

DEMOCRACY AND PLUTOCRACY

One of the most difficult things to learn in social science is that every action inside of the social organism is attended by a reaction, and that this reaction may be spread far through the organism, affecting organs and modifying functions which are, at the first view of the matter, apparently so remote that they could not be affected at all. It is a more simple statement of the same fact to say that everything in the social organism displaces everything else. Therefore, if we set to work to interfere in the operation of the organism, with our attention all absorbed in one set of phenomena, and regulate our policy with a view to those phenomena only, we are very sure to do mischief. The current speculations about social policy and social reform suffer very largely from this error.

The organization of a modern civilized society is intensely high; its parts are extremely complicated. Their relations with each other are close, and all the tendencies of our time are making them closer; and the closer they are, the more surely and immediately are interferences distributed through them. The bonds of connection between them are constantly becoming more delicate and subtle; and they are sublimated, as it were, so that they escape the observation of the senses. In a simple society, even though it be on the height of the best civilization, all the parts of the organization lie bare to view, and every one can see the relations of agriculturist, transporter, banker, merchant, professional

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man, debtor, creditor, employer, and employee, in their visible operation. In a highly organized society as, for instance, in a big city, those same relations have all become automatic and impersonal. They have escaped from control; they are regulated by assumptions and understandings that every one is to do so and so; that certain uniform and constant motives, aims, and desires will present themselves as long as human society endures; and that men will, therefore, continue to exert themselves in a certain manner for the satisfaction of their wants. This is what we mean by natural law, and by the field of a science of society. If any one will look over his dinner table the next time he sits down to dinner, he can see the proofs that thousands of producers, transporters, merchants, bankers, policemen, and mechanics, through the whole organization of society and all over the globe, have been at work for the last year or more to put that dinner within his reach, on the assumption that he, too, would do his work in the organization, whatever it is, and be prepared to pay for the dinner when it reaches him. All these thousands and millions of people, therefore, have co-operated with each other for the common good of all, without acquaintance or conventional agreement, and without any personal interest in each other, under the play of forces which lie in human nature and in the conditions of human existence on this earth.

Now, the organs of society do not impinge upon each other with hard and grating friction, like blocks of granite wedged together. If they did the case would be easier, for then we should have only a mechanical contact, and the relations would be of a simple order. Neither are the relations those of an orchestra, which produces harmony by voluntary co-operation under training,

according to a predetermined scheme, yet subject to the laws of harmony in sound. Nor are the relations like those of an army, where the co-operation is arbitrary, and enforced by discipline, although controlled by expediency for the attainment of an end under set conditions. The organs are elastic and they are plastic. They suffer both temporary and permanent modifications in form and function by their interaction on each other, and by the arbitrary interferences to which they are subjected by legislation or artifice of any kind. Thus, for instance, it is impossible to say how taxes will diffuse themselves; they may force a change in the immediate organ on which they fall — transporters, merchants, bankers — or they may be transmitted more or less through the organization.

It is this elasticity and plasticity of the organs of society which give the social tinker his chance, and make him think that there are no laws of the social order, no science of society; no limits, in fact, to the possibilities of manipulation by "The State."

He is always operating on the limit of give and take between the organs; he regards all the displacement which he can accomplish as positively new creation; he does not notice at all, and probably is not trained to perceive, the reaction — the other side of the change; he does not understand that he must endure a change on one side for all the change which he affects on the other. Since it is so hard to learn that exchange means exchange, and therefore has two sides to it, a giving and a taking — since, I say it is so hard to learn this, and people talk even about buying and selling as if they were independent operations, a fallacy which is itself the outcome of a high organization with a money system — then it is not strange that it should be so hard to learn that all

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social change is change, has two sides to it — the cost and the gain, the price and the product, the sacrifice and the obtainment.

Hence we see one fallacy of nearly all the popular propositions of “reform”: they would not be amiss, perhaps, if the change which they propose could be made and everything else remain the same.

