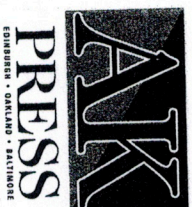


Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

PROPERTY IS THEFT!

A PIERRE-JOSEPH PROUDHON ANTHOLOGY

*Edited by
Iain McKay*



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but that, in order to reach solutions to certain questions of detail or of a higher level of complexity, a series of reasoning processes and inductions will be necessary which are completely analogous to the calculations by which one determines the movement of the stars. In actual fact, the description of the process of resolving the problems of social science will be one of the more interesting aspects of my third *Memoire*, and it will serve to better prove my own good faith and the emptiness of most political inventions.

In brief: *abolish to the point of extinction all forms of private income*, which will be the TRANSITION. The ORGANISATION will result from the principles of the *division of labour* and from the *collective force*, combined with the maintenance of the *individuality* of man and citizen.

This might all look like hieroglyphics to you now, but this is where the enigma becomes explained; this is where the mystery resides. You will watch me begin the process and you may well say to yourself: To achieve this goal, all that is required is men and the means of study.

You have forced me to be pedantic in an informal letter answering one simple question. When I correspond with you, am I putting myself in the role of teacher? One can never fully explain oneself regarding something complicated in just a page or two because there are always details requiring clarification in order to resolve issues. The most important thing today is to look closely at Property, reconsidering domestic policy regarding *abolition* and foreign policy regarding *customs duties*. It is all there; the rest will slot into place accordingly...

Yesterday I received a charming and flattering letter from M. [Jérôme-Adolphe] Blanqui which actually makes me feel quite proud. You understand that this teacher does not accept my doctrine in the terms that I have outlined it; but, aside from the words and the humility which is his natural demeanour, he is a man of considerable learning—indeed, he's a wise man, well-loved by everybody, and the most able organiser that we have. From time to time I receive testimonies of good faith from eminent people who, without agreeing with me, say: "Keep up the good work!"

When I began this letter, I wanted to chat and banter with you; but my writer's instincts always take over. And you're partly to blame too! Why do you ask me such questions?

Farewell, then, my oldest fellow student, my comrade of the *Rosa*. I have no more time to write, but I see from your letter that *the oldest ones are still the best*.

Yours truly,

P-J PROUDHON

Lyons, May 17th, 1846
Translation by Barry Marshall

LETTER TO KARL MARX

My Dear *Monsieur Marx*,

I WILL GLADLY AGREE TO BE ONE OF THE RECIPIENTS OF YOUR CORRESPONDENCE, the aim and organisation of which seems very useful to me.

However, I cannot promise to write to you all that much or all that often. All of my interests, combined with a natural laziness, leave me little time for engagement in epistolary efforts. I do want to take the liberty of making some criticisms, suggested to me by different parts of your letter.

First of all, although when it comes to ideas of organisation and achievement my thoughts are at this point in time more or less established, at least as far as principles go, I believe it is my duty, as it is the duty of all socialists, to keep a critical and sceptical frame of mind. In short, I am making a public profession of an almost absolute economic anti-dogmatism.

Let us seek together, if you will, for the laws of society, the manner in which these laws are manifested, the progress of our efforts to discover them. But for God's sake, after having demolished all *a priori* dogmatisms, let us not in turn dream of making our own, of indoctrinating the people. Let us not fall into the same contradiction of your countryman Martin Luther, who, having overturned Catholic theology, immediately set about founding a Protestant theology with excommunications and anathemas. For the last three centuries, Germany has been largely engaged in tearing down all that Luther built. We should not leave humanity with a similar mess as a result of our own efforts. With all my heart, I applaud your idea of bringing all opinions to light; let us show the world an example of learned and insightful tolerance, but since we are in the lead, let us not set ourselves up as leaders of a new intolerance; let us not be the apostles of a new religion, one that makes itself a religion of reason, a religion of logic. We should welcome and encourage all protestations. Let us get rid of all divisiveness, all mysticism. Let us never consider a question exhausted, and when we do get down to our last argument, let's start again if need be with wit and irony! I will join your organisation on that condition—or else not.

