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POVERTY, SYMPATHY, AND ECONOMICS.
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Last August there was published, in this review, a suggestive article on "The Conditions of Industrial Peace" -- "peace," that is, not between nation and nation, but between capital and labor, or the laborers and the employers of labor. Of such conditions the writer, Prof. R T. Ely, enumerated fourteen; most of them, in his opinion, still waiting to be realized. His list is instructive as illustrating the state of contemporary speculation, rather than valuable as an actual contribution to truth. Thus, among many conditions of doubtful or small importance, he specifies the one which is actually the most essential of all, and which is, at the same time, the least generally appreciated. That condition, in Prof. Ely's words, is "a general diffusion of knowledge in regard to social and political science." Prof. Ely proceeds as follows, and it is impossible too often or with too persistent emphasis to repeat what he says:

"Right action depends on right thinking, and there is as gross ignorance of the elements of political economy among the rich as among the poor; perhaps a denser ignorance, for the poor have lately given more attention to this study, as can be seen by comparing the 'labor' press with the 'capitalistic' press."

It seems to me, however, that Prof. Ely himself is, to a certain extent, a victim of the very ignorance which he deplors; not because he commits himself to any false economic theory, but because, having recognized that a true theory is important, he utterly fails to give that importance its due degree. Of his fourteen "conditions of industrial peace," economic knowledge is the eighth; and he places it incidentally between "applied Christianity" and an avoidance of any measures which might make martyrs of anarchists. This is much the same as if a priest, in instructing a penitent as to the various conditions essential to a good communion, were to place contrition between a decent coat and a prayer-book. Prof. Ely in this represents others besides himself. Many see that economic knowledge is a desirable thing, but they do not see how desirable. They do not see that it is desirable before all other things, and at the present moment beyond all other things. That it is so, and why it is so, is what I shall now endeavor to show.

The extraordinary importance, for its power of practically affecting the situation, which I claim for the study of economic science can be plausibly questioned on various grounds, and it is by considering these that its reality can be most sharply exhibited. The most obvious and most important objections are as follows: It will be said that the labor movement did not originate in scientific theories, does not derive its stimulus from scientific theories, and cannot, accordingly, be controlled by scientific theories; and different people, in urging this, will have foremost in their minds different aspects of the question. To some the main factor in the labor

movement will seem to be philanthropy, and the main requisites for bringing it to a successful issue to be a passionate pity for suffering and an indignation against injustice, which will never be appeased till suffering and injustice are done away with. To others, again, the movement will seem mainly due, not to pity for suffering, but to the temper of the sufferers themselves, who, it is said, under the regime of capital, find their condition growing constantly worse and worse, whilst their social tastes at the same time are developing, and their sense of their own power increasing. We shall thus, broadly speaking, be met by two classes of objectors: those who regard the labor movement as depending on sympathy and agitation from above, and those who regard it as the outcome of volcanic passion from below. The first will urge that economic science is a secondary requisite only, and that its frigid speculations can do little for the laboring classes compared with what can be done for them by passion, zeal, and perseverance; whilst the second will urge that such science can never affect the laboring classes at all, not only because its teaching could never be generally brought home to them, but because, even if it were, their conduct and their demands would be limited only by their desires and their own experience of their power, not by the gossamer chains of a philosopher's abstract arguments.

But though all this is plausible, yet if we look at the matter more closely, we can easily see that it is the very reverse of true. It must be plain to every one who will consider the labor movement for a moment that its vitality depends on three separate classes. It depends on both those of which we have just spoken —on those who openly promote it from above, and on the troubled multitude below—and farther, on a third class, consisting of those who, though not belonging to any definite labor party or distinctly assenting to any revolutionary theories, yet give the movement a certain amount of encouragement, the exact extent and grounds of which they are themselves unable to define.

Of the first class such persons as Mr. Henry George are examples, or, again, socialists like Mr. Lawrence Gronlund.

Of the second class no examples need be given. It may be said to consist of the laboring masses generally.

