

THE BANQUET OF LIFE

In 1886 the American Social Science Association published a set of analytical topics covering the field of social science. The list is in many respects remarkable, and might repay the labor of an examination, taking it as a specimen of analysis applied to social phenomena, and as a revelation of the conception of social science which prevails in some quarters. Among the other topics which the student is invited to discuss is this: "The Banquet of Life, a Collation or an Exclusive Feast." There is here a pardonable attempt at rhetoric. It is to be feared, however, that the student may be misled by the word "collation" into the belief that the antithesis which is suggested is that between something cold and something hot in the way of a meal. The antithesis which is intended, however, is undoubtedly, that between a supply for all and a supply for a limited number. If there is any banquet of life, the question certainly is, whether it is set for an unlimited or for a limited number.

If there is a banquet of life, and if it is set for an unlimited number, there is no social science possible or necessary; there would then be no limiting conditions on life, and consequently no problem of how to conquer the difficulties of living. There would be no competition, no property, no monopoly, no inequality. Fresh air and sunlight are provided gratuitously and superabundantly, not absolutely, but more nearly than any other material goods, and therefore we see that only in very exceptional circumstances, due to man's action,

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do these things become property. If food were provided in the same way, or if land, as a means of getting food, were provided in the same way, there would be no social question, no classes, no property, no monopoly, no difference between industrial virtues and industrial vices, and no inequality. When, therefore, it is argued that there is, or was, or ought to be, a banquet of life, open to all, and that the fact that there is no such thing now proves that some few must have monopolized it, it is plain that the whole notion is at war with facts, and that its parts are at war with each other.

The notion that there is such a thing as a boon of nature, or a banquet of life, shows that social science is still in the stage that chemistry was in when people believed in a philosopher's stone, or medicine, when they believed in a panacea, or physiology, when they believed in a fountain of youth, or an elixir of life. Many of the phenomena of the present seem to indicate that this group of facts is just coming under the dominion of science. The discord and confusion which we perceive are natural under the circumstances. Men never cling to their dreams with such tenacity as at the moment when they are losing faith in them, and know it, but do not yet dare to confess it to themselves.

If there was such a thing as a banquet of life, open to all comers, to which each person was entitled to have access just because he was born, and if this right could be enforced against the giver of the banquet, that is, against nature, then we should have exactly what we want to make this earth an ideal place of residence. We should have first of all a satisfaction which cost no effort, which is the first desideratum of human happiness, and which we have not hitherto ever seen realized at all except in the narrow domain of luck. Secondly,

we should have abstract justice in nature, which we have never had yet, for luck is of all things the most unjust. We should also have equality, which hitherto we have never found in nature. Finally, we should have a natural right which could be defined and enforced, not against men, but against nature — the trouble with natural rights hitherto has been that they could not be defined, that nature alone could guarantee them, and that against nature they could not be enforced.

If we take the other alternative and conceive of the Banquet of Life as a limited feast, then we see at once that monopoly is in the order of nature. The question of weal or woe for mankind is: what are the conditions of admission? How many are provided for? Can we, by any means open to us, increase the supply? But when we take the question in this form we see that we are just where we and our fathers always have been; we are forced to do the best we can under limited conditions, and the Banquet of Life is nothing but a silly piece of rhetoric which obscures the correctness of our conception of our situation.

When men reasoned on social phenomena by guessing how things must have been in primitive society, it was easy for them to conceive of a "state of nature" or a "golden age"; but, as we come to learn the facts about the primitive condition of man on earth, we find that he not only found no banquet awaiting him here, and no natural rights adjusted to suit him, but that he found the table of nature already occupied by a very hungry and persistent crowd of other animals. The whole table was already occupied — there was not room for any men until they conquered it. It is easy for any one now to assure himself that this is the true and only correct notion to hold on that matter. If land ever was a

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boon of nature to anybody it was given away to the plants and animals long before man appeared here. When man appeared, he simply found a great task awaiting him: the plants and animals might be made to serve him, if he could conquer them; the earth would be his if he could drive off his competitors. He had no charter against nature, and no rights against her; every hope in his situation had an "if" in it — if he could win it.

We look in vain for any physical or metaphysical endowment with which men started the life of the race on earth. We look in vain for any facts to sustain the notion of a state of primitive simplicity and blessedness, or natural rights, or a boon of material goods. All the facts open to us show that man has won on earth everything which he has here by toil, sacrifice, and blood; all the civilization we possess has been wrought out by work and pain. All the rights, freedom, and social power which we have inherited are products of history. Our institutions are so much a matter of course to us that it is only by academical training that we learn what they have cost antecedent generations. If serious knowledge on this subject were more wide-spread, probably we should have a higher appreciation of the value of our inheritance, and we should have less flippant discussion of the question: what is all this worth? We should also probably better understand the conditions of successful growth or reform, and have less toleration for schemes of social reconstruction.

Civilization has been of slow and painful growth. Its history has been marked by many obstructions, reactions, and false developments. Whole centuries and generations have lost their chances on earth, passing through human existence, keeping up the continuity of the race, but, for their own part, missing all share in the

civilization which had previously been attained, and which ought to have descended to them. It is easy to bring about such epochs of social disease and decline by human passion, folly, blunders, and crime. It is not easy to maintain the advance of civilization; it even seems as if a new danger to it had arisen in our day. Formerly men lived along instinctively, under social conditions and customs, and social developments wrought themselves out by a sort of natural process. Now we deliberate and reflect. Naturally we propose to interfere and manage according to the product of our reflection. It looks as if there might be danger soon lest we should vote away civilization by a plebiscite, in an effort to throw open to everybody this imaginary "Banquet of Life."