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Elisée Reclus

The Future of Our Children

1877

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Selfish people that we are! In our wishes for revolution, it is rare that we think of others than ourselves. We expose the workers' grievances, especially those of men, because men are the strongest; we claim for them the right to the instruments of labor and the integral product of their labor; we demand that justice be done. Beginning to know that we are the number and the intelligence, we feel rising within us the will to act and, in the half-consciousness of our strength, we prepare ourselves for the next revolution. If we felt weaker, cowardly as most of us are, we would still be begging for the crumb that falls from the table of the kings.

But below the grown man, however unhappy he may be, there is a still more unhappy being, the child. This weak being has no rights and depends on other people's whim, whether benevolent or cruel. Nothing protects it against the stupidity, indifference or perversity of those who are its masters. Who, then, will utter the cry of freedom in its favour?

In today's society, all authority is exercised from master to slave in a logical sequence. God reigns above, enthroned beyond the heavens and delegating his powers on earth to the strongest, priest or king, Hildebrand or Bismarck. Below come

satraps of every name, governors and deputy governors, presidents and vice presidents, generals and captains, masters and submasters, all bowing their backs before a superior, all puffing out their breasts in pride before the subjects: on one side adoration, on the other contempt, here command, there obedience! Since Jacob we haven't found anything better: society is nothing but a series of rungs descending from God to the slave and continuing down to hell. Gehenna, the [biblical] abyss of torment, is it not the symbol of what the vanquished and the weak have to suffer?

And among these weak ones, it is the children who are the great victims [souffre-douleurs]! I appeal to sincere men who remember their young years. Either they were unhappy by themselves, or if they were pampered, if the first struggles of existence were facilitated for them, they saw their little comrades suffer; an irremediable suffering against which any revolt is useless: what could they do against the violence and mockery, the cowardly insults of the grown-ups? Nothing, if not to amass little by little in their hearts a treasure of revenge which they, having grown up in their turn, perhaps spend in molesting other children.

Moreover, however tender the parents may be, however devoted to the happiness of their offspring, they must themselves submit to the conditions imposed on them by the society in which they live and submit their children as well. We know how hard these conditions are for the poor. The son of the starving must enter the factory at a very young age, become servant of the formidable machine that weaves wool or grinds iron. Not only does he have to obey the masters, the foremen and so on, the lesser workers, but he is also enslaved to all the cogs whose movements he must follow in order to regulate his own. He no longer belongs to himself; every gesture becomes for him a simple mechanism; any shadow of thinking is for him only an accompaniment to the work of the monster pushed by the steam.

This is how he rises to the state of man, when fatigue, misery and anemia do not quickly put an end to his wasted life. Weak in body, stupefied in intelligence, without moral ideas, what can he become and what will be his joys? Crude, brutal sensations that awaken him for a moment only to let him fall back, more numb, more unable to escape his slavery. And from time to time, legislators take care to regulate “child labor in factories”! According to these laws, which we have the audacity to extol as marvels of humanity, no boss has the right to make the child work for more than twelve hours and to deprive it of the night’s sleep, “except in exceptional cases,” and the exception, as we know, always becomes the rule. Suffice to say that it is allowed to poison, but only in small doses, to murder, but only with small blows. Here is your compassion, noble legislators!

But let’s assume that now child labor in factories is prohibited, let’s even suppose that the parents receive a state pension, in exchange for the meager salary that the boss would give to the children. Henceforth, the school would be open, and the education would be complete for all, the child of the poor as well as of the rich.

Now that the school is secular, the religious formula has been replaced by a grammar formula, the incomprehensible Latin sentences have given way to French words which are no clearer. Whether the child understands or not, it doesn’t matter; it must learn according to a form [formulaire] drawn up in advance. After the absurd alphabet which makes the child pronounce the words otherwise than it reads them, and thus accustoms it in advance to all the nonsense which will be taught to it, come the rules of grammar which he recites by heart, then the barbaric nomenclatures which are called geography, then the tale of royal crimes which is called history. And how can the very gifted child, in the long run, rid its brain of all these things that have been forced into it, sometimes with the help of a *martinet* and pensums! Besides, are these schools without slavery, without detention hours and without bars on the win-

dows? If we want to raise a free generation, let us first demolish the prisons called colleges and high schools!

Socialists, let us think of the future of our children even more than of the improvement of our situation. We ourselves, let us not forget, belong more to the world of the past than to the future society. By our education, our old ideas, our remnants of prejudices, we are still enemies of our own cause; the mark of the chain can still be seen around our necks. But let us try to save the children from the sad education we ourselves have received; let us learn how to raise them in such a way as to develop them in the most perfect physical and moral health; let us know how to make them the humans we would like to be ourselves.

Let us not forget that the ideal of a society always comes true. The present bourgeois society, represented completely by the State, has done for education precisely what it wanted to do. Now, what does the State do with the children in its care who have no family? We know it. It collects them in the hospices where, poorly nourished, badly looked after, they succumb in large majority; then it takes the rest and raises them to become child soldiers, prison guards, police bloodhounds. This is the work of the State, and the society it represents is fully satisfied. As for us, when our turn comes—and it will certainly come—when we are able to act and achieve our will, our great goal will be to spare our children all the miseries that we ourselves have suffered.

Let us have the firm resoluteness to make them free men, we who still have freedom only in vague hope.