X

DO WE WANT INDUSTRIAL PEACE?

[1889]

IT cannot be said that the discussion of the so-called labor question has been productive of any positive results in the way of making us understand the facts and relations of the industrial system any better. The discussion has fallen into certain grooves and has revolved around certain assumptions and pet notions. It has become almost hidden under conventionalities and has bred a series of commonplaces. An actual orthodoxy has arisen in connection with it, dissent from which is regarded with horror. A code of discussion has been elaborated for it and a certain conventional tone of mind has come to be recognized as proper to be assumed before taking part in it. Consequently the future historian will read our labor-bureau literature as a revelation of the mental fashion of our time. There never has been any literature just like it, inasmuch as its chief aim is, while maintaining some of the forms of a scientific investigation, to reach results which shall not brush rudely against the pet notions of any important school of social opinion, or against any one of the strong interests which are in conflict.

The consequence of the discussion is not matter for wonder when we consider how it has been carried on. Very rarely has anyone taken part in it who has been a party to the industrial war. The discussion has been almost entirely in the hands of socialists, social reformers,

friends of the people, economists, and prophets of a new social dispensation. If these classes of persons take up the discussion of matters affecting the practical relations of parties in the industrial organization, it is inevitable that the discussion should take exactly the turn which has just been described; that is to say, that it should become conventionalized, should lose actuality, should speedily run down into a repetition of commonplaces, should be controlled by dogmatic assumptions, not of fact, but of ethical relation, and in all this should be, as the saying is, "up in a balloon."

It has been said by those who are in the best position to know, that great inventions take place step by step, and that they advance best by reaching a point where all further progress is arrested by one difficulty which can be sharply and specifically defined. Then effort can be concentrated on this point till it is conquered. It is said that when ocean steamers were first built, their development was arrested by the fact that no means then in use were adequate to forge such masses of iron as were required for the shafts. The problem put to the inventors was to invent a steam hammer capable of forging shafts. The problem, being thus set, was soon solved. Other instances in the recent history of electric lighting, the telephone, etc., suggest themselves. It is evident that the progress is most steady and certain when it goes on with a regularity and system which produce a succession of these narrow, specific, sharply defined questions or problems.

In like manner the life of a society brings to the front a series of social and political problems. It is one of the tests of a real, rational, and practical political question that it likewise is specific, narrow in scope, and capable of simple formulation; and on the other hand,

it is a sign of a matter which is crude, unreal, fantastic, and certainly not yet ready for practical solution, that it is grand, vague, ethical, and aims at producing "states of things," and not at realizing a single positive result.

For instance, when a State has suspended specie payment, a proper political and public question is: Shall we resume specie payment? Another question which answers the test is: Shall we abolish the protective taxes? It has always been one difficulty with the reform of the civil service, as a political topic or question, that it is not easy to reduce it to an issue of positive form and that it easily runs out into regrets, complaints, scoldings, or alarmist criticisms, whereupon it dissolves and is lost. The so-called silver question has never yet been reduced to a question. It never will be until it is asked whether 412½ grains of standard silver shall be the American dollar. Last year we had the fisheries question, which never really reached public opinion, because it never was reduced to a question.

The labor question is the most remarkable example that could be brought forward of a topic of public talk which has never been reduced to any definite form. According to the only actual attempt to define it which has ever been made by anybody within my knowledge, the labor question means things in general, and consists in a regret that this world is such a hard place in which to get a living and in an enthusiastic aspiration for greater ease and facility in that respect.

The discussion of all ill-defined questions is sure to run off into whims and useless wrangling. Even a real question, if it is not yet ripe, must undergo a great deal of preliminary thrashing (which ought to be accomplished on the academic arena) before it can be got into the positive form of a public political question or a proposed

modification of custom and usage. It is inevitable in the nature of things that a great amount of energy must be wasted in preliminary work, which results only in finding out what the question is; but we ought to have some test which would show us whether we are going in the proper direction and whether there is reasonable probability that we shall accomplish something on the line we are pursuing. One such test is to notice whether the topic converges to a simple issue or whether it dissolves into mere logomachy and word-juggling.

Now it is characteristic of the discussion of the various forms of industrial war that they have lost definiteness, instead of winning it, during the last years. It has come out of the discussion, as almost the sole result, that we have a whole vocabulary of words of which we have no settled definition, which different people use in very different senses (for example, labor and capital, monopoly, competition, workingman, wages, cost of production), and that all social theorems or principles are as yet so obscure that a mist of transcendentalism and mysticism hangs over them all, which renders them most inviting to the crank. One is at a loss how to go on with any such discussion at all, for the reason that he can hardly use the only terms which the language affords for expressing thoughts about it, without using terms which, within his knowledge, have become parts of the jargon of pseudo-science and bogus philosophy.

