

Chapter XIII

THE last half of the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of many industrial and philanthropic movements for providing men with libraries, night schools, co-operative societies, co-partnership schemes, and other ameliorative expedients in lieu of justice. Hundreds of volumes on these questions from all kinds of philosophers were published. But it is doubted whether a work was published that asked the great question; "Why are all these expedients necessary?" When they were going at their best, how many people in the community did they affect? They never touched the vast, vast majority. The energy, time, and money wasted on those schemes for thirty or forty years before the war must run into figures that would fascinate a statistician. No one asked the question: if the state granted so much industrial and social amelioration, or made it possible for conditions to be bettered, why should the problems of unemployment, disease, and poverty show no consistent decline? While all the work of amelioration was going on, connected with hours, wage of labour, controlling sweated trades, half-day holidays, half-timers, and so on, and so on, almost without end, the deeper problems, such as national and international economic questions, threatened to overthrow or subvert all the work of the reformers. A shrewd observer of conditions thirty or forty years before the war says: "From the time the Liberal party became imperialistic and sentimental, it lost its force as a power in the concert of Europe and ceased in England to function along the lines of its tradition." It is true, for it is not to be

imagined that the budget of 1909 was meant by the government to be anything else but a "vote-catching dodge." What was promised and what was given differed so widely, even though so little was promised, that no student need suffer from the delusion that the budget of 1909 was a serious attempt to deal with fundamental problems. The business of drugging the public mind with numbers of betterment schemes served governments very well, for it enabled the cabinets to carry on the work of secret diplomacy and warlike preparations without discussing them in Parliament. So trade-union historians, shop-steward philosophers, and sweated-industries philanthropists supplied the narcotics that sent the Liberals to sleep, and, unfortunately, befuddled the best minds of the English Tories. And all through that period of industrial and social reform, with its labour bureaux, and insurance against sickness, and unemployment, and so on, the student rarely finds the merest suggestion of a fundamental reform; expedients all, nothing but expedients. It never occurred to the modern saviours of mankind that men might do all these things for themselves infinitely better if they were given the chance, that is, a thorough system of equality of opportunity, which would enable them to work out their own social and moral salvation.

Before the war, the late Bishop of Oxford invited eight essayists to contribute to a volume called *Property, Its Duties and Rights*. Canon Gore, to use the Bishop's more familiar title, as a representative of the church was very well fitted for the task of instituting an inquiry "about property in the light of the Bible doctrine of stewardship." He remarks that what is conspicuously lacking among us is a common mind about property.

We are groping in the dark, (he says), we are familiar with the traditional cry of the "rights of property," and we are painfully familiar, also, with the disastrous wrongs which the law and custom of property as it exists among us has inflicted and is inflicting. But we want a theory, a principle to guide us. We cannot act with any power as individuals without a corporate mind and conscience on the subject; and we can form no corporate mind and conscience without a clear principle.

Now the essayists are all learned men, first-class sociologists, lawyers, professorial economists, and great churchmen, but none seems to have thought it worth while to find out what property is; all the essays show it to be a thing of such varying character and possessing such magical powers, that the deepest desire of the reader to follow the search is continually baffled, and only when the last essay is reached, on "Some Aspects of the Law of Property in England," by Professor Geldart, does light break in. But it is not the light that Canon Gore and his friends expected. This light, coming from a lawyer, enables the student to see what a mass of confusions, contradictions, and absurdities confronted the essayists when they started their search for a definition of property. Professor Geldart says:

It is not by way of abstract definition that the lawyer, at any rate the English lawyer, can hope to make the conception of property more serviceable for non-legal discussion. He would be hard put to it to find a definition that would hold water for all, even legal, purposes. At one time he will distinguish property and possession, at another he will speak of the possessor as having a "special property" in the thing of which another is the owner. He will deny that the subject can have a true property in English land, and the next moment he will find that a man's fee-simple or leasehold estate is described in a statute imposing death duties as "property of which the deceased was competent to dispose."

So much for the opinion of the learned jurist who wrote the last essay.

Turning to Professor Hobhouse's essay, which is the first one in the book, the student learns that

Property is a principle which admits of variation in several distinct directions. It is a control which may be more or less fully recognized and guaranteed by society. It may be more or less permanent, more or less dependent on present use and possession or enjoyment. It may be concentrated in one hand, or common to many. It may extend to more, or to fewer, of the purposes to which a thing may be put. But that the control may be property at all, it must in some sort be recognized, in some sort independent of immediate physical enjoyment, and at some point exclusive of control by other persons. Within these limits there is room for indefinite variation in many directions, and the variations are not necessarily dependent on one another.

