

CHAPTER XLII

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS

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At first glance the various experiments and programs for individual and social betterment seem to have little in common. From the benevolent attempts of the employer to improve the condition of his worker to the insistent demands of the Socialist for the social ownership of the tools of production, there are many varieties of proposals. But while these programs of economic reform show such diversity of thought and opinion, they nevertheless have a com-

mon basis. All rest upon the belief that economic and social conditions demand improvement, — all are programs of progress.

Belief in Progress. — After all, then, these diverse plans of economic reform have a unity of purpose, — a desire to better the condition of the worker. Their advocates, who believe absolutely in the attainment of progress, are sharply distinguished from those conservatives and reactionaries who believe that “Whatever is, is right.” These progressives are not content with “well enough”; they are always striving for “something better.” Progress is **What is** the goal of all their activities. **But what is progress?** progress? It is the forward movement of all members of society, — not the mere advance of particular individuals. From an economic standpoint, progress is measured by individual and social welfare, and the test of this welfare is individual and social prosperity. Thus, progress is not only the goal of economic endeavor, but it is also the goal of economic reform.

What reason have men for believing that progress is possible? To answer this question, one must understand the character of the forces at work in shaping **Its basis:** the destinies of life. Broadly speaking, these **Influence of environment.** forces are those of heredity and environment. Every one’s life is a product of these two forces. Man is thus a combination of inherited traits and acquired characteristics. But which of these two sets of forces is the dominating element in the life of man? One’s attitude on this question determines one’s philosophy of life. The advocate of progress bases his belief on the dominating influence of environment.

The effect of the opposite view — that man’s course is

determined by hereditary influences — is at once apparent. If this be true, progress is impossible in many cases. According to this belief, men may be born vicious and destined, by the laws of heredity, to remain so from generation to generation. This represents the old fatalistic attitude of the past. So long as men believed that the evils of the past were transmitted to the present, progress was practically impossible. There was no possibility of going into the past and influencing the parents of the present generation. This present generation, depraved because of the depravity of its ancestors, must in its turn hand on its low standards to the generations of the future. Thus the process would be endlessly continued through years of hopeless despondency. This old belief in hereditary depravity — in the transmission of acquired characteristics — kept society from properly educating the child, prevented normal care of the criminal and social outcast, and, in every direction, restricted individual and social progress.

The new view is full of hope and promise. The modern progressive has shaken himself free from the old fatalistic belief in the inheritance of acquired traits; and announces fearlessly that, since he believes that only race traits are inherited, the vast majority of evils which beset mankind is not the product of heredity, but is generated largely by the environment. This view, by emphasizing the fact that most men are normal, makes progress possible. It forms the basis of a new optimism and is characteristic of the attitude of the modern social worker. According to this belief, social and economic conditions may be improved simply by improving man's environment. The fundamental evil lies not in the individual, but in conditions surrounding him. If bad living and working conditions are largely respon-

sible for misery and vice, the surroundings of the worker must be improved. Instead of the past, the present must be investigated. Each generation starts afresh and, by improving its surroundings, may rise to a higher level than that reached by its predecessor. Thus progress is always attainable.

The other side of this conviction, that improvement in enviroing conditions will remove the cause of misery and vice, is expressed, of course, in the belief in man's natural capacity. These convictions are complementary. Man himself is believed to be thoroughly capable of improvement, and this belief furnishes a real basis for progress. This concept of the natural capacity of man dominates the thought of a progressive society. If people were born with a fatalistic curse upon their heads, if total depravity were an inherited thing — the product of the degeneracy of past ages — progress would hardly be possible. During the centuries when such ideas were held, little progress in the condition of the masses was made, because each person felt the impossibility of a forward movement. Recent years, however, have seen a distinct change in this respect. Thinkers now vigorously maintain the possibility of improvement; they have turned from the argument of "total depravity" to that of "universal capacity."

*Belief in
natural
capacity.*

Requisites of Progress. — If, then, man is capable of improvement and progressive development, what is required to call this forth? In the first place, he must be given opportunity. This was emphasized at the outset of our study and it is now restated in the closing pages. Equal opportunity, however, means neither equality nor identity. An embryotic painter and an embryotic engineer are neither equal nor

identical, yet both may be afforded an equal chance to develop their respective talents. Thus, equal opportunity

The means simply an equal chance to advance and
ideals: is advocated, regardless of any particular program
Opportunity. of reform, by all believers in progress. If, to-day, nine tenths of the men and women about us are born approximately normal and naturally capable, they will all make progress when given equal opportunity.

