

AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT
Keith E. Whittington

Supplementary Material

Chapter 6: Civil War and Reconstruction – Democracy and Liberty

*Albion W. Tourgee, A Fool's Errand (1879)*¹

Albion Winegar Tourgee, a descendant of French and Swiss immigrants, was born on a farm in Ohio in the Jacksonian era. He had worked as a school teacher and was a student at Rochester University when he joined the Union army at the outbreak of the Civil War. He was severely wounded in battle and spent time as a prisoner of war before eventually being discharged and studying law. At the conclusion of the war, he moved his new family to North Carolina, where he became active in Republican politics. He edited a radical Republican newspaper, served in the state constitutional conventions of 1868 and 1875, and served for several years as a local judge. As the federal government abandoned Reconstruction in the South, Tourgee moved to Colorado in 1879 and later to New York. He continued work as a newspaper editor and Republican Party activist, eventually becoming a Christian socialist in the late nineteenth century. He served as an attorney for Homer Plessy in his ultimately unsuccessful constitutional challenge to legal segregation. After leaving North Carolina, he also became a successful novelist.

His most popular, and perhaps most enduring work, was a fictionalized account of his own experiences in postbellum North Carolina. The protagonist, the "fool" Comfort Servosse, is a Republican carpetbagger and Union army veteran, whose efforts on behalf of black civil rights in North Carolina are stymied by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Servosse writes in vain to his friends in the North arguing that they did not appreciate that the antebellum South "was a republic in name, but an oligarchy in fact" and that the North must cease "this snuffling whine about peace and conciliation" and recognize that she "is simply a conqueror; and, if the results she fought for are to be secured, she must rule as a conqueror." Only a "fool," he eventually concluded, would take seriously the words of the "cowardly" "wise men" of the northern Republican Party. In the novel, Tourgee paints a dark picture of white supremacy, terroristic violence, and feckless northern politicians unwilling to assume responsibility to finish the work that they had started on the battlefield. The United States had botched the postwar peace. In this chapter, Tourgee illustrates the distance between the democratic culture of the North and the South through the visit of a neighbor to the protagonist's plantation in North Carolina.

...

One day their neighbor . . . Squire Hyman, came over, ostensibly to see Mr. Savage, but really, as Mrs. Servosse thought, to renew his intimacy with them, which he broke off in a miff the year before, because they would invite the teachers of the colored schools to visit them. He seemed rather shy at first. . . . However, as it happened, she had one of the new novels of Victor Hugo upon her worktable; and knowing him to be a somewhat bookish man in his queer, rough way, having heard her husband say that he had read a great deal, and had quaint and original views in regard to what he read, she called the book to his attention, and soon had him sitting *vis a vis* with her. . . .

...

¹ Excerpt taken from Albion W. Tourgee, *A Fool's Errand, by One of the Fools* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1869).

After a time he asked to look into the bookcase, and was soon engrossed in making new, and renewing old friends, as he said. There were some works which Servosse had put on an upper shelf, lest they should attract any one's attention, and be thought to have been displayed with any intent to offend. They were works upon slavery and kindred subjects.

She noticed that the old man was peculiarly attracted to this shelf. He seemed very soon to have forgotten all about Victor Hugo, and he presently asked if he might borrow some of these volumes. She hardly knew what to tell him. She did not want to ask him to wait until Comfort came; for it seemed so absurd, in what was called a free and Christian land, to hesitate as to whether it would be safe to lend a simple book. He noticed her hesitation, and said,—

"I have a curiosity to read them. I have heard so much about them, and never saw them before. You may not be aware, madam, that they were regarded as 'seditious publications' before the war; so that one could only get to read them at considerable risk and trouble. This I never cared to take; but now that it is all over, and the doctrines of these books have come to prevail, I would like to read the books just to see what hurt us."

She remarked that her husband had put them on the top shelf in order that he might not seem either to obtrude them upon his neighbor's notice, or to deny their possession by concealment.

"No, he has no cause for that now," said he; "though I remember when a man was tried and convicted, and sentence of whipping and imprisonment passed on him too, just for having one of those in his possession."

"I did not know," she said, "that the law actually made it criminal, or, rather, I supposed it was never enforced."

"Oh, yes! It was," he answered. "The case I allude to was Mr. Wanzer, who belonged to a very well-known family here in the county, though he had just come in from Indiana, which as the way he come to have the book about him." There was a big trial and a powerful excitement over it. He was very ably defended, and his lawyers took a heap of points on the law, which it was thought might be declared unconstitutional. But 'twasn't no manner of use. The Supreme Court stood by the law in every particular."

"I thought it was only mobs that interfered with people for reading what they chose," said she; "at least since the good old days when they used to burn people for reading the Bible."

