



The Anti-Marxist Portrait of a Nineteenth-Century Prophet

Review of George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

The Anti-Marxist Portrait of a Nineteenth-Century Prophet

Review of George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* (London, [1956]: Routledge & Kegan Paul), *Sunday Times*, 21 October 1956, 8



Proudhon and his Children by Gustave Courbet, 1865

PROUDHON is a latter day prophet, one of the puritan preachers inspired by the Bible or by Rousseau who saw themselves as dedicated servants of the truth, implacable, infallible, incorruptible, come from the wilderness to denounce the luxury, the injustice – above all the injustice – of the sinful city, and call men to repentance and a simpler life.

Like Rousseau, and even more like Carlyle and Lawrence and Péguy, Proudhon was by temperament a dervish, one of the great *enragés* of the nineteenth century, who denounced the other visionaries – Rousseau, St Simon, Fourier, Louis Blanc, Marx – as false Messiahs who sought to liberate men only to impose their

own brand of slavery upon them. Yet he belonged to their number himself ‘I try to write like Voltaire,’ he said to his friend Herzen, ‘but I end by writing like Rousseau.’

Nor is this surprising. Like Rousseau he nurtured what Mr Woodcock calls ‘the nostalgic dream of a *paysan manqué*, cut off by his own temperament or circumstances from his native environment, at once fascinated and repelled by the sophisticated milieu in which he found himself.

Humourless, over-sensitive, self-centred, intensely suspicious, only too conscious of his lack of systematic education, convinced of his own genius, his mind an autodidact’s store of curious knowledge haphazardly collected and retained for ever, with fanatical faith in his own home-made nostrums, which had cost him such prodigious labour, he took pride in the violent hatred and fear that he inspired, and, like others before and after him, dramatised his own ‘alienation’ from society as a general social tragedy.

By origin a typesetter from Besançon, and largely self-taught, he made his way to Paris, where the boldly individual quality of his utterances attracted attention even in the great babel of revolutionary voices which preceded the upheaval of 1848. Like many a *petit bourgeois* crushed by the industrial and financial revolution, he was, above all, conscious of the horrors of centralisation, imposed uniformity and the despotism of political elites, whether reactionary or Jacobin or composed of captains of industry.

He preached the virtues of social quality – a single, classless society made up of industrious workers organised in loose decentralised cooperatives of producers and consumers, eliminating the need for middlemen such as bankers, industrialists and great merchants, living at peace with other similar communities, ignoring national frontiers and the differences of language and creed and race, governed by those principles of justice and humanity which every man knows naturally – as he knows love or desires freedom or possesses a sense of his own dignity.

Priests – above all those of the Roman Church – had tried to stifle these principles, but in vain: neither Rome nor all the

policemen in the world could in the end prevail against mankind risen to regain its freedom. He was no less fierce against the despotic habits of the leaders of the Socialist sects:

let us give the world the example of [...] tolerance, but let us not [...] make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance, let us not pose as the apostles of a new religion, even if it be the religion of [...] reason. [...] I believe [...] we should not put forward *revolutionary action* as a means of social reform because that [...] would be an appeal to force, to arbitrariness [...]. I would [...] prefer to burn Property by a slow fire, rather than [...] by making a St Bartholomew's night of the proprietors.

This was written to, of all men, Karl Marx, and inevitably led to his violent excommunication, by the father of 'scientific' socialism, as a petit-bourgeois muddlehead. Proudhon stuck to his principles: centralised power always ended by being abused; only mutual aid could replace coercion; we must have 'no more government of man by man, by means of the accumulation of powers, no more exploitation of man by man by means of the accumulation of capital'. No imposed solutions, no centralisation, no class war, no bullying even by revolutionary martyrs or popular leaders, not even by Robespierre or Mazzini ('Do you know anything that more resembles a tyrant than a popular tribune?').

Life was governed by the collisions of violent forces, but they could be held in equilibrium and directed into peaceful paths: the struggle for freedom was perverted by all political parties which could not avoid accumulating power for their own ends; honest men had to confine themselves to social and economic pressure; they were the majority and would prevail.

Despite the desperate love of paradox, the bombast, the mystical asides, the chaos of unfinished and confused ideas, the misunderstood Hegelianism, the countless, often exposed, contradictions, Proudhon's libertarian vision of social and economic self-government by functional groups, small enough not to flatten out individual needs, touched the minds and hearts of workers, especially in the less industrialised parts of France, Italy,

Spain and indirectly Russia and the Balkans. It is a potent influence in anti-Marxist left-wing movements still.

Mr Woodcock dwells with loving care on the touching story of Proudhon's life. Proudhon was always poor, was in prison more than once for his opinions, went into exile with his health broken, and died prematurely. His failure to be an effective reformer was, at least in part, due to the fact that he was inordinately proud of his honesty, his intransigence, his unconquerable independence, and put his unimpeachable integrity far above the success of the movement to which he was committed.

His vanity took the form of passionate advocacy of lost causes for their own sake, because at least they allowed no suspicion of opportunism. He saw himself as a Promethean figure: his imagination fed upon this image to the exclusion of the outside world, even of the suffering whose indignant voice he meant to be. With all this, he was generous, loyal and affectionate, and, like many professionally furious writers, in private life mild and amiable.

He was also naive to the point of eccentricity, and at times childishly vain. He proposed marriage to a local stranger – a lady whose looks and health and modesty of demeanour seemed to him to meet his needs. Oddly enough she accepted and proved a faithful and devoted wife. He recoiled with genuine horror from the prospect of meeting such notorious spreaders of wickedness as George Sand and Madame d'Agoult (who despite his violent anti-feminism admired his opinions), and ended by being delighted with both interviews. He sincerely believed that by speaking to the Emperor's cousin, Prince Napoleon, he would influence the course of history, and did speak to him with about as much effect as Lassalle's analogous conversations had had upon Bismarck.

Mr Woodcock does not dwell much on Proudhon's anti-liberal doctrines: his puritanical attitude to women; his simultaneous condemnation of and paeans to war as the law of life which brings out man's best qualities; his resentful suspicion of refinement, fastidiousness, aesthetic sensibility.

LAST ASQUITHIAN

Herzen liked him because he was fearless, independent and not deluded by the democratic claptrap of his time. The youthful Tolstoy was impressed by his directness, bluntness, his air of being a sturdy son of the soil, by the bearded figure with the steel-rimmed spectacles, in a peasant's smock and thick boots, sitting at work among his books and papers in the open air, surrounded by his lusty children, as his friend Courbet had painted him: and Tolstoy may have borrowed, too, the title of his greatest novel from Proudhon's work of the same name.

But this was an idealisation. Proudhon in middle life was a man of the people no more than Carlyle or Cobbett or Rousseau or Lawrence, or the other great thunderers of the last two centuries. He was a misfit, and at ease nowhere. He was a genuine victim of the social transformation of his time; and he grasped its moral and social consequences more vividly and with a deeper understanding of what simple men need, desire and should fear than did his disdainful rival Karl Marx.

Copyright the authors 1956

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 9 March 2022