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Letter to Pierre Leroux

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

14th December 1849

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Translated by Paul Sharkey.

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My dear Pierre Leroux,

I really must forgive you your incessant accusations, for you do not know me and do not engage in debate.

For a start, you haven't read me, so you have a cheek attacking me; next, I think you need telling and everything that you have written over the past month is there to prove it: you have absolutely no method. As a result of rehashing your empty formulae, wallowing in your sterile imaginings and focusing your thoughts upon some world beyond the senses, you have rendered yourself incapable of grasping other people's thinking; the upshot being that, all unbeknownst to yourself, your criticisms amount, I am sorry to say, to unrelenting demonisation.

On the basis of a few snatches of text quarried from my books and utterly misconstrued, you have cast me as an adversary of your own devising — anti-democratic, anti-socialist, counter-revolutionary, Malthusian and atheistic. This is the imaginary creature to which you address your arguments, without in the least bothering if the man you depict thus to proletarians fits the description. Sometimes you credit me with saying things that I never said, or you credit me with conclusions diametrically

opposed to my actual ones; at other times, you take the trouble to lecture me on what no one living in this century could honestly be ignorant of; all in order to banish me benignly from the democratic and social community.

Meanwhile, the well-intentioned readers who follow you, and the malicious ones — and of the latter sort there is no shortage — pick up on your accusations, passing comment on them, inflating them and exploiting them. So much so that, ultimately and thanks to you, today I find myself the Satan of socialism, just as, as year ago, I was the Satan of property. Socialism's main business at this point in time is to demolish Proudhon, or so one of your disciples, Madame Pauline Roland,¹ is telling all who are prepared to listen. How much more clear-sighted socialism will be, won't it?, once this renegade Proudhon has been cast down; whereupon Pierre Leroux's tittle-tattle merchants, eaten up by hypochondria, will take their seats among the denizens of the Assembly of representatives of the People!

So, my dear Pierre Leroux, would you care to see this controversy brought to an end? The crucial thing is that the debate be kept on track, that, in each particular, we deal first with one issue and then with the next, rather than rant about them all, and then some, as you do in every one of your articles; without this, our exchanges will inevitably become a laughing-stock for the Malthusians and scandalise the proletarians. As for myself, I will freely confess to you that I find it impossible to keep up such a polemic, squandering my time and my paper on relentlessly clarifying facts, reconstructing texts, clearing up your misunderstandings, rebutting your whimsy and translating your high-falutin' style into common parlance.

¹ Pauline Roland (1805-1852), a Saint-Simonian socialist, feminist, and associate of Leroux, also wrote a column for Proudhon's *Le Représentant du peuple*, but was later to write a critique of Proudhon's antifeminism, *La femme a-t-elle le droit à la liberté?* (*Does Woman Have the Right to Liberty?*, 1851). (Editor)

Thus you take me to task for having made a distinction between the labour question and the question of the State, two questions which are, at bottom, identical and susceptible to one and the same solution.

If you were as eager to acknowledge the common ground between your thoughts and mine as you are to highlight where they differ, you wouldn't have had any difficulty persuading yourself that, when it comes to the questions of labour and the State, as well as on a host of other matters, our two outlooks have no reason to feel jealous of each other. When I state, say, that the capitalist principle and the monarchist or governmental principle are one and the same principle; that the abolition of the exploitation of man by man and the abolition of the government of man by man are one and the same formula; when, taking up arms against communism and absolutism alike, those two kindred faces of the authority principle, I point out that, if the family was the building block of feudal society, the workshop is the building block of the new society; it must be as plain as day that I, like you, look upon the political question and the economic question as one and the same. What you upbraid me for not knowing on this score is your own sheer ignorance of my own thinking and, what is worse, it is a waste of time.

But does it follow from the fact that the labour question and the State question resolve each other and are, fundamentally, one and the same issue, that no distinction should be made between them and that each does not deserve its own resolution? Does it follow from these two questions being, in principle, identical, that we must arrive at a particular mode of organising the State rather than the State being subsumed by labour? Neither of those conclusions holds water. Social questions are like problems of geometry; they may be resolved in different ways, depending on how they are approached. It is even useful and vital that these differing solutions be devised so that, in adding further dimensions to theory, they may add to the sum of science.