I also want to make a few observations on this phrase in your letter: "At the moment of action." Perhaps you are still of the mind that no reform is possible with a *coup de main*, without what we used to call a revolution, and what is in reality nothing but a jolt. That opinion—which I understand, which I excuse, which I would willingly discuss having myself held it for a long time—I must admit to you that my latest studies have made me completely abandon it. We do not need it to succeed, and as a result we do not have to promote revolutionary action as a means to achieve social reform, because that pretended method is only simply a call for force, for arbitrariness—in short, a contradiction. I have set out the problem like this: to bring back to society through an economic combination the wealth that has left society by means of a different economic combination. In other words, via political economy, to turn the theory of property against property in such a way as to bring about what you German socialists call community [*communauté*] but which I prefer to call freedom or equality. But I believe in a little while I will have the means of solving this problem. I would therefore prefer to burn property slowly with a small fire than to give it new strength by carrying out a Saint Bartholomew's Night of the Proprietors.¹

My next book, which is at the printers, will have more to say to you.²

There you have it, my dear *philosopher*: that is where I stand right now. Except for me deceiving myself—and should that happen getting a rap on the knuckles from you—this is what I submit to in good faith while awaiting my revenge [*en attendant ma revanche*]. I should tell you in passing that this also seems to be the mood of the French working class. Our proletariat has a great thirst for science, which would be very poorly served if you only brought them blood to drink. In short, to my mind it would be terrible politics to talk like killers [*exterminateurs*]. The usual methods will suffice; the people do not need any exhortation for that.

I am very sorry for these petty divisions which, it seems, still exist in German socialism and which your complaints to me about M. Grun prove.³ I am afraid that you have seen this author in a poor light. My dear Marx, I want to set things straight. Grun has found himself exiled with no money, a wife and two children, and no means of making a living except by his pen. How else do you want him to make a living if not by modern ideas? I understand your philosophical ire and I admit that the quest for the ultimate truth [*sainte parole*] of humankind should not be underhand, but I see here only misfortune and extreme necessity and I excuse the man. Oh! If we were

1 Saint Bartholomew's Night refers to the massacre in 1572 of thousands of Huguenot Protestants by French Catholics. (Translator)

2 A reference to Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions*. (Editor)

3 Marx in his letter to Proudhon warned Proudhon that Grun had poked fun at him in his book on the French socialists and that Grun had also made erroneous claims that he had tutored him. (Translator)

all millionaires, things would be easier. We would be saints and angels. It is simple, we have to live. You know that that word does not yet express the idea of a pure society—far from it. Living means buying your bread, wood, meat, paying the landlord, and, by Jove!, he who sells social ideas is no more unworthy than he who sells a sermon. I am completely unaware that Grun had made himself out to be my tutor: tutor of what? I stick to political economy, things he knows nothing about. I look on literature as a little girl's toy, and as for philosophy, I know enough to have the right to be poked fun at myself on occasion. Grun has said nothing about it to me at all. If he did say that, he was being impertinent and I am sure he apologises.

What I do know and what I do value more than what I blame for a bit of conceit is that I owe to M. Grun and his friend Ewerbeck the acquaintance I have with your own writings, my dear M. Marx, those of M. Engels and that very important book by Feuerbach. They have kindly undertaken some analysis for me in French (I unfortunately cannot read German) of the most important socialist publications, and it is because of a suggestion of theirs that I include (besides what I had done by myself) in my next book mention of the works of MM. Marx, Engels, Feuerbach, etc. Finally Grun and Ewerbeck are working to keep the sacred fire [*feu sacré*] going in the German émigrés who live in Paris, and the respect that they have for the workers they are talking to assures me of the honesty of their intentions.

I hope to see you, my dear Marx, come back from a hasty judgement made in a moment of irritation, just because you were angry when you wrote to me. Grun has indicated to me his desire to translate my latest book. He can only do this with some help. I would be obliged to you and your friends if you lent your assistance on this occasion, by contributing towards the sale of a book, which would be a great benefit to me.

If you wanted to give me assurance of your help, my dear M. Marx, I would very shortly send my proofs to M. Grun, and I think that, in spite of your personal grievances, which I do not want to judge, this conduct would honour us all.

Yours very devotedly,

Pierre-Joseph PROUDHON