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THE CASE OF THE FORGOTTEN MAN FURTHER CONSIDERED

[1884]

THERE is a beautiful notion afloat in our literature and in the minds of our people that men are born to certain "natural rights." If that were true, there would be something on earth which was got for nothing, and this world would not be the place it is at all. The fact is, that there is no right whatever inherited by man which has not an equivalent and corresponding duty by the side of it. The rights, advantages, capital, knowledge, and all other goods which we inherit from past generations have been won by the struggles and sufferings of past generations; and the fact that the race lives, though men die, and that the race can by heredity accumulate within some cycle its victories over nature, is one of the facts which make civilization possible. The struggles of the race as a whole produce the possessions of the race as a whole. Something for nothing is not to be found on earth.

If there were such things as natural rights, the question would arise. Against whom are they good? Who has the corresponding obligation to satisfy these rights? There can be no rights against nature, except to get out of her whatever we can, which is only the fact of the struggle for existence stated over again. The common assertion is that the rights are good against society; that is, that society is bound to obtain and secure them

for the persons interested. Society, however, is only the persons interested plus some other persons; and as the persons interested have by the hypothesis failed to win the rights, we come to this, that natural rights are the claims which certain persons have by prerogative against some other persons. Such is the actual interpretation in practice of natural rights — claims which some people have by prerogative on other people.

This theory is a very far-reaching one, and of course it is adequate to furnish a foundation for a whole social philosophy. In its widest extension it comes to mean that if any man finds himself uncomfortable in this world it must be somebody else's fault, and that somebody is bound to come and make him comfortable. Now the people who are most uncomfortable in this world — for if we should tell all our troubles it would not be found to be a very comfortable world for anybody — are those who have neglected their duties, and consequently have failed to get their rights. The people who can be called upon to serve the uncomfortable must be those who have done their duty, as the world goes, tolerably well. Consequently the doctrine which we are discussing turns out to be in practice only a scheme for making injustice prevail in human society by reversing the distribution of rewards and punishments between those who have done their duty and those who have not.

We are constantly preached at by our public teachers as if respectable people were to blame because some people are not respectable — as if the man who has done his duty in his own sphere was responsible in some way for another man who has not done his duty in his sphere. There are relations of employer and employee which need to be regulated by compromise and treaty. There are sanitary precautions which need to be taken in

factories and houses. There are precautions against fire which are necessary. There is care needed that children be not employed too young, and that they have an education. There is care needed that banks, insurance companies, and railroads be well managed, and that officers do not abuse their trusts. There is a duty in each case on the interested parties to defend their own interest. The penalty of neglect is suffering. The system of providing for these things by boards and inspectors throws the cost of it, not on the interested parties, but on the tax-payers. Some of them, no doubt, are the interested parties, and they may consider that they are exercising the proper care by paying taxes to support an inspector. If so, they only get their fair deserts when the railroad inspector finds out that a bridge is not safe after it is broken down, or when the bank examiner comes in to find out why a bank failed after the cashier has stolen all the funds. The real victim is the Forgotten Man again — the man who has watched his own investments, made his own machinery safe, attended to his own plumbing, and educated his own children, and who, just when he wants to enjoy the fruits of his care, is told that it is his duty to go and take care of some of his negligent neighbors, or, if he does not go, to pay an inspector to go. No doubt it is often his interest to go or to send, rather than to have the matter neglected, on account of his own connection with the thing neglected and his own secondary peril; but the point now is, that if preaching and philosophizing can do any good in the premises, it is all wrong to preach to the Forgotten Man that it is his duty to go and remedy other people's neglect. It is not his duty. It is a harsh and unjust burden which is laid upon him, and it is only the more unjust because no one thinks of him when laying the burden so that it

falls on him. The exhortations ought to be expended on the negligent — that they take care of themselves.