And as to the State, since, despite this multi-faceted character, the ultimate conclusion is that the question of its organisation is bound up with that of the organisation of labour, we may, we must, further conclude that a time will come when, labour having organised itself, in accordance with its own law, and having no further need of law-maker or sovereign, the workshop will banish government. As I argue and into which we shall look into, my dear philosopher, whenever, paying rather more heed to the other fellow's ideas and being a little less sensitive about your own, you may deign to enter into a serious debate about one or other of these two things, about which you are forever prattling without actually saying anything: Association and the State.

The government question and the labour question being identical, you rightly remark that such identity is articulated in the following terms: *The Question of the organisation of Society*.

Now, read through chapter one of *Contradictions Économiques* and you will find it formally spelled out that it is incorrect to say that labour is organised or that it is not; that it is *forever* self-organising; that society is an ongoing striving for organisation; that such organisation is at one and the same time the principle, the life and the purpose of society. So, my dear Pierre Leroux, be so kind as to think me somewhat less of an ignoramus and above all less of a sophist than I may seem to your frightened imagination: it will lay to rest three quarters of our quarrel.

There can be nothing easier than justifying the orthodoxy of this proposition as penned by me and upon which you seize so contemptuously and irrationally: "The February Revolution has posed two crucial questions: one economic, namely, the question of labour and property; and the other political, to wit, the question of government and the State." I merely needed to issue a reminder of the message implicit in all my words, that politics and political economy are one and the same science, the former being the more personal, arbitrary or subjective; the latter more substantial and positive. However, that interpretation of the February Revolution

a hidden disciple of Malthus, determined to preserve *bourgeoisism* and *proprietaryism*.

Hang on, Pierre Leroux: do I need to tell you what I think of your role and mine in this mammoth drama of the nineteenth century? I am the thresher of the February Revolution: the proletarians who are listening to us will be the millers and the bakers and you, with your triad,⁶ and the rest with their tub-thumping claptrap, all of you are merely pastry cooks.

Yours, etc.,

P-J PROUDHON

⁶ In Leroux's philosophy the fundamental principle was that of what he called the "triad" – a triplicity which he finds to pervade all things, which in God is "power, intelligence and love," in man "sensation, sentiment and knowledge." In society, he pointed to the division of the human race into three great classes, philosophers, artists and industrial chiefs, to be paid according to their capacity, labour, and capital. (Editor)

pay for assets? Why, assets. An across-the-board buyback amounts to universal expropriation without public utility and WITHOUT COMPENSATION. Yet your sense of caution, Pierre Leroux, has no misgivings about being compromised by fostering such claptrap!

There is a more straightforward, more effective and infinitely less onerous and less risky way of transferring ownership, of achieving Liberty, Equality and Fraternity: that way is, as I have indicated many times, to put an end to capital's role in production by the democratic organisation of credit and a simplification of taxation.⁵

Capital having been divested of its power of usury, economic solidarity is gradually created, and with it, an equality of wealth.

Next comes the spontaneous, popular formation of groups, workshops or workers' associations;

Finally, the last to be conjured and formed is the over-arching group, comprising the nation in its entirety, what you term the State because you invest it in a representative body outside of society, but which, to me, is no longer the State.

That, dear philosopher, is how I see the Revolution going; this is how we should shift from Liberty to Equality and thence to Fraternity. Which is why I so forcefully insist upon the importance of economic reform, a reform that I have given this makeshift designation: *Free credit*.

And that too we might have scrutinised methodically, and have thrashed out item by item, had you but once managed to stand back from your amorous ecstasies and turn your attention to the sordid practice of loans and discounts. But you deemed it more purposeful, more urgent to have it out and repeat everywhere that I am a foe of Socialism, a foe of Democracy, a foe of Revolution,

⁵ The term Proudhon uses, "la productivité du capital," is literally "the productivity of capital" but such a literal translation unfortunately implies that he simply wishes to end returns to capital. Rather, he wants to achieve production without the mediation of capital and the chosen translation reflects this. (Editor)

strikes you as *dry* and *narrow*: it lacks that certain something beyond the government and economics of societies, without which any idea looks satanic to you and every proposition fit for the pyre. That certain something is the sense of the divine, the theological and religious sense. Topped off with a quotation from some homily by Monsieur de Lamartine, and one of your usual commentaries on God, religion, the head of Christ, the Convention and the Republic.

