who best appreciates the value of modern utopias, Pierre Leroux, writes on every page of the *Revue sociale [Social Review]*: “let us seek the solution of the problem of the proletariat; let us keep looking for it until we find it. It is the entire work of our epoch!...” Now, the problem of the proletariat is the constitution of social science. There are only short-sighted economists and fanatical socialists, for whom the science is summed up entirely in a formula, *Laissez faire, laissez passer*, or else, *To each according to his needs as far as social resources allow*, who boast of possessing economic science.

What then causes this delay of social truth, which alone maintains the disappointment of the economist and gives credit to the operations of the alleged reformers? The cause, in our opinion, is the separation, already very old, of philosophy and political economy.

Philosophy, that is to say metaphysics, or if it is preferred, logic, is the algebra of society; political economy is the realisation of this algebra. This was not noticed by J.B. Say, nor Bentham, nor anyone else who, under the names of *economists* and *utilitarians*, created a split in morals and rose against almost at the same time politics and philosophy. And yet, what more secure control can philosophy, the theory of reason, wish for than work, that is, the practice of reason? And conversely, what more certain control could economic science wish

than the formulas of philosophy? It is my dearest hope, that the time is not far when the masters in the moral and political sciences will be in the workshops and [behind] counters, as today our most skilful builders are all men formed by a long and arduous apprenticeship...

But on what condition can there be a science?

On the condition of recognising its field of observation and its limits, to determine its object, to organise its method. On this point the economist expresses himself as the philosopher: the words of M. Dunoyer, recounted earlier, seem literally taken from the preface of Jouffroy to the translation of Reid.

The field of observation of philosophy is the self [le moi]; the field of observation of economics is society, that is to say again the self. Do you want to know man, study society; do you want to know society, study man. Man and society reciprocally serve each other as subjects and objects; the parallelism, the synonymy of the two sciences is complete.

But what is this collective and individual self? What is this field of observation, where strange phenomena are going on? To find out, let us look at the analogues.

All the things we think seem to exist, to succeed one another or to be in three transcendent CAPABILITIES, outside of which we can only imagine and conceive absolutely nothing: these are *space, time and intelligence*.

Just as every material object is conceived by us necessarily in space; just as phenomena, connected with each other by a relationship of causality, seem to follow each other in time; thus our purely abstract representations are recorded by us to a particular receptacle, which we call intellect or intelligence.

Intelligence is in its species an infinite capacity, like space and eternity. There are restless worlds, of numberless organisms with complicated laws, with varied and unexpected effects; equal, for magnificence and harmony, to the worlds sown by the creator through space, to the organisms that shine and die out over time. Politics and political economy, jurisprudence, philosophy, theology, poetry, languages, customs, literature, fine arts: the field of observation of the self is more vast, more fecund, more rich in itself than the double field of observation of nature, space and time.

The self, as well as time and space, is infinite. Man, and what is the product of man, together with the beings thrown through space and the phenomena that follow one another in time, constitutes the triple manifestation of God. These three infinities, indefinite expressions of infinity, penetrate each other and support one another, inseparable and irreducible: space or scale not being conceived without movement, which implies the idea of force, this is to say a spontaneity, a self.

The ideas of things which are presented to us in space form for our imagination *tableaus*; the ideas which we place objects in time unfold in *histories*; finally, ideas or relations which do not fall under the category of time or space, and which belong to the intellect, are co-ordinated in *systems*.

Tableau, history, system, are thus three analogous expressions, or rather equivalents, by which we make known that a certain number of ideas appear to our mind as a symmetrical and perfect whole. That is why these expressions may, in certain cases, be taken for each other, as we have pursued from the beginning of this work, when we presented it as a history of political economy, no longer according to the date of the discoveries, but according to the order of the theories.

We conceive then, and we cannot not conceive of a capacity for things of pure thought, or, as Kant says, for *noumena*, in the same way that we conceive two others for sense things, for *phenomena*.

But space and time are nothing real; they are two forms imprinted on the self by external perception. Similarly intelligence is also nothing real: it is a form that the self imposes on itself, by analogy, in the context of the ideas that experience suggests to it.

As for the order of acquisition of ideas, intuitions or images, it seems to us that we start with those whose types or realities are included in space; that we continue by stopping, so to speak, the flight of ideas that time carries, and that we finally discover, with the help of sense perceptions, the ideas or concepts, without external model, which appear to us in this ghost capacity we call our intelligence. Such is the progress of our knowledge: we start from the sense to rise to the abstract; the ladder of our reason has its foot on the earth, crosses the sky and is lost in the depths of the mind.

Let us now reverse this series, and we envision creation as a descent of ideas from the higher sphere of intelligence into the lower spheres of time and space, a fall during which the ideas, originally pure, have taken a body of *substratum* that realises them and expresses them. From this point of view all created things, the phenomena of nature and the manifestations of humanity, will appear to us as a projection of the mind, immaterial and immutable, on a plane sometimes fixed and straight, space, sometimes inclined and moving, time.