It is an especially vicious extension of the false doctrine above mentioned that criminals have some sort of a right against or claim on society. Many reformatory plans are based on a doctrine of this kind when they are urged upon the public conscience. A criminal is a man who, instead of working with and for the society, has turned against it and become destructive and injurious. His punishment means that society rules him out of its membership and separates him from its association, by execution or imprisonment, according to the gravity of his offense. He has no claims against society at all. What shall be done with him is a question of expediency to be settled in view of the interests of society — that is, of the non-criminals. The French writers of the school of '48 used to represent the badness of the bad men as the fault of "society." As the object of this statement was to show that the badness of the bad men was not the fault of the bad men, and as society contains only good men and bad men, it followed that the badness of the bad men was the fault of the good men. On that theory of course the good men owed a great deal to the bad men who were in prison and at the galleys on their account. If we do not admit that theory, it behooves us to remember that any claim which we allow to the criminal against the "state" is only so much burden laid upon those who have never cost the State anything for discipline or correction. The punishments of society are just, like those of God and nature — they are warnings to the wrong-doer to reform himself.

When public offices are to be filled numerous candidates at once appear. Some are urged on the ground that they are poor, or cannot earn a living, or want

support while getting an education, or have female relatives dependent on them, or are in poor health, or belong in a particular district, or are related to certain persons, or have done meritorious service in some other line of work than that which they apply to do. The abuses of the public service are to be condemned on account of the harm to the public interest, but there is an incidental injustice of the same general character with that which we are discussing. If an office is granted by favoritism or for any personal reason to A, it cannot be given to B. If an office is filled by a person who is unfit for it, he always keeps out somebody somewhere who is fit for it; that is, the social injustice has a victim in an unknown person — the Forgotten Man — and he is some person who has no political influence, and who has known no way in which to secure the chances of life except to deserve them. He is passed by for the noisy, pushing, importunate, and incompetent.

I have said elsewhere, disparagingly, something about the popular rage against combined capital, corporations, corners, selling futures, etc. The popular rage is not without reason, but it is sadly misdirected, and the real things which deserve attack are thriving all the time. The greatest social evil with which we have to contend is jobbery. Whatever there is in legislative charters, watering stocks, and so on which is objectionable comes under the head of jobbery. Jobbery is any scheme which aims to gain, not by the legitimate fruits of industry and enterprise, but by extorting from somebody a part of his product under guise of some pretended industrial undertaking. Of course it is only a modification when the undertaking in question has some legitimate character, but the occasion is used to graft upon it devices for obtaining what has not been earned. Jobbery is the vice

of plutocracy, and it is the especial form under which plutocracy corrupts a democratic and republican form of government. The United States is deeply afflicted with it, and the problem of civil liberty here is to conquer it. It affects everything which we really need to have done to such an extent that we have to do without public objects which we need through fear of jobbery. Our public buildings are jobs — not always, but often. They are not needed, or are costly beyond all necessity or even decent luxury. Internal improvements are jobs. They are not made because they are needed to meet needs which have been experienced. They are made to serve private ends, often incidentally the political interests of the persons who vote the appropriations. Pensions have become jobs. In England pensions used to be given to aristocrats, because aristocrats had political influence, in order to corrupt them. Here pensions are given to the great democratic mass, because they have political power, to corrupt them. Instead of going out where there is plenty of land and making a farm there, some people go down under the Mississippi River to make a farm, and then they want to tax all the people in the United States to make dikes to keep the river off their farms. The California gold-miners have washed out gold and have washed the dirt down into the rivers and on the farms below. They want the Federal Government to clean out the rivers now and restore the farms. The silver-miners found their product declining in value and they got the Federal Government to go into the market and buy what the public did not want, in order to sustain, as they hoped, the price of silver. The Federal Government is called upon to buy or hire unsalable ships, to build canals which will not pay, to furnish capital for all sorts of experiments, and to provide capital

for enterprises of which private individuals will win the profits. All this is called "developing our resources," but it is, in truth, the great plan of all living on each other.

