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Proudhon and His Critic

Benjamin Tucker

1876

The student of Proudhon must have laid down The Index of June 22d, containing Stephen Pearl Andrews' article on "Proudhon and his Translator," with a feeling of pleasure not unmixed with pain; pleasure at meeting at last with an elaborate and scholarly criticism of this author and his work, dealing in argument rather than ridicule; and pain at finding this same criticism so alloyed with error and careless misstatement as to greatly detract from its value. The wicked lies and stupid sneers with which the press has almost uniformly greeted the translation into English of *What is Property?* I have chosen not to notice, believing that a book which cannot defend *itself* against assaults of such a character had better die at once; but when so able and keen a critic as Mr. Andrews is known to be carelessly misrepresents—by implication rather than direct statement—the theories advocated in the work, justice to his author's memory compels the translator to fulfil the duty imposed upon him by the function which he has assumed, by entering a protest and insisting on fair play. Those who have intelligently read the book already, will discover, without further help of mine, the discrepancy between Proudhon's doctrines as stated by himself and the idea that a novice would form of them in taking them at

secondhand from Mr. Andrews. That those also, whose knowledge of Proudhon is yet to be acquired, may appreciate this discrepancy, I shall endeavor, as far as possible, in this article, to “let the master speak for himself.” Before proceeding, however, to a detailed examination of the matter in hand, I must first thank Mr. Andrews for his handsome recognition of Proudhon’s virtues and abilities, and his clear and accurate insight into his character. Had he understood his writings as well as he understands the man, there would be no call for this expression of dissent.

The first point calling for attention is the critic’s assumption that Proudhon, in saying that “property is impossible,” meant that it cannot exist even temporarily or contingently. He says: “But if property is impossible, then it cannot exist; and if it cannot exist, then it does not exist; and why should M. Proudhon write a big book to do away with what does not and never did have any existence?” Now let us listen to Proudhon (page 40, outlining his arguments): “Considering the fact of property in itself, we shall inquire whether this fact is real, whether it exists, whether it is possible. Then we shall discover, singularly enough, that property may indeed manifest itself *accidentally*; but that, *as an institution and principle*, it is mathematically impossible. So that the axiom of the school—*ab actu ad posse valet consecutio*: from the actual to the possible the inference is good—is given the lie as far as property is concerned.” True, Mr. Andrews says immediately afterwards: “Of course the literal meaning of what he says is absurd”; and proceeds to show what he really did mean; but then where is the pertinency of our critic’s first argument? Why should Mr. Andrews write half a paragraph to refute what Proudhon never did mean? The only effect of such a course is the same as that which the former repeatedly charges upon the latter’s writings, *viz.*; the confusing of the reader’s mind. It is virtual misrepresentation.

In the next two paragraphs we find the same thing repeated. The critic first makes the following lucid statement of Proudhon’s understanding of the word *property*, for which he deserves great

William B. Greene traces it back even further than this, finding its origin in the Jewish Kabbala.

The criticism of Proudhon's remarks upon equality is, I confess, partially correct. He claimed too much when he said that equality was synonymous with society, and made a more accurate statement afterwards in calling it a *sine qua non* of society; but that this trivial error affords a "loophole of escape to the proprietor of every grade" from the crushing logic of the rest of the work, I utterly fail to see. I must not close without referring to the *animus* of Mr. Andrews' article, which is best exhibited in his statement that "Proudhon belongs as definitively to the past, at this day, and to the mere history of ideas, as Ptolemy after Copernicus." Has it come to this, then, that in this fast age we progress so rapidly that a single decade suffices to blot out the memory and destroy the usefulness of one of whom the Pantarch even is compelled to speak so highly? The hint is a very broad one; and it does not take the eye of Argus to discover that the Copernicus of our social system is named Stephen Pearl Andrews; and when Proudhon's translator is advised to waste no further time on such a useless task, but to be sure that he is doing the "best thing possible," it is evident that the best thing possible, in the critic's view, is to join the Pantarchy, and work therein. The whole article is an almost shocking revelation of the practice of the Pantarch in persisting in selfishly subordinating what he considers the comparative worthlessness of others to what he considers his own superlative worth.

credit, nearly all previous critics having failed to grasp and state this vital point: "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 meantime, to subjugate others to our service, by taking *increase* for its *use*, in the form of rent, interest, and the like." Then, after warning (very properly) his readers that unless this sense of the term property is constantly borne in mind, the author is certain to be misunderstood, he immediately dismisses it from his own mind, and indulges in the following remarks: "It is, however, not true that property, even so restricted in definition, is robbery, pure and simple. It is not proprietorship, but the use of proprietorship, to extort increase, which is vicious in principle." What is the meaning of this sudden twist in the critic's logic? If this "vicious use of proprietorship" is the very thing which Proudhon regards as the essence of proprietorship, how can Mr. Andrews deny that property, according to Proudhon's restricted definition, is robbery? The state of the reader's mind, when he reached this point of the criticism, must have been "confusion worse confounded." Indeed, the present writer hardly dares follow this line of thought further, for fear that, despite his intimacy with the views in question, he will begin to feel muddled himself.