It follows from this that ideas, equal to each other, contemporaneous and co-ordinated in the mind, seem thrown haphazardly, scattered, localised, subordinate and consecutive in humanity and in nature, forming tableaux and histories without resemblance to the original design [*dessin primitif*]; and all human science consists in finding this conception the abstract system of eternal thought. It is by a restoration of this kind that naturalists have found systems of organised and unorganised beings; it is by the same process that we have tried to re-establish the series of phases of social economy, which society makes us see isolated, incoherent, anarchic. The subject we have undertaken is really the natural history of work, according to the fragments collected by the economists; and the system which has resulted from our analysis is true in the same way as the systems of plants discovered by Linné and Jussieu, and the system of animals by Cuvier.

The human self manifested by work is thus the field for the exploration of political economy, a concrete form of philosophy. The identity of these two sciences, or rather these two scepticisms, has been revealed to us throughout the course of this book. Thus the formation of ideas appeared to us in the division of labour as a division of elementary categories; then, we have seen freedom being born from the action of man upon nature, and, following freedom, arise all the relations of man with society and with himself. As a result, economics has been for us at the same time an ontology, a logic, a psychology, a theology, a politics, an aesthetics, a symbolism and a morality...

The field of science recognised, and its operation delimited, we had to recognise its *method*. Now, the method of economic science is still the same as that of philosophy: the organisation of work, we believe, is nothing but the organisation of common sense...

Among the laws that make up this organisation we have noticed the antinomy.

All true thought, as we have observed, arises in one time and two moments. Each of these moments being the negation of the other, and both of which must disappear only within a superior idea, it follows that antinomy is the very law of life and progress, the principle of perpetual motion. Indeed, if a thing, by virtue of the power of evolution which is in it, is repaired precisely of all that it loses, it follows that this thing is indestructible, and that

movement supports it forever. In social economy, what competition is constantly occupied making, monopoly is constantly occupied unmaking; what labour produces, consumption devours; what property appropriates to itself, society gets a hold of: and from this results continuous movement, the unwavering life of humanity. If one of the two antagonistic forces is hindered, [so] that individual activity, for example, succumbs to social authority, organisation degenerates into communism and ends in nothingness. If, on the contrary, individual initiative lacks a counterweight, the collective organism is corrupted, and civilisation crawls under a regime of castes, iniquity and misery.

Antinomy is the principle of attraction and of movement, the reason for equilibrium: it is that which produces passion, and which breaks down all harmony and all accord...

Then comes the law of progression and series, the melody of beings, the law of the beautiful and the sublime. Remove the antinomy, the progress of beings is inexplicable: for where is the force that would produce this progress? Remove the series, the world is no more than a melee of sterile oppositions, a universal turmoil, without purpose and without an idea...

Even if these speculations, for us pure truth, appear doubtful, the application we have made of them would still be of immense utility. Let us think about it: there is not a single moment in life where the same man does not affirm and deny the same principles and theories at the same time, with more or less good faith, no doubt, but also always with plausible reasons, which, without soothing the conscience, suffice to make passion triumph and spread doubt in the mind. Let us leave, if you want, logic: but is it nothing to have illuminated the double face of things, to have learned to be wary of reasoning, of knowing how, the more a man has fairness in ideas and righteousness in the heart, the more he runs the risk of being a dupe and absurd? All our political, religious, economic, etc. misunderstandings come from the inherent contradiction of things; and this is even the source from which flow the corruption of principles, the venality of consciences, the charlatanism of professions of faith, the hypocrisy of opinions...

What is, at present, the *object* of economics?

The method itself tell us. Antinomy is the principle of attraction and balance in nature; antinomy is therefore the principle of progress and equilibrium in humanity, and the object of economic science is JUSTICE.

Considered in its purely objective relations, the only ones which social economy deals with, justice is expressed in *value*. Now, what is value? It is the labour performed.

“The real price of everything,” says Mr Smith, “what everything really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it... What is bought with money or with goods is purchased by labour as much as what we acquire by the toil of our own body. That money or those goods indeed save us this toil. They contain the value of a certain quantity of labour which we exchange for what is supposed at the time to contain the value of an equal quantity. Labour was the first price, the original purchase-money that was paid for all things. It was not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all the wealth of the world was originally purchased; and its value, to those who possess it, and who want to exchange it for some new productions, is precisely equal to the quantity of labour which it can enable them to purchase or command.”³

But if value is the embodiment of labour, it is at the same time the principle of the comparison of products with one another: hence the theory of proportionality which

³ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Volume 1, Book I, Chapter 5, 34-5. The original text is used where appropriate, although Proudhon quotes a French translation which differs somewhat from the original. (Editor)

dominates all economic science, and to which A. Smith would have raised, if it had been in the spirit of his time to pursue, with the aid of logic, a system of experiments.

