

## CHAPTER XVI

### SOME FINAL COMMENTS

Section 1. Production and Predation—Sec. 2. In what Sense, if any, are Rights "Natural"?

#### § 1

#### *Production and Predation*

We appear to be living in an era of tremendous upheaval the ultimate consequences of which no one can foresee. Economic systems are in flux. Political systems are changing rapidly. The centers of military power and of prestige appear at this writing to be shifting as they have not before in generations. Can it possibly be that the relative fairness of different economic systems has some causal significance in such changes and so in the rise and fall of nations and of empires?

The world of man, like the world of life generally, is a world of struggle and of rivalry. There is rivalry and struggle between individuals and there is rivalry and struggle between groups. There is ceaseless conflict of antagonistic interests, each seeking the maximum of gain and the minimum of loss. Nations take by force and fraud from other nations. Individuals, by cheating and by force, take from other individuals. Particular economic groups within each country undertake to control government and, as we have seen in previous pages, bend it to their uses in abstracting wealth from other groups and from the public generally.

Yet in the midst of all this *taking* or *predation*, there continues to be *production*, else there would be little or nothing for the predators to take. Always a large proportion of the people *produce* wealth. Thus we have commonly in human society the two inconsistent activities of *production* and *predation*,—although these may appear to be in one

sense consistent with each other, viz., as divergent aspects of the struggle for existence.

In Lord Dunsany's play,<sup>1</sup> "King Argimenes and the Unknown Warrior," a new prophet is called to the throne hall by King Darniak to entertain his Queens. But these are the prophet's ominous words:

"There was once a King that had slaves to hate him and to toil for him and he had soldiers to guard him and to die for him. And the number of the slaves that he had to hate him and to toil for him was greater than the number of the soldiers that he had to guard him and to die for him. And the days of that King were few. And the number of thy slaves, O King, that thou hast to hate thee is greater than the number of thy soldiers. Thine armies camped upon thy mountainous borders descry no enemy in the plains afar. And within thy gates lurks he for whom thy sentinels seek upon lonely guarded frontiers. There is a fear upon me and a boding. Even yet there is time, even yet; but *little* time. And my mind is dark with trouble for thy kingdom."

Is it not probably true, in general, except as those who are exploited are too utterly uncomprehending, that revolution or revolt is likely in proportion as the exploited are numerous, as well as in proportion to the degree of their resentment?

It is obvious, of course, that the degree of this resentment may be lessened if the exploited majority can be persuaded, however fallaciously, that they are not being exploited and that, instead, the exploiting policies are calculated to increase their prosperity and happiness. Nevertheless, the waste and poverty and inequality which exploitation brings about, even though cause and effect relations are little understood by the victims, are hardly conducive to satisfaction and contentment.

A master class of conquerors or aristocrats may live among those it exploits and may by force, or by teaching subservience and a "morality" of privilege and subjection, maintain itself for generations in a parasitic position. But any great discontent among the exploited must surely weaken

<sup>1</sup> From *Five Plays*, Boston (Little, Brown and Company), 1914.

this master class in conflict with alien enemies. If the exploited group has to be kept down by force or if, even, it does not enthusiastically support the régime through which it is exploited, the chance of overthrow of the dominating aristocratic class is enhanced.

If the inhabitants of a country are to have the best chance of successfully resisting foreign attack, they need, it would seem, a unity of spirit which certainly is not furthered by exploitation. In short, that country is strong, in conflict with those who would conquer it, whose people feel that they have an economic system which gives a fair chance to all, and which, therefore, is well worth fighting for. But what ruling caste is willing to give up its privileges even to make its people strong in war?

Or are we rather to conclude that the way for a nation to be strong is to maintain a highly privileged caste which lives parasitically upon the masses and which will fight eagerly to maintain its privileges against foreign foes who may seek to displace it? And are we to conclude, also, that such a privileged caste can, by its prestige and its propaganda, develop almost as great enthusiasm among the exploited masses for the waging of foreign wars as if these exploited masses were fighting for themselves instead of to keep in power over them and to further aggrandize a particular set of exploiters!

Survival of an individual in the struggle for existence does not mean that the survivor is perfectly adapted to his environment. On the average and in the long run it may indeed mean that he is *least ill adapted*. If we are to be accurate we must say "on the average" because particular and peculiar or "accidental" circumstances may sometimes eliminate an individual relatively well adapted to the conditions which have to be met ordinarily.

Similarly, survival of a group in the competition of war or otherwise does not mean that the group is the best or strongest imaginable. It may mean, in the long run and on an average, that the surviving group is *least ill adapted* to the conditions to be met.

