

## No Utopianism nor Solidarism.

# Is a materialist and critical understanding of association possible?

Communication for the IV Encontros de Portalegre

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### *Introduction: the alienated man*

From Engels to Adorno and Horkheimer, to Althusser or Bourdieu everything seems to occur as if criticism in its main variation – the Marxist approach – had **worked** to feed a principal way of thinking: individuals (**workers**, proletarians, social actors, etc.) unconsciously reproduce the social structures of capitalism which alienate them. They accept the conditions enforced on them and no longer seek to rebel against a world which substantially impoverish their **labor**, their soul and their creativity. Even worse: they ensure the reproduction of the system by seeking to engage in mass consumption at any price.

There is little doubt that Marx was not wrong to point out, with the concept of alienation, the inhuman **working** conditions in which the nineteenth century proletariat was, and which a huge part

of the **workers** still have to face all around the world nowadays. Should the **worker**-consumer only be seen as a scatterbrain being who unconsciously reproduces, to use Bourdieu's language, the conditions of his domination? My intention here is not to put Marx in the dock, since he is, I am sure, an author whose work has remained of unequalled power for over a century. However, I would like to try and show that by dint of favouring almost exclusively the concept of alienation in his work, there is a considerable risk that only a negative path for criticism can emerge from it. It is that initial heart of criticism which was Marx's thinking and which has irrigated the whole twentieth century from the Frankfurt School to French critical sociology that I would like to put into perspective by suggesting a new agenda for critical research that I would characterize as, for now and for lack of a better term, positive. This agenda of research is in its early days. Nonetheless, in my opinion, a theoretical base should be given to it straight away. The following pages will try to establish it by notably drawing on the main theoretician of libertarian anarchism, Marx's rival on socialist theory, Proudhon. However, I would like to insist on the fact that the purpose is not to truly turn the latter against Marx<sup>1</sup>.

Because I think that Marx must remain a topical issue, I rather wish to demonstrate that, at the cradle of criticism, right next to him, there is an equally – or even more? – Materialist position which could be pertinently combined to the criticism of alienation<sup>2</sup>. This position might be helpful to highlight, here and now, possibilities of emancipation through **labor** which are not exclusively conditioned by the “Grand Soir”. Proudhon's work is certainly philosophically and economically weaker than Marx's. However, Proudhon is very interesting in the way he manages to see in a “laboring” man something else than a slave-laboring animal deprived of subjectivity by capitalism and who only exists as a production tool. In that way, criticism, if any, may be considered as

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<sup>1</sup> Besides, this text does not apply to show that the concept of alienation would deserve to be expelled from the political and social sciences glossary. On the contrary, it remains significantly powerful and topical, particularly at a time when capitalism intensifies and heightens its legitimacy, de facto, so far as to turn the middle and popular classes into real micro-shareholders. The same people who, after not having the choice to invest their money in private pension fund saving, pay the heavy price for the crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Or to that of domination or to that of power, depending on whether we want to adopt the Bourdieusian or the Foucauldian approach.

positive.

### ***Marx, left wing Hegelian***

In reality, Marx, as materialist as he is, is indebted to the intellectualist tradition which will be punctuated by Hegel more than he wants to admit (Méda, 1995). According to the latter, as we know it, modernity (and secondarily the end of History) is characterized by the triumph of the spirit over the matter. By being opposed to physical objects, or, to speak as Hegel, by “denying” them (they are not in “me”), the spirit transforms and assimilates them to turn them into a part of itself, a knowledge. Through his **labor** of assimilation, a man knows and masters nature more and more adequately. Within the Hegelian approach, **labor** becomes the mediator between spirit and nature as well as the dynamics that will allow the first to dominate the second.

Thus, the chemist will, for instance, turn a block of stone into diverse molecules – by doing so, he assimilates that stone into a precise knowledge which will be part of him — where the archeologist will turn the very same stone into something else (a trace of ancient civilization ...) in order to assimilate it into another form of knowledge which will be part of him. The end of history, absolute knowledge is nothing but this moment when the spirit has taken everything that was outside of itself under all forms of knowledge (in our example, chemistry archeology, etc.). Yet, it comes down to the spirit knowing itself since all those objects of knowledge are now its abstractions, its components. Therefore, the history of Man has a meaning, a purpose, in short, a teleology: the perfect coincidence of the spirit with itself. All that was external and unknown to it (even frightening, like the lightning assimilated to the wrath of God) has become itself. Eventually, the known object is only a pretext for the spirit to discover itself by enriching itself with new knowledge, which, joined with the infinity of other knowledge, constitute absolute knowledge.

As put by Hegel, the spirit, like a child, never stops going beyond its representations – which have lasted until the present moment – towards new ones that seem more judicious. “Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labor of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward” as if it were in permanent gestation (Hegel, 1977: 6). Human evolution tends to the **labour** of the universal, of humanity on the self. **Labor** in its absolute fulfillment will take other forms than the ones that it knows in the eighteenth century, which are still mainly manual and laborious. Then, the life of the spirit will keep developing in abstraction. And this development would become the only activity likely to be considered as **labor**: scientific, political, artistic, philosophical, etc. The **labor** of material production will, for its part, be delegated to the industry.

