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The Forgotten French of 1848

‘A spectre is haunting Europe’, wrote Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, in one of the most famous opening sentences of political literature, and the spectre was communism.

The pamphlet, exceptionally happy in its timing, was written in Brussels in the first weeks of 1848, a year of revolutions, by an obscure Rhineland insurrectionary not yet thirty. It was promptly published in the original German in London in February, in a highly inaccurate edition of about a thousand copies, to be corrected, translated into some thirty languages and reprinted for a century and more; and it deserved its success, since it summarises with pungency and uncharacteristic brevity views that Marx and Engels – who helped Marx with advice – had already made public. Its fame rests less on its novelty than on its style. It set the tone, in literary terms, for the year of revolutions, and no socialist tract (it seems reasonable to guess) has been more widely read. Europe was about to explode.

France was the European nation most radically affected by the violence of 1848. On 24 February the July monarchy of Louis-Philippe was violently overthrown, ushering in the short and troubled life of the Second Republic. A few weeks later, in March, Metternich fell from power in Vienna, though the Austrian imperial system survived his fall. History was being made at high speed, and Marx’s bold talk about the spectre of communism was not bravado, though it wilfully exaggerated the scale of communist groups. Even before 1848 Europe, and above all France, already had reason to fear the violence of worker-revolution.

It was in the mid-1830s that the atmosphere had changed. George Sand remarked in *Horace*, a novel of 1842, that in the early 1830s ‘people were not afraid, as they are today, to be thought communist’, whereas now the word had become ‘a bogey to all shades of opinion’. Secret republican clubs were active in Paris by the mid-1830s; in 1839 Blanqui attempted an armed revolt, which was easily suppressed; while advanced republicans like Cavaignac were demanding universal suffrage, free education and a redistribution of property. It was in Paris, where the young Marx arrived in November 1843, that he became a communist, and there, only months later, that he met Engels. Socialism and communism, its more violent rival, may not have been French inventions, but it was in France that they first took root. The terms, it seems likely, were English, so that it was the English who conceived, the Germans who theorised and the French who took to the streets. Socialism was first used as a term by Robert Owen

in the *Cooperative Magazine* in 1827; and it was an English Christian Socialist, Goodwyn Barmby, who claimed in 1848 to have invented the word 'communism' in Paris in 1840. But what Owen and Barmby did belongs to lexicography rather than to political history, and there is no doubt that by the 1840s both dogmas looked French. No other large nation, as early as that, harboured violent groups devoted to social revolution and capable, as February 1848 showed, of changing governments and constitutions by demonstrations and riots, and it was a riot outside and inside the Chamber of Deputies in that month that finally toppled the monarchy. Shortly afterwards the new republic introduced male adult suffrage, the first on earth, and debated, though usually without adopting, statutes that threatened the rights of property. In July Proudhon's proposal to suspend and reduce all rents was rejected. The atmosphere in the summer of 1848 was heady with the prospect of social change, and it was in those dangerous months that two Frenchmen, Adolphe Thiers and Alfred Sudre, wrote their treatises in defence of private ownership.

What they wrote, unlike *The Communist Manifesto*, is now forgotten, but they deserve as thinkers to be remembered. By 1848 Thiers was a fifty-year-old man of some property who had twice been prime minister under the monarchy. During the summer he wrote a series of articles for the *Constitutionnel* which he collected as *De la Propriété*, the preface being dated September 1848; he apologises there for having taken so long to write the book among the distractions of a political life and his work as an historian. However, he adds, the argument had been revolving in his head for some years, and he marshals it analytically: first a defence of the right to private property, followed by chapters attacking first socialism and then communism. One day to become the first president of the Third Republic, Thiers was already a famous man, and the book was promptly translated into English as *The Rights of Property: a Refutation of Communism and Socialism*, with extensive historical notes added by an unknown translator.

