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# Proudhon's influence in Belgium: nationalism and culture

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2009

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## Abstract

### Proudhon in Belgium (1858–1862). Nationalism and Culture.

Erik Buelinckx will reflect on the influence Proudhon eventually had on right wing nationalism in Belgium and abroad. This influence can be retraced to a broader pilfering of Proudhon's ideas to sustain far-right ideologies across Europe and is an important, if negative element of Proudhon's legacy and one which must be engaged with. After bringing up the links Proudhon had with Belgium, the use and abuse of some of his ideas on religion and nationalism will be presented, followed by his influence on Georges Sorel, Hendrik de Man and Rudolf Rocker, three, more or less forgotten, but in their time influential thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century.

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## Proudhon's influence in Belgium: nationalism and culture.

### Introduction

'The people has never done anything else but praying and paying: we believe the time has come to make them PHILOSOPHIZE' (1860, v1, p. II). In Brussels, writing these lines for the new introduction to the second edition of his key work *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, Proudhon could seem to be overly optimistic that during and after his lifetime, and at least regarding his own texts, this would show true. Ample times his work is used to advance one's ideas without taking into account the complexity of his thought. Recent political evolutions in Belgium, like the fast growing importance of Flemish separatism and rather motionless national government unable to tackle the international financial crisis, the populist and strong leadership ideas propagated earlier by Blair in the U.K. and now by Sarkozy in France, the alliance between Berlusconi's popular party with the post-fascists of the Alleanza Nazionale, all of this in a European non-federation asked for some historical references. Can we learn from the first half of the twentieth century, a period when Proudhon's name and ideas popped up in sometimes unexpected places? Is there a straight path from Proudhon's writings, this attempt to transform society, to an ideology culminating in fascist regimes before and in some cases for many years after the second world war? Three thinkers of that period will be looked at: Georges Sorel (Cherbourg, 1847 – Boulogne-sur-Seine, 1922), Hendrik de Man (Antwerp, Belgium, 1885 – Mürten, Switzerland, 1953) and Rudolf Rocker (Mainz, Germany, 1873 – Mohigan Colony, USA, 1958). This choice is not accidental, the latter two having lived, written, and, albeit for different reasons, travelled extensively during the same period. And ultimately as well de Man as Rocker were both a victim of the nazi regime and fascist ideology, but also in very different ways. While de Man, branded as a nazi collaborator, is

now a largely forgotten socialist thinker, Rudolf Rocker, exiled from nazi Germany, an as much largely forgotten anarchist thinker, is even more neglected in circles other than anarchist ones. Both of them were acquainted with Proudhon's writings. Neither Sorel or Rocker have a real link with Belgium, but they serve as examples of the use of Proudhon. The study of de Man's theories gained some momentum in the 1990s with the rise of Blair's Third Way, and the spread of "ethical socialism" in the low countries (Pels 2002, Rosseel 1996).

## Trialectics?

Proudhon, although not a creator of systems, needs a systematic approach. First, a generalist view will be given of an aspect of Proudhon's thinking which I would like to use as a frame. Proudhon played with language and used irony, satire, mockery throughout his work (Forbes 2001). But this was not some gratuitous ranting, he had a goal, he always aimed for the transformation of society, and although 'one doesn't make a revolution with dialectics' (Proudhon 2004, p. 1177) continuous reform is needed. He had a special relation with his own words, and he was very well aware of the flaws in writing down his ideas. Simplifying Proudhon's play of dialectics between religion — based on a transcendent being which is at the same time author of justice and executer of justice —, and revolution — based on the new humanistic ideals that (should) have emanated from the French Revolution —, resulted in a triple set where immanent justice, not as an absolute but on the contrary always on the move, always changing, plays the most important role. This is not dialectics in its Hegelian form, although Proudhon was familiar with Hegel (1875, I, p. xxxiii; 1840, p. 258–259; 2004, p. 961; Sainte-Beuve 1875, p. 147). What is too easily seen as a Hegelian *synthesis in justice* is in fact constantly putting the so-called balanced result into question, by others called serial dialectics (Rives 1983, p. 140). Not Fourier, not Hegel, but going back as far as Heraclitus, Proudhon can accept that the universe follows the laws of justice and that justice follows the laws of the universe and that this unity of contradictions is to

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Proudhon that Marxism is not enough, that scientific materialism lacked a psychological foundation, but taking the authoritarian road to realise one's ideas is always doomed to fail. It was Rocker with his opus magnum *Nationalism and Culture*, leaning on Proudhon, giving historic evidence to justice and freedom in solidarity, or the lack of it, trying to understand, describing pitfalls and consequences, written during the extremely difficult times of the rise of fascism and the Nazi terror, who gave a good example of how to understand our times. With Rocker we can conclude that Proudhon shouldn't be neglected but instead used as the base of a critique of contemporary society, because every provisional government wants to become permanent (Rocker 1974, p. 546).

be seen as an ever moving order. This continuously changing result can be translated at the same time as *justice being as well the end as the means*. Proudhon works towards the possible by always trying to change and reform the current situation. In his lifelong quest to find a solution for the property question he wrote down the requirements when trying to define *property as a truth*. To consolidate all of his 'earlier critique by historical and political considerations, and show that in the end if property is a truth, this is only possible on one condition: that the principles of immanent Justice, of individual sovereignty and of Federation are admitted' (Proudhon 1866, p. 64). These three principles of immanent justice, individual sovereignty and federalism, understood as an intertwining form of social co-operation on different and overlapping levels, will serve as our touchstones. To visualise this one should imagine a balance with three arms instead of two. This is what I would like to call *trialectics*. It is not one against the other, it is continuously searching an equilibrium. And not the result counts, but the process of keeping this balance.