Marx incorporates the Hegelian idea of historical development. But he will endeavor to demonstrate that if Hegel has “found the abstract, logical, speculative expression for the movement of history; (...) this historical process is not yet real history of man-of man as a given subject” (Marx, Engels, 2011: 104). As noted by Salem in his French introduction in the *Manuscripts of 1844* Marx acknowledges that Hegel “has grasped the essence of human **labor** and showed that it transforms nature by shaping it to impose the human mark on it. With Hegel, Man masters nature, the subject penetrates its object” (Salem, 1996: 39). This man, however, far from referring to the image of the suffering and hard-**working** material individual, remains, for the thinker of the eighteenth century, the incarnation of spirit at a time in history **working** to make it evolve towards its own end. According to Marx, historical materialism will attempt to put an end to this illegitimate privilege that spirit still makes prevail over the body, affirming that, through abstraction, such spirit is only assimilated to a completely transcendent divine identity, whereas men in flesh and bone are the ones who create history through their concrete activity. The latter is no longer that of a conscience which knows itself but exclusively that of individuals who, through their material constructions, humanize the hostile and wild nature.

Nevertheless, despite this significant materialist watershed and this deep desire to bring back things on an immanent and understandable perspective, we can bring out with Méda, as well as with Althusser, that Marx does not quite go beyond Hegel yet. Both share a fear of the naturally given, a refusal of man's animality and an enhancement of technical evolution, suitable to domesticate the untamed nature. The difference between both philosophers is to be found in the way they consider that domestication. For Hegel, it is cognitive, since the informed spirit penetrates the nature by denying it. According to Marx, it falls under each man's action, that is to say **labor**. As he himself wrote in his third manuscript, "the only labor which Hegel knows and recognizes is abstractly mental labor" (Marx, Engels, 2011: 108). As to him he wishes to consider all human productions. In each one of these, the creative individual expresses himself and gets acknowledged by the others.

Marx points out the triple quality of **labor**: it transforms the natural world into a human world, it reveals myself to me, and finally, it reveals my sociability since the object that comes from my **labor** reveals myself to the others (besides, in this way, the exchange between men is no longer a mercantile exchange but a pure relation of expression because each object becomes the image of its creator). Arendt mentioned it well: With Marx, we see for the first time the idea of a completely "socialized mankind" in which "the distinction between labor and work would have completely disappeared, all work would have become labor; because all things would be understood, not in their worldly, objective quality, but as results of living labor power" (Arendt, 1998: 89). Drawing from this the conclusion that labor becomes "the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man", there is only one step that Marx will not hesitate to take for a second (Arendt, 1998: 101).

***Marx's first paradox of labor***

Therefore, if **labor**, in the *manuscripts of 1844*, positively identifies to the expression and the fulfillment of the self, how can the same Marx step into a critical perspective which goes against it and advocate its drastic reduction a few years later in *Le Capital*. (see Marx, 1977, chapter X: 340-416) ? As Arendt mentions, “such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of the great authors they lead into the very center of their work” (Arendt, 1998: 105). With Marx, the fundamental question consists in asking to what extent the formerly much-valued **labor** and the one whose escape is advocated are not, in fact, of the same nature. The answer can be guessed and is developed in his theorization of communism. The **labor** that must be reduced is obviously the alienated industry **labor**, although it often produces things that are essential to human life (whether it is an agricultural production or a factory, etc.). Evolving towards the suppression of this state of affairs is authorizing that “the area of freedom supplants that of necessity”. Indeed, Marx adds, “the realm of freedom really begins only where labor determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper” (Marx, 1981: 958-959). When the law of the immediate physical needs is off, “the development of human powers as an end in itself begins” (Marx, 1981: 959)<sup>3</sup>.

In order for men to communicate fully and freely through **labor**, all their biological needs must be formerly satisfied so that, freed from their relation with nature, they can produce for purposes other than the satisfaction of these biological needs. A man freed from the need and from all material and natural necessity becomes nothing more than an individual who resolves himself to his social being and to the interactivity he has with his fellows. Everyone’s purpose is therefore to take part in the evolution of human history through his productions.

Unfortunately, Marx notices, in this middle of the nineteenth century, **labor**, far from being a

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<sup>3</sup> Besides, everyone knows this famous excerpt: “Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But a animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need while man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (Marx, Engels, 2011: 54).

factor for emancipation, seems to be completely alienated in a sense that its purpose is not the person's development but self-enrichment. Even though everyone is supposed to benefit from his labor and take pleasure in it by expressing himself through it, even though everyone is supposed to materialize their gifts in it beyond all already satisfied natural necessity, labor within a capitalist society regresses and becomes the only way to support the most basic needs. To quote Méda again, "by degrading man's free creative activity to the rank of means of livelihood, alienated labor turns his generic life into an instrument for his physical existence" (1995 : 105). In other words, we no longer have a labor which allows self-manifestation but a mere means of survival. The purpose of labor is no longer a purpose of enjoyment that a man can know after having satisfied his needs but the means of the satisfaction itself. He becomes mere merchandise.