Such being the position of the matter in the world of thought and discussion, while it is in daily experience a matter affecting the interests and happiness of great numbers of people who are brought into antagonism to each other, any attempt to deal with it by legislation must be the purest empiricism. We are told that the coming session of the German Parliament is to be occu-

pied with measures for the prevention of strikes. It will be an interesting experiment, and one on many accounts deserving of careful watching. The Emperor some weeks ago, in his speeches about the strike then existing, gave it to be understood that he could and would stop strikes, putting both masters and men in their proper places. He seems just now to have the key of the universe, and it will be interesting for us, who are at a safe distance, to stand by and see him use it. The experiment of State socialistic legislation and tyrannical anti-socialist legislation, both at the same time, is, to say the least, bold and interesting. It is not possible now to say what the question will be which will come before the Parliament. If it is: How can we put down strikes? the first incidental question will be: How do you know that you want to put down strikes?

There are only two ways in which strikes can be put down. The first is to make it a crime to strike and to punish it with pains and penalties. That way has been tried and is effete. That way was addressed to the employees. The other way must be addressed to the employers, and will consist in compelling them to pay what the employed ask for. At present, wages are fixed by a contract between two consenting parties. If either party wants to revise the contract — that is to say, to make a new one — they must both consent again, else there is a strike or a lock-out. How can this be prevented except by forcing that one to consent who is holding back? Then, however, his will is coerced, his interests are sacrificed, and his civil or social freedom is violated. Hence the obvious fallacy of arbitration. There is no time when a man is more supremely sovereign and independent than when he is making a contract, for then he is freely subjecting himself to conditions which he con-

siders satisfactory, for purposes which he considers worth obtaining. It is only another of the confusions which have been introduced into this subject that a juggle is made here on the word "free." It is declared that the contract is not free, because it is made under the existing conditions of the market, which may be hard for one of the parties — an objection which is entirely irrelevant, since the only "freedom" which can here come into account, where the proposition is to use civil and social coercion, is civil and social freedom If, then, a man is making a contract, how can anybody else judge for him what conditions he shall submit to or what ends he ought to consider worth attaining? His final and perfectly conclusive answer is: I will, or, I will not. Now if one man can force another, by virtue of law and social force, to enter into a contract which is not satisfactory to him — that is to say, which is not the best one that he thinks he can make — then the latter is a slave and the relationship might serve as a definition of slavery. This is as true if the victim is an employer as if he were an employee.

Industrial war is, in fact, an incident of liberty. It is an inconvenience; it is doubtful if it is an evil. The greatest injustice about war is that it imposes loss and harm on those who are not parties to it. If two nations go to war, they interfere with all their neighbors by breaking up the regular currents of trade and industry and cutting off the ten thousand relations of various kinds which have sprung up during peace and which affect the happiness and welfare of all mankind. It is so in industrial war. Strikes and railroad wars cause loss and inconvenience to thousands who are not parties to the quarrel at all, because they upset all those social and industrial relationships upon which the regularity and

security of modern society depend. They destroy the social organization which is our reliance nowadays for the supply of our needs. Indeed, this is the real strain upon which a strike relies for its hopes of success; and if there is any justification for legislation to prevent industrial war, it lies in this interest of the public, not in any interest of either of the parties. It is an interesting thing to notice that industrial war has arisen in modern society in proportion as greater State organization has modified the old form of chronic war and brigandage.

There is an interesting and important parallel to this transformation of one kind of social ill into another, attendant upon what we call progress, in another branch of the social organization. A century ago France was so thoroughly policed that violence or breach of public order was scarcely possible. In general, even now, anywhere on the continent of Europe, the man who first strikes a blow is held to be in the wrong, without much regard to provocation, because he violates public peace and order. In Russia any overt act of violence meets with very prompt suppression, without regard to the grievance which caused it. This may be the very worst tyranny and wrong, unless it is attended by a constant and effective redress of all grievances upon proper complaint. Now a modern election, such as we are accustomed to in this country, is a form of riot and disorder which would have set the whole police of France in agitation a century ago. A sarcastic critic might find many amusing analogies by which to sustain the proposition that a modern American election is only a revolution under legal form; that it is a fight of two factions for State power under legal form, but that it works by the same means and toward the same end as a palace revo-

lution, only openly and avowedly. Such an assertion would be extravagant and untrue, but not devoid of foundation. Political liberty must have room in which to play. It will, in its moments of transition and new creation, lose the forms of disciplined and harmonious action and undergo crises of disorder, struggle, and strife.