## Proudhon and Belgium

Since Belgium was created it has been a playground for liberalism and Catholicism, with only at the end of the nineteenth century the appearance of social democrats as a third player. Even before the Belgian Revolution of 1830, liberals and Catholics started to work together, under the label of Unionism (De Potter 1829). Catholic and Liberal newspapers from Liège and Brussels had a common goal: a less centralised state with less influence for the Dutch Protestant king. They were influenced by de Lamennais (Mayeur 1997), and opposed by the ultramontanians, mostly the higher clergy and nobility, who had an anti-liberal and traditional view on Church and State (Lamberts 1984). Especially the freedom Belgian Catholics had, and the influence they often could exert on politics and had among the population were inspirational for French 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholics. But all shared a common basic premise: a defensive, protective, patriotic and nationalistic view of a Belgian state under a parliamentary

democracy conceived as a constitutional monarchy. The Belgian Revolution of 1830 was typical of the transitional period of Europe during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As well in the Walloon part of Belgium, with Verviers and the coal and metal industry regions, as in Flanders, with Ghent and the cotton industry, this change from an agrarian and artisan economy to industrialisation happened roughly the same way. While the power, which was in the hands of church and nobility, came under attack by revolutions as witnessed in France in 1789, the revolution in Brabant, 1789–1790, was quite different from the French one because of its roots in the countryside and coalition with nobility and clergy against the laicisation, while the Liège revolution, 1789–1792, resembled more the French one. Influences of these revolutions will trickle down to the 1830 uprising, mainly the more liberal aspects, also found in the bridge Napoleon tried to build between old and new by an agreement with the pope and the redefinition of the role of the church to a more social organ, subsidised by the state. The use of French in the southern part of the Low Countries will lay the roots for the later linguistic problems (Kuypers 1960; Pirenne 1972; Witte 1997). At the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) the statute of the southern low countries and Liège were drawn without an existing sense of unity between these regions, while the northern part of the low countries was rather united. Nevertheless putting it all together into one kingdom under Willem I, the breakdown could have been easily predicted. Proudhon (1863b, p. 49–51) even states that the breakdown of this kingdom was in concordance with the spirit of the Congress of Vienna. The north was less populated, Protestant and less liberal, while the south was more populated, catholic and had more liberal sentiments. Being forced to accept a king from the north and the unequal socio-economic situation, created tensions. So when in 1830 at first some food riots broke out, liberal bourgeois groups easily steered this revolt to a struggle for independence of the southern part of the low countries. International powers grasped this opportunity to create Belgium as a buffer state to refrain France (Bologne 1929, Witte 1997). Stengers (2000, 2002) and Morelli (1996) give a good overview of the rise of nationalist sentiments in Belgium, and the building of the nation-state from 1830 to 1847.

This construction of the modern state creates the nation, from his mostly European viewpoint, and both are for him then inseparable. This seems incompatible with national liberation groups fighting against the state. It is good therefor to remember that Rocker, as did Proudhon before him, pointed to the dangers. He documents how the state is very able to use progression for its own ends. He exposes the clear line linking Hobbes, Rousseau, Jacobins, Hegel, Bolshevism and fascism. Rocker draws the picture of the nation as a concept defined by the state and religion. Both use nationalism as the necessary glue to get the adhesion of the people. He gives examples of state efforts to impose pure languages or pure races, and when such purist ideas are already in place the state uses them and its totalitarian tendencies become clear. To counter nationalist liberation fronts emerging also in his time, Rocker cites Rabindrath Tagore that ‘the idea of a nation is one of the most powerful anaesthetics ever invented by man’ (1978, p. 252). Rocker was also one of the first to criticize cultural particularism, which for him always ends in labelling different cultures with different levels of development, thus giving a moral appreciation.

## Conclusion

It is clear that with a theoretical corpus like Proudhon’s it is fairly easy to come up with sentences and paragraphs to be put to use in any possible situation in a wide political, economical and cultural environment. In this period of renewed interest in state intervention by the political apparatus against, or more exactly in favour of the power of capital in order to create a just society, and the still ongoing important religious influence on power, infecting as well official governments as terrorist groups, one needs the necessary tools for critique. With Proudhon’s triple requirements — immanent justice, federalism and individual freedom — the inherent dangers of great plans for humankind can be brought to light before too much damage is done. Sorel learned from Proudhon that for a revolution to succeed there needs to be more than the social and the scientific, but the myth of the general strike stayed a myth. And de Man learned from

