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Letter to Langlois

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

December 1851

To Mr. [Amédée Jérôme] LANGLOIS

My dear Langlois, all your criticisms are fair, and I would have to write ten volumes to clarify the points that appear obscure to me in your brochure, but they would still be so.

Society, it is infinite, and it is certain that there are *millions* of cases to resolve of which those who pose as reformers will never think. All that one can do, in the time of revolution, is to strongly deny the past, and, up to a certain point, the present, then to note the aim—an Ideal!—and to plant, in the direction of that *ideal*, some markers. The strongest of men will never do more than that, and barely that. Did Jesus Christ make Christianity? Though we worship him as its author, he did not know the hundredth part of it! Did Romulus or Numa make Rome? Was it Charlemagne who made feudalism? Was it Turgot, who only know what the men of 89 knew, who invented the constitutional system?...

A man never knows, can never express but a very small portion of the Truth. Truth, whether social or human, is a product of time...

Thus, in my last book, I made a critique; deduce from that critique the indication of an aim; I have posted some markers.

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Do not expect me to give you a system. My system is Progress, the necessity of working ceaselessly to discover the unknown, bit by bit, as the past is exhausted... next year, that aspect, the most important of our work, will be brought to light in a manner to quickly seize minds; then one will understand that free credit and other formulas are for us only the first step out of the past; but that the future, in its fullness, evades us, and that it is hardly possible to imagine it except through a symbol, more or less mythical, that I call Anarchy, as others call it *Fraternity*. Then, also, one will see why and how sects and systems are nothing; why the true revolutionary only labors from day to day; why the destiny of man is a void, a gap placed before us. It is children that are amused by systematic perspectives. It is still the People, incapable of understanding that it must always go on, like the Wandering Jew, who love to rest with Cabot, Fourier, etc., under the shades of Community and Association. The People, like the reaction, would like to be done with it; now, I repeat, there is no end; and if history teaches us anything of the curve that we describe, we remain almost entirely ignorant of the future. Our forecast does not go beyond the antithesis that the present suggests to us.

That largely developed theory of Progress, a theory that posits the exclusion to all absolute notions, all the so-called definitive hypotheses, is that which, in my opinion, must furnish the solid, but always mobile basis of the future. It is that which shelters society from conservative idleness and from false revolutionary enterprises.

What does it matter, after that, that we are harassed every day by some new difficulty of details and application? Some difficulties? Can that one be regarded as a flat refusal when one exists in an *impossible* present? Would they hope to prevail against us, who cross their arms heroically and sleep soundly, awaiting the occasion of rushing forward to the rudder, without having the least knowledge of the Pole?...

You see, my dear friend, that far from concealing the objections that could be made, I am instead inclined to exacerbate them myself, but to refer them to those who propose them; for I don't know anyone who is not held to resolve them, unless they have decided, with the Jesuits and the big *rentiers*, that all is well.

I have written, in my latest work, five or six propositions that I regard as essential, and that is for the moment all that I wanted:

1. The government, at its highest point de perfection, is organized for the subjection and dispossession of the greatest number;
2. To the system of political powers, we have to substitute a system of economic forces;
3. Association, in the precise and legal sense of the word, is not an economic force; it is of the government;— nevertheless, there are cases where that modification of individual liberty appeared indispensable;
4. That system, or rather than equilibrium of economic forces, cannot be created by means of authority; it must result from the tacit or expressed consent of the citizens, namely from *free contract*...

What I then add on the *liquidation*, the *organization of the economic forces*, the *dissolution of the political powers* are only general views, too condensed, I know, for the understanding of the details, still too rigorous *in its formulas* for the multiplicity of cases. I know all these things. But is it fair for me to object to them? In physics, are the most general laws anything but simple abstractions that, in individual cases, receive thousands of different modifications? Just so, the truest, most general laws of society are also only some abstract notions, which practice

modifies infinitely. But we must have these notions, or else we can do nothing: we must post them, or perish on the road.

I believe, my dear friend, that these reflections, instead of leaving you idle and indifferent, under the pretext that I do not respond to everything, that [elements] remain unintelligible in my work, will urge you to seek yourself..., since, at this moment, I am nearly the only man who works seriously on these questions. What, in truth, do our fellows do? Each of them, convinced that they possess the key to the future, the formula of the absolute, remains tranquil and waits for the world to come and ask for its salvation. As for the need of *investigators* of the truth, we only find revelators. And I tell you that if we let ourselves go on in this way, we are lost.

P.-J. PROUDHON.