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THE GENERAL CONFESSION OF P.-J. PROUDHON

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To Mr. Romain Cornut
Ste-Pélagie, November 26, 1851.

Before reporting to the public on my various publications, you wish, for greater certainty, to ask me how I envision them as a whole, how I understand their unity and connection.

This desire of yours, sir, is entirely legitimate, and the question perfectly just; there is no doctrine where there is no unity; and, as a thinker, as a revolutionary, I would not merit an hour of consideration if there did not exist, within the multitude of sometimes very disparate propositions that I have alternately supported and denied, something that connects them and forms a body of doctrine. In the past, one would ask a man, in order to judge him: What is your God? What is your faith? The least that one can demand of an innovator today is to know his principle.

I cannot thank you enough, sir, for this profound impartiality, this sincere critical faith, which leads you to seek, above all else, not the writer's weakness — it is all too apparent — but their true thoughts, the precise value of their assertions. In any legal proceeding, before pronouncing sentence, the accused must be heard; the fairest judgment is that which results from the words, the confessions of the accused.

I will, sir, try to satisfy your desire; or rather I will surrender myself, bound hand and foot, to your justice, by presenting to you here, not a plea, but a *general confession*.

Take me then, if you can, by my own words, I will not appeal the judgment. What dominates in all my studies, what makes their principle and end, the summit and the base, the reason, in a word; what gives the key to all my controversies, all my disquisitions, all my deviations, what constitutes, finally, my originality as a thinker, if I can attribute any to myself, is that I resolutely, irrevocably, in everything and everywhere, affirm *Progress*, that I deny, no less resolutely, in everything and everywhere, the *Absolute*.

Everything I have ever written, everything I have denied, attacked, fought against, I have denied or affirmed in the name of a single idea: *Progress*. — My adversaries, on the other hand, and you will see if they are numerous, are the partisans of the absolute, *in omni genère, casu et numero*, as Sganarelle said.

What then is Progress? For almost a century everyone has been talking about it, without Progress, as a doctrine, having advanced a single step; the word is mouthed; the theory is still at the point where Lessing left it.

What is the Absolute, or, to better designate it, Absolutism! — Everyone repudiates it, no one wants it anymore, and yet I can say that everyone is still attached to this idea; everyone is Christian, Protestant, Jewish or atheist, monarchist or democrat, communist or Malthusian; everyone, in a word, is absolutist.

If, therefore, I could just once make tangible the opposition I place between these two ideas, explain what I mean by *Progress* and what I consider to be the *Absolute*, I would have given the principle, the secret, and the key to all my polemics; you would possess the logical link of all my ideas, and, based on this single notion, you could not only appreciate the entirety of my writings, but also foresee and point out in advance the propositions that I will sooner or later have to affirm or deny, the doctrines of which I would eventually become the defender or the opponent; you could, in short, judge my entire thesis both by what I have said and by what I do not know. You would then know me, *intus et in cute*, as I am, as I have been all my life, and as I would find myself a thousand years from now, if I were to live a thousand years: the man whose thought is always advancing, whose program is never completed. And, at whatever point in my career you refer to me, in whatever conclusion you must reach about me, you will always have to either absolve me in the name of *Progress*, or condemn me in the name of the *Absolute*.

Progress, that which is least empirical, is the movement of the mind, *processus*, a natural, spontaneous and regular movement, which is to the mind what gravity is to matter; it manifests itself above all in the transformations of society throughout history. From this it immediately follows that, since the essence of the mind is movement, truth, that is to say, reality, both in nature and in society, is essentially *historical*, subject to mutations, conversions, evolutions and metamorphoses; only the very laws of movement are fixed and immutable, and their study forms the object of logic and mathematics.

The common people, the mass of scholars and the ignorant alike, understand *Progress* in a purely material sense. The multiplication of machines, the increase in well-being, at most the expansion of education — in short, the participation of an ever-growing number of people in the pleasures of wealth and intellect — that, for them, is more or less *Progress*. Certainly, this too is Progress; progressive philosophy would be to be pitied if it had forgotten, in its speculations, the improvement of humanity's physical and moral lot, but all this gives us only the surface of *Progress*.

Theoretically, such a limited idea of Progress is worthless.

