

The New England Conscience: A Study in Moral Perception

Author(s): Louis Wallis

Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Jul., 1913, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jul., 1913), pp. 48-60

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2763276>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Sociology*

JSTOR

THE NEW ENGLAND CONSCIENCE  
A STUDY IN MORAL PERCEPTION

LOUIS WALLIS  
Author of *Sociological Study of the Bible*

The development of American public opinion with reference to the "social problem" during the last twenty years has been so remarkable that an attempt to diagnose its present condition from the standpoint of psychological sociology may be in order. It is hardly too much to say that the American mind is now undergoing a revolution comparable to that which marked the rise of Protestantism at the opening of modern history. The new spiritual order of things may not have entirely "arrived"; but its outlines are in sight; and the services of a prophet are hardly necessary to indicate the direction in which society is tending.

At the outset, we hazard the proposition that American society has even now *ceased to produce moral and social leaders whose chief emphasis falls upon the "individual" in the campaign against sin*. What we mean is, that the moral censor of twenty years ago cannot command his former hearing: he is unable to get into the spotlight. There are even yet, of course, plenty of the older type who speak from obscure platforms; but the nation has at least moved this far from its ancient moorings: it will admit no new leader to the franchise of national confidence who undertakes to point a moral by using the shortcomings of any individual as the whole text or pretext of his argument!

If specifications are wanted before we proceed, they can be readily supplied by running over the outstanding aspects of American life for the last two decennia. Twenty years ago, we were a nation of rank individualists; and if we have not wholly graduated from the swaddling clothes of that philosophy, we are at least ready for a change of garments. In politics, not long ago, the popular cry was "The Trusts!" by which we really meant certain individuals

who were supposed to have the power to fashion the world at their own pleasure. It was this state of mind which made possible the meteoric rise of Mr. Bryan to fame. Mr. Roosevelt, at the same time, was vigorously at work in another quarter of the political horizon, denouncing the "boss" as the root of all evil. But today both of these gentlemen have outgrown their earlier standpoints; and if neither of them has yet matured a coherent program, they have at least "progressed." In politics now, the cry is for "social justice," and investigation of the fundamental monopolies which underlie business.

On the industrial side of life, the ruling tendency among the foremost men twenty years ago was to assume that financial success is due *solely* to the element of individual initiative. The factory owner, the railroad president, and the banker were fond of telling how they began as poor boys and worked their way up the ladder. The prevailing impression was that any poor boy with "push" could become rich. But today this is decidedly a thing of the past. And while it may be true that the business man has not yet had time to study economics and sociology, his consciousness of the industrial situation is modified; and he is learning to take up a different standpoint. "The rich man," says Frederick Harrison, "is simply the man who has managed to put himself at the end of a long chain, or into the center of an intricate convolution, and whom society and law suffer to retain the joint product conditionally." This truth is gradually forcing its way into the mind of the business world. Bellamy states it even more clearly: "All that man produces today more than did his cave-dwelling ancestors, he produces by virtue of the accumulated achievements, inventions, and improvements of the intervening generations, together with the social and industrial machinery which is their legacy. . . . Nine hundred and ninety-nine parts out of the thousand of every man's produce are the result of his social inheritance and environment."

From the point of view of religion, the change is equally startling. Twenty years ago the prevailing gospel was a kind of propaganda for the redemption of the world by spiritual arithmetic through the simple addition of "saved souls" to the communion of the saints. Society was viewed as a mere crowd composed of "individuals."

To save society, you merely had to rescue the constituent units.  
This theory found expression in the popular hymn:

Throw out the life-line across the dark wave;  
There is a brother whom someone should save.

Its foremost representative was, perhaps, Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist. This admirable and worthy lay preacher was approaching the close of a remarkable career. He had put stress upon the old-fashioned "simple gospel," and was innocent of all compromise with sociology. In his later evangelistic tours, it began to be apparent that the public was not giving its old response to the gospel appeal. Mr. Moody himself was forced to note that his audiences were not simply "people," but certain *kinds* of people. Speaking on one occasion in New York City where the "Labor Temple" now stands, he was unable to draw a large audience from the local population; but going uptown he attracted plenty of auditors from the middle and well-to-do classes. Moody was big enough not to be embittered by such experiences; but they made him thoughtful. One sign of his outreach toward new things was his invitation to the higher critic George Adam Smith (then of the Free Church College, Glasgow) to speak to the Moody School at Northfield. He said to this scholar: "Explain to me briefly what the higher criticism is"; and after listening for awhile he asked: "What's the use of telling the people there are two Isaiahs, when most of them don't even know there was one?"

