

The Coming Era of Mutualism

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

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If I am not deceived, my readers must be convinced at least of one thing, that Social Truth is not to be looked for either in Utopia or in the Old Routine; that Political Economy is not the Science of Society, and yet that it contains the elements of such a science, even as chaos before creation contained the elements of the universe; and finally, that in order to arrive at the definitive organization which would appear to be the destiny of our race upon this globe, it is only necessary to make a general equation of all our contradictions.

But what shall be the formula of this equation?

Already we have been enabled to perceive, that it must be a Law of Exchange, a theory of Mutualism, a system of Guarantees, which dissolves the old forms of society civil and commercial, and satisfies all the conditions of efficiency, progress and justice, which criticism has pointed out; a Society no longer merely conventional, but real, which substitutes for the present piecemeal divisions of property a scientific distribution; which abolishes the servitude [of] machinery, and prevents the crises engendered by new inventions; which converts competition into a benefit and makes of monopoly a pledge of universal security; which by the power of its principle, instead of demanding credit for capital and protection for the state, subjects both capital and the state to the uses of labor; which by the truthful honesty of the exchanges produces a real solidarity among nations; which without interdicting individual enterprise and without prohibiting domestic expenditure, incessantly restores to society the wealth that private appropriation diverts from it; which by the rapid turning over, the outflux and influx of capital, insures the political and industrial equality of citizens, and by a grand system of public education produces,—while constantly elevating the general level,—an equality of functions and an I equivalence of skill; which regenerating human conscience by justice, well being and virtue, ensures harmony and the equilibrium of generations; a society, in a word, which being at once organized and transitional, avoids what is merely provisional, guarantees all, yet leaves the way open for improvement.

This theory of Mutualism, that is to say of exchange in kind, of which the simplest form is the loan of articles of consumption is, when the collective being of society is regarded, a synthesis of the two ideas of appropriation and of communism; a synthesis as ancient as the elements of which it is composed, inasmuch as it is only a return of society to its primitive practices, across a labyrinth of inventions and systems, the result of six thousand years of meditation upon this fundamental proposition, A equals A.

All is prepared to day for this solemn restoration; every thing announces that the reign of delusions is ended, and that society is about to return to its natural sincerity. Monopoly has swelled to a world-wide size; and monopoly embracing the world can not remain exclusive; it must either popularize itself or explode and disappear. Hypocrisy, venality, prostitution, robbery, form the very foundations of the public conscience, and unless humanity learns to live upon that which is its bane, we must believe that the era of justice and expiation draws nigh.

Already Socialism, feeling the unsatisfactoriness of Utopian dreams, applies itself to realities and facts; laughs at its own follies in Paris; plunges into discussions in Berlin, Cologne, Leipsic, Breslau; rages in England; thunders from across the Atlantic; stands ready for martyrdom in Poland; makes governmental experiments at Berne and Lausanne. Socialism, penetrating the masses, has become transformed; the people care little for the honor of particular schools; they demand work, knowledge, well-being, equality. Little reck they of systems, if only the end they seek is gained. When the people have set their will upon a certain good, and the only question is how to obtain it, we have not long to wait before it comes; prepare to see the grand masquerade break up and vanish.

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