

VIII. ECONOMIC LIBERATION

1. *Why Organize?*

FROM many sides echo voices urging the human race to co-operate for the general advantage. The world, torn and distracted by the subsistence struggle, yearns toward a method of life that will ease the strain and relieve the heart-ache that are involved in the present-day conflict. It seems that this world-need can be met by a world economic organization built along the lines of productive activity controlled by those who produce, and sufficiently powerful to utter the final word with regard to the disposition of resources and raw materials, of transport, of credit, and of the more general phases of production and consumption.

There can be little difference of opinion concerning the necessity for some such organization. A question may well be raised, however, with regard to the probable developments of so vast a world machine. What are its ultimate purposes? Why, in the last analysis, do men seek to improve the economic and political structure of human society? Why organize at all?

There is a clear-cut answer to these questions: Men desire changes and improvements in their economic life in order that they may attain greater freedom, and they organize for the purpose of making these changes and improvements more easily.

Man is subject to many drastic limitations. First, there are the physical limitations of his own body—its height, its reach, its flexibility, its resistance, its fund of energy. Then he is limited by nature—by the climate, the altitudes, the fertility of the soil, the deposits of minerals, the movement

of water. Man is further limited by habit, custom, tradition, and by the opinions of his friends and neighbors. Again, he is limited by ignorance, by fear, by cowardice, by prejudice, and by his own lack of understanding as to the true nature of freedom. In addition to all of these restrictions he is limited by the economic bonds that hold him to his job, that tempt him with gain, that drive him, day by day, to seek for food, clothing, shelter: for comfort and luxury.

Only dimly do men realize these limitations. The more they learn, the more clearly they understand the nature of the bonds that hold them, and the better are they prepared to break down the most hampering barriers, and to follow where aspiration and hope beckon. Yet, even among the masses of the people, who have had little time to learn, and less in which to reflect, there is a persistent longing to be free. The plea for liberty always awakens a response in them because, through their own lives they come into such intimate contact with the hateful burdens that oppression lays upon its victims.

The longing to be free is probably one of the most widely distributed of human qualities, and one, moreover, which men share with many of the higher animals. The World War focussed this longing and raised it to a pitch of frenzied exaltation, under the spell of which hundreds of millions fought and worked, as they thought, for liberty. The fact that they were mistaken in their ideas regarding the purposes of the war does not in any sense detract from the sincerity of their desires, nor from the earnestness of their efforts.

The World War fervor was typical of the eager attempts that men have made at intervals all through history, to win freedom against immense odds. During the past three or four centuries this struggle has been particularly severe in the political, the social and in the economic fields alike.

Although the Dark Ages almost obliterated the expression of creative energy in the Western World, the Renaissance, the

Reformation and the industrial revolution, following in quick succession, proclaimed its reawakening, and to-day there is scarcely a group of people—in Egypt, in Ireland, in Korea, in the Philippines, or in dark, enslaved Africa that does not hold a molten mass of sentiment surging toward freedom,—a seething, smouldering pressure, continually seeking an outlet.

Economic emancipation does not include all aspects of freedom. Many other chains remain to be broken. But the economic organization of the world would be one step in the direction of freedom, and would burst many a bond that now holds the human race in subjection.

2. *Freedom from Primitive Struggle*

The first step in economic liberation is to free man from the more savage phases of the life struggle—the struggle against nature: the struggle with other men.

Since those far-off times when men lived by tearing away clusters of nuts, by picking berries, by digging roots, by snaring fish and by clubbing game, they have been compelled to wrest from nature the means of subsistence. In this struggle, there have been the terrible phantoms of hunger, thirst, cold, darkness and physical suffering of every sort, driving men on. He who won in the contest with nature was able to escape the worst of these miseries, but he who lost was tortured by them as long as life remained in his body. The race is saddled, even to-day, by an oppressive fear of these physical hardships that makes the strongest a willing servant of any agency that will promise to ward them off.

The first victory that men must gain in their battle for economic liberation, will be won when hunger, thirst, cold, darkness and other aspects of physical suffering are banished from the lives of all people as effectively as yellow fever and cholera have been banished from the western world during recent generations.

This end has already been attained for the favored few in most countries, but famine still stalks periodically among the peoples of Asia, and even Europe, since the Great War, has felt its grip. Among the industrial workers of the imperial countries, and among the citizens of the exploited countries, the wolf is a far more frequent visitor than is the fatted calf.