"Well," said he, "there used to be mobs about it too: at least we used to get very much excited at the idea of people bringing what were called 'abolition' books here, to stir up our slaves to insurrection; and probably did some things that had as well not have been done."

"But how could you, Squire?" she asked. "This claimed to be a free country; and how could you think you had any right to persecute one for reading, writing, or saying what he believed? I suppose in those days you would have hung my husband for expressing his opinions?"

"In those days," said he solemnly, "Colonel Servosse would never have expressed such opinions. I admit that he is a brave man; but no one would any more have uttered such sentiments as he puts out now than he would have carried a torch into a powder-magazine. The danger was so apparent, that no one could be found fool-hardy enough to attempt it. I think such a one would have been torn limb from limb, as by a wild beast, by any crowd in the South."

"But you could not have thought that right, Squire," she interposed.

"Well, now, I don't think you ought to say that, madam. You see, you are blaming a whole people whom we are bound to admit were, in the main, honest in what they did. If any one believed slavery to be a divinely appointed and ordained institution, I can not see how he could do otherwise."

"If!" she said hotly. "Do you suppose there were any such?"

"Undoubtedly," he answered seriously,— "many thousands of them, and are today. In fact, you may say that the bulk of the Southern people believed it then, and believe it now. They regard the abolition of slavery only as a temporary triumph of fanaticism over divine truth. They do not believe the

negro intended or designed for any other sphere of life. They may think the relation was abused by bad masters and speculators and all that, and consequently God *permitted* its overthrow; but they have no idea that he will permit the permanent establishment of any system which does not retain the African in a subordinate and servile relation."

"But you do not believe any such horrible doctrine, Squire?" she could not help asking quickly.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he answered politely enough: "I don't know what I believe. I have been a slaveholder from my youth, and ever since I could remember have heard the institution of slavery referred to in the pulpit and in religious conversations, not so much as a thing that might be proved to be holy, but which was incontestably divine in its origin and character, just as much as marriage, or any other Christian institution. I don't think a minister who had a doubt upon that subject could have found any market for his religion here. Until the war was over, I think, I there was any one thing that I believed stronger and clearer and firmer than another, it was the niggers were made for slaves; and cotton, terbacker, sugar-can, an' rice, were made for them to raise, and could not be raised in any other way. Now I'm most ready to say that I'll be dog-goned if I know what I *do* believe. I *know* the niggers are free, and, for all I can see, they are likely to stay so; but what's to come on't I don't know."

"My husband," said she, "thinks they will remain so, and become valuable citizens, and that the Southern people have actually gained by the war more than emancipation cost them."

"Yes, yes, I know," said he: "I've heard the Colonel talk, and what he says looks mighty plausible too. I think it's that has had a heap to do with unsettlin' my faith. However, I do wish he would be more keeful. He don't seem to realize that he's among a people that ain't used to his free and easy ways of talking about every thing. I'm afraid he'll get into trouble. I know he means well, but he is so inconsiderate."

"He's not used to hiding his opinions," she said with something of pride.

"No," he answered; "nor are those he is among used to having their pet notions assailed in that manner. I'm afraid there'll be trouble. I was anxious to see him today, an' talk with him about it; but I shall have to come again. Meantime, if you'll let me take these books, I'll read 'em carefully, an' perhaps find some way out of my dilemma."

"Certainly," she said. "We have no books that our neighbors are not welcome to read, believe or disbelieve, accept or refute, as they see fit. We practice what we preach, Squire."

"I believe that, madam," said he, as he stooped for his hat and stick; "an' I believe you're very much in earnest, both in preachin' an' practicin'. Oh! Did I tell you?" he added suddenly, "my son Jesse, he's heard the Colonel speak once or twice, an' he's clean carried away with him. Says he's got more sense than anybody he ever heard talk about such matters. He's quite took up that notion you spoke of a while ago,—that freein' the slaves is the best thing that's ever happened for the white folks of the South. Maybe he's right, but it sounds right queer to hear him talk so. He's like you say, though,—practicin' what he preaches, an' is going in to work as if he'd been raised to it all his life. It looks hard, and sounds queer; but maybe he's right. Good-evening, ma'am! Tell the colonel I'm right sorry he was not at home. I'll come again when I've read these through,"—touching the books with his pipe,—"an' hope I may catch him then."

Servosse was not quite pleased when his wife told him that night of what she had done. He had been very careful not to give any *just* ground of offense, as he thought, to their neighbors. While he did not hesitate to avow his opinions upon any question of present interest, he did not think it well to open the controversies of the past, and had studiously avoided all reference to them, unless it became necessary in considering the present. He did not say much, however; and when, a few nights afterwards, the Squire came over to return the books, the Fool was rather glad she had loaned them.

...