Progress, once again, is the negation of any immutable formula, of any doctrine of eternity, immovability or impeccability, applied to any being whatsoever, of any permanent order, without excepting that of the universe itself, of any subject, any object, any reality that does not change.

The *Absolute*, on the contrary, or *Absolutism*, is the affirmation of everything that Progress denies, the negation of everything that it affirms; it is the search, in nature,

society, religion, politics, morality, etc., for the eternal, the [ ], the perfect, the definitive, the immutable; it is, to use a well-known term, in everything and by everything the *status quo*.

From this double definition of *Progress* and the *Absolute*, we first deduce as a corollary this proposition, rather strange for our minds shaped for a long time by Absolutism, that the true in all things, the real, the positive, the practicable, is that which changes, which is susceptible to progression, to transformation; while the false, the fictitious, the impossible, the absurd, is all that presents itself as fixed, complete, unalterable, indefectible, not susceptible to increase, decrease or conversion.

So that the theory of *Progress* provides us immediately and before any experience, with a means of distinguishing in the practice of humanity, a true hypothesis from a false hypothesis, the reality of the average Utopia which could not exist in the doctrine of the *Absolute*.

Among the many projects of improvement and reform that occur daily in society, some are undoubtedly useful and desirable, while others are not. But before experience determines this, how can we distinguish, using the concept of the Absolute, the true from the fictitious, the possible from the utopian, the achievable from the hallucinatory? This deduction is, a priori, impossible in the absolute sense, since of all things, true or false, that have not been subjected to experience, none has the right to accuse others of being impractical. All are equally legitimate, since all fall under the purview of the Absolute, all tend toward the Absolute.

In the theory of Progress, on the contrary, the criterion is readily found and can do without experience; this is because any idea, any doctrine which secretly aspires to immobility, which aims to perpetuate itself, which flatters itself that it has the last word on liberty and reason, which consequently harbors in the flanks of its dialectic the exclusion or intolerance which asserts itself as pure, absolute, immutable, eternal truth, in the manner of religions, this idea, this doctrine denying the movement of the mind, is utopian, is false.

Thus, the truest of political constitutions, in terms of principles, although perhaps the most unfortunate in terms of provisions, is the constitution of 1848. And why?

This well understood, and the notion of *Progress* and movement, being once introduced into the intellect, admitted into the republic of ideas, in the face of its opposite, the *Absolute*, everything changes in philosophy; the whole world seems turned upside down: logic and metaphysics, religion, politics, political economy, morality, jurisprudence and art, appear in a completely new light, revolutionized from top to bottom. What the mind had believed to be true until then becomes false, and what it had rejected as false becomes true. In the interval between the two points of view, and during the time it takes to go from one to the other, consciousness hesitates, wavers, between traditions and aspirations, and since few people know how to understand the double impression which they obey, to separate what they affirm or deny, by virtue of their belief in the *Absolute*, from what they deny by virtue of their adherence to *Progress*, there results for society, from this conflict between fundamental

notions, a melee of opinions and interests, a confusion of the parties, in which civilization would soon be lost, if light did not shine in the void.

This is the situation we are in, not only since the February revolution, but since that of 1789; a situation for which I accuse, to a certain extent, the philosophers, the publicists, all those who, having the mission to instruct the people and to form opinion, have not seen, or have not wanted to see, that the idea of Progress, being admitted by everyone, having [achieved the status of right] not only in schools, but even in temples, ends by stirring them up, along with the fundamental categories of the mind; that the old representations of things, both natural and social, are perverted, and that it is necessary to reconstruct again, with the help of this new lamp of understanding, science and the laws.

Divisit lucem à tenebris! — That is to say, separation of the ideas of *Progress* from those of the *Absolute:* such, sir, is the general thought that guides me. It will be easy for me to show you how, in each of my controversies, I have believed I obeyed it: you will say whether I have been faithful to it.

