

THE ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

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I

INTRODUCTORY

It is a commonplace that the characteristic virtue of Englishmen is their power of sustained practical activity, and their characteristic vice a reluctance to test the quality of that activity by reference to principles. They are incurious as to theory, take fundamentals for granted, and are more interested in the state of the roads than in their place on the map. And it might fairly be argued that in ordinary times that combination of intellectual tameness with practical energy is sufficiently serviceable to explain, if not to justify, the equanimity with which its possessors bear the criticism of more mentally adventurous nations. It is the mood of those who have made their bargain with fate and are content to take what it offers without re-opening the deal. It leaves the mind free to concentrate undisturbed upon profitable activities, because it is not distracted by a taste for unprofitable speculations. Most generations, it might be said, walk in a path which they neither make, nor discover, but accept; the main thing is that they should march. The blinkers worn by Englishmen enable them to trot all the more steadily along the beaten

road, without being disturbed by curiosity as to their destination.

But if the medicine of the constitution ought not to be made its daily food, neither can its daily food be made its medicine. There are times which are not ordinary, and in such times it is not enough to follow the road. It is necessary to know where it leads, and, if it leads nowhere, to follow another. The search for another involves reflection, which is uncongenial to the bustling people who describe themselves as practical, because they take things as they are and leave them as they are. But the practical thing for a traveler who is uncertain of his path is not to proceed with the utmost rapidity in the wrong direction: it is to consider how to find the right one. And the practical thing for a nation which has stumbled upon one of the turning-points of history is not to behave as though nothing very important were involved, as if it did not matter whether it turned to the right or to the left, went up hill or down dale, provided that it continued doing with a little more energy what it has done hitherto; but to consider whether what it has done hitherto is wise, and, if it is not wise, to alter it. When the broken ends of its industry, its politics, its social organization, have to be pieced together after a catastrophe, it must make a decision; for it makes a decision even if it refuses to decide. If it is to make a decision which will wear, it must travel beyond the philosophy momentarily in favor with the proprietors of its newspapers. Unless it is to move with the energetic futility of a squirrel in a revolving cage, it must have a clear apprehension both of the

deficiency of what is, and of the character of what ought to be. And to obtain this apprehension it must appeal to some standard more stable than the momentary exigencies of its commerce or industry or social life, and judge them by it. It must, in short, have recourse to Principles.

Such considerations are, perhaps, not altogether irrelevant at a time when facts have forced upon Englishmen the reconsideration of their social institutions which no appeal to theory could induce them to undertake. An appeal to principles is the condition of any considerable reconstruction of society, because social institutions are the visible expression of the scale of moral values which rules the minds of individuals, and it is impossible to alter institutions without altering that moral valuation. Parliament, industrial organizations, the whole complex machinery through which society expresses itself, is a mill which grinds only what is put into it, and when nothing is put into it grinds air. There are many, of course, who desire no alteration, and who, when it is attempted, will oppose it. They have found the existing economic order profitable in the past. They desire only such changes as will insure that it is equally profitable in the future. *Quand le Roi avait bu, la Pologne était ivre.* They are genuinely unable to understand why their countrymen cannot bask happily by the fire which warms themselves, and ask, like the French farmer-general:—"When everything goes so happily, why trouble to change it?" Such persons are to be pitied, for they lack the social quality which is

proper to man. But they do not need argument; for Heaven has denied them one of the faculties required to apprehend it.

There are others, however, who are conscious of the desire for a new social order, but who yet do not grasp the implications of their own desire. Men may genuinely sympathize with the demand for a radical change. They may be conscious of social evils and sincerely anxious to remove them. They may set up a new department, and appoint new officials, and invent a new name to express their resolution to effect something more drastic than reform, and less disturbing than revolution. But unless they will take the pains, not only to act, but to reflect, they end by effecting nothing. For they deliver themselves bound to those who think they are practical, because they take their philosophy so much for granted as to be unconscious of its implications, and directly they try to act, that philosophy re-asserts itself, and serves as an overruling force which presses their action more deeply into the old channels. "Unhappy man that I am; who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" When they desire to place their economic life on a better foundation, they repeat, like parrots, the word "Productivity," because that is the word that rises first in their minds; regardless of the fact that productivity is the foundation on which it is based already, that increased productivity is the one characteristic achievement of the age before the war, as religion was of the Middle Ages or art of classical Athens, and that it is precisely in the century which has seen the greatest increase in produc-

tivity since the fall of the Roman Empire that economic discontent has been most acute. When they are touched by social compunction, they can think of nothing more original than the diminution of poverty, because poverty, being the opposite of the riches which they value most, seems to them the most terrible of human afflictions. They do not understand that poverty is a symptom and a consequence of social disorder, while the disorder itself is something at once more fundamental and more incorrigible, and that the quality in their social life which causes it to demoralize a few by excessive riches, is also the quality which causes it to demoralize many by excessive poverty.

