

The Poverty of Philosophy: notes for study sessions

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"Our conception first outlined..."

In Paris (late 1843 to early 1845) Marx met organised socialist workers for the first time.

They won Marx over. He became a communist, though still philosophically a follower of Feuerbach. He also (August 1844) established his working relationship with Engels, who had moved ahead politically faster than Marx.

Marx and Engels wrote a Feuerbachian communist critique of the left-wing German philosophers, "The Holy Family". In it, they defended Proudhon, with whom Marx had been on friendly terms, against the Germans.

Marx was expelled from Paris in early 1845, and moved to Brussels. There he and Engels first wrote a further, vast and unfinished, critique of the German philosophers ("The German Ideology", of which Marx and Engels were later very dismissive), and then turned towards politics.

According to Marx himself, writing later, "the salient points of our [his and Engels' new, political-communist] conception were first outlined in a scientific, although polemical, form in my 'Poverty of Philosophy'," written in winter 1846-7.

"Poverty of Philosophy" is the first text in which Marx sets out his mature outlook. It is the text in which he settles accounts with Hegel and the whole school of thought following Hegel. And it is the text in which he outlines his working-class and democratic version of communism.

It makes things more difficult for modern readers, but was unsurprising at the time, that Marx did this via a criticism of Proudhon.

Proudhon

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65) was a self-educated printworker from a poor family background who, with writings starting with "What Is Property?" (1840) became, for decades, the most influential socialist writer among French workers. France was then by the far the main centre of working-class radicalism.

Proudhon coined the idea of "scientific socialism", meaning a notion of socialism as based in social realities rather than in a concocted ideal scheme.

Some writers say that Proudhon coined the phrase later popularised by Marx, that the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the workers themselves. At any rate Proudhon wrote in 1848 that "the proletariat must emancipate itself without the help of the government".

But Proudhon did not mean emancipation through class struggle. He meant that the workers should organise themselves into small workshop groups and trade between the groups. He claimed that by doing that "they would soon have wrested alienated capital back again... become the masters of it all... without the proprietors being despoiled..."

Proudhon's view seems daft to us today. In fact it seemed daft to Engels even in September 1846, when, from Paris, he wrote to Marx in Brussels: "the workers here, they who can't keep six sous in their pockets to visit a marchand de vin on the evenings of their meetings, propose to buy up toute la belle France with their savings..."

In its time, a time where in France in particular industry was dominated by tiny workshops, it had wide influence among radical-minded workers.

The Philosophy of Poverty

"The Philosophy of Poverty", the book by Proudhon to which "The Poverty of Philosophy" is a retort, is a vast, rambling, eccentric scrawl. It starts, for example, not with poverty but with a long and cryptic disquisition about God.

It seems odd to us today that it should have been influential among working-class radicals. But it was.

Marx's letters

A letter by Marx to Annenkov, written just as he started writing "The Poverty of Philosophy", conveniently and crisply sums up the gist of Marx's response.

Fortunately for the modern reader, the letter deliberately avoids discussing Proudhon's idea of "constituted value". In Proudhon's scheme this was the key to how the workshop groups in the future society would trade with each other fairly and without exploitation.

Understandably in the circumstances of 1846-7, but off-puttingly for modern readers, when Marx wrote up "The Poverty of Philosophy" he felt obliged to put his critical analysis of "constituted value" first, as chapter 1. That chapter is obscure to modern readers, and not very important to study.

Marx came back to Proudhon's ideas about economics again in later writings, including in "Capital", and more clearly.

Chapter 2 of "The Poverty of Philosophy", of which the letter to Annenkov is an excellent summary, is much more important.

The other letter by Marx usually published with "The Poverty of Philosophy" is one to Schweitzer in 1865, where Marx gives an overview of Proudhon's whole trajectory.

The seven observations

Chapter 2 opens with seven observations in which, in polemical view, Marx sums up his whole method.

In the *first observation* and the *third*, Marx crisply deals with the whole Hegelian school of thought. He will later go on to argue that Proudhon gives a very poor, garbled version of an Hegelian approach.

"... the positive and the negative, the yes and no. The struggle between these two antagonistic elements comprised in the antithesis constitutes the dialectical movement... The fusion of these two contradictory thoughts constitutes a new thought, which is the synthesis of them. This thought splits up once again into two contradictory thoughts..."

"M. Proudhon considers economic relations as so many social phases, engendering one another, resulting one from the other like the antithesis from the thesis..."

Isn't this what dialectics is supposed to be? What's wrong with this dialectics - in Marx's view and in yours?

In the *second*, *third* and *fifth* observations, Marx counterposes an attention to "the real, profane history of men [meaning, women and men] in every century and to present these men as both the authors and actors of their own drama".

"The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist"

But then what gives you the handmill and the steam-mill? Marx outlines different layers of analysis - productive forces, production relations using those forces, the production within those relations both of goods and services and of social relations themselves, conscious human activity... How do they interrelate?

In the *fourth observation*, Marx comments on Proudhon's garbling of dialectics, which consists of analysing everything into a "good side" and a "bad side" and then devising ways to keep the "good side" and get rid of the "bad side".

Get rid of the bad side and keep the good side - of capitalism, for example? Isn't that common-sense and realistic? What's wrong with it?

In the seventh observation, Marx counters Proudhon with a deliberately paradoxical-sounding statement: "It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle". What's he getting at?

In the *sixth* observation, Marx criticises teleological thinking, what he calls "providential history", the idea of history as determined by a purpose. This is important, if only because many writers on Marx take Marx himself to be an advocate of teleological thinking rather than an opponent.

Proudhon declared equality as the aim of history.

Marx responds, coolly: "Of course, the tendency towards equality belongs to our century". How?

In the *seventh* observation, Marx gives a sketch survey of the social thought of the time as he saw it: the various schools

of economists, and the utopian (i.e. blueprint-sketching) socialists. He concludes that Proudhon, rather than going beyond both economists and socialists, as Proudhon himself thought, "is beneath them both".

"In the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, [socialists and communists] no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece. So long as they look for science and merely make systems, so long as they are at the beginning of the struggle, they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society. From this moment [i.e. from the moment when they do see the subversive side], science, which is a product of the historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary".

It is not necessary to dwell on detail of Marx's discussion of Proudhon's ideas about *division of labour*. Important is how Marx sees future "integral development of the individual" as being based on the modern "automatic workshop" rather than a return to the old craft-working.

"What characterizes the division of labour in the automatic workshop is that labour has there completely lost its specialized character. But the moment every special development stops, the need for universality, the tendency towards an integral development of the individual begins to be felt. The automatic workshop wipes out specialists and craft-idiocy. M. Proudhon, not having understood even this one revolutionary side of the automatic workshop, takes a step backward and proposes to the worker that he make not only the 12th part of a pin, but successively all 12 parts of it".

Discussing *competition and monopoly*, Marx argues that the task is to supersede both capitalist competition and capitalist monopoly, not to find the good sides of both and get rid of the bad sides.

The discussion on *rent* is not important for the modern reader.

The section on *strikes and combinations of workers* is, however, very important, and indeed epoch-making in the history of socialist thought.

Marx's argument that wage rises will not produce general price rises is not original to him - he takes it straight from the bourgeois economist David Ricardo - but is very important for dealing with the argument, common among socialists at the time, that trade-union struggle was a waste of time.

In this section, Marx summarises very crisply the general perspective for working-class socialism which would underpin his politics from 1846-7 for the rest of his life.

"In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle".

Can we make a diagram, or a flow-chart, of how Marx argues that working-class struggle must tend to develop from elementary resistance to the bosses into "the creation of a new society... the abolition of every class"?