Thus, I maintain, and this is one of my most unshakeable convictions, that with the notion of Progress, all our old Aristotelian logic, all our academic dialectic, is utterly worthless; that we must rid ourselves of it as quickly as possible, lest we spend our entire lives in irrationality. What is taken for reasoning today, a mixture of absolutist and progressivist conceptions, is nothing but a fortuitous or arbitrary association of ideas, a brilliant gibberish, a precious or sentimental Phoebus. No one understands their neighbor or even themselves anymore; and if sometimes, especially in party matters, a few individuals seem to agree, it is because a remnant of habit makes them repeat the same words, the same phrases, without, moreover, attaching the same meaning to them. Since the notion of *Progress* has invaded minds, the *Absolute* having retained most positions, chaos reigns in everyone's heads. And since *Progress*, to some degree, imposes itself irresistibly on everyone, the craziest person is still the one who, by denying it, has the pretension of not appearing crazy.

I did what I could, to the best of my ability, with more goodwill no doubt than aptitude, to shed some light on this darkness: it is not for me to say to what extent I succeeded, but here is roughly how I proceeded.

From the moment we conceive that the law of society, that is to say the essence of the mind, is movement, it follows first of all that reasoning, or the art of classifying ideas, is a kind of evolution, a history or, as I have called it somewhere, a *series*, from which it follows that the syllogism, for example, the king of arguments of the old school, has only a completely hypothetical value: it is a truncated series, fit only to make those who do not know how to restore it to its fullness, to carry out its complete reconstruction, irrationalize in the most innocent way possible.

What I say about the syllogism, one must also say about Baconian induction, the dilemma and all of the ancient dialectic.

Induction, which remained sterile in the hands of philosophers, despite Bacon's announcement, would once again become the instrument of invention and the most fortunate expression of truth, if it were conceived, no longer as a kind of syllogism

taken in reverse, but as the complete description of the movement of the Spirit, indicated only by a small number of data.

The dilemma, considered the strongest of arguments, would henceforth be regarded as nothing more than a weapon of bad faith, the brigand's dagger attacking you from the shadows, from the front and the back, until it has been rectified by the theory of the antinomy, the most elementary form of intellectual movement. In short, and to conclude, I say, I affirm that the old method of reasoning upon which philosophy has lived until now, and with which our generation has been raised, is now proven false, all the more so because it admits the presence of that inescapable element, *Progress*, from which I conclude that it must as soon as possible reform itself, complete itself through the elaboration of the new idea, under penalty of infamy and suicide.

If we move from logic and dialectics to ontology, we encounter, after the admission of the idea of *Progress*, disadvantages no less serious, which raise similar observations and even call for reform.

Our entire ontology, all the general ideas about bodies contained in our treatises on physics, chemistry and natural history, is deduced exclusively from the ancient categories of Aristotle and Kant, what in the Middle Ages were called universals: *time, space, substance, cause, action, reaction, mind, matter, body, soul*, etc. Only one, the most important, is missing: *Progress*.

No doubt, we are no longer told about occult qualities, entities, quiddities, the horror of the void, etc. All of that has disappeared from ontology. Are we any further ahead? Is it not true that all our scholars, without exception, are still, whether they like it or not, and without realizing it, dualists, pantheists, atomists, vitalists, materialists, partisans of all the systems that the old ontology spawned?

With the idea of PROGRESS, all these systems, founded on the categories of substance, causality and indivisibility, collapse, never to rise again. The notion of being can no longer be sought in any indivisible entity — mind, body, atom, monad or whatever you like. It ceases to be simplistic and becomes synthetic. It is no longer the conception, the fiction of an indivisible, unbreakable *Nescio quid;* it is the idea of a *group*. Just as in logic, the idea of Progress has *series* as its synonym, so too in ontology, its synonym is *group*. Everything that exists is a group; everything that forms a group is one, and therefore exists. The more complex the relationships that serve to form the group, the more variety and centralizing power it possesses, and the more reality the being acquires. Outside the group, there are only abstractions, phantoms. The living man is a group, like a crystal, but of a higher degree than the crystal, all the more alive, as the organs are better grouped and in a more perfect harmony. This *self* is one; what I call the *soul* I no longer consider as a monad governing, from the sublimity of its so-called *spiritual* nature, other *monads,* which are supposedly *material;* these distinctions are meaningless to me. I consider the one, the self, as a whole inconceivable outside of the union of its parts, but endowed by this union with properties which they lack. It is according to this conception of the individual self that I am on a way to demonstrate the reality and, to a certain extent, the laws of the *social self,* of the collective man, and

to level this being, of which philosophy has hitherto understood nothing, which, according to its own data, it was unable to comprehend.

