

# The Strange Case of Charles Ferguson

SOME years ago there was published a work by Rev. Charles Ferguson, "The Religion of Democracy," that attracted merited attention. There was little in the book that was constructive; it was, however, an appeal to the spirit, and there is need of such books. Now Mr. Ferguson is here with another work, "The Revolution Absolute," (Dodd, Mead & Co., N.Y.).

Mr. Ferguson is not merely a writer. He is the spokesman of a group having headquarters in the Singer Building, and called the office of the New Machine. The group is composed of engineers, editors, bankers, and journalists. There is also a member of the Chamber of Commerce, of New York. It is, therefore, in its way, a "movement," and deserves rather more than casual attention.

## OUR EXAMINATION TAKES A PATHOLOGICAL TURN

We have entitled this criticism "The Strange Case of Charles Ferguson," because Mr. Ferguson cannot be understood unless—and even then we suspect it is not possible—we view his mind as under a form of tyranny of words which seems to him to involve some vast conception, but which to the reader conveys merely an impression of perplexity. From the consequences of this tyranny Mr. Ferguson does not escape when we seek to pin him down to details. He confesses to no working plan, and seems to think this is one of the real merits of his philosophy. He pictures a utopia of his own, but says "we must escape from utopias."

Seeing that his philosophy has no plan he is forced to deny that it can be brought about by ballot or legislation. Business men have only to gather together and acknowledge it. He repudiates socialism but is going to socialize credits, commerce and the press. His socialism is all-embracing. Notwithstanding the talk of personal wills and personal freedom, scarcely a crumb of comfort is held out to the man who would leave something to personal initiative. If there is a natural law of economics, as Single Taxers contend, there is apparently not a glimmering of it in Mr. Ferguson's philosophy.

## NEVER SURE OF WHAT HE MEANS

Yet while we say this we are not sure that it summarizes Mr. Ferguson's philosophy. For we could readily cite passages which seem to point the other way. Indeed, in his work there are guide-posts—with our apologies to every guide-post that ever existed—that point in all directions.

He tells us that for thousands of years political philosophers sought a cure for poverty and war. "They have failed because it is quite impossible to solve the war problem or the poverty problem by mere refinements upon the definitions of property and territorial sovereignty."

So far we are dealing with mere phrases. But surely Mr. Ferguson is dealing with a problem. Let him state it thus: "How can the constitution be made to achieve the highest possible power over the forces and materials of nature?"

## CONFESSES THAT HE HAS NO PLAN

How he is going to do this we do not gather. He says: "I did not occupy myself with reforms and no reform ever interested me. \* \* \* \* \*

He confesses that he cannot point a way. For 300 pages he has wandered on, but what is so desirable he cannot tell us how we are to establish. Conscious that he has left something lacking he asks impatiently, "Would you have me reduce the thesis to blue prints and detailed drawings." Indeed we would. "The autocracy must melt away." These are the last words of the book. They are as vague and unsatisfactory as the rest. But we refuse to be satisfied with mere words. Who is to kindle this flame in which the autocracy is to melt? He has told us little or nothing of this autocracy, and nothing at all of the method by which it will be made to disappear.

The problem to Mr. Ferguson is more production. He says there is no problem of distribution, and his reason for thinking so is because the sum total of wealth produced would be insufficient to provide all with a reasonable competence! This is as far as he has got in his economic thinking.

## TRYING TO GET AT THE MEANING OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

Let us try to summarize the philosophy of this work. If we follow Mr. F., society is abnormal; it nourishes in its bosom "the fanged wolf." We cannot understand public events unless we are able to measure them against a sound criterion of public health. Yet a nobler, far happier future than any we have known or imagined is in process of being born.

"For four centuries of travail we have been moving toward the rule of the servant through the organization of an earth-subduing power on an ever-widening basis." "Grand scale industry is fatal to the rule of abstract idealism—the physically irrelevant kind of goodness and rightness that obtains in our schools, courts and chambers of commerce." "The unbridgeable chasm between labor and capital—between those who live by the natural law of physical function and those who depend for their existence upon the validation of conventional claims." "The autocracy of money is rooted in a soil of passionless legalism." "You have the controversy between labor and capital. It is due to the fact that we have too low a voltage of enterprise." "We are in the midst of revolution that sums up all revolutions. It is the revolution absolute—the passing of the conscience of mankind from creaturehood to creatorship." "The question of the right division of goods shall be regarded as a detail of production."

