Proudhon, Pierre Joseph (1809–65), French social theorist. Of a poor family, Proudhon won an education through scholarships. Much of his later life was spent in poverty. He achieved prominence through his pamphlet *What Is Property?* (1840, tr. 1876), in which he condemned the abuses of private property and embraced anarchism. He also edited radical journals. After the Revolution of 1848, he was elected a member of the constituent assembly; at that time he tried unsuccessfully to establish a national bank for reorganization of credit in the interest of the workers. As a replacement for the existing social and political order, Proudhon developed a theory of “mutualism,” by which small, loosely federated groups would bargain with each other over economic and political matters within the framework of a consensus on fundamental principles. He hoped that man's ethical progress would eventually make government unnecessary and rejected the use of force to impose any system. Proudhon left a great mass of literature, which influenced the French syndicalist movement. Among his most important books are *System of Economic Contradictions; or The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846; tr. of Vol. I, 1888) and *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* [of justice in the revolution and in the church] (3 vol., 1858).

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