



This is a draft of the entry for *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy* (forthcoming 2023) published by Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE). This work has been funded by the Government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

## Associations and Associationalism

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Bibliographic information

**Bruno Frère and Laurent Gardin. Forthcoming 2023. Associations and Associationalism. Edited by Ilcheong Yi, Peter Utting, Jean-Louis Laville, Barbara Sak, Caroline Hossein, Sifa Chiyoge, Cecilia Navarra, Denison Jayasooria, Fernanda Wanderley, Jacques Defourny, and Rocio Nogales-Muriel. *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE).**

Or

**Bruno Frère and Laurent Gardin. Forthcoming 2023. Associations and Associationalism. Edited by Ilcheong Yi et al. *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE).**

June 2022

**UNTFSSSE Knowledge Hub Draft Paper Series**

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### *Abstract*

Many people still think of citizens' associations either as unrealistic utopias or as offering social or cultural services that neither the state nor the market wants to provide. This entry will define associationalism, showing that its project for society has never been a mere pipe dream, nor has it been confined to addressing poverty or to the socio-cultural sector. In the 19th century, association between workers was really thought of as an economic model. It was a relatively successful attempt to restore the economy to civil society via a serious political movement. Sometimes described as associationalist socialism, and sometimes as libertarian socialism, this movement's goal was not so much the disappearance of all forms of political and economic coordination at a supra-local level as the end of capitalism. Basically, it was less about replacing public action and more about replacing capitalism, which at the time was in rapid industrial expansion. This entry aims to show why associationism, as a political goal, is still relevant today as a society project: beyond capitalism and towards a radical and federative democracy.

*Keywords:* libertarian socialism; workers association; democracy; communism; liberalism; mutualism; third sector; social entrepreneurship

## Introduction

Many people still think of citizens' associations either as unrealistic utopias or as offering social or cultural services that neither the state nor the market wants to provide. This entry will define associationalism, showing that its project for society has never been a mere pipe dream, nor has it been confined to addressing poverty or to the socio-cultural sector. In the 19th century, an association between workers was really thought of as an economic model. It was a relatively successful attempt to restore the economy to civil society via a serious political movement. Sometimes described as associationalist socialism, and sometimes as libertarian socialism (Frère 2009), this movement's goal was not so much the disappearance of all forms of political and economic coordination at a supra-local level as the end of capitalism. Basically, it was less about replacing public action and more about replacing capitalism, which at the time was in rapid industrial expansion.

This entry first presents the emergence of associationalism in the 19th century by introducing Proudhon, its main theorist. This emergence rested on a few major ideas that are still quite easy to discern today in a range of civil society organisations: self-management, collective ownership of the means of production, political participation, etc. In a second step, the entry tries to show how serious reflection on associationalist socialism cannot be separated from a question that was already crucial when it first emerged: what place should be given to the state, or to any form of collective political and economic organisation related to it? The entry will show how, by redefining state power in a federative and radically democratised way, associationalism can still provide an answer today.

The entry will particularly focus on why associationalism cannot be reduced to the idea of the third sector, social entrepreneurship or the charitable economy. And then it further describes the relationship that a radically democratised and federalised state might have with the associations that constitute it (see the entry "Participation, governance, collective action, democracy and SSE"). Finally, by way of conclusion, this entry will try to show that if the associationalist project is to have a future at a time when some claim the end of ideologies, then it must avoid conceiving of social relations as devoid of conflict. Associationalism was born in the context of workers' struggles. If it is to endure today, then it must do so within the framework of a more global struggle – a struggle that opposes capitalism, the injustices it entails, and all the neo-liberal policies that support it by destroying more and more public and environmental goods.

