

“Proudhon and His Translator” Again

Stephen Pearl Andrews

1876

In THE INDEX of July 13, 1876, Mr. Benj. R. Tucker criticizes my criticism of Proudhon, published in a previous issue of THE INDEX (June 22). Permit me to use a small portion of space for a reply. For the most part the tone of Mr. Tucker’s article is elevated and courteous his appreciation of what he approves in mine ample and generous, and his discriminations in behalf of Proudhon full of a devotedness alike honorable to the head and heart of the disciple. In some of the eases in which he finds fault with me I think he has misapprehended me; in others our judgments differ; in one or two he is partially right, and in one, at least, he is in danger of falling below the dignity of the occasion, and dealing in the insinuation of bad motive, and in vituperation

In my comments on Proudhon’s use and repeated use of the phrase “property is impossible,” I did not deny, but distinctly affirmed, that, in the sense he meant, he made out his case. I was simply showing that it was a blinding statement for the ordinary reader, instead of an illuminating one; more calculated, as I said, to astound than to convince; to repel than to attract; to confuse than to enlighten—wholly apart from the question whether there might or might not be a hidden sense in which it was true and in which, if the reader would go along with him a fact rendered doubtful by the seeming absurdity, he might convince him of its truth.

In my first sentence (objected to), I was stating, not my own ultimate estimate of the proposition, which I reserved for the next sentence, but the natural train of reasoning which would pass through the mind of the reader at its announcement; the first-blush impression, and it seems that I, too, presumed too much, as I was accusing Proudhon of doing, upon the intelligence of my reader, and for want of more explication of the idea failed to be understood. I was endeavoring to show that the love of such surprises—stating what, in a sense to be afterwards explained, is essentially true, but which when first put seems absurd—sometimes prevents Proudhon from being lucid or easily apprehended. It was a trivial criticism, if you will, upon style merely; but it was what I thought, and I think so still.

Mr. Tucker’s next point is allied with this. He adopts and praises my rendering of Proudhon’s meaning in his celebrated aphorism, *Property is robbery*. I had said this: What he means by property is that subtle fiction which makes that mine or thine of which we are out of possession, for which we have no present use, but which by this subtle tie we may recall at our option, using it in the mean time to subjugate others to our service by taking increase for its use, in the form of rent, interest, and the like. In this definition there are two branches, one covering

the proprietorship, and the other a nefarious use of that proprietorship, which I say, and Mr. Tucker assents, Proudhon consociates, as if inseparable, with the proprietorship itself. Either the necessity or the propriety of this consociation I deny, and because I do so, Mr. Tucker accuses me of forgetting and departing from the beautiful definition I had just made of Proudhon's formula. I hope that simply showing that I understand a man does not bind me to agree with him. Having defined Proudhon's meaning, I then dissent, in part, from the correctness of his idea. Mr. Tucker's head is set whirling, he says, by this complication of discriminations, and he is afraid he will get muddled if he does not at once desist from the effort to comprehend me. I would gently encourage him to try again. He will get possession of his wits presently, and the whole thing will come clear to him.

If Mr. Tucker had been old enough to have taken an interest in the old anti-slavery discussions, he would have been familiar with the question, whether slave holding is; *in itself*, sinful, or whether it is the abuses of the power it gives which are so. The same question arises here whether it is proprietorship, *per se*, which is wrong, or only an oppressive use which *may be made* of the power it gives. Differently from my verdict in the case of slavery, I was now favoring the latter view, pointing out the fact that Proudhon involves the two things in the same definition, and objecting that they ought not to be so confounded. Is there anything so awfully confounding in all this? Whether Proudhon is right or I am right, I am certain that Mr. Tucker's mental capacity is amply good for the comprehension of the difference.

The space which I can presume on in the columns of THE INDEX will not allow me to make a full answer to Mr. Tucker's points in his next paragraph. He concedes that I am partially justified in one of my view by the language of Proudhon, though he thinks Proudhon meant otherwise. In that particular the *onus* lies with him. Upon the other point, my mere opinion and general estimate, not from this particular book, but from his whole labors, that the genius of Proudhon was, in predominance, critical and destructive, rather than constructive, I have at least, in respect to manner, the concurrence of an authority to which Mr. Tucker greatly defers. What I said was mildness itself compared with a *dictum* of his friend William H. Green. I quote from his little work called *Mutual Banking* (pp. 21, 92) He is speaking of *Money and Banking*, a work by William Beck, assuming also Mr. Beck to be the writer. "In the pages of Proudhon," Mr. Green says, "socialism appears as an avenging, fury, clothed in garments dipped in the sulphur of the bottomless pit. and armed for the punishment of imbeciles, liars, scoundrels, cowards, and tyrants; in those of Mr. Beck, she presents herself as a constructive and beneficent genius, the rays of her heavenly glory intercepted by a double veil of simplicity and modesty. Mr. Beck's style has none of the infernal fire and profundity which cause the reader of the *Contradictions Economiques* to shudder; you seek in vain in his sentences for the vigor and intense self-consciousness of Proudhon; yet the thoughts of Proudhon are there."