We must frankly admit, of course, that even a perfectly fair economic system can not at all guarantee the survival of a group which fails to meet every other test of adaptation. Nevertheless, an economic system in which the majority are discontented and greatly exploited hosts of a parasitic few or in which burglary, pocket picking and highway robbery are so extensively practiced that security is reduced to a minimum and general discontent and disorganization prevail,—such an economic system must tend not towards the survival of the society but towards its elimination.

In the struggles of the present century, have the so-called democratic countries had an economic system so fair, so favorable to the common run of folks, so devoid of all elements of parasitism, as to call out the maximum of enthusiasm on the part of these common folks in its defense? Can we say, for example, that Great Britain, with the descendants of feudal lords and of royal favorites owning a large part of the island, including large sections of many of the cities, has such an economic system? Do the common people of Britain, who must pay many millions of British pounds every year to those who own the island, for *permission* to work on it and to live on it, have real reason to enthuse over their economic system and to suffer and die to preserve it as against the rival and alien systems of other states? Might they not be inspired to a greater constancy than is perhaps now possible, if, when asked to risk their lives in the defense of their country, they could feel that all of its geologically produced natural resources and all of its community-produced location advantages belonged alike to all of the British people? As it is, would the workers of England, Scotland and Wales necessarily be so much worse off, economically, under German or Italian or Russian domination as the conservative defenders of the prevailing parasitism would have them believe? If the workers do object to such domination, is it because they believe they would then be worse exploited than now? Or could it be, rather, that exploitation by aliens is more objectionable on sentimental grounds than

exploitation by their own aristocracy? Or is it that they fear persecution? Or merely that they dread the unknown?

What if, in beginning the second World War, in 1939, the Germans had *really and definitely intended to liberate* the British masses from their present exploitation! What if in Germany itself the annual value of sites and natural resources were *definitely regarded* as belonging to *all* the people! What if German leaders were to pledge themselves to the common folk of Britain to introduce such a system there, so that no one in Britain should any longer be able to gain a living by charging his fellow Britons for *permission* to work on and to live on their island or draw mineral wealth from its sub-surface deposits! There seems, indeed, no possibility of any such appeal being made at all in any near future and, certainly, no remotest prospect of its being made convincingly.<sup>2</sup> Yet the time may come when some potentially conquering nation will be able to make this kind of appeal and *will* make it. What then?

How largely is the willingness to fight, in modern war, the result, on *both sides*, of a sporting instinct,—the desire to have “our team” win? How largely is it the result of effective propaganda which makes the enemy look far worse than he is? And how largely is it the consequence of a truly intelligent comprehension of the comparative advantages of different economic systems notwithstanding each and all of them may fall far short of the requirements of efficiency and fairness?

Through what influences do rules and standards of fairness and security develop? For in every society there seem to be rules and standards enforced by the group and not merely by each producer against those who would rob him individually. Possibly those who desire to produce wealth, inevitably, sooner or later, realize that they have a common interest and therefore combine to limit the predation of men who would live at their expense. Or the recognition of the

<sup>2</sup>In fact, this reform seems, at present writing, to have far more political support and so to be nearer to possible realization in Great Britain than in Germany.

rights of others and the requisite sympathy to implement this recognition, which develops in the family, may extend further so as to affect relations among neighbors, among fellow citizens of a nation and, even, among citizens of different nations. Perhaps natural selection, in weeding out groups whose members cannot seem to coöperate effectively, has helped to evolve a type of mentality capable of a larger degree of social sympathy and not *merely* of more intelligent self interest. And no doubt the appeals and preachments of those who first and least unclearly realized the need of rules and standards, have had some effect in bringing other men to their support and in introducing sanctions, such as fines, jail and capital punishment, which may add still further to the respect for and observance of the rules and standards accepted. Indeed, it may often happen that even an exploiting group—e.g., slave owners or landowners—will join wholeheartedly in popularizing and enforcing standards and principles which are directed against every important kind of exploitation except that—or those—through which their own class profits. For if the stealing of others from producers is effectively prevented, their own exploitive gains will likewise be more secure.

## § 2

### *In What Sense, if any, are Rights "Natural"?*

No society has completely eliminated exploitation or parasitism even in its cruder and most generally recognized forms. Highway robbery certainly is not unknown in the modern "civilized" world. Burglary continues to be practiced. So does the picking of pockets. But at least all of these are generally and violently reprobated. Other forms of exploitation, such as monopoly, unfair competition, the gaining of subsidies and tariff favors at the expense of the people through influencing government, etc., are certainly similar in their fundamental nature, although the devious windings involved in some of them may bring it about that their exploitive character is less clearly and generally recognized.

Entire tribes and nations of men have accepted extreme and essentially unreasonable theories of obligation to exploiters, and many millions of human beings have learned to submit humbly to the lot of the exploited. And yet the connection between effort and the satisfaction of needs and desires seems so clear, at any rate in the more simple economies, that we must believe any human being of normal mind to be capable of recognizing it.

