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In Connection with Louis Blanc

The Present Use and Future Possibility of the State

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

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From *La Voix du Peuple*. Translated by Paul Sharkey.

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There is something odd about the fate of the writer of these lines. No matter how little he may be tempted to take pride in an all but unprecedented situation, he would be compelled to believe that, just at the moment, everybody, excepting only himself, has taken leave of their senses; or that he himself, through some inexplicable freak, has gone mad, albeit a madness of the most erudite, considered, thought out, conscientious, philosophical sort and (in terms of its principle, its purpose, its deductions) the sort that conforms most closely to pure science and common sense.

But God forbid that we should mentally entertain this presumptuous alternative: and would do better to investigate whether the contradiction currently existing between public belief and the views we hold might not be the effect of some sort of misunderstanding. Every idea delivered into this world for the very first time, even though it may be derived from the universal consciousness, is a deduction from previous tradition and, at the moment it first appears, is nonetheless regarded, by the one who

articulates it, as his own personal creation and for that reason he assumes sole responsibility for it. At which point the notion appears to sit outside of the general belief and is dubbed a *paradox*. But in next to no time that paradox is acknowledged; little by little common sense overtakes it. The idea is absorbed into the public mind which then grants it credibility and leave to circulate. There is not one of us who has not witnessed such a shift in public consciousness at least once in our lives. So might we not, today, be witnessing just such a shift?

What have we been saying since February? What has *La Voix du Peuple*, founded to carry on the work of its older siblings, *Le Peuple* and *Le Représentant du Peuple*, been saying for the last three months?¹

That the Revolution in the nineteenth century has a dual purpose:

1. In economic terms, it seeks the utter subordination of capital to labour, the assimilation of worker and capitalist, through democratisation of credit, the abolition of interest, and the reduction of all dealings relating to the instruments of labour and products to equal and honest exchange. In this sense, we were the first to point out and remark that henceforth there are but two parties in France: the party of labour and the party of capital.

2. In political terms, the object of the Revolution is to absorb the State into society, which is to say, to put paid to all authority and do away with the entire machinery of government through the abolition of taxes, simplification of administration, and the separate centralisation of each and every class of function, or, to put this another way, the organisation of universal suffrage. In which regard we say that now there are but two parties in France: the party of freedom and the party of government.

¹ All three of these papers were suppressed by the state, as was its next incarnation *Le Peuple de 1850* (Editor)

Revolution: it will never allow itself to be overtaken, nor dragged along. It will never be carried along in the wake of the proletariat.

Now, now, citizens. If you cannot see eye to eye with one another, then at least try to see eye to eye with common sense. How can you fail to see that every *tendency* points to a law? That tendency is law itself, not in the form of a latency, but in the form of action? Aristotle used to teach that the first cause of motion is the intelligible heavens, by which he meant pure Idea, Reason, Law. Thus what we describe in bodies as *attraction*, or in man as *love* or *passion*, is in society, *tendency* or *progress*; in organised creatures, *life*; in the universe, *destiny*. All of which is nothing more than a manifestation of the Idea, the Law, the Intelligible Heavens, commanding the creature, nurturing it, shaping it and magnetically commanding obedience...

But let us put psychology, ontology and metaphysics to one side. Let us turn to facts and evidence. For as long as the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, in their mutual suspicion, hold each other in check, the Revolution, instead of growing peaceably, will do so in fits and starts; and at every step society will be in danger of a general dislocation. Let us show them both, therefore, that their principle is one and the same, their tendency one and the same and their pride one and the same: that whatever the one might do in the pursuit of its own interests would amount to a realisation of the wishes of the other, just as the victory of the one over the other would spell the suicide of them both.

Odd, is it not, that, in order to break through universal ostracism, we should now need to effect a universal reconciliation?

There, summed up in two articles, you have our declaration of social and political faith.

Yes, the future requires that the worker aspect and the capitalist or proprietor aspect of every producer be made equal and clear. Just as in a bygone age the serf was bound to the land, so today, by an inversion of relationships, capital should be bound to the worker. There you have the most positive pledge and most authentic tendency of the Revolution. Socialism and democracy are of like mind with us on this count.

Yes, freedom and authority must be equal in every citizen: otherwise, there would be no equality and equality would be compromised; and the sovereignty of the people, vested in a small number of representatives, would be a fiction. Here again we have the pledge as well as the irrepressible and irresistible tendency of the Revolution, even though opinion has yet to wake up entirely to the way in which this parity between freedom and authority is to be established. In this respect, let the bourgeoisie look to tradition: let it cast its mind back to its own long exertions against despotism, its deep-seated hatred of government; let those who were the first on February 22nd to bellow *Long live Reform!* and who, even before Ledru-Rollin himself, laid the first foundation stone of universal suffrage, let them answer for us: let them say whether we have truth on our side!

Now, this double pledge, this trend, detected and acknowledged, is what we are still affirming! What is the loftier and definitive conclusion we afford the Revolution?

