

The Single Tax, December, 1896

THE PROGRESSIVE REVIEW By Lewis H. Berens

Last month we witnessed the birth of a new review, to the appearance of which we looked forward with curiosity and interest. For years past we have heard much about Progressivists, progressive principles, the progressive policy, and the Progressive Party. The term, progressive, is a taking one; and although we have learnt to look behind terms at the facts or ideas they are intended to convey, yet, in our weaker moments, were we prone to imagine that we, as Single Taxers, could claim to rank amongst Progressivists, amongst those who are " powerfully impressed by the need of a genuine policy of drastic reform in the social, economic, and moral conditions of life." But, alas! Our dream has been rudely dispelled. For this journal, whose avowed aim is " to give a coherent form and rational purpose to a progressive policy;" which "sets itself to a free and fearless investigation of the material and moral factors of the Social Question ; has, prior to any such published investigation, already formulated its belief in a manner that leaves us, as Single Taxers, without the pale. " In the task of social reconstruction," it tells us, "we shall recognise that the free play of the enlightened self-interest of individuals cannot suffice to secure the common good." And, as a necessary consequence, it concludes that we should look to something apart from and above the individual citizen, to the State—to those who hold the governing power, and who represent or are assumed to represent " the organised intelligence and will of the community "—to " play a larger part in ordering the life of the future," to secure advantages, to attain which the free play of the enlightened self-interest of individuals is confidently assumed to be incompetent.

Now this fundamental belief of this would-be organ of progressive thought, we, as Single Taxers, do not share; still less can we give in our adherence to the inevitable conclusion therefrom. In our opinion the social evils of to day are due to the fact that the enlightened self-interest of individuals has not free play ; and that, thanks to the interference of the very body to whom we are directed to look to order more largely our lines in the future, viz:—the State. In fact, our social

and political philosophy is the very opposite of that expounded in the introductory "Progressive Review."

We regret that this should be so. For we too feel "the need of intellectual and practical unification ; " we too " believe that the pace and character of popular progress are not set or measured by the blind unconscious efforts of the past, but that they may be indefinitely quickened and improved by imparting a higher conscious purpose to the operations of the social will;" and we too would fain assist political thinkers in formulating that much-needed " unity of principles and of policy which shall give solidarity of structure, singleness of aim, economy of force, consistency of action to this [present] medley of multifarious effort." This, however, we would respectfully submit is not to be effected, or even promoted, by the tacit assumption that the aim and policy of one out of the many conflicting schools of political thought is the only true one, and entreating, ever so earnestly and eloquently, all to join it; but rather by endeavouring to trace out the causes of the prevailing discord amongst men animated by the same desires and avowedly fighting to attain the same end, and doing what is possible to remove these.

Nor should these causes be far to seek. For in no other department of human thought—save those relating to Man—could such bitter and apparently irreconcilable differences long continue; and that for the simple and obvious reason that points at issue would be referred for settlement to principles accepted by all competent to speak with authority on the subject. On questions of Mechanics, mechanical principles; on questions of Chemistry, the principles of chemistry: in short, on any question relating to the physical arts, the principles of Natural Philosophy would be appealed to decide, not only as to whether the desired end can be attained by any proposed method, but also the relative merits of differing proposals. And the man who would presume to pronounce judgment, or even express an opinion, on any such question without adequate knowledge of the underlying principles, would only make himself appear ridiculous. In politics, however, all this is wanting. The management of the common affairs of the community; the establishment of laws, regulations and institutions, to determine the economic and social relations of the citizens: in short, the art of legislating or governing, on which the welfare of millions depends, still remains entirely empirical, based on no recognised principles, and determined solely by expediency and compromise. And to this fact is due that on questions of

legislation the most conflicting opinions are tenaciously held by men whose main objects and aspirations are identical. To unite these, and at the same time, as our new contemporary expresses it, "to relieve progressive movements from the imputations of blind opportunism, irrational compromise, and Utopian aspirations, under which they labour, and to establish a safer and more scientific basis for social activity." To these ends, the principle on which all legislation should be based must be established, and any and every legislative proposal judged in accordance therewith. Such a principle once established and recognised by all students of the social problem, would tend to weld into one compact whole the now separate and oftentimes opposing elements of the Progressive Party.

Nor should the task of formulating such a principle be a difficult one; for as a matter of fact there are but two alternatives. Society can be established and legislation proceed on the principle of equality or of privilege, of freedom or of coercion: for the principle of equality involves the principle of freedom, as does privilege that of coercion. The claims of some to special privileges may be recognized, and these enforced on the rest of the community; or the claims of all to equal opportunities, to equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, be accepted as the fundamental principle to which all social institutions and legislation should be made to conform.

For earnest men there is no half-way house in which to take refuge; their choice lies between these two principles. The old-fashioned Tory was true to the one; we new-fashioned Radicals intend being true to the other. We have given in our adherence to this law of equal freedom and all that it involves. For we recognise that it is to the non-conformity to this principle—to the securing of privileges and monopolies to some—that existing social evils can be traced, and that, therefore, it is only by obedience to its behests that the present Social Question can be solved. Our mission is, not to assist in patching up existing institutions, but by striking at the very foundation of society as it exists, at the root monopoly, the parent and source of all privileges and monopolies, to prepare the way for the peaceful evolution of that new society towards which we yearn, a society based on the safe and sure foundations of equality and liberty. Privileges swept away, coercive laws will become unnecessary; and the people will look, not to the State, but to themselves, to their own enlightened self-interest, to order their own activities in a manner conducive to a higher physical, moral, and spiritual life.

For our part we are willing to make common cause with all who accept this principle as the test and touchstone of their social and political activities. And this being so, could not this principle be made the test of all Progressivists; could it not be made the standard round which could be rallied all the now scattered elements of the Progressive Party?

Should our comments reach the eyes of the editors of our new contemporary, we trust they will accept them in the spirit they are intended, viz., in the most friendly and brotherly spirit. We are inspired by the same motives, fighting for the same end, but we differ; and we can only hope to convince one another by the unreserved criticism of each other's views. And when we urge on them that Progressivist is not synonymous with Collectivism we do so because we feel that their Review would be strengthened by the recognition and frank avowal of this fact. In conclusion, bearing in mind its avowed objects, we need hardly say that we wish the "Progressive Review" a long life and every success.