But something more than opportunity is essential to progress. Society needs adjustment. In order to secure this universality of opportunity which will permit of individual development, changes must be made in
Social ad- environing conditions. Families are underfed
justment. and badly housed; children are sent into the mills at fourteen; the school system is not planned primarily for the worker; and men die at an early age because of industrial accidents and preventable diseases. These maladjustments which are responsible for lack of opportunity must be swept aside. No conscious will has placed obstacles in the way of man's development; and through adjustment society itself must remove them wherever they exist.

Of equal importance with opportunity and adjustment is efficiency. Of course, if opportunity is afforded, efficiency will usually follow. In all directions the cry of efficiency is heard. If progress is to be attained, society as well as individuals must develop the capacity to produce maximum
Efficiency results with minimum outlays. In the factory,
and edu- in the home, in the school, in the nation — every-
cation. where — efficiency is equally essential. All programs of genuine progress emphasize this as one of the foundations of progress. Efficiency, of course, is attained through some form of education. Thus the economic importance of

education becomes at once apparent. Efficiency, as we have previously seen, also involves conservation.

With opportunity, adjustment, and efficiency, come other ideals of progress. Chief among these are leisure, recreation, and health. Without free activity, progress is not possible. Individuals must have spare time in which to do those things that it is impossible to accomplish in the rush of industrial life. The great achievements of the world are often the products of leisure time. When men and women are educated to a wise use of free time, a shorter working day will prove of inestimable advantage to true progress.

Along with the requisite of leisure comes the chance for recreation. To be progressive — to be able to move forward in the affairs of life — man must have some relief from the strain of industry. This is afforded through proper facilities for recreation. Thus, realizing that recreation is an ideal of true progress, municipalities every year appropriate large sums of money for playgrounds, parks, and recreation piers; while in many directions attempts are being made to regulate theatrical performances and moving picture exhibitions. At the same time, many efforts are directed toward providing some legitimate form of recreation for rural districts.

Another ideal absolutely essential to progress is that of health. It is, in some respects, the most vital of them all. Without a strong, robust body, life is undesirable if not impossible. In every program of progress, therefore, full provision should be made to develop and maintain sound health. The social worker, to-day, realizes the necessity for this ideal more than any other reformer.

Formerly, men believed that disease always came as a

punishment for wrongdoing and was an evidence of divine wrath. This was a remnant of the old fatalistic attitude. To-day, men have scientifically demonstrated that, not divine wrath, but germs and bacteria are the cause of disease. Malaria is not carried through the air in the form of vapor, but is transmitted through the sting of a mosquito. Remedy for malaria, therefore, takes the form, not of sacrifices to appease divine wrath, but of a generous application of crude oil to the marshes and ponds in which the mosquito breeds. Thus, science puts to rout the old fatalism, and helps in the cause of progress.

Concerning these ideals of progress all reformers are in practical accord. All would move in the same direction, with the same general end in view. It is not the end — the goal of progress — upon which social reformers differ; it is the means — the method of attaining their ultimate desire. But even here there is some agreement — some measure of unison. This manifests itself chiefly in one direction. It is generally admitted that progress should be attained, not through sudden revolution, but through gradual evolution. Sudden disturbances seldom effect permanent changes. Through the slow processes of time, extending over many generations and even centuries, progress is attained. To be sure, revolutions do occur; and when they do, they provoke thought and discussion. Nevertheless, no one can reasonably conceive of a social or economic revolution that in one generation would permanently change the methods of thought or motives of activity of all the people. The incoming of the factory system and the enunciation of Darwin's concept of evolution are good illustrations of revolutionary changes in economic belief and social thought. Yet, in both these

**The
method of
attaining
progress.**

cases, the change in popular opinion required decades for its completion. So, inevitably, it must be with any fundamental change instituted in behalf of social and economic progress. Revolution is uncertain; evolution is unfailing.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What is your idea of progress?
2. What part does the environment play in progress?
3. Why are modern thinkers optimistic?
4. What is meant by the expression "environment is plastic"?
5. What basis does the belief in natural capacity furnish for optimism?
6. What part will opportunity play in progress?
7. What measures are being taken to-day to prevent congestion of population? Premature employment?
8. What steps are being taken to accomplish a better distribution of population in this country?
9. What are some of the leading lines of activity in social work now being undertaken in America?
10. Which is more important, approximate equality of possessions or approximate equality of opportunity? Do we have to destroy the present in order to secure the latter?
11. With a more general diffusion of knowledge, culture, and publicity, is political democracy in more or less danger? Is equality of opportunity more or less likely to ensue?

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