

FRANCE AND THE RHINE

[TRANSLATION IN PROGRESS]

PREFACE

The manuscript left by Proudhon under the title of *France and the Rhine* should, according to some indications left in the margin of the text, form a work of fourteen or fifteen chapters, divided into three or four parts. The first part alone, comprising three chapters under the common title *The Line of the Rhine*, was written and edited.

The rest of the manuscript consists only of a series of loose sheets, on which Proudhon, with distinct subtitles, collected in his own way materials for his work and developed certain ideas in view of his subject.

It is these sheets that we have brought together under the title of *Notes and Fragments*. They should be, in their strict conformity with the original text, of particular interest to those who like to study the first draft of a great writer.

The comparison of the copy delivered to the publisher with the original text was made by several friends of Proudhon, and in particular by MM. Rolland and Crétin.

Under the title *Appendix*, we have added to *France and Rhine* some pieces taken from various notes, which, not being unrelated to the present work, seemed to us better placed here than in a separate publication.

Gustave Chaudey.

Paris, October 1867.

I

OF THE PRINCIPLE OF NATURAL FRONTIERS

Among the most dangerous and unfortunately the most fashionable prejudices, we must count that of a delimitation of States drawn *a priori* by geography and nationalities.

It seems to a lot of people, who are pleased above all by the most superficial ideas, that if from the beginning we had followed, regarding the circumscription of the States, the indications of nature, there would no longer be any pretext for war; that, each people being sovereign within its limits, as the coalman is master in his hut, and humanity would develop in peace, rich and happy. For these people, the so-called principle of *natural frontiers*, combined with that of *nationalities*, forms the basis of political topography, the first article of the right of nations, against which no treaty, no prescription can be invoked.

For example, just as it seems monstrous that Austria should have Italian, Slavic or Magial subjects, just so we are disposed to believe, especially in France, that the limit of the French State should stop only at the Rhine, and that if it is otherwise, it is by an effect of Germanic

Machiavellianism and the fortune of arms, two causes against which France eternally preserves the right of appeal. Let, therefore, on a pretext as well-chosen as that which led to his last campaign, the Emperor Napoleon III take it into his head tomorrow to throw down the gauntlet to Europe, and to claim this famous border: he is sure to meet with the same favor, the same applause that the war in the East and the war in Italy won him. The republicans will not breathe a word, for fear of being taken for bad patriots; they will even admit that the possession of the Rhine enters into their principles, that such would be their policy, if they increased in power: only they will maintain that for such an enterprise the revolution is indispensable and that the Emperor does not have their trust at all.

The Legitimists, full of memories of Charlemagne, Philippe Auguste and Louis XIV, will think exactly like the Republicans: however, as they start from an opposite point of view, they will add that, to conquer the Rhine, it is necessary to begin by restoring the legitimate prince, the condition of all greatness, the instrument of all solid conquest.

The bourgeoisie—Orleanist or indifferent, it's all one—will also agree that it seems fine, rational, just; but it will allege the inopportunity, the risk of the enterprise, the uncertainty of the profit, the enormity of the expense. They will remark that the debt is already very heavy, the budget very large; that the last governments have done without the Rhine, and that the imperial government can also do without it. In short, they will conclude that the Emperor would do well to leave this magnificent, this magnanimous project to his heir.

It is not, as one might think, with an opposition of this strength that one prevents anything. Let us speak more justly: it is with such an opposition that a government—despotic or constitutional, the system has nothing to do with it—does whatever it wants. The day when the Emperor of the French enters Belgium, say it without fear, all parties will be his accomplices; and they will be his accomplices, because all obey the same prejudice.

Furthermore, it must be admitted: prejudice has facts on its side; it can even, to a certain extent, invoke practice, usage. It is obvious that France is admirably separated from Spain by the Pyrenees, from England by the English Channel. Why shouldn't it be the same with the Germanic peoples by the Rhine? It is also positive that the States, in their interminable changes, have come as close as possible to what could be considered a natural border. It is almost always a river, a mountain range, an arm of the sea that separates the territories. Finally, the idea of a border given by nature has the merit, which is certainly very considerable, of bringing international politics out of the arbitrariness in which it likes to remain, and of imposing on it a superior law, borrowed, we suppose at least, from the very reason of things. As we see, if the prejudice has its naivety, sometimes even its insolence, it also has its excuse.

Without doubt, it is up to a positive science, founded on the laws of nature and history, to furnish the bases of the law of nations, and since nations cannot but constitute themselves as separate sovereignties, to mark, as far as possible, the limit of the States. But, without taking into account that nothing proves that such an energetic separation was a good thing, we are going to see that in the application this so-called principle of *natural frontiers* is subject to two serious drawbacks: the first is that it is incompatible with the respect for nationalities, which however he

is called to serve; the second is that, under the political conditions imposed on States, it would create shocking inequalities, and soon become a means of domination, much more than a guarantee of peace. Contradiction and injustice: that, in a nutshell, is what the so-called principle of natural frontiers is reduced to in practice. This is what I will demonstrate in a few words.

