

The Cult of the Insoluble

By JOHN HANNA

THE thoughtful reader of current literature on the subject of social reform cannot fail to be impressed by the prevalence of a desire to show the futility of such a movement, to cultivate a belief that most of it is unwise, misdirected or without reasonable foundation. It is discussed from many different premises, by men of widely different viewpoints—many of whom seem to agree in conclusion that a happier condition of society cannot be brought about by legislation or by any modification of the system affecting the distribution of wealth. In harmony with prevailing custom of describing as a "cult" any number of people, whether organized or not, who agree in the acceptance of certain beliefs, it is apparent that there is in this country a body of opinion which may be aptly described as the "Cult of the Insoluble."

We are told by some that the great need is a change in the motives of men, that the motive of acquisitiveness must cease to operate before any great improvement in economic relations can be achieved. Others tell us that proposals for social reform are of no avail; that our present system, although full of holes, is the best ever devised by man; that we should recognize that some problems are insoluble. One man of high position in the literary world tells us the cycles of boom and depression are in reality psychological cycles; that they are the "by-products of the workings of human nature." Another of high scholastic attainments tells us that we must continue to "feel and fumble"; that our only hope is to "provide such a curb on selfishness and greed as only a good education can provide." Clergymen tell us that when the heart of mankind is ruled by love, then—and then only—will the world be much improved. The "man in the street" has adopted this attitude, and we hear much of greed being the cause of the social and economic distortion from which the world is suffering. It is so comforting to blame it all on an attribute of human nature!

All of this makes one wonder if our knowledge of economics is in a period of thought comparable to the time when the world sought for the Philosopher's Stone. Everyone concedes the inadequacy of our knowledge in other matters, that we have much to learn about the universe, its composition, its forces, the energy of atoms and the cosmic rays, about earthquakes, floods and droughts, about diseases of mind and body. In this field alone, the field of economics, it seems to be assumed that we have built on an immutable and sacred foundation. There is much discussion of capital and labor, of wages and profits, of monopolistic greed, of economic royalists, of the great contributions of industrialists to modern progress, of the blighting effects of trade unions, and many other

surface phenomena. In respect to the basic factor in production—land—and our rules regulating its use, it is mentioned, if at all, as if in this we have reached the ultimate of human wisdom, the validity of which must not be questioned. Poor human nature only is at fault. We must make it over! This is the "Philosopher's Stone" of current thought!

To support the claim that these problems are insoluble, it is said that social science differs from the physical sciences in the fact that it deals with forces that cannot be weighed or measured; that it deals with unpredictable human emotions and reactions. Are they unpredictable? Hungry men have always sought food; when cold they have sought sunshine, fire or clothing; when exposed to storms they have sought shelter; when impelled by the procreative instinct they have sought a mate. Civilization in all its forms and all the cultures of all ages have not removed these basic traits. Einstein or Rabindranath Tagore respond to the same stimuli as the cave man of the primitive world. Hunger becomes appetite and taste, demanding greater variety and finer foods; the protection of the body developed the desire for personal adornment and led to the making of innumerable fabrics; the need for shelter finds resort to the cave in the side of a hill and develops into the modern residence with air-conditioned rooms. When it comes to seeking a mate we find the same influences in greater variation but as surely predictable as in more primitive days.

After all, are not these "unpredictable human reactions" but symbols and shadows, phases and corollaries of the deeper law to which they may be traced as definitely as the subtle nuances of color in a landscape may be related to the spectrum and the law of optics? The fact that human desires, with respect to the part they play in the problems of society, and the nuances of color under the fleeting effects of light and shade in a landscape, cannot be submitted to any known method of mensuration does not impair the truth of the statement that they are related to a principle or law in nature and are subject to interpretation by sympathetic insight.

It is said that laws or principles applicable to a primitive condition cannot be considered of any force in this highly mechanized age; that there cannot be a law for all periods but that it evolves out of the conditions existing in each period of development; that life develops from the simple to the complex in all kinds of organisms, society being no exception to this rule. This is the argument advanced to rationalize the "social planning" of which we hear so much. Is this not another instance of confusing underlying principles with methods and processes? Controlling principles are found through all forms of life from the simple to the complex. Methods and processes are the outgrowth of physiological necessity and are built upon principles already established. They do not displace the principle, they use it. The principle of the circular

tion of the blood as the means of transport of new materials to the tissues and the removal of waste is the same in the lower and higher order of animals. The development of highly specialized organs, all our knowledge of hormones, of metabolism and of endocrinology has not, in the least degree, altered the importance of this basic principle common alike to the primitive and the complex orders of animal life.

