

Proudhon and His Translator

Stephen Pearl Andrews

1876

Benj. R. Tucker, the business partner and *confrère* of E. H. Heywood of Princeton, Mass., has translated and published, in an elegant volume of nearly 500 royal octavo pages, the most renowned of the politico-economical works of the justly celebrated P. J. Proudhon. The title of the work in English is: *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. I am requested to write a review-notice of the work. The temptation is strong to expand into an exhaustive review, but I am not certain of any avenue to the public for such a treatise, and I shall confine myself to the smaller plan. First, as to what is usually put last. The volume as a book is superb. Print, presswork, paper, and binding are at the top of the powers of the bookmaking art, and the price (\$3.50, or \$0.50, according to style) is not excessive. The work of the translator is also conscientiously and well done, and is nearly faultless from the literary point of view. A few Gallicisms may be pointed out, but they are exceptionally few, and the translator's personality is completely sunk in the labor of love which he evidently had before him.

The work itself consists of two "Memoirs," the first of which is the more important, and is that to which my comments will mainly apply. Proudhon was confessedly one of the great thinkers of France, at a time, thirty years ago, when France abounded in distinguished men. He combined the metaphysical subtlety of the German with the vivacity of the Frenchman, and the dead-in-earnest character of the genuine reformer. His was a truly religious nature, in the right sense. He was in love with truth, and on fire with devotion to its promulgation; and he struggled hard with the problem of its solution. His scope was not confined to social affairs. He traversed the whole field of philosophy, and, as I think him more characterized by analytical than by constructive power, I cannot but regard his *Creation de l'Ordre* as a more remarkable and valuable work than that which Mr. Tucker has chosen to introduce him to the American public; although I have no doubt that he has been judicious in his choice, as that would find a still smaller circle of minds prepared to appreciate it.

Proudhon had the genius of discovery, a wonderful depth and clearness of perception, wonderful accuracy of statement, in the main, and wonderful strength of intellectual grasp upon his conception; but after all he is by no means, always, a luminous writer; sometimes because he had not reached the bottom of his subject, and sometimes because his love of epigrammatic and paradoxical statement betrayed him into astounding rather than convincing the reader. For example, he heads a long succession of propositions with the repetition of the statement that *property is impossible*, and proceeds to show, under each head, why it is so. But if property is impossible,

then it cannot exist; and if it cannot exist, then it does not exist; and why should Mr. Proudhon write a big book to do away with what does not and never did have any existence? Of course the literal meaning of what he says is absurd; but if you have the patience to study him intensely, you will find out that what he intends by this expression is: that property (in so far as he is here considering it. as that what gives increase) contains within itself a suicidal principle; that it is self-defeating; that it is constantly “killing the goose that lays the golden egg.” His statement *covers*, but it does not *convey*, that idea. The idea is, in part, true; is profound, and profoundly important; but his way of saying it is afflicted with the same evil; it is repellant, self-defeating, and suicidal of his supposed purpose, that of being understood by his reader.

But what, in fine, does Proudhon mean by property? His startling epigrammatic thunderbolt, *property is robbery*, aroused, bewildered, and repelled all Europe. Perhaps not a dozen persons from his time till now have ever studied him severely enough to understand exactly what he meant. It is just possible that he did not quite understand himself, and that if he had done so, he would never have put his statement in that form. What he meant covers an immensity of truth, of new truth (at that day), and of important truth; but is it all true, to the extent of maintaining such a sweeping indictment? Let us see what he meant by property. He did not mean possession, enjoyment, usufruct of the land, and of the products of labor. These he contrasts with “property,” and maintains and defends. 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. He uses the term property, therefore, in a very rigorous and technical sense; and unless this is constantly borne in mind, he is certain to be misunderstood, and the truth which he is representing will be lost sight of. “Possession,” he says, “is a right; property is against right.”

It is, however, not true that property, even so restricted in definition, is robbery, pure and simple. The acute thinker has still not discriminated closely enough. It is not proprietorship, but the use of proprietorship to extort increase, which is vicious in principle; or else proprietorship applied where, in the true nature of things, it is not applicable, as in the case of land. The product of the labor of the free laborer, equitably and fairly produced, is in justice his property, and the argument of Proudhon to the effect that he owes it to society even before it is produced, and holds it only on sufferance, seems to me, at least, the weakest part of his First Memoir. It (the product) is his (the producer’s) to lend, to own while out of possession, to recover back in kind or in equivalent, and in all senses precisely as ownership is understood in the world and defined in the law-books. The simple distinction between natural wealth which, while it can be possessed and enjoyed when needed, ought not to be *owned* in the technical sense (except temporarily, as adjunct to improvements, to secure the repayment for them), and proprietary wealth as the product of labor, sets the whole matter right. There may be an ethical inhibition against abusing one’s own, but not rightly a social one; that is to say, a man’s neighbors should not be set upon him to decide when he is rightly using and when he is abusing what belongs to him by a perfect title. All that the law means here is that the decision on that point is best left to the individual; and the law of the land and the law of sociological right are in perfect harmony in that particular, and Proudhon is wrong.

