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Society and Economy in History

KARL MARX

This selection comes from Marx's letter of December 28, 1846, to P. V. Annenkov, who had asked for his opinion of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's new book *The Philosophy of Poverty*. Marx subsequently expanded his critique of the book into a book-length polemic, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (the meat of which is succinctly stated in this letter).

The material here presented is of interest as a trenchant statement of the materialist conception of history, Marx's enlarged understanding of the division of labor as a ubiquitous fact of human historical development, his view on the evolution of machinery, and his notion of dialectics as a process that finds final resolution in a social condition beyond conflict ("contradictions"). Since this document appeared at the close of Marx's early period, it conclusively disproves the notion of a hiatus between a Hegelian-Feuerbachian philosophical early Marx who hadn't reached historical materialism, and a scientific mature Marx who had.* It was *in and through* the early writings represented in this section of our reader that Marx created historical materialism.

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* * * M. Proudhon sees in history a series of social developments; he finds progress realised in history; finally he finds that men, as individuals, did not know what they were doing and were mistaken about their own movement, that is to say, their social development seems at the first glance to be distinct, separate and independent of their individual development. He cannot explain these facts, and so the hypothesis of universal reason manifesting itself comes in very handy. Nothing is easier than to invent mystical causes, that is to say, phrases which lack common sense.

But when M. Proudhon admits that he understands nothing about the historical development of humanity—he admits this by using such high-sounding words as: Universal Reason, God, etc.—is he not implicitly and necessarily admitting that he is incapable of understanding *economic development*?

What is society, whatever its form may be? The product of men's reciprocal action. Are men free to choose this or that form of society? By no means. Assume a particular state of development in the productive faculties of man and you will get a particular form of commerce and consumption. Assume particular stages of

* A recent exponent of the hiatus *Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (New theory is Louis Althusser. See his *For* York: Pantheon, 1969), e.g., p. 47.

development in production, commerce and consumption and you will have a corresponding social constitution, a corresponding organisation of the family, of orders or of classes, in a word, a corresponding civil society. Assume a particular civil society and you will get particular political conditions which are only the official expression of civil society. M. Proudhon will never understand this because he thinks he is doing something great by appealing from the state to civil society—that is to say, from the official résumé of society to official society.

It is superfluous to add that men are not free to choose *their productive forces*—which are the basis of all their history—for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of former activity. The productive forces are therefore the result of practical human energy; but this energy is itself conditioned by the circumstances in which men find themselves, by the productive forces already acquired, by the social form which exists before they do, which they do not create, which is the product of the preceding generation. Because of this simple fact that every succeeding generation finds itself in possession of the productive forces acquired by the previous generation, which serve it as the raw material for new production, a coherence arises in human history, a history of humanity takes shape which is all the more a history of humanity as the productive forces of man and therefore his social relations have been more developed. Hence it necessarily follows that the social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their material relations are the basis of all their relations. These material relations are only the necessary forms in which their material and individual activity is realised.

M. Proudhon mixes up ideas and things. Men never relinquish what they have won, but this does not mean that they never relinquish the social form in which they have acquired certain productive forces. On the contrary, in order that they may not be deprived of the result attained and forfeit the fruits of civilisation, they are obliged, from the moment when their mode of carrying on commerce no longer corresponds to the productive forces acquired, to change all their traditional social forms. I am using the word “commerce” here in its widest sense, as we use *Verkehr* in German. For example: the privileges, the institution of guilds and corporations, the regulatory regime of the Middle Ages, were social relations that alone corresponded to the acquired productive forces and to the social condition which had previously existed and from which these institutions had arisen. Under the protection of the regime of corporations and regulations, capital was accumulated, overseas trade was developed, colonies were founded. But the fruits of this men

would have forfeited if they had tried to retain the forms under whose shelter these fruits had ripened. Hence burst two thunder-claps—the Revolutions of 1640 and 1688. All the old economic forms, the social relations corresponding to them, the political conditions which were the official expression of the old civil society, were destroyed in England. Thus the economic forms in which men produce, consume, and exchange, are *transitory and historical*. With the acquisition of new productive faculties, men change their mode of production and with the mode of production all the economic relations which are merely the necessary relations of this particular mode of production.

