Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
The Nature and Destination of Government
1849

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1. Translator's note: Proudhon uses the word "*partis*," the plural of "*parti*." Though "party" in the modern sense might be the most direct translation, according to Hal Draper, in the 1840s, "party" meant "a political tendency, even if unorganised, … a certain wing of politics." Thus "*parti*" is rendered throughout the text as "faction" to reflect the conflictual element that Proudhon emphasizes. 2. Jean-Bénigne Bossuet, 1627-1704, French Bishop renowned for his sermons. Author, notably, of the "Declaration of the Four Articles" (1682), seeking to define a sphere of autonomy from papal authority for the French church.

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There must, says holy Scripture, be factions [*partis*] [1]: For there must be heresies* [Oportet enim hoereses esse*]. – Terrible. *There must!* writes Bossuet [2] in profound adoration, without daring to search for the reason behind this *There must!*

A little reflection has revealed to us the principle and the significance of factions: the point is to know their goal and their end.

All men are equal and free: society, by nature and destination, is thus autonomous, one might say, ungovernable. If the sphere of activity of each citizen is determined by the natural division of labor and the choice one makes of a profession, social functions are combined so as to produce an effect of harmony, and the order results from the free action of all; there is no government. Whosoever lays a hand on me in order to govern me is a usurper and a tyrant; I declare him my enemy.

But social physiology does not at first contain this egalitarian organization: the idea of Providence, among the first to appear in society, is repugnant to it. Equality happens to us by a succession of tyrannies and governments, in which Freedom is

continually in a struggle with absolutism, like Israel with Jehovah. Equality is thus born, for us, continually out of inequality. Freedom's father is Government.

Once the first men assembled on the edges of the forests to found the first societies, they did not say to one another, as shareholders of a company [*commandite*]: "Let us organize our rights and our duties in such a way as to provide each of us with the greatest amount of well-being, and to bring along our equality and our independence as well." So much reason was beyond the grasp of the first men, and in contradiction with the theory of those preaching revelation. The language we used was quite different: "Let us constitute among ourselves an authority that will watch over and govern us, *Constituamus super nos regem*! It is in this way that our peasants heard it, on December 10, 1848, when they gave their votes to Louis Bonaparte. The voice of the people is the voice of power, while waiting for it to become the voice of liberty. Also, all authority is by divine right, *Omnis potestas à Deo,* says Saint Paul.

> Authority, then, behold that which was the first social idea of human kind. And the second was to work immediately for the abolition of authority, each person wanting to make it an instrument to his or her own freedom against the freedom of others: such is the work and the destiny of Factions.

Authority was not long inaugurated in the world, when it became the object of universal competition. Authority, Government, Power, State, – these words all designate the same thing; – each sees in them the means to oppress and exploit his fellows. Absolutists, doctrinaires, demagogues and socialists, all incessantly turn their regard to authority, as if towards their shared magnetic pole.

> From this comes the aphorism of the radical faction, which the doctrinaires and absolutists as-

> suredly would not disavow: *The social revolution is the goal; the political revolution* (that is to say, the change of authority) *is the means*. This means: "Give us the right of life and death over your persons and your belongings, and we will make you free!."..For more than six thousand years the kings and priests have been repeating that line!

Thus the Government and the factions, are, reciprocally one to the other, Cause, End and Means. They exist for each other; they have a common destiny: it is to call the populace to emancipation each day; it is to energetically solicit their initiative at the expense of their faculties; it is to mold [*façonner*] their minds and push them continually towards progress by prejudice, by restrictions, and with a calculated resistance to all their ideas, to all their needs. You will not do this; you will abstain from that: the Government, no matter which faction reigns, has never known how to say anything else. *Interdiction* has been, since Eden, the educational system of humanity. But, once man reaches the age of majority, the Government and the Factions must disappear. This conclusion arrives with the same logical force, the same necessary tendency as we saw socialism come out of absolutism, philosophy be born of religion, and equality find purchase [*se poser*] on inequality itself.

