

What is Property?

P. J. Proudhon

AN INQUIRY INTO THE PRINCIPLE OF RIGHT AND
OF GOVERNMENT P. J. Proudhon

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P. J. PROUDHON:

HIS LIFE AND HIS WORKS.

The correspondence[1] of P. J. Proudhon, the first volumes of which we publish to-day, has been collected since his death by the faithful and intelligent labors of his daughter, aided by a few friends. It was incomplete when submitted to Sainte Beuve, but the portion with which the illustrious academician became acquainted was sufficient to allow him to estimate it as a whole with that soundness of judgment which characterized him as a literary critic.

[1] In the French edition of Proudhon's works, the above sketch of his life is prefixed to the first volume of his correspondence, but the translator prefers to insert it here as the best method of introducing the author to the American public.

He would, however, caution readers against accepting the biographer's interpretation of the author's views as any sense authoritative; advising them, rather, to await the

publication of the remainder of Proudhon's writings, that they may form an opinion for themselves.--Translator.

In an important work, which his habitual readers certainly have not forgotten, although death did not allow him to finish it, Sainte Beuve thus judges the correspondence of the great publicist:--

"The letters of Proudhon, even outside the circle of his particular friends, will always be of value; we can always learn something from them, and here is the proper place to determine the general character of his correspondence.

"It has always been large, especially since he became so celebrated; and, to tell the truth, I am persuaded that, in the future, the correspondence of Proudhon will be his principal, vital work, and that most of his books will be only accessory to and corroborative of this. At any rate, his books can be well understood only by the aid of his letters and the continual explanations which he makes to

those who consult h their doubt, and request him to define mre clearly his position.

"There are, among celebrated people, many methods of correspondence. There are those to whom letter-writing is a bore, and who, assailed with questions and compliments, reply in the greatest haste, solely that the job may bever with, and who return politeness for politeness, mingling it with mre or less wit. This kind of correspondence, though coming from celebrated people, is insignificant and unworthy of collection and classification.

"After those who write letters in performance of a disagreeable duty, and alost side by side with them in point of insignificance, I should put those who write in a manner wholly external, wholly superficial, devoted only to flattery, lavishing praise like gold, without counting it; and those also who weigh every word, who reply formally and pompously, with a vi to fine phrases and effects. They exchange words only, and choose them solely for

their brilliancy and show. You think it is you, individually, to whom they speak; but they are addressing themselves in your person to the four corners of Europe. Such letters are empty, and teach as nothing but theatrical execution and the favorite pose of their writers.

"I will not class among the latter the more prudent and sagacious authors who, when writing to individuals, keep one eye on posterity. We know that many who pursue this method have written long, finished, charming, flattering, and tolerably natural letters. Beranger furnishes us with the best example of this class.

"Proudhon, however, is a man of entirely different nature and habits. In writing, he thinks of nothing but his idea and the person whom he addresses: ad rem et ad hominem. A man of conviction and doctrine, to write does not weary him; to be questioned does not annoy him. When approached, he has only to know that your motive is not

one of futile curiosity, but the love of truth; he assumes you to be serious, he replies, he examines your objections, sometime verbally, sometimes in writing; for, as he remarks, 'if there be some points which correspondence can never settle, but which can be made clear by conversation in two minutes, at other times just the opposite is the case: an objection clearly stated in writing, a doubt well expressed, which elicits a direct and positive reply, helps things along more than ten hours of oral intercourse!' In writing to you he does not hesitate to treat the subject anew; he unfolds to you the foundation and superstructure of his thought: rarely does he confess himself defeated--it is not his way; he holds to his position, but admits the breaks, the variations, in short, the EVOLUTION of his mind. The history of his mind is in his letters; there it must be sought.

"Proudhon, whoever addresses him, is always ready; he quits the page of the book on which he is at work to answer you with the same pen, and that without losing

patience, without getting confused, without sparing or complaining of his ink; he is a public man, devoted to the propagation of his idea by all methods, and the best method, with him, is always the present one, the latest one. His very handwriting, bold, uniform, legible, even in the most tiresome passages, betrays haste, and a hurry to finish. Each line is accurate: nothing is left to chance; the punctuation, very correct and a little emphatic and decided, indicates with precision and delicate distinction all the links in the chain of his argument. He is devoted entirely to you, to his business and yours, while writing to you, and never to anything else. All the letters of his which I have seen are serious: not one is commonplace.

