

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

"Not only do we find ourselves confronting Nature, to whose orders we must conform, but confronting Society, whose laws we must obey. We have to learn what Nature is and does, and what our fellow-men think and will; and unless we learn aright and act in conformity, we are inexorably punished." — G. H. Lewes.

As originally planned, these essays were intended to treat in an elementary way of such questions as are generally included in works on Political Economy. As we proceeded with our studies, however, we first found ourselves compelled to reject many of the vague and ambiguous terms in general use in such works, as calculated only to mislead and confuse; and later on, owing to its currently accepted definition and view of its aim and object, to renounce the use of the term Political Economy itself, as inappropriate to denote the aim and scope of the investigations we desired to make.

The subject-matter of Political Economy, as now taught, is "Wealth"; and its aim is to treat of "the nature of Wealth, and the laws of its production and distribution." The subject-matter of our inquiry, on the other hand, is the social relations of mankind; we are concerned solely with the nature, function, and methods of these relations; or, in other words, with the causes impelling men to enter into relations with their fellows, with the methods — the customs, laws, and institutions — by means of which these relations are fixed and determined, and with the principle, or principles, in accordance with which such customs, laws, and institutions are framed. Laws and institutions are simply social customs and duties which have become crystallised or fixed, and made obligatory to all; and the customs, laws, and institutions prevailing in any given community necessarily form the main factor determining the relations and inter-relations of its members. Every social institution bears its fruit; and to ascertain the fruit to be expected from any given social institution, and to determine the principle, or principles, in accordance with which all social institutions should be framed, on which they should be based, are the main objects of these essays.

Such studies form an important branch of Sociology, and would generally and correctly be included under Politics or Economics; etymologically, the former term may be the more correct, but, owing to the restricted and narrow sense in which it is now commonly used, we are inclined to think that the latter will more readily suggest and more appropriately denote the subject-matter of our inquiry. As we conceive of it, Politics may perhaps be best defined as the art of ordering the social relations of mankind; at all events, this is the art to promote which is the object of these studies, as

it should be of every Politician or Economist worthy of the name. The discovery and precise formulating of the principles in accordance with which the precepts of this art should be framed, of the principles to which it should be the aim of this art to give practical application, would constitute the Science of Economics; or, at least, would constitute that Science, by whatever name it may be known, to the principles of which all social, political, or economic precepts and enactments should conform.

The distinction here drawn between Science and Art — between the knowledge of principles and of their application to certain practical ends — is now generally accepted, but is one which writers on social or political subjects seem specially apt to disregard. To put it briefly, the discovery and establishment of principles, of those universal, immutable, and unalterable regularities, relations, and tendencies, or "Natural Laws," in accordance with which all phenomena take place, of which all phenomena are but the results or rather manifestations, and which, whether we cognise them or not, determine the results of all our activities, individual and social, industrial and political, is the province of Science; the application of such knowledge, is the province of Art. The principles of Science, once correctly ascertained, are of universal application; the precepts of Art, or the statement of the application of these principles to attain some practical end, may vary indefinitely, not only with the aims of the artificer, but also with the means at his command. But to attain any desired end these precepts must be framed and our actions must be shaped in accordance with the demands of Science; in other words, in accordance with those invariable and undeviating relations, regularities, and tendencies which, when discovered and formulated by scientific investigation, constitute the principles of Science.

As bearing on their industrial activities, mankind have gradually and reluctantly learned this lesson; in this sphere of their activities, at least, harsh facts have forced them to recognise that the results of their actions will not be determined by the desires that inspire them, but by the means adopted to attain their ends; hence in the industrial field the precepts of Art are constantly being modified in accordance with the demands of scientific principles. But in what may be termed the Social Art, the art of living in social union, empiricism still reigns supreme; in this sphere of action men still cling to the customs of their forefathers, modifying and pruning them as necessity may demand, and expediency render possible; and that there are similar principles determining the results of their social activities, and of the customs, laws, and institutions by means of which these are ordered and regulated, is not as yet generally recognised, or even readily admitted. True it is that most writers on political and social subjects admit in the abstract, or make a sort of confession of faith in the existence of such principles; but hitherto, following the method of mediaeval scholasticism, they have been more prone to invent axioms on which to base their speculations and defend their own personal opinions, than to discover and establish

principles. Hence such phrases as "Laissez faire, laissez alier," "The greatest good of the greatest number," and others, have been formulated and eagerly seized on, even by many who have no real knowledge or appreciation of the philosophic speculations of which they were the outcome, as forming an all-sufficient basis for the art of governing, or rather for the art of ordering the social relations of mankind, which seems to us to constitute the art of Politics, or the art of Economics.

