

Chapter 42

How Modern Civilization May Decline

OUR CONCLUSIONS about the law of human progress agree completely with our previous conclusions about the laws of political economy. They also show that making land common property—by taxing its value—would give an enormous boost to civilization. Furthermore, unless we do so, we will regress.

Every previous civilization has been destroyed by the unequal distribution of wealth and power. I have traced this tendency to its cause—and provided a simple way to remove it. I will now show how, if this is not done, modern civilization will decline to barbarism, as all previous civilizations have.

History clearly shows these periods of decline, though they were not recognized at their start. When the first Emperor was changing Rome from brick to marble and extending the frontier, who would have said Rome was entering its decline? Yet such was the case.

Our civilization appears to be advancing faster than ever. Yet anyone who looks will see the same cause that doomed Rome is operating today—with increasing force. The more advanced the community, the greater the intensity. Wages and interest fall, while rents rise. The rich get richer, the poor grow helpless, the middle class is swept away.

It is worthwhile to explain the process, since many people cannot see how progress could turn into retreat. They think such a thing is impossible. Many scoff at any implication that we are not progressing in all respects. The conditions of social progress, we have found, are association and equality. The general tendency of modern development has indeed been toward political and legal equality. We have abolished slavery, revoked hereditary privileges, instituted representative government, and recognized religious freedom. High and low, weak and strong have more equal security in their person and property. There is freedom of movement and occupation, of speech and of the press.

The initial effect of political equality is a more equal distribution of wealth and power. While population is sparse, unequal distribution of wealth is due mainly to inequality of personal rights. The inequality resulting from private ownership of land shows itself only as material progress advances. Political equality does not, in itself, prevent inequality arising from private ownership of land. Furthermore, political equality—when coexisting with an increasing tendency toward unequal distribution of wealth—will ultimately beget either tyranny or anarchy.

A representative government may become a dictatorship without formally changing its constitution or abandoning popular elections. Forms are nothing when substance has gone. And the forms of popular government are those from which the substance of freedom may go most easily. For there despotism advances in the name of the people. Once that single source of power is secured, everything is secured. An aristocracy of wealth will never struggle while it can bribe a tyrant.

When the disparity of condition increases, democratic elections make it easy to seize the source of power. Many feel no connection with the conduct of government. Embittered by poverty, they are ready to sell their votes to the highest bidder or follow the most blatant demagogue. One class has become too rich to be stripped of its luxuries, no matter how public affairs are administered. Another class is so poor that promises of a few dollars will outweigh abstract considerations on election day. A few roll in wealth, while the many seethe with discontent at things they don't know how to remedy.

Where there is anything close to equal distribution of wealth, the more democratic government is, the better it will be. Where there is gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, the opposite is true. The more democratic government is, the worse it will be. To give the vote to people who must beg or steal or starve, to whom the chance to work is a favor—this is to invoke destruction. To put political power in hands embittered and degraded by poverty is to wreak havoc.

Hereditary succession (or even selection by lot) may, by accident, occasionally place the wise and just in power. But in a corrupt democracy, the tendency is always to give power to the worst. Honesty and patriotism are a handicap, while dishonesty brings success. The best sink to the bottom, the worst float to the top. The vile are ousted only by the viler.

National character gradually absorbs the qualities that win power. In the long panorama of history, we see over and over that this transforms free people into slaves. A corrupt democratic government must finally corrupt the people. And when the people become corrupt, there is no

resurrection. Life is gone, only the carcass remains. It is left but for the plowshares of fate to bury it out of sight.

Unequal distribution of wealth inevitably transforms popular government into despotism. This is not a thing of the far future. It has already begun in the United States, and is proceeding rapidly before our very eyes. Men of the highest ability and character avoid politics. The technique of handlers and hacks counts more than the reputations of statesmen. The power of money is increasing, while voting is done recklessly. Political differences are no longer differences of principle. Political parties are passing into the control of what might be considered oligarchies and dictatorships.

Modern growth is typified by the great city. Here we find the greatest wealth and the deepest poverty. And here popular government has most clearly broken down. In all the great American cities of today, a ruling class is defined as clearly as in the most aristocratic countries. Its members have whole wards in their pockets, select slates for nominating conventions, and distribute offices as they bargain together. "They toil not, neither do they spin,"* yet they wear the finest of raiment and spend money lavishly. They are men of power, whose favor the ambitious must court, and whose vengeance they must avoid.

Who are these men? The wise, the learned, the good? No. They are gamblers, fighters, or worse. Men who have made a trade of controlling votes, and buying and selling offices and legislation. Through these men, rich corporations and powerful financial interests pack the Senate and the courts with their lackeys. In many places today, a

* Matthew 6:28

Washington, a Franklin, or a Jefferson could not even get into the state legislature. Their very character would be an insurmountable disqualification.

In theory we are intense democrats. Yet growing among us is a class who have all the power of the aristocracy—without any of their virtues. A few men control thousands of miles of railroad, millions of acres of land, and the livelihood of thousands. They name the governors as they name clerks, and choose senators as they choose attorneys. Their will with legislatures is as supreme as a French king's.

