Capital and Labor

Three Aspects of the Problem

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NO question of greater importance than the relationship that should exist in society between capital and labor, or in other words, the normal relationship existing between these two arms of productive activity in a well constituted community, has ever before occupied the attention of the thoughtful minds of this country. Many and various are the efforts made to reach the public ear, in ponderous quarterlies and reviews, the daily press, and through political organization with carefully prepared panacea's for all social ills.

The threefold law of Comte that every conception invariably passes through three stages in its evolution is nowhere more clearly manifest than in the history of the discussion of politico-economical questions. The theological stage is by no means as yet outgrown, but is everywhere still fiercely maintained; the all-sufficiency of Christ and a crust being as strenuously defended as in the preceding century. Nor is it a matter of surprise to us that the theologian should take the ground he does, for when we understand the laws of social growth we will see that he instinctively and inevitably is forced from the very nature of his position as a theologian to take reactionary grounds on this question.

The distinguishing conception of modern times, that, in fact, which characterizes modern times, and separates them forever from ancient times, is the relevance of scientific methods in every department of thought; the adoption with all its far-reaching consequences of the relativity of knowledge, by which the Why of events is no longer a subject of study or of curiosity even, human knowledge being content with the investigations into the How of phenomena, thereby gradually supplanting the old deductive processes of thought with the strictly inductive method, where facts are first ascertained before any generalization is attempted.

Our theological friends, on the contrary, in spite of individual exceptions, who but confirm the rule, are committed to a deductive system. The fundamental basis of their entire structure is revelation, truth revealed, not discovered; handed down from a superior to an inferior; rules for the guidance of conduct, and life condescending set forth before finite man by infinite wisdom, an constituting a source of knowledge, a fund of undoubted information, on the most important of all questions, to which we can appeal in any emergency of life, and from which deduce practical lessons in application to every requirement of social life.

Such is the theological theory, and, however the counter scientific tendencies of the age may have effected lodgment in the curriculum of the theological studies, and modified the individual

theologian, still from the very nature of the case, so far as he is a theologian, he is instinctively forced to occupy the ancient standpoint, and take issue, however indirectly, with the tendencies of modern growth, or social progress. There is a "logic of events" more relentless than the logician may imagine, and which shapes the course and determines the end of the very theories given forth as the consummate effort of freedom of thought and independent reflection. Turning from the idiosyncrasies of illogical theologians to the course of events underlying the theological *régime* for the right understanding of the instinctive tendencies of the theological stage, we find all history bearing witness that upon the anthropomorphic conception of God, the superior mind, Governor of the world and Controller of events, there inevitably arose the absolute, or monarchical type of government, an extension of the same fundamental idea, transferred from the government of infinite things to finite things, a modification of the theological conception of government adapted to finite society.

This conception carried with it not only the recognition of a superior, in social life, claiming title as agent or vicegerent of the infinite superior one, but permeated the whole social structure with this idea, from which logically, though unconsciously, resulted orders and castes in society; to sum up in one phrase its logical outcome, the subordination of the many to the few is the characteristic of the theological stage of thought, and wherever a man by training and experience has been accustomed to refer to a "Thus Saith the Lord" he is by instinct allied with they reactionary school. We see this singularly; illustrated at the present day in men of wide sympathies and generous natures, like Henry Ward Beecher, who, by the logical necessities of his position and education, is forced to the heartless recommendation of a "bread and water" diet as a cure for social distress, for which the future will hold his theological training strictly responsible. Although Mr. Beecher by a striking phrase drew upon himself the odium that justly belongs to his class, it is notorious that all his fellows, of al shades of orthodoxy, logically occupy the same standpoint.