Moreover, a recent re-perusal of many important and classical works on similar subjects has impressed on us the necessity of here emphasising the fact, which once stated is self-evident, that the aim of science, of scientific investigations and scientific knowledge, is not to enable us to predict or to prophesy what will be; this is only possible of a very limited range of phenomena, or of experiments where we can control or artificially provide all the conditions, all the contributing causes. Every phenomenon, every result, every effect is the product, not of one cause, but of a multiplicity of causes, and is itself a contributing cause of a multiplicity of effects. The least change in conditions, unless counteracted by other agencies, necessarily produces a change in the effect. To trace the complex effect to its constituent elements, and to trace the fixed and constant tendencies of each separate agency, is the province of all scientific investigations. Not, however, for the purpose of enabling us to prophesy what will be — this was the avowed purpose of the now discredited Science of Astrology — but to teach us how certain results may be achieved, or certain results may be avoided. The results of our activities are not determined by the motives that inspire them, but by the means adopted to attain our ends. "Nature is not conquered save by obedience," and it is to instruct us how to conform our actions to the demands of Nature, to the permanent and invariable natural principles determining their effects, to teach us how certain desired ends may be attained and undesired ends may be avoided, which is the main object of all scientific investigation, of all scientific knowledge. As Professor Huxley expresses it: "The alleviation of the miseries and the promotion of the welfare of mankind must be sought by those who will not lose their pains in that diligent, patient, loving study of all the multitudinous aspects of Nature, the result of which constitutes exact knowledge or science." And, as it seems to us, this dictum is specially applicable to any inquiry into the rational, natural, scientific ordering of the social relations of mankind.

The foregoing introductory remarks seem to us sufficient to indicate the aim and scope of our inquiry. Our first step must necessarily be to inquire into the mainspring of man's individual activities; or, in other words, to seek the correct answer to the simple question: Why do men work? This answered, we should be able to gain some insight into the aims and causes impelling them to enter into peaceful association and co-operation with their fellows. These once ascertained, we may hope to be able to establish the alternative principles on which any such association can be established;

and from these to select the principle which must be accepted, and all customs, laws, and institutions framed in accordance therewith, if the aim and object of peaceful, voluntary social union is ever to be achieved.

Of the importance of such inquiries we need say nothing, since it has long been recognised; and if the harvest of our labours depended on the amount of work done, the necessity for such inquiries would long ago have vanished. But, unfortunately for mankind, not only does the necessity still exist, but is daily becoming more urgent. The marvellous advance in physical science, and the consequent improvement in the industrial arts, which characterised the opening of the preceding century, were welcomed by the thoughtful as the commencement of a new era, and as promising to relieve mankind from all anxiety as to the material needs of life. The best energies of the race were now to be set free, and devoted to higher ends. Everything was to change; everything ignoble and vicious to be doomed to extinction, everything noble and good to flourish and develop; the world was to become daily happier and better, and more in accordance with our highest and worthiest aspirations. But disappointment has followed disappointment. Our increase in wealth has not brought in its train a proportionate increase in welfare. And today, with powers over Nature such as the wisest of old could scarce have conceived of, with the command of riches such as prior generations could scarce have dreamed of, we sit spell-bound, enchanted, and, as with Tantalus of old, the desired fruits vanish from within our reach whenever we stretch out our hands to grasp them. Well may we ask each other, in the words of Thomas Carlyle:¹ "To whom, then, is this wealth of England wealth? Who is it that it blesses, makes happier, wiser, more beautiful, in any way better? . . . We have more riches than any nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any nation ever had before. Our successful industry is hitherto unsuccessful; a strange success, if we stop here! In the midst of plethoric plenty, the people perish; with gold walls and full barns, no man feels himself safe or satisfied."

¹"Past and Present," p. 3.

"No man feels himself safe or satisfied!" A damning verdict; the truth of which, however, no impartial witness can deny. There probably never was a time in the history of mankind when there was more profound and widespread dissatisfaction with the results of the existing social customs, laws, and institutions. Unrest and discontent pervade all classes of society. Everywhere, even in the most remote corners of the land, in the ale-house and in the vicarage, in the study and in the streets, amongst the students in our universities and the mill-hands in our mills, the social problem is being earnestly, seriously, and at times passionately discussed. Every proposal is considered; every book, pamphlet, or essay eagerly perused. But, lacking any exact knowledge, in the absence of any accepted principle, the number of

suggested remedies increases with the number of the writers. Hence we cannot wonder that, amid the din of conflicting counsels, the average citizen, even if temporarily aroused from his normal apathy, halts blinded and confused, and, doubting the ability of men to solve the questions at issue, to slay the monsters they, as Frankenstein, have themselves created, returns to his own narrow, self-centred, individual life, shutting his eyes and hardening his heart against the misery and suffering that everywhere surround him. And yet the best energies of the most active, enlightened, and ethical of our fellows are everywhere being enthusiastically devoted to the establishment of healthier social relations, of a higher social life. What is stultifying their efforts, hindering radical change, is, in truth, not so much any blind attachment to things as they are, but rather the dimly recognised, half-formulated feeling, which at times overtakes even the most enthusiastic reformer, that we have as yet no certain knowledge how to build any better. It is gradually dawning on mankind, more especially on the increasing few who would gladly dedicate their fortunes and their lives to the amelioration of the condition of the masses of their fellows, that all efforts, however vigorous and well-intentioned, must necessarily remain futile unless dominated and directed by a knowledge of those principles determining the effects of our social activities. To discover, establish, and spread the knowledge of such principles, is thus the most pressing necessity of the age. To use a simile of Thomas Carlyle's, the Sphinx still sits by the wayside propounding her riddle to the Nations, and threatening to destroy those who cannot read it. What is Justice? This is the question she puts to us, which not to answer is to doom ourselves to destruction.