The worker is in front of his own product as if it was an unknown product which does not correspond to him at all<sup>4</sup>. He trades it for a salary; he produces it for someone else who will pay for it<sup>5</sup>. Thereby the contradiction is to be found at the very heart of this double pole which implies the man-object relation: not only the worker becomes alienated from his production to which he becomes a slave in order to subsist, but moreover, he himself as a worker becomes an object that the owner buys and who will do his labor only by necessity, alienated from the rest of his man's life. Alienated labor is nothing but the one that Smith accentuated a few decades ago: labor defined as a burden, a sacrifice that we inflict to ourselves to obtain goods and to endlessly increase production. In this sense, Althusser observes, "political economy is not at all the science of labor but the science of alienated labor, that is to say a science that will consider work only through pain and production" (Althusser, 1986: 185). And for Marx, material production must not exceed abundance. Once the latter is reached, the production must be stopped in order to allow everyone to create his own

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<sup>4</sup> "The object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor's realization is its *objectification*. In the condition dealt with by political economy this realization of labor appears as loss of reality for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and object-bondage; appropriation as estrangement, *as alienation* (Marx, Engels, 2011: 50)".

<sup>5</sup> In that way, the alienation, the "estrangement" is manifested "in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another" (Marx, Engels, 2011: 89).

essence through labor.

Emancipation therefore implies the increase of free time and leisure thanks to which the laborer finds his dignity and the possibility to develop a free and genuine labor, that is to say a piece of work. Therefore here we find the connection made by Marx between free labor and artistic work as opposed to alienated labor, an opposition clearly conceptualized by Arendt in terms of *homo faber* and *animal laborens*<sup>6</sup>. Currently reduced to a state of *animal laborens*, man must endeavor to return to his state of *homo faber*, his status of creator and artist. According to Arendt, it is the way that rose “the hope that inspired Marx and the best men of various workers’ movement – that free time eventually will emancipate men from necessity and make the *animal laborans* productive”. Nevertheless, Arendt goes on, this hope “rests on the illusion of a mechanistic philosophy which assumes that labor power, like any other energy, can never be lost, so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish other, ‘higher’, activities” (Arendt 1998: 133). Increasing free time against the slavery of labor is necessary until the implosion of capitalism and the advent of communism because, in that second system, man knows that working is not producing.

### ***Marx’s second paradox and negative criticism***

Whereas we can clearly see how the expression-alienation paradox is only a subtle dialectic used by Marx in order to give an original impact to his criticism of capitalism, another contradiction seems harder to solve. In fact, it appears that Marx finally remains closer to Hegel than he wishes to admit. Indeed, although he firmly affirms to go beyond the Hegelian abstraction of the spirit towards the concrete Man, we can ask ourselves if, in that type of ideal communist society which

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<sup>6</sup> "*Homo faber* who makes literally ‘works upon’ as distinguished from the *animal laborans* which labors and “mixes with”” (Arendt, 1998: 136).



ensures the conciliation between individual expression and collectivity, and which does so exclusively through **labor**, sociability itself is not turning into something extremely abstract which occurs through signs. Abundance being acquired through the machine and the communist management of wealth, the ultimate purpose of production is solely to allow individuals to exchange mirrors of what they are.

It is no longer about making objects whose purpose is to satisfy needs but to build abstractions in which society feels its own sociability. As if **labor** and production were only a pretext, a stage where individuals can collectively perform, each one of them leaning towards what they are deep inside and towards what they are socially, a place where the product is nothing but a support for something else. That is the distinction Marx makes between two types of **labor** which sets us on the way to his latent Hegelianism: on the one hand, **labor** aiming for the satisfaction of our physical needs and which must be minimized. It is the one that characterizes our capitalist societies where each man is defined by his elementary and biological needs beyond which he is not given the opportunity to go. On the other end, **labor** (work) that is promoted to the rank of means of maker, which evolves within the sphere of freedom, detached from any material need and which allows the reduction of the first one. Eventually, like Hegel, Marx values a “leisure” **labor**, an abstract **labor**, a **labor** of the spirit in opposition to material work which, as minimized as possible, allows the satisfaction of our natural needs. Marx’s free **labor**, as said earlier, only has enjoying and non-binding objects. The rest must be taken in charge by the machine. This developmental and expressive **labor**, which is both individual and social, is almost exclusively intellectualist since its purpose is the pure expression of the self to itself and to the others from a simple material inconsequential support. Marx’s desalienated **labor** therefore seems to be about spirits that present themselves to others by communicating what they are, through a kind of game of mirrors. Nonetheless, such **labor** can only happen when socialism, through revolution – that is to say the taking up of power (of the reins of the State) by the proletarian party – will generate the ideal

communist society. Until then, nothing can be valued in the **worker's** activity. It is in that sense that we can talk about negative criticism.

