

Letter from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to Karl Marx

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Letter from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to Karl Marx

My dear Mr. Marx, I willingly agree to become one of the recipients of your correspondence, the goal and objective of which seem to me most useful. . . .

I will take the liberty of having a few reservations suggested to me by various passages in your letter. First of all, even though my ideas, in terms of organization and production, are at this time well settled at least with respect to principles, I believe it is my duty, as it is the duty of any socialist, to preserve for some more time a critical or doubting posture; in a word, I make it my practice to have, along with the general public, an almost absolute economic antidogmatism.

Let us seek together, if you'd like, the laws of society, the manner in which these laws are produced, the progress by which we succeed in discovering them; but, for God's sake! after having demolished all dogmatisms *a priori*, we must not, in turn, think of indoctrinating the people; we must not fall into the contradiction of your compatriot Martin Luther, who, after having overturned Catholic theology, set about soon after, with the reinforcement of excommunications and anathemas, to found a Protestant theology. . . . Because we are at the head of a movement, let us not become the leaders of a new intolerance, let us not pose as apostles of a new religion, be it the religion of logic, the religion of reason. We should welcome, encourage all protests; denounce all exclusions, all mysticisms; let us never see a question as exhausted, and when we will have made our final argument, let us, if needed, begin again with eloquence and irony.

On that condition, I will join your association with pleasure, otherwise, no!

I also have some remarks to make on this phrase of your letter: "at the moment of action!" You perhaps still hold the opinion that no reform is at present possible without a push, without what we once called a revolution and is plainly nothing more than a jolt. That opinion I understand, I excuse and would willingly discuss, having long shared it myself, but I confess that my most recent studies have caused me to abandon it completely. I believe that we have no need for it in order to succeed, and consequently ought not suggest revolutionary action as a means of social reform since this supposed means would quite simply be an appeal to force, to arbitrariness, in short, a contradiction. . . .

The problem is for me as follows: to retrieve for society, by an economic combination, the wealth that was withdrawn from society by another economic combination. In other words, one needs to transform a theory of property into a political economy against property in such a way as to generate what you German socialists call community, and what I will, for the moment, stubbornly call liberty, equality. . . .

That, my dear philosopher, is where I am, at present; unless mistaken, and in the event of receiving a caning by your hand, to which I will submit with good grace in anticipation of getting even. . . .

In short, it would be in my opinion a bad policy for us to speak in terms of extermination; rigorous means will sufficiently come: the people need for that no exhortation!

May 17, 1846

Translated from P.-J. Proudhon, *Correspondance* (Paris: A. Lacroix Éditeurs, 1875), 198–202.