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What will Society Do with the Thief under Freedom

F. B. Parse

1890

That old bugaboo, “What will you do with the thieves and criminals under economic freedom, liberty,—Anarchy, with no government of force, no restraint, no control; would not the criminal be uncontrollable? would he not steal, murder, and destroy wholesale, the moment governmental restraint was lifted?” is a question that is continually confronting the advocate of self-government. Now this is a question that cannot be answered by the positive and negative of yes or no. We must first inquire into the nature and character of the thief, and criminal. If we analyze him, reduce him to the last analysis, we will find him to be the product of the present monopolistic state of society, divided into two classes, the legal and illegal thief or criminal, each having reflected in himself the spirit, character, and principles of the government and society under which he is born, and under which his character for aggressive acts is formed. The thief is thus what his predominating environment makes him; therefore society is responsible for its own devils, for there would be no devils if there were no hell. Conditions are always first, results follow.

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Man did not put in an appearance upon this earth until the climatic conditions were favorable to his advent. The devils (criminals) of society will not disappear until our present social atmosphere is purified by liberty—the liberty to *practice* self-government. Then the criminal will commence to disappear, for the simple reason that the socialistic climate under economic freedom will not be congenial for the production and growth of thieves of either class. Then the honest man will no longer be “crucified between two thieves”—the legal and the illegal thief. As society is now organized, the small thief, the committer of petit larceny, breaks the law while the legal, wholesale robber (speculator) both observes and respects the law; one is a law-breaker, the other oftentimes a lawmaker. Both obtain their desires by diametrically opposite methods, and yet, contradictory as it may appear, both are the products of the same authoritarian state of society, that of brute force—majority rule. One lives in virtue of the existence of the other, while the honest man lives not in virtue of either, but in *spite* of both. The small thief stimulated by the successes of his legal brother in crime makes feeble efforts to ape him in the magnitude of his stealings, but owing to his ignorance of legal and political methods, succeeds only in committing petit larceny; as a law-breaker he is a success, but as a thief he is a failure. Now in this monopolistic state of society nothing excites contempt like failure; the failure of the nickle thief to steal a “million” is the signal for society to “let slip the dogs” of law, and during the hubbub and excitement of the chase, trial, and punishment of the small thief, the legalized criminal escapes notice and conviction. All eyes are turned upon and attracted toward the liliputian thief, while the giant malefactor, the product of special privileges is elevated to a position of respectability, popularity, and authority, bearing upon his political coat of arms the monogram, “PPP”; Privilege, Power, and Pelf, or Pockets Picked Professionally. Over his place of business is the Sign, “Rents Collected, Interest

taken, and Poverty enforced according to Law.” Here are the two classes of thieves, “look on this picture then on that.” Both are chromos *given* away by society to the student of economic liberty; both painted by the same artist, one of the “old masters”—Monopoly. Of the two classes of thieves and criminals the Individualist and Anarchist fears the legalized offender a thousand fold more than the illegal outcast pariah of society, whose stealings and criminal acts sink to a ridiculous minimum in comparison with the legalized speculator and monopolist. Nothing but an intellectual rape committed upon the public mind by the superstitious god of political authority could blind “the people” to a clear conception of this important distinction between the two classes of criminals; a distinction and difference which the ignorance of, causes society to build jails and gibbets for one class, and Wall street castles and halls of congress for the other. If anyone who is enamored with brute force government—majority rule (whether he is a State Socialist or advocate of the present system), will analyze their lust for political authority they will find that they want it as the church wants eternal punishment, not for themselves, oh no! but always for that “other fellow,” and that other fellow is the average voter whose attention is attracted to the small thief by the hue and cry raised against him while the legalized plunderer gets away with the interest, rent, and taxes.

It will be readily seen that the Individualist does not look upon the illegal criminal as being by any means the worst product of society, nor the most to be feared. Neither do we believe that the legalized speculator and monopolist is always conscious of his own criminality, for he has yet to learn that *equity* is a law superior to majority rule and special privilege; he is ignorant of the glorious truth that equity is the “principle of liberty applied to trade and commerce.” If he were not thus ignorant, he would see that the word, “criminal” in the true sense would be more justly applied to himself than the ordinary law-breaker, and that the small thief will commence

to disappear when the power of example set by the privileged plunderer is removed. This removal “so devoutly to he wished for” cannot be accomplished by threats, gunpowder, or dynamite; physical force will expensively and needlessly retard our objects and give the lie to our declaration that we are opposed to brute force.

For the sake of argument and truth we will suppose that the illegal criminal, all there is left of his peculiar species out of the present civilization, will be there when equal freedom is attained. Now, no thief, no murderer, no warrior ever risks his life or person in any aggressive act of violence unless he thinks there is a reasonable chance for success and his subsequent escape from the consequences of his invasive acts against his fellowman; it is only with the chances more in his favor than against him that he does commit them. In a free state of society—the absence of political authority where mankind enjoyed the liberty to voluntarily associate for purposes of defense against criminal encroachments, the aggressor and invader would see that the chances for success were overwhelmingly against him owing to his numerical weakness, which is even now the fact in the present thief producing state of society; and the solidarity which an economically free people would thus present to his invasion, would convince him of the utter futility of attacking society at such a great disadvantage. He would then see that as a matter of self-preservation it were more expedient to gain a living, and even wealth by working for it than to steal it.

Soon as we can obtain freedom from governmental monopoly of land and money we will not only be in a position to practice self-government, but in a condition to convince men that it is easier to work than it is to steal. Then the criminal as well as the thief will in time become an honest man both from *choice* and *necessity*.

But before these favorable conditions prevail we have a certain amount of educational work to perform; we must teach

men and women the art of *minding their own business*. This is one of the “lost arts,” but its revival and restoration is not impossible, and it is an easy accomplishment for an Anarchist and Individualist, as they are not cursed with the governmental itch, nor a lust for control over their fellow beings. While we are teaching self-government let us *practice* self-control and self-reliance. We are striving for the liberty to practice what we teach, ours is an intellectual battle with political authority, and our battle ground is the public mind. We have no patent medicine, no governmental pill, plaster, or panacea to cure the social ills that now exist, we plead only for *conditions*, the condition of liberty—equal freedom; freedom from that old dogma that the collectivity rises higher than the individual; that society enjoys a monopoly over the stream of rising higher than its source. We look upon the present unequal and unhealthy condition of society as we would upon a sick patient to whom medicine will no longer do any good, and nothing but a complete change of climate and *conditions* will cure.

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