The greatest job of all is a protective tariff. It includes the biggest log-rolling and the widest corruption of economic and political ideas. It was said that there would be a rebellion if the taxes were not taken off whisky and tobacco, which taxes were paid into the public Treasury. Just then the importations of Sumatra tobacco became important enough to affect the market. The Connecticut tobacco-growers at once called for an import duty on tobacco which would keep up the price of their product. So it appears that if the tax on tobacco is paid to the Federal Treasury there will be a rebellion, but if it is paid to the Connecticut tobacco-raisers there will be no rebellion at all. The farmers have long paid tribute to the manufacturers; now the manufacturing and other laborers are to pay tribute to the farmers. The system is made more comprehensive and complete and we are all living on each other more than ever.

Now the plan of plundering each other produces nothing. It only wastes. All the material over which the protected interests wrangle and grab must be got from somebody outside of their circle. The talk is all about the American laborer and American industry, but in every case in which there is not an actual production of wealth by industry there are two laborers and two industries to be considered — the one who gets and the one who gives. Every protected industry has to plead, as the major premise of its argument, that any industry which does not pay *ought* to be carried on at the expense of the consumers of the product, and as its minor premise, that the industry in question does not

pay; that is, that it cannot reproduce a capital equal in value to that which it consumes plus the current rate of profit. Hence every such industry must be a parasite on some other industry. What is the other industry? Who is the other man? This, the real question, is always overlooked.

In all jobbery the case is the same. There is a victim somewhere who is paying for it all. The doors of waste and extravagance stand open, and there seems to be a general agreement to squander and spend. It all belongs to somebody. There is somebody who had to contribute it and who will have to find more. Nothing is ever said about him. Attention is all absorbed by the clamorous interests, the importunate petitioners, the plausible schemers, the pitiless bores. Now, who is the victim? He is the Forgotten Man. If we go to find him, we shall find him hard at work tilling the soil to get out of it the fund for all the jobbery, the object of all the plunder, the cost of all the economic quackery, and the pay of all the politicians and statesmen who have sacrificed his interests to his enemies. We shall find him an honest, sober, industrious citizen, unknown outside his little circle, paying his debts and his taxes, supporting the church and the school, reading his party newspaper, and cheering for his pet politician.

We must not overlook the fact that the Forgotten Man is not infrequently a woman. I have before me a newspaper which contains five letters from corset-stitchers who complain that they cannot earn more than seventy-five cents a day with a machine and that they have to provide the thread. The tax on the grade of thread used by them is prohibitory as to all importation, and it is the corset-stitchers who have to pay day by day out of their time and labor the total enhancement of price

due to the tax. Women who earn their own living probably earn on an average seventy-five cents per day of ten hours. Twenty-four minutes' work ought to buy a spool of thread at the retail price, if the American workwoman were allowed to exchange her labor for thread on the best terms that the art and commerce of to-day would allow; but after she has done twenty-four minutes' work for the thread she is forced by the laws of her country to go back and work sixteen minutes longer to pay the tax — that is, to support the thread-mill. The thread-mill, therefore, is not an institution for getting thread for the American people, but for making thread harder to get than it would be if there were no such institution.

In justification, now, of an arrangement so monstrously unjust and out of place in a free country, it is said that the employes in the thread-mill get high wages and that, but for the tax, American laborers must come down to the low wages of foreign thread-makers. It is not true that American thread-makers get any more than the market rate of wages, and they would not get less if the tax were entirely removed, because the market rate of wages in the United States would be controlled then, as it is now, by the supply and demand of laborers under the natural advantages and opportunities of industry in this country. It makes a great impression on the imagination, however, to go to a manufacturing town and see great mills and a crowd of operatives; and such a sight is put forward, *under the special allegation that it would not exist but for a protective tax*, as a proof that protective taxes are wise. But if it be true that the thread-mill would not exist but for the tax, then how can we form a judgment as to whether the protective system is wise or not unless we call to mind all the seamstresses, washer-women, servants, factory-hands, sales-