This right of the free and unlimited disposition of what is really one’s own is, in this property domain, precisely that individual sovereignty which, without the name, Proudhon so vigorously defends, elsewhere, against communism; and the endangering of which is his grand objection

to communism. His error in denouncing property, in this limited and just sense, as robbery, is as fatal to his own system as if he had averred that the individual owes *himself*, absolutely, to the community from birth, and should, therefore, submit to established authority with a loving and unquestioning obedience. Such a view (which the Comtists now virtually affirm) would, of course, have been the reversal of his whole doctrine, but not more so than this fundamental error in denying to the individual the control over the products of his own industry. Indeed it may be said, quite generally, that he fails to distinguish between ethical and sociological questions,—those matters which appeal to the conscience of the individual, as a member of society, and those matters which authorize society to intervene, to constrain, or to regulate the conduct of the individual. He 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.

Another of Proudhon's startling paradoxes, seemingly so at least, and I think we shall see really so, is the use of the term anarchy, to denote not chaos and confusion, but the basis of order in the freedom of the individual from the control of others. Etymologically, this use of the term has a show of reason as it merely means absence of *government*; and a writer has the right, if he choose, so to revert to etymological origins; and frequently there is a great advantage in so doing. There is a loss it is true in the temporary obfuscation of the mind of the reader, but, it may be, a more than compensating advantage in arousing deeper, thought, or in furnishing a securer technicality. But in this case the disadvantage is certainly incurred: and neither advantage is secured. There are two very different things covered by the term government: personal government by *arbitrium*, and the government of inherent laws and principles. Proudhon is denying the rightfulness of the former, and affirming the latter. Now the Greek *arché* meant both of these things; but if either more peculiarly than the other, it meant the government of laws and principles, whence the negation of such rule by the prefix *an* has meant, and rightly means, chaos. Proudhon undertakes to make the Greek word mean exclusively the other idea, whereby he spoils one excellent technicality without getting for his other purpose a secure and good one in the place of it.

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. We might as well assume that the acquired use of knives and forks is a degeneracy. Men will be just as much in a state of equality if their property rights remain, and are made equal, by equity, as they would be if they returned to a state of nature, and so had no property rights. 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. Everything is subordinated to "The Law of the Three States" in a larger sense than is meant by the author of that phrase. 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,—as a permeative factor in a highly complex order of society. That form Proudhon failed to discover and formulate. Both his argument and his remedy for existing evils, on that head, are fallacious. One side of the truth of the subject, the individualistic side, Warren, more fortunate than Proudhon, did discover and formulate; the other side, the opposite and counterparting side, is communism, best represented as yet, on any large scale, by the Oneida Perfectionists. These two opposite ideas and types of life are to be reconciled and united, not merely despite of their appositeness, but *because of their oppositeness*.

Everything that approximates perfection is made up, primarily, of two opposite factors. This is the meaning of sex in the universe, the type and model of the reconciliation of opposites. We must and shall attain, therefore, to the mutual adjustment, harmony, and balanced vibration of sundered equality and communistic unity in the bosom of a higher reconciliative unity. That Proudhon did not attain to this idea condemns him as a lover of thought for our epoch. It makes of him what Fourier would call a simplist, a man of one idea, of the vision of one side of the truth, and, in this case not a clear vision of that.

Now that we have this book in English, it should go into every library; should be consulted, and, if leisure permits, read by every advanced student of these high questions, and should be prized as a contribution to the history of the evolution of thought in this line. But every reader should be notified that it is already superseded by better thought on the same subjects; and it seems hardly worth while on the part of Mr. Tucker to import at great cost the less perfect lucubrations of even a truly great thinker of a past epoch, when the later thought of our home production, and of our day, is so superior, even to the extent of the whole difference between failure and complete solution. Mr. Tucker, in disposing of himself, is recommended to study the doctrine of relative values. It is not enough that such a man should be engaged in doing a *good thing*. He should be quite certain that he is engaged in doing *the very best thing*. He should, in other words, economize himself, on the ground that *good men are scarce*.

