

CHAPTER 9 — THE ELEMENTS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The complex phenomena of the production and distribution of wealth in the elaborate organization of modern civilization will only puzzle us, as the many confused and confusing books written to explain it show, if we began, as it were, from the middle. But if we seek first principles and trace out main lines, so as to comprehend the skeleton of their relation, they will readily become intelligible.

To understand a complex machine the best way is first to see what is the beginning and what the end of its movements, leaving details until we have mastered its general idea and comprehended its purpose. In this way we most easily see the relation of parts to each other and to the subject of the whole.

When the safety bicycle was yet a curiosity even in the towns of England and the United States, an American missionary in a far-off station received from an old friend, unaccompanied by the letter intended to go with it, a present of one of these machines, which for economy in transportation had not been set up, but was forwarded in its unassembled parts. How these parts were to be put together was a perplexing problem, for neither the missionary himself nor anyone he could consult could at first imagine what the thing was intended to do, and their guesses were of almost anything but the truth, until at length the saddle suggested a theory, which was so successfully followed that by the time, months afterwards, another shipment brought the missing letter, the missionary was riding over the hard sand of the beach on his wheel.

The immense aggregate of movements by which, in civilization, wealth is produced and distributed, viewed collectively as the subject of political economy constitute a system or arrange-

ment much greater than, yet analogous to, the system or arrangement of a great factory. In the attempt to understand the laws of nature, which they illustrate and obey, let us avoid the confusion that inevitably attends beginning from the middle, by proceeding in the way suggested in our illustration — the only scientific way.

These movements, so various in their modes, and so complex in their relations, with which political economy is concerned, evidently originate in the exertion of human will, prompted by desire; their means are the material and forces that nature offers to man and the natural laws which these obey; their end and aim the satisfaction of man's material desires. If we try to call to mind as many as we can of the different movements that are included in the production and distribution of wealth in modern civilization — the catching and gathering, the separating and combining, the digging and planting, the baking and brewing, the weaving and dyeing, the sewing and washing, the sawing and planing, the melting and forging, the moving and transporting, the buying and selling — we shall see that what they all aim to accomplish is some sort of change in the place, form or relation of the materials or forces supplied by nature so as to better satisfy human desire.

Thus the movements with which political economy is concerned are human actions, having for their aim the attainment of material satisfactions. And the laws that it is its province to discover are not the laws manifested in the existence of the materials and forces of nature that man thus utilizes, nor yet the laws which make possible their change in place, form or relation, but the laws of man's own nature.

The world, regarded from the standpoint of political economy, has for its original elements, man and nature. Of these, the human element is the initiative or active factor — that which begins or acts first. The natural element is the passive factor — that which

receives action and responds to it. From the interaction of these two proceed all with which political economy is concerned.

Between the material things which come into existence through man's agency and those which come into existence through the agency of nature alone, the difference is as clear to human reason as the difference between a mountain and a pyramid. Whatever man makes must have for its substance pre-existing matter; whatever motion he exerts must be drawn from a pre-existing stock of energy. Take away from man all that is contributed by external nature, and you have, what? Something which has no form or substance or direct power in or over the material world, but which is yet the originating impulse which utilizes motion to mold matter into forms it desires — and to which we must look for the origin of the pyramid.

We cannot really consider the beginning of things without seeing that when man came into the world, the sum of energy was not increased, nor that of matter added to — and so it must be today. In all the changes that man brings about in the material world, he adds nothing to and subtracts nothing from the sum of matter and energy. He merely brings about changes in the place and relation of what already exists, and the first and always indispensable condition to his doing anything in the material world, and indeed to his very existence therein, is that of access to its material and forces.

The steam engine rushing along with its long train of coal or goods or passengers is, in all that is evident to our senses, but a new form of what previously existed. Everything about it that we can see, hear, touch, taste, weigh, measure or subject to chemical tests, existed before man was. What has brought pre-existing matter and motion into the shape, place and function of an engine and train is that which, prisoned in the engineer's brain, grasps

the throttle; the same thing that in the infant stretches for the moon, and in the child makes mud-pies. It is this conscious will seeking the gratification of its desires in the alteration of material forms that is the primary motive power, the active factor, in bringing about the relations with which political economy deals. And this will can act only in certain ways, and is subject in that action to certain uniform sequences, which we term laws of nature.