Some weeks later a young Paris lawyer called Alfred Sudre published a *Histoire du Communisme*, its preface dated 1 November. This was the first history of socialism (or communism) in any language, and it was written, as the preface explains, during the confused events of the summer of 1848 and to all appearances without reference to Thiers's book or to *The Communist Manifesto*, which was not yet available in French. Sudre was born two years after Marx, in 1820, but unlike Marx he remains an obscure figure. In the preface of his first book he speaks of being called to arms, presumably as a member of the National Guard in the streets of Paris in June 1848 in defence of the social verities (as he calls them) that his history is concerned to justify; and the book is erudite in its handling of

ancient sources, though he may have had little leisure to read the pamphlets of the day. It is natural to assume that *The Communist Manifesto* and the works of Thiers and Sudre derive not from one another, then, but from a common body of arguments for and against private property in the France of the 1840s. Only the German pamphlet, however, is now remembered. France was the cradle of socialism in the 1840s under the July monarchy and of its more violent extreme known as communism. But in literary terms the French of 1848 are now forgotten.

The fall of the monarchy in February, as Sudre explains, was a surprise. Much as Guizot, Louis-Philippe's conservative prime minister, was detested, the constitution itself was not widely expected to fall, and within days of its fall it was clear that a fate even more perilous than universal male suffrage threatened France – a threat to property itself. Socialism and communism, Sudre argues, had gained an influence in the 1840s rashly ignored by enlightened opinion, and his book, which must have been written in a rush, though perhaps from historical materials already assembled, was a belated attempt to answer the arguments of communism that had once seemed too rash and too silly to need answering at all. It is a pioneering attempt to trace a subversive body of theories back to their sources in the fatal utopianism of the ancient Greeks, as theorised in Plato's *Republic* and practised in Sparta. In ancient Sparta the land was equally divided by area among its free citizens and worked by helots or slaves; Plato, meanwhile, proposed a utopia ruled by a just élite to whom property and marriage are forbidden: the first blueprint, as Sudre sees it, of more recent and still more dangerous attempts to define and institute a perfect state. His story continues through the early Christians, the German Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* of 1516. Then it turns mainly French, with chapters on the eighteenth-century philosophers, the French Revolution of 1789 and the egalitarian doctrines of Babeuf, who was guillotined in 1797; and it ends with accounts of early nineteenth-century theorists such as Robert Owen, Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, along with Louis Blanc and Proudhon. The book takes no interest in Germany since the Reformation, and though it appeared some nine months or more after *The Communist Manifesto* it does not mention Engels or Marx. That had to wait till a German version in 1882, when the book was extensively expanded by Otto Wenzel.

An historical plan must seem remarkable for a doctrine which as early as the 1840s had no very continuous ancestry, but the book is less an academic treatise than a polemic in the shape of a history. That is announced on the title-page with the subtitle "an historical refutation of socialist utopias". Sudre accepts the challenge of historical interpretation and the analysis of ancient and medieval sources. Even before he wrote the *Histoire* socialists and communists were given to justifying their views by appeals to the

Ancients as well as to primitive Christians and medieval heretics; years later, in fact, Engels was to remark disapprovingly that French socialists were nearly all Christians, and in his *Catéchisme des Socialistes* of 1849 Louis Blanc bluntly called socialism ‘the gospel in action’. Socialism was always, in one way or another, a theory of history, and it is historical parallels like these that Sudre debates, unaware that Marx and Engels had already linked the coming revolution to a bold and comprehensive theory of class war.