p. xvii). So it is not the positioning of one theory, of an absolute, that will further the cause of liberation of man, but the creation of environments, cultures, institutions, social forms which 'shall leave to this incalculable complexity the utmost possible freedom — the utmost opportunity to be complex and incalculable (Rocker 1978, p. xvii). In his preface Rocker wrote that he wanted to show how the minorities developed, hiding behind the "Will of God" or the "Will of the Nation", imposing it by force on the people. (Rocker 1978, xi). He was, after the war, not allowed to return to Germany and stayed in the United States until his death in 1958. In 1946 he wrote an epilogue to the book stating that the USSR is now surpassing the other countries in imperialist tendencies, distrusting the cartels of the Western powers and exposing the inefficiency and undemocratic nature of the United Nations, where only a few super-powers will decide. Especially regarding to the USSR, but very well applicable to other kinds of regimes, Rocker agrees with Proudhon that without political, social and economical freedom, socialism is impossible. In 1949 *Nationalism and Culture* was at last published in German, under the original title, *Die Entscheidung des Abendlandes*, *The decision of the West*, referring to Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–22) in which he states the European culture is in his end phase. Rocker could be seen as too Eurocentric (Breton 2002, p. 124–125). With Nietzsche, Rocker agreed that culture and the state are antagonists (Nietzsche 1889, p. 35). By tracing back mankind's history Rocker wants to explain the constant clash between two main streams, defined by him as nationalism and culture. Culture, civilisation in German, is progress, the evolution of the human being towards more freedom by overcoming material and spiritual constraints. What man does is culture, but in this struggle against dominance of nature, or better the struggle to free himself from certain aspects of nature, man finds this liberatory force which will be used also against oppression created by man himself and by systems created by man. 'The same humankind has produced, in different times, religious conscience and free conscience' wrote Proudhon (1860, v4, p. 152). The logical conclusions drawn by Proudhon of this continuous struggle between liberty and authority is given by Rocker a more documented scientific historical foundation.

Proudhon's stays in Belgium are rather well documented (Proudhon 1875, 1946, 2004; Piérard 1932; Bartier 1953, 1967). It was also one of the few countries where his ideas played an important role in the formation of future anarchist, communist and socialist thinkers (Dandois 1974, Moulaert 1995). In his own words we have the fourteen volumes of his *Correspondance* and the partly published *Carnets*, although Haubtmann mentions that after 1859 there are not so many notes (1982, 1094). When writing about Proudhon's exile in Belgium, Piérard (1932) consulted the archives of the Belgian Sûreté to give some insight in the way he had contacts with the Belgian authorities. For the period of his long stay from 1858 to 1863 his letters to Rolland are explanatory (Proudhon 1946). What follows is, only as a reminder, a short overview of Proudhon's links with Belgium, beginning with his first short stay in 1849 when at the end of March he fled from Paris to Liège where he stayed from April 2<sup>nd</sup> to April 7<sup>th</sup>. He regained Paris on April 8<sup>th</sup>, letting the authorities in France believe he was still in Belgium. Under the cover of being a Brussels correspondent, his articles appeared in *Le Peuple*. When he got arrested in Paris on June 5<sup>th</sup> he continued to say he was only for eight days back in his own country while in fact it was already for two months. He commented on the unsuccessful export of the 1848 uprising to Belgium (Proudhon 1869, p. 204), an action used in Belgium to stress the annexation ambitions of France. Proudhon not only wanted to supervise in Paris the liquidation of his *Banque du peuple*, despite the risk of being imprisoned, but he was also, in his own special way, romantically in love and desperate to get married (Halévy 1955). Proudhon commented dryly on the consummation of his marriage while in prison (2004, p. 1032). Serving a 3 year sentence from June 1849 to June 1852 he wrote *Confessions d'un révolutionnaire, Idée générale de la Révolution au XIXème siècle, La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du 2 décembre 1851* and *Philosophie du Progrès*. His activities, though, during the 1848 uprising made him for the Belgian Catholics the incarnation of evil, which they wouldn't forget. A couple of years later, in 1853, he was thinking of going to Belgium again. This time the freedom of press attracted him (Proudhon 1875, V, p. 285–286). With the publication in 1858 of *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, a sharp

response to the attacks by the archbishop of Besançon, Proudhon was sentenced to four years of prison on moral grounds, so he decided to flee again, and this time his stay in Belgium would last more than four years. Proudhon's contacts in Belgium were mostly non-political for several reasons: a promise to the Belgian authorities not to mix in internal politics, the still not mended break-up between different flavours of French republican refugees of 1848, and the low of revolutionary activities by the Belgians after the failure of their 1848. His most important contacts were the writer Félix Delhasse, professor Altmeyer, writer and former radical politician Lucien Jottrand, the publishers F. Bourson, Alphonse Lebègue and Albert Lacroix. Bartier (1953) also notes that all of them were more or less hostile to as well catholic as liberal parties. One of the figures he really enjoyed frequenting was Lucien Jottrand, strangely enough as a Walloon he was also an active adherent of Flemish nationalism, and as a catholic he was anticlerical, which let Proudhon explain to him his views on the (historical) meaning of Jesus (Proudhon 1875, XIV, p. 76–77). When in 1859 an amnesty was declared for political activists, Proudhon couldn't return, because his crime was not political but moral, and after all he enjoyed life in Belgium, his family was with him, although coping with a shortage of money, he had friends, discussions with interesting people, and appreciated his local status (Proudhon 1946). In April 1860 he writes in a letter: 'Those good belgians are rather welcoming; they read, they pay attention, something they don't do anymore in France, where people think they know everything' (1875, X, p. 8). And he goes on to say that he's denationalising himself, because where man finds justice, his fatherland lies. One important meeting in Brussels was with Leo Tolstoy in Brussels early March 1861. Proudhon was one of the few intellectuals of that time to have impressed Tolstoy (Pevear 1995, p. xv-xvi). Talking about a book he was writing then, *La Guerre et la Paix*, Proudhon gave Tolstoy the idea for the title for his great novel *War and Peace* which appeared in 1869. During that period Belgium was in a very nationalistic mood, not uncommon during that time in Europe, and Proudhon seemed well aware of the danger of so-called French support for emerging nation-states, so they wouldn't become concurrents in power. He managed, unlike his compatriots, not to