With Marx, everything happens as if critical activity solely and wholly consisted in the global rejection of this world. No matter the context in which he **labors** (factory, workshop, agriculture, etc.), modern man is brought back to his animality and to a pure pathos of suffering by capitalism. He is condemned to material production without ever having the possibility to express himself abstractly as a socialized being.

Already in his youthful writings, Marx carried out this cold but probably rightful analysis about the Irish or English **worker** in factory: “Light, air, etc.- the simplest animal cleanliness – ceases to be a need for man. Dirt-this stagnation and putrefaction of man-the sewage of civilization (speaking quite literally)-comes to be the element of life for him. Utter, unnatural neglect, putrefied nature, comes to be his life-element. None of his senses exist any longer, and not only in his human fashion, but in an inhuman fashion, and therefore not even in animal fashion (...). The savage and the animal have at least the need to hunt, to roam, etc. –the need of companionship. Machine labor is simplified in order to make a worker out of the human being still in the making, the completely immature human being, the child-while the worker has become a neglected child. The machine accommodates itself to the weakness of the human being in order to make the weak human being into a machine” (Marx, Engels, 2011: 83). The critical activity must not do anything else than lifting the veil on this state of affairs.

What Marx seems to share with the conservative spirit of his time, is the idea that proletariat is unvarying, that all the workers, alienated, present vile and degraded human characteristics. As he will write it in his inaugural address of the IWA, it might be true that “workers’ emancipation must be the work of the workers themselves” (Marx, [1867], 1964) but, given what he says about the alienated **worker** (and therefore by extension about the whole **working**-class) we hardly believe that the latter can ever rise up. This is what his most lucid successors will clearly detect, notably within

the group *Socialism or Barbarism*. For instance, Lefort wrote down that Marx depicts the proletariat with such gloomy terms that we are entitled to wonder how can he be up to the conscience of his conditions and to his role as a leader of humanity. Capitalism would have turned him into a machine and deprived him from “any human nature, physically and morally” (Lefort, 1979: 73). From his youthful writings to his maturity ones, Marx refuses to consider that the **worker** may, before the revolution, escape the destitute condition of his class, and emancipate a little. Even though he affirmed in his youthful works that the **worker** tended to praxis (synonym of art at the time) through revolution, he will give up this one later, too full of the defects of capitalism to be “recyclable”, and he will turn to another form of “art”: science.

This transition from his youthful writings to his maturity writings is anything but insignificant. If there is no doubt that the scientific economy developed in his maturity works will be tremendously useful within the political struggle against a capitalism whose mechanisms are deeply analyzed, these works still obliterate what, in his youthful writings, was about recognition, to paraphrase Honneth: Recognition of a popular skill with emancipating praxis and the critical return of the **worker** to his own life conditions.

### ***Proudhon or the materiality of the workers’ praxis***

Everything happens as if Marx had lost his belief in the critical potential of the **working** class and his own praxis. It was hard to prove him wrong. The **workers** who took part in the *Manifeste des 60*<sup>7</sup> themselves deplored the havoc illiteracy and alcohol created in their ranks. Their text, however, brought something else to light: the conscience of persisting in a being who does not

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<sup>7</sup> This « *Manifeste des soixante ouvriers de la Seine* », through which they invited their peers to run for elections, was published in *L’opinion Nationale* on the 17th of February, 1864 and in *Le Temps* on the 18th of February. It can also be read in Proudhon’s annex sections (1977, t.2: 420-429).

reduce himself to what capitalism has made of him. And this was sensed better by Proudhon than by Marx.

In spite of this, since he is a non-communist, he cannot be categorized in the second important tradition of nineteenth century socialism, that of utopists. Indeed, he purely and simply did not suggest any “utopia”, even “concrete” as it was often believed<sup>8</sup>. The issue with utopist theories is finally identical to that of Marxism: their critical theory is a critical theory of the existing, which considerably complicates any theory of emancipation since it can only concretely be based on a future fantasized society which does not exist yet. This society directly comes out from one man’s imagination and his community organization is oriented by himself from start to finish. Proudhon especially attacks the revolutionary conceptions that Cabet sets out in *Voyage en Icarie* (1848, Paris, *Bureau du populaire*) in which he indicates how to organize and construct what he reckons to be an ideal community of labor. According to Proudhon, “Mr. Cabet does not conceive social revolution as a possible effect of the development of institutions and of the cooperation of intelligences: this idea is too metaphysical for his big heart (...). For Mr. Cabet, reform comes through advice, will, the important task of a hero character, messiah and representative of the Icarians. Mr. Cabet certainly holds back from generating the new law of the discussions of an assembly regularly produced by the popular election: it is too slow a means and would compromise everything. It needs a MAN. After having suppressed all individual wills, he gathers in a supreme individuality, which expresses the collective thinking as Aristotle’s motionless engine brings growth to all subaltern activities” (Proudhon, 1957: 68).