The complexities of modern industrialism have not changed the underlying principles of economics, any more than the complex mechanism of the automobile and the innumerable "gadgets" that are now a part of it has changed the underlying fact that it is propelled by the explosive force of gas. Such use of this force exemplifies "Boyle's Law"; it does not supersede it. The industrialist makes skilful use of the forces available to him to bring about the desired results. He changes no law. He may not know the law. Great artists have produced great pictures without a knowledge of the scientific basis of such work. In all the changes from the work of the primitives, the old masters, to that of the modern impressionists, nothing has been done to change the spectrum or modify the law of optics. The pugilist is a master in the coordination of muscular movement for the accomplishment of a certain purpose but he may know nothing of the physiological law governing the coordination of muscular movement. This law may be well known to any teacher of physiology who could not stand before the pugilist for one short round. Under a just recognition and application of the underlying principle of economic activity, the intricacies of industry and commerce, the specialized processes of modern life, would not require control or manipulation by society any more than the mechanism of metabolism requires control by the individual. Meddling in either is harmful and confusing. "Know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

Is it reasonable to believe that in all the universe there is law save only in the field of social relations? The development of society is as natural as the development of the individual body. There is in the human body a group of nerves, the sympathetic, which act apart from any conscious control; it is to be thought that they have been acting in the same way from the beginning of animal life—before man knew anything about nerves they performed their function according to certain principles and for the good of the organism as a whole when not interfered with by abnormal living habits. Because men do violate the laws of health and disturb the bodily functions, are we justified in saying that it is all a matter of personal reaction; that there is no true principle which should govern? Physiologists do not so teach it.

If there is any meaning to the work of science, it is to show that law exists in all phases of life; that it does not depend for validity on obedience nor is it invalidated by

disobedience. The law operates: in obedience we benefit, in disobedience we suffer. The Persian Poet stated not only a concept of oriental fatalism but a profound philosophic truth when he wrote: "The moving finger writes and having writ moves on; nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it." James Harvey Robinson has said, "It is the determination of these 'laws' and the seeking out of their application to which the modern scientific investigator devotes his efforts, whether he be calculating the distance of a nebula or noting the effect of light on an amoeba; he is convinced that the natural laws have been found to work regularly in every instance where they have been observed carefully."

But without waiting for the exact determination and acceptance of these natural laws, a reasonable effort in "humanizing knowledge" would develop an insight which would inevitably point the way to an application of the remedy for some of our social maladjustment. Pasteur did not wait for full and exact demonstration of the principle underlying his methods; his perception of the principle was more the result of an understanding insight; experiment and demonstration followed and is still being carried on, the principle applied in numberless ways. An earnest effort to find, to formulate and to promote the recognition of natural laws in social relations would go far to combat the demand for "social planning" with all its inconsistencies and superfluities, its interferences and artificialities. The law of gravitation was not invented by Newton, nor the circulation of the blood by Harvey. The method of science has ever been observation and logical deduction leading to a working hypothesis, the hypothesis either discarded or leading to the establishment of a principle or law. It has been the experience in every field of human activity that the development of a principle has been the surest method of progress. To mention a few from history—

In Astronomy: The law of gravitation put an effective stop to the involved and fantastic attempts to account for the movements of the planets and made possible far-reaching and sure deductions where before there was utmost confusion. Observation and deduction were greatly accelerated because they had a guiding principle to direct them.

In Medicine: When the germ theory of disease was even partially accepted, observation of pathological conditions became clarified, diagnosis surer and resultant treatment more certain of success, further knowledge of this principle opening up illimitable vistas in therapeutics and surgery. The so-called discovery of the circulation of the blood was not so much the discovery of a phenomenon as it was the establishment of a principle of physiology; a principle, the knowledge of which clarified the entire range and concept of physiological functions. These principles became the guide-posts along the way which

workers in medical science must travel. Although there were many trials and many errors in the treatment of human ills, it was these guide-posts which ultimately led to the most outstanding achievements in therapeutics and sanitation.

