

SOCIOLOGICAL FALLACIES

[1884]

In the extension of modern arts and industry the mass of mankind have been taught to expect comfort and ease, if not luxury; we boast so constantly of what we have accomplished in this direction that many believe we can do away with all hardship and establish universal well-being, if we choose. In our discourses, debates, and discussions we assume that the end for which society exists is the greatest happiness of the greatest number; it is laid down as an axiom of political science that political institutions should produce that result. Our philosophers encourage this doctrine and encourage the application to themselves of this test. It is, indeed, affirmed that our civilization is a failure because poverty continues to exist, and that a society in which poverty continues to exist is fit only to have "war" made upon it with fire, sword, and dynamite by any one who is still poor. Yet here is a plain question: is there any other man in the world who is to blame for the fact that I am poor?

The triumph of civilization is in the fact that we are not all steeped in poverty and misery. The student of sociology is more and more appalled as he goes on gaining fuller knowledge of what the primitive condition of man was, and a more definite conception of what human life must once have been. A missionary who resided among the Fuegians heard a shouting often at sunrise; when he asked what it meant he was told: "People very sad; cry very much." This instinctive and childlike howling

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with which they greeted a new day of misery is the most pathetic, and, at the same time, most rational and fit manifestation which we should expect to find among such people. Why are any of us today better off than the Fuegians? Why are we not sunk in misery and squalor, and destitute of all things fitted to serve human need and raise men out of slavery to nature? The triumph of civilization is that all of us are above that stage, and that some of us are emancipated from poverty.

It is also asserted by some that there are men or classes among us who have no share in the gains of civilization. Such an assertion rests on a great misconception of facts. There is not a person in a civilized state who does not share in the inheritance of institutions, knowledge, ideas, doctrines, etc., which come down as fruits of civilization; we take these things in by habit and routine, and suppose that they come of themselves, or are innate. It would be one immense gain from the study of sociology if men should learn to know by what prodigious struggles all these things have been won. Every man in a civilized state inherits a status of rights which form the basis and stay of his civil existence. These rights are often called "natural"; in truth they are the product of the struggles of thousands of generations. Men, before they were capable of reflection or had developed science, had but one process for learning: that was by their mistakes and at the price of all their experiments which failed. Our inheritance of established rights is the harvested product of the few successful experiments out of thousands which failed.

If we turn to look at capital, the case is not different. Every item of capital is productive of utilities which are immeasurable in amount and broad in variety; only a few of the simplest of them can be appropriated by the

man who "owns" the capital. A man who tilled the ground was already comparatively far up in civilization. He began with a pointed stick or the horn of an animal; by thousands of years of experiment and invention a spade was perfected. How can we measure the utility of a spade as compared with that of the pointed stick or the horn? That question would include the greater power of production of the spade and also the lessened pain and toil of the laborer. Now, if A owns a spade today, can he make B, who has none, pay him for the use of the spade an amount in any sense proportioned to the advantage of using a spade as compared with using a pointed stick? Certainly he cannot. Neither can A, if he keeps his spade, in any manner win by the use of it a superiority over his neighbors to be measured by the superiority of the spade to the stick. All but a small margin of the gains of civilization enters into a common stock which nobody can appropriate; it goes to make up a kind of industrial atmosphere around every one born into the society. Though a man may never have handled a plow, he gets his food under the conditions of a society which possesses plows; another may never have handled a pen or a type, but he gets his reading matter under the same conditions as a man who has pens and types. The same is true of every item of capital. Knowledge of the facts of history enables us to see when we look at a coin, a knife, a lead-pencil, a match, a book, a lock, a coat, the product of thousands of generations of tireless efforts to serve human needs more completely and easily with the materials offered by the earth.

What we might call the metaphysical side of capital is its most important side in the history of civilization. Every bit of capital presents devices, methods, processes, which are of general application. If one of us

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has a task to perform he unconsciously begins to review the various processes or devices with which he is familiar, to see if he cannot employ one of them. Springs, catches, levers, cams, etc., are presented to us all the time in capital which we do not own; the devices are available for new applications. He who owns the capital cannot appropriate these; his use of capital is only the most primary and simple of all the utilities which it offers, and he cannot get out those utilities without entering into co-operation and exchange with his neighbors through which they share the primary utilities. It is interesting to watch children at play, to see the uses to which they put their toys, the combinations, plans, devices, and processes which they will work out; to notice how they use what they have seen, how they collect experience of the qualities of substances, how they bring all their knowledge, to bear; and to reflect that they possess at five or six years of age a store of facts, knowledge, skill, and the like which it cost the human race thousands of years to accumulate. Most grown people use the products of civilization as unconsciously as children, and as much by habit and routine; but it is monstrous ignorance, when the point is raised for discussion, to affirm that some now do not share in the fruits of civilization.

If any one is still unconvinced of what I have here said, let him try to cut down a tree with a flint hatchet, or to produce fire with a fire drill, or to grind corn with one stone rubbed on another. Intense labor kept up over a long period was the price of everything to the primitive man; that is, he worked very hard and got very little. If a modern hod-carrier had to work a fire drill until he got a light, and if he could then strike a match to get another, he would see whether he had any share in the fruits of civilization.