“But increased production is important.” Of course it is! That plenty is good and scarcity evil—it needs no ghost from the graves of the past five years to tell us that. But plenty depends upon co-operative effort, and co-operation upon moral principles. And moral principles are what the prophets of this dispensation despise. So the world “continues in scarcity,” because it is too grasping and too short-sighted to seek that “which maketh men to be of one mind in a house.” The well-intentioned schemes for social reorganization put forward by its commercial teachers are abortive, because they endeavor to combine incompatibles, and, if they disturb everything, settle nothing. They are like a man who, when he finds that his shoddy boots wear badly, orders a pair two sizes larger instead of a pair of good leather, or who makes up for putting a bad sixpence in the plate on Sunday by putting in a bad shilling the next. And when their fit of feverish energy

has spent itself, and there is nothing to show for it except disillusionment, they cry that reform is impracticable, and blame human nature, when what they ought to blame is themselves.

Yet all the time the principles upon which industry should be based are simple, however difficult it may be to apply them; and if they are overlooked it is not because they are difficult, but because they are elementary. They are simple because industry is simple. An industry, when all is said, is, in its essence, nothing more mysterious than a body of men associated, in various degrees of competition and co-operation, to win their living by providing the community with some service which it requires. Organize it as you will, let it be a group of craftsmen laboring with hammer and chisel, or peasants plowing their own fields, or armies of mechanics of a hundred different trades constructing ships which are miracles of complexity with machines which are the climax of centuries of invention, its function is service, its method is association. Because its function is service, an industry as a whole has rights and duties towards the community, the abrogation of which involves privilege. Because its method is association, the different parties within it have rights and duties towards each other; and the neglect or perversion of these involves oppression.

The conditions of a right organization of industry are, therefore, permanent, unchanging, and capable of being apprehended by the most elementary intelligence, provided it will read the nature of its countrymen in the large outlines of history, not in the bloodless abstrac-

tions of experts. The first is that it should be subordinated to the community in such a way as to render the best service technically possible, that those who render no service should not be paid at all, because it is of the essence of a function that it should find its meaning in the satisfaction, not of itself, but of the end which it serves. The second is that its direction and government should be in the hands of persons who are responsible to those who are directed and governed, because it is the condition of economic freedom that men should not be ruled by an authority which they cannot control. The industrial problem, in fact, is a problem of right, not merely of material misery, and because it is a problem of right it is most acute among those sections of the working classes whose material misery is least. It is a question, first of Function, and secondly of Freedom.

II

RIGHTS AND FUNCTIONS

A FUNCTION may be defined as an activity which embodies and expresses the idea of social purpose. The essence of it is that the agent does not perform it merely for personal gain or to gratify himself, but recognizes that he is responsible for its discharge to some higher authority. The purpose of industry is obvious. It is to supply man with things which are necessary, useful or beautiful, and thus to bring life to body or spirit. In so far as it is governed by this end, it is among the most important of human activities. In so far as it is diverted from it, it may be harmless, amusing, or even exhilarating to those who carry it on, but it possesses no more social significance than the orderly business of ants and bees, the strutting of peacocks, or the struggles of carnivorous animals over carrion.

Men have normally appreciated this fact, however unwilling or unable they may have been to act upon it; and therefore from time to time, in so far as they have been able to control the forces of violence and greed, they have adopted various expedients for emphasizing the social quality of economic activity. It is not easy, however, to emphasize it effectively, because to do so requires a constant effort of will, against which egotistical instincts are in rebellion, and because, if that will is to prevail, it must be embodied in some social

and political organization, which may itself become so arbitrary, tyrannical and corrupt as to thwart the performance of function instead of promoting it. When this process of degeneration has gone far, as in most European countries it had by the middle of the eighteenth century, the indispensable thing is to break the dead organization up and to clear the ground. In the course of doing so, the individual is emancipated and his rights are enlarged; but the idea of social purpose is discredited by the discredit justly attaching to the obsolete order in which it is embodied.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the new industrial societies which arose on the ruins of the old régime the dominant note should have been the insistence upon individual rights, irrespective of any social purpose to which their exercise contributed. The economic expansion which concentrated population on the coal-measures was, in essence, an immense movement of colonization drifting from the south and east to the north and west; and it was natural that in those regions of England, as in the American settlements, the characteristic philosophy should be that of the pioneer and the mining camp. The change of social quality was profound. But in England, at least, it was gradual, and the "industrial revolution," though catastrophic in its effects, was only the visible climax of generations of subtle moral change. The rise of modern economic relations, which may be dated in England from the latter half of the seventeenth century, was coincident with the growth of a political theory which replaced the conception of purpose by that of mechanism. During a great part of history men had

