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The Social Revolution Demonstrated by the Coup d'Etat of December 2, 1851

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

1852

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Introduction and working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur.

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One of the things that ought to be clear from recent developments here is that sometimes the most interesting, and also the most unexpected, insights into Proudhon's work come from double-checking those things that "everyone knows" about his work. It was, after all, in the context of tracking down how close he came to saying "anarchy is order" that I ran across the dubious translations in *The General Idea of the Revolution*, and that has led to a general scouring of his work for discussions of "anarchy" and "anarchism," which keeps raising interesting points about the early uses of that term.

When I started working through what I was finding, I was reminded that some of Proudhon's discussion of *anarchy* occurred in a work which has, in fact, been partially translated, but which is very seldom consulted, probably because of its unsavory reputation. Proudhon's 1852 work, *The Social Revolution Demonstrated by the Coup d'Etat of December 2, 1851* was partially published in

a 1972 book, *December 2, 1851*, edited by John Halstead, collecting contemporary writings on the *coup*. The collection is a bit scarce now, and often not cheap if you can find a copy, but given the very small number of Proudhon translations available, its obscurity is fairly remarkable. It does not appear to be, as it might be under other circumstances, one of the “grails” of the literature. Much of the reason for that is undoubtedly that the work has been treated as one of the great missteps of Proudhon’s career, with the common claim being that it was written in support of Louis Napoleon’s coup and regime. That’s probably a fairly poor reading.

I think the simplest way to approach the work is to think about what Proudhon had already said about the nature of “the Revolution” and the workings of historical change, and to compare the common understanding of this work, which was addressed *in some sense* to the Emperor, with the widespread enthusiasm for *The General Idea of the Revolution*, which called upon the *bourgeoisie* to continue their own revolution. I’m sure for some, these questions of address are sufficient to banish both works, but nobody will be surprised if I’m not convinced. And those who find inspiration in the work that gave us the famous and beloved “to be governed” rant might perhaps find reasons to take a look at the more audacious later work.

The Social Revolution develops as I think a careful reader of Proudhon might expect. He had been predicting something very much like the coup for some time, and had ended up in prison precisely because he had missed very few chances to oppose Louis Napoleon. For him to argue then that the events of December 1851 had as much to do with broader historical movements than they did with the newly minted Emperor might be easily taken as a new affront, rather than any sort of support. In *The General Idea of the Revolution* he had spoken of the indifference of the people to governmental forms, so long as their interests were served, and he had called that indifference revolutionary, even while he was attempting to infuse “the Revolution in the 19th century” with an idea (*justice*, ul-

timately) which would both serve the interests of the people and avoid the pitfalls of false solutions like the coup. The more familiar you are with Proudhon's conception of progress the fewer surprises there are in the work, I think, but I suspect that for many readers the conclusion, "Anarchy or Caesarism," would come as a pleasant surprise, as he addressed in it, quite directly, whether or not he was, as is sometimes claimed, "rallying" to the new regime. I'm posting here the conclusion of that concluding chapter, which shows off some of Proudhon's infamous "patriotism" (in, I think, a not terribly unpleasant light) but also clarifies not just his posture towards Louis Napoleon, but to government and rulers in general.

Do you believe, I am asked at this moment, by an indiscreet, perhaps malicious curiosity, that the December 2 accepts the revolutionary role in which you confine it, as in the circle of Popilius? Would you have faith in its liberal inclinations? And based on this inevitability, so well demonstrated by you, of the mandate of Louis-Napoléon, would you rally to his government, as to the best or least worst of transitions? That is what we want to know, and where we await you!...

— I will respond to that question, which is a bit suggestive, with another:

Do I have a right to suppose, when the ideas that I have defended for four years have obtained so little success, that the head of the new government will adopt them straightaway and make them his own! Have the taken on, in the eyes of opinion, that character of impersonality, reality, and universality, which would impose them on the State? And if these ideas, all still young, are still hardly anything but the ideas of one man, from whence would come the hope that the December 2, who is also a man, will prefer them to his own ideas!...

I write so that others will reflect in their turn and, if there is cause, so they will contradict me. I write so that truth being manifested, and elaborated by opinion, the revolution, with the government, with the government, or even against government, can be accomplished. As for men, I readily believe their good intentions, but even more in the misfortune of their judgment. It is said in the book of Psalms: *Put not your trust in prince, or in the children of Adam*, that is to say in those who thought is subjective, *because salvation is not in them!* So I believe, and unfortunately for us all, that the revolutionary idea, ill defined in the minds of the masses, poorly served by its popularizers, still leaves to the government the full choice of its politics; I believe that power is surrounded with impossibilities that it does not see, contradictions that it does not know, traps that the universal ignorance conceals from it; I believe that any government can endure, if it wishes, by affirming its historical reasons, and placing itself under the direction of the interests that it is called to serve, but I also believe that men change little, and that if Louis XVI, after having launched the revolution, had wanted to withdraw it, if the Emperor, or if Charles X and Louis-Philippe had preferred to be lost [doom it?] than to continue it, it is improbable that those who succeeded them would have made themselves straightaway, and spontaneously, its promoters.

That is why I hold myself apart from government, more inclined to pity it than to make war against it, devoted solely to the homeland, and I join myself body and soul with that elite of workers, head of the proletariat and middle class, the party of labor and progress, of liberty and the idea, which, understanding that authority is nothing, that popular spontaneity is of no use; that liberty which does not act is lost, and that the interests that need to put themselves in relation with an intermediary which represents them are interests sacrificed, accepts for its goal and motto *the Education of the People*.

O homeland, French homeland, homeland of the bards of the eternal revolution! homeland of liberty, for, despite all your servitudes, in no place on the earth, neither in Europe, nor in America, is the mind, which is all of man, so free as it is with you! homeland that I love with that accumulated love that the growing son bears for his mother, that the father feels grow along with his children! I will see you suffer for a long time yet, suffer not for yourself alone, but for the world which rewards you with its envy and its insults; to suffer innocent, only because you do not know yourself?... It seems to me at every instant that you are at your last ordeal! Awaken, mother: neither can your princes, your barons and your counts do anything for your salvation, nor can your prelates no how to comfort you with their benedictions. Guard, if you wish, the memory of those who have done well, and go sometimes to pray at their monuments: but do not seek their successors. They are finished! Commence your new life, O first of immortals; show yourself in your beauty, Venus Urania; spread your perfumes, flower of humanity!

And humanity will be rejuvenated, and its unity will be created by you: for the unity of the human race is the unity of my homeland, as the spirit of the human race is nothing but the spirit of my homeland.