My hypothesis is that, after having shared a lot of his reflections (notably concerning praxis), Proudhon will stray from Marx for the same reasons for which he refused to be classified among the utopists. Contrary to him, Proudhon got out of libraries and tried to become deeply impregnated with workers’ experiences through sociological enquiries. As soon as the revolution of

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<sup>8</sup>. See for instance A. Pessin, 2001, *L’oimaginaire utopique aujourd’hui* (Paris, PUF) or in English : Parker et al., 2007, *The Dictionary of Alternatives: Utopianism and Organization*, London, Zed Books.

1848, he started to study very closely the way **labor** in **workers'** companies was self-organized. More particularly, he will be fascinated by the cooperative workshops held by the Canuts, those weavers capable of maintaining the political position of the rebellion – everyone remembers their insurrections of 1831, 1834 and 1848 at the dawn of the Second Republic – and of developing a form of autonomous organization of labor. Just like Marx, he develops a theory of praxis as the true expression of man. But unlike him, he does not reject it in a desalienated future. The abstract activity of the spirit (philosophy, art, etc.) displaying pieces of work must not be designed as this **labor** which would transcend the industrial and “hard-working” **labor** in the communist society but as what is present straightaway in the **workers'** life of the time.

Therefore, according to Proudhon, the intellectuals' task does not involve developing a negative critical theory which helps the individuals become aware of their **labor** condition in order to get away from it and think but consists in diving in it themselves (Frère, 2009, Frère, Reinecke, 2011). They must “observe how the population connects to certain ideas rather than to others, how it generalizes them, how it develops them in its own way, how it turns them into institutions and customs that it traditionally follows, until they end up in the hands of legislators and upholders of the law who, when their time comes, turn them into law articles and rules for courts”. As specifically regards **labor**, “it will be the same for the idea of reciprocity (or association, or workshop, which no status distinguishes), he foresees, way before the famous law of 1901. As old as the social State, the organic power and the revolutionary impact of this idea had been foreseen by several speculative minds but it is only since 1848 that it gains in importance” (Proudhon, 1977: 70-71, 80-81). Far from the now emerging factories by which Marx is fascinated, Proudhon's attention will be enthralled by the first forms of credits, health insurance and cooperatives which take shape within workshops and small **workrer** associations. He will attempt to extract the original substrate out of it: reciprocity (Gardin, 2006).

The practice of mutuality embodies par excellence what I would like to theorize as positive critical

theory. It is conditioned by an anthropological principle of common humanity (Frère, 2009, chap.2): “Man, as a reason-endowed being, has the ability to feel dignity inside other people, as in himself, to assert himself as an individual as well as a species. Justice is the product of this ability: it is the spontaneously felt and reciprocally ensured respect of human dignity” (Proudhon, 1988: 423). This theory will make Proudhon one of the leaders of associationist (or libertarian) socialism, a project which, for him, is planned in full coherence with the anarchist nature of his words: men must be economically and politically organized between one another by referring to this principle of mutuality rather than to any authority. The critical task invariably comes with two sides, one positive and the other negative: one must highlight the alienation specific to the capitalist production mode; the other must emphasize the practices of emancipation already initiated in mutualist experiments.

### ***Reciprocity at the heart of criticism?***

The theory of reciprocity is not one that rests upon science, in the manner of Marx’s alienation theory. This science, in the pieces of work of maturity such as *Le Capital*, becomes, instead of the praxis, the nest of ideology criticism. Like Mounier (1966: 91 and s.), Ricoeur considers that this “scientific” Marx is way less striking than the young Marx. He loses his interest in the “real life” of “real individuals”, whose structuralist interpretation will get Althusser lost in the apology of science against the praxis which he will even more excessively assimilate to ideology (Ricoeur, 1988: 187). Conversely, Proudhon sticks to praxis and will generate the principle of reciprocity within the proletarian life itself.

In this respect, one must not ignore Proudhon’s and young Marx’s similarity in the importance they both give to praxis. However, no matter the period when he wrote it, with or

without Engels, aged 25 or 50, Marx takes the path of a more negative criticism, directed to a deprived man, sent back to his animal condition. In spite of the exhortation he made to the reader, in his youthful writings, to integrate the **workers'** background, these latter are always described in their lack and vulgarity. It is true that these productive forces must be understood, because they are the ones that make history. But they do so as an alienated class. The purpose of critical theory is to help that class evolve towards the *conscience* of its own determinations – in the youthful writings – or towards science which will supplant the conscience and the scientific criticism of ideology – in the works of maturity. Nevertheless, in his youthful writing, Marx does not only herald the Frankfurt School (Adorno Horkheimer and Marcuse) or Bourdieu, since his criticism, if it aims at supporting the emancipation of a partially scatterbrained **working** class, is still firmly hooked to his praxis (and therefore to its associative and mutualist activities). On the other hand, criticism will lose this positive link as soon as it restricts itself to ideology criticism.