But how is justice manifested in society, in other words, how is proportionality of values established? Say said it: by an oscillatory movement between value in *utility* and value in *exchange*.

Here appears in political economy, with regard to work, its master and all too often its executioner, the *arbitral* principle.

At the outset of the science, work, devoid of method, without understanding of value, barely stammering its first attempts, appeals to free will to build wealth and set the price of things. From this moment two powers enter into struggle, and the great work of social organisation is inaugurated. For work and free will is what we will later call labour and capital, wage-labour and privilege, competition and monopoly, community and property, plebe and nobility, state and citizen, association and individualism. For anyone who has obtained the first notions of logic, it is obvious that all these oppositions, eternally reborn, must be eternally resolved: now, that is what the economists do not want to hear, to whom the arbitral principle inherent in value seems resistant to all determination; and it is, with the horror of philosophy, what causes the retardation, so fatal to society, of economic science.

“It would be as absurd,” says [John Ramsay] McCulloch, “to speak of absolute height and depth as of absolute value.”

Economists all say the same thing, and we can judge by this example how far they are from each other, and on the nature of value, and on the meaning of the words they use. The *absolute* expression carries with it the idea of wholeness, perfection, or plenitude, on the basis of precision and accuracy. An absolute majority is a true majority (half plus one), it is not an indefinite majority. In the same way absolute value is the precise value, deduced from the exact comparison of products together: there is nothing in the world so simple. But the consequence of this critical effect is that since values measure one another, they must not oscillate at random: such is the supreme wish of society, such is the significance of political economy itself, which is nothing else, in its totality, but the picture of the contradictions whose synthesis infallibly produces true value.

Thus society is gradually established by a sort of swinging between necessity and arbitrariness, and justice is constituted by theft. Equality does not occur within society as an inflexible standard; it is, like all the great laws of nature, an abstract point, which oscillates continually above and below, through arcs more or less large, more or less regular. Equality is the supreme law of society; but it is not a fixed form, it is the average of an infinity of equations. That is how equality appeared to us from the first epoch of economic evolution, the division of labour; and such has been constantly manifested from the legislation of Providence.

Adam Smith, who had a kind of intuition on almost all the great problems of social economy, after having recognised labour as the principle of value and described the magical effects of the law of division, observes that, notwithstanding the increase of the produce resulting from this division, the wages of the worker do not increase; that often, on the contrary, they diminish, the gains of collective force not going to the worker, but to the master.

“The profits of stock, it may perhaps be thought are only a different name for the wages of a particular sort of labour, the labour of inspection and direction. They are, however, altogether different, are regulated by quite different principles, and bear no proportion to the quantity, the hardship, or the ingenuity of this supposed labour of inspection and direction. They are regulated altogether by the value of the stock

employed, and are greater or smaller in proportion to the extent of this stock... In this state of things, the whole produce of labour does not always belong to the labourer. He must in most cases share it with the owner.”⁴

That, A. Smith tells us coldly, is how things happen: everything for the master, nothing for the worker. Whether we call it injustice, plunder, theft, the economist is not moved. The robber proprietor seems to him in all this as an automaton as the worker is robbed. And the proof that they deserve neither envy nor pity is that the workers only demand when they are dying of hunger; it is that no capitalist, entrepreneur or proprietor, neither during life nor at the moment of death, has felt the slightest remorse. They accuse ignorant and distorted public consciousness; they may be right, they may be wrong. A. Smith limits himself to reporting the facts, which is much better for us than declamations.

So by designating amongst workers a select [*privilégié*], *nazaræum inter fratres tuos*, social reason personified collective force. Society proceeds by myths and allegories. The history of civilisation is a vast symbolism. Homer summarises heroic Greece; Jesus Christ is suffering humanity, striving with effort, in a long and painful agony, to freedom, to justice, to virtue. Charlemagne is the feudal type; Roland, chivalry; Peter the Hermit, the crusades; Gregory VII, the papacy; Napoleon, the French Revolution. In the same way the industrial entrepreneur, who exploits a capital by a group of workers, is the personification of the collective force whose profit he absorbs, as the flywheel of a machine stores force. This is really the heroic man, the king of work. Political economy is a whole symbolism, property is a religion.

Let us follow A. Smith, whose luminous ideas, scattered in an obscure clutter, seem a repetition [*deutérose*] of primitive revelation.