Another reading of Proudhon was done by Rocker in *Nationalism and Culture*, in which leaning on original ideas of Proudhon played an important role to develop his own interpretations. Born in a working class family in 1873 in Germany, his view on the world, as for Proudhon, could have been shaped by the region where he grew up, the Mainz region with its history of small shop ownership and a rather liberal republican constitution. Fleeing Germany for socialist and anarchist activities ended up as a 20 year exile, first in Paris, then in London where he found a home in the Jewish community and even learned Yiddish. At the outbreak of WW I the British government interned him, only to be released and deported in 1918. He was refused to enter Germany and returned to Holland as a Staatlose (Rocker 1956, p. 355). But at the end of that year he did manage to enter Germany again to live in Berlin. At the time worker's councils were formed all over Germany, he managed to live in Berlin and renewed his contacts with the movement to become quickly one of their spokesmen, as the editor of the weekly *Der Syndikalist*. The failure of the 1918 Berlin uprising, and the 1919 Bavarian revolution, led Rocker to comment on these events, in which his friend Gustav Landauer was killed by Noske's Freikorps, with 'a people that puts up with a Noske at the beginning, should not be surprised if it ends up with Hitler as its grave-digger. (Vallance 1973, p. 79). Until 1933 Rocker led the life of an active propagandist. 'Every nationalism begins with a Mazzini, but in its shadow there lurks a Mussolini.' he wrote Max Nettlau in 1930 (Vallance 1973, p. 88–89). This is a key observation to understand his reasons for starting to work on what would become his opus magnum. *Nationalism and Culture* was meant to be published in Germany in 1933. After the Reichstag fire Rocker needed to flee Germany again, with his the manuscript. He toured the U.S. and Canada with talks about anarchism, the dangers of fascism and the events in Nazi Germany. The first translation of *Nationalism and Culture* appeared in Spanish in 1936–37, the English translation in 1937, the Dutch one just before the outbreak of WW II, and only in 2008 appeared the integral French translation. 'Rocker has made it his guiding principle to take man as given and, taking him as given, he finds him altogether too complex and incalculable to be formulated at all' wrote his translator (Rocker 1978,

the crisis of capitalism (1931). But his solution to beat Fascism is the use of temporary, consented by the masses, authoritarian socialist structures (1932). He had to leave Germany when Hitler took power in 1933. The pacifism of de Man led to neutrality, but the drive to realise his ideas made him, although reluctantly, accept the nazi regime as a force that will do more for the disappearances of class differences than so-called parliamentary democracies. This was to be foreseen when de Man published his *Plan of Work*, planned socialism, in which strong state interventions were required for the necessary reforms. He had to flee Belgium in 1942 because his writings and public declarations fell ill with the occupator. After the war, as a convicted collaborator, he was not allowed to return to Belgium. He died in Switzerland in 1953. For some the name de Man may sound familiar. Paul de Man, a well known specialist of deconstructionism in literary theory, was a nephew of Hendrik de Man. After his death in 1983 he was found to have written articles in the wartime Nazi-controlled Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, even a few rather anti-Semitic ones. Pels argues that the political and cultural influence of the uncle on the nephew was not insignificant (1991, p. 21–56). Occasionally people or groups try to rehabilitate Hendrik de Man, and his ideas leading up to his acceptance of nazi occupation are often dismissed as less important. Nevertheless the study of his texts could help us understand some tendencies leading up to WW II and certain developments afterwards. Ethical socialism gained importance in the 1980s and 1990s in Belgium, the Netherlands, and with Blair in the U.K., so with de Man as an example it may be enlightening to see what such third-way neo-socialism could lead to (Pels 2002).

## Rudolf Rocker

While Sorel did indeed study Proudhon, many of the Sorelians, and especially those involved in the *Cercle Proudhon* took only the parts of Proudhon which fitted their view of society. Hendrik de Man at first admitted to be influenced by Proudhon as a young man, but later rightly minimised this influence only to be inspired by Proudhon's ethical approach to create his own *Psychology of socialism*.

