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Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

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What is Government? What is God?

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

November 5, 1849

What is Government? What is its principle, its object, its right? – This is incontestably the first question that the political man poses to himself.

Now, this question, which appears so simple and the solution of which seems so easy, we find that faith alone can answer. Philosophy is as incapable of demonstrating Government as it is of proving God. Authority, like Divinity, is not a matter of knowing; it is, I repeat, a matter of faith.

That insight, so paradoxical at first glance, and yet so true, merits some development. We are going to try, without any significant scientific apparatus, to make ourselves understood.

The principal attribute, the signal trait of our species, after THOUGHT, is belief, and above all things, the belief in God. Among the philosophers, some saw in that faith in a superior Being a prerogative of humanity, while others discovered there only its weakness. Whatever there is of merit or demerit in the belief in the idea of God, it is certain that the beginning of all metaphysical speculation is an act of worship of the Creator: it is

that which the human mind, among all the Peoples, records in an invariable manner.

But what is God? That is what the philosopher and the believer immediately, and with an irresistible movement, demand. And, as a corollary to that first interrogation, this one arises immediately: What, of all the religions, is the best? Indeed, if there exists a Being superior to Humanity, there must also exist a system of relations between that Being and Humanity: what then is that system? The search for the best religion is the second step that the human mind makes in Reason and Faith.

To this double question, no response is possible. The definition of Divinity escapes the intelligence. Humanity has been by turns fetishist, idolater, Christian and Buddhist, Jew and Mohammedan, deist and pantheist: it has worshiped in turn plants, animals, stars, the heavens, the soul of the world, and, finally, itself: it has wandered from superstition to superstition, without managing to determine its God. The problem of the attributes and essence of God and of the worship that is proper to him, like a trap set for his ignorance, torments Humanity from its origin. The Peoples are sacrificed for their idols, society is exhausted by the elaboration of its beliefs, without the solution being advanced a step.

The deist and the pantheist, like the Christian and the idolater, is reduced to pure faith. One could even say, and it is the only progress we have made in this study, that it is repugnant to reason to know and understand God: it is only given to us to believe. And this is why in all eras, and under all religions, we encounter a small number of men, bolder in appearance than the others, who, not understanding God, have taken the part of denying him: we have given them the name of free spirits or atheists.

But it is clear that atheism is still less logical than faith. The basic, conclusive fact of the spontaneous belief in the supreme Being remaining always, and the problem implied by that fact inevitably posing itself, atheism could not be accepted as a solution. Far from testifying to the strength of the mind, it would only prove its des-

peration. It is with atheism as it is with suicide: it has only been embraced by the smallest number. The People have always had a horror of it!

Things were thus. Humanity seemed eternally placed between an insoluble question and an impossible negation, when, at the end of the last century, a philosopher, Kant, as remarkable for his profound piety, as for the incomparable power of his reflection, realized how to attack the theological problem in an entirely new manner.

He no longer asked himself, as everyone had before him: What is God? and what is the true religion? From a question of fact he made a question of form, and he said to himself: Why does it happen that I believe in God? How, by virtue of what is that idea produced in my mind? What is its point of departure and its development? What are its transformations, and, if need be, its decline? How, finally, is it that, in the religious soul, the things, the ideas, come to be?

Such was the course of studies proposed, on God and Religion, by the philosopher of Koenigsberg. Renouncing further pursuit of the content, or the reality of the idea of God, he set himself to writing, if I dare put it in this way, the biography of that idea. Instead of taking, like an anchorite, the idea of God for the object of his meditations, he analyzed the faith in God, as a religious period of six thousand years presented it to him. In short, he considered in religion, not an external and supernatural revelation of the infinite Being, but a phenomenon of our understanding.

From this moment the spell was broken: the mystery of religion was revealed to philosophy. What we seek and what we see in God, as Malebranche said, is not at all that being, or to speak more fairly, that chimerical entity, that our imagination constantly enlarges, and that, by the very fact that it must be after all the notion that our mind makes of it, cannot in reality be anything: it is our own ideal, the pure essence of Humanity.

What the theologian pursues, without knowing it, in the dogma that he teaches, is not the mysteries of the infinite: it is the laws of our collective and individual spontaneity. The human soul does not perceive itself at first by reflective contemplation on itself, as the psychologist believe; it perceives itself outside itself, as if it was a different being placed in front of it: it is that mirror image that it calls God.

Thus, morals, justice, order, laws, are no longer things revealed from on high, imposed on our free will by a so-called creator, unknown, unintelligible; they are things that are as proper and essential as our faculties and organs, as our flesh and blood. In short: Religion and Society are synonymous terms; Man is sacred pour himself as if he was God. Catholicism and Socialism, identical at base, differ only in form: in this was we explain faith, and the primitive face of the belief in God, and the indisputable progress of the religions.

Now, what Kant did nearly sixty years ago for Religion; what he had previously done for Certainty; what others before him had attempted for Happiness or the Sovereign Good, the Voix du Peuple proposes to undertake for Government.

After the belief in God, that which occupies the most prominent place in the general thought is the belief in Authority. Everywhere that there are men grouped in society, we encounter, with the rudiments of a religion, the rudiments of power, the embryo of a government. That fact is as basic, as universal, as indisputable as that of the religions.

But what is Power, and what is the best form of Government? for it is clear that if we manage to understand the essence and attributes of power, we will know at the same time the best form to give to it, what is, of all the constitutions, the most perfect. We would have, in this way, resolved one of the two great problems posed by the February Revolution: we would have resolved the political problem, principle, means and end, — we do not prejudge anything, — of economic reform.

of its wholeness, that it is still, just like Religion and Government, only a hypothesis, or rather, a hypotyposis of Society, that is to say, an allegorical representation of a conception of our intelligence.