“As soon as the land of any country has all become private property, the landlords, like all other men, love to reap where they never sowed, and demand a rent even for its natural produce. The wood of the forest, the grass of the field, and all the natural fruits of the earth, which, when land was in common, cost the labourer only the trouble of gathering them, come, even to him, to have an additional price fixed upon them. He must then pay for the licence to gather them; and must give up to the landlord a portion of what his labour either collects or produces [*without him*].”⁵

Here is monopoly, here is interest on capital, here is [economic] rent! A. Smith, like all the enlightened, sees and does not understand; he recounts and has not the intelligence. He speaks under the inspiration of God without surprise and without pity; and the meaning of his words remain for him a closed letter. With what calm he recounts proprietor usurpation! As long as the land seems good for nothing, as long as labour has not loosened, fertilised, *utilised*, created VALUE [*mise en VALEUR*], property gives it no thought. The hornet does not alight on the flowers, it falls upon the hives. What the worker produces is immediately taken; the worker is like a hunting dog in the master’s hand.

A slave, exhausted from work, invents the plough. With a hardened wooden hook dragged by a horse, he opens the ground, rendering him capable of making ten times, a hundred times more. The master, at a glance, grasps the importance of the discovery: he seizes the land, he

⁴ Smith, Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter VI, 54-5. (Editor)

⁵ Smith, Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 6, 56. As before, Proudhon is quoting from a French translation and this ends with the words “Il faut qu’il paie pour avoir la permission. de les recueillir; c’est-à-dire qu’il paie au propriétaire une portion de ce qu’il recueille ou de ce qu’il produit, *sans lui*, par son travail”: “He must pay to have permission to collect them; that is to say, he pays the landlord a portion of what he collects or produces, *without him*, by his labour.” (Editor)

appropriates the revenue, he attributes the idea to himself, and makes himself adored by the mortals for this magnificent gift. He walks the equal of the gods: his wife is a nymph, Ceres; and he is Triptolemus. Poverty invents, and property reaps. For genius must remain poor: abundance would smother it. The greatest service that property has rendered to the world is this perpetual affliction of labour and genius.

But what to do with these heaps of grain? What a poor wealth [is] that which the boss shares with his horses, his oxen and his slaves! It is well worth being rich, if all the advantage consists of being able to gnaw a few more handfuls of rice and barley!...

An old woman, having pounded grain for her toothless mouth, realises that the dough soured, fermented, and cooked under the ashes, gives a food incomparably better than raw or grilled wheat. Miracle! The daily bread is discovered. – Another, having pressing into a jar a mass of dropped grapes, intends to boil the mash on the flame; the liquor spews out its impurities; it gleams, ruddy, bountiful, immortal. *Evoe!* it is the young Bacchus, the darling son of the proprietor, a child beloved of the gods, who has found it. What the master could not have devoured in a few weeks, a year will suffice for him to drink. The vine, like the harvest, like the earth, is appropriated.

What is to be done with these countless fleeces that each year provides such a large tribute? When the proprietor would raise his bed to be worthy of his pavilion, when he would duplicate thirty times his sumptuous tent, this useless luxury would do nothing but attest his impotence. He abounds in goods and he cannot enjoy; what a mockery!

A shepherdess, left naked by the avarice of the master, collects from the bushes some wool fibres. She twisted this wool, stretching it into equal and fine threads, gathering them on a spear, crisscrossing them, and making herself a soft and light dress, a thousand times more elegant than the patched skins that cover his scornful mistress. It is Arachne, the weaver, who created this marvel! Immediately the master begins to shear the hair of his sheep, his camels and his goats; he gives his wife a troop of slaves, who spin and weave under his orders. It is no longer Arachne, the humble servant; it is Pallas, the daughter of the proprietor, whom the gods have inspired, and whose jealousy avenges itself on Arachne by causing her to die of hunger.

What a sight this incessant struggle of labour and privilege, the first created everything out of nothing; the other always arriving to devour what it has not produced! – It is because the destiny of man is a continuous march. *It is necessary that he work*, that he create, multiply, perfect forever and forever. Let the worker enjoy his discovery; he falls asleep on his idea: his intelligence no longer advances. This is the secret of this iniquity which struck A. Smith, and against which, however, the unemotional historian did not find a word of reprobation. He felt, although he could not realise it, that the touch of God was there; that until the day when labour fills the earth, civilisation is driven by unproductive consumption, and that it is by rapine that fraternity is gradually established between men.

Man must work! That is why at the advice of Providence, theft was instituted, organised, sanctified! If the proprietor had tired of taking it, the proletarian would have soon be tired of producing, and savagery, hideous misery, was at the door. The Polynesian, amongst whom property has been aborted, and who enjoys in an entire community of property and love, why would he work? The earth and beauty are for everyone, children to anyone: what do you say to him about morals, dignity, personality, philosophy, progress? And without going so far, the Corsican, who is found for six months living and residing under his chestnut tree, why do you want him to work? What does he care for your conscription, your railways, your tribune, your press? What else does he need but to sleep when he has eaten his chestnuts? A prefect of

Corsica said that to civilise this island it was necessary to chop down the chestnut trees. A more certain way is to appropriate them.