“Well, Colonel,” he said, after he had chatted a while with the child, “I’ve brought back the books I borrowed of the madam the other day.”

“So I see,” laughed Servosse. “Well, I hope you enjoyed reading them?”

“That I did, Colonel,” he answered,—“more, I suppose than you would ever imagine that I could.”

“Indeed!,” said Servosse. “I was half afraid they would make you so angry that you would feel like visiting your displeasure on me.”

“No, indeed!” said the old man with a sort of chuckle. “I had no notion of being angry; though, now I come to think on’t, I can’t imagine why I am not. There’s certainly hard things enough in those books about me and my people to make any man mad. But the truth is, Colonel, it seems to be all about the past—what is all over and done with now—so that I seem to be reading of somebody else, and some other time than my own. Do you know, Colonel, that I never read any ‘abolition’ books before, only some of the milder sort? And I am of the notion now, that our folks made a mistake in keeping them out of the South. I was a little surprised when the madam here . . . asked me if anyone really believed in slavery. If it had been you, I should have asked if anyone really believed in ‘abolitionism.’ But I am satisfied that the people who wrote those books believed what they were writing; and it does seem as if they had good reason to do so. It’s a thousand pities we couldn’t have talked these things over, and have come to the right understanding of them without this terrible war.”

“That was quite impossible, Squire,” said Servosse. “We could never have agreed. I have learned enough of the former state of affairs here already to see that. Each party distrusted the other’s sincerity, and despised the other’s knowledge. War was inevitable: sooner or later it must have come. . . .”

. . .

“Human nature is a sullen, obstinate, unreasonable brute; but it always has its own way with all of us. Ain’t that so, Colonel?” he asked with a self-appreciative chuckle.

“Just so, Squire,” replied Servosse. “And almost always disappointing too. Now, I cannot see why the South should not have seen its own interest to have lain in the way of graduate emancipation long ago.”

“The very idea I was going to advance as to the North,” laughed the old man. “I never could make over what *interest* they had in the matter at all. Now, the people who wrote those books I can understand. With them it was a principle, a religious idea. They thought it was a wrong and a sin which they would do God’s service to exterminate. They are what we call ‘fanatics.’ No one can blame them, only for not crediting us with like sincerity. They might have done that, I should suppose. They made too much, too, out of the abuses of slavery. It *was* abused—no doubt of that—and many bad things done by bad men under cover of it; but they might have credited us with honesty, at least. We were not all bad, nor all cruel and unjust. Some of us thought the master’s relation one of divine duty; and others, who weren’t quite so clear upon that point, or didn’t care so much whether it was true or not, felt that he institution was on our hands, had come be there lawfully, and we didn’t see how we were to get rid of it without immense loss and sacrifice. So we just let it float along. But we were not hard masters nor cruel owners. We did feel bound to protect the institution. Not only our interests, but the safety of society as we honestly thought, depended on its continuance, unimpaired and perfect, until something else should take its place, at least. As long as the nigger was *here*, we were all satisfied that he must be a slave. A good many of us though it would not be any injury if they could be removed somewhere else.”

“No doubt you are right,” said Servosse. “And it is not surprising, either, that you should have felt so, or that those who wrote those books should have misconceived your motive. Slavery did two things which naturally prevented such knowledge from being obtained: it excluded the stranger from its inner sanctuary with rigorous care, and persecuted with unsparing severity all who rejected its dogmas”

“Yes, yes, I see,” laughed the Squire. “You and I are getting back to human nature again in our anxiety to excuse our respective sides. But do you know I have a still greater reason for being angry, after reading one of those books, on my own personal, individual account?—I, Nathaniel Hyman?”

“No, indeed, I did not,” said Servosse. “You are not one of the characters, are you?”

“That’s exactly what I am,” was the reply, “and not cast in a very enviable *role*, either. . . .”

. . .

“Well, I don’t know as I mind it, though one hardly likes to go down to posterity as one of the black sheep of his day. The affair of which so much is made was a very trifling matter, and I had mighty little to do with it, at best.”

Then he read aloud the passage and the note, and explained:

“Now, the whole matter was this. There were a couple of Northern ministers—Wesleyans, I believe they called themselves—who couldn’t make out to hold their tongues, but were a-spoutin’ an’ argyfyin’ around here as if the Lord hadn’t given them any instructions, only to abuse and denounce slaveholders and slavery. I went to hear ‘em once or twice just to satisfy myself. They were very imprudent and very intemperate. I spoke to one of them after meeting was out that day, an’ told him so. He wouldn’t listen at all, but rattled off more Scripture at me than I ever heard in the same time from anybody else on earth. I didn’t quarrel with them (you know I never quarrel with anybody, Colonel), an’ I presume I did tell him I was his friend. I’m everybody’s friend, an’ always have been. I didn’t want him to get into no trouble, an’ didn’t want no harm to come to him. That’s all true, an’ I’ve no doubt I said so to him. But I did not approve his doctrine, nor sympathize with his sentiments; nor did I tell him so, though he says I did in the note. I never thought such a thing. I probably told him I was a magistrate, which was true, and that I was afraid of trouble, which was equally true. . . . I thought they were fools, and think so yet; but I hadn’t any malice or harm against them in the world. But as it happened, without my knowledge or advisement of mine, directly or indirectly, the next Sunday morning, when the meeting was to be at Shallow Ford, there came by my house a party of gentlemen going on . . . to hear the Wesleyans, they said. I told them they were on the wrong road, just as a matter of politeness, you know. . . . After they had been gone about an hour or so, it occurred to me that they might be bent on mischief. I don’t say I might not have done just the same if I had known their errand; but as a fact I did not, and never suspected it till afterwards.”

“Well,” asked Servosse, “is the rest of the incident true—that about dragging the ministers from the pulpit, bucking them across a log, and beating them?”

“Well, I heard afterwards that they did break up the meeting, and give the preachers a little brushing. They might have bucked ‘em across a log; more’n likely they did: it’s a powerful handy way to larrup a man. I don’t allow, though, that it was anything like so severe as it’s represented in the book, though no doubt the preachers thought it pretty rough. I s’pose they weren’t used to it—perhaps though their cloth would save them. I understand they go away powerful quick after that, not waiting for any repetition of the dose, which was about the sensible thing they did do.”

The old man told it with twinkling eyes, and an evident relish of the whole proceeding.

“I have always had some doubt in regard to these incidents,” said Servosse, “and am glad to have confirmed by one who was an actor in it; but you don’t pretend to justify such proceedings, Squire?”

“Well, now, Colonel, I don’t really see what there is to make such a fuss about,” said Hyman. “Here was a peaceable community, living under the protection of the Constitution and laws of the country; and these men, who had no business or interest here, came among us, and advocated doctrines, which, if adopted, would have destroyed the constitution of our society, and perhaps have endangered our lives and families. Such doctrines lead at once and naturally to insurrection among the blacks, and threaten us with all the horrors of San Domingo. I must say, Colonel, I think the gentlemen were very lenient and forbearing, when they only striped the preachers’ backs a little, instead of

stretching their necks, as would have been done in any less peaceable community under like provocation.”

“It is just such intolerance as this, Squire, which makes it next to impossible for the South to accept its present situation. You all want to shoot, whip, hang, and burn those who do not agree with you. It is all the fruit and outcome of two hundred years of slavery: in fact, it is part and parcel of it,” said Servosse.

“But you don’t think those men had any right to come here, and preach such dangerous doctrines, do you?” asked his neighbor in surprise.

“Certainly,” said Comfort: “why not?”

“Why not?” echoed the Squire. “Why, it seems to me the most evident thing on earth that every community has an undoubted right to protect itself. That is all we did—protected ourselves and our institutions.”

“Protected yourselves *against* your institutions, more properly,” said Servosse. “That is the very strength of the abolitions’ position, Squire. No community has any right to have, cherish, or protect any institution which cannot bear the light of reason and free discussion.”

“But, suppose they do tolerate such an institution, does that give one a right to bring a firebrand among them? Are not they the proper judges of what is the correct thing for their own good—the keepers of their own consciences?”

“It is useless to discuss the matter,” said Servosse. “The arguments you sue are the arguments of intolerance and bigotry in all ages. Even men who wish to be liberal-minded, like you, Squire, are blinded by them. You thought it was fair to whip these ministers for preaching what they deemed God’s work, *because* the bulk of the community did not agree with them. That was the very argument which would have been used to justify Tom Savage and the other, if they had succeeded in giving me a flagellation a while ago, as they attempted to do. The principle is the same. I had disagreed with my neighbors, and advocated strange doctrines. By your reasoning they had a right to suppress me by violence, or even by murder if need be.”

“Oh, not so bad as that, I hope, Colonel!” said the Squire.

“Yes, it is just as bad as that; and I tell you what it is, neighbor Hyman,” said Servosse, “the most dangerous and difficult element of the future, at the South, is this irrepressible intolerance of the opinions of others. You deem disagreement an insult, and opposition a crime, which justifies any enormity. It will bring bitter fruit, and you will see it.”

“Oh, I hope not!” said the old man lightly. “I want to get along peaceably now, and I am sure our people want to do the same. We may be a little hot-blooded, and all that, but we are not mean . . .”

He lighted his pipe, and went home, evidently thinking that his connection with this antebellum barbarity had somehow increased his importance in the eyes of his new neighbors.

. . .