

Chapter 41

The Law of Human Progress

WHAT, THEN, IS THE LAW OF HUMAN PROGRESS? This law not only describes how civilization advances—it must also account for arrested, decayed, and destroyed civilizations. Since mankind presumably started with the same capacities at the same time, it must explain the great disparity in social development that now exists. It must account for regression, as well as progression; for different rates of progress; and for the bursts and starts and halts. In short, it must tell us what the essential conditions of progress are—and which social arrangements advance it and which retard it.

It is not difficult to discover such a law. If we simply look, we can see it. I do not pretend to give it scientific precision, but merely to point it out.

Desires inherent in human nature are the incentives to progress: to satisfy our physical, intellectual, and emotional wants. Short of infinity, they can never be satisfied—for they grow as they are fed.

Mind is the instrument by which humanity advances. Through it, each advance is retained and made higher ground for further advances. The narrow span of human life allows each individual to go only a short distance. Each generation does little by itself. Yet succeeding generations add to the gains of their ancestors, and gradually elevate

humanity.

Mental power is, therefore, the motor of progress. Civilizations advance in proportion to the mental power expended in progression—that is, mental power devoted to the extension of knowledge, the improvement of methods, and the betterment of social conditions. There is a limit to the amount of work that can be done with the mind, just as there a limit to the work that can be done with the body. Therefore, the mental power that can be devoted to progress is only what is left over after what is required for other, non-progressive purposes.

These non-progressive purposes, which consume mental power, can be classified in two categories: maintenance and conflict. Maintenance includes not only supporting existence, but also keeping up social conditions and holding advances already gained. Conflict includes not only war or preparation for war; it encompasses all mental power expended seeking gratification at the expense of others, and resisting such aggression.

If we compare society to a boat, we see its progress is not based on the total exertion of the crew. Rather, it depends only on exertion devoted to propelling it. The total is reduced by any force expended on bailing, or fighting among themselves, or pulling in different directions.

A person living alone would need all of his or her powers just to maintain existence. Mental power is set free for higher uses only when human beings associate in communities. Improvement becomes possible when people come together in peaceful association. This permits the division of labor—and all the economies that come from cooperation. The wider and the closer the association, the greater the possibilities of improvement. Therefore, association is

the first essential of progress.

Mental power is wasted in conflict to the extent moral law is ignored—for moral law gives each person equality of rights. The terms equality or justice signify the same thing here: the recognition of moral law. So equality, or justice, is the second essential of progress.

Association frees mental power for improvement. Equality keeps this power from dissipating in fruitless struggles. We thus arrive at our law:

Association in equality is the law of human progress.

Here, at last, is the law that can explain all diversities, all advances, all halts, and all retrogressions. People progress by cooperating with each other to increase the mental power that may be devoted to improvement. However, as conflict is provoked, or as inequality (of power or condition) develops, this tendency is lessened, checked, and finally reversed. The rate of development will depend on the resistance it meets. Obstacles may be external and internal. In earlier stages of civilization, external forces tend to be greater. Internal obstacles grow more important in later stages.

Humans are social animals. We do not need to be caught and tamed to persuade us to live with others. A family relationship is necessary due to our utter helplessness at birth and our long period of immaturity. We observe that the family is wider, and in its extensions stronger, among simpler peoples. The first societies are families. They expand into tribes, still holding a mutual blood relationship. Even when they have become great nations, they claim a common descent.

The first limit, or resistance, to association comes from

conditions of physical nature. These vary greatly with location, and must produce corresponding differences in social progress. Climate, soil, and physical features will largely determine population growth and the cohesion of society in the early stages. Association brings only minor improvement at first, especially under difficult conditions, or where mountains, deserts, or sea isolate people. On the rich plains of warm climates, people can exist with much less effort. More mental power can be devoted to improvement. Hence, civilization naturally first arose in the great valleys and table lands where we find its earliest monuments.

Diversity in natural conditions produces diversity in social development. Differences arise in language, custom, tradition, religion. Prejudice and animosity arise. Warfare becomes a chronic and seemingly natural relation of societies to each other. Power is depleted in attack or defense, in mutual slaughter and destruction of wealth, or in warlike preparations. Protective tariffs and standing armies among the civilized world today bear witness to how long these hostilities persist.

When small, separated communities exist in a state of chronic warfare, a conquering tribe or nation may unite these smaller communities into a larger one, in which internal peace is preserved. So conquest can promote association, by liberating mental power from the demands of constant war.