But already the proprietor is no longer strong enough to devour the substance of the worker: he calls his favourites, his jesters, his lieutenants, his accomplices. It is again Smith who reveals this wonderful conspiracy.

“In the progress of the manufacture, not only the number of profits increase, but every subsequent profit is greater than the foregoing; because the capital from which it is derived must always be greater. In raising the price of commodities the rise of wages operates in the same manner as simple interest does in the accumulation of debt. The rise of profit operates like compound interest. If in the linen manufacture, for example, the wages of the different working people, the flax-dressers, the spinners, the weavers, etc., should, all of them, be advanced two-pence a day; it would be necessary to heighten the price of a piece of linen only by a number of two-pences equal to the number of people that had been employed about it, multiplied by the number of days during which they had been so employed. That part of the price of the commodity which resolved itself into wages would, through all the different stages of the manufacture, rise only in arithmetical proportion to this rise of wages. But if the profits of all the different employers of those working people should be raised five per cent, that part of the price of the commodity which resolved itself into profit would, through all the different stages of the manufacture, rise in geometrical proportion to this rise of profit. The employer of the flaxdressers would in selling his flax require an additional five per cent upon the whole value of the materials and wages which he advanced to his workmen. The employer of the spinners would require an additional five per cent both upon the advanced price of the flax and upon the wages of the spinners. And the employer of the weavers would require a like five per cent both upon the advanced price of the linen yarn and upon the wages of the weavers.”⁶

This vivid description of the economic hierarchy, starting with the Jupiter-proprietor, and ending with the slave. From labour, its division, the distinction of the master and the wage-worker, the monopoly of capital, arises a caste of landlords, financiers, entrepreneurs, bourgeois, masters and supervisors, labouring to consume rents, to collect usury, to squeeze the worker, and above all to exercise policing [*d'exercer la police*⁷], the most terrible form of exploitation and misery. The invention of politics and laws is exclusively due to property: Numa and Egeria, Tarquin and Tanaquil, as well as Napoleon and Charlemagne, were noble. *Regum tirnendorum in proprios greges, regel in ipsos irnperium est lavis*, says Horace. One would say a legion of infernal spirits, rushing from every corner of hell to torment a poor soul. Pull him by his chain, take away his sleep and food; beat, burn, torture, without rest, without pity! For if the worker were spared, if we did him justice, nothing would remain for us, and we would perish.

O God! what crime has this unfortunate man committed, that you abandon him to the guards who distribute blows to him with such a liberal hand, and subsistence with a hand so miserly? ... And you, proprietors, Providence's chosen rulers, do not go beyond the prescribed measure, because rage is rising in the heart of your servant, and his eyes are red with blood.

⁶ A combination and slight re-organising of selections from *The Wealth of Nations*. The first sentence is from Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 6 (57) while the rest is from Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 9, with the second sentence originally appearing at the end of the rest of the passage. (110, 109-10). (Editor)

⁷ In chapter VII, Proudhon writes of “great family of preventive, coercive, repressive, and vindictive institutions which A. Smith designated by the generic term police.” In other words, State power. (Editor)

A revolt of the workers wrings a concession from the pitiless masters. Happy day, deep joy! Work is free. But what freedom, for heaven's sake! Freedom for the proletarian is the ability to work, that is, of being robbed again; or not to work, that is to say to die to hunger! Freedom only benefits strength: by competition, capital crushes labour everywhere and converts industry into a vast coalition of monopolies. For the second time, the plebeian worker is on her knees before the aristocracy; she has neither the possibility, nor even the right to discuss her salary.

“Masters,” says the oracle, “are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform league, not to raise wages above their existing rate. To violate this rule is an act of a false-friend. And by abhorrent legislation, this league is tolerated, while the coalitions of workers are severely punished.”⁸

And why this new iniquity, which the unalterable serenity of Smith could not help declaring *abhorrent*? Would such a crying injustice have been even necessary and that, without this favouritism [*acception de personnes*], fate would have been in error and Providence thwarted? Will we find means of justifying, with monopoly, this partial policing of the human race?

Why not, if we want to rise above societal sentimentalism, and consider higher facts, the force of things, the intimate law of civilisation?

What is labour? What is privilege?

Labour, analogous to creative activity, without awareness of itself, indeterminate, barren, as long as the idea, the law does not penetrate, labour is the crucible where value is elaborated, the great matrix of civilisation, the passive or female principle of society. – Privilege, emanating from free will, is the electric spark that determines individualisation, the freedom that realises, the authority that commands, the mind that deliberates, the self that governs.

The relation of labour and privilege is thus a relation of the female to the male, of the wife to the husband. Amongst all peoples, the adultery of the woman has always seemed more reprehensible than that of the man; it was consequently subjected to more rigorous penalties. Those who, stopping at the atrocity of forms, forget the principle and see only the barbarism exercised towards the sex, are politicisers of romances worthy of appearing in the stories of the author of *Lélia*. Any indiscipline of workers is comparable to adultery committed by woman. Is it not obvious then that, if the same favour on the part of the courts were to accept the complaint of the worker and that of the master, the hierarchical link, outside which humanity cannot live, would be broken, and the entire economy of society ruined?