The development of industry and commerce—acting in a social organization where land is privately owned—threatens to force every worker to seek a master. (Just as the collapse of the Roman Empire compelled every free-man to seek a feudal lord.) Industry takes on a form where one is master, while many serve. If a person steals enough, the punishment will only amount to losing part of the theft. And if a thief steals a fortune, colleagues will greet the embezzler like a Viking returning from pillage.

The most ominous political sign in the United States today is the growing complacency with corruption. Many believe there is no honest person in public office; or worse, that if there were one, he or she would be a fool not to seize the opportunities. The people themselves are becoming corrupted. Our democratic government is running the course it must inevitably follow under conditions producing unequal distribution of wealth.

Where this will lead is clear. Contempt for law develops, and reform becomes hopeless. Volcanic forces festering among the masses will explode when some accident gives them vent. Where will the new barbarians come from? Go through the squalid ghettos of great cities and

you can already see them gathering.*

Hinting that our civilization may be in decline seems like wild pessimism. A fundamental belief in progress remains. But this will always be the case when advance gradually passes into retrogression. In social development, as in everything else, motion tends to continue in a straight line. Where there has been previous advance, it is extremely difficult to recognize decline—even after it has begun.

Civilizations do not decline along the same paths they came up. Government will not take us back from democracy to monarchy and to feudalism. It will take us to dictatorship or anarchy. Religion will not go back to the faiths of our forefathers, but into new forms of superstition.

The regression of civilization, after a period of advance, may be so gradual that it attracts no attention at the time. Indeed, many mistake such a decline for advancement. As the arts decline, the change may be accompanied by—or rather caused by—a change of taste. Artists who quickly adopted the new styles are regarded—in their day—as superior. As art and literature become more lifeless, foolish, and stilted—conforming to changing taste—the new fashion would regard its increasing weakness as increasing strength and beauty. Really good writers would not find

*The British historian Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859) predicted that after all the decent land had been claimed in the United States, poverty would reach the levels it did in England. The nation would then destroy itself through its own democratic institutions. "The Huns and Vandals who ravaged the Roman empire came from without; your Huns and Vandals will have been engendered within your own country by your own institutions [because]... There is nothing to stop you. Your constitution is all sail and no anchor." (Letter to Henry S. Randall, biographer of Thomas Jefferson.)

readers; they would be regarded as dull. The prevailing taste becomes that of a less cultured class who regard what they like as the best of its kind.

Whether current trends in taste and opinion indicate regression is not the point. Many other things beyond dispute indicate our civilization has reached a critical point—unless a new start is made toward equality. Inequality is the necessary result of material progress wherever land is monopolized. Inequality cannot go much further without carrying us into a downward spiral so easy to start and so hard to stop.

Industrial depressions, which cause as much waste and suffering as war or famine, are like twinges and shocks preceding paralysis. The struggle to survive is increasing in intensity. We must strain every nerve to keep from being trodden underfoot in the scramble for wealth. This saps the energy to gain and maintain improvements. Diseases from related causes proliferate. In every civilized country, poverty, crime, insanity, and suicide are increasing.

When the tide turns, it does not happen all at once. When the sun passes noon, the heat of the day continues to increase. One can tell only by the way the shadows fall. But as sure as the tide must turn, as sure as the setting sun brings darkness, so sure is it that our civilization has begun to wane. Invention marches on, our cities expand. Yet civilization has begun to wane when, in proportion to population, we have more prisons, more welfare, more mental illness. Society does not die from top to bottom; it dies from bottom to top.

But the decline of civilization looms far more palpable than any statistics. There is a vague but general disappointment, an increased bitterness, a widespread

feeling of unrest and brooding revolution. If this were accompanied by some definite idea of how to obtain relief, it might be a hopeful sign. But it is not. Though we have been searching a long, long time, our power of connecting cause to effect seems not a whit improved.

A vast change in religious ideas is sweeping the world that may have a momentous effect, which only the future can tell. This is not a change in the form of religion—it is the negation and destruction of the ideas from which religion springs. Christianity is not simply shedding superstitions; it is dying at the root. And nothing arises to take its place.

The fundamental ideas of an intelligent creator and an afterlife are quickly weakening in the general mind. Whether or not this may be an advance in itself is not the point. The important part religion has played in history shows the significance of the change now going on. Unless human nature has suddenly changed its deepest characteristics, as shown by the universal history of the human race, the mightiest actions and reactions are thus being prepared.

Previously, such stages of thought have always marked periods of transition. To a lesser degree, a similar state preceded the French Revolution. But the closest parallel to the wreck of religious ideas now going on is when ancient civilization began to pass from splendor to decline.

What change may come, no mortal can tell. But that some great change must come, thoughtful people are beginning to feel. The civilized world is trembling on the verge of a great movement. Either it must be a leap upward, to advances yet undreamed of—or it will be a plunge downward, carrying us back toward barbarism.