

CHAPTER 10 — THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

Desire is the prompter, and the satisfaction of desire is the end and aim, of all human action. All that men seek to do, to obtain or to avoid may be embraced in one term, as satisfactions of desire. But of these desires and their corresponding satisfactions, some are more primary or fundamental than others; and it is only as these desires obtain satisfaction that other desires arise and are felt. Thus the desire for air is perhaps the most fundamental of all human desires. Yet its satisfaction is under normal conditions so easily had that we usually are not conscious of it — it is in fact rather a latent than an actual desire. But let one be shut off from air, and the desire to get it becomes at once the strongest of desires, casting out for the moment all others. So it is with other desires, such as those for food and drink, the satisfaction of which is necessary to the maintenance of life and health and the avoidance of injury and pain, and which we share in common with the brute. These primary desires lie as it were beneath, or are fundamental to, the manifold desires which arise in man when they are satisfied. For, while the desires of other animals seem comparatively few and fixed, the desires of man are seemingly illimitable. He is indeed the never-satisfied animal, his desires under normal conditions growing with his power of satisfying them without assignable limit.

Now, of human desires and their corresponding satisfactions, some may be subjective, that is, relating to the individual mind or thinking subject; and some objective, that is, relating to the external world, the object of its thought. And by another distinction, some may be said to be immaterial, that is, relating to things not cognizable by the senses, i.e., thought and feelings; and some to be material, that is, relating to things cognizable by the senses, i.e., matter and energy.

In the order of human desires, what we call needs come first, and are of the widest importance. Desires that transcend the desires of the animal can arise and seek gratification only when the desires we share with other animals are satisfied. And those who are inclined to deem that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the gratification of material needs, and especially with the way in which men are fed, clothed and sheltered, as a secondary and ignoble science, are like an architect who should deem the ornamentation of a façade more important than the laying of a foundation.

The only way man has of satisfying his desires is by action.

Now action, if continued long enough in one line to become really exertion, a conscious putting forth of effort, produces in the consciousness a feeling of reluctance or weariness. This comes from something deeper than the exhaustion of energy in what we call physical labor; for whoever has tried it knows that one may lie on his back in the most comfortable position and by mere dint of sustained thinking, without consciously moving a muscle, tire himself as truly as by sawing wood; and that the mere clash and conflict of the involuntary or undirected thought or feeling, or its continuance in one direction, will soon bring extreme weariness.

But whatever be its ultimate cause, the fact is that labor, the attempt of the conscious will to realize its material desire, is always, when continued for a little while, in itself hard and irksome. And whether from this fact alone, or from this fact, conjoined with or based upon something intuitive to our perceptions, the further fact, testified to both by observation of our own feelings and actions and by observation of the acts of others, is that men always seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion.

This, of course, does not mean that they always succeed in doing so, any more than the physical law that motion tends to persist in a straight line means that moving bodies always take that line. But it

does mean the mental analogue of the physical law that motion seeks the line of least resistance — that is seeking to gratify their desires men will always seek the way which under existing physical, social and personal conditions seems to them to involve the least expenditure of exertion.

This disposition of man is so universal and unailing that it constitutes one of those invariable sequences that we denominate laws of nature, and from which we may safely reason. It is this law of nature that is the fundamental law of political economy — the central law from which its deductions and explanations may with certainty be drawn, and, indeed, by which alone they become possible. It holds the same place in the sphere of political economy that the law of gravitation does in physics. Without it there could be no recognition of order, and all would be chaos.

Yet the failure clearly to apprehend this has led to very serious and widespread mistakes as to the nature of the science. For the principle that men always seek to satisfy their desires with the least exertion, there has been substituted the principle of human selfishness. And with the assumption that political economy takes into its account only the selfish feelings of human nature, there have been linked, as laws of political economy, other assumptions as destitute of validity. This presumption, that political economy must eliminate everything but the selfish feelings of mankind, has continued to pervade the accredited political economy up to this time, whatever may have been the effects of the attacks made upon it by those, who, not putting their objections into logical and coherent form, could be spoken of as sentimentalists, but not political economists. Yet, however generally the accepted writers on political economy may have themselves supposed the assumption of universal selfishness to be the fundamental principle of political economy, or how much ground they may have given for such a supposition on the part of

their readers, a true political economy requires no such assumption. The primary postulate on and from which its whole structure is built is not that all men are governed only by selfish motives — it is that all men seek to gratify their desires, whatever those desires maybe, with the least exertion. This fundamental law of political economy is, like all other laws of nature, so far as we are concerned, supreme. It is no more affected by the selfishness or unselfishness of our desires than is the law of gravitation. It is simply a fact.