

Letter to A. M. Boutteville

On Proudhon's "Kronos"

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

December 17, 1851

In the biographical introduction to Tucker's edition of *What is Property?* is a brief mention that around 1851 Proudhon's "entertained the idea of writing a universal history entitled "Chronos." This project was never fulfilled." There was probably no shortage of "universal history" in France by 1850, although an entry by Proudhon would no doubt have been novel and interesting. The Saint-Simonians and their allies, including P. J. B. Buchez, Auguste Ott, Pierre Leroux, had written volume after volume on the subject. In 1849, William B. Greene published his *Remarks On The History Of Science; Followed By An Apriori Autobiography*, which was greeted by Boston's radical ministers with "inextinguishable peals of laughter," but which may have been a little *French* for his audiences in any event. Orestes Brownson took issue with the notion of an "a priori history," but he, at least, should have known where all this was coming from, as he had been instrumental in introducing Leroux to American audiences. The truth is that all of this stuff is pretty hard sledding a century and a half later. But in its time, the assumption was widespread that a science of history or a philosophy of progress could be elaborated. In the "First Letter" of his *Philosophy of Progress*, for example, Proudhon (not generally one of the names associated with this tradition) wrote:

If then I could once put my finger on the opposition that I put between these two ideas, to explain what I mean by Progress and what I consider Absolute, I would have given the principle, secret and key to all my polemics; you would possess the logical link of all of my ideas; and you could, with that notion alone, become for you with regard to me an infallible criterion, not only estimate the ensemble of my publications, but forecast and signal in advance the propositions that sooner or later I must affirm or deny, the doctrines of which I will have to make myself the defender or adversary; you would be able, I say, to evaluate and judge all my theses by what I have said and by what I do not know. You would know me, *intus et in cute*, such as I am, such as I have been all my life, and such as I would find myself in a thousand years, if I could live a thousand years: the man whose thought always advances, whose program will never be finished. And at whatever moment in my career you would come to know me, whatever conclusion you could come to regarding me, you

would have always, either to absolve me in the name of Progress, or to condemn me in the name of the Absolute.

We are not far from the realm of “a priori autobiography.” And this is right in the midst of Proudhon’s explanation of his own driving philosophy, what he will call his “religion.” If the *Chronos* (or *Kronos*) was never written, it was probably not a passing fancy. The next work that Proudhon *did* complete was *The Philosophy of Progress*, and that work led naturally to *War and Peace* and *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, as well as the historical accounts in *The Theory of Property* and various of the posthumous works.

We know a bit about Proudhon’s plans, from some letters he wrote. We know that he was working with Marc-Lucien Boutteville, who was eventually the editor of Proudhon’s posthumously-published *Contradictions politiques*, and who published in 1863 a volume entitled *La morale de l’église et la morale naturelle* which shows considerable Proudhonian influence. So far, I’ve found no evidence that the collaboration went much of anywhere, but the correspondence relating to it is interesting. Here’s the key letter:

Sainte-Pélagie, December 17, 1851.

A. M. BOUTTEVILLE

My dear Boutteville, the more I advance in my individual labors, the more I realize that the work that we make in common must be conceived and, as much as possible, written according the plan of mine, and in a manner so as to serve it as continuation and conclusion. The history of democracy is nothing other than the history of the emancipation of the human spirit in all spheres, and, and without counting the disadvantages for us to publish a book soon described as *demagogic*, it is clear that by taking the word *democracy* in a sense too close to that of jacobinism, we make quite uselessly the monograph of a hypothesis rejected for the moment, and perhaps for many years.

Thus, it is necessary to enlarge further our views and our plan, and to make ourselves more generalizing, more profound, by sacrificing something of the epic interest.

I have decided to give my book the title *Kronos* (or whatever you please), to match the *Cosmos* of A. de Humboldt.

It will include, from the origin of things, the creation, as they say, up to Luther, the moment where our history begins, and will be divided into sixteen periods.