For Proudhon, critical work must *also* dive into the **worker** practice and find in it the principles of actions able to generate structures of desalienation. In his text entitled *Popular Philosophy*, which opens his imposing *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, he describes his project in these terms: “The people pray for their princes, for their magistrates, for their exploiters and parasites, they pray for their executioners, they pray for the very ones who should by rights pray for them. They pay the government, the courts, the police, the church, the nobility, the crown, the proprietor, the soldier, They pay for every move they make, pay to come and to go, to buy and to sell, to eat, drink and breathe, to warm themselves in the sun, to be born and to die, They even pay for the permission to **labor**. The people have never done anything but pray and pay: we believe that the time has come to make them PHILOSOPHIZE” (Proudhon, 1988: 7). At first, we might believe that such a project is paradoxically nothing less than Marxist. The deprived people must escape their miserable condition and reach the critical philosophical science if they want to have a single opportunity to break that condition. Proudhon, however, wants to prove something else than

Marx.

A little like with the latter, the paradox reveals the author's interest. To put it briefly, criticism is not on the side of desalienated **labor**, which explains why making the people think, according to Proudhon is not, as in a Hegelian approach, making them deny the object of their **labor** to affirm the exclusiveness of a spirit which knows itself. And this for the simple reason that **labor** as it exists in certain places *already* includes criticism. More precisely, the principles enunciated by critical philosophers must be nothing else than tendencies that people implement in their own life and **labor**, which arises desalienated in the praxis. Retrospectively, Proudhon writes:

“[there is not] an artisan who is not in a perfect state to understand what philosophy proposes, since there is not one who, in the exercise of his profession, does not make use of several means of justification, measure, evaluation and control. The **worker** has, to direct him in his labors, the yardstick, the scale, the square, the rule, the plumb, the level, the compass, standards, specimens, guides, a touchstone, etc. Seemingly, there is not a **worker** who cannot say the purpose of his **labor**, the ensemble of needs or ideas to which it is attached, what its application must be, what its conditions and qualities are, and consequently its importance in the general economy. Now, what the artisan does in his specialty, the philosopher seeks for the universality of things: his criterion, consequently, must be much more elementary, since it must be applied to all; his synthesis much broader, since it must embrace all. What then is the yardstick to which we must relate all our observations? In the second place, on what basis, according to what plan, in view of what end, will we raise the edifice of our knowledge, so that we can say what Leibniz said of the world of which it must be the expression, that it is the best, the most faithful, the most perfect possible? The day when philosophy will have responded to these two questions, philosophy, we do not say that it will be done (it has no limits) but it will be completely organized” (Proudhon, 1988: 33-34).

And it is, so to speak, organized since the yardstick, this standard of everything that the philosopher has from the **worker**, like the plan from which he will be able to trace transversally the



link between the **worker**'s practices, is the tool which shapes the reciprocity. It passes through the hands of experienced **worker** and their apprentices and in their daily learning gestures there is the recognition of a common humanity at **worker**. In Proudhon's work, all happens as if philosophy had to withdraw as soon as it has fulfilled its task (finally minor): pointing out the concepts contained in the proletarian practice that cooperative **workers** already express in the depiction they make about the way they **labor**, handle their tools, pass on the knowledge of their use. And all of these concepts always have a critical task before them because they, as a whole, oppose to alienated **labor** in bourgeois capitalism<sup>9</sup>. Ideas about classes thus have an essentially spontaneous aspect since they only express an autonomous practice. That spontaneity does not imply that the idea is formulated mechanically with the extension of this practice. Proudhon points out that the understanding of the present and the projection that the idea implies suggest a creation from the class, through which the class develops its own critical materials and expresses its own reality in words. The class must express through speaking, explain through reasoning, that is to say express and rationalize its own reality through a critical work of release which becomes a form of creation of a non-capitalist theory (Ansart, 1969: 227). The thinker, at best, comes when it turns out necessary to indicate that a juxtaposition of practices and their verbalization by **workers** is possible and that this synthesis is revolutionary, in acts, completely different from the existing economical practices. He comes as to summarize what has always been there.