When, by philosophical analysis, one wants to take account of authority, of its principle, its forms, its effects, one recognizes quickly enough that the constitution of authority, spiritually and temporally, is nothing other than a preliminary organism [*organisme préparatoire*], in essence parasitic and corruptible, incapable of producing anything by itself but tyranny and misery, whatever form it takes, whatever ideas it represents. Philosophy affirms in consequence that, contrary to faith, the constitution of authority over the people is but a transitional establishment, that power not being a conclusion of science, but a product of spontaneity, disintegrates as soon as it is dis-

cussed, that, far from strengthening and growing with time, as suppose the rival factions that besiege it, it must be reduced indefinitely and be absorbed into the organization of industry. In consequence, it must not be placed *on*, but under society; and, turning the aphorism of the radicals on its head, it concludes: *The political revolution*, the abolition of authority among men, *is the goal*, *the social revolution is the means*.

It is for this reason, adds the philosopher, that all factions, without exception, as much as they affect power, are variations of absolutism, and that there will not be freedom for citizens, order for societies, unity among workers, until the renunciation of authority has replaced the political catechism of faith in authority.

> No more factions;
>
> No more authority;
>
> Absolute freedom for man and citizen.

In three phrases, I have made my political and social profession of faith.

It is in this spirit of governmental negation that one day I spoke thus to a man who, though he was of rare intelligence, had the weakness of wanting to be a minister:

> "Conspire with us for the demolition of the government. Make yourself a revolutionary for the transformation of Europe and the world, and remain a journalist. (*Représentant du Peuple*, June 5, 1848)

He replied:

> "There are two ways of being a revolutionary: *from above*, which is to say the revolution by initiative, by intelligence, by progress, by ideas; – *from below*,

its atrocious rites: anthropophagy subsists everywhere in the spirit of our institutions, I attest it in the sacrament of the Eucharist and the penal code.

Philosophical reason repudiates this symbolism of savages. It proscribes these exaggerated forms of *human respect*. And yet it does not claim, with the radicals and the doctrinaires, that we can undertake this reform by legislative authority; it does not concede that anyone has the right to prosecute the good of the people, in spite of the people, or that it be lawful to liberate a nation that wants to be governed. Philosophy only puts its trust in reforms coming out of the free will of societies: the only revolutions that it admits are those which precede from the initiative of the masses: it denies, in the most absolute manner, the revolutionary competency of governments.

In summary:

If we consult only faith, the schism [*scission*] of society appears as the terrible effect of the original fall of man. That is what Greek mythology expressed by the fable of the warriors born of snake's teeth who all killed each other at birth. God, according to this myth, left the government of humanity in the hands of antagonistic factions, such that discord establish its reign on earth, and that man learn, under perpetual tyranny, how to turn his thought towards another plane of existence [*séjour*].

Before reason, governments and factions are naught but the staging of the fundamental concepts of society, a realization of abstractions, a metaphysical pantomime whose meaning is FREEDOM.

I have made my profession of faith. You know the characters who, in this account of my political life, must play the principal roles. You know what subject they represent. Be attentive to what I will now recount to you.

it is not the Bible that reveals it, but the logic of societies, the chain reaction of revolutionary acts; it is all modern philosophy.

Following Mr. de Lamartine, agreeing on this with Mr. de Genoude, it is for the government to say *I want*. The country has but to respond *I consent*.

And centuries of experience answers them, saying that the best governments are those which are most successful at rendering themselves useless. Do we need parasites to work and priests to speak to God? We have no more need of the elected officials who govern us.

The exploitation of man by man, someone said, is theft. Well, then! The government of man by man is servitude. And all positive religion, finding its end point in the dogma of papal infallibility, is nothing other than the worship of man by man – idolatry.

Absolutism, founding, all at once, the power of the altar, the throne, and the bank, has multiplied the network of chains on humanity. After the exploitation of man by man, after the government of man by man, after the worship of man by man, we have yet still:

> The judgment of man by man,
>
> The condemnation of man by man,
>
> And to finish the series, the punishment of man by man.

These religious, political, and judiciary institutions, of which we are so proud, we must respect and obey until, by the progress of time, they wither and fall, like fruit falls during its season. They are the instruments of our apprenticeship, visible signs of the governance of Instinct over humanity, the weakened, but not disfigured remnants of the bloody customs that signal our base age. Anthropophagy has long since disappeared, but not without the resistance of authority, with

> which is to say the revolution by insurrection, by force, by desperation, by throwing cobble stones.
>
> "I was, I still am a revolutionary *from above*, I have never been, I never will be a revolutionary *from below*.
>
> "Do not count on me to ever conspire for the demolition of any government, my spirit [*esprit*] would refuse. It is open to but one thought: improve the government." (*Presse*, June 6, 1848).