feel exiled in Brussels (Goriely 1967, p. 153). Away from Parisian agitation, or even provincialism, Proudhon was able to go further on what was only sketched in his *Petit catéchisme politique* (1860, v7, p. 111–152). From a rather local view that the Revolution by itself would serve as an example for all nations, this new observational place gave him a more global perspective, following events in Italy and Poland, the expansionist politics of Napoleon III (especially regarding Belgium), and the Secession war in America. Proudhon always tried to take the current situation to develop, sometimes to the extreme, necessary hints for change. In the earlier mentioned letter to Jottrand, Proudhon explains also his views on the liberation of the oppressed black people. This should be studied further, since often Proudhon is considered to be against slave liberation, because he elaborates the consequences of taking sides by certain contemporaries which, in case they don't like them, are reversely attributed to him. His stay in Brussels was an extremely active period for Proudhon (1861a, 1861b, 1862a, 1862b, 1863b, 1865, 1867b, 1863a). In his 14-volume *Correspondance*, with letters from before 1836 until his death in 1865, 4 volumes make up the 4 year period he stayed in Belgium. It all came to an end when in 1862 in the *Office de la Publicité*, a series of articles about the Italian unity he wrote, brought onto him, and this very much to his own surprise, a serious conflict with the Belgian journalists and parts of the population. Noteworthy reactions were found in catholic newspapers, now rallying for him because they saw in him a supporter of a strong papal state, but also in publications which were until then on his side. The situation got out of hand and he had to flee Belgium, because of nationalists protesting almost violently at the house he lived. In some letters written shortly hereafter he re-tells story in his own words (1875, vol. XII, p. 192). He even thought some manipulating was going on a supranational level (1875, vol. XII, p. 190) and looks back rather surprised how his own words were misread so easily (1875, vol. XII, p. 199). And of course, for him, journalists were at the base of all this (Proudhon 1862a, p. 55). He republishes the two articles *Mazzini et l'unité italienne* and *Garibaldi et l'unité italienne* together with *La presse belge et l'unité italienne*, adding some explanations (1862a). Before his long stay in Belgium, in *General Idea of the Revolution*

in the Nineteenth Century, he writes: ‘France is everywhere that her language is spoken, her Revolution followed, her manners, her arts, her literature adopted, as well as her measures and her money. Counting thus, almost the whole of Belgium, and cantons of Neufchâtel, Vaud, Geneva, Savoy, and part of Piedmont belong to her; but she must lose Alsace (. . .). But of what use are these repetitions? (. . .). Revolutionize, I tell you. Your frontiers will always be long enough and French enough if they are revolutionary.’ (Proudhon 1851b, p. 285). It’s such ideas which may confuse many readers of Proudhon. Interpreting this, sometimes larded with a slight feeling of superiority, *Frenchness*, as the base of nation forming, one once again just lifts out some elements and doesn’t see the whole picture of Proudhon’s ideas. In the posthumously published *France et Rhin* he clarifies that between the most dangerous prejudices, one should count those which limit states a priori to borders based on geography and nationality (1867b, p. 1). Before delving deeper in the problem of nation, nationality and nationalism, we will pay some attention to another one of Proudhon’s lifelong favourite intellectual subjects: religion.

## Proudhon and religion

One of the more known Proudhon specialists of the twentieth century is certainly Pierre Haubtmann, whose reasons for studying Proudhon were explained (1969, p.8) in his defence at the *Pontificia Università Gregoriana* in Rome on July 9<sup>th</sup> 1966, for his doctoral thesis in theology at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. As it is indeed a Jesuit’s duty to study and understand, the young Haubtmann found Proudhon while searching to explain the gap between the population and the Church. But his approach to Proudhon touches recuperation, although enough proof exists to refute this idea of Proudhon being on the side of religion. ‘God! I don’t know of a God, it’s all mysticism. (. . .) when one talks to me about God, I know one’s after my liberty or my purse’ (Proudhon 1867a, I, 229). During his lifetime and after his death, authors read their own beliefs into Proudhon’s texts,

an individual moral code, not as a motor for a political movement, because ‘Marxist radicalism seemed much more suited to react against parliamentary opportunism and bourgeois reformism’ (1974, p. 105). Much later he understood that these anarchist aspirations for freedom in the evolution of institutions, were used by him after a long Marxist detour and freed from utopian elements, as a foundation for his psychological approach (1974, p. 106). Both de Man, with *Psychology of Socialism* in 1926, and Sorel, with *The decomposition of Marxism* (1908a), take elements from anarchism, especially from ethical requirements advanced by Proudhon. In their critique on Marxism they are joined by Robert Michels (1912) and Marcel Déat (1930), both ending as real fascists. In Sternhell’s conclusion to *La droite révolutionnaire*, the influential Belgian socialist theoretician appears a few times (1983). But some years later in *Ni droite ni gauche*, de Man already gets a whole chapter and more devoted to him: *La révision idéaliste du marxisme : le socialisme éthique d’Henri de Man* (1987), and Sternhell writes that a certain form of reformism — that of Sorel, Marcel Déat or Hendrik de Man — results into fascism (1987, p. 156). He goes further saying de Man often turns to Proudhon, and that, as Sorel did, as all the social maurassians and all the socialists who glided to fascism did, de Man appreciated Proudhon’s *socialism with the taste of the earth* (Sternhell 1987, p. 174). According to Sternhell attacks on liberalism and Marxism should lead inevitably to the birth and spread of fascist ideas. Fascism was born out of the combination of right wing anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois nationalism, and left wing anti-democracy. Between the wars the neo-socialists, as the true heirs of revolutionary syndicalism (Sternhell 1983, p. 167), paved further the way. But to illustrate the complexity of those times there is this answer de Man gave Mussolini, who felt attacked by some parts in *Psychology of Socialism*, that although both of them have learned from Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*, Mussolini’s attempt to organise freedom through the organisation of authority, will fail, as history shows, unless he would remain faithful to the dynamics of his youth (Peski, p. 131–132). In 1930 de Man held a conference on *Socialism and National-Fascism* in which he analysed Fascism as partly a psychological reaction of poor middle class and young intellectuals against the proletarians instead of fighting the real roots of