## MORE OF THIS EXTRAORDINARY PHILOSOPHY

These quotations leave the vaguest idea of what it is all about, so it may be well to quote a few more lengthy citations. On page 257 he says:

"We must grasp the conception that society as it actually exists within a given territorial jurisdiction—say a Federal Reserve district—is the historical heir to a great fortune, that this fortune consists on the one hand of a precious share in the incorporeal hereditament of art and science that has accumulated through the ages, and on the other hand of a right of eminent domain and reversionary ownership in all the lands of the district and in all the physical property that the common heritage of art and science has produced."

On page 185 he says:

"There is no social problem that cannot be reduced to utter insignificance by generating a sufficient current of creative enterprise. Slight inequalities of property distribution have not been interesting in times and places where the creative imagination has worked free—with an open career for every man who cared for a career."

We are told:

"The old politics is to be supplanted by a working order. The world of modern business must cease to be administered by official persons. The world affairs must be administered by shipmasters and organizers of industry."

#### PERHAPS THE CRUX OF THE PHILOSOPHY

We are to "socialize credits." This is the *summum bonum* of the Fergusonian philosophy. On what these credits are to be based or how they are to be issued, we are left in blissful ignorance. That this can be done within a limited sphere is true; it is done now. That it can be done in a universal way so as to compel an economic revolution is the veriest phantasmagoria of illusion around which it is small wonder that a facile pen like Mr. Ferguson's can dart words of curious and uncertain import, and build, Pelion upon Ossa, such a mass of cloud-like sentences, each more vague than another, that dazzle and confuse the unsuspecting. Mr. Ferguson is dealing with simple economic phenomena—all economic phenomena is simple when reduced to its elements and discussed in terms of its constituent factors. Why should he choose to discuss it in terms of bewildering metaphysics as if it were a philosophy of thaumaturgy and not the simple science of making a livelihood?

Do we misrepresent? Then let us quote a single paragraph in which Mr. Ferguson comes nearest to explaining:

"There is a way—and the only way—to pour untold billions into the physiological system of the United States, without vertiginous and apoplectic consequences. The loans must be issued through agencies whose motives and resolute purpose is to improve the technique and morale of the working system; *"and these agencies must frankly intend to shift the gravitational center of the system from the organizers of investment ownership to the organizers of enterprise."*

If we gather correctly from the mass of vague philosophizing what lies at the bottom of it all is (to quote) "not nicety of division but the power to create." Nakedly it is thus revealed as stressing the need of greater production. He tells us, that the great desideratum is "a people more concerned to produce goods than to divide them, more interested in creative art than in distributive justice." And lo, the utopia!

#### MR. FERGUSON DIFFICULT TO DEAL WITH

It is hard to deal with such reasoning and such conclusions. Clothed in a philosophic garment showing the author's familiarity with much of the best thought of the last two thousand years, the absence of body to the outward garment becomes increasingly mystifying. Indeed, if Mr. Ferguson had actually designed to perpetrate a literary delusion that would attract by an appearance of truth, a certain cleverness of phrasing, and a convincing manner, he has succeeded better than he could have dreamed. Is the work indeed such a *tour de force*? Is it really possible for a mind of high intelligence to write a book of several hundred pages around this simple injunction—*Men must devote more time to production and produce more.*

No wonder readers have been perplexed at Mr. Ferguson. To some it has seemed that his teachings—if they can be dignified by so definite a term—are deliberately designed as a stop-gap to all real social reform. And indeed if that was his design we have but to accept his theories to make that design completely successful.

We are to witness the shifting of "control of tools to those who know how to use them from those who do not." Mr. Ferguson is sure that "the legal lotus land is drifting into memory behind us." We shall escape from utopia, he repeats. But for what port shall we set our sails? In Mr. Ferguson's uncharted sea of economics there looms no solid ground for the mooring of our craft that we can descry through the mystifying and elusive fog of words.

#### NOT AN ENTRANCING OUTLOOK

The assumption by Big Business of all the forces of government may present an entrancing outlook to Mr. Ferguson, but it involves no really attractive prospect. Government is not business, as business is not government. The business of government is limited to the raising of taxes and the expenditures of revenues so raised in the preservation of order and in the building and conduct of public utilities. It should be strictly so limited if human happiness and human rights are to be conserved. The delusion that Mr. Ferguson has made an important discovery is not likely to be shared by any one but himself.

One more citation:

"It is not believed that any intelligent and untutored man of an out-of-door habit of mind could stand in face of the intricate apparatus of modern industry and commerce and insist that it needs no guidance but the instinct of private gain." He speaks of such an idea as only possible to a man who has never seen a railroad or talked through a telephone. He speaks of this kind of economics as being stalled in the alcoves along with Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and Adam Smith. He scouts the idea of submitting our bodies and souls to the guidance of "enlightened self-interest."