According to some, society is simply justice, a position of homogeneous individuals, each sacrificing a part of their activity in order to remain juxtaposed and side by side in peace. According to others (and these are the most progressive), society, a being of pure reason, is merely the representation on a larger stage of individual organization, such that knowledge of the individual immediately gives knowledge of the social being.

In my opinion, or rather, according to the notion of *progress, series, group*, the ontology of which is now forced to take into account society is a *sui generis* being, in which the individual man, a group himself, functions as an atom, an integral and constituent part of a molecule, much like hydrogen in water, or carbon in diamond, a being which has its own functions, attributes, faculties, and will, often in diametrical opposition to that of the man.

This part of my studies has not yet been published, and it will be difficult for you, sir, to speak of it except by conjecture. However, I do not hesitate to acknowledge that it is within the rights of the critic to prejudge it and to say what of it he deems possible and useful.

Shall I now come to Religion, and in order to summarize everything on this vast subject, to the problem of divinity? I have again found myself placed on new ground, where the idea of Progress comes to abrogate everything that has been written and taught by the learned, in the name of the Absolute.

I observe first, something that everyone knows today, that the notion of God is like that of government, that it is for the mind and society a cause of perpetual mobility, that the philosopher launched in pursuit of the Divine Being is continually carried from one hypothesis to another, from fetishism to polytheism, from the latter to monotheism, from monotheism to theism, then to pantheism, to idealism, to nihilism, to start again with materialism, fetishism, etc. Thus, for the man who seeks social order through authority, reason is irresistibly driven from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, from the latter to an oligarchic or property-based republic, from oligarchy to democracy, from democracy to anarchy, from anarchy to dictatorship, only to begin again with absolute monarchy, and so on, ad infinitum. — This necessity of interminable transitions, which had been so clearly perceived, for politics, by Aristotle, and which has been established in our time, for the religious question, by modern philosophy, is perhaps the only thing that has been observed by criticism, forced to recognize that, even within the circle of its static categories, the mind is always in motion.

This circular course of the mind on political and religious questions placed outside the constitution, I wonder what its cause is, and I seek its outcome.

I therefore distinguish with Kant, in the theological question, 1. the form, 2. the substance; I mean, on the one hand, the testimonies, arguments, considerations, according to which one claims to show the reality and the attributes of the divine

Being; then the very object of this demonstration, whatever it may be, assuming that it is God.

In terms of form, I find that everything that has been written about the Supreme Being, in all languages, is nothing but a work of the imagination on the old categories, a work that consists of giving reality to pure abstractions, of affirming as a positive, living, intelligent and free being, what would nevertheless be neither man, nor beast, nor metal, nor plant, nor anything known, finite or definable, nothing especially grouped, serial, but pure substance, pure cause, pure will, pure reason, in an infinite extent, an eternal duration, in a word, in the absolute.

I reject this entire argument, firstly as flawed, since it lacks an essential element; secondly, as radically flawed, since, the idea of progress being admitted, the God we seek can no longer be as taught according to the old ontology; on the contrary, he must be quite different from what theologians make him out to be. — Indeed, if we apply the notion of Progress to the Supreme Being, and we cannot help but apply it, since without it he would not be supreme, it will follow that this being will no longer be, as before, eternal, immutable, infinite in every sense, etc., and infinitely so. The God of Kant, Aristotle and Moses is therefore not true, at least according to the evidence presented, since he excludes the most essential aspect of nature and humanity: Progress; since this exclusion implies a contradiction with the life that is nevertheless granted to him. God, in short, is *not*, cannot *be* and can only *become*.

Getting to the heart of the matter, to the very object of the theological demonstration, and setting aside official doctrines, in order to adhere to the spontaneous testimony of human lives, I see first of all that the notion of *Progress*, carelessly left out of consideration in the list of categories of the School, has not been lost to the people, that by virtue of this notion humanity will constantly tend, through the series of its religions, to anthropomorphize the ineffable being; that everywhere and always in the popular consciousness the theological problem is resolved in the identity of the divine nature and human nature, that thus the people have not only lent to God the faculties, although in a transcendent degree, the faculties, the passions, the virtues of man; but that they have sought him with all their strength, with all their love, in man; that they have united him to man incarnate in man, and finally recognized him in man. Thus, what we affirm, seek and worship as God is nothing other than the pure essence of Humanity. This is what the progress of religions attests, in accordance with a rectified and complete metaphysics.