Sorel as one of their theoretical forefathers, never stimulated the reading of Sorel, and only used dubious sources (Sand 1998). Sorel's anti-democratic stance is mostly used as proof of him being a proto-fascist, although anarchists have since long pointed out the fallacies of parliamentary representative democracy. For Proudhon force rests in as well the individual as in the collective (1860, v7, p. 111), and as long as democracy is not elevated to the true conception of power, it will be, as it is until this day, a lie, a shameful and short transition, one time from aristocracy to monarchy, the next from monarchy to aristocracy (1860, v7, p. 130). Anarchists have since long pointed to Marxist authoritarianism and pseudo-democratic liberalism as leading to unfree societies. Sorel was very well familiar with anarchism, and saw it rather early in his life as synonymous with organisation of the working class outside the political. Sorel, ending as a from the working class isolated thinker, praised earlier in his life the collaboration of different socialist groups, like in Augustin Hamon's *Humanité nouvelle*, to fight the moral catastrophe, a struggle for which scientific socialism wasn't appropriate any more (1898, p. 610–12). In such a critique of Marxism he was not alone.

## Hendrik de Man

Belgium could be seen as a laboratory for all kind of ideas because of its cultural, geographic and linguistic construction. It was Cesar De Paepe who first tried to merge Marxist authoritarian socialism with Proudhon's mutualism to arrive at some sort of collectivism with respect for the individual (Dandois 1974), but with no enduring success. Decades later the Belgian Hendrik de Man tried to add psychology and ethics to Marxist socialism. He came from a bourgeois family and as for many others born in the late nineteenth century, anarchism played an important role in their political education. He wanted to break with his bourgeois roots, and even though being influenced by Proudhon and other anarchists, he opted for Marxism, especially after his stay in Ghent, where the Marxists had more power in the worker's movement. He still believed in anarchism as

using carefully chosen citations, out-of-context fragments and disregarding Proudhon's clearest exposé on this subject written while imprisoned in Sainte-Pélagie. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 1851 he leaves us no doubt. In a letter to Robin he writes: 'In two words, I reject the absolute God of the priests and the always incomplete divinity of man, even though I recognize the reality of this : I don't worship anything, not even what I believe : that's my *antitheism*.' (1875, IV, p. 374). After all, his main quarrel is with church and religion as threats to human independence, and less with God as a human belief system. Throughout his produced work he broached the subject (1846, 1858, 1860). 'What Humanity searches in religion, under the name of God, is its own constitution, is itself' (1853, p. 64). He proposes the abolition of all religion and emphasized to replace 'the cult of a so-called supreme Being by the culture of humanity.' (1853, p. 65). Using God, a hypothetical one, gives body to his hypotheses, to build up his reasoning and to prove his point (1867a, 353–354). The lifelong study of the bible and his extensively citing from the it, is not a proof of his own beliefs, but merely shows the importance the bible has in Western cultural and political history, and for emotional reasons he kept his own, by himself in 1836 proof corrected, bible always with him. Hauptmann uses words like shocking and frightening (1982, p. 698) in describing Proudhon's locking God up as only acceptable or possible in an absolute (Proudhon 1860, v7, p. 42), in disregard of the hundreds of citations of Proudhon's writing against God and religion one can come up with (Devaldès 1927 & 1930). Hauptmann implies that, in deciding to give his God the contours of a Satan, so that attacking this God is just natural, Proudhon started from a wrong thesis, and because of this "fact", his conclusion must also be wrong. When Proudhon fights God, Hauptmann adds a question mark (1969, p. 215–230). Other specialists have similarly tried to clothe Proudhon with a belief in God and religious aspirations (Prévôtél 1990). When at the end of his life Proudhon wanted to publish his work on Jesus (1959), Ernest Renan had just published his *Vie de Jésus* (1863), so Proudhon at first postponed and finally even didn't publish his work. Proudhon's critique on Renan's Jesus, a romantic fool to be destroyed by his own idealism, is set in the view he had of Renan as a reactionary political conservative.

In the same way Proudhon couldn't accept David Strauss' view on Jesus because Strauss, in *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1837), translated into French in 1839–40, didn't understand the similarities between socialism and Jesus protesting against the rich and powerful. According to Proudhon one need first to understand where the religious feelings surrounding Jesus, which he considered a social revolutionary reformer, originated. Where are the roots of religion developing this sort of hostile view on humanity? Proudhon sees in the transcendental view, with order emanating from the exterior, one of the reasons of acceptance of religious power. By accepting transcendental justice people give in to fear and dependence, and thus accept also man-created Authority and Providence. It's religion as an obstacle for the realisation of justice — 'Dieu, c'est le Mal' (1867a, p. 360) — that matters for Proudhon. When the Absolute makes its appearance, progress becomes impossible and we end up with the status quo (Proudhon 1853, 19–24), which means religion can't be part of his ever moving trialectic balance.