How, next, does man labor? How do we establish the comparison of products? How will circulation take place in society? On what conditions? According to what laws?

And the conclusion of all these monographs on property has been this:

Property indicates a function or allocation; community, reciprocity of action: usury, always decreasing, identity of labor and capital.

In order to bring about the disengagement and realization of all these terms, until now shrouded beneath the old proprietary symbols, what must we do? Let the workers guarantee work and outlets to one another; to that end, let them accept, as currency, their reciprocal obligations.

Well! today we say:

Political liberty will result for us, like industrial liberty, from our mutual guarantee. It is by guaranteeing liberty to one another, that we will pass from this government, whose purpose is to symbolize the republican motto: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, leaving to our intelligence the care to find its realization. Now, what is the formula of that political and liberal guarantee? presently, universal suffrage, later, free contract...

Economic and social reform, by the mutual guarantee of credit;

Political reform, by the commerce of individual liberties;

Such is the program of the Voix du Peuple.

The Revolution advances, cried an absolutist paper yesterday, with regard to the message of Louis Bonaparte. Those people see the Revolution only in catastrophes and coups d'état. We say in our turn: Yes, the Revolution advance, for it has found interpreters. Our strength may fall short of the task; our devotion, never!

Well! On Government, as on Religion, the controversy has endured since the origin of societies, and with as little success. It is for governments as for religions, for political theories as for systems of philosophy: that is to say, there is no solution. More than two thousand years before Montesquieu and Machiavelli, Aristotle gathered the various definitions of government, distinguishing them according to their forms: patriarchies, democracies, oligarchies, aristocracies, absolute monarchies, constitutional monarchies, theocracies, federative republics, etc. He declared, in short, that the problem was insoluble. Aristotle, with regard to government, as with regard to religion, was a skeptic. He had faith neither in God nor in the State.

And we who, in sixty years, have gone through seven or eight kinds of governments; who, hardly entered into the Republic, are already weary of our Constitution; we, for whom the exercise of power has only been, from the conquest of the Gauls by Julius Caesar until the ministry of the brothers Barrot, the practice of oppression and tyranny; we, finally, who witness in this moment the saturnalia of the governments of Europe, do we then have more faith than Aristotle? Isn't it time that we get out of this unhappy rut, and instead of exhausting ourselves any more in the search for the best government, the best organization to make of the political idea, we should pose the question, no longer of the reality, but of the legitimacy of that idea?

Why do we believe in Government? From where, in human society, comes that idea of Authority, of Power; that fiction of a superior Person, called the State?

How is that fiction produced? How is it developed? What is its law of evolution, its economy?

Won't it be with Government as with God and the Absolute, which have so long and so fruitlessly occupied the philosophers? Would this not still be one of the first-born conceptions of our understanding, which we wrongly give the name of ideas, and that,

without reality, without possibility of realization, expresses only something indefinite, which only has tyranny for its essence?

And then, relative to God and Religion, we have already found, by philosophical analysis, that beneath the allegories of its religious myths, Humanity pursues nothing other than its own ideal, could we still seek what we want beneath the allegory of its political myths? For in the end, the political institutions, so different, so contradictory, exist neither for themselves, nor by themselves; like the cults, they are not essential to society, they are hypothetical formulas or combinations, by means of which civilization maintains an appearance of order, or to put it better, seeks order. What then, once again, is the secret meaning of these institutions, the real reason why the political concept, the notion of government, comes to nothing?

In short, instead of seeing in government, with the absolutists, the organ and expression of society; with the doctrinaires, an instrument of order, or rather of policy; with the radicals, a means of revolution: let us try to see simply a phenomenon of the collective life, the external representation of our right, the education of some one of our faculties. Who knows if we could not discover then that all these governmental formulas, for which the Peoples and citizens have slit each others' throats for sixty centuries, are only a phantasmagoria of our mind, that the first duty of a free reason is to return to the museums and libraries?

Such is the question posed and resolved in the Confessions of a Revolutionary, and of which the Voix du Peuple proposes, with the aid of facts furnished to it by the power and the parties who dispute it, to give daily commentary.

Just like Religion, Government is a manifestation of social spontaneity, a preparation of Humanity for a higher state.

What Humanity seeks in Religion, and calls God, is itself.

What the citizen seeks in Government and names King, Emperor or President, is also himself, it is Liberty.

Without Humanity, no God; the theological concept makes no sense: — Without Liberty, no Government; the political concept is without value.

The best form of Government, like the most perfect of religions, taken in the literal sense, is a contradictory idea. The problem is not to know how we will be governed best, but how we will be the most free. Liberty suitable and identical to order, that is all that power and politics really contain. How is that absolute liberty, synonym of ordered, constituted? that is what the analysis of the different formulas of authority will teach us. For all the rest, we do not accept the government of man by man, any more than the exploitation of man by man...

Thus, the march that we propose to follow, in treating the political question and in preparing the materials for a constitutional revision, will be the same that we have followed up to this day in treating the social question. *La Voix du Peuple*, in completing the work of the two journals that preceded it, will be faithful to their wanderings.

What should we say, in these two papers, fallen one after the other under the blows of the reaction and the state of siege?

We should not as, as our predecessors and associates have thus far:

What is the best system of community? the best organization of property? Or better still: Is property or community worth more? the theory of Saint-Simon or that of Fourier? the system of Louis Blanc or that of Cabet?

Following the example of Kant, who should pose the question in this way:

How does man possess? How does he acquire property? How is it lost? What is the law of its evolution and transformation? Where is it going? What does it want? What, finally, does it represent? For it appears sufficiently, by the indissoluble mixture of good and evil that accompanies it, by the tyranny that is its essence (*jus utendi et abutendi*) and which is the condition *sine quâ non*