In the proposition it is assumed that everything else is to remain the same. But it is inevitable that other things will not remain the same; they will all of them adjust themselves to the new elements which are introduced. If we make a change involving expense, taxes must be increased, and every taxed interest must undergo a change to fit it to the new conditions. I know of no reform by state agency which does not involve increased taxation.

Let us note another fact. In the advancing organization of society, the tendency is all the time to subdivide the functions, and each one is assumed by a different set of persons; thus the interests of living men and women become enlisted in all the play of the organs, and are at stake in all the legislative and other interferences. What I have called the elasticity and plasticity of the organs means in fact the rights, interest, happiness, and prosperity of the one set of human beings versus the same interests of another set of human beings. It is men who strive, and suffer, and plan, and fight, and steal, and kill, when the great impersonal and automatic forces push them up against each other, or push group against group. The tendency is all the time to go back from the industrial struggle to the military struggle. Every strike illustrates it. Better educated people, while talking about respect for law, seize upon legislation as the modern mode of pursuing the military struggle under

the forms of peace and order — that is to say, they turn from industrial competition and industrial effort to legislative compulsion, and to arbitrary advantages won and secured through the direction and the power of the state. When the strikers and Knights of Labor declare that they are going to reach after this power, they have simply determined to contend for the latest form of force by which to supersede the industrial struggle for existence by a struggle of craft and physical force. Yet there are those who tell us that this is really a supersession of the struggle for existence by intelligence and “ethical” forces, as if every page of the Congressional Record did not reveal the sordidness of the plans and motives by which it is all controlled.

Here comes in another fallacy in the philosophy of state interference. Let the reader note for himself with what *nawetS* the advocate of interference takes it for granted that he and his associates will have the administration of their legislative device in their own hands and will be sure of guiding it for their purposes only. They never appear to remember that the device, when once set up, will itself become the prize of a struggle; that it will serve one set of purposes as well as another, so that after all the only serious question is: who will get it? Here is another ground for a general and sweeping policy of non-interference. Although you may be in possession of the power of the state to-day, and it might suit you very well, either to triumph over your business rivals and competitors; or to bend to your will the social organ which stands next to you, and with which you have the most friction (as, for instance, shippers with transporters); or to see your pet reform (temperance, for instance) marching on, you would far better consent to forego your satisfaction, lest presently

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your rivals, or the railroads, or the liquor-sellers, should beat you in a political struggle; and then you must suffer wrong and in the end be forced to give up industrial and persuasive methods altogether and devote your whole energy to the political struggle, as that on which all the rest depends.

Of all that I have here said, the Interstate Commerce Law is the instance which stands out in point with the greatest distinctness. The shippers and transporters, the competing railroads, the people who can extort passes and those who do not want to give them, the people at way-stations and those at competing points, and other interests also which cluster about the transportation, which is the most important element in the opening up of this great and rich continent, all clash and struggle for shares in the wealth which the people of the United States produce. The contest has phases and vicissitudes of every description. The politicians, editors, economists, *litterateurs*, lawyers, labor agitators, and countless others who, in one way or another, have something to make out of it, join in the struggle, taking sides with the principal parties, or hovering around the strife for what may turn up in it. When once the fatal step is taken of invoking legislation, the contest is changed in its character and in its arena. That is all that is accomplished; from that time on the questions are: who will get this legislative power? Which interest or coalition of interests (such as passed the bill) will get this, the decisive position in the battle, under its control? Already, in some of the Western States, the next phase has developed itself. The majority interest, by numbers, seizes the power of the state and proceeds to realize its own interest against all others in the most ruthless fashion. That capital has means of defense is unques-

tionable; that it will defend itself is certain; that it cannot defend itself without resorting to all the vices of plutocracy seems inevitable. Thus the issue of democracy and plutocracy, numbers against capital, is made up. It is the issue which menaces modern society, and which is destined to dispel the dreams which have been cherished, that we were on the eve of a millennium. On the contrary, it will probably appear that the advance of civilization constantly brings new necessity for a still more elevated activity of reason and conscience, and does not tend at all to a condition of stability, in which the social and political problems of the race would reach a definitive solution.