There is, nevertheless, a sense in which this and the other works of Proudhon have an intrinsic value altogether above and beyond that which attaches to his particular dogmas and solutions. I mean in respect to method. No man of his epoch, perhaps, in the whole world, understood so well; none, I am certain, insisted so earnestly and effectively upon the true scientific method; that which carries everything by analysis back to first principles; but in this also he is superseded now by a better understanding of that method. Permit me, in conclusion, to point out some inaccuracies even in his closest reasonings.

The deepest conviction, the intellectual worship, of Proudhon was invested in the idea of equality. In this nobody is, by organization and conviction, more profoundly sympathetic with him than I am, but within limits which are also imposed upon me by intellectual analysis. I am compelled to see that intrinsically, metaphysically, mathematically, scientifically—every way,—equality has, set over against it, inequality, as a counterparting principle, equal in validity and extension to itself. Proudhon was grandly precise, and impressive, and almost unique, in his assertion of the principle that all science must be carried back and down to mathematical origins, before it can claim to be truly scientific. But he merely *sensed* the principle, and dogmatically maintained it. He failed to discover the method of it, so as to make it a corrective, or a canon of criticism upon his own reasonings and the reasonings of others. By the mathematical analogies, equality refers to the equal or even numbers, and inequality to the unequal or odd numbers, and both are alike fundamental in the mathematical series. What does it mean, then, when this great thinker affirms that justice and society itself are absolute synonyms of equality; except simply that he is mistaken? It means that he came short of a full understanding of his subject, and that he was not true to, because he did not comprehend, the method which he, with such utter fidelity, believed in. It was his immense merit to have “intuited” its validity, and to have deferred, even theoretically, to its demands; but it was not given to him to thread its intricacies, or rather to discover its almost infinite simplicity.

He could not fail to meet the consequences of his lack of mastery of the true method. He came unprepared for the satisfactory answers of some of his own most pregnant questions. I cite,

as instance, the whole of page 230. "Does it follow," he asks, "that the preferences of love and friendship are unjust?" Certainly it does, if justice means simple and absolute equality. Equality is impartiality, and preference is partiality; and if justice is equality, pure and simple, which is the author's prime postulate, then justice excludes absolutely all favoritism, all partiality, the preferences of love and friendship included. Justice and equality being co-extensive and synonymous with society, there is no place left in society for grace and favor of any kind. Straightlinism has excluded the possibilities of curvature, and consequently of grace or gracefulness.

There is no avoidance of this logic. The efforts of the author to escape from his own trap are painful. "Within universal society," he says, "there exist for each of us as many special societies as there are individuals; and we are bound, by the principle of sociability itself, to fulfil the obligations which these impose upon us, according to the intimacy of our relations with them." But there was nothing said of universal and special when the prime postulate was propounded; and, what principle of sociability? By the prime postulate the *only* principle of sociability is equality, which prohibits absolutely what is now asserted. This introduction, on the sly, of an opposite principle of sociability, referring it to the degree of "intimacy of our relations with others" and to "social compact," new and unheard-of factors in the calculation, is what the philosophers call a "surreptitious interpolation"; and through this loop in his logic, the proprietor of every grade escapes from the force of any part of it.

What a writer discussing this subject, radically, should have done, would be, first, to lay down the proposition that society rests upon two equal and equally fundamental bases; the one impartiality or equality, and the other partiality or inequality; then to inquire and ascertain in what spheres impartiality should prevail, and in what spheres partiality should be indulged and fostered; and then what is the proportion between them, their balanced vibration, their ultimate reconciliation. Proudhon is wholly right *in his conclusion*, that commercial exchanges should rest, like the administration of public justice, on the basis of equality; but he is wholly wrong, when, in order to reach the conclusion, he affirms that equality is the sole factor of society itself, or that the two (equality and society) are synonymous. Indeed, it is my anxiety to place his conclusion on an absolutely safe logical basis, which he has not done, that forces me to criticise his logical procedure.

I should like to say more of the author's use of the terms justice, *équité*, and proportionality, but I must resist the temptation, and let this suffice for the present. I will observe, however, again, in conclusion, that it seems a pity to continue any longer the wholly vague, or the partially scientific, treatment of social subjects, now that science is competent to cover that whole domain. Proudhon belongs as definitively to the past, at this day, and to the mere history of ideas, as Ptolemy after Copernicus; and, while I have conceded that, from that point of view, it is well to read him, I fear that, incidentally, Mr. Tucker's enterprise may contribute to the wasting of the time of new students. Such certainly would be the case, if all that is known on the subject were published and accessible. As it is, perhaps the best that can be done is to read Proudhon.

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