Liberation from this widespread physical hardship can be achieved by producing enough of the necessaries of life to feed, clothe and house all of the people of the world, and by supplementing an adequate production by a system of distribution that will eliminate hunger and cold. Machine industry has made such an achievement possible. It only remains for a world economic organization to co-ordinate the resources, the productive machinery and the labor, and to distribute the commodities produced to those who need them.

The conflict with nature is but one aspect of the primitive struggle in which men are engaged. In addition, there is the struggle of man against man; not to aid, to emulate, to excel, but to rob, cripple and destroy.

The existing economic system is built upon the assumed desirability of a struggle whose outward manifestations are: (1) competition between economic groups; (2) the class war between owners and workers, and (3) wars between the nations. Throughout the business world one establishment seeks to build up its organization by wiping out its competitors; one class seeks to win supremacy at the expense of a rival class, and one nation seeks to found its greatness on the prostrate remains of those opposing nations that it has been able to overthrow. These three phases of competition are accompanied by three forms of war—the economic war, the class war and international wars.

All three forms of war have an economic background. The economic war is the contest for resources, trade, markets, monopolies and investment opportunities. The class war

between the exploiter and the exploited, grows out of the economic relations existing between the owner and the worker. International wars are fought for economic advantage—for resources, trade, markets.

The object of all war is the destruction of a rival by resorting to those measures calculated to bring the desired result. Since all is fair in war, the end (destruction) justifies the means, no matter what it may be.

What need is there to speak to this generation of the devastation caused by these wars? of the killing, the maiming, the famine, the disease, the disorganization and chaos?

The western world has not yet recovered from the latest international war, while the economic war and the class war are being fought on the six continents and the seven seas. The cost of wars in blood, treasure, happiness and usefulness is an intolerable one. The chains with which Mars loads the human race weigh men down to the earth.

The organization of a world producers' society would go far toward freeing men from the ravages of war. The necessity for economic competition being removed, and exploitation being done away with, the basis of international war and of the class war would be swept away. Thus the same economic world organization that enabled man to free himself from the more brutal phases of the struggle with nature would likewise enable him to eliminate the principal causes of war.

3. *Freedom from Servility*

The organization of a producers' society would do more than abolish the cruder aspects of the present economic struggle. It would lay the foundation for a new culture founded on the dignity and the worth of labor.

There are two groups of human instincts in ceaseless contention for supremacy—the possessive and the creative. Both are of immediate economic importance, and the triumph of the one usually means the subordination of the other. The

instincts which urge in the direction of acquisition and accumulation tend to make the man a conservator. Once let him possess an abundance of the world's goods and his chief object is to hold what he has gained. The instincts which urge toward construction and creation tend to make man an innovator, initiator, an improver. The side of man's nature that urges him to possess, directs him toward wealth and power. The side of his nature that leads him to create points to invention, to craftsmanship, to artistry. Thus the possessive and the creative instincts are not merely at odds. Possession leads to status while creation leads to improvement.

There are some natures that are definitely inclined toward acquisition. There are others as firmly set in the direction of creation. For such natures the social standards possess little importance. They have their bent and they follow it. The great mass of men, however, have no positive set in either direction. Their lives will be primarily possessive or primarily creative, depending upon the kind of training that they receive.

Modern society lays its emphasis on possession and accumulation, and upon the wealth and power which they yield. The owner of land or of capital, under the present economic order, is not required to work for his living. His rents and dividends furnish him a source of income far more regular and much more dependable than the wage of the worker, or even than the salary of the man higher up. The rewards of the property owner, moreover, are far larger than those of the worker. Compare the income tax returns of Germany, Britain and the United States with the wage scales from the same countries. The incomes above ten thousand dollars (two thousand pounds or 40,000 marks in pre-war values) per year are derived largely or exclusively from the ownership of property. It pays far better to own than it does to work. The ownership of capital, like the ownership of land, carries with it power over those who must use the capital and

work the land, thus setting up an owning group or class which is able to control the lives of the workers, at least to the extent of taking a part of their product and living upon it without rendering any commensurate service in return. With the economic rewards go social honors and distinctions, and the wealthy enjoy social as well as economic privileges. They develop a system of dress, of language, of manners and customs that will distinguish them as far as possible from the common herd, namely, those who work for a living. Veblen describes the process admirably in his "Theory of the Leisure Class." The leisure class, he says, has its origin in some form of ownership, on which it builds the structure of its prerogatives.

