

SOCIAL WAR IN DEMOCRACY

It is one of those popular assumptions of our time which, although never distinctly formulated, have such an important part in all our accepted faiths, that social forces change in the progress of civilization, so that, for example, slavery and feudalism pass away completely. The students of social history, however, find that social forces are ever the same; only the phenomena present themselves under new combinations. It is when this fact forces itself upon the observation of men in spite of their pet dogmas, that we hear about the "labor problem," or "wage slavery." Men toss and heave and squirm, changing their position from generation to generation; they have always just got, or are about just to get, the final and completely satisfactory solution, and they find that the hardships of life, the difficulty of getting a living, the task of rearing children, pain, disease, and death, remain about the same. The new discovery, instead of annihilating ills and closing the account of earthly hardship, proves only the point of departure for new ills unknown before; and the old ills brighten as they take their flight, for their unappreciated advantages come to light.

Let us notice how class struggles have run through modern history and see what the position of democracy is in respect to class struggles and social war.

The feudal system properly had only two classes, nobles and peasants; kings were differentiated from nobles and they made a breach in the system. In Russia

and Poland these three classes fought it out, and the difference in the results has a value for the student of political class struggles which no one has yet, to my knowledge, developed. In Russia the crown won; the nobles never became "nobles"* in the Western sense; the peasants were reduced to serfdom as mere pawns in the game. They always maintained a tradition that the Czar had subjected them to servitude under the nobles that the latter might fight for the fatherland — a capital instance of what comes of sacrificing private rights to "the greater good of the state."* In Poland the crown was subjugated to the nobles, and then the latter developed a tyranny over the peasants far worse than that of Russia, and reduced their country first to anarchy and then to foreign conquest.

In Western Europe another class was differentiated from the two classes of feudalism — the middle class, the *bourgeoisie* of the cities. This made four classes, and political history has been moulded by their alliances and conflicts. The middle class was at war with feudalism; while the lords were strong the monarchs and cities combined against them. In Germany the crown could not win a real victory, while in France and Spain it did do so. In England the four classes came to a compromise and adjustment under the Constitution, but their rubbing against each other has marked the history of that country for five hundred years.

Now, if we have a democratic republic, the crown disappears out of it. If the economic situation is that of a new country, with sparse population and an abundance of land, there are no nobles, and in an older country, under the democratic republican form, there cease to be any nobles. Titles are a mere matter of courtesy and have only social value. There remain then only two

314 EARTH HUNGER AND OTHER ESSAYS

classes, the *bourgeoisie* and the peasantry, and these undergo very important modifications. The high *bourgeoisie* develops into a class of wealth and luxury, supplanting, imitating, reproducing with variations, the old baronage; it struggles to form out of itself a patriciate — a body of selected families defined by its own sympathies and voluntary recognition, or a body of locupletes or optimates, or a timocracy of those who have enjoyed the honors of the state. The process has been repeated so often in the classical states, in the Italian republics, and in the rich cities of the Middle Ages that it ought to be sufficiently familiar to us. The force at work is plainly the trait of human nature which leads men to gratify their vanity, to seek to excel, to try to guarantee the future of their children, and to secure the fruits of their own efforts. Like all other traits of human nature, it has its good side and its bad side.

On the other hand the modern representatives of the ancient peasantry are very different from their predecessors. The middle class is constantly fed from them at the bottom. A class of yeomen farmers or peasant proprietors has little in common in its status, its fund of ideas, or its outlook, with mediaeval peasants. There are no peasants in the modern Western world with whom the other classes can play, or whom they can afford to disregard.

In this matter also the modern statesman is all ready to act. The chip which floated on the current thought that it made the river go; so statesmen and political philosophers think that they make institutions and mould history. The thing which makes and breaks institutions is economic forces, acting on the interests of men, and, through them, on human nature. The statesman who goes along with these forces, wins great "triumphs"; but

he is like the chip on the current, after all; the most that he does is to show in which direction it is going. Now the cheapening of transportation between the great centers of population and the great outlying masses of unoccupied land is the greatest fact of our time, and it is the greatest economic and social revolution which has ever taken place. We, of this generation, are the first ones to see the real effects of the discovery of America beginning to operate on the whole social system of the Old World. Through the reduction in the rent of land there, the present forces are undermining and will presently sweep away the whole class system built upon the competition of a dense population for a limited area of land. The fall in rent, the obliteration of social distinctions, the decline of aristocracy, the rise of democracy, the subdivision of great estates, the rise of peasant proprietors, are all consequences of the economic revolution — consequences which no statesman or philosopher has made or can prevent; but there will, no doubt, be a great number of conventions held and innumerable “resolutions” will be passed “approving” of the change, and thereby claiming to have caused it; and the world will be enriched by a number of great statesmen who will be credited with having made it all.

A land-owning peasant class and a property-owning middle class do not appear likely to go to war with each other. On the contrary, the social combinations which must arise under the new order of things are already discernible: it is plainly the antagonism of those-who-have and those-who-have-not which is to rise out of the social residuum, when kings and nobles and old-fashioned peasants are gone; and the middle class, covering a wider compass between its extremes, is left alone. It is then that the test of democracy and of the current political

316 EARTH HUNGER AND OTHER ESSAYS

philosophy must come. With a proud and powerful plutocracy on one side, and a hungry proletariat on the other, can democracy find resources anywhere for controlling the elements of human greed and passion? A plutocracy wants to obtain free swing for its powers through and over the social organization. It wants, above all, security and guarantees for what-is, for what-has-been-accomplished for capital and accumulated wealth. The proletariat wants free swing for the forces of new creation, for what-is-to-be, for the unaccomplished. The former wants quiet enjoyment, the latter wants free chance for enterprise.

It is an easy thing, now, to get a majority to vote that the capital-which-is belongs to the chances of the new effort for what-is-to-be, and to resolve accordingly that those-who-have-not, belonging to the party of enterprise and of the future, ought to, and of right must take possession of the capital now "detained" by the party of the past and of the thing-accomplished, in order to go on with progress. We have already had an abundance of philosophers profound enough to prophesy this unto us; but when these notions turn from the precepts of philosophers into the program of parties under a democracy, we see that the old social war is not over. It is not settled: the old evils are not abolished; the passions are not stifled — they are all here under new forms. The robbery of a merchant by a robber baron, the robbery of an investor by a railroad wrecker, and the robbery of a capitalist by a collectivist, are all one. Democracy as a political form, instead of settling anything, has set them all loose; what, now, should be and can be its policy toward them? If it stands away from them, only insisting on peace and order and upon submission by everybody to the administration of rights according to

contract, then the landlord who finds that his rents fall, or the railroad investor who gets no dividends, or the producer who is dissatisfied with the price which his product brings, will have no recourse except each against himself. He will have to learn more, and to become wiser. Inasmuch as this would call reason and conscience into play, there might really be some hope that we might gain something toward doing away with social war; but that democracy can solve the antagonisms in the newest order of things, can adjust the rights of the contending interests by a series of "ethical" decisions, or that it can, by siding with one party, give it a victory over the other, and thereby found a stable social order, it is folly to believe.