found the significance of their social order in its relation to the universal purposes of religion. It stood as one rung in a ladder which stretched from hell to Paradise, and the classes who composed it were the hands, the feet, the head of a corporate body which was itself a microcosm imperfectly reflecting a larger universe. When the Reformation made the Church a department of the secular government, it undermined the already enfeebled spiritual forces which had erected that sublime, but too much elaborated, synthesis. But its influence remained for nearly a century after the roots which fed it had been severed. It was the atmosphere into which men were born, and from which, however practical, or even Machiavellian, they could not easily disengage their spirits. Nor was it inconvenient for the new statecraft to see the weight of a traditional religious sanction added to its own concern in the subordination of all classes and interests to the common end, of which it conceived itself, and during the greater part of the sixteenth century was commonly conceived, to be the guardian. The lines of the social structure were no longer supposed to reproduce in miniature the plan of a universal order. But common habits, common traditions and beliefs, common pressure from above gave them a unity of direction, which restrained the forces of individual variation and lateral expansion; and the center towards which they converged, formerly a Church possessing some of the characteristics of a State, was now a State that had clothed itself with many of the attributes of a Church.

The difference between the England of Shakespeare,

still visited by the ghosts of the Middle Ages, and the England which merged in 1700 from the fierce polemics of the last two generations, was a difference of social and political theory even more than of constitutional and political arrangements. Not only the facts, but the minds which appraised them, were profoundly modified. The essence of the change was the disappearance of the idea that social institutions and economic activities were related to common ends, which gave them their significance and which served as their criterion. In the eighteenth century both the State and the Church had abdicated that part of the sphere which had consisted in the maintenance of a common body of social ethics; what was left of it was repression of a class, not the discipline of a nation. Opinion ceased to regard social institutions and economic activity as amenable, like personal conduct, to moral criteria, because it was no longer influenced by the spectacle of institutions which, arbitrary, capricious, and often corrupt in their practical operation, had been the outward symbol and expression of the subordination of life to purposes transcending private interests. That part of government which had been concerned with social administration, if it did not end, became at least obsolescent. For such democracy as had existed in the Middle Ages was dead, and the democracy of the Revolution was not yet born, so that government passed into the lethargic hand of classes who wielded the power of the State in the interests of an irresponsible aristocracy. And the Church was even more remote from the daily life of mankind than the State. Philanthropy abounded; but religion,

once the greatest social force, had become a thing as private and individual as the estate of the squire or the working clothes of the laborer. There were special dispensations and occasional interventions, like the acts of a monarch who reprieved a criminal or signed an order for his execution. But what was familiar, and human and lovable—what was Christian in Christianity had largely disappeared. God had been thrust into the frigid altitudes of infinite space. There was a limited monarchy in Heaven, as well as upon earth. Providence was the spectator of the curious machine which it had constructed and set in motion, but the operation of which it was neither able nor willing to control. Like the occasional intervention of the Crown in the proceedings of Parliament, its wisdom was revealed in the infrequency of its interference.

The natural consequence of the abdication of authorities which had stood, however imperfectly, for a common purpose in social organization, was the gradual disappearance from social thought of the idea of purpose itself. Its place in the eighteenth century was taken by the idea of mechanism. The conception of men as united to each other, and of all mankind as united to God, by mutual obligations arising from their relation to a common end, which vaguely conceived and imperfectly realized, had been the keystone holding together the social fabric, ceased to be impressed upon men's minds, when Church and State withdrew from the center of social life to its circumference. What remained when the keystone of the arch was removed, was private rights and private interests, the materials of a society rather

than a society itself. These rights and interests were the natural order which had been distorted by the ambitions of kings and priests, and which emerged when the artificial super-structure disappeared, because they were the creation, not of man, but of Nature herself. They had been regarded in the past as relative to some public end, whether religion or national welfare. Henceforward they were thought to be absolute and indefeasible, and to stand by their own virtue. They were the ultimate political and social reality; and since they were the ultimate reality, they were not subordinate to other aspects of society, but other aspects of society were subordinate to them.

The State could not encroach upon these rights, for the State existed for their maintenance. They determined the relation of classes, for the most obvious and fundamental of all rights was property—property absolute and unconditioned—and those who possessed it were regarded as the natural governors of those who did not. Society arose from their exercise, through the contracts of individual with individual. It fulfilled its object in so far as, by maintaining contractual freedom, it secured full scope for their unfettered exercise. It failed in so far as, like the French monarchy, it overrode them by the use of an arbitrary authority. Thus conceived, society assumed something of the appearance of a great joint-stock company, in which political power and the receipt of dividends were justly assigned to those who held the most numerous shares. The currents of social activity did not converge upon common ends, but were dispersed through a multitude of channels,