"But at the same time not at all artistic or affected; he does not CONSTRUCT his letters, he does not revise them, he spends no time in reading them over; we have a first draught, excellent and clear, a jet from the fountain-head, but that is all. The new arguments, which he discovers in support of his ideas and which opposition

suggests to me, are an agreeable surprise, and shed a light which would vainly search for even his works. His correspondence differs essentially from his books, in that it gives you no uneasiness; it places you in the very heart of the man, explains him to you, and leaves you with an impression of moral esteem and almost of intellectual security. We feel his sincerity. I know of no one to whom he can be more fitly compared in this respect than George Sand, whose correspondence is large, and at the same time full of sincerity. His role and his nature correspond. If he is writing to a young man who unbosoms himself to me in sceptical anxiety, to a young woman who asks him to decide delicate questions of conduct for her, his letter takes the form of a short moral essay, of a father-confessor's advice. Has he perchance attended the theatre (a rare thing for him) to witness one of Ponsart's comedies, or a drama of Charles Edmond's, he feels bound to give an account of his impressions to the friend to whom he is indebted for this pleasure, and his letter becomes a literary and philosophical criticism, full

of sense, and like nther. His familiarity is suited to his correspondent; h affects n rudeness. The terms of civility or affection which he employs towards his correspondents are sober, masured,appropriate to each, and honest in their simplicity and cordiality. When he speaks of morals and the family, heems at times like the patriarchs of the Bible. His command of language is coplete, and he never fails to avail himself of it. Now and then a coarse word, a fe personalities, too bitter and quite unjust or injurious, will have to be suppressed in printing;time, however, as it passes away, permits many things and renders them inoffensive. Am I right i saying that Proudhon'sorrespondence, always substantial, will one day be the mst accessible and attractive portion of his works?"

Almost the whole of Proudhon's real biography i included iis correspondence. Up to 1837, the date of the first letter which we have been able to collect, his life,

narrated by Sainte Beuve, from whom we have numerous extracts, may be summed up in a few pages.

Pierre Joseph Proudhon was born on the 15th of January, 1809, in a suburb of Besancon, called Mouillere. His father and mother were employed in the great brewery belonging to M. Renaud. His father, though a cousin of the jurist Proudhon, the celebrated professor in the faculty of Dijon, was a journeyman brewer. His mother, a genuine peasant, was a common servant. She was an orderly person of great good sense; and, as they who knew her say, a superior woman of HEROIC character,--to use the expression of the venerable M. Weiss, the librarian at Besancon. She it was especially that Proudhon resembled: she and his grandfather Tournesi, the soldier peasant of whom his mother told him, and whose courageous deeds he has described in his work on "Justice." Proudhon, who always felt a great veneration for his mother Catharine, gave her name to the elder of his daughters. In 1814, when Besancon was blockaded, Mouillere, which

stood in front of the walls of the town, was destroyed in the defence of the place; and Proudhon's father established a cooper's shop in a suburb of Battant, called Vignerons. Very honest, but simple-minded and short-sighted, this cooper, the father of five children, of whom Pierre Joseph was the eldest, passed his life in poverty. At eight years of age, Proudhon either made himself useful in the house, or tended the cattle out of doors. No one should fail to read that beautiful and precious page of his work on "Justice," in which he describes the rural sports which he enjoyed when a neatherd. At the age of twelve, he had a cellarboy in an inn. This, however, did not prevent him from studying.

His mother was greatly aided by M. Renaud, the former owner of the brewery, who had at that time retired from business, and was engaged in the education of his children.

Proudhon entered school as a day-scholar in the sixth class. He was necessarily irregular in his attendance; domestic

cares and restraints sometimes kept him from his classes. He succeeded nevertheless in his studies; showed great perseverance. His family were so poor that they could not afford to furnish him with books; he was obliged to borrow them from his comrades, and copy the text of his lessons. He has himself told us that he was obliged to leave his wooden shoes outside the door, that he might not disturb the classes with his noise; and that, having no hat, he went to school bareheaded. One day, towards the close of his studies, on returning from the distribution of the prizes, loaded with crowns, he found nothing to eat in the house.

"In his eagerness for labor and his thirst for knowledge, Proudhon," says Sainte Beuve, "was not content with the instruction of his teachers. From his twelfth to his fourteenth year, he was a constant frequenter of the town library. One curiosity led to another, and he called for book after book, sometimes eight or ten at one sitting. The learned librarian, the friend and almost the

brother of Charles Nodier, M. Weiss, approached him one day, and said, smiling, 'But, my little friend, what do you wish to do with all these books?' The child raised his head, eyed his questioner, and replied: 'What's that to you?' And the good M. Weiss remembers it to this day."

Forced to earn his living, Proudhon could not continue his studies. He entered a printing-office in Besancon as a proofreader. Becoming, soon after, a compositor, he made a tour of France in this capacity. At Toulon, where he found himself without money and without work, had a scene with the mayor, which he describes in his work on "Justice."

Sainte Beuve says that, after his tour of France, his service book being filled with good certificates, Proudhon was promoted to the position of foreman. But he does not tell us, for the reason that he had no knowledge of a letter written by Fallot, of which we never heard until six