

CHAPTER 2 — CAUSES OF CONFUSION  
AS TO THE MEANING OF WEALTH

Since the term comes into our language from the Greek, the proper word for expressing the idea of relationship to political economy is "politico-economic." But this is a term too long, and too alien to the the Saxon genius of our mother tongue, for frequent repetition. And so the word "economic" has come into accepted use in English, as expressing that idea. We are justified therefore, in supposing, and as a matter of fact to do generally suppose when we first hear of them, that the works now written by the professors of political economy in our universities and colleges, and entitled "Elements of Economics," or "Principles of Economics," are treatises on political economy. Examination, however, will show that many of these are at least not in reality treatises on the science of political economy, but treatises on what their authors might better call the science of exchanges, or the science of exchangeable quantities. This is not the same thing as political economy, but quite a different thing — a science in short akin to the science of mathematics. In this there is no necessity for distinguishing between what is wealth to the unit and what is wealth to the whole — and moral questions, that must be met in a true political economy, may be easily avoided by those to whom they seem awkward.

A proper name for this totally different science, which the professors of political economy in so many of the leading colleges and universities on both sides of the Atlantic have now substituted in their teaching for the science they are officially supposed to expound, would be that of "catallactics," as proposed by Archbishop Whately, or that of "plutology," as proposed by Professor Hern, of Melbourne; but it is certainly not

properly "economics," for that by long usage is identified with political economy.

The neglect of political economy in the classical world has been explained by modern economists as due to the effect of slavery in causing labor to be regarded as degrading.

But in this a quicker and more direct effect of slavery in preventing the cultivation of political economy has been overlooked. Except perhaps as the crucified fomentor of a servile rebellion, the only class in which any philosopher of the ancient world might have got a hearing that could have brought his name and teachings down to us, was the wealthy class, whose riches were largely in their slaves. For any social condition in which privilege and wealth are inequitably distributed, what Jefferson said of Jesus must be true of all moral or economic teachers — "all the learned of His country, intrenched in its power and riches, were opposed to Him, lest His labors should undermine their advantages."

The first question which a coherent political economy must answer is, "What is wealth?" This, in a state of society in which the ruling class were universally slaveholders, was too delicate a question for any accredited philosopher to have fairly met. Even the most astute among them could do no further than to say, with the intellectual giant Aristotle, that wealth "is all things whose value is measured by money," or with the Roman jurist Ulpian, "that is wealth which can be bought and sold." From this point, the very point to which modern political economy has in current scholastic teachings now come again, though there may be economies of finance and economies of exchanges, there was and could be no political economy.

But this indisposition to recognize the distinction between what may be wealth to the individual and what is wealth to the society, which has prevented the growth of any science of political economy,

has not ceased to show itself with the abolition of chattel slavery — only one of the means by which individuals become wealthy without increase in the general wealth. As it has, in modern civilization, lost importance, other means to the same end have taken its place. But wherever and from what ever causes society is divided into the very rich and very poor, the primary question of political economy, what is wealth? must be a delicate one to men sensibly or insensibly influenced by the feelings and opinions of the dominating class. For in such social conditions much that commonly passes for wealth must really be only legalized robbery, and nothing can be more offensive to those enjoying the profit of robbery than to call it by its true name.

In the preliminary remarks to his *Principles of Political Economy*, John Stuart Mill says:

*It often happens that the universal belief of one age of mankind — a belief from which no one was, nor without an extraordinary effort of genius and courage, could at that time be free — becomes to a subsequent age so palpable an absurdity, that the only difficulty then is to imagine how such a thing can ever have appeared credible. It has so happened with the doctrine that money is synonymous with wealth. The conceit seems too preposterous to be thought of as a serious opinion. It looks like one of the crude fancies of childhood, instantly corrected by a word from any grown person. But let no one feel confident that he should have escaped the delusion if he had lived at the time when it prevailed.*

Let no one be confident indeed!

Yet it is a mistake to liken the absurdities of the mercantile or protective system to the crude fancies of childhood. This has never been their origin or their strength. In the petty commerce in marbles and tops that goes on among school-boys no boy ever imagined that the more he gave and less he got in such exchange the

better off he should be. No primitive people were ever yet so stupid as to suppose that they could increase their wealth by taxing themselves. Any child that could understand the proposition would see that a dollar's worth of gold could not be more valuable than a dollar's worth of anything else. Such ideas are not the fantasies of childhood. Their strength, their persistence, is due to the growth of special interests and artificial restrictions on trading as a means of increasing individual wealth at the expense of the general wealth.