It is for this reason, therefore, that the workingman has turned away from the church, and notwithstanding its gilded baubles so freely given to Sunday-school children, and its sugar-coated pills of a "liberal" ministry, their instincts as a body rightly teach them that here no cure can be found for the evils of which they are the sufferers, and of those who do seek quietude within its precincts, and receive the sacraments at the hands of those who trample upon their humanity six days of the week and fatten on the diverted profits of their earnings, the humiliation of the spectacle tends to check it repetition, for, like the theologian, the workingman is himself in the hands of the "logic of events" far transcending his will and generally his intelligence.

Consequently, from the theologians we meet only exhortation to submission addressed to the laborer and appeals to charity addressed to the capitalist, without recognition of the fact that the tendency of events is such as to give an abnormal development to the selfish interest of each class. Practically, though unconsciously, the clergy of the day are giving expression to the famous saying of Prince Metternich, "*Apres moi, le déluge!*" and undoubtedly will maintain an existence until engulphed in its waters already heard thundering in the distance.

The *second*, or transitional stage, through which the relationship of capital and labor is now passing, is a stage of discussion, but not of discussion based on certain definite and well considered principles, but an angry conflict of recrimination, wherein the old authority of a revelation has been supplanted by certain metaphysical entitles to which appeal is made. Instead of enforcing conviction with a "Thus saith the Lord," as in the previous condition of social growth, certain entities, termed Laws, are supposed to have an absolute existence and govern phenomena, and

these abstractions are deemed to rule events so imperiously, that to run counter thereto, or impugn their validity is deemed a species of idiocy only equaled by him who would endeavor to ignore the laws of the natural world. These laws of political economy, concerning which, and I speak for my brother workingmen and wage-laborers, we are so frequently assailed as exhibiting such crude ignorance, must be met at the outset, and will prove to be no such devouring monstrosities as we have been taught to believe.

To show the metaphysical basis of the whole structure, and strike it at its weakest point, though that be its cornerstone, let us first endeavor to clear away the useless debris of old discussions lumbering the ground by inquiring at the outset, What is law? or What is a law? So far from being an objective real ruling or determining events, laws are simply conceptions of the mind, the ideal representation of the coexistence of phenomena. A law, instead of determining events, merely expresses events; it is the phenomena themselves classified with other, phenomena of a similar nature, the functions of which are expressed in the formula law. The law of any phenomenon, or series of phenomena, is but the observed process itself mentally detached and generalized by extension to other phenomena. The current conception of laws as "a kind of wise police keeping nature in order," is a figment of the understanding, an illusion by which the logical processes of thought are stamped upon phenomena as laws.

The laws of political economy, therefore, our ignorance of which is so loudly bewailed by our would-be leaders of public opinion, are seen to be but the formula whereby the phenomena are themselves expressed, in other words the law and the course of events are identical, the one being but the formula whereby we express the other. The scientific conception, or "law," of relativity is seen, therefore, to hold good in this instance, so that if the course of events were different, the law would also be different. It is impossible within this article to run through the entire gamut of our metaphysical economists and show in like manner the unsubstantial character of their boasted authorities.

In pursuance, however, of this conception we have the current illusion that the course of events cannot be otherwise than as they are. Because under the present metaphysical *régime*, wherein man's selfish and egotistic nature has been abnormally developed as a consequence, phenomenal events have been formulated as the expression of an absolute fact determining them, all human activity has been confined to the existing modes, and resulted in the anarchical scramble for place and pelf characterizing social life to-day. The God of our fathers has given place to Mammon; a Plutocracy is being built up of gigantic proportions under which man becomes of secondary importance to the necessities of Property, which strides the social world, the embodiment (under the present conception of its uses and nature,) of all that is heartless and selfish in man's nature, well worthy of the stigma affixed by Wesley upon chattel slavery, "the sum of all villainy." For by the economical subjection of the man of labor to the monopolizer of the means of labor that the fruit of labor, wealth, may become diverted from social application to augment the selfish gains of a few whose aggrandizement already endangers the stability of the social structure, an unsocial state of things is introduced, for it is directly opposed to social bonds which imply reciprocal relations and harmonious action.