That between labour and liberty, like capital and government, there is a kinship and identification: so that instead of four parties such as we had in the land but recently, placing us in turn in the economic point of view and in the political point of view, there are really only two: the party of labour or liberty and the party of capital or government. And these two propositions — *abolition of man's exploitation of his fellow-man* and *abolition of the man's government of his fellow-man* — amount to one and the same proposition; that

finally the revolutionary IDEA, despite the dualism in its formula, is one and indivisible, as is the Republic itself: universal suffrage implying negation of capital's preponderance and equality of wealth, just as equality of wealth and the abolition of interest are implicit in negation of government.

We need not spell out the identity of these ideas for any logical mind to acknowledge and embrace it; it represents the point of transition between the capitalist, governmental age which is nearing its end and the era of freedom and equality which is just beginning. And, so to speak, history's apogee and the humanitarian equator.

Our entire opposition, our polemic, our revolutionary science flows from this fact: just as, further along, all philosophical advancement, every manifestation of religion — should society still need to manifest itself in this manner — will flow from it. With all of our might we are striving for, on the one hand, the abolition of interest and for lending to be free and, on the other, the obliteration of government. *La Voix du Peuple* has no other reason for its existence.

Now, this is what has befallen us.

As a result of one of those contradictions so frequent during times of great intellectual endeavour, it turns out that at present the labouring class, that which resists capital, and for whose benefit the Revolution is primarily made, is unwittingly sliding, due to a communism in its thinking and thanks above all to the ineptitude of its leaders, into the preservation of authority: the old monarchist instinct is still around, in the form of Dictatorship, Convention or whatever, to delude the people; whereas the middle class, or bourgeoisie, eternally hostile to authority, having baptised itself the liberal party, is tilting, as a consequence of its economic routine and the servility of its interests, towards perpetuation of capitalist and proprietary exploitation.

So that we who, in the name of the Revolution and of the principle invoked by every single one of the parties who stand for it, are also and simultaneously striving for the abolition of capital and of

the contradictions, inconsistencies and exaggerations of which the entire people accuses you.

Thus one socialist says, it is correct, and we were delighted to welcome this truth, that capital and products should circulate free of charge and that use of the instruments of labour should be guaranteed for all at no cost other than what covers the costs of depreciation. This, indeed, is one of the laws of society: and you yourself have demonstrated it mathematically. But, by the same token, it is not true that society can and should dispense with government. In the absence of government, in the absence of the State, who would then extend loans to the worker, organise commerce and ensure that everyone gets education and work?

But, responds an economist from the liberal school, that is the very opposite of what is true. The abolition of governments is what societies dream about; and the elicitation of order by means of the boundless spread of freedom is their law. As for reducing interest, the phenomenon of social economics should be seen as a mere tendency rather than as a principle of amelioration. Rent on capital dwindles as capital proliferates; this is a fact. But it is nonsensical to claim that interest ever falls to zero; in that case who would be willing to make loans? Who would save? Who would work? Discard your political and egalitarian mirages, therefore, socialist, and follow freedom's banner: the banner of 1789 and 1830!

THE SOCIALIST: You do not want a social Revolution! You support usury! You actually advocate man's exploitation of his fellow man! There is enough intelligence, initiative and patriotism within the people for it to be able to complete the Revolution on its own. It will be able to do without a suspect alliance: it will never tag along behind the bourgeoisie.

THE ECONOMIST: Liberty is indebted to the bourgeois for all its gains; it is to it that the labouring class is beholden for the welfare and the rights that it enjoys, Thus far, it is this valiant and disciplined bourgeoisie that has, all unaided, shouldered the burden of

ment, the ventures of the authorities, the prerogatives of the State?
— Again, yes.

Those two points made, what say we?

That what, in politics, goes under the name of *Authority* is analogous to and synonymous with what is termed, in political economy, *Property*; that these two notions overlap one with the other and are identical.

That an attack upon one is an attack upon the other.

That the one is incomprehensible without the other, and *vice versa*.

That if you do away with the former, you still have to do away with the latter, and *vice versa*.

That where capital is stripped of all interest, government is rendered useless and impossible; and, on the other hand, capital, in the absence of a government to support it, cloak it with its prerogatives and guarantee it the exercise of its privileges must, of necessity, remain unproductive and all usury unfeasible.

Finally, that Socialism and Liberalism are the two halves of the wholesale opposition that Liberty has, ever since the world began, mounted against the principle of AUTHORITY as articulated through property and through the State.

Are we wrong now, are we being frivolous, disloyal to our cause and treacherous to our principles when we champion this grand, magnificent conclusion? Is it our fault if the proletariat and the middle class, divided right now by the selfishness of their respective tendencies, are, in essence, of one mind on principles as well as on aims and on means?

And just because self-styled revolutionaries, capitalising upon hatred, service this factious antagonism for the benefit of their own despicable ambitions are we supposed to stay silent about our ideas, the same ideas as February? Should we cravenly shy away from the risk of calumny and unpopularity?