At a time of your choosing, my dear Pierre Leroux, I shall give you such a sermon on God, his Spirit and his Word, as will draw tears from socialism's blue-stockings and their concierges; I can play that instrument every bit as deftly as you and Monsieur de Lamartine. But permit me not to throw theology into the pot with Political Economy, or, as the proverb has it, serve up *God with plums*. Such abuse of religiosity is one of the mystifications of our age and one that it behoves socialism to purge from its literature and press. Talking religion to men when the task in hand is to lay the foundations of social, mathematical and objective science amounts to a muddying of minds; and to perpetrating against the People the very same crime as the notorious Mazarin² was accused of having committed against the person of the young Louis XIV.

What is your God?

What is your religion, your ritual, your dogma?

What is the meaning of this constant invocation of Christ and Church?

You do not know the first thing about these things; you cannot see a single drop of them in your own thinking and all this other-worldly lyricism is nothing but a cover for the wretchedness of your alleged faith and the nullity of your means. You only prattle so much about God, of whom you, the anti-Christian, know nothing,

² Jules Mazarin (1602-61) was an Italian cardinal who served as the chief minister of France from 1642 until his death first under King Louis XIII and then Louis XIV. As the later was only five years old when he became King, Mazarin functioned essentially as the co-ruler of France alongside the queen. (Editor)

to spare yourself the need to talk about matters here below, *non ut aliquid dicatur sed ne taciturn.*³

Yes, I tell you, the February Revolution (and I am sticking to my formula precisely on account of its concrete simplicity and its very materiality), the February Revolution has posed two questions; one political and the other economic. The first is the question of government and freedom; the second that of labour and capital. I defy you to express bigger issues in fewer words. So leave the Supreme Being to heaven and religion to conscience, to the household, a matter for the mother of the family and her offspring.

Let me add – and there is nothing in me to validate your entertaining doubts, the way you do, about my feelings on this score – that once those two major issues have been resolved, the republican catch-cry, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, is a reality. If this is what you refer to as *God's kingdom on earth*, let me say to you, indeed, that I have no quarrel with that. It is a real comfort to me to find out at last that the kingdom of God is the kingdom of liberty, equality and fraternity. But could you not express yourself in everyday language?

You have me saying, and I really do not know where you could have found this, that *ownership of the instruments of labour must forever stay vested in the individual and remain unorganised*. These words are set in italics, as if you had lifted them from somewhere in my books. And then, on the back of this alleged quotation, you set about answering me that society, or the State that stands for it, has the right to *buy back* all property assets, that it has a duty to pursue such *buy backs* and that it will do so.⁴

But it does not follow at all from my speaking on the basis of socialism in order to reject the buy back of such assets as nonsensical,

³ A slight misquotation of St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*: "Dictum est tamen tres personae, non ut aliquid diceretur, sed ne taceretur" ("We shall speak of [God as having] three persons, not in order to say anything, but in order not to be silent"). (Editor)

⁴ The French word translated here as *buy back* and *buyback*, "rachat," can

illegitimate and poisonous that I want to see individual ownership and non-organisation of the instruments of labour endure for all eternity. I have never penned nor uttered any such thing; and have argued the opposite a hundred times over. I make no distinction, as you do, between real ownership and phoney ownership: from the lofty heights of righteousness and human destiny, I deny all kinds of proprietary domain. I deny it, precisely because I believe in an order wherein the instruments of labour will cease to be appropriated and instead become shared; where the whole earth will be depersonalised; where, all functions having become interdependent [*solidaires*], the unity and personhood of society will be articulated alongside the personality of the individual. True, were I not familiar with the candour of your soul, I should think, dear Pierre Leroux, that such misrepresentation of my meaning and my words were done on purpose.

But how is such solidarity of possession and labour to be achieved? How are we to make a reality of such personhood of society, which must result from the disappropriation, or de-personalising of things?

That plainly is the issue, the big question of the revolution.

Together with Louis Blanc, you make noises about *association* and *buy back*: but association, such as it must emerge from fresh reforms, is as much a mystery as religion, and all the attempts at association made by the workers before our very eyes and more or less modelling themselves on the forms of companies defined by our civil and commercial codes, can only be deemed transitory. In short, we know nothing about association. But, besides its requiring the acquiescence of all property-owners, by all the citizenry – which is an impossibility – buying back assets is a notion of mathematical nonsensicality. What is the State supposed to use to

also have a theological dimension, as in the English words *redeem* and *redemption*: the phrase "redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ," in French, is "rachat par le sang de Jésus-Christ." (Editor)