There is in this distinction, *from above*, *from below*, much rattling and very little truth. Mr. de Girardin, in expressing himself thus, thought he was saying something as new as it was profound. He has only reproduced the eternal illusion of demagogues who, thinking that they were advancing revolutions, with the help of those in power, have only ever managed to push them back. Let us examine Mr. de Girardin's thought more closely.

It pleases this ingenious publicist to call a revolution by initiative, intelligence, progress and ideas, a *revolution from above*; it pleases him to call a revolution by insurrection and despair, a *revolution from below*. It is precisely the opposite which is true.

From above, in the thought of the author that I cite, is evidently the power; *from below* means the people. On one side, the action of the government, on the other, the initiative of the masses. What is at issue, then, is which of these two initiatives, that of the government and that of the people, is more intelligent, more progressive, more peaceful.

But, the revolution from above is inevitably – I will say the reason why later – a revolution by the capricious pleasure [*bon plaisir*] of the prince, by the arbitrariness of a minister, by the tentative groping [*tâtonnements*] of an assembly, by the violence of a club; it is revolution by dictatorship and despotism.

Louis XIV, Napoleon, Charles X practiced it thus; so Mr. Guizot, Louis Blanc, Leon Faucher want it. The whites, the blues, the reds, they are all in agreement on this point.

The revolution by the initiative of the masses is a revolution by concerted citizens, by the experience of workers, by the diffusion of enlightenment – a revolution by freedom. Condorcet, Turgot, Robespierre sought the revolution from below, real democracy. One of the men who revolutionized the most, and who governed the least was Saint Louis. France, at the time of Saint Louis, made herself what she is; like a grapevine grows its buds, she produced her lords and her vassals: When the king published his famous rules, he was nothing but the recorder of the public wills.

Socialism has given in completely to the illusion of radicalism. The divine Plato, over two thousand years ago, is a sobering [*triste*] example. Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, Cabet, Louis Blanc, all partisans of the organization of work by the State, by capital, by any authority, call for, like my Mr. de Girardin, the revolution from above. Instead of teaching the people how to organize themselves, to appeal to their experience and their reason, they demand power from them. In what way do they differ from the despots? They are also utopian, like all despots: the latter cannot last, the former cannot take root.

The implication is that the Government can never be revolutionary, and for the very simple reason that it is government. Only society, the mass of the people penetrated by intelligence, can revolutionize itself, because only it can rationally deploy its spontaneity, analyze its situation, explain the mystery of its destiny and its origin, change its faith and its philosophy; because it alone, ultimately, is capable of struggling against its author, to produce its fruit. Governments are the scourges of God, established to discipline the world; and you want them to destroy themselves, to create freedom, to make revolutions!

It cannot be that way. All revolutions from the coronation of the first king to the Declaration of the Rights of Man,

were accomplished by the spontaneity of the people. Governments have always impeded [*empêché*], always suppressed [*comprimé*], always struck with force [*frappé*], never have they revolutionized anything. Their role is not to bring about movement, but to hold it back. Even if they were to have the revolutionary science, social science, to which they are averse, they could not apply it, they would not have the right. It would first be necessary to disseminate their science among the people, so that they could obtain the consent of the citizens; to expect this is to misunderstand the nature of authority and power.

The facts come to confirm the theory here. The nations which are most free are those where the power has the least initiative, where its role is the most restrained: let us cite only the United States of America, Switzerland, England, Holland. On the contrary, the most subjugated nations are those where the power is the best organized and the strongest, we can witness. And yet we complain ceaselessly about not being governed, we demand always a stronger power, always stronger!

Long ago the church said, speaking like a tender mother: Everything for the people, but everything by the priests.

The monarchy came after the church: Everything for the people, but everything by the prince.

The doctrinaires : Everything for the people, but everything by the bourgeoisie.

The radicals have not changed the principles for having changed the formula: Everything for the people, but everything by the state.

It's always the same governmentalism, the same communism.

Who would dare say finally: All for the people, even the government? – All for the people: Agriculture, commerce, industry, philosophy, religion, police, etc. All by the people: the government, religion, just as much as agriculture and commerce.

Democracy is the abolition of all powers, spiritual and temporal, legislative, executive, judiciary, proprietary. Doubtless