II

THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF NATURAL FRONTIERS IS IN CONTRADICTION WITH ITS OBJECT, WHICH IS NATIONALITY, AND WITH ITS END, WHICH IS PEACE.

Every State has its origin in an agglomeration of persons brought together by spontaneity of blood, community of language and customs, solidarity of interests. The family, in a word, root of the nation, such is the basis or raw material of the State. We can therefore say that in principle, but only in principle, the State is adequate to the nation and that, as it is born with it, it develops, for a time, with it alone.

Now the nations appear in the first place on the heights, of which they occupy the two slopes, and from which they spread then into the valleys, while following, on the two banks, the course of the rivers. All the traditions tell it; geology and ethnography add their testimony. Thus Lebanon is Syrian, the Alps Celtic (Gallia cisalpina, and Gallia transalpina), the Jura Sequanian, etc., on their eastern and western slopes. The Apennines, much more than the Mediterranean and the Adriatic, made the Italic peoples homogeneous. For the same reason, the Nile is Egyptian, I mean that the race of Misraïm is indigenous to the Nile, left bank and right bank, the Euphrates is Chaldean, the Jordan Hebrew, the Rhine German, the Vistula Slavic. There is not even the English Channel which is not Breton on its two coasts, the Italian Adriatic, the Cattegat and the Sund Scandinavian, as formerly the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea were Greek. Something which was far from expected, when after the dissemination of peoples, States began to form, nationalities everywhere found themselves cut in two in the sense of their territorial length, precisely by what should group them together, the natural borders. Faced with this universal, fatal fact, what becomes of the pretended principle? To ensure the State, will nationality be sacrificed? This would be to subordinate man to matter, society to irregularities in the terrain, freedom to fatalism. This would, at the same time, enshrine the law of amalgams, which Austria above all represents, and which we are fighting today. On the contrary, to ensure nationality, let us set aside nature and its borders! We fall into vagueness; there is no longer any possible delimitation. On which side will be, according to you, the reason of things!

Thus, from the point of view of the formation of States, the principle of natural frontiers is in contradiction with that of nationalities. The peoples obeying a double impulse, the State was constituted with the help of a transaction between the race and the soil. Diplomacy, in treaties, seeks borders in relief, war finds its account there: basically, the conscience of the human race protests against this anti-fraternal principle.

But that is not all. Another disadvantage, no less serious, of the principle of natural frontiers would be to create, between the States that it is a question of bringing to agreement, an inequality of force such that their independence would not be of long duration; there would inevitably be one who, thanks to this geographical preponderance, would soon dominate all the others. Napoleon I said that whoever was master of Constantinople would become master of the world. Also the generally widespread opinion today, in the case of a dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, is it, after having carried out the division, to neutralize this strategic point. In a lesser proportion, perhaps France, brought back to its natural frontiers, would enjoy a similar position.

The natural borders of France are, as everyone knows, the Mediterranean, the Pyrenees, the Ocean, the English Channel, the Rhine and the Alps. This magnificent enclosure, of more than 50,000 square leagues, constitutes, within Europe, the most formidable position. To consult only the map, and without knowing anything of history, it is evident that, the States obeying their law of antagonism, and tending to absorb each other, sooner or later France will be dominant; what did I say? — Europe will form only one State, whose capital will be Paris. Would civilization and liberty gain from it? I doubt it, but that question is off topic. Let us confine ourselves to noting this fact, quite material, that the French State, if we grant it the limits that nature seems to have assigned to it, is predestined to absorb all the others. The position of this vast country, at once maritime and continental, which, by disengaging itself, puts, so to speak, its foot on its rivals; its temperate climate, its salubrious and fertile territory, its flora and fauna, conditions of existence for a race of the most gifted men, are a guarantee of triumph. So, either a great monarchy, with France as its home; or a vast feudalism, under the suzerainty of the Emperor of the French: this is what geography predicts for Europe, if it is geography that makes the rule.

Germany, more central, is less favored in other respects. Its territory, from sea to sea, is too extensive, less well put together for struggle; its ports, in the North Sea, in the Baltic and the Adriatic, too far from the ocean, are as badly placed for trade as for war. Hence a necessarily less homogeneous population, less centralized interests, less united, a spirit of divergence, a lesser tendency to political unity, a less pronounced desire for domination. One does not need to consult history to predict that Germany will be federalist, and therefore weaker than France in overcoming and repelling the foreigner.

Russia, eccentric and cold, late to civilization, is in a still more unfavorable condition than Germany. Always late, it cannot logically aspire to supremacy. Its unity is entirely artificial, in no way organic. Suppose it, in all its parts, to have reached the level of Franco-Germanic civilization, it would then tend to disintegrate; it would not take the effort of 1812 to defeat it.