That is not all: while this movement of humanizing the divine being continued among the masses, another was taking place, still unbeknownst to the theologians and philosophers, within the intellectual discipline. This was the progressive renunciation of mysticism, the abandonment of ontological categories, recognized as useless for explaining nature and society as myths, revelations and miracles. In one sense, humankind, through its anthropomorphic tendencies, was drawing closer to and identifying with the Divinity; in another sense, through its growing positivism, it was distancing itself from God, and making Him, so to speak, recede. In one sense, humanity, through its anthropomorphic tendencies, was drawing closer to the

divinity; in another sense, through its growing rationalism, it was distancing it, making it, so to speak, regress. Thus, where Newton, stopped by a difficulty which seemed to him insoluble, invoked the Divinity for the balance of the world, Laplace, by a higher science, rendered this intervention useless, and sent the god and his machine to the attic.

For me, therefore, reasoning through all these facts and all these ideas, I am left with a question on the religious issue: what does humanity seek in religion, under the name of God? It is its own sanctification, it is itself; that nevertheless God, according to theological dogma, being infinite in all his attributes, perfect, absolute, immutable; the identity of the two natures can never be complete, that they inevitably remain antithetical, the first being the reversed impression of the second, that the consequence of this antithesis, of this *anti-theism*, as I have named it, is to abolish all positive religion, idolatry, theolatry, christolatry, anthropolatry, since on one side the idea of God, opposed to that of movement, group, series, progress, represents no possible reality, and on the other humanity, essentially perfectible, but never perfect, remains forever and below adoration, which I summarize in this formula both positive and negative, and perfectly clear in our language: Replacement of the cult of the Supreme Being by the culture of humanity.

Is it really necessary now, sir, for me to recall those of my proposals which, in politics, political economy, morality, etc., have caused the most noise, the most scandal; for me to show how in my mind they all stemmed from the notion of Progress?

Eleven years ago, I wrote: I am an *anarchist,* thereby negating the principle of authority and government. In this, I was merely reiterating a thesis of Saint-Simon, distorted by his followers and now refuted with the most egregious clumsiness by Mr. Enfantin. This thesis, based on history and the absolute incompatibility of the idea of progress with that of authority or government, states that society is completing, for the last time, the governmental cycle; that public reason has become certain of the State's impotence with regard to the further improvement of the lot of nations; that the notion of power is logically replaced in public opinion and in history by that of free contract; that the consequence of this substitution is to replace the organization of political powers with that of economic forces, etc., etc.

I trust you, sir, to say whether my deductions have been logical, whether, truly, as I assert, the notion of Progress, whose synonym in politics is liberty, leads to this point...

It is in political economy that I have pushed the development of the notion of Progress furthest, which here translates into *mutuality*, *mutuation*, in other words, *equality in exchange*. I have said that the Malthusian theory or the theory of the productivity of capital is incompatible with this notion, vaguely perceived by the ancient casuists, reproduced first by Adam Smith and then abandoned almost immediately by J. B. Say and the multitude of economists; that what causes industrial stagnation, commercial crises, unemployment, and what makes bankruptcy a permanent means of equilibrium, is that the circulation of products is not regular, that the inflow of value by road does not occur for each producer with the same ease as their outflow by purchase; that this is due first to the preference given to money among

all products, as a representative sign of values, and secondly to the capitalist predication, a consequence of this prerogative of currency; cross-subsidization of land rent, key to the sanction and glorification of the whole system. — I said that this right of the capitalist or master, which stops the economic movement and hinders the circulation of products is the same thing as the royal right as it results from the notion of government and the State, that the only difference is that the first is understood as civic or *quiratiaire* privilege and the second as monarchical or imperial privilege; that for the rest both were only a transformation of the idea of God, the highest expression of the Absolute, the most destructive of the ideas of Liberty, Equality, Progress.