The sentimentalists sometimes bewail the loss of skill due to machinery and division of labor. The fact is as alleged, but it dates from a point much further back than the factory system — it dates from the dawn of civilization. The primitive man developed great skill of eye, hand, and ear, because his tools were so poor that the wear all came on his nerves. He could accomplish nothing unless his skill was high; the man, for instance, who had to fashion a flint axe by flaking off pieces under great pressure must either work very long and spoil a great many or be very skilful. When he came to bore a hole in it with a piece of horn, some sand and water, he must work long, skilfully, and with a true eye, or he would spoil his whole work. A Swiss anthropologist has made a stone axe, with such tools as a primitive man possessed, polished but not perforated, in five hours and forty minutes of working time with intervals of rest. As tools have been perfected, men have put the work on the tools and spared their nerves. Take, for comparison, the manufacture of a modern axe, which requires more skill than many modern processes. In saving skill we have saved men. The division of labor does not probably lessen skill, but it concentrates it in narrow lines, and produces routine and monotony. Poetry is what really suffers, but the loss is more than compensated for by poetry in literary and other purer forms; we can spare poetry from industry when we have literature, drama, or art, just as we can afford to use bolted flour when we have a meat diet.

Another notion for which there is no foundation in fact is that there was more liberty in early ages of the world or in simpler societies than there now is; that is, liberty in the sense of freedom from restraint upon choice or caprice. The primitive man had no liberty in this sense

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or any other. He was a slave to nature, and that meant that he was in continual terror before dangers which he did not know, could not measure, and could not guard against. All that we learn of primitive races shows us that nature is appalling to them; they have intelligence enough to believe more and fear more than brutes. If we look at their social regulations we find that these fetter the individual in relentless traditions and rules. The impulsiveness, waywardness, and self-will of the savage are delusive if they are regarded as manifestations of liberty. The development of individual liberty, and its reconciliation with social order, is one of the grandest of those developments of original antagonism into the ultimate harmony which go to make up civilization. We have not, however, by civilization emancipated individual choice and caprice; the civilized man has won the social harmony by submitting to orderly and regular industry, under which a savage would pine and die just as surely as a cotton operative would perish in Patagonia or Greenland.

Now, the achievements of the human race have been accomplished by the *elite* of the race; there is no ground at all in history for the notion that the masses of mankind have provided the wisdom and done the work. There are, in this whole region of thought, a vast mass of dogmas and superstitions which will have to be corrected either by hard thinking or great suffering. A man is good for something only so far as he thinks, knows, tries, or works. If we put a great many men together, those of them who carry on the society will be those who use reflection and forethought, and exercise industry and self-control. Hence the dogma that all men are equal is the most flagrant falsehood and the most immoral doctrine which men have ever believed; it means that the man who has

not done his duty is as good as the one who has done his duty, and it takes away all sense from the teachings of the moralists, when they instruct youth that men who pursue one line of action will go down to loss and shame, and those who pursue another course will go up to honor and success. It is, on the contrary, a doctrine of the first moral and sociological importance that truth, wisdom, and righteousness come only by painstaking, study, and striving. These things are so hard that it is only the few who attain to them. These few carry on human society now as they always have done.

Hence we see that so soon as the exigencies of life are felt, men are differentiated according to their power to cope with them into "better" or "worse" with reference to personal and social value; and as soon as any conquest is achieved which contributes to civilization, the inequality between the men who won it and those who did not win it is established as a positive fact. Men are very unequal in what they get out of life, but they are still more unequal in what they put into it. The most unequal bargain has always been made by the men who have done the world's thinking for it.

In nothing have we, as yet, made so little progress as in the art of civil government, or, more generally, in our political organization. We have abandoned hereditary government because we regard it as illogical; it affords no guarantees that fit persons will hold power; it is stable, but it is not flexible or plastic. Have we, however, as yet produced political methods under democratic-republican government which afford us any guarantees that fit persons alone will obtain power? It is very certain that we have not done this. We do not fear for the stability of the civil organization. We desire flexibility and plasticity, but if we have lost the notion of fitness alto-

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gether, and are irritated by it when it is brought to our notice, we have made no step in advance.

The fact is, that the vague encouragement which has been given, for a century, to impossible dreams and senseless ambitions has produced social problems with which our sociology is in no position to cope. How far we are from it may be judged when we find it asserted that the end of society is justice. To ask what is the end of man, or society, or the earth, is to put a teleological or theological problem. Such a problem has been discussed in regard to man; if it has ever been discussed in regard to society, it is at least new. It is also idle. The scientific view of the matter is that a thing exists for reasons which lie in its antecedents and causes, not in its purposes or destiny. Human society exists because it is, and has come to be on earth because forces which were present must produce it. It is, therefore, utterly unscientific to regard man or society as a means to any further end. The state exists to provide justice, but the state is only one among a number of social organizations. It is parallel with the others, and has its own functions. To confuse the state with society is to produce a variety of errors, not the least of which is to smuggle statecraft into political economy. It is plain that, until such courses of confusion are put entirely beyond the pale of social discussions, our social science cannot make very rapid progress. The sources of confusion lie at the very beginning, and they vitiate our political economy and political science into their remotest developments. An attentive study of any of the current controversies will show that they arise from fundamentally confused or erroneous notions of society, and that they cannot be solved without a rectification, on a scientific basis, of our data and our doctrines about human life on this earth.