Of the third class, a good example may be found in the English Radicals. These men, or at least the most eager among them, are continually, in the press and on public platforms, indorsing and emphasizing the more general language of the socialists with regard to the injustice of existing society, the claims and wrongs of the poor, and the tyranny and false position of the rich; and they have during this winter actually joined hands with the socialists for the purpose of organizing labor demonstrations in London. And yet these men, with regard to certain points, and those the very points which the socialists think most essential, are not only not adherents of socialism, but are bitterly and irreconcilably opposed to it. A good specimen of this class is Mr. Stead, the editor of the "Pall Mall Gazette." No

socialist could declaim with more energy than he against the tone and influence of the capitalistic classes, and the implied iniquity of riches and luxury generally. But whereas the socialists, in using such language, have a definite economic theory at the back of it—a theory which maintains that all interest and all profits are illegitimate, and simply represent so many thefts from labor—Mr. Stead, and others like him, whatever their own theories may be, certainly consider this a most fatal and monstrous heresy; for not only do they never join in any definite attack upon capital, but they always treat capitalistic enterprise with the quiet acceptance of ordinary business men. and without any concealment, apology, or self-reproach, are active in the pursuit of profit-making themselves. But this class I am speaking of is not composed only of Radicals. Many of its members are by natural temper conservative, but a vague misgiving assails them that the times are out of joint. Though they cannot accept for a moment the formal theories of the socialists, yet they are haunted with ideas of some widespread social injustice, and what the Radicals proclaim with exultant bitterness these men echo in dejection. Such are the three classes concerned in the labor movement; and it, is almost an identical proposition to say that, in a certain sense, the most important of them is the mass of the laborers themselves. Not only is this movement a movement in their behalf, but from them, if from anywhere, must come the strength which alone can bring it to a conclusion. The voting strength must be theirs, and, in the last resort, the physical strength.

Now, without speaking of the education of the laborers at large in any terms of undue disparagement, it may safely be said that they are not, as a body, profound and critical students of the science of political economy, either of the orthodox version of it or of the socialistic. The latter especially, as being comparatively new and strange, requires considerable time and concentration of thought to master it, and the average socialist workingman has as little accurate knowledge of its doctrines as an Italian peasant has of the philosophy of the Athanasian Creed. But are we to conclude from this that economic science plays but a small part in the labor movement; that it has done little to stimulate and direct it, and can do still less to curb it? Those who think thus fail to understand one of the chief facts of the situation. No social revolution can be made by a theory: it is equally true that it can never be made without a theory. The most ignorant men, stimulated into revolt against their circumstances by mere physical suffering, are obliged, if they would combine for any continuous action, to unite themselves and direct themselves by a general principle of some sort, by some common theory-, however rude or crude.

"When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?"

Even there we have some attempt at a social philosophy, something beyond the mere cry of hunger or the momentary passion of a street fight. The French Revolution shows us the same thing; so does the Nationalist movement in Ireland, and the recent land agitation among the Crofters in the Scotch Highlands. Mere

hunger and suffering may produce a riot; a creed is needed as well to produce a sustained movement. And if this is true of the most ignorant populations, much more is it true of the modern laboring classes as a whole. The artisans and factory hands in the great centers of industry may not have assimilated the actual teachings of science to anything like the extent that some optimists suppose; but they have, at any rate, learned to respect science, if not to understand it; and if any scheme of revolution is to win their adherence, it must have the semblance of a scientific basis. The modern revolutionary workingman, however scantily educated, knows that science is too complex to be shut up in a couplet, and he does not ask to master the body of its doctrines himself; but he does ask to be assured that such a body of doctrines exists, and that they are capable of holding their own in the world of research and controversy. His scientific theory and his scientific programme of revolution he may get at second or even at third hand; but he must get them somehow, and they must be derived from sources which he believes to be authoritative.

We shall perhaps realize the state of the case more vividly if we turn for a moment from the social question to religion.

The laboring classes, as a body, are certainly not readers either of Strauss or of Colenso, of Darwin or of Herbert Spencer; but contemporary atheism, as found among these classes, is backed up by, and takes its special tone from, a more or less vague impression that great scholars and great scientific philosophers have proved the Bible to be of purely human origin, and man, like the other animals, to be a mere creature of evolution. No impression can be falser than that thought produces its main influence directly. Its great practical influence is almost entirely indirect. Who, for instance, has affected the thought of the age more powerfully than Darwin? Our modern socialists, among others, confessedly owe half their theory of life to him.