In the representation that Proudhon apprehends about the labour of a **worker** in a cooperative workshop (and therefore mutualist), the use of the yardstick or the scale, since it is that of a partner who shares with his fellow **worker** s his instruments of production as well as those productions

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<sup>9</sup> *De la capacité de la classe ouvrière* says: "Working classes have revealed their secret. We know that after they started to believe, for a moment, in 1848, in the ideas of common life, common **labor**, family State or servant State (that is to say, respectively, in Fourierian's and Cabetian's mistakes which consist either in believing that we can construct artificial and ideal communities or in believing in the fiction of a socialist-tutor State), they abandoned that utopia; and that on the other hand, they do not express themselves with less strength against the bourgeois' economic anarchy political "happy medium" system, and that their thought is focused on a unique principle, also practicable (...), the principle of reciprocity. This idea being exposed in the light of day, we do not need to question the **working** classes on their thoughts for the future" (Proudhon, 1977: 94).

themselves (by the means of expression of the consumption cooperatives), is a gesture of artistic nature, desalienating within itself even though it is material, laborious or even troublesome from time to time. It is so here and now, not in a post-revolutionary hereafter which should finally see the proletariat seize back his identity of *homo faber*. As in the anthropological nature of Proudhon's discourse: man is, in his current work (that is to say in a hostile capitalist environment against which his workshop must fight), a producer of matter (an object) and concept (reciprocity). "working is praying, says an old proverb. Could not we also say: whoever works, as long as he pays attention to his own labor, philosophizes", asks Proudhon (Proudhon, 1977: 14)? Desalienated labor or praxis display pieces of work, would have said Marx. It delivers the plans which allow one to think, adds Proudhon. This illustrates how, from a constraint of practical nature, emanates a theoretical maxim. "The idea was generated by the action" of few: action is a form of thinking, "acting is always thinking". And thinking, when one is in a situation of suffering, hard-labor and exploitation, is spontaneously coming to criticize what makes the conditions of exploitation to enforce its homonym: reciprocity.

### ***Conclusion: an impure libertarian project***

It is well known that Marx and Proudhon will separate with completely opposed perspectives although they had a mutual admiration for each other. Proudhon's theory of reciprocity leads him to see in man's material labor the veinstone of criticism, desalienation and artistic or philosophical creation. Unlike with Hegel, the spirit does not deny matter, it emerges from it and remains intrinsically blended into it. Provided that this labor is freely orientated and decreed, in cooperative workshop rather than in a factory or a manufacture where the workers must be submitted to their bosses, it may not be alienated and be a vector of subjective realization. The

equation which makes critical theory the *a priori* product of manual labor and worker self-organization drives Proudhon to turn the cooperative (or the association or the workshop, depending on the texts) into the cradle of autonomy, in the place of a scientific critical theory *a posteriori*. However, that was not conceivable for Marx, according to whom Proudhon was a backward-looking person who, at the time of industrialization wants to “bring us back to the companion, at most to the master craftsman of the Middle Ages” (Marx, 2014: 291). Revolutionary criticism must be a lot more demanding because it cannot suffer from a humanity expressed that occasionally.

The tone will become tougher with time and soon, *Le Capital* will completely reject the cooperative rather than simply criticizing its weakness and the erratic aspect of its desalienated realizations, unable to “stop the geometrical progress of monopoly, to emancipate the masses and to lighten the burden of their misery”. Of course, the German thinker still accepts that the cooperative or the association may constitute a shape for the future of socialism. But as long as the conquest of political power, guided by critical scientific theory, itself embodied by the party, does not take place, they remain so to speak ballasted by the capitalist working methods. This capitalist form of cooperation “presupposes from the outset the free wage-labourer who sells his labor-power to capital (...). The capitalist cooperation does not appear as a particular historical form of cooperation, instead, cooperation itself appears as a historical form peculiar to, and specifically distinguishing, the capitalist process of production” (Marx, 1977 : 452-453). Published in 1867, *The Capital* and this criticism of cooperation will come as bombshell within the International Workingmen's Association. On the occasion of the Second International, in 1889, the absence of the Proudhonians is felt, as the First International (1864) broadly consisted of workers associations marked by the influence of the Frenchman. Marx triumphed and the workers’ workshops no longer exist (Desroche, 1976: 87). Thus, cooperatives, associations and mutual funds will slowly break away from the labor movement and will end up gathering under the flag of a so-called social economy rather depoliticized.

From a theoretical point of view, even Marx's most detached successors will agree with him when it comes to workers' associations criticism testing out self-management (modern declension of production mutualism) after 1968. We may for instance remember Gorz, for whom **workers** "can certainly "self-manage" the production workshops, determine the **working** conditions, co-determine the design of the machines and the definition of the tasks. These ones still remain hetero-determined as a whole by the social process of production, that is to say by society as being itself a big machine. Actually, the **workers'** inspection (excessively qualified as self-management) only consists in self-determining the methods of hetero-determination: the **workers** divide up and define their tasks as part of a division of **labor** pre-established on the entire society scale (Gorz, 1982: 19). For labor can only be, for a **worker**, a loss of his own reality and an objectification of his creations, Gorz, in the manner of Marx, will plead in favour of a free time and leisure society. In that society, the material production **labor** necessary to the satisfaction of our physical needs is limited to its simplest expression in order to let humanity do the **labor (work)** on itself which is essential to its pure social expression (Gorz, 1988). Manual **labor** is just as denigrated, which seems to be a somewhat hedonist gesture to us at a time when an ever-increasing number of unemployed people suffer from not having a job.