### 1. Associationalism as mutualism

The works of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon are generally considered associationalism's founding texts, alongside those of certain other socialists such as Pierre Leroux (Frère 2018). In the mid-19th century, this perceptive observer of working-class practices developed an economic project that he initially described as "mutualism". For the workers in various workshops at the time, mutualism involved training themselves in economic autonomy through mutual aid with a view to emancipating themselves, not only from the grip of the market but also from the state. Although Proudhon developed the idea of mutualism at length, notably in a few key texts such as *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières (On the Political Capacity of the Working*

*Classes*) (1865), he was also one of those self-taught intellectuals who ventured to put their economic ideas into practice. In France, he initiated the People's Bank, which he based on an alternative local currency. Along with Owen's National Equitable Labour Exchange in England, the People's Bank can be considered one of the first modern experiments in social currencies (Proudhon 1865). It allowed various professionals to offer their services in exchange for a quantity of an alternative currency indexed to the number of hours worked. Proudhon also formalised interest-free mutual credit (or "free credit"), the forerunner of credit unions, by studying some of the rural practices of the time that sought to enable small farmers to buy back the land they farmed. His "mutual credit fund" was intended to finance agricultural associations so they could compete with the first large industrial consortia (Proudhon 1846, 1851). This kind of initiative contributed to the birth of the "cooperative" status in France, notably with the so-called Waldeck-Rousseau law in 1884 (some twenty years after Proudhon's death).

Proudhon also often mentions the Canut workshops. These forerunners of the workers' cooperatives put up resistance to the big factories, as well as to the silk merchants who tried to subject their goods to (very low) international prices. The Canuts made a point of recruiting journeymen with few, or even no, qualifications to train them in the silk trades and, in the best cases, to integrate them into the management and ownership of the workshop (Frère 2018).

Proudhon thought that all of these initiatives should come together on a regional and then a national scale, forming federal economic governments whose members, elected at the grassroots level, would only have short-term mandates that could be revoked to ensure the permanent rotation of representatives. This economic federation should be responsible for coordinating trade and all macro-economic regulations on the basis of a principle of reciprocity distinct from strict market exchange. Preventing the accumulation of surplus value beyond what was necessary to meet vital needs, workers would exchange service for service, credit for credit, and labour for labour (Proudhon 1865, 210).

The idea of reciprocity is at the heart of mutualism. It is intended to govern workers' organisations internally (Proudhon 1846) through a few major principles, which can be used to characterise the typical format of an associative enterprise even today (Frère 2018): serving the members of local communities by involving their representatives; democratic self-management; social ownership of capital and the means of production; the primacy of people over the capital in the redistribution of profits; rotation of management tasks; wage equity (maximum ratio of lowest to highest wage); anti-capitalist struggle.

## **2. Democratising and federalising as a response to social entrepreneurship and the withdrawal of the social state**

As with economic power, Proudhon wished to alter political power to become radically more democratic, so that it would incorporate self-management. He would continually refine his stance on this, notably in *Du principe fédératif* (*The Federative Principle*)(1863). In this text, he sought to limit the state's prerogatives without denying them all. So the government is subalternized by "the representatives or institutions of liberty, namely: the central state by the deputies of the departments or provinces; the provincial authority by the delegates of the communes and the municipal authority by the inhabitants; so that liberty thus aspires to make itself predominant, authority to become the servant of liberty, and the contractual principle to be substituted

everywhere, in public affairs, for the authoritarian principle” (1863, 81). Using the concept of contract, Proudhon emphasises that the parties to the federation do not submit to the federation itself, thus he rejects “any measure or initiative that tends to strengthen the power of the federal state or federation and consequently to compromise the (political) sovereignty of the contracting parties on which his federalist theory is based” (Caglio y Conde 2011, 292). It is here that Proudhon develops the idea of subsidiarity: a decision can only be taken by a higher level of federal organisation if it cannot be taken by a lower level – the region, the commune or the association (Million-Delsol 1993, 22-24).