And yet more copies probably are sold of a sensational novel, or book of travels, in one year, than are sold of all Mr. Darwin's works in ten. The circle to which the philosopher directly appeals is small, but in countless ways it is active, and influences a larger circle, and that circle a circle larger yet. From the volume the thought passes to the review, to the pulpit, to the newspaper; from these again to the leaflet, to the tract, to the debating society, and to common conversation. Thus do doctrines and theories, no matter how abstruse, where they have pushed themselves to the front in the narrow world of thinkers, at once begin to filter downward, ever extending the area of their influence.

But though the case of religion may offer us the most obvious example of this, that afforded by social and economic questions is in many ways even more striking. They exhibit a far more rapid and a far closer connection between theory and action, and with regard to the labor movement we may with truth say this: that if popular passion is the metal out of which it is made, theory is the mold into which the metal is run. Theory gives an agitation its shape, and determines how

far it shall be useful or useless, how far it shall be for good or evil. Of course theory will not fill empty stomachs, or make people contented who are bitter with penury and privation; but on the nature of the theories accepted by such people depend the direction and the temper in which they will seek for a remedy. There is this farther to add: Though there are some sufferings which mere theory by itself never can alleviate, inasmuch as mere theory- has not caused them, there are others which it has caused, and which it consequently can alleviate. Such are the sufferings which -come, not from physical hardship, but from mere comparison of what is with what ought to be or what may be. The labor movement, then, is produced by both these causes, bodily suffering and mental suffering; and theory, whether it be true or false, base or noble, determines the character of both, and actually produces the second.

Thus the doctrines of the labor movement depend, not, as at first sight they may seem to do, on ideas that originate in the mass of the laboring multitude, but on ideas which that multitude receives from above, from a class or from classes comparatively small. The small classes I speak of are socially the most heterogeneous mixture, recruited from all ranks; but intellectually they have one bond of union, in that they read and think, that they appreciate logical argument or what they believe to be such, that they recognize the complexity of our social problems, and the necessity for study and statistical research if we would understand them rightly. In a word, they constitute the circle to which social and economic science directly appeals, and whose influence on the classes below them is directly shaped by the teaching of such science, as they themselves interpret it. And now let us ask this highly pertinent question: What is the condition of economic science at present? There is no science, there is no department of knowledge, in a state so disorganized, so chaotic, and so incomplete as this. There are certain conclusions, indeed, of certain great economists, which are generally accepted by all who understand them, and which no thinker of any school has been able to call in question. But these are imbedded in a mass of other doctrines, with regard to which there is no such agreement, and the whole is commonly spoken of, and too often thought of, under the common name of political economy. To illustrate this it is enough to cite the celebrated saying of a living English statesman, that, under certain circumstances, "political economy might go to Saturn."

What a revelation is contained in the fact that the use of such a phrase was possible! If political economy has established any truths whatever, if it has put anything beyond the reach of doubt, it is as ridiculous to say that these truths may go to Saturn, as it would be to say that arithmetic might go to Saturn. Plainly, then, in the mind of the statesman who used the phrase, and the public that tolerated it, there was complete confusion as to what political economy is or comprises. Its undoubted conclusions were confounded with its debatable ones, as if in a madman's dream; the former were eclipsed or discredited by the latter, and the whole province of economic thought, for the time being, had relapsed into anarchy.

And there is precisely such an anarchy now. Of what is settled in this science and what is debatable, there is no general, efficient, practical knowledge.

Consequently every kind of speculation is able to put itself before the public with sufficient plausibility to wear an air of science to those whose sympathies may dispose them to assent to it I said just now that with many of the intellectual leaders of the labor movement philanthropy and moral emotion come first, and science, though they recognize its authority, comes second; and such being the case, emotion becomes the judge of what scientific theory is reasonable, not scientific theory the judge of what emotion is reasonable. Everything is topsy-turvy, and why? I answered the question a moment ago.

I answer it now again. Because general knowledge with regard to this particular subject is far behind general knowledge with regard to any other subject of equal general importance.