The power of a special interest, though inimical to the general interest, so to influence thought as to make fallacies pass as truths, is a great fact without which neither the political history of our own time and people nor that of other times and peoples can be understood. A comparatively small number of individuals brought into virtual though not necessarily formal agreement of thought and action by something that makes them individually wealthy without adding to the general wealth, may, exert an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. A special interest of this kind is, to the general interests of society, as a standing army is to an unorganized mob. It gains intensity and energy in its specialization, and in the wealth it takes from the general stock finds power to mold opinion. Leisure and culture and the circumstances and conditions that command respect accompany wealth, and intellectual ability is attracted by it. On the other hand, those who suffer from the injustice that takes from the many to enrich the few, are in that very thing deprived of the leisure to think, and the opportunities, education and graces necessary to give their thought acceptable expression. They are necessarily the "unlettered," the "ignorant," the "vulgar," prone in their consciousness of weakness to look out for leadership and guidance to those who have the advantages that the possession of wealth can give.

Now, if we consider it, injustice and absurdity are simply different aspects of incongruity. That which to right reason is unjust must be to right reason absurd. But an injustice that impoverishes the many to enrich the few shifts the centers of social power, and thus controls the social organs and agencies of opinion and education. Growing in strength and acceptance by what it feeds on, it has only to continue to exist to become at length so vested or rooted, in that constitution of opinions, beliefs and habits of thought which we take from our social environment, that it is not perceived as injustice or uncertainty, but seems even to the philosopher as an integral part of the natural order.

When an incongruous substance, such as for instance a bullet, is implanted in the human body, the physical system, as soon as it despairs of its removal, sets about the endeavor to accommodate itself to the incongruity, frequently with such success that at length the incongruity is not noticed. The stout, masterful man with whom I have just now been talking, and whom you might liken to a bull were it not for the intelligence of his face, has long carried a bullet under his skin. And men have even been known to live for years with bullets in their brains.

So, too, with philosophical systems. When an incongruity is accepted in a philosophical system, the abilities of its professors are at once set to work to accommodate other parts of the system to the incongruity, frequently with such success that philosophical systems containing fatal incongruities have been known to command acceptance for long generations. Indeed the artificialities and confusions by which an incongruity is made tolerable to a philosophic system, for the very reason that they cannot be understood except by those who have submitted their minds to a special course of cramping, become to them a seeming evidence of superiority, gratifying a vanity like that of the contortionist who has painfully learned to

walk a little way on his hands instead of his feet and to twist his body into unnatural and unnecessary positions; or like that of the conveyancer or lawyer, who has in the same way painfully learned to perform such tricks with language.

This, I think, is what was meant in the concise but deep philosophy of Christ by such sayings as that the Kingdom of Heaven, or system of right-doing, though revealed unto babes, is hidden from those deemed wise and prudent, and that what the common people heard gladly was foolishness to the learned Scribes and Pharisees.

But not to depart from the matter in hand: it is evident that the efforts of able men to bring into some semblance of coherency the system of political economy destitute of any clear and coherent definition of wealth must have surrounded the subject with greater perplexities and helped powerfully to prevent the need of a definition of wealth from being felt.

This is precisely what we see when we examine the different attempts to define wealth in the economic sense, and note the increasing confusions that have attended them, culminating in the acceptance of the common meaning of the word wealth — anything that has exchangeable power — as the only meaning that can be given to the economic term; and the consequent abandonment of the possibility of a science of political economy.

Nor can this power of a great pecuniary interest to affect thought, and especially to affect thought in those circles of society whose opinions are most respected, ever be done away with save by the abolition of its cause — the social adjustment or institution that gives power to obtain wealth without earning it. The pecuniary interest in the ownership of slaves was never very large in United States. But it so dominated the thought of the whole country that up to the outbreak of the Civil War the term abolitionist was to good, kindly and intelligent people even in the North an expression that

meant everything vile and wicked. And whatever else might have been the issue of the war, had the pecuniary interest in the maintenance of slavery remained, it would still have continued to show itself in thought. But as soon as the supplies of the slave-owning interest were cut off by the freeing of the slaves, this power upon opinions vanished. Now, no preacher, professor or politician, even in the South, would think of advocating or defending slavery; and in Boston, where he narrowly escaped mobbing, stands a public statue of William Lloyd Garrison.