I said finally that in order to pull society out of the vicious circle in which it has suffered death and passion for so many centuries, it was necessary to continue lowering the rate of rent and interest to zero, to reorganize credit by raising from the purely individualistic notion of *Loan* to the purely social one of *Exchange;* that then economic phenomena will occur in reverse mode; that while wealth increases in arithmetic proportion and the population in geometric proportion, we would see this ratio reversed, and production go faster than the population; that it is a law of our perfectible nature that the more intense work becomes and the more perfect man becomes, the less the reproductive faculty, approaching its goal, has fertility, etc.

I have observed, in the meantime, that society is already engaged, at all points, in this aspect of industrial progress; that thus the definition of property, according to the constitution of 1848, is contradictory to that of the Code; that by the effect of the same causes jurisprudence tends to get closer and closer to the idea of commutative justice and to desert the civil court for the commercial court.

The is not a single criticism from me, not a single denial, on this line of study as on all others, that is not explained, justified or excused, as you may wish to say, in the same way. Everything I have said about taxation, centralization, the police, justice, customs, etc. stems from this.

I have gone further: in order to avoid any pretext for irritation and hatred, I took care to distinguish between *acceleration* and movement in Progress. I repeatedly stated that the question of *speed* was left to the judgment of the majority, and that I in no way considered as my adversaries, as enemies of progress, those who, while agreeing with me on the principle, the direction and the goal, might differ on the timing. Should we rush or march? That is a matter of practice, which concerns not the philosopher, but the statesman. All I am saying is that we cannot maintain the *status quo*.

I believe it unnecessary, with a judge as enlightened as yourself, sir, to prolong this review any further. I affirm *Progress:* that is my socialism. Nothing less, nothing more.

The generic term *Progress*, allow me, sir, to remind you once again, translates for me, in logic, as *series*, the general form of reasoning, which, in my view, is nothing other than the classification of ideas. When the series is reduced to two terms in mutual opposition or contradiction, it takes the name *antinomy* and, through the fusion, equation or mutual negation of the two terms, gives rise to a synthesis of a particular kind, celebrated among mystics as the *trinity* or *Triad*.

In ontology, Progress is group, as opposed to all chimeras, whether substantial, causative, creative, animistic, atomistic, etc..

In religion, progress is the agreement of faith and experience, the return of the supernatural to humanity and nature, the substitution of reason for revelation, of man for God in the ideality of consciousness.

In politics, political economy, and law, Progress means *liberty*, *mutuality* and *solidarity*, not personal, but real, or rather, *valorique,* value-based, resulting from the abolition of political powers and the organization of economic forces; above all, it means tolerance. All social forms, from absolute monarchy to universal suffrage, from Roman slavery to free, collective, and jointly owned associations, have, from the perspective of Progress, had their legitimacy; all have marked an increase in civilization; all constitute an acquired benefit. Of all the rights of man and of the citizen declared for our revolutions, there is only one that I consider primitive, prior, and superior, which therefore, for a time, cannot be denied for any reason: the right to life, that is to say, the right to evolution, investigation, and improvement, revolutionary right, *Progress*.

In morality, Progress is synonymous with *Purity*. Purity is the foundation of all religions as well as the principle of all virtues. In Japan and China, where all expiatory symbolism was fortunately rejected, no other worship is recognized than the practice of purity. Purity or clarity of reason. — Purity or innocence of the heart, purity of the body, purity in conduct and speech: This is my morality. It presupposes a continual effort of the soul upon itself, and since it admits all transitions, it is also suitable for all eras. The definition of progress in morality will give us that of the beautiful, the sublime, the ideal, which is subject to the law of Progress. While the ancients, immobilized and petrified by their incomplete notions, sought the ideal above all in form, we seek it preferentially, without neglecting the former, in *expression*. Expression is the beautiful, the sublime in this moment. It is through this that every creature can become sublime and beautiful, something the ancients did not cherish as much as we do. Through virtue, wit and taste, an ugly woman can become adorable; through intelligence, a painting with unattractive figures can be a masterpiece. Form taken as the sole object of art leads to stereotype and imitation, to the negation of art itself...

Having not yet done anything in this field of study, I cannot go beyond my definition, perhaps, monsieur.

You will be able to see more than I can say about it.

Thus,

[manuscript ends]