## Proudhon and nationalism

Seventeen years after Proudhon's death, in March 1882, Ernest Renan held his famous conference 'Wat is a Nation?' at the Sorbonne (1887, p. 277–310), in which he laid down the "French" concept of a nation. It is the view that one should not confound nation and race, and shouldn't also attribute sovereignty to ethnographical or linguistic groups analogous to that of real peoples. One can read parts of Renan's speech as a critique and as a confirmation of certain aspects of Proudhon's views on race, language and nation. For a more elaborated view on nationalism see Anderson (1991, 2005). We use an extremely simplified version, for the sake of the argument, of the ideological split in the definitions of nationalism, mainly a "German" blood and soil nationalism versus a "French" cultural nationalism. Belgium as a country situated on the linguistic barrier between Dutch and French language, Germanic and Latin culture, suffers the tensions between the two interpretations of nationalism. In Flanders the idea prevails that a territorial space, surrounded

Sorel also seemed to have inspired some people who created the *Cercle Proudhon*, especially Edouard Berth, a lifelong friend of Sorel and probably the only true Sorelian, but he could not agree with their ideas. Before the start of the *Cercle Proudhon*, he warned Berth about the dangers of such a group. After thinking about it 'he was sure this enterprise wouldn't have any success' and 'wouldn't help young people to better understand Proudhon, because one needs to make *abstraction of all political projects* to do that' (1987, p. 168). And he cautions Berth of their anti-proudhonianism, despite the declaration in their first issue to gather 'federalist republicans, integrationist nationalists and syndicalists, who having resolved or distanced from their thinking the political problem, all equally impassioned for the organisation of the *cit  fran aise* according to principles taken from French tradition which they find in the work of Proudhon and in current syndicalist writing' (Valois 1912, p. 1). Sorel opposed WW I, but saw in Lenin someone with the necessary weight to inspire the masses. He was not all attracted to the rising fascism, although he seemed to have put some hope in Mussolini for a short while (Meisel 1950a, 1950b). In 1918 he published *Mat riaux d'une th orie du prol tariat*, in which the central theme is once again the emancipation of the proletariat. According to Sternhell (1984, 1987, 2000, 2008), Sorel was an inspirational source for the *Cercle Proudhon* this incarnation of the last pre-fascist movement before WW I. He sees, rightly, the group as the coming together in France of two extremes of nationalism and socialism, both of them critical of Marxist and liberal materialism. Accentuating the influence of Sorel however, and indirectly Proudhon, on the *Cercle Proudhon* was refuted for instance by Navet (1992) and Poumar de (1994). Charzat (1983) has clearly shown the difficulties of fascist appropriation of Sorel and Vincent (1998) puts Sorel's patriotism and longing for a lost traditional French *cit * forward as key elements. Together with a dislike for decadence and weak democracy, Sorel, despite his own reticence, becomes attractive for the views of later fascist doctrines (Roth 1963; Jennings 1998). But the simplified view on Sorel's anti-intellectualism has clearly no ground in, and certainly doesn't do justice to, Proudhon who strove for an all encompassing intellectualism, education being a key element of his thought. The fascists, claiming



dynamics (1912, p. 131) to surpass the deficiencies of Marxism on the level of ethics and practice. He theorized the idea that the worker's struggle could be fuelled by the use of images, or a myth, and that violence, this philosophised counterpart to mere force, could be a valid means. By emblematising this myth of general revolutionist mass strike, with direct action as a constant appetizer, Sorel could be credited as one of the great thinkers of revolutionary syndicalism (1898, 1908). In a letter to Halévy he sheds some light on his goals, pointing also to the degradation of one's thought often made by followers, because it 'is better to have obtained this result than to have gained the banal approbation of people who repeat formulas and enslave their own thought in the disputes of the schools.' (1912, p. 6–7). Sorel critiques the utopians as working only for reforms to end as part of the system they wanted to deconstruct. Contrary to a utopia, a myth can't be refuted because it is identical to the convictions of the groups it belongs to, it talks the language of the movement and can't be decomposed (1912, p. 33). Deception in the CGT, exemplified by his disappointment by the orderly, police directed, May 1<sup>st</sup> demonstrations in 1909, implying union conformism, brought him to get shortly involved with Charles Maurras' *Action Française*, around 1909–10, but of which he quickly withdrew because his federalism was completely opposite of the nationalist monarchism of *Action française*. Charles Maurras' *Action française* defended a French nationalism with Provençal roots, and used Proudhon praising his own region of birth, to give it a some weight. In the way Maurras and his followers used Proudhon, *Lorsque Proudhon eut les cent ans*. . . was in 1912 republished in the *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon* under the title *A Besançon*. we see that by labelling him specifically as franc-comtois, and undeniable the region where he was born played an important role in his forming, Maurras tends to undo Proudhon from the more universal ideas. He admits that Proudhon's ideas were not always the ideas of *Action française*, but then adds that Proudhon's ideas were sometimes not even from himself, in the way that he didn't manage to clearly put them in order (1912, p. 3). Proudhon gets then claimed as being pure French and as deeply religious. But for Proudhon this *Frenchness* was embodied in the universal values expressed by the French Revolution before it turned a dictatorship.

by clearly defined borders, is where the Flemish culture should be dominant and Dutch should be spoken. A French-speaking minority holds on to their view of the universality of the French culture and language, even in Flemish country. This culminated in an extremely complicated state structure, with overlapping substructures, which is used to conceal or at least make more difficult this clash of concepts. This is not what was imagined by Proudhonian in his ideas about federalism, as three communities (Flemish, French and German) overlap with three regions (Flemish, Brussels, Walloon), but all the different levels have their own power structures working against the other instead of collaborating on an equal base. But nationalism in one form or another keeps gaining importance, the more so in Flanders because of its history, like the still not really accepted suppression of the language in the 19<sup>th</sup> and a greater part of the twentieth century, combined with a currently better economic situation. Solidarity with the less well off neighbours of the Walloon part of Belgium is under pressure, and too easily historic knowledge about an earlier richer Walloon region supporting a poorer Flanders is cast aside. Elections during the last years were mainly coloured by nationalist sentiments, ranging from Flemish separatism over Belgian unionism to even a minority asking for attachment to France. The collaboration of an important part of Flemish nationalists during Nazi occupation, believing it would further their cause isn't helpful either.