His arguments, none the less, can be placed in a French context, if the pamphlets of the age are examined. An undated pamphlet by the Catholic apologist Frédéric Ozanam, for example, *Les Origines du Socialisme*, may already have appeared. Ozanam died in 1853, and two years later the pamphlet was collected in the seventh volume of his *Oeuvres*. True, its religious element marks it out, as an anti-socialist argument, from Sudre’s entirely secular view. But some of his points prefigure Sudre’s, notably his claim that socialism represents not progress but a return to the past. Socialist doctrines, he argues, have never been nearer fulfilment than in the theocratic nations of antiquity like ancient India or Persia – or in Plato’s *Republic*, which had implied the abolition of private property. Ozanam’s pamphlet traverses much of the same ground as Sudre’s book: Sudre’s thesis too is that the abolition or equalisation of private property, as in Platonic theory or Spartan practice, must favour the powerful and the rich. The notion that socialism must prove conservative in its effects perhaps starts here, in this forgotten Parisian debate, and it is disarming to watch a view Arthur Koestler and George Orwell discovered for themselves in the 1940s being laid down so uncompromisingly by obscure Frenchmen a century before. Perhaps the essential conservatism of the socialist idea is a truth that every generation has to discover for itself.

Sudre, in any case, was less an original thinker than the spokesman of a party hitherto content to leave its views unpublished. Like Thiers he held that private property, far from oppressing the poor, was their best defence against oppression, much like Naboth’s vineyard in the Book of Kings. Property protects the poor. The powerful scarcely need to own anything, after all, since (like high party officials in the heyday of the Soviet Union) they command the use of what the state provides. The liberating claims of socialism, then, however sincere, are a chimera, and the nation that places economic power in the hands of a central authority, Sudre argues, will end with a tyranny like Plato’s guardians, ruled by fear under military discipline. Though the guardians own nothing, they dispose of everything. Such, Sudre argues, was Plato’s legacy in his search for perfection. It was the commitment of political thinkers in antiquity to the concept of a perfect state that had led them into the monstrous errors that now threaten mankind, and Sudre may have been the first to notice how deeply indebted the early

socialist thinkers were to the heritage of ancient philosophy, though his target was not Aristotle, who inspired Marx, but Aristotle's master Plato. It was the search for utopia, Sudre insists, that led Plato to propose the abolition of the family along with communism in property as well as free abortion and infanticide: all due to the fatal Greek fascination with *a priori* reasoning, or the illusion that the manners and customs of a whole people can be transformed and perfected by laws, that tradition and historical precedent count for nothing.

Sudre's own positive convictions, which remain obscure, were more radical than traditionalist. He was not, apparently, a conservative. Indeed he was anti-socialist because he believed socialism to be conservative. But he is clear that societies have their own momentum and that history has its power to teach. His case is both theoretical and practical. The real charge against communism is that, whatever its motives, its effects would be to create a privileged caste. It is more conservative, as an idea, than any group or party which in a democratic age chooses to call itself that.

Such arguments look interesting, but there is not much evidence that they did so at the time. The book went through several editions, it is true, but its critical effects are hard to trace. Though awarded the Prix Montyon by the French Academy when it first appeared, and translated twice into Spanish and, much later, into German, it is not known to have attracted reviews and was never translated into English. Proudhon in his notebooks exclaimed indignantly about the scale of the prize, which was three thousand francs, and all for a book full of outworn platitudes, as he puts it: 'les mêmes platitudes ressassées'. Perhaps he meant he had already encountered some of Sudre's arguments in the *Constitutionnel*. But his comment, brief and dismissive as it is, stands alone. No historian of socialism, even in France, has ever bothered with the book, in its own century or since, though Elie Halévy, who lectured on European socialism in Paris shortly before his death in 1937, would surely have found it significant. His *Histoire du Socialisme Européen*, published years later in 1948 from notes taken down by his pupils, fails to mention it. Sudre's book sank without a trace; and though Lord Acton owned two copies and marked them he never mentions it in his writings.