In Government: The principle imbedded in the United States Constitution that there shall be no duties levied by any state against the importation of goods from any other state of the Union, has been of incalculable benefit in the development and prosperity of this nation. Never before in history has there been free and unrestricted trade over so large an area with so great diversity of climate as in the United States. This provision of the Constitution has been accepted so complacently that its great influence in promoting our prosperity and unity of interest has been overlooked. Other provisions of the Constitution have been questioned, amendments proposed and adopted. In this one phase of our growth "trial and error, feel and fumble" have been eliminated. Imagine, if one can, our condition if this principle had not been recognized and fixed in our basic law—forty-eight states, if they had ever grown to that number, with their forty-eight varieties of "trial and error." We are getting a slight insight into such possibilities by the effort that some of the states are making to discourage the purchase of goods made in other states by the imposition of "use taxes" and by the restrictions being placed upon some of the movements of freight by truck, in interstate commerce. If it were not for the profound influence of this principle of the Constitution, this tendency to set up barriers would be much more serious.

Much of the foregoing seems so obvious that statement of it seems superfluous, but as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "We need education in the obvious." As the "Cult of the Insoluble" is so widespread, and some of its leaders men of high position, it would seem that any effort to chart a course away from this Sargasso Sea of social thought would be justified.

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One of the outstanding contributions in support of the idea of insolvency was an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* for May, 1935, "So Conceived and So Dedicated" by Professor William F. Russell. In compliance with his own suggestion of "free, frank and open discussion" and because of some statements which can only add to the bewilderment of the average reader, it seems fitting to offer some comment affecting the general theme.

Giving the historical background of the ideal of liberty, Professor Russell evokes an impressive list of the world's great thinkers from Roger Bacon to Adam Smith. His background of the ideal of equality begins with John Ball, Wat Tyler and Jack Straw. Later it was dignified with the names of Locke, Helvetius and Rousseau. "In America it had a home only on the frontier and in the minds of a few leaders like Thomas Jefferson." Much

of the argument provokes the question: Because the idea of liberty is advocated at one period of history or by one group, and the idea of equality at another period or by another group, is it any evidence that there is any essential antagonism or incompatibility in them? Is it not rather that they present two facets of the gem of truth varying in brilliance for different observers, each reflecting the light of its own time and circumstance? Many of these names could be included, with perfect justice in both lists. Jefferson's work in many of the movements of his time could be arrayed under the banner of liberty as well as that of equality. It is apparent that many of these thinkers believed the two ideas to be interdependent, that they rise or fall together.

Periods of extravagant living and corruption on the part of those in high places, when contrasted with the debasing poverty of the lower ranks of society, have always given rise to the demand for greater equality. This was the condition which led to the "Peasants' Revolt" in England. It was the condition which led to the French Revolution. Both were the occasion for demands for certain rights and liberties for the lower ranks of society. These demands have a reasonable place in the name of liberty, equality, justice, or just plain righteousness. It would seem that any distinction is no more than an arbitrary distinction. *A privileged class restricts the liberty of others; if it were not so, there would be no advantage in privilege.* The plea for liberty is an attack on privilege. The plea for equality is an attack on privilege. In both is involved the demand for justice.

Wat Tyler opposed the Poll Tax which expressed the only equality the rulers were willing to recognize; for the purpose of this tax all men were equal. In this very practical sense the rulers were the equalitarians. Wat Tyler demanded the repeal of the "Statute of Laborers" and the abolition of serfdom. In this he was a libertarian. The same conjunction of ideas prevailed in the French Revolution. The stumbling block seems to be the assumption that "whatever is, is right"; that existing privilege is right and that any attempt to change the system must be considered as artificial leveling—when in fact, the system of privilege is the artificial condition the removal of which would tend to restore the natural order.

Professor Russell says we could "trace the idea of liberty in industry, agriculture and commerce by following the Physiocrats, Quesnay and Turgot." In another paragraph, speaking of organizations in the United States which prefer equality to liberty, he classes together "Coxey's Army, I.W.W.'s, Non-Partisan Leaguers, and Single Taxers." If the Professor could trace the idea of liberty through the Physiocrats, Quesnay and Turgot, how did he lose it in reaching the Single Taxers? The Physiocrats are the Eighteenth Century prototype of the Nineteenth Century Single Taxers. Their proposal was, in principle