The existence of an owning, ruling class divides society into factions, whose contentions threaten the destruction of any social group in which they take place. From the intolerable social situation which they create, there seems to be but one logical means of escape, and that is through the establishment of a society in which labor and not parasitism is the ideal toward which children are taught to strive.

Such a society would shift the emphasis from possession to creation (production) by rewarding the worker rather than the owner. This result may be accomplished quite simply by giving the chief rewards to those who create, and by denying to the owner any direct reward for his ownership. Another step in the same direction could be taken by limiting individual ownership to the things that men use, and concentrating in the producing group the ownership of all productive tools.

When economic rewards are withdrawn from possession and given to creation, it will pay better to create than it will to own. Furthermore, since ownership of itself would involve no power over others, another important incentive to accumulation would be removed.

A producers' society, as a matter of course, would accord the most honor to those who engaged in productive activity,

thus registering the social opinion in favor of creating rather than of possessing and exploiting. With the economic and the social rewards going to producers, the young of each generation would learn that it was more worth while to be a producer than to be an owner.

Again a producers' society would aim to secure the common participation in the necessary social tasks—the drudgery and the “dirty-work.” With the essential work performed in part by all able-bodied persons, no stigma would attach to those who were engaged in it, the class of economic pariahs would be eliminated, and each participant in the necessary economic work of the world would feel that he belonged to the group in which he was playing so important a rôle.

“But,” argues the doubter, “all of this is against human nature. How is it possible to expect that men will stop possessing, or will lose the desire for possession?”

They cannot be expected to do either, of course. But it so happens that, in any industrial society, the group living on its ownership is a very small one compared with the group living by its labor. The preference, in an industrial community, can therefore easily incline to labor rather than to ownership. As for the chief rewards of life going to producers rather than to owners, this is historically practicable. Greek society worked out an elaborate system of honors and rewards for those who could create. Human nature has not been fairly or adequately tested in recent years. Only certain of its phases have been developed by social demands, and those phases—the possessive instincts—are among the least socially advantageous of human qualities.

An emphasis on production rather than on accumulation would have another important result—more important, in a sense, than any of those named. It would establish a feeling of self-respect among those who work by giving them the only conceivable economic basis for self-respect—the ownership and control of their jobs.

While one man owns a job on which another man must work in order to live, the job-owner is the master, and the job-taker is his vassal. Necessarily, the vassal occupies a position of servility. When he asks for an opportunity to work, he is asking for an opportunity to live. When he takes a job he is binding his life and his conduct under terms prescribed by the job-owner. If he has a family, or owns a home, or is in any way tied to one spot, he is doubly bound.

The establishment of a producers' society would make each man his own master in somewhat the same sense that the farmer or the artisan who owns his land or tools is the arbiter of his own economic destiny. That is, he would own his job and share in its control.

Thus society would eliminate the inequalities that are now created by the concentration of ownership and power in a few hands, and would establish a relative equality among those who produced. The great fear of the modern worker—the fear of unemployment or job-loss—would also be eliminated, since the producers, in a society of which they had control, would be able to hold their own jobs.

These various means would serve to dignify labor and production, and to establish a society in which prestige and honor would attach to creation rather than to ownership.

4. *Wisdom in Consumption*

One of the chief weapons of a leisure class is some mark that will easily distinguish its members from the workers. This mark, in modern society, is conspicuous consumption. By the quality and style of its wearing apparel, by the scale of its housing, by the multitude of its possessions, its luxuries and its enjoyments, the leisure class sets itself apart from the remainder of the community, advertising to the world, in the most unmistakable manner, its capacity to spend more than the members of the working class can earn.

This need for distinction through consumption has set a

living standard which the less well-to-do families seek to emulate. Among the leisured, there is an eager race to decide which can spend the most lavishly, while those of less economic means make a determined effort to put on front and to appear richer than they really are.

The result of this competition among neighbors is an absurd attention to the quantity and to the cost of possessions, with a comparative indifference to their intrinsic beauty or to their utility. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the rapidly altering styles of woman's dress. One season silk stockings and low-cut waists are worn in the middle of winter: the next, expensive furs appear in mid-summer. With little reference to artistic effect, and with even less attention to the needs of the individual, the procession of the styles moves across the social stage with tens of millions eagerly watching for the tiniest change in cut or color.

The devotion of an entire class to this conspicuous leisure has no social justification save the silly argument that "it makes work." It is one of the logical products of a stratified or class society where the lower classes seek to ape the upper classes, while the latter engage in a mad scramble to determine which shall set the most grotesque standards of social conduct.

