

“You’re Another”

Fallacy Number Four

<p>TU QUOQUE</p>

IF THE typical example of *ad hominem* is in a British court, that of *tu quoque* is in a Russian subway.

The story runs that when the Moscow underground was first opened to visitors in the 1930’s, an American tourist was invited to inspect one of the stations. He was shown the self-registering turnstiles and the spotless washrooms. “Fine,” he said; then, looking down the tracks, “How about the trains?” They showed him the safety devices and the excellent tile frescoes on the tunnel walls. He was again impressed, but continued to look anxiously down the tracks.

“How about the trains?” snapped his guide. “How about the trains? How about the sharecroppers in Alabama?”

Tu quoque, literally translated, means “Thou also,” and in the vernacular, “You’re another!”¹ The Oxford dictionary defines it as “an argument which consists of rotating a charge upon one’s accuser.” Instead of speaking to the issue, one launches an irrelevant counterattack. In algebra, a minus multiplied by a minus makes a plus, but in straight thinking two wrongs do not make a right.

John Gunther in *Inside Africa* relates how he was upbraided by European residents for the mistreatment of American

¹ Per the “sharecroppers” remark, William Tell calls this particular fallacy “changing the subject.”

Indians in U.S. history. “Look,” they said, “you exterminated your natives, but we try to educate our blacks.” This, they thought, was a complete answer to any criticism by Americans of discrimination against native Africans.

Here again two wrongs do not make a right. Says Gunther: “The fact that Americans have behaved abominably toward Indians does not excuse Europeans of the present day for doing the same.” The American Indians who have survived, furthermore, have a higher legal and social status than Negroes in South Africa. Intermarriage is not looked down on in most sections of America. A prominent New York lawyer of my acquaintance never loses a chance to boast that one of his ancestors was a full-blooded Indian. There is no real parallel between the case of red Indians and black Africans, for in America the whites were soon in the majority, while in Africa they are still far in the minority.

Zoning, which as a hot legal issue in our town seems to provide me with a number of cases, offers an excellent example of this fallacy too. A resident was denied permission to break open a new door in his stone garage, giving directly on the road some eight feet away. The Board of Appeals found a serious traffic hazard in backing a car out of the proposed opening. The owner indignantly protested. “Why,” he said, “my door wouldn’t be nearly as bad a traffic hazard as the cars I see parked in front of houses all over town!” Even if what he said was true, it was beside the point. The point was that zoning decisions are supposed to prevent *additional* traffic hazards.

A man comes home from a January clothing sale with a sport jacket which is practically self-illuminating. Proudly he tries it on, only to hear his wife say, “My dear, how loud! Couldn’t you find something a little quieter?”

“Well, you get yourself up in some pretty noisy numbers, and not any too becoming either!”

And off they go in a family row, fed by new and old grievances, rather than sticking to the legitimate issue. Instead of firing a *tu quoque*, the man might have quoted the salesman to the effect that loud plaids were all the rage this year, and the jacket would put him on a level with the North Shore set. An appeal to fashion might well have mollified his wife, and the couple could have had an amiable discussion on blistering plaids and current styles.

Bennett Cerf once complained, in his column in the *Saturday Review*, that a standard box lunch cost \$1.50 at the San Francisco airport, and only \$1.00 at Eastern airports. Peppery letters from the West Coast were soon in the mails. Go down in the New York subway, said one, and pay six cents for a five-cent candy bar. Put a dime in a New York stamp machine and get only eight cents’ worth of stamps; out here, said the letter writer, we get nine cents’ worth. Pay ninety-five cents for admission to “Do-it-yourself” shows in the East, and walk in free throughout the West.

All true, but the point still remains: Should the traveler pay \$1.50 for a box lunch at San Francisco?

Revolving arguments of this type are common enough. Still more common is the standard one-two: “You’re a liar!” “You’re another!” Small boys in back lots, and larger boys in bars, make this retort as an automatic reflex, hardly to be dignified as logical. We note the reflex and pass on to matters where reason is at least supposed to operate.