But conquest is not the only civilizing force. While diversities of climate, soil, and geography at first separate mankind, they also act to encourage exchange. Commerce also promotes civilization. It is in itself a form of association or cooperation. It not only operates directly—it also

builds up interests opposed to war. It dispels ignorance, which is the fertile mother of prejudice and hate.

And likewise religion. Though it has sometimes divided people and led to war, at other times it has promoted association. Common worship has often furnished the basis of union. Modern European civilization arose from the triumph of Christianity over the barbarians. If the Church had not existed when the Roman Empire fell, Europe would have lacked any bond of association, and might have fallen to a primitive condition.

Looking over history, we see civilization springing up wherever people are brought into association—and disappearing as this association is broken up. As people have been brought into closer and closer association and cooperation, progress has gone on with greater and greater force.

But we shall never understand the course of civilization, and its varied phenomena, without considering the internal resistances or counter forces that arise in the very heart of advancing society. Only they can explain how a civilization, once adequately started, could be destroyed by barbarians—or stop by itself.

Mental power, the motor of social progress, is set free by association—or perhaps “integration” may be a more accurate term. In this process, society becomes more complex. Individuals become more dependent upon each other. Occupations and functions are specialized.

Instead of each person attempting to supply all wants in isolation, the various trades and industries are separated. One person acquires skill in one thing, and another in something else. The body of knowledge becomes larger than any one person can grasp. So it is separated into different parts, which different individuals pursue. Government

acquires special functions for preserving order, administering justice, and waging war. Even religious ceremonies pass to people specially devoted to that purpose. Each member is then vitally dependent on the others.

This process of integration, and the specialization of functions and powers, is vulnerable to inequality. I do not mean that inequality is a necessary result of social growth. Rather, it is the constant tendency of social growth—if it is not accompanied by certain changes in social organization. These changes must secure equality under the new conditions that growth produces.

To put it plainly, the force that halts progress evolves along with progress. How does this operate? Let us recall two qualities of human nature: One is the power of habit; the other is the possibility of mental and moral decay. Because of our tendency to continue doing things the same way, customs, laws, and methods persist long after they have lost their original usefulness. Decay allows the growth of institutions and ways of thinking from which people's normal judgments would instinctively revolt.

The growth and development of society makes each person more dependent on the whole. It lessens the influence of individuals, even over their own conditions, compared with the influence of society. But even further, association gives rise to a collective power. This power is different than the sum of individual powers. Groups exhibit actions and impulses that individuals would not under the same circumstances. By analogy, as simple animals become complex, a power of the integrated whole arises above that of the parts.

We observed the same phenomenon in our inquiry into the nature and growth of rent. Where population is

sparse, land has no value. To the degree that people congregate, land value land appears and rises. This is something clearly distinguishable from value produced by individual effort. It is a value that springs from association. It increases as association grows greater, and disappears as association is broken up.

The same thing is true of power. As society grows, habit tends to continue previous social arrangements. Collective power, as it arises, lodges in the hands of a portion of the community. This unequal distribution of wealth and power, which grows as society advances, tends to produce greater inequality. Then the idea of justice is blurred by habitual toleration of injustice.

The war chief of a band of savages is merely one of their number; they only follow him as their bravest. When large bodies act together, personal selection becomes more difficult. A blinder obedience is necessary and can be enforced. As collective power grows, the ruler's power to reward or punish increases. From the necessities of war on a large scale, absolute power arises. The masses are then mere slaves of the king's caprice.

And so of the specialization of function. When society has grown to a certain point, a regular military force can be specialized. It is no longer necessary to summon every producer away from work in case of attack. This produces a manifest gain in productive power. But this inevitably leads to the concentration of power in the hands of a military class or their chiefs.

Similarly, the preservation of internal order, the administration of justice, the construction and care of public works, and, notably, the practice of religion, all tend to pass to special classes. And it is their nature to magnify

their function and extend their power.

But the greatest cause of inequality is the natural monopoly given by possession of land. The initial understanding of people always seems to be that land is common property. This is recognized at first by simple methods, such as cultivating land in common or dividing it annually. These approaches are only compatible with low stages of development.

The idea of property arises naturally regarding things of human production. This idea is easily transferred to land. When population is sparse, ownership of land merely ensures that the due reward of labor goes to the one who uses and improves it. As population becomes dense, rent appears. This institution ultimately operates to strip the producer of wages earned.

War and conquest tend to concentrate political power and lead to the institution of slavery. They also naturally result in the appropriation of land. A dominant class, who concentrate power in their own hands, will soon concentrate ownership of land. They take large portions of conquered land, while the former inhabitants are forced to farm it as tenants or serfs. Some public domain or common lands remain for awhile in the natural course of development. But these are readily acquired by the powerful, as we see by modern examples. Once inequality is established, ownership of land tends to concentrate as development goes on.