In the same manner industrial war is an attendant upon liberty. It has come just because industry has been unfettered and has been allowed to shape itself freely. How can it shape itself freely unless it works out the full effect of all the forces that are in it? It would be a fatal undertaking to endeavor to police elections in such a way as to put an end to those features of them which, from the standpoint of ordinary times, are disorderly; for he who policed would soon elect. The good sense of our people long ago recognized this fact, and within limits which are respected by this good sense, the comparative license of an election is endured, because it is worth what it costs.

The same is true with regard to industrial war. It is worth all that it costs to maintain industrial liberty. So far as individual interests are concerned, those who find themselves weak under liberty may be sure that they would find themselves very much weaker under any system of legal regulation. That, however, is a comparatively unimportant consideration. The most important consideration is that the industrial war is solving questions which can never be solved in any other way.

We are told, indeed, that they can be solved otherwise; some say by science, others by ethics and religion, others by the specific prescribed by some social philosopher. In regard to all such propositions we may observe at

once that, although the philosophers and literary men should reach, by their discussion, a unanimous conclusion as to the principles of social dissolution and reconstruction, the men of this age will never put their inheritance of institutions and property in voluntary and unnecessary liquidation. It is well to remember that there are millions of people in the United States who do not know what the literary disputants and the various learned societies are talking about. The latter are led by their knowledge of the movement among themselves to judge of the effect on all outsiders, whereas the two are related very much like the ripples on the surface of the ocean and the great currents at its depths.

Then, again, even within the limits of the discussion, it may become plain to anyone who will take up and compare any two articles on this subject of industrial war that the writers are not agreed as to the fundamental assumptions which constitute the root and stock of their respective positions. For instance, when they talk about the labor question, they do not agree as to what makes the rate of wages. But how is it possible to advance a step in the discussion of any question about employers and employed without a definite doctrine of what it is that makes the rate of wages? In the discussions about railroads it is constantly assumed that there is some "cost" which can be taken as a basis for the definition of fair and reasonable rates. On the other hand, it is stoutly asserted that cost in this sense is a myth, and that no cost can be determined which will serve as a basis for any such computation. How can there be any deliberative solution of a practical question as to what railroads and shippers and legislators respectively ought to do, with such discord on the very first notions about the relations of the parties to each other inside the indus-

trial organization? Again, in the discussion about trusts it is asserted that trusts adopt an arbitrary capitalization and then fix the prices of their products at such rates as to pay dividends on the paper capital. On the other hand, it is asserted that there are laws of the market which are imperative in their action and which make it utterly impossible for anybody to do that. In fact, the whole discussion revolves around this issue, without ever bringing it out as a definite, independent subject of debate. One or the other view is assumed implicitly, and the discussion moves over secondary and derived applications, while any chance of clearing the matter up is diminished by the odium which is imported into the discussion.

Indeed, there is another and still more fundamental difficulty than that last noticed. These questions all finally reach down to the notion which we entertain of the social organization and the facts as to what human society is. All schools of opinion talk about "nature," or what is "natural," and all of them ridicule each other's pretensions to know or to use the real natural order. It is here, in fact, that the great difficulty lies for any deliberative or theoretical solution of social questions. Our age has inherited the ruins of a half-dozen old philosophies and has invented a number of new ones. Each deduces an explanation of the social order from its own grand premises and an independent social science with its own guarantees does not exist. This does not stop the discussion, it only makes it all the more lively; but when one of us states his views, you can see that he is only rehearsing the platform of his school; and one who is well up in the doctrines of the schools can save time if each disputant will only say: I am a Comtist; I am a Darwinian; I am an evangelical Christian; I am an

economist of the historical school, and so on. He knows all the rest if he has seen the label.

Far be it from me now to deride science in this field of study. My point is that we cannot wait for science to work out its results, because we must live to-day and to-morrow, and the day when public opinion will be founded on correct notions of the order of society, reduced to commonplace, and ingrained into the common mind, is at an indefinite distance; and that therefore, in the meantime, the thing to do is to abstain from empirical undertakings and to let the problems solve themselves under liberty, no matter if the process be attended by industrial war.