It will be seen by a glance at these two quotations what enormous fields the explorers searched to find a definition of property. Why anyone continued to search after Professor Hobhouse's discouraging essay is a mystery, but they started out with the idea of writing eight essays on the subject, and it is to be supposed that each thought he was obliged to write one. Professor Hobhouse, in starting the quest, was very badly chosen for the work of pioneering. He says: "While modern economic conditions have virtually abolished property *for use* apart from furniture, clothing, etc.; that is, property in the means of production, for the great majority of the people—they have brought about the accumulation of vast masses of property *for power* in the hands of a relatively narrow class." (Italics in the essay.) This statement may mean something definite, but if it does, it is hidden somewhere behind the differentiation of the terms, *for use* and *for power*. Perhaps it

would not be in order to ask the learned Professor what he means by property, and what the thing is he has in mind. He mentions furniture, clothing, etc.; would food be included in the et cetera? Would the tools of a market gardener, or the pliers and hammer of a plumber be included? Suppose a printer, starting in a small way, employing two men and a boy, accumulated over a period of twenty years enough property to buy four modern machines and employ thirty persons as printers, machinists, designers, and clerical staff, in all thirty persons, would Professor Hobhouse say that, in the case of this printer, he began with property "for use" and in twenty years reached the position of owning property "for power"? But proceed a step further and suppose the printer today is using only one machine, and his staff is reduced to eight or ten people, some kept employed rather for charitable reasons than for business ones; would the learned Professor say that the one machine had returned to the first economic position and was now "for use," and would he say that the three idle machines were "for power"? Perhaps there is some special meaning understood by schools of economics in connexion with terms such as property "for use," and property "for power." Today the world is suffering from a superabundance of machinery constructed to turn out goods on a great war basis. One enormous mill could be operated at a fair profit, net 7 per cent, at 32 per cent of its capacity. There is no earthly hope of that mill ever being run at more than 40 per cent its capacity. Now would Professor Hobhouse say that that vast accumulation, that awful deteriorating blight, of 60 per cent of the plant was property "for power"? The great trouble which afflicted liberalism in all countries for two decades before the war was a peculiar kind of sentimentality engendered by loose thinking; and this book, *Property, Its Duties and Rights*,

with the exception of Professor Geldart's essay, is about the best example the student can find of this loose thinking. No one can question the earnest, sincere intentions of the writers. They all realize profoundly the danger of the system; they all desire better conditions.

Dr. Rashdall's difficulty in his essay, particularly in the section in which he attempts to deal with Locke, is the familiar one of regarding the economic conditions around him as the true position from which to view economic principles. Locke looked at the economic conditions around him from the viewpoint of economic principles. When he went, as the Roman jurists attempted to do, behind the inception of any state, primitive, communal, or political, and took his stand in natural law, he discovered the law of property and ownership. So long as men will let the conditions around them distort their vision when they are considering the matter of changing the system, nothing will be done, nothing can be done. It is essential to find out what is wrong, and this cannot possibly be done until there is an all-round agreement as to the economic meaning of the terms we use. Neither Professor Hobhouse nor Dr. Rashdall was quite fair to Locke.

It is no use going to Parliament or the law for economic definitions, and either property has a precise economic definition or it is the many-sided indefinable thing referred to in these essays. The student would have thought Canon Gore should have laid down a rule that property, when used in an economic sense in the essays, should have one definite meaning understood by all. And when the essayist wished to use the word in a sentimental, religious, or poetic sense, he was perfectly free to do so, if he took the trouble to let the reader know that he was not, in that place, using it in an economic sense. It is a splendid term for certain political platforms,

where the orators ask, "Who plucks the pigeons?" and "Who shears the lambs?" For denunciatory purposes the word "property" has served very well. Numbers of new eras, in one form or another, have been ushered in by denouncers of property. The question of property which now seems to be disturbing numbers of thoughtful people is of quite another character. Pretty nearly all the different forms of capital associated with private ownership in the essays referred to above, are threatened with something like extinction by the taxing authorities. The most astounding changes in connexion with distribution have taken place since the essays were written. No regular reader of *The Times* can be in doubt as to what is taking place in England in connexion with death duties. The state is now deliberately at work reducing the sources of supply. The system of confiscation by increment is certainly distributing something, but the instrument of distribution is rapidly bringing an end to the system of well kept-up estates. No one feels now like spending much, even on a pot of paint. Let anyone be so stupid as to repair fences, or drains, or roofs, or make an improvement of the kind that can be valued by an assessor, and he is hit for his folly. High income taxes and high death duties have pretty nearly done their work. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the people who run the state have not the faintest conception of the economic definition of the term "property" or its function. Some people might point out that many reformers have complained that estates were too large, and that it would be to the benefit of England if they were smaller; practical farmers would be able to buy pieces of them, and consequently there would be more food produced at home. That is true, but even in this some people must change their opinion again. The state now is succeeding in breaking up big estates and forcing land into the market,