Judge moreover by the facts. Compare the physiognomy of a workers' strike with the march of a coalition of entrepreneurs. There, distrust of the proper law, agitation, turbulence, outside screaming and trembling, inside terror, spirit of submission and desire for peace. Here, on the contrary, calculated resolution, feeling of strength, certainty of success, calmness in execution. Where, in your opinion, is power? where is the organic principle? where is life? Without doubt society owes assistance and protection to all: I do not plead here the cause of

⁸ A paraphrase of Adam Smith: “the law, besides, authorises, or at least does not prohibit their combinations, while it prohibits those of the workmen [...] Masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate. To violate this combination is everywhere a most unpopular action, and a sort of reproach to a master among his neighbours and equals [...] The masters upon these occasions are just as clamorous upon the other side, and never cease to call aloud for the assistance of the civil magistrate, and the rigorous execution of those laws which have been enacted with so much severity against the combinations of servants, labourers, and journeymen.” (Volume 1, Part 1, Chapter 8, 74-6). (Editor)

the oppressors of humanity; may the vengeance of heaven crush them! But the education of the proletariat must be accomplished. The proletariat is Hercules arriving at immortality through work and virtue: but what would Hercules do without the persecution of Eurystheus?

Who are you? asked Pope Saint Leo of Attila, when this destroyer of nations came to set his camp before Rome.

“I am the scourge of God,” replied the barbarian. “We receive with gratitude,” continued the pope, “all that comes from God: but you, take care not to do anything that is not commanded of you!”

Proprietors, who are you?...

Weirdest thing, property, attacked on all sides in the name of charity, of justice, of social economy, has never known how to respond for its justification other than these words: *I am because I am*. I am the negation of society, the plundering of the worker, the right of the unproductive, the right of the strongest [*la raison du plus fort*], and none can live if I do not devour him.

This appalling enigma has made the most sagacious intelligences despair.

“In that original state of things, which precedes both the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock, the whole produce of labour belongs to the labourer. He has neither landlord nor master to share with him. Had this state continued, the wages of labour would have augmented with all those improvements in its productive powers, to which the division of labour gives occasion. [...] They would have been produced by a smaller quantity of labour [...] they would have been purchased likewise with the produce of a smaller quantity.”⁹

So says A. Smith. And his commentator adds:

“I can well understand how the right of appropriating, under the name of *interest*, *profit* or *rent*, the product of other individuals becomes nourishment for greed; but I cannot imagine that by diminishing the reward of the worker to add to the opulence of the idle man, we can increase industry or accelerate the progress of society in wealth.”¹⁰

The reason for this deduction, which neither Smith nor his commentator has seen, we will repeat, so that the inexorable law that governs human society is again and for the last time brought to light.

To divide labour is to make only a production of pieces: for there to be value, a composition is needed. Before the institution of property, each is a master to take from the ocean the water from which he draws salt for his food, to gather the olive from which he will extract his oil, to collect the ore which contains iron and gold. Each is free to exchange some of what he has collected against an equivalent quantity of provisions made by another: so far, we do not go beyond the sacred right of work and the community of the earth. Now, if I have the right to use, either by my personal labour or by exchange, all the products of nature; and if the possession thus obtained is entirely legitimate, I have the same right to combine, from the various elements which I obtain by labour and exchange, a new product, which is my property, and which I have the right to enjoy exclusively of any other. I can, for example, by means of the salt from which I extract soda, and the oil I draw from the olive and sesame, to

⁹ Smith, Volume 1, Book I, Chapter VIII, 72. Indicators of missing sentences have been added. (Editor)

¹⁰ Hodgskins, Volume 1, Book I, Chapter X, *Recherches sur la nature et les causes de la richesse des nations* (Paris: Chez Guillaumin Libraire, 1843), 132. (Editor)

make a specific composition to clean linen, and which will be for me, from the point of view of cleanliness and hygiene, a precious utility. I can even reserve for myself the secret of this composition, and consequently take, by means of exchange, a legitimate profit.

Now, what is the difference, under relation of right, between the manufacture of an ounce of soap and that of a million kilograms? Does the greater or lesser quantity change anything of the morality of the operation? So property, as well as commerce, as well as labour, is a natural right, of whose exercise nothing in the world can steal from me.

But, by the very fact that I compose a product which is my exclusive property, as well as the materials that constitute it, it follows that a workshop, an exploitation of men is organised by me; that profits accumulate in my hands to the detriment of all who enter into business relations with me; and that if you wish to substitute yourself for me in my enterprise, quite naturally I will stipulate for myself a rent. You will possess my secret, you will manufacture in my place, you will turn my mill, you will reap my field, you will pick my vine, but at a quarter, a third, or half share.