POLITICAL GIVE-AND-TAKE

The chairman of the Republican National Committee and his opposite member on the Democratic National Committee engage in a kind of perpetual *tu quoque*, as formalized and

stately as a seventeenth-century minuet. The Democratic chairman calls a press conference to announce that the Republican candidate is receiving a secret fund from large oil operators. Within an hour the Republican chairman has a release on the wires affirming that the Democratic candidate receives secret funds from the CIO.² A top party logician, giving a lecture to the faithful on answering campaign arguments, laid down the rule: "If he asks you where you stand on Dulles, jump right in and ask him where he stands on Acheson."

David Lawrence, a vigorous Republican of the Taft school, in his daily column often proves himself a master of *tu quoque*. When some unpleasantness develops in the Republican administration upon which the Democrats might happily capitalize, he directs his able research staff to find a parallel in past Democratic administrations. Thus when the Secretary for the Air Force, a Republican, was charged while in high office with advancing the interests of a private engineering firm, Mr. Lawrence reminded his readers that Franklin D. Roosevelt saw nothing amiss in allowing his private secretary, Louis Howe, to receive substantial sums for a weekly broadcast.³ The cases were not quite parallel, but Mr. Lawrence equated them with skill.

Again, when the Senate Banking Committee, controlled by Democrats, criticized a prominent Republican administrator for overlooking the distinction between public duty and private business, Mr. Lawrence promptly pointed out how administrative boards had been packed by New Dealers not so long ago, and how "the labor bosses defeated the confirmation of Judge John J. Parker for the Supreme Court because he had, in a matter of law, ruled against a labor union."

Sometimes below this perennial exchange of political rhetoric

² Cf. the Nixon and Stevenson battle of funds in 1952.

³ New York *Herald Tribune*, July 27, 1955.

we strike a more sordid *tu quoque*. One party discovers a piece of personal scandal concerning a candidate of the other party and threatens to release it — reluctantly of course — as a duty to the country. The high command of the other party then beats the bushes for an offsetting item. In the 1940 presidential campaign, fast work by the Democrats, it is said, prevented the disclosure of a very warm piece of news in possession of the Republicans. The unpleasant details need not concern us here, but I heard them firsthand from one of the bush-beaters.

Mr. Dooley, the sage of Archie Road, noted *tu quoque* arguments inside the same political camp. “When ye see two men with white neckties go into a sthreet car an’ set in opposite corners while one mutters ‘thraitor’ an’ th’ other hisses ‘miscreent,’ ye can bet they’re two dimmycratic leaders thryin’ to reunite th’ ol’ party.”

FOREIGN MATTER

Somebody writes a letter to the papers attacking Russian propaganda. Somebody else — not necessarily a fellow traveler⁴ — replies that it is no worse than U.S. propaganda threatening “massive retaliation.” In the fracas, the techniques of Red propaganda, a very real issue today, are never objectively examined.⁵

Here is a letter to the *Times* saying in effect: “Who are we to complain about Red China’s atrocities after what the U.S. did at Hiroshima?” Again one wrong is proffered to cancel another wrong — a specious logic frequently displayed in war-time propaganda.

When the Russian-drilled army of North Korean crossed the 38th Parallel to attack the South Koreans on June 25, 1950, the Communists of the world staged a *tu quoque* so massive

⁴ William Tell’s note: This term refers to a “Communist sympathizer,” that is, someone whose politics are a little pink around the edges.

⁵ As I shall try to do in Chapter 21.

that it can also be labeled a Big Lie. Day and night, beginning in 1950, year after year, the Reds continued to repeat that it was the *South Koreans* who first attacked the long-suffering North Koreans. Factual disproof, though ample, had little effect. For a time more than half the world may have believed this story, which completely reversed the actual situation, and millions, I suspect, still believe it.

Tu quoque becomes a logical fallacy only when it is used to avoid a real issue. We are not concerned with loud verbal exchanges on the eleven-year-old level of You're-a-liar-you're-another. The issue must be general and capable of intelligent discussion. These issues may range from fashions in sport jackets, to global trends. Politics, as noted, has many authentic issues which transcend campaign oratory. When these important matters are smothered in cries of "You're another," serious social and economic problems remain unsolved.

Tu quoque will normally be thrown out of any courtroom. Imagine the defendant arguing with the judge in a traffic case: "Sure I was drunk when I knocked him over, but he was drunk too!"

How about the trains; how about the trains? Well, how about them?