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Order and Progress

Dyer D. Lum

1877

Now that the majesty of the law has been vindicated, proprietary rights protected, and “order reigns in Warsaw,” it is quite in the line of duty to indulge in reflections on the anomalous state of affairs through which we have recently passed.

I would at the outset insist most strenuously upon the proposition that society involves reciprocal relations. The modern or scientific conception of society is no longer that of a mere aggregation of individuals, who, by their legislation, determine the nature and character of the community, but rather that society is an organism, a living body exercising definite functions, and the source of life to the individual units which enter into its organic structure. The aim of society, therefore, is to harmonize the working forces of the organism, so that general health shall be the result.

Order and social health are identical; it is that condition of prosperity where happiness crowns every individual life. Social order, therefore, is but the expression of the healthful condition of a community. Order is not an end in itself, but is that balance of social forces obtaining at any given moment whereby general health is promoted, or, in other words, happiness diffused. “Order,” said

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Comte, “is the condition of all Progress; Progress is always the object of Order.”

Order and progress, therefore, are in essence identical: order is not stationary, but must become manifest in progress, and progress has no meaning save as understood to apply to human relationship. Where progress is not the development of order; where the interaction of social laws do not tend to diffuse happiness; where, on the contrary, they tend to promote discord, to institute relations destructive to happiness, there is no progress, and, consequently, there is no social order, but rather disorder and anarchy. The “order” with which the magistrate is charged and on which the policeman depends, is but the existing condition of functions in the social organism, however retrograde that social condition may be; in such a case “law and order” are not a blessing; they have become oppressive, have grown tyrannical, and the interest of progress demands a revolt, though all tradesmen, unable to see beyond the range of their counters, render the air discordant with their shrieks.

The general application is plain. The social condition of our times does not accord with progress; personal greed has disrupted the social bonds; order has been displaced by anarchy; government instead of being the highest of all functions, a responsible public duty, has become the guardian of irresponsible private *rights*, its sole object to promote class interest, acquired rights taking precedence over duties. Our social laws no longer work together in organic unity; they have assumed abnormal phases, and are no longer in general harmony. The social body is diseased, fever flows through its veins, and its pulse beats spasmodically, and the only remedy proposed is that of the quack—a “Morrison’s Pill”—as if political legislation were a creative force in social life! We have started from wrong principles. The fruit of individualism is now ripening, and we discover with dismay that the taste is bitter in the mouth. Instead of social ends we have sought personal benefits, we have sacrificed mutual benefit to private greed wealth

is sought not as a trust, but as the means to personal power, as a stepping stone to selfish aggrandizement.

Great corporations, as railroad, iron, mining, and gas companies, forget that as developers of wealth they are performing social functions, but have sought with Midas-like greed to turn everything they touch to individual profit, though in so doing, they spread misery and ruin among their fellows. *This* is disorganization; here are the “dangerous elements” in society. Not so much to those who endanger the permanency of a chaotic state of affairs does the term so well apply as to those who, by their selfishness, tend to render a better adjustment of relations well nigh impossible. This is social anarchy, not the spasmodic protest against it, however blind that protest may be. The normal functions of the organism have been prevented, and the automatic wrenching of the system that follows is no cause for alarm. The “order” threatened is the order found in death rather than in life, and renovation has become a necessity, or progress is stayed and order becomes retrograde.

The Church, as our spiritual guide, has grossly neglected her duties, and, instead of exerting a spiritual power to overcome greed with nobler motives, she has struck hands with the disorganizing influence of selfishness, rewarding her shrewdest and most overreaching members with the church offices until deacon has become a synonym for far other characteristics than once hallowed the word—conforming in their management to “business principles,” so that it may be said of every new church building in process of erection that the love of gain on one hand and human despair on the other, becomes incorporated between every layer of brick, or stone, or mortar, until religion bids fair to become a hollow mockery, and its forms of worship but the ritual of a system where competition has been deified as the savior of men, and the spirit of greed installed on the throne of the universe to give an absolute sanction to the fundamental principle of our Christian civilization. “*Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost!*” Success in life

has been set forth as consisting in the acquisition of wealth, in the mere accumulation of capital, even though only attainable through the failure of others less shrewd, and national prosperity is said to prevail where the more grasping and avaricious ones are easily enabled to climb over their fellows and escape from the slough where the great mass must remain, in no wise benefited but often cursed by the individual escapes.

The Spiritual Power being powerless and legislation but a quack remedy for social evils, wherein lies the remedy? Alas! Evolution knows only the old, old way. To make a particular application to the times is easy. Great corporations have held their immense wealth for private ends regardless of the social responsibilities resting upon them. They have practically ignored the necessity of reciprocal relations, foolishly fancying that having entered into a contract with their employee and paid the sum stipulated (and, in some cases, requiring them to sign an agreement releasing the company from responsibility in case of accident or death in the discharge of their duties), they may imperiously ask, "Is not our duty ended at the paymaster's table? Have we not a right to do as we like with our own?" The question is not legitimate, for the more searching query arises, "What is our own? Has the obligation ceased when the stipulated wage is counted out?"

The growing intelligence of the age is fast answering these questions. That noble old man, Peter Cooper, has clearly perceived that the laws governing society are not acts and resolves, but have a deeper basis, and has lovingly sought to place himself in harmony with them, and no better service can be done at this time than to call attention to the clear and concise views of Mr. Cooper on the duties of wealth. "I cannot shut my eyes to the fact," he has said, "that the production of wealth is not the work of any one man, and the acquisition of great fortunes is not possible without the cooperation of multitudes of men; and that, therefore, the individuals to whose lot these fortunes fall, whether by inheritance or the laws of production and trade, should never lose sight of the fact that,

as they only hold them by the will of society, expressed in statute law, so they should administer them as trustees for the benefit of society, as inculcated by the moral law."

This truth has made itself felt in the conscience of a Peabody, an Astor, a Hopkins, a Stewart, and compelled recognition. Again has the lesson been enforced, proclaimed in thunder-tones, that wealth involves responsibilities, that its use is a social function. The only hope of social progress lives in the recognition of this fact; for unless heeded, these spasmodic gripings of the social body must occur. Wealth must heed it, or learn the lesson by finding its possessions rendered insecure. Corporations paying their presidents salaries ranging from ten to forty thousand dollars per annum, issuing thousands of free passes, habitually placing extra trains at the disposal of those in authority without pecuniary recompense, and managing to declare from eight to ten per cent dividends—and all this through that most selfish and tyrannical management which regards labor but as a means for obtaining dividends—have certainly forfeited all claims for social sympathy; and whatever may be our abhorrence of violence, we feel compelled to regard its manifestation under these circumstances as evidence of life, an indication of an effort on the part of the social organism to right itself.

Shall we take heed to our fears and join with the petty tradesman—as true to the instincts of his class today in France or America, as was his more ancient Pharaonic brother in Jerusalem—in the short-sighted cry for "law and order" and expressive measures? Will these symptoms of fever disappear through a coercive treatment? Is it best to rely on the soldier's bayonet and policeman's locust to inspire Capital with a conscience? Are social bonds cemented by force? Or, rejecting this whole outcome of our political and religious individualism, does not progress require these ebullitions until wealth shall have learned its duties, even though these sad scenes are again and again repeated?