All this is a necessary and indissoluble chain; there is no serpent or devil here; it is the very law of the thing, the *dictum* of common sense. In commerce, plundering is identical to exchange; and what is really surprising is that a regime like this one does not excuse itself only by the good faith of the parties, it is commanded by justice.

A man buys from his neighbour the collier a sack of coal, from the grocer a quantity of sulphur from Etna. He makes a mixture to which he adds a portion of saltpetre, sold by the druggist. From all this results an explosive powder, of which a hundred pounds would suffice to wreck a citadel. Now, I ask, the woodcutter who charred the wood, the Sicilian shepherd who picked up the sulphur, the sailor who transported it, the commission agent from Marseilles who reshipped it, the merchant who sold it, are they complicit in the disaster? Is there any interdependence [*solidarité*] between them, I'm not saying in its use, but in the manufacture of this powder?

Now, if it is impossible to discover the least connection of action between the various individuals who, each without his knowledge, have co-operated in the production of the powder, it is clear, for the same reason, that there is no more connection and interdependence [*solidarité*] between them as to the profits of the sale, and that the gain which may result from its use also belongs exclusively to the inventor, that the punishment, to which he might become liable for as a result of crime or imprudence, is personal to him. Property is identical to responsibility: we cannot affirm the one, without granting at the same time the other.

But admire the unreason of reason! The same property, legitimate, irreproachable in its origin, constitutes in its use a flagrant iniquity; and this, without adding any element which modifies it, but by the mere development of the principle.

Let us take as a whole the products that industry and agriculture bring to the market. These products, such as powder and soap, are all, to some degree, the result of a combination of materials which were drawn from the general store. The price of these products invariably consists, firstly of the wages paid to the different categories of workers, secondly, of the profits demanded by the entrepreneurs and capitalists. So that society is divided into two classes of people: 1) entrepreneurs, capitalists and proprietors, who have the monopoly of all objects of consumption; 2) employees or workers, who can offer only half of what these are worth, which makes their consumption, circulation and reproduction impossible.

Adam Smith tells us in vain:

“It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.”¹¹

How could this be achieved, except with the dispossession of the monopolists? And how can monopoly be prevented if it is a necessary effect of the free exercise of the industrial faculty? The justice that Adam Smith wants to establish is impractical in the regime of property. Now, if justice is impractical, if it becomes actual injustice, and if this contradiction is internal to the nature of things [*intime à la nature des choses*], what is the use of even speaking of equity and humanity? Does Providence know equity, or whether fate is philanthropic? It is not to destroy monopoly, any more than labour, which we must reach; it is, by a synthesis which the contradiction of monopoly renders inevitable, to make it produce in the interests of all the goods which it [currently] reserves for some. Outwith of this solution Providence remains insensitive to our tears; fate inflexibly follows its path; and while we, gravely seated, argue over the just and the unjust, God who has made us contradictory like himself in our thoughts, contradictory in our actions, answers us with a burst of laughter.

It is this essential contradiction of our ideas that, being realised by labour and expressing itself in society with a gigantic power, makes everything happen in the inverse direction of what it must be, and gives society the appearance of a tapestry seen in reverse or an inverted animal. Man, by the division of labour and by machinery, was to gradually rise to science and to liberty; and by division, by the machine he stupefies himself and becomes a slave. Tax, says the theory, must be as a result of wealth; and quite the contrary tax is because of poverty. The unproductive must obey, and by a bitter mockery the unproductive command. Credit, according to the etymology of its name, and according to its theoretical definition, is the provider of labour; in practice, it squeezes and kills it. Property, in the spirit of its most beautiful prerogative, is the extension of land; and in the exercise of this same prerogative, property is the prohibition of land. In all its categories political economy reproduces the contradiction and the religious idea. The life of man, affirms philosophy, is a perpetual emancipation from animality and nature, a struggle against God. In religious practice, life is the struggle of man against himself, the absolute submission of society to a superior Being. *Love God with all your heart*, the Gospel tells us, and *hate your spirit [âme] for eternal life*: precisely the opposite of what reason commands...

I will not push this summary further. Having reached the end of my journey, my ideas are pressing in such a multitude and vehemence, that already I would need a new book to recount what I have discovered, and that, in spite of the oratorical expedience, I see no other means of finishing than to stop abruptly.

If I am not mistaken, the reader must to be convinced of at least of one thing: that social truth cannot be found either in utopia, or in routine; that political economy is not the science of society, but that it contains the materials of this science, in the same way that the chaos before creation contained the elements of the universe; it is that, to arrive at the definite organisation which appears to be the destiny of the species on the globe, it remains only to make a general equation of our contradictions.

But what will be the formula of this equation?