Even Sudre's later career, apart from books on sovereignty and banking, is largely mysterious. So are his political affiliations, though he may be presumed to have been hostile to the Second Empire instituted by Louis Napoleon in 1852, resigning from the Paris bar on 26 December; and he ends his *Histoire de la Souveraineté* with a long diatribe against the imperial idea in antiquity, condemning an age that can prefer Sparta to Athens and deploring the reign of the Caesars in ancient Rome. The shift from republic to empire, Sudre argues in his final chapter, after an extensive summary of Hebrew, Greek and Roman views of sovereignty, was a shift to decadence,

whether in political and military terms or in literary achievement, and Rome here is no doubt a metaphor for France:

What an enormous difference between what the republic and the empire achieved in the field of politics! The first had conquered the world in a long series of victories, the second could barely keep what had been conquered, and ultimately succumbed less from the effects of the barbarians than from its own weakness. Once caesarism had taken hold there was no more a senate firm and far-seeing, there were no more great generals or negotiators.

No more great eloquence, either, among the Romans, as in the days of Cicero; indeed human dignity itself, Sudre argues, was degraded by the cult of the imperial title. An age accustomed to parallels between the ancient and the modern would no doubt have read this as a coded rejection of the rule of the Emperor Napoleon III. It seems probable, then, that Sudre, like Thiers, and perhaps with a similar reluctance, accepted the claims of the Second Republic to represent the people of France and regretted its collapse in 1852. He may even have been something of an ideological republican, as Thiers was not, a principled enthusiast for a land without kings and emperors, though surely with something less than the republican zeal of Proudhon or George Sand. Enthusiasm, in any case, was not the mark of his mind, which was lawyer-like and analytical. But he remains an unknown being outside his writings. Even his death, which may have been around 1885, is unrecorded, and his last work – dated March 1882 – appears to have been an affectionate tribute to his dead brother Charles.¹

Thiers, by contrast, was a famous man by 1848, and in his writings of that year he showed himself little interested in the history or prehistory of the socialist idea. His *Rights of Property* was an analysis of the challenge to property provoked by the French Revolution of 1789, of which in the 1820s, under the Restoration, he had already written an ample history: and though a professional historian, unlike Sudre, all his essays in defence of property are concerned with his own age. France, after all, was the only large nation with universal male suffrage and a recent tradition of violent popular revolution, and nowhere but in France did radical mobs take to the streets and overthrow established dynasties. In Spain the people were conservative, in England peaceful, and in 1848 Germany and Italy were not yet nations. As the English translator of the book remarks, its real interest lies in its logical pattern, in the ‘rapid and irresistible series of deductions’ it draws from the socialist polemics of France in its day, couched in a ‘simple and nervous’ style.

1. Charles Sudre, *Les Finances de la France au XIXe Siècle*, with a preface by Alfred that condemns Napoleon III and praises Gladstone

Thiers's argument is more economic in its emphasis than Sudre's, less political and ideological. The association of workers, he argues, or what might later lead to collective bargaining, must prove inflationary, increasing the price of goods and services as an effect of higher wages and salaries; and inflation is always more likely to damage the interests of the poor than of the rich. That prophecy does not now sound idle. Nor does Thiers's view that a state-guaranteed right to work, which in 1848 some socialists were demanding, could only lead in practice to the degradation of labour by forcing skilled workers into unskilled jobs. The rights of a free people are based on property, he concludes; and socialism, though less violent than communism, must destroy liberty by destroying the rights of individual ownership. The difference, he argues, is only in style and tempo. 'The Communists are pure utopians; the Socialists claim a more practical character.' But their claim is an empty one. Socialism must depress the living standards of the poor through inflation and destroy civil liberty too.

With the triumph of Gladstone in 1868 and, two years later, the fall of Napoleon III, such sources as Thiers and Sudre were rapidly forgotten. One reason was the failure of revolution itself. History had not marched to the socialist drum. There were no class wars, only wars between nations. The Paris Commune in 1871, like the Franco-Prussian war that had precipitated it, found workers on both sides. Even Marx, in a speech in Amsterdam in 1871, conceded that peaceful reform rather than bloody revolution might, after all, be the way ahead, and long before his death in 1883 he had come to look harmless, while in Britain no socialist was elected to the House of Commons until as late as 1892 with Keir Hardie, who sat there alone.

