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Dilemma: Red or White

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

March 16, 1850

A captain of the line assures me—the papers friendly to the government will say tomorrow if the information is exact—that on the occasion of the next elections, the order has been given to prevent, by all possible means, the gentlemen of the military from attending the electoral gatherings. Any disobedience in this regard will be punished by eight days in jail.

The government is right. It is consistent with itself. It follows, imperturbably, like Mr. Cabet, its straight line. For sixty years, the French people, leading the rest of the world behind it, has descended the path of the Revolution; Mr. Louis Bonaparte has sworn to make us turn back up the path of the Revolution. That is why Mr. Louis Bonaparte has been made President of the Republic:—ask the legitimists; ask the doctrinaires or the Jesuits.

Now, whoever desires the ends desires the means; to make the army vote as a municipal guard and forbid it from political discussions: such is, with regard to the army, the means that the government proposes to use. And I repeat that the government, from its own point of view, has it right. Follow this reasoning, I beg you: it is as demonstrative as the history.

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The Revolution of 89, by abolishing the old despotism and feudalism, led us to the Constitutional Monarchy.

The Constitutional Monarchy, after thirty years of parliamentary evolutions, led to the Republic.

The Republic established universal suffrage.

Universal suffrage make the soldiers eligible voters, make them, in fact, with the other citizens, arbiters of peace and war, judges of the politics of the government, inspector of the acts and opinions of their leaders—all things incompatible with the spirit of hierarchy and the feudal discipline of the army.

So there is an incompatibility between the current regime of the army, which costs us 400 million per year, and the exercise of political rights. And to conclude, either no republic or no army: that is the dilemma.

But what is true today of the army is true of all the rest. It is everywhere the same antagonism, the same incompatibilities. The government has seen it very well; by its propositions, its nominations, its communications, each day it reproduces the same alternative; and if we do not understand it, it is because we do not wish to hear it.

Red or White, it says to us,

Republican or Cossack,

Socialist or Jesuit,

Voltaire or de Maistre,

The Revolution or the Holy Alliance,

Labor or Capital,

Association or Statute Labor,

Free Credit or Usury,

The Bank of the People or Malthus,

The citizen army or the praetorian army.

There is no middle ground: it is necessary to choose. The question is precisely the same for the bourgeois, the peasant, the soldier, the philosopher and the statesman, for France and for Europe. Every other party is committed to the happy medium, to hypocrisy.

Now, the experiment of the happy medium has been made, and the world does not want it. So it is a question of knowing if the people will be red or white, if the army will be for Christ or for Belial. We are happy to agree with the government, if not with regard to the goal, at least regarding the logic; and we support its dilemma with all our strength.

The government is white; we are red. It no longer wants the tricolor; neither do we. That is clear.

The Revolution of February was made by the red flag, which became from then on the symbol of the right to work and the beacon of Humanity. The tricolored flag has only ever been, despite all its glory, the flag of the happy medium, the flag of the doctrinaires. In 1804, not daring to restore the monarchy, it created an emperor. Forced in 1815 to hide itself, it returned in 1830 to give us Louis-Philippe; after February, Mr. de Lamartine took it for the lightning-rod of socialism; and it is thanks to this that we had had, in a democratic Republic, along with the exclusion of the right to work, the presidency of a Bonaparte. Since then, the tricolored flag has no longer been anything but the flag of reaction and calumny. Moreover, it showed this very well in June when it bathed with so much delight in the blood of the workers. And we wrote from the mouth of March 1848, as if we could have foreseen those odious days.

“Red is the color of justice and sovereignty. And since all men love and seek the red, is not red the symbol of human fraternity?... Deny the red flag, dye the purple, but that is to eliminate the social question, the right to work. Every time that the people, defeated by suffering, has wanted to express, outside of that juridical legality that murders it, its wishes and complaints, it has marched under a red banner. The red flag, it is true, has still not made the tour of the world, like its fortunate rival, the tricolor. Justice has spoken very well; Mr. de Lamartine has not gone farther than the camp of Mars. It is so terrible, Justice, that one could not hide it too much. Poor red flag! Everyone abandons you! Well! I embrace you. I clutch you

to my breast. Cheers to fraternity! The red flag is the sign of a revolution that will be the last. The red flag! It is the shroud of Christ, the federal standard of the human race.”

Honest souls, who only see in the red flag the sign of vengeance, and for whom a bunch of peasants will suffice to make you afraid: do you want to abolish the scaffold once and for all? Plant a red flag atop it.

The red flag is the sign of the democratic reality, just as the white flag is the sign of the sign of feudal suzerainty. The tricolor is that of the politics of the seesaw and the presidency. Napoleon and Louise-Philippe, illegitimate monarchs, would adopt it. The reactionaries no longer want to, and you know why. No truck, they say, with the republican principle. And we respond, we socialists, no truck with the feudal principle!

As at all the times that the throne and altar have been united against liberty, the white flag is the banner of Catholicism in France as well as the monarchy: the red flag, on the contrary, is the symbol of the democratic and social philosophy. The Jansenists and Gallicans, false royalists and false Christians, ground around the tricolored flag.

That is why, from one side, the whites demand that the Church be richly endowed, and work with all their strength to render it its goods and its tithes; from the other, the reds want the clergy, like the laborers, subject to the law of free commerce and, as a consequence, only those who have need of the priest's services will pay him. The tricolors, who neither want to render the goods of the clergy nor abolish the parasitism of the Church, resist both; they have invented the budget of the cults and the salary of the priests, in order to declaim at once against the Socialist and against the Pope.

We do not want the Church to be salaried, say the whites. We do not want it to be endowed, respond the reds. And all shout at the same time: Down with the tricolors!

In the past, the magistracy was like property, hereditary and venal. Justice was given at a price in cash: that was the white justice. The judge lived on his *spices*, as the bailiff lives on his exploits. Under the general designation of *Parliaments*, the people of the courts and tribunals formed one caste. What we call the ministerial offices are a remnant of that old institution.

After 89, the venality of the offices should have been entirely abolished, and justice elective and free. This was the generalization of the just, the red justice. Instead of that, we have the salaried, tenured magistracy, a judicial order marching in connivance with the executive power. Part of the officers have, in addition, preserved their venal privileges. That is the system of the Héberts, the Dupins, the Lehons; the tricolored justice.

It is with the army as with justice, as with the Church, and with the government.

In the past, the grades higher than noncommissioned officer were reserved for the nobles, inaccessible to the commoners. Discipline by baton blows...