Let me give instances; and I will take them, not from any theories (properly so called) of the economists, but from the ascertainable facts of industrial life, by which all theories must be tested. One of the most specious and widely read works on political economy which has appeared for many years is Mr. Henry George's "Progress and Poverty." Now this work, as many of its readers may remember, endeavored to explain the existence of poverty by the constant increase of rent, which, according to Mr. George's demonstrations, not only was always increasing absolutely, but was always having a greater and greater proportion of the total income of the community; so much so, that Mr. George declared that its ultimate tendency was to absorb the whole of that income, except such a portion of it as would yield a bare subsistence to those who were not land-owners. And nowhere was this doctrine received with greater favor than in England. Now, had the thinking classes in England possessed, as a body, the commonest knowledge of statistics, and had Mr. George himself thought it worth his while to consult authorities as accessible as parliamentary blue books, it would have been utterly impossible for such a work as "Progress and Poverty" ever to have been written, or if written, to have commanded a moment's attention. For its whole main assumption with regard to the increase of rent is not only not true, but is the absolute reverse of the truth; nor is there, when once the statistics of the subject are studied, the smallest room for dispute or doubt about the question. Rent in England, as the country has grown in wealth, though it has, of course, grown greater absolutely, has been growing constantly smaller relatively; and instead of rent tending to absorb all other sources of income, the other sources of income are tending to outstrip rent and to dwarf it into comparative insignificance. Nor is this tendency due to any recent depression in agriculture. It has steadily shown itself through the whole period for which we possess any exact records of our industrial progress.

Again, what statement can be commoner than that "the rich are getting richer, the poor poorer, and the middle classes are being crushed out"? I do not know how often it is made in America; but in England it has become a commonplace with certain classes of reformers, a sort of postulate on which their demands or

speculations are based. And yet when once statistics are consulted—and they are ample and unimpeachable—the whole of this statement is found to be, just like Mr. George's, not only wide of the truth, but literally and absolutely an inversion of it. Large incomes, on the whole, are diminishing, small incomes are increasing, and moderate incomes are multiplying. Yet again, how constantly are we presented with appalling pictures of the destitution of the poor! And it is hard, when reading these, to repress the feeling that a civilization which produces such horrible and such miserable results must be rapidly hastening forward to some great catastrophe. But let us apply to this dark picture the test of authoritative statistics, and what do we find then? We do not find that the details of the picture are false; on the contrary, we find that we could go on adding to them; but we do find this: that the extent of this disheartening and alarming misery, though vast in itself, is small when compared with the extent of the community. In England the darker pictures of distress and poverty do not apply to more than one-eighth of the population. It is true that the eighth of the population would people the whole of Scotland, people it from end to end with want and misery; but, appalling as this fact is, it should not blind our eyes to the other fact, that for one miserable population there are seven populations progressively prosperous, and that misery of the kind spoken of is, in spite of the millions of the miserable, not the rule, but the exception. But of this fact our philanthropic economists seem for the most part in utter ignorance. They go on taking the exception for the rule, and by their very way of approaching the problem disqualify themselves for explaining it.

Here, then, are three illustrations of the density of the ignorance prevailing among the thinking classes on the subject of political economy; and they are illustrations, also, of the rapid way in which such ignorance operates on the passions and character of the multitudes, and produces movements which must be hurtful and dangerous, since they are wholly out of relation with the world as it actually exists. It is in this atmosphere of ignorance that the current estimates of our existing social civilization are shaped by our economic reformers; and sympathies and fears which, if broken in to the complicated harness of fact, might be noble, wise, and useful, run loose like so many wild horses, doing no work themselves, but confusing and endangering those that do.

What, therefore, I would urge on all who are interested in the labor movement, and who believe in its importance, is not to turn from economic science as a secondary element in the problem, but to recognize that it is the rudder and the compass of the movement, if not the sails. I urge this on the socialists themselves, and on the semi-socialists, though probably they will not think the advice needed. What I urge on them is statistical study, which shall be not only accurate, as far as it goes, but also comprehensive. But the persons to whom I would specially address myself are that other class, of which I spoke at starting: men who are not socialists, or even semi-socialists, but who are disquieted by the attacks and arguments of those who are; and who, though they do not join in assailing the existing social order, are bewildered and half-hearted in their defense of it. A wider, a more accurate, a more general knowledge of the question will show them

that the pictures drawn by extremists do indeed resemble things as they are to some extent, but only in that remote and fanciful way in which a cloud resembles a weasel or a whale.