And thus, though men may become accustomed to submit to certain forms of exploitation as "right," it would seem that, *a priori* at least, the minds of most of them naturally and inevitably react with resentment when that which is clearly the result of their effort is taken from them by others. The man who has hunted or fished all day that he and his may have meat for their evening meal, is likely to experience more bitter resentment if another, who has avoided this effort through the heat of the day, takes his catch from him at sunset, than if this product of his effort had come to him without labor or thought on his part. Likewise, the man who has spent many weeks preparing the ground, planting it, weeding it and then getting the produce it yields, will probably feel much more resentment if the reward of all this labor is taken from him than he would feel to have the same provisions taken from him had they been dropped into his home by unseen powers and with no labor or planning of his own. And similarly if one has spun and woven cloth and made clothing for protection against the cold of winter or has made bowls and plates from which to eat or beds in which to sleep or has built walls and a roof to shelter him against winds and rain.

Is it not probable that considerations such as these are at the basis of the claim that the "right" to the product of one's own labor is a "natural" right? *It is indeed natural, under the actual circumstances of life and with human minds what they are, that there should be a definite tendency to recognize the material result of an individual's productive effort as something to which he has a rather special and justifiable claim.* And so it seems not unreasonable to conclude that a

society which recognizes the principle that the laborer is, in general, entitled to the product of his labor, will have a greater degree of cohesion than a society in which that principle is completely repudiated.

It is true that modern economic society is complex. The use of money and bank credit, the rise and fall of price levels, the processes of large scale production with the hiring of labor for manifold specialized tasks, the subtle forms which monopoly may sometimes take, the variety of methods of unfair competition, etc., may make the connection between a person's labor and the product of it far less obvious than it would be in a more primitive society.

The connection is still obvious enough, however, to any one at all given to serious reflection; and it is still probably true that the welfare—and the cohesion and strength—of any society is best furthered by a system of distribution or sharing that apportions rewards in at least some sort of relation to productive contribution.

The connection between work *and saving* on the one hand and the extra return yielded by capital over what work alone would yield, on the other hand, is, apparently, not quite so obvious. For communists and socialists seem able to convince themselves that no individual as such is fairly entitled to a return on capital; and this conviction presumably grows out of their view that all value is produced by labor. Yet men do reason beyond the simple and the obvious. And the conclusion that saving, with investment of the savings in capital construction, is a real contribution to the productive process, *is but a logical extension* of the conclusion that labor is such a contribution.

Under the circumstances, then, we may reasonably expect that those who have saved and who have even the vaguest idea of the necessity of saving for capital construction and of the advantage of capital to industry, will easily and naturally feel themselves entitled to receive interest on their capital. And we may reasonably expect that, at any rate with the more understanding, something of the same resentment will be felt when others take from them what their



capital yields as when others rob them of the direct product of their labor.

It is true that the habit of confusing land with capital is still widespread and that the writings of some professional economists, even, contribute to the confusion. But there have been many men, since economics began, and there are now, probably, an increasing number, who recognize that land and capital are not at all the same and that the private enjoyment of land rent cannot be justified on any basis of stimulus to efficiency and thrift, or of general well being, or of social cohesion, or of survival of the group, as can the private enjoyment of interest on capital and wages of labor. To socialize the annual rental value of land would make the people of a nation more prosperous and happy in peace, and it would make them more formidable in war—if war there must be. The economic waste of land speculation would be done away with. Revenues which now go to private individuals for no service in return, would be available to the public. The citizens of such a nation could not—unless utterly uncomprehending—be other than enthusiastic about their system and anxious to retain and extend it. And in enemy states where the system was beginning to be understood but whose dominant classes were determined not to adopt it, there would be grave risk of divided counsels and of lack of that enthusiasm without which the sacrifices and horrors of war soon become insufferable.

Sometimes, indeed, the military defeat of a nation the majority of whose people are exploited by a privileged few, if the defeat does not bring serious subjection to alien exploiters, may help to relieve the common folk of the defeated nation from their economic subservience. For such defeat may destroy the prestige of the ruling caste, diminish the respect or the fear in which it is held, and so make possible a disruption of relationships that had come to seem eternal.

Unless, however, there is widespread understanding of economic facts and forces, including widespread ability to recognize as such the various forms and devices of exploitation, any reform is likely to be only temporary. Even if the

old caste of parasites fails to regain its position, there will arise new exploiters who may be no less hard to suffer than the old.

In any event there is, in these concluding paragraphs, no intention to do aught but make suggestions and raise questions. For historical prediction, the explanation of the history of the past, and extended appraisal of rival political systems, are alike outside of the scope of this book. It is enough if the reader has been aided a little in gaining a comprehension of the nature and the mode of operation of the existing economic system and an intelligent appreciation of the nature of those reforms by means of which it might be made to operate more effectively for the common advantage.