The industrial war is, in great measure, the entirely inevitable means by which redistributions of capital and labor are brought about. We boast very often about the modern achievements, without noticing the incidental effects which are not all pleasant. The world-wide organization is necessarily automatic and impersonal; that makes it mechanical and unfeeling in action. One of us is pursuing in peace and honesty the occupation to which he has become accustomed; he asks nothing better than to live his life out in modest and contented circumstances, but on the lines to which he has become accustomed. Formerly he could do it. It has become one of the commonest experiences for such a man, no matter what his occupation or social position may be, to find that he must change his occupation, or his investments, or his methods; forfeit his acquired skill, change his abode, acquire new habits, and seek other means of livelihood. He will be very apt to find that the first warning of this comes in the shape of a reduction in the price of his product, or in his dividends, or his salary, or his professional income, or his wages. He resents the change

and resists it as long as he can, and this resistance takes the form of a battle with the members of that social group nearest to his own, to whose voluntary human action he attributes that injury to his own interest which is really due to "natural causes." Hence landlords and tenants, borrowers and lenders, producers and consumers, shippers and transporters, employers and employees are pushed against one another in collisions which are nothing but the social manifestation of great changes in the currents of trade and in the organization of production. Many railroad wars are interpreted as efforts of railroad managers to force trade into certain places, when they are really symptoms of the tendency of trade to certain places — a tendency which makes itself felt by the transporters in the first place and is transmitted by them to the local interests. In all such cases the rational thing to do would be to investigate the real significance of the war, but such an investigation has to contend, not only with the obscurity of the matter itself and the inadequacy of our scientific attainments for the task, but also with various developments of local pride and personal vanity, the worst lions which ever rise to bar the way of a labor bureau or a railroad commission. In the absence of such investigation, however, one thing is reasonably certain: that is, that any interference which would stop the war by enabling any party to escape for the time being the irksome change which is forced upon it by economic changes is sure to produce nothing but greater misery under a renewed and intenser necessity at a later time. That is the dilemma which repeats itself over and over again in the social developments of our time and brings up one after another of these "great social questions." If we go on we can see plainly before us that we have to encounter a threatening social peril.

We stop or try to turn back in order to avoid it; then we find either that it is impossible to turn back or that, if we do, we shall suffer still worse.

The irksomeness of industrial changes as an inevitable attendant of intense industrial activity such as we live under is a subject which would form an important chapter in some new popular ethics. We have been taught for a century that everything ought to go on with concurrent results, contributing to our enjoyment and satisfaction, without drawbacks of any kind; and those theories of social facts are always popular and are eagerly accepted which pretend to show that all things concur to make it nice and easy for us here. Industrial war is one of the penalties of adopting a notion so sweet and seductive, but so false to all the facts. Industrial war is a symptom of the social changes produced by the seething chaos into which all industrial relations have been thrown by great modern inventions. We want to develop the symptoms; we do not want to suppress them.

There is another feature of the industrial war which is of immense importance — its political side. What we call modern progress is to a great extent an effect of the extension of population from the crowded countries of Europe to the outlying continents, especially America; it is also an effect of the great inventions. The former provided more land; the latter increased power over the land acre by acre. The social effect of these two things has been the emancipation of the classes which had neither land nor capital. These forces have undermined the privileges of the classes which had the advantage under the mediæval system. They have modified class differences and brought about comparative equality. Politically, they have given the advantage to democratic

forms and have carried power over to the "masses"; that is, to the classes powerful by numbers.

It is impossible in this place to trace the immeasurable social effects which are in the way of development, much less to show how mistaken is the received opinion about the causes of the social phenomena which we see about us, whose development has been so greatly accelerated during the nineteenth century. No one can be blind to the interplay of political power and economic interest in the industrial war. Socialism is nothing but a phase of that relation of the parts of the social organization, and its self-satisfied parading of itself as being at once the cause and the arbiter of the new social growth is among the humorous features of the situation.

It is inevitable, however, that the classes which constitute the masses should go on to win all the power which is thrown into their hands by the facts of the situation. In the long run this social antagonism, like those which have preceded it, will be reduced to new harmony; but never by the wit of man, only by the working out of the forces. A movement so vast and so new will have to construct its own institutions. It is vain to speculate as to what they will be. Such a movement will, of course, be attended by a vast chorus of bystanders; some shouting in honor of its triumph, some asserting that they always predicted it, an immense number claiming that they brought it about, some shaking their heads over it and predicting disaster. On the other hand, it is not sound philosophy to say that all other forces should be withdrawn and that the social revolution should go on without hindrance. No revolution is healthful and sound which does not contain all the elements, and the conservative elements must be included in their full force. How then can we have industrial peace? Why

should we not have industrial war? Industrial war is a sign of vigor in society. It contains a promise of a sound solution. It is not possible to stop it if all the philosophers and statesmen in the world should agree to try it; and it will be wise philosophy and statesmanship not to try.