This is what M. Proudhon has not understood and still less demonstrated. M. Proudhon, incapable of following the real movement of history, produces a phantasmagoria which presumptuously claims to be dialectical. He does not feel it necessary to speak of the seventeenth, the eighteenth or the nineteenth century, for his history proceeds in the misty realm of imagination and rises far above space and time. In short, it is not history but old Hegelian junk, it is not profane history—a history of man—but sacred history—a history of ideas. From his point of view man is only the instrument of which the idea or the eternal reason makes use in order to unfold itself. The *evolutions* of which M. Proudhon speaks are understood to be evolutions such as are accomplished within the mystic womb of the absolute idea. If you tear the veil from this mystical language, what it comes to is that M. Proudhon is offering you the order in which economic categories arrange themselves inside his own mind. It will not require great exertion on my part to prove to you that it is the order of a very disorderly mind.

The series of economic evolutions of the eternal reason begins with *division of labour*. To M. Proudhon division of labour is a perfectly simple thing. But was not the caste regime also a particular division of labour? Was not the regime of the corporations another division of labour? And is not the division of labour under the system of manufacture, which in England begins in the middle of the seventeenth century and comes to an end in the last part of the eighteenth, also totally different from the division of labour in large-scale, modern industry?

M. Proudhon is so far from the truth that he neglects what even the profane economists attend to. When he talks about division of labour he does not feel it necessary to mention the world *market*. Good. Yet must not the division of labour in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, when there were still no colonies, when America did not as yet exist for Europe, and Eastern Asia only existed for her through the medium of Constantinople, have been fundamentally different from what it was in the seventeenth century when colonies were already developed.

And that is not all. Is the whole inner organisation of nations, are all their international relations anything else than the expression of a particular division of labour? And must not these change when the division of labour changes?

M. Proudhon has so little understood the problem of the division of labour that he never even mentions the separation of town and country, which took place in Germany, for instance, from the ninth to the twelfth century. Thus, to M. Proudhon, this separation is an eternal law since he knows neither its origin nor its development. All through his book he speaks as if this creation of a particular mode of production would endure until the end of time. All that M. Proudhon says about the division of labour is only a summary, and moreover a very superficial and incomplete summary, of what Adam Smith and a thousand others have said before him.

The second evolution is *machinery*. The connection between the division of labour and machinery is entirely mystical to M. Proudhon. Each kind of division of labour had its specific instruments of production. Between the middle of the seventeenth and the middle of the eighteenth century, for instance, people did not make everything by hand. They had instruments, and very complicated ones at that, such as looms, ships, levers, etc.

Thus there is nothing more absurd than to derive machinery from division of labour in general.

I may also remark, by the way, that M. Proudhon has understood very little the historical origin of machinery, but has still less understood its development. One can say that up to the year 1825—the period of the first general crisis—the demands of consumption in general increased more rapidly than production, and the development of machinery was a necessary consequence of the needs of the market. Since 1825, the invention and application of machinery has been simply the result of the war between workers and employers. But this is only true of England. As for the European nations, they were driven to adopt machinery owing to English competition both in their home markets and on the world market. Finally, in North America the introduction of machinery was due both to competition with other countries and to lack of hands, that is, to the disproportion between the population of North America and its industrial needs. From these facts you can see what sagacity Monsieur Proudhon develops when he conjures up the spectre of competition as the third evolution, the antithesis to machinery!

Lastly and in general, it is altogether absurd to make *machinery* an economic category alongside with division of labour, competition, credit, etc.

Machinery is no more an economic category than the ox which draws the plough. The application of machinery in the present day is one of the relations of our present economic system, but the way

in which machinery is utilised is totally distinct from the machinery itself. Powder is powder whether used to wound a man or to dress his wounds.

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M. Proudhon, mainly because he lacks the historical knowledge, has not perceived that as men develop their productive faculties, that is, as they live, they develop certain relations with one another and that the nature of these relations must necessarily change with the change and growth of the productive faculties. He has not perceived that *economic categories* are only *abstract expressions* of these actual relations and only remain true while these relations exist. He therefore falls into the error of the bourgeois economists, who regard these economic categories as eternal and not as historical laws which are only laws for a particular historical development, for a definite development of the productive forces. Instead, therefore, of regarding the political-economic categories as abstract expressions of the real, transitory, historic social relations, Monsieur Proudhon, thanks to a mystic inversion, sees in the real relations only embodiments of these abstractions. These abstractions themselves are formulas which have been slumbering in the heart of God the Father since the beginning of the world.