Hence, the current phenomena of social life, formulated in abstraction as laws, and thundered into our ears as the governing power by which events are determined, is at once seen to be a metaphysical illusion, a sort of mental jugglery whereby names are made to do the duty of things.

The *third*, or scientific stage, is the ultimate, or normal condition to which we are tending, and until this is reached there can be no peace, but a period of wrangling and strife. The conception of society as an organism, though frequently shadowed forth in the past, is now distinctly formulated as a scientific truth, and its growth studied in the light of our knowledge of the laws of organic evolution. This conception is seen to be directly antipodal to the theological one, for herein the unifying conception of a living organism exerting definite functions, renders the functions, of each part subservient to the interest of the whole. Instead of the many subjected to the interest of the few, social life in a state of normal health is seen to require the subordination of self to the many, the obliteration of the current egoism by the development of a noble altruism, wherein social ends supplant the private interests with which the world has heretofore been cursed.

When this renovating conception of man as a unit shall have permeated modern thought, and the many rather than the few are clearly seen to constitute the social body for whose sole use the special classes, or limbs, exist, the relation between capital and labor will no longer involve a conflict of rights, but will be seen to inculcate a mutual lesson of duties. Property, the result of social action, will henceforth be held for social ends, regarded as a sacred public trust, but controlled entire by moral, not legal, agencies. The moralization of capital and its use or the welfare of the producing classes, instead of the producing classes existing for the aggrandizement of the capitalist, is the extent of the change that must obtain as man, already come of age, passes on to middle life.

Just as sure as the scientific stage *must* succeed the transitional metaphysical period, so certain is it that in the broad future man's activity will yet be turned solely to the benefit of humanity. While our theologians and mammon-worshiping economists may laugh at the Utopian dream, the thoughtful mind can even now see indications of the coming dawn, breaking athwart the dark night of the past ages. In the Roman empire, during the long peace which followed the victories of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, were piled up those enormous fortunes, which, according to Pliny, eventually brought disaster and ruin to Italy and the entire Roman empire. The evils of centralization are sharply depicted by Sismondi, as follows:

"A single proprietor by degrees came to buy up whole provinces, the conquest of which had in former times furnished the occasion of many triumphs to the generals of the republic was amassing riches, wholly disproportioned to the capacity of man, the once numerous and respectable but now beggared middle classes disappeared from the face of the earth. In districts where so many brave and industrious citizens were to be seen in former times, alike ready to defend or cultivate their fields, were found to be nothing but slaves, who rapidly declined in numbers as fields came to be exclusively devoted to pasturage."

The Roman Plutocracy, like their successors in France in the last century, laughed at the irresistible "logic of events," and deemed their hold on the means of life absolute, but they were deceived. The organism of which they were but a part, is immortal and although often sick "nigh unto death," yet ever bursts forth from the fatal environments created by selfishness and greed. Undoubtedly the Roman capitalist prated in his way of the dispensations of an all-wise Jove, and the immutable laws of supply and demand—even while he, through his gigantic schemes of monopoly, was overriding all operation of the law—and the politico-economical fallacy that labor is a commodity the price of which is determined by this alleged metaphysical law, yet the deluge came and swept his law and order and the system of political economy based thereon

into irretrievable ruin; and though the devastation of Alaric and his horde might seem for the moment to be reactionary, it was but the necessary prelude to social progress.

The increased intelligence of the age will not permit a repetition of the degradation witnessed under the Roman capitalists, and again under the French nobility, but though the retribution will be more prompt, its severity will be measured only by the exigencies of the case. Humanity is one, a common life pervades the whole organism, and the common health will be asserted and maintained, even though the parasites who now feast on its body, are crushed in the convulsive wrenchings it may undergo to overcome the poison self-interest has introduced into its veins, and in the subsequent years approach more nearly the normal condition of social health.

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