This political federalism enters into a dialogue with the economic federalism based on mutualism mentioned above. The state then becomes one actor among others. “The state has retained its power, its strength (...) but it has lost its *authority* (...) it is itself, so to speak, a kind of citizen, it is a civil person just like families, trading companies, corporations, communes. Just as it is not sovereign, it is not a servant either (...): it is the first among its peers” (Proudhon 1860, 68). Proudhon’s thinking embraces diversity. “[He] invokes the noisy dialectic of a pluralist society, in which each individual, each group, participates in determining the general interest”(Chambost 2004, 247). More broadly, the pluralist management of public affairs described by Proudhon is a form of regulation (Vaillancourt and Laville 1998, 131) that goes beyond that of tutelage, whereby the public authorities alone decide on the general interest, with associations applying its directives. In France, such tutelary management can be found in the financing of organisations promoting social and economic inclusion, which take the “labour market” to be a sacred space into which the “defective parts of the social body” must reintegrate at all costs. The fact that unemployment is a structural invariant of capitalism is thus passed over in silence by the elected representatives in charge of this sector “under tutelage”. If Proudhon’s associationalism cannot tolerate such public supervision, it also rejects all forms of quasi-market regulation aimed at making associations compete with each other to fulfil missions in the public interest financed through “project-based” funding – missions that are once again defined by the state alone in the name of the *New Public Management*.

It is because they focus only on “tutelised” associations that some people see in associationalism the disengagement of the state or subversion of “the foundations of the status of the civil service” (Hély and Moulévrier 2009, 41). But from a Proudhonian perspective, it is the private capitalist economy rather than the civil service that must be supplanted, even if the latter is to be radically federalised. For Proudhon, mutualism or associationalism does not constitute a third sector that compensates for the failings of the state. In his vision, the state (or the federation) continues to provide funding streams for social security, unemployment, health care, pensions, culture, schools, public spaces, etc. Better still, it can, and indeed should strengthen them. It is just that the tax collected to fund all of these redistributive activities is levied on an economy that is entirely associative, cooperative and mutualist rather than capitalist. A form of secondary solidarity – both large-scale and universal – thus replaces the primary forms of solidarity embedded locally in associations and cooperatives.

Today, it is actors involved in social entrepreneurship who reduce associationalism to quasi-market regulation. They advocate the introduction of laws in the health and social sectors that “replace the historical *bottom-up* process based on civil society initiatives with a *top-down* process that enshrines (...) the planning of supply and the placing of actors in competition with one another” (Itier 2016, 43). To this end,

the sector has a policy of issuing calls for projects, which can be seized on by capitalist companies, for example in the field of temporary work and professional training (see the entry “Social policy and SSE”). This new post-welfare state social model is clearly neo-liberal. As well as restoring power to the state that Proudhon’s subsidiarist and pluralist logic wanted to take away once and for all, it abandons associations to the throes of competition that Proudhonian economic federalism aimed to eradicate. For Proudhon, federations of non-capitalist economic organisations should be allowed to share the production of goods and services democratically, rather than opposing each other.

### **3. Neither charity nor utopian communism**

From an associationalist perspective, democratising the economy and the state in no way implies that the latter should relinquish its social prerogatives (see the entries “Origins and histories of SSE” and “Participation, governance, collective action, democracy and SSE”). In contrast to associationalism, neo-liberal political currents are keen to transfer the social responsibilities of what, in Western Europe, has long been called the “welfare” state to a charitable civil society populated by voluntary associations and/or to the neo-liberal market. This was true, for example, of the British Conservative Party, which sought to promote “*the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to councils, local residents and community groups*” (Conservatives 2010). But they do not think for a moment that these local residents – principally those living in the poorest communities – could play a direct role in controlling *all* the country’s economic resources and political responsibilities on a larger scale (see the entry “Community economics and SSE”). For if such localism were really to take on its associationalist logic, it would have to recognise that empowering local residents must also logically lead to the redistribution of economic power and resources that have been concentrated in the hands of private shareholders.