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Monsieur Proudhon has very well grasped the fact that men produce cloth, linen, silks, and it is a great merit on his part to have grasped this small amount! What he has not grasped is that these men, according to their abilities, also produce the *social relations* amid which they prepare cloth and linen. Still less has he understood that men, who produce their social relations in accordance with their material productivity, also produce *ideas, categories*, that is to say the abstract ideal expressions of these same social relations. Thus the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products. To M. Proudhon, on the contrary, abstractions, categories are the primordial cause. According to him they, and not men, make history. The *abstraction*, the *category taken as such*, i.e., apart from men and their material activities, is of course immortal, unchangeable, unmoved; it is only one form of the being of pure reason; which is only another way of saying that the abstraction as such is abstract. An admirable tautology!

Thus, regarded as categories, economic relations for M. Proudhon are eternal formulas without origin or progress.

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M. Proudhon is therefore necessarily *doctrinaire*. To him the historical movement, which is turning the present-day world upside down, reduces itself to the problem of discovering the correct equi-

librium, the synthesis, of two bourgeois thoughts. And so the clever fellow by virtue of his subtlety discovers the hidden thought of God, the unity of two isolated thoughts—which are only isolated because M. Proudhon has isolated them from practical life, from present-day production, which is the combination of the realities which they express. In place of the great historical movement arising from the conflict between the productive forces already acquired by men and their social relations, which no longer correspond to these productive forces; in place of the terrible wars which are being prepared between the different classes within each nation and between different nations; in place of the practical and violent action of the masses by which alone these conflicts can be resolved—in place of this vast, prolonged and complicated movement, Monsieur Proudhon supplies the whimsical motion of his own head. So it is the men of learning that make history, the men who know how to purloin God's secret thoughts. The common people have only to apply their revelations. You will now understand why M. Proudhon is the declared enemy of every political movement. The solution of present problems does not lie for him in public action but in the dialectical rotations of his own head. Since to him the categories are the motive force, it is not necessary to change practical life in order to change the categories. Quite the contrary. One must change the categories and the consequence will be a change in the existing society.

In his desire to reconcile the contradictions Monsieur Proudhon does not even ask if the very basis of those contradictions must not be overthrown. He is exactly like the political doctrinaire who wants to have the king and the chamber of deputies and the chamber of peers as integral parts of social life, as eternal categories. All he is looking for is a new formula by which to establish an equilibrium between these powers whose equilibrium consists precisely in the actual movement in which one power is now the conqueror and now the slave of the other. Thus in the eighteenth century a number of mediocre minds were busy finding the true formula which would bring the social estates, nobility, king, parliament, etc., into equilibrium, and they woke up one morning to find that there was in fact no longer any king, parliament or nobility. The true equilibrium in this antagonism was the overthrow of all the social relations which served as a basis for these feudal existences and for the antagonisms of these feudal existences.

Because M. Proudhon places eternal ideas, the categories of pure reason, on the one side and human beings and their practical life, which, according to him is the application of these categories, on the other, one finds with him from the beginning a *dualism* between life and ideas, between soul and body, a dualism which recurs in many forms. You can see now that this antagonism is nothing but

the incapacity of M. Proudhon to understand the profane origin and the profane history of the categories which he deifies.

My letter is already too long for me to speak of the absurd case which M. Proudhon puts up against communism. For the moment you will grant me that a man who has not understood the present state of society may be expected to understand still less the movement which is tending to overthrow it, and the literary expressions of this revolutionary movement.

The sole point on which I am in complete agreement with Monsieur Proudhon is in his dislike for sentimental socialistic day-dreams. I had already, before him, drawn much enmity upon myself by ridiculing this sentimental, utopian, mutton-headed socialism. But is not M. Proudhon strangely deluding himself when he sets up his petty-bourgeois sentimentality—I am referring to his declamations about home, conjugal love and all such banalities—in opposition to socialist sentimentality, which in Fourier, for example goes much deeper than the pretentious platitudes of our worthy Proudhon? * * *