Yet it is this enlightened self-interest—the involuntary impulse to satisfy the craving of self, the supplying of pri-

vate wants—that has constituted our reliance hitherto. It will continue to be. It has given us the food, clothing and shelter that we have. The laws that were laid down by Adam Smith were not concerned with business but with principles governing business. That they were applicable to the industry of his time we have abundant testimony, for “the mercantile theory” dissolved in the light of those teachings. In what way have these principles become obsolete? Business has not changed—wealth is produced as it was and always will be. If the principles laid down by Adam Smith were applicable to his day, and we have proof that they were, they are applicable to this.

We have noted that men who would apply ill-considered theories to conditions begin by trying to discredit Smith. Every protectionist will tell you “The Wealth of Nations” is obsolete. But it is not true that Smith is stalled in the alcoves. He is read where books on political economy appearing year after year gather dust before the ink on the types is dry.

#### WHAT MR. FERGUSON DOES NOT SEE

What Mr. Ferguson sees, and what he is unable by a certain imperviousness to other related phenomena to properly appraise, is the increasing importance of Big Business. How much of this arises from the union of business and privilege he does not see. That much of the increasing importance exercised by business in government is due to the fact that government has certain privileges within its gift, land, tariff and transportation privilege, he does not see. That government is able to dispense such privilege, involves a misuse of government functions and is a denial of equality from which economic maladjustments spring. To this aspect of the question Mr. Ferguson is blind or remains significantly silent.

But indeed to have indicated it at all would have made the writing of this book entirely unnecessary, for it falls within the category of the great number of volumes that had to be written because there were so many things the authors did not know. The writing of this book, with all its ingenious philosophy, analogies, speculations and prophecies, was made possible only by shutting one's eyes to certain rather obvious facts.

#### WILL DISCARD ALL HIS PLANS AT ANY TIME

An amusing confession concludes this extraordinary work. We quote: “We have quite definite plans for the operation of such offices—the enrollment of men for better placement of their abilities, the technical survey of cities, the development of scientific news service, of public service banks, of commercial corporations to lower the cost of food—but *all these plans may be cast aside for other plans.*” (The italics are ours.) Mr. Ferguson's economic and social philosophy is at all events an elastic one. It is free from bondage to any established principle—indeed, it is doubtful if there are any established principles.

#### ADOPTS ONE OF THE ERRORS OF THE SOCIALISTS

One of Mr. Ferguson's many errors is that of our Socialist

friends. It lies in the assumption that Big Business differs in any way from little business. Why should there arise such a misconception? The factors are the same: labor, capital, transportation, government service, elements of monopoly. In what do these differ whether business be on a large or small scale? It would puzzle Mr. Ferguson to answer. The difference between the needle and the sewing machine, the hand-plow and the steam-plow, the stage coach and the locomotive, is merely a difference of degrees. The steam-shovel is still a shovel. Its relation to production is the same, nor is the relation to the man who handles it to the government under which he lives changed one iota. The forest which obstructs the vision of these gentlemen of the type of Mr. Ferguson and the Socialists is still an assemblage of trees, each nurtured by its individual roots.

#### NOT SURE EVEN NOW

We have written this criticism of Mr. Ferguson. Yet we are not sure that we have said the right word, because we are not sure after all what it is that Mr. Ferguson is trying to say.

Some day in fewer words he will—there lingers with us this great hope—write a book in which, perhaps, simply and in a way to be understood, he will say the things that he appears to be trying to say. JOSEPH DANA MILLER.

IN a vacant lot on the beautiful Avenue “18th of October,” Montevideo, the owner has put up a sign of large size, bearing the following notice:

This vacant lot will grow in value, thanks to the labor of all. Yet the amount of this increase will not be enjoyed by all, but by the owner alone.

That is the consequence of our present absurd economic system.

It will continue until the Single Tax is established.

Atlantida, Buenos Aires, February 27, 1919.

“NO MATTER what working men in shipyards and in other industries were paid, the landlords and other profiteers took it all away from them Saturday night.”

MAYOR OLE HANSON, of Seattle, Wash.

THE Single Tax farmers are at least right in demanding that legislatures and political parties recognize that problem at the present time as an issue deeply involving public welfare.

Evening World, April 25.

THERE is nothing the matter with the “Good Ship Earth.” There is abundance in the hold. Only they have padlocked the hatches. Your ballot is the key that will open them.