A producers' society will of necessity take a stand of far-reaching consequence on the question of consumption. In the first place it will realize that one of the most signal failures of the present order lies in the inability of the people to find either happiness or growth in the accumulation of possessions. If the multitude of things owned would satisfy men's needs, the upper classes of the present society would be the happiest that the world has ever known, since they are able to command a quantity and a variety of things that far surpasses previous historic records. Instead of bringing happiness, however, these things have merely brought care, anxiety and finally disillusionment. Now, as always, it is true that a man's

life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions, or, as Carlyle puts it, "Not what I have but what I do is my kingdom."

The citizens of a producers' society will therefore teach to their children, and will practice an abstemiousness in the midst of plenty—a withdrawal from possessions—in order that the body may have enough, but not too much, and that the spirit may be freed from an undue weight of things. The Greeks understood the principle well; so did the American Indians. They desired, not many things, but an enrichment of life, which they realized could come only through understanding, tranquillity and inner growth.

As a matter of course, a producers' society will enforce the axiom: No luxuries for any until the necessities are supplied to all. This corresponds with the well-established practice of many primitive peoples. It is likewise the application of the highest ethical principles to economic life, and is the course of procedure that man's most elemental sense of justice demands.

A more or less rigid adherence to the principle of necessities first, and an understanding of the futility of seeking for happiness through possessions, will place a rigid limitation upon the amount of time devoted to satisfying economic needs, and will release a generous share of time and energy that may be devoted to supplying the other needs of man. Heretofore, leisure has been absorbed by one class or group. Under a producers' society it would be distributed, like any other social advantage, on an equitable basis.

Already sufficient advances have been made in machine production to enable the human race to produce the economic necessities of each day in a few hours of labor—two, or three, or four, perhaps. It remains for a producers' society to take advantage of this productive efficiency, and to convert the increased productivity, not, as at present, into more goods, but rather into more free time for people.

5. *Leisure for Effective Expression*

The primary aim of a producers' society would be leisure rather than goods—an opportunity for expression rather than an increase in the amount of possessions. One of its great tasks would therefore be the education of its citizenship in the effective use of leisure.

This new, socialized leisure, which yesterday was a privilege of the ruling classes and of many of the artisans and farmers, which is to-day the heritage of primitive peoples, and which has been so largely lost in the rush of machine production, will be used: (1) to make and to maintain social contacts; (2) for creative activities; (3) for recreation, and (4) for whatever other means are necessary to promote the growth of the individual.

An effective society must be composed of effective individuals. In no other way can a high social standard be maintained. The growth of the individual, in a modern community depends, in large measure, on the way in which he uses his leisure.

6. *Culture and Human Aspiration*

At various stages in the development of society there have emerged cultures founded on some particular group of human aspirations. Thus the forward-looking side of man's nature expressed itself.

After he had finished the daily tasks by means of which he earned a subsistence, or, more usually, as a member of a leisure class that was exempt from the necessity of labor, the man dominated by strong creative impulses sought to embody, in some concrete form, the desires which he felt springing up within him, and which could not be satisfied by physical activity. He turned, therefore, to drawing, to painting, to music, to speculation, to discussion.

The present age has not as yet developed its culture, and it seems now as though capitalism, with its heritage of revolu-

tion, and its curse of instability and hurry, would not persist long enough to establish a well-defined culture. Hence, in the present society, multitudes feel that certain finer things are excluded from their lives because the ground is so littered with possessions, and because life is too harried and too sordid to give them place.

These forces, the creative impulses of the artist and the builder, yearn unspeakably for expression. Each human breast holds a void that is the result of their suppression, and it is this, perhaps, more than anything else, that accounts for the unrest and dissatisfaction that are so characteristic of the present generation.

In the past only the favored few had a chance to express their most holy aspirations. The development of modern industry, with its facility in the production of livelihood, promises a time, and that at no very great distance, when this opportunity may be common property, and men everywhere may be able to participate in that unending search after love, beauty, justice, truth—the highest of which humanity is capable.

All of these things lie outside the realm of economics, yet none of them is possible for the masses of mankind until there is established a system of economic life that will provide the necessaries upon which physical health depends, together with an amount of leisure sufficient to enable a generation to find itself.

This is the goal toward which men are working in their efforts to organize economic life, as they strive to provide a fit dwelling-place for the descendants of the world's seventeen hundred millions.