But, they tell us, you are forever mistaking civilisation's *trends* for its *laws* and this is where you go astray: that is the origins of

the State, at a time when we should be rallying every opinion, find ourselves at odds with each of them and upbraided and opposed by all of the very people whose cause we serve! Politics! If you want to get surely to power then refrain from being in the right against everybody.

And so the Revolution that the middle class and the proletariat, by virtue of their shared ideas and needs, seemed to be competing to accomplish, has been stopped in its tracks by the short-sighted, illogical parting of the ways between their views and their interests. Since 26th February, when it looked as if everyone was agreed upon giving it a formidable forward thrust, the Revolution has been faced with the entire nation split into two antagonistic camps — those who, with Messieurs Dunoyer, Frédéric Bastiat, etc., following in the footsteps of J.-B. Say, were ready to surrender the State, were championing capital; and the rest, who, together with the provisional government, Louis Blanc, Pierre Leroux and the entire democratic and utopian tradition, were bent on turning the State into the creator of freedom and order.

For, and we can say this without fear of misquotation and calumny, it was in all seriousness that Pierre Leroux who rejects man's governance of his fellow man, or so he assures us, nevertheless craves, in the name of the Triad and the consent of *each one*, to establish over *all* the sovereignty of *THE FEW*. The draft for a Triadic Constitution published by Pierre Leroux, which we will some day make time to examine, reeks of its author's governmental tendencies. And it was also with the utmost seriousness that Louis Blanc, for all his celebrated dictum about going "from the *master-State* to the *servant-State*", wants an authority formed, as all authorities are, through delegation by the citizenry; a State that is the organ and representative of society: in short, a government that may be to the people as the head is to the body, which is to say, master and sovereign.

This is the contradiction which we are striving with all the vigour of our consciousness and all the might of our reason to

banish. Whilst the political thinking by which the middle class is prompted and the economic rationale pursued by the people should, through mutual complementation, resolve into one and the same notion that would thus encapsulate the Revolution's past and its future and reconcile those two classes, these two ideas are at war with each other and by virtue of their clash, stopping movement and jeopardising public safety.

And this also lies at the root of the recriminations that our polemic has sparked every time that, contrary to one of the half-baked ideas competing for influence, it falls to us to expand upon one of the great principles of February. On our right we find the old liberalism, inimical to the authorities, but protective of interest and exclusive property; on our left, the governmentalist democrats, inimical, like us, to man's exploitation of his fellow man, but full to the brim with faith in dictatorship and the omnipotence of the State; and in the centre ground stands absolutism, its banners emblazoned with the two faces of the counter-revolution; and, bringing up the rear, the moderates whose phoney wisdom is always ready to compromise with all shades of opinion.

Each party ascribing its own contradictions to us, we are simultaneously accused by the democratic socialists of treason; by the liberal economists, of frivolity; by the moderates, of exaggeration. The first take us to task for preaching individualism after having opposed property. They tell us: you see only one term in the republican equation of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*; this AN-ARCHY of yours is Monsieur Dupin's *every man for himself, each to his own*; what you attack under the name of government is the core idea of the age, association.

The economists, in turn, ask us how it is that, rejecting State initiative, we could nonetheless look to the initiative of the people; they contend that putting society in the place of government through the organisation of the free interplay of wills and interests, still amounts to going around in the same circles and to opposing freedom.

The moderates acknowledge the correctness of our reasoning: they give their blessing to our principles; but they refuse to follow us all the way to our conclusions. Following a principle through to its every consequence is, they say, tantamount to sacrificing truth on the altar of logic and venturing beyond the target one wishes to reach and going astray through exaggeration.

As for the absolutists, they are, of all our adversaries, the ones who best understand us. They level no charges against us and do not slander us; they take the line that we are playing into their hands by making our *reductio ad absurdum* of all of the notions shared by public opinion, democracy, constitutional monarchy, economism, socialism and philosophism; and, bedazzled by their illusions, they gravely wait for us to be converted and repent our errors. However, the situation must become clear and this already too long-lived error must come to its end.

Who, then, is contradicting himself, us, or the governmental socialists whose noxious tendencies we have been denouncing these past twenty months and whose every defeat we have foretold? Us, or the liberal economists whose errors we have been refuting these past ten years? Us, or the pig-headed doctrinaires whom we are forever telling that their alleged moderation is nothing but impotence and arbitrariness? Who is it that needs to win his adversary over — we who have kept to the broad thoroughfares of progress all the way, or the supporters of absolutism, as rigid as milestones, at the furthest extremity of the horizon?

All doubts will be dispelled and the public spared many a discussion if, just the same way as we agree in acknowledging, on the one hand, the bourgeoisie's liberal inclinations and, on the other, the proletariat's egalitarian tendencies, we might yet agree that they are one and the same.

Is it true that socialism, an expression of the proletariat, is at war for all eternity against capital, indeed, against property? — Yes.

Is it a fact that liberalism, an expression of the middle class, has, since time immemorial, been resisting the factiousness of govern-