women, teachers, and laborers' wives and daughters, scattered in the garrets and tenements of great cities and in cottages all over the country, who are paying the tax which keeps the mill going and pays the extra wages? If the sewing-women, teachers, servants, and washer-women could once be collected over against the thread-mill, then some inferences could be drawn which would be worth something. Then some light might be thrown upon the obstinate fallacy of "creating an industry" and we might begin to understand the difference between wanting thread and wanting a thread-mill. Some nations spend capital on great palaces, others on standing armies, others on iron-clad ships of war. Those things are all glorious and strike the imagination with great force when they are seen, but no one doubts that they make life harder for the scattered insignificant peasants and laborers who have to pay for them all. They "support a great many people," they "make work," they "give employment to other industries." We Americans have no palaces, armies, or iron-clads, but we spend our earnings on protected industries. A big protected factory, if it really needs the protection for its support, is a heavier load for the Forgotten Men and Women than an iron-clad ship of war in time of peace.

It is plain that the Forgotten Man and the Forgotten Woman are the real productive strength of the country. The Forgotten Man works and votes — generally he prays — but his chief business in life is to pay. His name never gets into the newspapers except when he marries or dies. He is an obscure man. He may grumble sometimes to his wife, but he does not frequent the grocery, and he does not talk politics at the tavern. So he is forgotten. Yet who is there whom the statesman, economist, and social philosopher ought to think

of before this man? If any student of social science comes to appreciate the case of the Forgotten Man, he will become an unflinching advocate of strict scientific thinking in sociology and a hard-hearted skeptic as regards any scheme of social amelioration. He will always want to know, Who and where is the Forgotten Man in this case, who will have to pay for it all?

The Forgotten Man is not a pauper. It belongs to his character to save something. Hence he is a capitalist, though never a great one. He is a "poor" man in the popular sense of the word, but not in a correct sense. In fact, one of the most constant and trustworthy signs that the Forgotten Man is in danger of a new assault is that "the poor man" is brought into the discussion. Since the Forgotten Man has some capital, anyone who cares for his interest will try to make capital secure by securing the inviolability of contracts, the stability of currency, and the firmness of credit. Anyone, therefore, who cares for the Forgotten Man will be sure to be considered a friend of the capitalist and an enemy of the poor man.

It is the Forgotten Man who is threatened by every extension of the paternal theory of government. It is he who must work and pay. When, therefore, the statesmen and social philosophers sit down to think what the state can do or ought to do, they really mean to decide what the Forgotten Man shall do. What the Forgotten Man wants, therefore, is a fuller realization of constitutional liberty. He is suffering from the fact that there are yet mixed in our institutions mediæval theories of protection, regulation, and authority, and modern theories of independence and individual liberty and responsibility. The consequence of this mixed state of things is that those who are clever enough to get into

control use the paternal theory by which to measure their own rights — that is, they assume privileges — and they use the theory of liberty to measure their own duties; that is, when it comes to the duties, they want to be “let alone.” The Forgotten Man never gets into control. He has to pay both ways. His rights are measured to him by the theory of liberty — that is, he has only such as he can conquer; his duties are measured to him on the paternal theory — that is, he must discharge all which are laid upon him, as is the fortune of parents. In a paternal relation there are always two parties, a father and a child; and when we use the paternal relation metaphorically, it is of the first importance to know who is to be father and who is to be child. The rôle of parent falls always to the Forgotten Man. What he wants, therefore, is that ambiguities in our institutions be cleared up and that liberty be more fully realized.

It behooves any economist or social philosopher, whatever be the grade of his orthodoxy, who proposes to enlarge the sphere of the “state,” or to take any steps whatever having in view the welfare of any class whatever, to pursue the analysis of the social effects of his proposition until he finds that other group whose interests must be curtailed or whose energies must be placed under contribution by the course of action which he proposes, and he cannot maintain his proposition until he has demonstrated that it will be more advantageous, *both quantitatively and qualitatively*, to those who must bear the weight of it than complete non-interference by the state with the relations of the parties in question.