Nationalism is not linked in se to the state, although in its 19<sup>th</sup> century incarnation, nationalism was mostly used to create new or strengthen existing states. And here we can return to Proudhon because for him this view of the nation as a state and the state as a nation, was the gravest error, namely an absolute, a fatherland bound by definitions. Contrary to what some may have read in Proudhon, he expressed himself clearly, stating that the when the fatherland vanishes, humanity will be saved (1875, vol. XI, p. 156). Proudhon is certainly not blind for the attraction and influence of culture, language, region and even the undefinable soul, and thus it is exactly when Proudhon praises the Gallic soul, that it is not so strange to find him quoted by nationalists and regionalists. But, and here it is clear that out of context quoting of Proudhon is doing injustice to

its meaning, we need to understand the situation. In 1849, after his disillusion in the 1848 uprising he challenges the socialists Pierre Leroux and Louis Blanc to engage in a polemic discussion to defend himself and his newspaper against unfair accusations of betraying the Revolution. He portrays Blanc as the demagogue, supporting a strong state structure, and Leroux as the mystagogue, the pope of this new “State” religion (1871, p 7). In an open letter Proudhon responds to personal attacks by Leroux. Trying to defend the freedom he believed should have come from the “French” Revolution, he wrote that his ‘only faith, love and hope lie in Liberty and my Country’ (1871, p. 33). This culminates in a song of praise for his native Gaul, which suffered for too long the influence of Greeks, Romans, Barbarians, Jews and Englishmen. He ends, after all it was a polemic, with ‘you can’t understand this restoring of our nationality, which, more than economic reform and the transformation of a degraded society, and appears as the highest aim of the February Revolution. You are on the side of the foreigner ; this is why Liberty, which was everything and did everything for our ancestors, is so odious to you.’ (1871, p. 33–34). This early text is most often used to label him a proto-fascist. Proudhon still believes in the ideals of liberty, equality and brotherhood, sadly once again not reached in 1848, even as only a more little step was needed to make: the abolishment of the productiveness of capital (1871, p. 39). In his *Petit catéchisme politique* he explains that the Revolution, which could start for instance in Paris or Berlin, does not make a distinction in race, that it doesn’t want to subdue nations or defend frontiers. It will only interact with the exterior by giving the example (1860, v4, p. 145). So when Proudhon talks about ‘this place where one’s soul belongs’ we have to take into account that his views indeed remained tied to his region of birth, but that this situation was for him only natural (1860, v4, p. 146–147) and not at all contrary to a larger federation of equal regions, with associations of factories, workshops and similar cultural interests overlapping these territorial federations to make up for a system based on respect for the individual, implying the place of origin, in society. But, what is remembered are the catchy lines, the perception of this French agitator, like in the short-lived journal *L’Insurgé*, in 1937, where he is mentioned alongside other ‘agitators’ coming from

monarchist as well as anarchist backgrounds, like Drumont, Sorel, Jules Vallès, Bakounin and Charles Maurras (Netter 1992, p. 72). Under the Vichy regime Proudhon is repeatedly used, or recuperated (Bachelin 1941), as a true Frenchman, a modest hardworking family man, intelligent but not an intellectual, and by taking some well chosen, out of context phrases such use becomes manipulation (Netter 1992, p. 72–73). Proudhon sees reasons enough for people to group together, even based on blood or soil, but he immediately raises questions as ‘What are nationalities? Are there as much of them as there are races? Need we add culture and language at race?’ (1863b, p. 9). Because for Proudhon the base for all federations are natural groups, the family, village, province, region. Their collaboration into confederations goes beyond or counter the forming of nation-states (1862a, p. 25–26), and surpass nationalist or statist entities to avoid the great wars he witnessed in his time and predicted yet to come, as seen in the twentieth century. This means that for getting some lasting the peace, real federalism, and not nationalism, should be part of our ever moving trialectic balance.

## Georges Sorel

Sorel published his first essay on the philosophy of Proudhon in 1892, and certain critiques on Proudhon already emerge, about the Revolution of 1789 (1892, p. 635) and not being clear enough in the distinction between justice and law (1892, p. 47). Sorel also notes that Proudhon in *La guerre et la paix* was not really understood and quotes him about the power of force of the masses which may be violent and not at all chivalrous, but isn’t this the nature of the multitude (Proudhon 1861a, II, p. 249; Sorel 1892, p. 49–50). Sorel has always wanted to write a great work on Proudhon (Rolland 1989, p. 128; Prat 2001; Proudhon 2001). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Marxism had gained much importance in France, but while studying Marx, Sorel seemed also to agree with many of Proudhon’s ideas but he thought the ways to achieve immediate results were missing. In 1908 in *Reflections on violence* Sorel tried to build a bridge between Proudhon’s anarchism, Nietzschean violence and Bergsonian