In a critical, political and libertarian project, unemployed people must certainly not return to the factory but to autonomous **labor**. As for Proudhon, he considered that self-determination areas could develop – including – especially – within a capitalist context which finds itself undermined from the inside. Alienated **labor** truly exists. It is even massive. And it contains very little critical potential. But, above all, it is to be found in mass industry, where there is a boss, where the **workers** are not the owners of their means of production. If we agree to look into some of their comrades' background, we can notice that outlines of desalienated **labor** exist. And it is here and now, in the workshop. In this respect, Proudhon will remain more faithful than Marx to the materialist project: how to exhume all the critical content of the matter of the **working** class which, besides, is what it

is, with its cooperative wealth, its deep poverties, without divine transcendence and without relying on the godsend of an uncertain revolution?

From a classic Marxist position, we can only judge with condescension the way unemployed people (or casual **workers**) stay proud, between two integration itineraries, of the **labor** they managed to do with the companies which accepted to hire them with a fixed-term contract or a subsidized contract, which are both unstable anyway. Apart from the possibility for the left to make up with this increasing class of excluded contemporaries, Proudhon's materialism also provides a quite fresh lucidity. He offers society a positive anthropological condition, even if it is impure: it will have to determine its future form with men that an excessively classically "Marxist" point of view would have quickly sent back to their desires for cars, their televisions, their consumerist leanings, their alienations of all types.

Nowadays, considering the misery around the world which, for instance, G. Le Blanc (2007) depicts with great tragedy, renewing critical theory seems more than ever necessary. In my opinion, this can only be made by re-establishing with a thinking of contingency able to grasp the self-determination of the social which, from the second Marx to Bourdieu to Frankfurt, faded away behind a negative critical theory which depicts modern actors as agents deprived of autonomy, brainwashed and conditioned as long as they do not see the salvation in it (see for instance Marcuse, 1964: 7-10, Adorno, Horkheimer, 1973: 25-28, Bourdieu, 1984: 386-387).

In 1975, Cornélius Castoriadis already notices that the origin of the decay of Marxism and of the ideological equivalent of the decay of the labor movement must be sought in the fast transformation of Marx's "new conception" in a completed system, in a return to the contemplative and the speculative as a dominant mode for the solution to problems humanity has to face (Castoriadis, 1987: 68-70). A communist godsend that would have arranged history with a view to product our freedom is no less a godsend with a rational world, knowable from start to finish, so brutal, solid and encompassing that we would suffocate. In these conditions, the first problem of

praxis disappears: that men have to give their individual and collective life a meaning which is not pre-assigned, and that they must do so while having to deal with real conditions which neither exclude nor ensure the achievement of their project (Castoriadis, 1987 : 52-53).

To Proudhon, there is no teleology or end of history as it is the case with Hegel and Marx. Men make their history but they also have to accept that they make a history which does not have a pre-established meaning. They compose mutually with what they are and do here and now in their cooperatives or assemblies; they turn away from this abstract man, pure spirit presented by his pieces of work and who shows up in the inaccessible communist horizon. Far from any a-capitalist purity which can only exist as an idea, they give back its dignity to the *animal laborens* refusing that he distinguishes from the *homo faber*. By returning the possibility of his pride to the worker (even after having spent thirty years welding car bodies for Renault), Proudhon allows the thinking of a libertarian dynamic of liberating experiments that are critical just because they are and that they are *something else* than capitalism. Thus, critical theory would also start from what exists and, inevitably, *inside* capitalism. Because, as in the era of Proudhon, all the associative practices would always be infected (and because their comfort might suffer from it), the contemporary radical left intellectuals sometimes exonerate themselves from integrating the alternative initiatives such as the Community-supported agriculture (or collective purchasing groups), the local exchange trading systems, the fair trade or, more generally, the solidarity economy. It is not difficult to reveal the depth with which capitalism passes through in these associations as in all the social backgrounds, to a point that not a single human life is left untouched by it. However, it is more laborious to see, in the same backgrounds, what keeps escaping from it. Because then, we must do without the inevitable software of massive alienation which would spare only the thinker who teaches lesson to masses from his ivory tower...with a megaphone bought at Carrefour's (and made in China) to combine the purity of the gesture and that of the spirit.

However, it is the same laborious labor which must, in my opinion, be the future of

criticism. It has found in these few pages the burgeoning of socio-historical foundations which have principally tended to establish the basis of a materialist tradition which might do without the latent Hegelianism that can be found in most of the critical tradition. In order to bestow an actual theoretical component to this “positive” critical materialism, we now need to figure out how the contemporaneous suggestions (like, for instance, Boltanski, 2011, Frere, 2014) may enrich and strengthen it. The agenda remains open.

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