From Luther’s time until our own requires four others (twenty altogether), divided thus:

17th – From Luther to the Treaty of Westphalia (1517-1648)

18th – From the Treaty of Westphalia to the French Revolution (1648–1789)

19th – The French Revolution (1789–1848)

20th – Socialism (1848-****)

We will preserve that distribution; the last period will serve as the historic and prophetic *conclusion* of the nineteen preceding.

It is necessary then for you to attach to this summary all the facts relating to Christian-Muslim-European civilisation, including America (excluding China, India, Mongolia, the Asiatic archipelago, the Burmas, Siam, Japan, etc., with the exception of that which concerns the affairs of Europe), and take for a superior principle of historical direction the movement of nations towards an order of things which must realize at once *liberty* (individual, locale, etc.) in its highest expression, and the *unity* of the human race.

Thus, *my* work and *yours* will form a continuous series, without crossed purposes or repetitions. By conserving more space in the treatment of my first sixteen periods, I could give more scope, interest and evidence to the demonstration of recent times, as also, in condensing more the manner of the first part of Bossuet's *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle*, and including only that table of facts, citations, reflections of major interests, we will have made a work of sound philosophy, instead of a masterpiece of literature.

It is understood that in the *Histoire de la Démocratie moderne*, the exposition in order of dates, as I employ it in *Kronos*, will not be followed; in this regard, the two works, though forming a continuous whole, will differ noticeably. It will be necessary to follow the method of Poinson, du Rozier and Des Michels in their very substantial, conscientious and exact, but insufficiently philosophical summaries of the Greek, Latin and Medieval history.

In a word, let us not lose sight of the fact that we must not aim to render useless the works made before us, or those that will be made after, but to make a treatise which throws light on the whole history of humanity and establishes its philosophy.

At our next meeting, I will speak at more length of all these things, and, in making you a part of my own work, I will convince you of the ease with which I group in a single narrative, a single idea, and single general evolution, all the history for example of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which includes as you know besides:

The empire of Charlemagne and all its divisions;

The Greek empire of the Orient;

The papacy and the schism of Photios;

The Angles, Saxons, Normans, Slavs, etc.

Islam, subdivided in three or four independent caliphates and in two great parties;

The war of Spain against the Moors, etc.

All of that, and it is the whole world (minus the Far East, the evolution of which separate, but always on the same plan and by virtue of the same laws), all that, I say, so complicated moments, can only be one, absolutely one, and it is as easy to recount that universal history, by stating at once all the contemporary facts, as it is to describe a session of the Convention.

So group, research, accumulate the facts, and limit yourself to giving them the most faithful expression; do not manage the dates and the facts. We must raise a monument which overshadows Catholicism and tyranny, and which is as precious and as accessible to the ignorant as to the wise.

My firm conviction is that we can do this if we wish to, and that this double labor must cast on the destinies of the species an as yet unknown and inextinguishable light.

The *Kronos* alone will form two large volumes, as much as the *Histoire de la Démocratie moderne*. By abridging from it the whole space of time that the other includes, I will give it more lucidity, firmness and scope, and make our labor more complete, easier to make and to understand, and more conclusive. It will always be the same work, published in two forms and by two different publishers.

I hope, my dear friend, that instead of becoming impatient with my reshufflings, you understand as I do that it is not possible to make a special history or any monograph without knowing as a basis universal history, and that you will be grateful to me for contributing thus, although indirectly, to the composition of a work which, without that contribution would, I warn you, have run the risk of being only a plea for the good of the cause.

Besides, you understand that the plan that I have marked for you has no need of modifications. The large divisions and the general sense I have indicated are already the consequence of my own studies; I ask of you only more generality still, more universality, conciseness and fullness.

The century has enough literature: let us give it facts and truths. One is always eloquent enough when one is Newton, Cuvier or Jussieu; let us try to be something like those gentlemen. If they are justly admired, they are not, after all, gods.

I extend my hand to you.

P.-J. Proudhon.

Slowly but surely the shape of Proudhon's larger project emerges, and some of the key differences between his work and that of Greene seem to loom considerably less large.

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