The critic next falls into the error of supposing that his author favors the forcible intervention of society to control the property relations of individuals. This misapprehension, in view of the slightly misleading character of some of Proudhon's phrases, is partially excusable; but a close reading reveals the fact that the only control which he favored is that which is exercised, not through institutions based on physical force, but through the natural operation of the law of equitable exchange. "He (Proudhon) also leaves us very much in the dark as to the precise social machinery by which he would have the world organized and run. He is far more specific with regard to what he would abolish than with regard to what he

would construct.” Why should he treat of organization in a work devoted to analysis? This objection is thus answered by Proudhon in the closing passage of his preface: “On the following conditions, then, of subsequent evidence, depends the correctness of my preceding arguments: the discovery of a system of absolute equality in which all existing institutions, save property, not only may find a place, but may themselves serve as instruments of equality: individual liberty, the division of power, the public ministry, etc.,—a system which better than property, guarantees the formation of capital and keeps up the courage of all; which, from a superior point of view, explains, corrects, and completes the theories of association hitherto proposed, from Plato and Pythagoras to Babeuf, Saint Simon, and Fourier; a system, finally, which, serving as a means of transition, is immediately applicable.” Proudhon was no less keenly alive to the necessity of organization than is Mr. Andrews himself. He fulfilled the above promise in his subsequent works by developing his theory of mutualism, which was to find its first external expression in the organization of credit on a gratuitous basis by a system of banking which he devised, the results of which would be so vast and beneficent that one fears to present even the barest outline of them, for fear of so awakening the incredulity of the reader as to blind him to the truth of the principles involved.

Mr. Andrews next objects to Proudhon’s use of the term anarchy to denote order, for the reason that, while the Greek *arche*, from which it is derived, meant both “personal government by *arbitrium* and the government of inherent laws and principles,” Proudhon confined it to the former of these ideas. It is difficult to see why he had not as good a right to confine it to the former, as had Mr. Andrews, when coining the word Pantarchy, to confine it to the latter.

The worst instance of misrepresentation, however, contained in the whole criticism, occurs in the following sentences: “At the 56th page the author propounds the theory that there was a primitive

state of social equality; that our departure from it is a degeneracy; that we are to return to that state of nature, etc. Surely our social theories are in advance of that idea now. Man never returns to prior conditions. He advances to new conditions which reproduce the *spirit* of primal states, but in *still newer* forms, which embody also the good of what now is. We pass from an undifferentiated state to differentiation, and thence not backward but forward to integration. So the equality which Proudhon so aspired after will never come in the simple primitive form, but it will come in a higher and scientifically adjusted form.” Now, it is assumed here that Proudhon said the precise opposite of what he really did say. Suppose we compare this rendering of the 56th page with the 56th page itself (and I ask any fair-minded person if it is not expressed in terms so unmistakably plain that no ordinarily careful reader could fail to understand it): “To suppose original equality in human society is to admit by implication that the present inequality is a degeneration from the nature of this society,—a thing which the defenders of property cannot explain. But I infer therefrom that, if Providence placed the first human beings in a condition of equality, it was an indication of its desires, a model that it wished them to realize *in other forms*; just as the religious sentiment, which it planted in their hearts, has developed and manifested itself in various ways. Man has but one nature, constant and unalterable: he pursues it through instinct, he wanders from it through reflection, he returns to it through judgment; who shall say that we are not returning now?” And yet, in the face of this, Mr. Andrews would have us believe that Proudhon wanted to go back, not only to the old spirit, but to *old forms*! The fact is, the idea expressed by Mr. Andrews in his formula of unism, duism, and trinism, was completely developed by Proudhon in 1845 in his *Contradictions Economiques* (the only difference being that the latter used the terms thesis, antithesis, and synthesis), and for him to say that “Proudhon never attained to it” is almost impudent. Proudhon borrowed it from Hegel, to whom he credited it; and Colonel