As for England, if the strait that covers it seems up to a certain point to guarantee its independence, the same reason prevents it from aspiring to the domination of the continent. It is therefore in the interest of England to maintain the balance between the States, to combat any tendency to supremacy, and, in order to achieve this, to ensure, as long as it can, the superiority of capital, navy, industry, colonies. This superiority must have an end, but this end coinciding with the cessation of antagonism between States, Great Britain has nothing to lose in seeing itself equaled; it has no other goal, no other glory.

The role of Italy and Spain is no less clearly indicated, I always reason in the double hypothesis of the application to France of the principle of natural borders and the permanence of antagonism: these are the two satellites of the planet, to put it better, the two wings of the French army.

Thus, Europe being given with its geographical configuration, the tendency to absorption being the law of the States, French domination follows inevitably. And the march of conquest is traced: on the one hand, to secure Italy and Spain; on the other, to balance England by sea and by trade; then to burst into Europe by the Rhine. Now, as the instinct of peoples is given by the reason of things, what happens? Precisely that the innate passion of the French people is to obtain the supremacy of Europe, and for that to possess the Rhine; on the other hand, that the passion of the Germanic people, of England and of Russia, is to oppose this possession.

The whole of French politics, I am talking about instinctive, traditional politics, is there: it is innate in the people; all governments, more or less, on pain of unpopularity, have had to serve it; it is the principle of that antipathy for which we have been so reproached for the Austrians and the English, our rivals, I should say our natural wardens. This is why the last expedition to Italy, after some murmurings, obtained so much favor among the masses, although in reality there exists between the Italian and the Frenchman a far greater incompatibility of temper than between the latter and the Austrians or English. This is why, for centuries, our kings have not ceased to battle with the English, to dispute the sea with them, at the same time as they tiptoed in Italy and the Netherlands. Napoleon I did nothing but copy the policy of kings throughout his reign: he placed one of his brothers in Italy, another in Naples, a third in Holland; this done, he becomes mediator of the Swiss Confederation, protector of the Confederation of the Rhine; he creates a kingdom of Westphalia; he dismembers Austria, Prussia, and, to end it all at once, carries his arms to Russia. What force could have held against him? He was vanquished, because the idea of a universal monarchy, in the nineteenth century, had become retrograde; because civilization no longer admitted it, as was proved by the insurrection of nationalities in Spain, in southern Italy, in Russia, and throughout Germany. The empire defeated, the line of the Rhine is taken back from France, but no explanation returns to enlighten the masses; the instinct of the country is reborn more stubborn; France must know the preponderance: the monarchical tradition, the imperial memories, the opposition of the parties, the resentment of the masses, the insolence of the coalition, everything pushes there.

The unfortunate Bourbons got back to work like convicts, broke with England, intervened in Spain, protected Greece, made North Africa a French colony. It is not until Louis-Philippe, the deserter of French supremacy, who did not see himself forced, in spite of his love of peace, to support the separation of Belgium, which he dared not accept for one of his sons, to occupy Ancona, and to maintain, in a profound peace, but in all eventualities, an army of 400,000 men.

Can we admit, in good philosophy, that this stubborn effort had no other cause than the ambition of the princes, the belligerent mood of the nation, or, what would be more silly still, the pretexts of the current policy? ? This would be making the effects greater than the causes, explaining a perfectly intelligible natural phenomenon by follies, by miracles.

Each people, says Herder, a philosopher from beyond the Rhine, has no inclination, no idea, except what the soil it inhabits communicates to it. What gave the French people their unitary genius, consequently their tendency to the supremacy of Europe, is the territorial massif of which they occupy the center, between the Mediterranean and the Ocean, the Rhine, the Pyrenees and the Alps. And what prevented this same people from realizing, before and after Rome, the hypothesis of a universal empire, is that they have never been able, either before or since Jesus Christ, to establish in a way solid its domination on the Rhine, and it could not because at the time when Rome was fighting against Greece, against Carthage and against Asia, for the domination of the world, Gaul, still barbarous, had not formed its own unit; because then, at the fall of the Roman Empire, universal opinion, in Gaul as everywhere, was contrary to the constitution of this grandiose utopia; because later the feudal system, created under the initiative of France, as of Italy and Germany, excluded it; because in the end, when feudalism fell, either under the Dukes of Burgundy or after the Treaty of Westphalia, it was too late.

For more than two thousand years, the strategic reason of Europe protested against this application of the principle of natural frontiers: the possession of the line of the Rhine by the French. A glance back will show us what role this powerful barrier played in the revolutions of Europe, what fatality it weighed on it. I only want this monograph of the Rhine to demonstrate the reality of a philosophy of history; and, at the present time, it would be for my compatriots, if I could be heard by them, the greatest service that I could render them.

Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur