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Fundamentals in Reform

An Address Delivered Before the La Salle Educational
Club, of Chicago, on Sunday, Feb. 2, 1896.

William Henry van Ornum

May 1896

My purpose, in this address, is to bring about a juster understanding and appreciation of different classes of reformers among one another and to direct their attention to what seems the most practical as well as the easiest method of reform which is already within their grasp whenever they are willing to undertake it. I have no expectation of bringing about any formal union of those different classes; but only to favorably incline the most thoughtful individuals among them toward united action; and to soften, in some degree, the asperities which now prevail. Hoping that it will not entirely fail of its purpose, is the hope of...

The Author.

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Three little girls, from 15 to 16 years of age, kept for more than six weeks in a loft over a saloon, for the gratification of the brutal

lust of the saloonkeeper, his bartender and their male friends, during which time they were never permitted to go to their homes: I say, kept for more than six weeks on beer, pop and whisky, in a loft devoid of furniture of any kind, and nothing but a pile of hay in a corner for a bed – is the picture which was presented in a Chicago police court a few weeks ago. So brutal were the details of this horrible story that even the Chicago justice, familiar as he was with stories of depravity, bowed his head and groaned when he contemplated it. And yet, you know; and I know; and everyone who is familiar with the condition of the poor in this great city knows that even this does not sound the depths of degradation which everywhere exist among them. This is only one of a thousand and one forms in which the brutalizing hand of poverty is seen. Stories like this are not every day told in the newspapers; but the facts are here, in infinite variety, just the same.

What was true of those little girls may become true of my own little ones, or of yours, or even of those who are now surrounded by the most comfortable and happy homes. Causes are at work in society which are producing just such results. These are but the fruit that naturally grows upon the tree of this false and vicious social system which we are trying to reform.

It is a knowledge of these things that drives me by a power which I could not resist even if I wanted to, and which I would not if I could, to devote my life to the work of changing the conditions which make these things possible, not merely for my own, but for all mankind; for I know that there is no safety for my little ones so long as there is danger for any other. And I want to ask every man and woman in this hall today to register one firm resolve that we will, under any and all circumstances, work for the destruction of this hellish system that pauperizes and brutalizes good and bad, male and female, wise and simple, and the old as well as the young; that we will not spare either time or means, so far as lies in our power, to make possible a better a fuller and a freer life for every human being. Will you do it?

Seeing a drop close by its side;
“The warm south breezes would dry me away,
And I should be gone ere noon today;
But I’ll help you and you help me,
And we’ll make a brook run to the sea.”

“Help one another,” a grain of sand,
Said to another grain just at hand;
“The wind may carry me over the sea,
And then, O! what will become of me;
But come, my brother and give your hand,
We’ll build a mountain and there we’ll stand.”

And so the snowflakes grew to drifts,
The grains of sand to mountains;
The leaves became a pleasant shade,
The dewdrops fed the foundations.

The next thing is, how shall we do it? It is to the how and the what that I wish to direct your attention today.

First, reform does not exist in palliating existing evils. If we have a tree that bears bad fruit we cannot expect by cultivation to change the character of the product. “Men do not gather grapes from thorns nor figs from thistles,” and no amount of culture and refinement expended on a thornbush or a thistle will give you anything else than thorns and thistles. The tree itself must be torn up by the roots and the new planted in its place.

The first practical step among reformers is to secure unity of action. I think that one of the most deplorable effects of our competitive system is to be found in the relations which exist between the different schools of social reform. There are socialists, anarchists, single-taxers, populists, free-silverites, greenbackers, prohibitionists and a host of lesser varieties, all seeking to bring about better conditions among the mass of the people which will raise the average of human enjoyment, and, to a greater or less extent, abolish poverty, destitution and manifold evils which result from them. One would naturally suppose that where so many are animated by objects so nearly identical that they would maintain some unity in their work, some sympathy, some bond of fellowship which would enable them to pull together instead of pulling apart. But they do not. Competition has poisoned the moral, the intellectual and even the reformatory atmosphere. Its vile breath is felt in our most earnest efforts for human betterment. Just as it does the commercial world, it here sets man against man, school against school and party against party, each trying to pull the other down in order to build himself or itself up at the expense of every other. As a result, fully nine-tenths of all our efforts are utterly wasted: which means that, if we would unite our efforts in mutual helpfulness we could accomplish more with one-tenth the effort we now expend, whether that effort be in the production of wealth or in the work of reform. We are frittering away our strength in mutual destruction instead of a mutual and helpful construction. Socialists

are painting the anarchists in the blackest of colors and trying to destroy their influence; while the anarchists heartily reciprocate their sentiments. Then, the single-taxers are fighting them both. While complaining that their own position is not understood or is misrepresented, they quite as hopelessly misunderstand or misrepresent all those who fail to speak their shibboleth. And so the thing goes on throughout the whole list. Our principal occupation is in putting tags on other people – labelling them so that we shall know just how to classify them – and then doing our best (or worst) to annihilate all those who wear any label but our own. Do we not see that if we attack others that they are certain to attack us; and that we are quite as likely to be hurt ourselves as we are to hurt them? Can we not realize that it is stupid, to say the very least, to waste our energies thus in tearing each other down and rendering it impossible for any of us to climb?

Let us take off all our labels, and, for the time being at least, forget that we have any labels – forget our hobbies, our isms and our differences – forget to think unkind thoughts or speak unkind words about one another; and see if we cannot find points of agreement instead of points of disagreement. Let us, for once, have a genuine love-feast instead of a scrap.

First, let us see how far we agree! I think we shall all agree that the question before us is an economic one. It has to do with the production and distribution of wealth. However some of us may regard politics and kindred questions, they have more to do with means than with ends. The real thing is to insure an abundant production and a just distribution of wealth – that is, of the products of labor. How can this be accomplished so as to harmonize with the ideas of all of us? There is an abundant production now: or there would be if production were not restricted to the supply of a restricted market. But the main trouble is that the distribution is bad. There is enough produced, even now, to keep every man, woman and child in this country in a very good degree of comfort every day in the year; but instead of its being used to promote that comfort, it goes to swell

hopes; and we have fallen short. When we would rise something has seemed to be pulling us down. Those whom we have trusted have proved false, have even played upon our purest sentiments the better to promote their own greedy or sinister ends. All these things have their roots in private greed which is itself the product of this competitive system that constantly pulls down others to build one's self up.

I propose that we begin the building of the new society, the cooperative commonwealth, just as the monks began the building of the new order in their day, by each contributing their time, their talents and their substance to a common stock for the common benefit. Each will engage in such employments as he or she is best fitted for; each stand on a perfect equality with every other; and each share according to his needs from the common hoard. Private rights, so far as property is concerned, will be sunk in the common right. In this way, and in this way only, can we avoid competition, eliminate greed, and lift ourselves out of the slough of despond into which the world has fallen. How many are there who are ready to begin?

“Help one another,” the snowflakes said,
As they huddled down in their fleecy bed;
“One of us here would not be felt,
One of us here would quickly melt;
I’ll help you and you help me,
And then, what a big white drift there’ll be.”

“Help one another,” the maple spray,
Said to his fellow leaves on day;
“The sun would wither me here alone,
“Long enough ere the day is gone;
But I’ll help you and you help me,
And then, what a splendid shade there’ll be.”

“Help one another,” the dew-drop cried,

we can do infinitely more under our present improved methods of production.

I shall not undertake to enlarge upon this subject now. My purpose is only to indicate what I believe be the foundation principle on which all our efforts at reform should rest. I leave details to other times and places. It is enough now to show that all human progress has been toward co-operation; that co-operation – that spirit of helpfulness of man for man which is its animating principle – is always a success. Men fail in their undertakings for want of it, but never by reason of it. It is that principle which finally must redeem the world.

As to our little petty quarrels between the different schools, in the name of all that we hope for, let use have done with them. Oh, let us not keep on practicing among ourselves the very things against which we preach. In our reform work, at least, let us abandon competition and unite for the up-building of a new order – that grander civilization which will come just as surely as that the darkness of night shall give place to the light of day. For competition is certainly self-destructive. It has within it the seeds of its own death. The very fruition of competition is destructive of all competition; and however much the world may laud competition and strive to preserve the competitive system, agencies which are a necessary part of it, and which are essential to its very life, will finally bring its death. The world is already full of its wrecks: wrecks of Empires, wrecks of civilizations, wrecks of great enterprises, wrecks of hopes and fortunes, and, saddest and worst of all, wrecks of lives and characters, like the three little girls over the saloon. Go where you will, and those wrecks are ever present with us. More than that, there is not a man, woman or child anywhere, whose life has not been embittered, dwarfed and blighted by its foul and poisonous influence. Whenever any of us have hoped to experience some good, have aspired to some great end, or have sought to attain some high purpose something would intervene. Some one's jealousy, envy, petty malice or inordinate greed has come between us and our

private fortunes which might as well never have been produced so far as any good it does in the world. But with a just distribution and production freed from arbitrary restriction, there is no reason why any man, woman, or child in this world should want for any good thing. I believe that we all are agreed upon this; so that there is no ground for disagreement between any of the different schools of social reform on this point.

Now, as to the resources of wealth, such as the land and the forces of nature, I think we will all agree that, inasmuch as these things must be used by all, they should be owned by all in order to insure the access of all to them. It makes no difference that the socialists would vest the title to them in the government in trust for the people; that the single-taxers would destroy present individual titles by taxing their values into the public treasury; and that the anarchists would hold them in co-operative communities for the common use and benefit of all their members; the fact remains that we all want the land and the other sources of wealth to be the common heritage of all. We want every man woman and child that is born into this world to have an equal chance, with no possibility of being crowded out or crushed in the struggle for an existence. Now there is a pretty broad ground for an argument right there. There is lots of standing room on that plank. The only possible chance for a disagreement is in the how and not in the what. We are all perfectly agreed in what we want, and only differ, if we differ at all, in how it is to be secured – in methods rather than in ends. Now we will take another step – as to the means of production; for there must be not only the land and forces of nature, but the means for utilizing them, such as implements, tools, machinery, improved processes, etc. I very much doubt if anyone will deny that this age is the heir of all the ages that have gone before; that whatever of progress the world has realized rightfully belongs equally to all the people of the world. It is of no consequence that one school wants the State to take charge of and operate the machinery, etc., for the benefit of all; that another would allow to individuals the unrestricted use

of them; while still another would allow voluntary associations of men to use them as they like. The fact remains that all want the benefits of improved appliances and processes to accrue, in some way, to all the people. So that again we are all agreed as to the ends and only differ as to the means. We are all attacking present economic conditions simply because they do not accomplish this end.

Now, with the land and the tools, what is the next step? Why, simply to use the tools on the land: in order words, to labor; and the product of labor is wealth, which brings us to the question of distribution. And here also we shall find the same substantial agreement. One class of reformers wants the State, or society in its organized form, to take charge of and distribute the product of that labor so as to secure practical equality. Another wants the matter left to the free play of individual activities, thinking that the same end will more certainly be reached in that way. But it is far more important that the thing be done than it be done in any particular way. The essential thing is always the end instead of the means. To revert to the question of land, it is more important that we have free land than that we get it through the application of the single tax. If it should be found, in the course of the coming struggle, that there is an easier way to break down landlordism than by levying all taxes on land values, then, I insist, that it would be the height of folly to hang back in the harness and refuse to go on because we did not have our way in the how of it.

Thus you see when we begin to compare our agreements instead of discuss our disagreements the ground begins to widen; and we find that we agree on many more points than we had supposed possible. We are all engaged in the great struggle for a larger opportunity, for a fuller and freer life and for higher achievements; and we want all mankind to share in those same benefits.

Suppose now we look at the field of method and see if we can find grounds for a substantial agreement there. And right here we must lay the foundation, if it is laid at all, for a unity of action. It

had wrought its natural results, results which it always has and always must produce when carried to its logical ends, there sprang up all over Europe, throughout northern Africa and into Asia, little co-operative societies where the oppressed could find shelter from the wild disorder and the universal clash of private interests which prevailed outside. These were the monkish orders. While they assumed a certain religious character they could not have stood a week in the midst of the universal disorder which surrounded them. As it was, they furnished a harbor of refuge for whatever came. The profane dared not violate their sacred precincts. Notwithstanding many unsocial features which they contained, owing to the ignorance of the age, such as their vows of poverty and celibacy, there prevailed within them a society where each contributed his talents to a common stock; where the different professions and handicrafts were carried on for the benefit of all; and where everyone shared from the common hoard according to his need. According to Charles Kingsley, these were the most democratic institutions that the world has ever seen. Then, during all that long period after the fall of the Roman empire, now known as the dark ages, when the light of learning went out, so far as the outside world was concerned, there, for more than a thousand years the learning of the past was kept alive to again be given back to the world when the world was ready to receive it.

These co-operative societies were a most remarkable success, not only in the larger and more important field which I have described, but as economic ventures, although the methods of production which then prevailed, compared with what we have today, were rude and barbarous. They accumulated vast estates, largely by the labor of their members and of those who found refuge within their walls. It was only when they had waxed powerful in wealth and numbers and through them obtained a powerful influence over the people that they were able to acquire pious gifts from penitents. If they could do what they undoubtedly did, with all the disadvantages under which they labored, there is not the slightest doubt that

rules necessary for the co-operative conduct of business, pertaining to the production and distribution of wealth which will prevail under such co-operation, rules which all will recognize as necessary and which will be obeyed because it will be to the interest of all to obey them, will furnish all the law and social regulation which the socialists now contend for. They will have obtained the essentials of everything ever sought. The true anarchists will also have attained their own goal – perfect freedom of the individual to develop his own individuality free from the restraints which now dwarf and distort it. He will have a social organization based upon voluntary association with common rights and common interests. Single-taxers, too, will have free access to the land and all other natural opportunities. If it should then appear that the land has any value at all, which I cannot conceive of, that values will accrue to all the people in common with all other values without the formality of levying any tax at all. Right here, in voluntary co-operation, is the common ground upon which all schools of social reformers can meet, not only in theory but in practice; not only as to ends but also as to means. This is the foundation stone, the fundamental principle of all reform. Heretofore we have been building our reforms upon the shifting sands of politics, and according to the principles of this horrible system of competition which we all despise and wish to abolish; and it has given us results which are both disappointing and discouraging. Let us build our house upon this rock and then the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

This is the method of which I spoke in the earlier part of my address when I said that it had been tried for more than a thousand years, and always with success. I will mention just one instance, or rather class of instances, because there were hundreds of cases which have gone into history as some of the most conspicuous successes ever achieved; and which have had an influence upon human destiny which will endure as long as time shall last.

Beginning in the fourth century after Christ, when the Roman empire was tottering to its fall, when the capitalism of that day

is not enough that we are all seeking the same end; but it must be possible for us to find some common plan of work which will enable us to join hands, not as a compromise, not as a giving up of any part of our genuine contention, but in a way which will realize the aspirations of all of us. I believe that this is possible; nay, I know that there is such a plan, one that has been tried over and over again for more than a thousand years; and it has always been a success. But the conditions now are much more favorable than they have ever been before in the whole history of the world. Let us trace that out! Let us study, for a little while, our system of industry.

One of the most conspicuous facts in our industrial system is the minute and constantly increasing subdivisions of labor. This is one of the most momentous facts in this world. And yet it is one that is very little understood by many who undertake to discuss social questions. It has two sides: one of promise and the other of threat. As a promise, it brings increased efficiency to labor, constantly increasing application of machinery to the processes of production, leisure and opportunity for improvement to the workers and a higher development of all the manly and womanly qualities which constitute the higher life. As a threat it means more and more subjection to capital, lower and still lower wages, deeper and still deeper poverty, and the degradation, brutalizing and dehumanizing of mankind. This subdivision of labor is a grand but an awful fact. It is as resistless in its progress as the sun in its course. No power can stay it. Shall we place ourselves in harmony with it and be carried to a better, a truer and a grander life and civilization; or shall we remain in the way of it and be crushed?

This is the question we are called upon to answer; and how do we answer it? By everlastingly bickering and quarrelling with one another over names and classifications: illustrating, in our dealings with one another, the workings of this horrible system of competition which prevents us from uniting to realize that higher life. This is how we are answering it. We, who ought to understand the evils of the competitive system; and who are trying to abolish it, are

practicing it in our intercourse with one another in its most absurd and destructive form. What foolishness!

But to return to our system of industry; as I said, the subdivision of labor is the most conspicuous fact in the production of wealth. Workmen now only learn to do one little thing. There is not a thing that we use that is not the product of a multitude of hands. Take any article you please as an illustration. A watch is a good one. There are probably thousands of hands engaged, in one way or another, in the making of a single watch, some in the gold and silver mines, some in the mines where jewels are found, others in the iron mines, in the steel works and throughout the whole round of industries which contribute to the building of that watch. All these people are working together: in other words, co-operating in the production of watches. This is co-operation in production. The manufacture of watches has become a social function: that is, it requires the associated labor of a multitude of people to complete the process. And what is true of the making of watches is just as true of any other form of wealth. Just as labor becomes more and more subdivided, requiring a greater and still greater number of individuals to produce any given form of wealth, then the production of wealth becomes more and more of a social function. Now, if the production of wealth is a social function then the enjoyment of it must also become so, or else progress is robbed of its social benefits. I will see if I can make that plain.

Why do we produce wealth at all? Is it not that we may enjoy it? Do men make watches merely for the exercise? Not at all. They make them so that by the exchange of them they can procure the things they want for the satisfaction of their needs. Then we produce wealth that we may enjoy it. But there can be no social enjoyment of private goods. The very object of private property is to limit the enjoyment of private goods. The very object of private property is to limit the enjoyment to private persons – to the owners. By our system of industry the work of production is carried on for account of employers, whose only interest is in building up

their own private fortunes. If there is a gain they get it, whether it is one dollar or a thousand. The gain all goes to swell private fortunes and is completely removed from all possibility of a social enjoyment. The co-operation is one sided. It is a co-operation of the workers for the benefit of the bosses. What is wanted is a production carried on for account of the workers – a co-operation of all for all, and which will embrace both the production and the enjoyment of wealth. Enjoyment of the products of labor must become a social function to correspond with production as a social function. We must substitute common rights, common interests, common property for private rights, private interests and private property. Collectivism must take the place now occupied by individualism. Instead of wasting our energies in destructive competition with one another, trying to tear each other down to build ourselves up with our little fortunes, we must unite for the upbuilding of all and of the common fortune – the commonwealth, from which we can all share equally. The competitive system is the outgrowth of private property, and can never be done away with as long as we maintain our little separate interests, our private properties. Those interests must be united in a common interest. Jesus was a communist; and he stated the case perfectly when he said: “Wheresoever the treasure is, there will the heart be also.” So long as men preserve their little separate interests, their private fortunes, their hearts will be centered in those interests, and this destructive competition will go on. The greed of gain will continue to be stimulated to an abnormal degree; and the most greedy and unscrupulous will continue to crush the weaker and the less greedy. As I said before, we must have a co-operation which covers, not only the production of wealth but its enjoyment also. And when we do, coercive governments (some people call them “invasive” governments) will become a thing of the past, because the violence, the wrong and the disorder which they pretend to correct, which are the direct result of the competitive system and which furnish the only rational excuse for their existence, will disappear. Then those few