

Letter to the Members of the Academy of Besançon

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

August 3, 1840

Besançon, August 3, 1840

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY OF BESANÇON

Gentlemen, I have learned through the confidences of some of my friends that the publication of my Memoir on *Propriété*, and especially the preface addressed to the Academy of Besançon, which appears at the beginning of that Memoir, have roused your displeasure, not to mention you indignation, against me. That is the motive that enlists me to explain to you here, in few words and in all their simplicity, my conduct and my intentions.

First of all, what has been taken for a dedication is only a simple report, which my condition as the Suard *pensionnaire* and the obligation imposed on me to make known each year the progress of my studies seemed to me to explain sufficiently. I knew that a dedication is a certification of patronage of the person or the body to which one has dedicated it, so that it must be agreed to or even planned between the parties involved; I did not wish to free myself from that rule of decorum. On the other hand, a report is necessarily determined in form and content by the work on which one reports; that, Gentlemen, is what explains the silence that I have kept with regard to you, concerning the work, and concerning the address that precedes it.

As for the book itself, I would not argue here the cause that I have embraced; I had no desire to place myself before you as an adversary, no than as an accused; my conviction, what I am saying? my certainty concerning the truths that I have elaborated is invincible, and I respect your opinion to much, Gentlemen, to ever combat it directly. But, if I advance some unheard of paradoxes concerning Property, that basis of our present political state, does it follow that I am an implacable revolutionary, a secret conspirator, an enemy of society? No, Gentlemen; in admitting my doctrines without reservation, all that you could conclude from it, and all that I conclude myself, is that there exists a natural, inalienable right of *possession* and labor, for the enjoyment of which the proletariat must be prepared, just like the *black* of the colonies, before receiving the liberty of which no one today contests the right, must be prepared for liberty. That education of the proletariat is the mission confided today to all the men powerful in intelligence and fortune, under pain of being sooner or later crushed under an deluge of those barbarians to whom we are accustomed to give the name of *proletarians*.

Should I respond to another sort of accusation? Some have seen in my conduct toward my academic tutor, to whom I have never made any communication, a sort of ingratitude.

My conduct with regard to Mr. Droz has been dictate to me by a sentiment of decorum; could I enter with that venerable writer into some conferences on moral science and political economy, when those conferences must have, in my opinion, the result of calling into doubt the value of the moral and economic writings of Mr. Droz? Should I put myself in a state of argumentativeness and, so to speak, permanent disobedience with him? No one loves and admires the talent of Mr. Droz more than me; no one can ever demonstrate a more profound veneration for his character. Now, these sentiments were precisely so many reasons that that forbade a polemic that would have been awkward and too perilous for me.

Gentlemen, the publication of that work was commanded of me by the order of my philosophical studies. This is what the future will demonstrate to you. One last Memoir remains for me to compose on the question of Property; that work accomplished, I would pursue, without turning aside from my path, my studies in philology, metaphysics and moral science.

Gentlemen, I belong to no party, to no coterie; I am without advocates, without partners, without associates. I make no sect, and I would reject the role of tribune, were it ever offered to me, for the simple reason that I do not wish to enslave myself! I have only you, Gentlemen. I only have hope in you. I await favor and a solid reputation only from you. I know that you propose to condemn what you call my *opinions*, and to reject all solidarity with my ideas. I will nonetheless persist in believing that the time will come when you will give me as much praise as I have caused you irritation. Your first emotion will pass, the distress born among you by the bold expression of a still unperceived physical and economic truth will ease, and with time and reflection, I am sure, you will arrive at the enlightened consciousness of your own sentiments, which you do not know, which you combat and I defend.

I am, Gentlemen, with the most perfect confidence in your understanding and in your justice, your very humble and devoted *pensionnaire*.

P.-J. Proudhon

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