We can now explain all the phenomena of petrification and retrogression from the fact that inequality of wealth and power develops as social development occurs. This finally counteracts the force by which improvements are made and society advances. I will simply set forth this general fact here, because the particular sequence of events

will vary under different conditions.

These two principles—association and equality—can be seen at work in the rise and spread, and then the decline and fall, of the Roman Empire. Rome arose from the association of independent farmers and free citizens of Italy. It gained fresh strength from conquests, which brought hostile nations into common relations. Yet the tendency to inequality hindered progress from the start, and it only increased with conquest. Inequality dried up the strength and destroyed the vigor of the Roman world. Rome rotted, declined, and fell. Long before Vandal or Goth broke through the legions, Rome was dead at the heart.

Great estates—“latifundia”—ruined Italy. The barbarism that overwhelmed Rome came not from without, but from within. It was the inevitable product of a system that carved the provinces into estates for senatorial families. Serfs and slaves replaced independent farmers. Government became dictatorship, patriotism became subservience. Vices were openly displayed, literature sank, learning was forgotten. Fertile districts became wastelands, even without the ravages of war. Everywhere inequality produced decay: political, mental, moral, and material.

Modern civilization owes its superiority to the growth of equality along with association. Two great causes contributed to this. First, power was split into numerous smaller centers. The second factor was the influence of Christianity.

Europe saw the association of peoples who had acquired, through separation, distinctive social characteristics. This smaller organization prevented concentration of power and wealth in one center. Petty chiefs and feudal lords grasped local sovereignty and held each other in

check. Teutonic ideas of equality were a transforming influence, as they worked their way through the fabric of disconnected societies. Although Europe was split into countless separated fragments, the idea of closer association existed in the recollections of a universal empire and in the claims of a universal church. It is true Christianity was distorted by percolating through a rotting civilization. Yet the essential idea of equality was never wholly destroyed.

In addition, two things of utmost importance to the budding civilization occurred—the first was the establishment of the papacy; the second was the celibacy of the clergy. The papacy prevented spiritual power from concentrating in the same lines as temporal power. Celibacy prevented the establishment of a priestly caste, during a time when power tended to hereditary form.

In spite of everything, the Church still promoted association and was a witness for the natural human equality. In common hands, the Church placed a sign before which the proudest knelt. Bishops became peers of the highest nobles. Church edicts ran across political boundaries. The Pope arbitrated between nations and was honored by kings.

The rise of European civilization is too vast a subject to give proper perspective in a few paragraphs. But all its main features, and all its details, illustrate one truth: Progress occurs to the extent that society tends toward closer association and greater equality. Civilization is cooperation. Union and liberty are its factors.

Modern civilization has gone so much higher than any before due to the great extension of association—not just in larger and denser communities, but in the increase of

commerce, and the numerous exchanges knitting each community together, and linking them with others far apart; and also in the growth of international and municipal law, advances in security of property and person, strides in individual liberty, and movement towards democratic government. In short, our civilization has gone farther in recognizing equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The spirit of fatalism pervading current literature finds it fashionable to speak of war and slavery as means of human progress. But war is the opposite of association. It can aid progress only when it prevents further war, or breaks down antisocial barriers.

As for slavery, I cannot see how it could ever have aided progress. Freedom is the synonym of equality, the stimulus and condition of progress. Slavery never did, and never could, aid improvement. Slavery necessarily involves a waste of human power. This is true whether the community consists of a single master and a single slave, or thousands of masters and millions of slaves. Slave labor is less productive than free labor. Masters waste power holding and watching their slaves. From first to last, slavery has hampered and prevented progress—as has every denial of equality.

Slavery was universal in the classical world. This is undoubtedly why mental activity there polished literature and refined art, but never hit on any of the great discoveries and inventions of modern civilization. Robbing workers of the fruits of their labor stifles the spirit of invention. It discourages the use of improvements, even when made. No slaveholding people were ever an inventive people. Their upper classes may become luxurious and polished,

but never inventive.

The law of human progress, what is it but moral law? Political economy and social science can teach only the same simple truths that underlie every religion that has striven to formulate the spiritual yearnings of man. Civilizations advance as their social arrangements promote justice. They advance as they acknowledge equality of human rights. They advance as they insure liberty to each person, bounded only by the equal liberty of every other person. As they fail in these, advancing civilizations come to a halt and recede.