On the other hand, associationalism does not refer to the inaccessible possibility of a post-revolutionary society (as many variants of Marxism-Leninism did). It is practised here and now, as Proudhon said. Of course, it is marginal. But it is not utopian. In France, Associations pour le Maintien de l’Agriculture Paysanne (AMAP, or Associations for the Maintenance of Small-scale Farming), wind power cooperatives, solidarity finance, Local Exchange Trading Systems, local food networks, and Sociétés Coopératives d’Intérêt Collectif (SCICs, or Collective Interest Cooperative Companies) are multiplying faster than ever. These initiatives are based on the mutualist principles from which Proudhonian theory was constructed, as well as the practices of the first workers’ cooperatives and associations (those of the Canuts, for example). Contemporary associationalism owes its success to the fact that it is not subservient to a “tutelary state” and that it refuses to be subjected to the rules of the market. There is no capitalist principle that can enable us to understand its mode of operation – neither the invisible hand, nor free competition, nor the pursuit of financial interests, nor private property, nor even the idea of growth, be it social or cultural. Instead, the idea of reciprocity and the principles outlined above in the discussion of Proudhon remain relevant.

But beyond the enthusiasm this development may generate, a pressing question has arisen over the last two decades. As many other entries in this encyclopedia show, associations are growing all over the world. At the end of the 19th century, libertarian socialism lost its struggle against statist socialism and trade unionism within the

Workers' International in Europe. State socialism – which was authoritarian and involved economic planning – emerged in the East. In the West, trade unionism was confined to defending workers against capitalist exploitation, as the project of a market society had, it was thought, triumphed once and for all. So can a collaboration between trade unions and contemporary civil society organisations now succeed where this collaboration failed as part of associationalist socialism 150 years ago? Can this associationalist socialism recompose a project for society today? At present, nothing could be less certain. At a time of platform capitalism, the complete virtualisation of financial transactions, and the overexploitation of human and natural resources, the power of neoliberalism seems to be unparalleled (Frère 2019) (see the entry “Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and SSE”). If associationalism – as a project that is as economic as it is political – is to have a future, it will undoubtedly have to reconceptualise itself as a joint struggle to be waged with the unions towards a radically federalised and democratized redistributive social state.

#### **4. Rethinking the state form based on the social state, in opposition to the nation-state**

If contemporary associationalism must rethink the state form from top to bottom in order to revitalise a socialist-libertarian societal project, it must also do so in order to eliminate everything in this project that is deleterious: patriarchy, inhuman migration policies, and low taxes on wealth or capital, for example. But all these things can be fought against while trying to safeguard the progressive institutions that the state has been forced to develop following a century of worker and popular struggles in Western Europe, for example in health, education and social protection. For these are institutions that we care about today (Hache 2013). The anthropologist James Scott, much of whose work consists of a radical critique of the nation-state, declares his inclination towards anarchism while also conceding that human rights have become unsurpassable and that it is no longer possible for many states to discard them. “I do not believe”, he writes, “that the state is everywhere and always the enemy of freedom. Americans need only recall the scene of the federalised National Guard leading black children to school through a menacing crowd of angry whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to realise that the state can, in some circumstances, play an emancipatory role” (2012, xiv). Everything depends on the form it is given in a democracy. When we understand it simply as one public policy tool among others, it can be horizontalized.

Meanwhile, the linguist Noam Chomsky, still in a libertarian socialist vein, develops this idea further: what is called the “state” today, in Western societies, is no longer *only* a superstructure in the service of the bourgeoisie’s interests. In contrast to its pre-democratic forms, its function today is also to protect a set of rights and the political culture of a population accustomed to freedom. We can no longer one-sidedly reject everything that comes together in the form of the state if we understand this as that collective public organisation that goes beyond the scale of the locality. Evidently, Chomsky confesses, the socialist-libertarian vision he espouses ultimately consists in dismantling the power of the state and all its discriminatory tools: armies, prisons, bureaucracy, patriarchy, and so on. But in the world we live in at the beginning of the 21st century, destroying the state in one fell swoop would be dangerous. In the face of advancing neoliberal policies, it may be appropriate “to defend and even strengthen certain elements of state authority that are now under severe attack”, he adds, when asked about the social services and welfare state programmes that are being laid into by the political right worldwide (Chomsky 2013, 39). It is a safe bet that in the hands of