without the concomitant benefit to agriculture and the inhabitants generally. Mr. Beard, in his presidential address to the Council of the Central and Associated Chamber of Agriculture, referred to "the thousands of men who had left the land," and said that:

If those men had not gone to the towns, and if, instead, 100,000 men had gone to the country, Britain might have escaped the crisis as we know it. Last year, we found we had bought so much food on "tick," that other nations began to distrust us, and all the while our rich prolific lands were going to idleness and despair. The story of the acres of land fallen mostly, not to grass, but to rough feed and sometimes to weeds were pretty sad. In 1920 we had wheat crops on 1,929,011 acres and in 1929 that acreage had fallen to 1,380,939. The barley crop had also fallen; and in reference to that crop they had better tell the world that barley had other uses besides that of making beer; indeed, there were people ready to declare that it was seldom used for that purpose. (Laughter.) At any rate, it was an important constituent of cattle food. Between 1920 and 1929 the barley acreage fell from 2,048,480 to 1,340,300. The story of oats was a little better. In 1920 there were 2,271,700 acres and by 1929 the acreage had been reduced to 1,854,400. Similarly other productions had decreased.

One of our policies should be "back to the land" in organized fashion; the elimination of the waste in production and distribution; new methods of collection and sales through the provisions of the Marketing Act; the abolition of the market ground disputes of buyer and seller; and the substitution of a system of co-operation which would assure the grower fair prices. This could be better achieved if the agricultural community could be roused to demand that the nation should take a real live interest in its land and in the people who dwelt on it.

Mr. Beard is a realist when he talks about men leaving the towns and going back to the land; he is very much nearer the first step towards the solution of the problems than were

Canon Gore's essayists. Some day Spengler may write a work extending and amplifying the sketches he has given of towns in *The Decline of the West*. It is one of the surest manifestations of the third curse that the town should not only kill the desire to return to the land, but that it should, by its complex conditions, twist and warp the minds of men who realize the shocking injustices of its markets, its streets, and its courts. The question is often asked now, will the bruised and crushed in the towns, when they do get the chance to rise again, leave the ravines and canyons of modern ghettos in the cities and go back to primitive conditions? Who can tell! Maybe Spengler is right: the point of this civilization is reached when the next great Exodus will mean the return to the state of the fellaheen. Anyway, suppose only a few are able to leave with their families and go back to the land; it will be to face the hardest, severest conditions, and the town does not breed stock ready to face hardship. Everyone who experienced labour conditions as they were fifty years ago, even so short a time as that, and labour conditions now, knows perfectly well that, in the main, a quite different stock is bred. So it may be only a few that will have the courage to leave the town and start anew in the country. As an instance of the great difference of opinion held by two men, directors of the same company, of about the same years, one said: "It makes me sad to think of the thousands who will have to start life all over again on the prairie; it will be hard for them." The other replied: "Not nearly so hard as it was for my folks or for me; I used to take the wool to the primitive carding-machine and then take it home to my mother to weave. We made our own clothes, and built our own house, we fended in every way for ourselves. The trouble with you is, you were born in a town and went to a town school." There it is; the town man is

almost useless as a counsellor in these times. As Stamp says: "He lives on slogans," and, once take away the slogans, he remains just what he is now, helpless.

The city-bred man is afraid to leave the town; he fears the prairie; its silence oppresses him; and the darkness troubles him like a bad dream. He will spend a week-end loafing in the country; he will spend a day picnicking there; he will hike, cycle, motor in it; but to stay in the country, live there, work there, he would "rather be dead." Only the few, very few, who are luckily born with the old peasant feeling, the instinct for the soil, ever desert the city for the prairie. And for those who escape the "remorseless town," and begin afresh as tillers of the soil under the present system, they will at best make only a bare living. There is no prospect of such people being able to produce for the markets.