We already have a glimpse of it: it must be a *law of exchange*, a theory of MUTUALITY, a system of guaranties which solves the old forms of our civil and commercial societies, and satisfies all the conditions of efficiency, progress and justice that was indicated by criticism; a society no longer merely contractual [*conventionnelle*] but genuine; which changes

¹¹ Smith, Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 8, 88. (Editor)

fragmented [*parcellaire*] division into an instrument of science; which abolishes the servitude of machines, and prevents the appearance of crises; that makes competition a benefit, and monopoly a pledge of security for all; which, by the power of its principle, instead of asking credit from capital and protection from the State, subjugates capital and State to labour; which, by the sincerity of exchange, creates a true solidarity between peoples; which, without forbidding individual initiative, without prohibiting domestic savings, continuously restores to society the wealth which appropriation diverts; which, by this movement of *exit* and *return* of capital, assures the political and industrial equality of citizens, and by a vast system of public education, brings the equality of functions and the equivalence of aptitudes, by continuously raising their level; which, by justice, well-being and virtue, renews the human conscience, assures the harmony and the equilibrium of generations; a society, in a word, which, being at the same time organisation and transition, escapes the provisional, guarantees everything and imposes nothing...

The theory of *mutuality*, or of *mutuum*, that is to say, of exchange in kind, whose most simple form is loan for consumption, is, from the point of view of collective existence, the synthesis of the two ideas of property and of community [*communauté*], a synthesis as old as the elements that constitute it, since it is nothing other than the return of society to its primitive practice through a maze of inventions and systems, the result of a meditation of six thousand years on the fundamental proposition, A equals A.

Everything today is being prepared for this solemn restoration; everything announces that the reign of fiction has passed, and that society will return to the sincerity of its nature. Monopoly has swelled to equal the world; yet, a monopoly which embraces the world cannot remain exclusive; it must be republicanised or else it must be destroyed. Hypocrisy, venality, prostitution, theft, form the foundation of the public conscience: now, unless humanity learns to live on what kills it, we must believe that justice and atonement approach....

Already socialism, sensing its utopias fail, attaches itself to realities and to facts, it laughs at itself in Paris, it discusses in Berlin, in Cologne, in Leipzig, in Breslau; it trembles in England; it thunders on the other side of the ocean; it is killed in Poland, it tries its hand at government in Berne and in Lausanne. Socialism, by penetrating the masses, has become very different: the people care little for the honour of schools; it asks for work, science, well-being, equality. The system matters little, as long as the thing is there. Yet, when the people want something, and it is no longer a question of knowing how they can obtain it, the discovery is not long in arriving: get ready to see the grand masquerade descend.

Let the priest finally get it his head that poverty is a sin, and that true virtue, that renders us worthy of eternal life, is to fight against religion and against God; – that the philosopher, lowering his pride, *supercilium philosophicum*, learns on his part that reason is society, and that to philosophise is to work with his hands; – that the artist may remember that he once descended from Olympus into Christ's stable, and that from this stable, he rose suddenly to unknown splendours; that as well as Christianity, labour must regenerate it; – that the capitalist thinks that silver and gold are not true values; that by the sincerity of exchange all products amount to the same dignity, each producer will have in his house a mint [*un hôtel des monnaies*], and, as the fiction of the productivity of capital has plundered the worker, so organised labour will absorb capital; – that the proprietor knows that he is only the collector of society's [economic] rents, and that if he could once, under the guise of war, put a prohibition on the soil, the proletarian can in his turn, by association, put a prohibition on harvesting, and make property expire in the void; – that the prince and his proud cortege, his soldiers, his judges, his councillors, his peers, and all the army of the unproductive, hasten to cry *Thanks!* to the agricultural and industrial worker [*au laboureur et à l'industriel*], because

the organisation of labour is synonymous with the subordination of power, that it depends on the worker abandoning the unproductive to his indigence, and to destroy power in shame and hunger.

All these things will happen, not as unforeseen, un hoped novelties, a sudden effect of the passions of the people, or of the skill of a few men, but by the spontaneous return of society to an immemorial practice, momentarily abandoned, and rightly so...

Humanity, in its oscillatory march, turns incessantly upon itself: its progress is only the rejuvenation of its traditions; its systems, so opposite in appearance, always exhibit the same basis [*fond*], seen from different sides. Truth, in the movement of civilisation, always remains the same, always old and always new: religion, philosophy, science merely translate. And this is precisely what constitutes Providence and the infallibility of human reason; which ensures, in the very heart of progress, the immutability of our being; which renders society at once unalterable in its essence and irresistible in its revolutions; and which, continually extending perspective, always showing from afar the latest solution, establishes the authority of our mysterious premonitions.

Reflecting on these battles of humanity, I involuntarily recall that, in Christian symbolism, the militant Church must succeed on the final day a triumphant Church, and the system of social contradictions appears to me like a magic bridge, thrown over the river of oblivion.