the far-right, which is making steady progress in North America (Trump), South America (Bolsonaro in Brazil) and Europe (Italy, Poland, Hungary and Austria have already been severely affected), the state apparatus will continue its backward march. It will put an end to social security (which is already inadequate) once and for all, abolish taxes on capital (which is already too low), threaten paid leave, challenge-free health care and freedom of the press, abandon the financing of public services and public education. It will put a stop to all the collaborations that have developed in recent years between local authorities and associations on a number of emancipatory social, environmental and cultural projects. And the list of dangers could be continued ad infinitum. As Chomsky again points out, “given the accelerating effort that’s being made these days to roll back the victories for justice and human rights which have been won through long and often extremely bitter struggles in the West, in my opinion, the immediate goal of even committed anarchists should be to defend some state institutions, while helping to pry them open to more meaningful public participation, and ultimately to dismantle them in a much more free society.” (*Ibid.*, 40)

### **Conclusion: Reconstitute**

To sum up, as the 21st century seems to be moving increasingly down an associative path, it is vital to remember that this is neither a third sector (it aims to replace the market capitalism sector, nor to constitute a third one) nor social entrepreneurship (which aims to make “moral capitalism” and social purpose compatible), nor a charitable economy (which aims to relieve the excluded in order to keep social violence and potential revolution on the horizon), nor a substitute economy that aims to discharge the state of its social responsibilities. In this respect, associationalism can help redefine the functions of the social state.

Proudhon, the first theorist of associationalism, already thought that associations could potentially establish fruitful relations with local state organisations if the latter agreed to allow them complete freedom of action. Recent research on his “people’s bank” has shown that it was not his work alone, but that it was developed together with the elected representatives of the “Luxembourg Commission” created by Louis Blanc (Chaïbi 2010, 17-18). These elected officials not only gave the necessary authorisation for the Bank; they also played a key role in its management and development, while Proudhon was busy with his political and journalistic activities. In short, they helped to establish the Bank through their political support.

Thus, from an associationalist perspective, it is not only a question of asking which institutions we want to eliminate since many institutions exist independently of those of the nation-state, which the associationalist tradition has always rightly criticised. We must also correctly distinguish between those institutions we want to create and those we want to keep. The danger would be to believe that, in a society that is as ideal as it can be, “we cannot institute at all” (Latour 2018, 99). We can certainly do without the state in its nation-state form, the form that institutions have taken in modernity. We probably cannot do without institutions, namely the “state” form understood in its broader sense as the organisation of the collective, together with the intersubjective norms and rules of coordination that this collective gives itself. What we can do, however, is to make these institutions participatory, horizontal, democratic – in short, associationalist. “There are institutions in all (or almost all) societies; there will be institutions in an emancipated society. But we can conceive of institutions differently: not as authorities claiming a kind of absolutism, but as fragile constructions that accept

that they will be constantly confronted with critique (...). We must not throw out the institutions that, in certain respects, are indispensable to social life, with the bathwater of the nation-state, a quite recent historical form that has nothing universal about it. Our task is thus to construct a framework that allows us to critique institutions – as does, for example, the notion of symbolic violence forged by Bourdieu – and, at the same time, to defend them against the temptation of autonomous anarchism, which does not account for all of libertarian thought” (Boltanski and Jeanpierre 2011, 480).

Once it has freed itself from capitalism, the associative society will nonetheless still need large-scale economic institutions. It is a fiction to believe that in the future of a society without economic exploitation we will all agree on the rules for collective life and the directions to be taken. Conflicts and differences of opinion will persist, which makes democracy unavoidable, even in the society, we aspire to. Whatever form society takes, it will not be pacified unless we assume that humans can become clones of each other able to agree on everything, which would be reminiscent of the worst totalitarian fantasies. If there is one task that associationalist thought can give itself, it is to assume the inevitable agonistic contingency of human political relations (Mouffe 2016). It is crucial that we think about how to organise disagreement over the common good, even in its economic dimension, as democratically as possible.

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