Two eras confronted each other in the persons of these men. Mr. Moody was perplexed by the new biblical scholarship, and saddened by the alienation of the working classes from the church and religion. In the meanwhile, the advance of higher criticism was rapid and steady. At the present time, the leading theological seminaries of most Protestant denominations in America and Europe have been reorganized around a new view of the Bible and of religion. The younger ministers and the more progressive clergy are profoundly influenced by the reconstruction of theological thought. The religious process today is distracting, because, along with the rise of higher criticism, there has come a shifting of emphasis from personal salvation to the "social gospel." The development of thought, instead of being simple, is a very complex

matter. There is acute spiritual distress at present, because the nature of the process going on around us is not clearly in evidence. To many minds, it seems as if all the old landmarks have been swept away. The constructive aspects of the newer scholarship are not yet in full sight; but every day brings us nearer to a positive issue. The advocates of old-school theology, of course, take a merely personal view of the situation: Our troubles, they think, are caused by certain scholars who have led this generation astray. But no man can *cause* a great historic movement, such as that going on around us in religion. What we may do is to guide and control the inevitable. The older theology looked upon the Bible and its religion as having been projected into human history like a meteor from the sky. The newer theology contemplates the Hebrew-Christian religion as the outcome of a process in which conscience and morality are the central factors. "Clouds and darkness are round about Him; but righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne." It would be inaccurate to say that theological scholars are unanimously conscious of the sociological meaning of higher criticism in the technical sense. Yet they are becoming more aware of it every day, as criticism takes its place in the wider perspective of general culture.

The assimilation of politics, economics, and religion with the "social problem" has been so gradual that we are scarcely conscious of the change in the American attitude toward "réform" in general. It needs to be recalled that when the American public of twenty or twenty-five years ago was in a reform frame of mind, it was not consciously thinking in terms of politics, economics, or religion. Reform was treated as a kind of undertaking that had no organic relation to conventional modes of human activity. The reformer's vocation was looked upon as an enterprise which could proceed independently, while existing political, industrial, and religious institutions remained standing without essential alteration. But the change which has taken place here is just as remarkable as that which is registered by other phases of American life. Reform has passed out of the individualistic into the collective stage. It is no longer viewed as an isolated matter, but is blended with all aspects of social life.

To go back twenty years, then, and approach the world of today along the lines of politics, business, religion, and reform is like taking different routes which converge toward a common center. We are no longer a nation of rank individualists; and this fact is the underlying condition of all that we do and think, whether we clearly realize it or not. Characteristic of the present social awakening is the experience of Lincoln Steffens with the problem of municipal corruption. Mr. Steffens began his investigation of city politics on the basis of individualism: certain "bosses" needed to be exposed and deposed, and then politics would be all right. The remedy for misgovernment was the election of "good, clean men." This was very simple and easy. But as the investigation went on, certain underground connections were discovered between bosses and "business." Then it became apparent that the interest of business men in politics was not to be explained merely on the theory of "individual sin": it was due to economic pressure which the uninitiated layman could not comprehend without actual experience of the facts. Political "corruption," therefore, began to take on the character of a signpost pointing to maladjustments of the social system as a whole. Then it became clear that the church was timid about handling the problem in vigorous fashion. Finally, the truth was forced into view that the moral sense of the entire community is not such a direct and infallible guide as we have taken for granted. Mr. Steffens' conclusion was that if he went much farther on the trail of political corruption, he would catch himself and all the rest of us. In brief, he had learned, through patient investigation, that what we glibly call social *problems* are merely the various phases, or aspects, of *one* fundamental problem which simply cannot be cut up into sections and solved piecemeal.

The present social awakening provides a training school for that "New England conscience" with which America started. It is the ethical discipline of us all. By "New England conscience" we refer, of course, not to a provincialism, but to a state of mind. In Great Britain, we should have to call it the "Nonconformist conscience." The moral headquarters of America were at one time situated in its northeastern section; but the Puritan sense of righteousness is now pretty well diffused over the country. The American citizen of German, or Italian, or, if you please, of African,

descent may talk with a straight face about "our heritage from our Pilgrim forefathers." We make bold to affirm that the New England conscience is not dead nor even sleeping; but that it stands at the basis of the national character, and is now struggling to adjust itself to the moral demands of today. The forefathers of our national life had strong ideas about justice, duty, morality, and right dealing between man and man. And we have no less ethical fervor than they in seeking for the "rightness" of the social problem as it unrolls before us. A striking illustration of the new national spirit, which gathers into itself all that we have been saying about the general situation, is the famous "tainted money" controversy, which flared quickly up a few years ago, and then promptly subsided. That excitement could no more be repeated today than the Civil War could be fought over again. Yet, if the Reverend Washington Gladden was right in his position, we ought to be having a continuous ethical side show in America, with "tainted money" as the leading bill of attraction.

It will be recalled that after certain officials in the Congregational churches had solicited and received from Mr. Rockefeller a contribution to their missionary board, certain ministers objected strenuously. The leading figure in the campaign of protest has reviewed the controversy in a volume of *Recollections* under the suggestive rubric "Partnership with Plunderers." Everybody might be willing to agree with him that the "tainted money" discussion "revealed a widespread need of elementary instruction in the first principles of ethics" (p. 403); but we might not be unanimous about the line along which that instruction ought to proceed. The protesting party took the ground that the money in question was not earned; that it came to the donor's hand through plunder, and not through any service that he had rendered to the community; and that the acceptance of this money by the Congregational authorities brought them into partnership with iniquity. These persons argued the case upon the assumption that the fortunes of the very wealthy are due to individual sin; and that if certain rich men would only stop sinning, a large part of the evil and corruption which exist in our politics and business would be cured straightway.<sup>1</sup> If

<sup>1</sup> Washington Gladden, *Recollections* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), chap. xxvi, pp. 398-409.

the fundamental assumption were true, the task of the moral teacher today would be far simpler than in fact it is; and if the problem of "great wealth" could really be treated by such methods, our industrial and civic ills would be far less perplexing than they are. Dr. Gladden bears witness that he received hundreds of approving letters from all parts of the country, and that he had the emphatic support of the great audience which heard his argument at the meeting of the Mission Board in Seattle. This is no doubt true. But ethical questions are not to be decided by counting heads. The less fortunate are always in a majority, and are always jealous of those who possess a greater abundance; and this jealousy exists irrespective of the manner in which the more fortunate acquire their wealth. The applause of the multitude cannot always be identified with the verdict of absolute morality. The feelings of the people are not, of course, to be treated disrespectfully, for it is probably true that when all the facts in a given case are before the great democratic jury, *vox populi* is as near as we can come to *vox Dei*. But there is the rub: the New England conscience has not yet digested the facts of the social problem.<sup>1</sup>

America is now struggling to adjust itself to the fact that the problem of "wealth" raises the whole subject of the system in which wealth is made. What we are facing is not a mere question of "rebates," or "combination in restraint of trade," or "plunder," or "trusts." The discussion which is now going on brings into debate the categories of property in capital and land which lie at the foundation of all business. The problem of the Steel Trust, for instance, is not to be settled by saying that its income is "tainted"; that Mr. Morgan, Mr. Carnegie, and their partners ought not to combine and raise prices; and that if they will not voluntarily cease these practices, they should be coerced by law. Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that every dollar which the Steel Company gets for its product stands for only seventy-five cents in

<sup>1</sup> Part of the field indicated by this paper has been traversed in greater detail by Professor Edward A. Ross, of the University of Wisconsin, in his book *Sin and Society*. "Now, as ever," he writes, "the judgments the average man passes upon the conduct of his fellow are casual, inconsistent, and thoughtless" (p. 25). And further: "In today's warfare on sin, the reactions of the public are about as serviceable as gongs and stink-pots in a modern battle" (p. viii).

real service-value, and twenty-five cents in "exploitation," or "plunder." And let us extend the supposition to all the great industrial concerns, in order to make the argument general. Now, it is exactly this problem which the Sherman anti-trust law undertakes to meet and fails to solve. The Sherman statute is based upon the so-called "abhorrence of English law for monopoly." Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence is supposed to detest monopoly in the same mysterious way that Nature "abhors" a vacuum. This principle sounds very democratic and brave when proclaimed as a generality. But when examined in the light of history, it stands out in its real significance.

The truth is that the tainted-money philosopher does not voice a full-rounded morality. In his fight against "big" business, he represents the aggrieved moral sense of *little* business. It is the small shippers and manufacturers and storekeepers that he seeks to protect. His complaint against big business men as the chief of sinners overlooks a fundamental fact which plays havoc with his argument. If we are to admit, with him, that every dollar of big business income stands for an element of exploitation, then he, in turn, must go farther, and admit that the institutions of private proprietorship in capital and in land, upon which the entire structure of industry is founded, involve elements of exploitation. To this claim he will not fail to reply: "But how do our existing institutions of property in capital and in land spell exploitation? These institutions are *legal*. Everybody recognizes the rightfulness of private property in the machinery of wealth production and in the soil. What have these things to do with the problem of plunder?" Let us look at this question.

It is obvious that human labor did not create the earth, and that the value of land arises from either its fertility, its mineral deposits, or the presence of population. When the proprietor of a given piece of land receives rent for the use of his land, he gets money for which he does not give a return out of his own labor. There is no escaping this conclusion. It stands at the heart of all speculation in real estate. The market price of a given piece of land is the estimated amount of money on which the rent of that land will pay interest over and above taxes. The "unearned incre-

ment," about which we hear so much, is the increase in rental value of land which follows upon the growth of population. Land is purchased at a certain price, and then held for a rise. The phenomenon of land value exists not only in connection with land which can be measured and sold by the square foot; it exists wherever a franchise is granted to lay rails, or pipe lines, or to string telegraph, telephone, or electric wires over specified strips of land. Private property in land carries with it an element of exploitation which affects all business that has anything to do with land either in the form of real estate or in that of quasi-public franchises. And this is only part of the story.

All business, both big and little, is conducted by the use of tools, machinery, buildings, etc., which are technically known as "capital." There is, of course, a broad sense in which land or any form of wealth can be viewed as "capital." But from the standpoint of abstract analysis, there is a difference between land, which is not created by human labor, and *things* produced by labor for use in the operations of industry. It is in this sense that we employ the term "capital" in the present connection. Now, unless the tainted-money moralist sets up the claim that the existing proprietors of capital created that form of property out of their own labor, or got it in exchange for wealth created by their own labor, then he will be compelled to admit that private capitalism also involves an element of exploitation. The capitalists who own railroads, manufacturing plants, buildings, steamships, etc., cannot by any possibility have produced these things by their own personal labor. We, therefore, have to note two things: (1) Private ownership of capital is in itself exploitation. (2) Not only so; but capitalism considered as a process, in which the capitalist enters the field of business life with all the advantages conferred by ownership, in competition with a vast army of persons who have no capital and have only their labor to sell—this phase of capitalism brings with it a continuous exploitation by way of interest and profit.

These aspects of the property institutions which underlie and condition *all* business, big and little, are ignored by conventional morality because they are so familiar and universal. The tainted-money philosopher thinks in terms of categories which he assumes

will stand without criticism, when, as a matter of fact, the very terms of his own thought need inspection. The trust magnate in all lines of industry has gone ahead with the game and worsted the small competitor by means of property institutions which, whatever their absolute moral character, have been until recently viewed as "right" and "legitimate" by everybody. But the change from individualistic to socialized thinking makes the tainted-money philosopher more and more a lonely figure. No longer may we condemn particular individuals as the *causes* of great public problems. We must all be ready now to acknowledge our community of responsibility for the social tangle.

Our new sociological insight, however, has not yet extended far enough to dispose of the superstition that the uninstructed conscience is fully equipped unto all good works. The judgment of the conventional "good" citizen may be unwittingly as evil as that of the worst criminal. An example from the experience of our New England forefathers illustrates this. The Puritan immigration to Massachusetts in the seventeenth century brought into close contact two sharply contrasted social orders in a way which was not realized by any of the people then living in the world. On the one hand were the Indians, in the clan stage of evolution, with common property in the soil, and having no more idea of the complexities of individual private ownership of real estate than a South Sea Islander has of an electric dynamo. Over against the Indian, the God-fearing Puritan loomed up suddenly. The white man brought with him not only an objective material outfit wholly strange to the native, but an equally alien system of property-concepts based on the foundation of Roman and English jurisprudence. And the white man was as ignorant of the Indian as the native was of the white man. When the Puritans made treaties with the Indians, and undertook to purchase land in fee simple, the transaction was looked at, necessarily, from two different standpoints. To the Puritan, it was an ordinary matter of real estate business, such as took place in the home country. To the Indian, it seemed as if the foreigner were giving him a few trinkets, bits of cloth, etc., in exchange for the right to live in the land as a neighbor. From the Indian's point of view, Massachusetts was as much his country as

before. The Puritan, on the other hand, felt that he had acquired rights of proprietorship just as sacred as those of the native. Consequently, as the eastern shore filled up, and the English moved inland, war became inevitable. There was no possibility of harmonizing the divergent views of the two races. They simply did not and could not understand each other. So the Indian tried to exterminate the foreigner, and failed; and the Puritan wiped the native race from the map of New England.

Posterity has hit off the ethical paradox by saying that when the Puritans reached this country, they first fell on their knees, and then fell on the aborigines. Mr. Palfrey, the learned historian of New England, has been very careful to point out, in vindication of his ancestors, that they scrupulously "paid" the Indians for all territory which they occupied; yet, at the same time, Palfrey admits (without being conscious of the problem involved) that personal ownership of land was a conception which had not yet risen upon the mind of the Indian.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we see that not only were the Puritans themselves unable to perceive the situation in its true colors, but that a learned historian, more than two centuries later, was also oblivious to it. While Palfrey's history was being published (1858 *et foll.*), the New England conscience was again going astray, this time on the slavery question. The Webster party was on one side; the Sumner party was on the other; and not until the Civil War did New England succeed in adjusting itself to the moral demands of the situation.

We recall these facts in order to show that the present age is not the only time of moral perplexity and struggle in American history. The past, indeed, was no golden age, as some would fondly believe. It was marked by epochs of transition the same in principle as that in which we now find ourselves. Our ancestors were no more perfect than we are. There has been no moral decadence from an age of pristine impeccability. While we have big problems to solve, the conscience of the people is more fully awake than ever before. We are moving into a new period in which the question is not whether America is to be controlled by radicalism or by conservatism, but: Shall radicalism be controlled by sanity or by insanity?

<sup>1</sup> Palfrey, *History of New England* (Boston, 1858), I, 36, 37, 38; cf. III, 138; IV, 364, 419.

In spite of the progress registered by the last twenty years, it has to be confessed that the change thus far is one of general atmosphere rather than of intelligent conviction about concrete aspects of the case. Twenty years ago, we were all dead set against the so-called "criminal poor," as a matter of course. Today, we are in peril of being equally dead set against the so-called "criminal rich." We have no more right to assume that the present hue and cry after the "man higher up" is a sign of progress in moral perception than a slave-hunter would have to assume that there is any essential difference between putting bloodhounds on the track of quadroons and putting them on the scent of full-blooded Negroes. We are in danger of trying to persuade ourselves that the substitution of one kind of quarry for another constitutes a radical transformation in the nature of the hunt. At the moment this paper is being written, the president of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad is in legal toils under charge of obstructing the free course of business; and the president of the National Cash Register Company is reported to be facing a prison sentence for a similar cause. If any considerable portion of the American public thinks that the passage of laws like the Sherman anti-trust act, and the prosecution and imprisonment of corporation heads under this legislation, will meet the difficulties now before us, that section of our people is destined to have a rude awakening. If the people, through the agency of their government, begin to clap millionaires into jail for playing the game of business on the basis of property institutions which the people *themselves* do not question, then we shall present the spectacle of a nation which not only stultifies itself morally, but which also impeaches its own intelligence.

When the United States Supreme Court rendered the Dred Scott decision, the court was technically right: it was bound to interpret the law within the terms of existing statutes. Nevertheless, the decision marked the breakdown of an imposing social organ; and the crisis was resolved only by the violence of a great civil war which incidentally abolished the type of property in question. A similar breakdown is indicated by current decisions in the cases of the Standard Oil Company and other corporations coming within the purview of the Sherman law. The real trouble, of course, is not

in the Supreme Court, but in the attitude of mind which forces the passage of such legislation as the Sherman law. So far as the actual results go, the entire anti-trust campaign in the United States down to the present hour has no more relevance than the amputation of pimples as a cure for the blood disease that makes the pimples. It is mere fussy tinkering with superficialities; and the sooner people find this out, the better for all of us. Popular prejudice of the moment finds a caterer in *Hearst's*, which continues to print Mr. Archbold's private correspondence with the righteous air of producing burglars' tools in police court (how obtained is not stated). While fully conscious that he is doing business in a popular market, Mr. Hearst would no doubt be entirely obtuse to the suggestion that his reading of the Standard Oil mind is connected not remotely with his failure to qualify in the statesman class.

If the evident intention of the government to press the trust issue farther is based on the policy of stinging the national conscience into an exploration of the social system as a whole by frankly showing up the limitations of its anti-trust and anti-protection remedies, then the Wilson administration is likely to cover itself with a glory which has attached to no administration since the time of Lincoln. On the other hand, if the intention of the government is based only on the policy of revising the tariff and pressing the Sherman law to the limit, then the Wilson administration lacks the necessary qualities of political leadership, and it will presently find itself confronted by a tremendous demand for goods which, in the nature of the case, it cannot deliver. The force of conscience in human society is like that of steam in the locomotive, which is guided by the logic of the engine's mechanism and by the intelligence of the engineer. Conscience, like steam, is a good servant, but a bad master. American society today has reached the turning of the ways. It has plenty of the propelling force of conscience; and it has also accumulated a new and unused stock of social insight. The immediate future will depend upon the intelligence with which our leaders teach us to apply our insight to our conscience. Unconquerable optimism should be the faith, as it is the duty, of every patriotic man and woman. We should all do our part to see that the new social thought and policy of America shall be sane.