I come now to what Mr. Tucker most, and with most show of reason, complains of. I said that Proudhon proposed a return to a primitive state of equality, whereas (as I also meant) the true thing is a constant advance to higher states of scientific harmonization between equality and inequality. Mr. Tucker admits, if I understand him, that I am right in insisting on the inequality, as an equal factor,—what Proudhon wholly omits,—and I admit that my language does not imply a sufficiently careful reading of the fifty-sixth page. I was misled by the insistency on equality of conditions as the whole truth; the designation of the departure from an assumed primitive equality as a "degeneracy" (which from my point of view would be a growth); the phrase that if Providence placed the first human beings in a condition of equality it was an indication of

its desires, etc., and by the repeated use on the same page of the phrase “returning to,” with reference to this idea of equality. My eye catching these phrases, I thought that I recognized the old, familiar doctrine about returning to a state of nature, and I partly overlooked the modifying words “in other forms,” which I ought to have noticed. Measured, therefore, by the standard which I now see Proudhon entertained, I did him injustice, but measured by what *I had in mind*, as the true mode of viewing the subject, and by his failure explicitly to insist on the ideas of *growth* and *advance*, instead of *degeneracy* and *return*, I doubt whether the injustice is more than apparent. Such as it was and is, however, it was wholly unintentional that I should fail to present his idea fairly, and I am obliged to Mr. Tucker for correcting me. I could make myself better understood on this difference between growth and degeneracy with more space to expand the subject.

As if to pay me off for this oversight, Mr. Tucker adds in this connection, that my three universological principles, Unism, Duism, and Trinism, were known to Proudhon from Hegel in Germany, called by them Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis; that they go back to the Kabbalists, etc. In the announcement of all this, substantially, I am beforehand with Mr. Tucker, as more familiarity with my ideas would have made him aware; only, to be particular, it was Fichte, back of Hegel, who first explicitly propounded Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis. In *The Basic Outline of Universology*, I have traced the same ideas also to Pythagoras, and, indeed, with proximate definiteness they form the staple of thought of all the great classifiers and thinkers of all ages and countries. But they are not, for that reason, either, on the one hand, false, nor, on the other hand, sufficiently explicit and definite to have a specific scientific value. Unism, Duism, and Trinism, while substantially like the other trio, are still *vitally* different. The likeness, or sameness, is readily apprehended, the difference not so readily, without a conscientious study of the subject. It consists in identifying Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis with the root-ideas of the mathematics, thereby carrying them over from vague philosophizing generalizations, and converting them, by this new alliance, into the basis of the unity of the sciences, and into an absolute guide for all classifications; mental and physical, from the broadest generalizations to the minutest particulars. The difference is, therefore, the *new* and the *main* element, and it is that which Mr. Tucker has failed to appreciate.

Frankly, then, it is to the study and comprehension of this discovery that I hoped to divert Mr. Tucker’s attention, as I once thought he gave me some reason to think that I might. In my first article I veiled my intention somewhat, *ex gratiâ modestiæ*, to assert the existence of a better way; although I have never quite comprehended why it should be immodest to tell a truth simply because it is a big one. But Mr. Tucker has penetrated the “*animus*” of my allusion to prior great changes in the scientific *status* of things.

Yes, certainly, it has come to this, that a single decade is quite sufficient to change the proper method of scientific investigation, provided that, during that decade, a real and all-comprehensive discovery touching that very matter has been made. Whether such a discovery has been made or not is a simple question of fact, and need not be the occasion of bad blood. It has been said, I think by the editor of some of Proudhon’s works, that he discovered nothing, but elucidated much. If, then, to his genius of elucidation and device are due views so profound that “one fears to present even the outline of them, lest he may overtop credulity,” how much more critical the situation, if a discovery as single and definite as anything of Kepler or Newton were in question and which claimed to traverse the ground traversed by Proudhon, to furnish a canon of

criticism upon what has been done, and to reveal an ocean of new truth not heretofore dreamed of!

Yes, precisely what I mean is that Mr. Tucker would ward off future regrets, and save half a lifetime, if he could and would come squarely up abreast of the real questions of the hour, and cease to act upon old methods when a better is known. I am sorry it is an offense for me to tell him so. The Pantarchy is not exactly something to be “joined,” as one joins the Methodist Church, or a debating society, but rather something to be arrived at by increased knowledge; but one can be helped in the matter, if he is not too captious. Mr. Tucker may, perhaps, recognize the probability that there were, in France, during the lifetime of Proudhon, several brave and noble-minded young Tuckers, whose clear and impartial comprehension of him, and whose sympathy and devoted help, would have been everything to “the master”, but that they were too busily and earnestly engaged in just waking up to the appreciation of the thought of some thinker of the just-previous age and consequently, perhaps, predisposed to disesteem him, without any adequate effort to understand him. He may, perhaps, even conceive that Proudhon might, years before, have studied, comprehended, absorbed, and transcended the very thought which these young devotees were so assiduous in mastering, and which, if mastered, might help, in another twenty years, to bring them to the vantage-ground which he then occupied, and was only too anxious to share with them. Can he not think that, if they could have seen it so, they would have saved him and economized their forces, if they had begun at the other end *in his school*, and gone back, subsequently and incidentally, upon the past, and can he not also think that true as all this might have been, he would only have made himself *suspected*, and have got himself snubbed for his pains, if he had ventured to tell them so? There is so much *human nature* in people, that it is difficult to tell what under certain circumstances, one should do. What right has Mr. Tucker to talk flippantly of my “foolishly persisting” in asserting the transcendent value of what he cannot judge of? How does he know that every word of what I say, and more is not true? Is he sure that it is not he that is making the blunder of arrogance? The dogmatism of ignorance is as old, and, I suppose, as immodest, as the dogmatism of knowledge.

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