As for literature, it is notable how little any writers of the last years of the century, whether for or against socialism, refer to the great property debate in the first exciting months of the Second French Republic of 1848. Too much had happened since then. Erskine May, a clerk in the House of Commons of Gladstonian sympathies, wrote an introduction to his *Democracy in Europe* in 1877 where he called socialists and communists 'the most mischievous and dangerous fanatics of European democracy'. But he did not suppose, as Thiers and Sudre had done nearly thirty years before, that they were in any imminent prospect of taking power. John Stuart Mill, another Gladstonian, had died four years earlier, in 1873, his "Chapters on Socialism" (as they were called when they posthumously appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1879) uncompleted. The loss to radical literature is considerable, but Mill's case is clear enough in outline, and the text has since been made fully accessible in his *Essays on Economics and Society*.

According to the preface of his stepdaughter, Helen Taylor, Mill conceived the work as early as 1869, provoked by the Second Reform Act of 1867 and the enfranchising in Britain of working-class voters. The United

States moved towards manhood suffrage too, in the late 1860s, after a civil war, a step first taken by France in 1848. Mill's task, then, was to educate the new masters of the electorate in much of the English-speaking world, conscious that socialist arguments might easily be made to look plausible to working people as they contemplated the manifest evil of 'great poverty, and that little connected with desert', along with the threat of a 'new feudality', as he strikingly calls it, of capitalists and entrepreneurs.

Nowhere does Mill mention Thiers or Sudre; his chief source in socialist literature is Louis Blanc's *Organisation du Travail* of 1839. During the Second French Republic Blanc had taken refuge in England, and Mill quotes his book extensively, refuting it point by point. Socialists tend to see only one side of competition, he argues – the side that depresses wages – and forget that capitalists, too, have to compete for commodities and skilled workers. In their hostility to private property, too, they forget that the concept is not fixed but variable: there are still states, after all, where slavery exists and where it is legal to own a human being, while in Britain 'we are only now abolishing property in army rank'. In other words, a competitive economy can and often does regulate and limit the powers of the rich. Communism, what is more, in abolishing the profit-motive, would encourage far bloodier instincts to flourish, so that equality of income would lead not to harmony but to violence. The labour theory of value, in any case, is an absurdity. The citizen who invests, Mill argues, is performing a social service in forgoing for a period the use of his wealth, and it is fair as well as practical that he should be rewarded for doing so: 'As long as he derives an income from capital, he has not the option of withholding it from the use of others.' Labour, then, is not the only source of wealth.

Anti-property doctrines, in any case, Mill argues, are merely a muddle, since socialists commonly confuse the question whether the rich should invest their capital with the question whether they should possess it at all. But his real case against socialism is that it is reckless – rather as if he had anticipated the modern adage that the difference between socialists and scientists is that scientists try it on mice first:

Those who would play this game on the strength of their own private opinion, unconfirmed as yet by any experimental verification, . . . must have a serene confidence in their own wisdom, on the one hand, and a recklessness of other people's sufferings on the other,

a recklessness, Mill adds, much like that of Robespierre and St Just in the French Terror of 1793-4. Since Louis Blanc was openly an admirer of Robespierre and the Jacobin tradition, the point is a telling one. Mill died, however, leaving his critique of socialism unfinished and unpublished; and Louis Blanc, who died soon after in 1882, a year before Marx, is unlikely to have seen it. Events since then have supported Mill's view. Both mice

and men were experimented on, with the results he once feared. He is a thinker still remembered and valued. But few have had cause to mention Thiers, least of all his arguments in favour of property, and nobody mentions Sudre. Perhaps the revolutionary Proudhon was right, in 1848, to speak of platitudes. But he might have added that the platitudes of one generation can be forgotten by the next and, in future ages, regain their power to surprise.

SAMPLE