

### CHAPTER III

#### THE RISE OF THE RULING CLASS: THE LOSS OF EQUAL RIGHTS

"By tyranny, as we now fight it, we mean control of the law, of legislation and adjudication, by organizations which do not represent the people, by means which are private and selfish. We mean, specifically, the conduct of our affairs and the shaping of our legislation in the interest of special bodies of capital and those who organize their use. We mean the alliance, for this purpose, of political machines with selfish business. We mean the exploitation of the people by legal and political means."—WOODROW WILSON, *The New Freedom*, Chap. II, p. 49.

ECONOMIC principles first of all. Mr. Schwab in advocating this change is in excellent company. He stands with the greatest of English reformers; his cry rings true to the great democratic tradition, and he is in direct line with the greatest of Americans. He must, however, stand or fall according to his definitions. If his definitions pass the scrutiny of a true economist, and he will lead those who desire a true democracy, we shall enter upon a new era. He makes an appeal to every astute mind to consider the great problems which face us, but we are afraid the appeal may not reach the forces that honestly desire change. There is only one way to reach the mass of men and that is the English way, in free and open

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meeting, where questions may be put and answered. What is there to fear? Dare we not test ourselves? Surely the powers that be know the time is fast approaching when we shall all have to come into the open with the candour of Mr. Schwab. If he can make such a speech before a gathering of commercial men formed to consider reconstruction, surely he can carry the same message to those who may not trust the kind of reconstruction the Chambers of Commerce wish to impose. It is just as well to be prepared for emergencies.

Economic principles first of all. If economic principles are to be re-established we must be prepared to take our ideas of what economic principles are, far beyond the confines of the reconstruction committee. Being prepared to take them into the larger field, we must not underestimate the forces which lie in wait. First of all, have we any record of the condition of a people practising economic principles? There are many records of different peoples who experienced little difficulty in producing abundance for themselves. The history of England tells us that there was no such thing as a poor law until the people were driven away from the lands to make room for the sheep. A commission of the year 1517 reports wholesale depopulation, empty houses, churches in ruins, owing to the breakup of the villages and the spread of sheep farming. An act of Parliament of the time refers to "greedy and covetous people who accumulate in their hands such great portions of the lands of the realm from the occupying of the poor husbandman, because of the great profit that cometh from sheep." Sir Thomas More has in his *Utopia* left us a graphic description of the state of England after the people were driven

from the countryside to the town. Poor law legislation was enacted in the days of Elizabeth as a means of coping with the evils of poverty. Is it a mere coincidence that legislation against "cut-throats, thieves, and vagrants" was enacted about the time it was found necessary to introduce palliative measures dealing with the poor?

The period of change from the operation of economic principles is as surely marked in the history of England as the period of change, pointed out above, in the form of government. Though there were short periods after the time of Elizabeth when the people enjoyed comparative abundance, economic principles saw their best days before the time of the Tudors. In what has been called the Golden Age, a peasant could earn enough in fifteen weeks' work to keep himself, wife and children in food for a year. We do know that even the serfs under the feudal system held from twenty to twenty-four acres of land and a hut for which they paid little or nothing in rent: a half-penny per annum or a day's service in spring or at harvest. So far as necessities were concerned the economic position of the serfs in the fourteenth century was vastly superior to that of the free labourer of today. We know from the records of an Oxford college that in the Middle Ages seven men and horses had food and lodging for twenty-seven cents a day. A glance at Thorold Rogers' *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* will convince anybody that with all our boasted civilization we do not begin to compare with the long ago for high wage and short hours. Now the secret lies in that phrase of Mr. Schwab: Economic principles first of all.

Restrictive legislation imposed by a ruling class

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against the interests of the many has been the curse of the nations. It brought all the old Empires tumbling to the ground, though, at times of stress, they rang all the changes of socialistic legislation. The socialists of today can teach us nothing which Greece and Rome did not try. Let us, therefore, glance at the methods practised in England, by which the people were reduced to poverty. We shall find on the one hand the landlords depopulating the countryside by enclosing the free lands; and on the other Parliament grinding out restrictive legislation to deal with the landless, homeless hordes created by the landlords' policy of taking away the common land by force.

In 1351 the first Statute of Labourers was imposed upon the people. Under the provisions of this detestable act unemployment was made a penal offence; every employer was given the right to demand the labour of any unemployed man. For the first time in Britain an act of Parliament fixed wages and hours. The people rose against this iniquitous measure and rebellion broke out in many parts of the land. As Green says, "the country was torn with riot and disorder." Then Parliament enacted far sterner measures. The labourer was forbidden to leave his parish in search of better paid employment, on pain of imprisonment and outlawry. The peasantry rose in revolt. Then in 1360 there came one who preached what seemed, to the ruling class, to be a new doctrine. Though a mild form of communism is suggested in the speeches and quaint rhymes of the day, this new doctrine was based on equal rights and equal opportunities. It was John Ball, "a mad priest of Kent," as Froissart calls him, who preached his strange sermons for twenty years

in the Kentish churchyards, where the stout yeomen gathered to hear him. And he preached in defiance of interdict and imprisonment. The peasant revolt of Ball's day is one of the most interesting uprisings of labour that is recorded; the story of it might well be read anew for the profit its economic character would yield to us moderns. Certainly some of the verses circulated at that time contain much more economic truth than we find in many of the verses touching the kindred evils of this day. Green says:

"In the rude jingle of these lines began for England the literature of political controversy: they are the first predecessors of the pamphlets of Milton and of Burke. Rough as they are, they express clearly enough the mingled passions which met in the revolt of the peasants; their longing for a right rule, for plain and simple justice; their scorn of the immorality of the nobles and the infamy of the court; their resentment at the perversion of the law to the cause of oppression. The revolt spread like wildfire over the country; Norfolk and Suffolk, Cambridge and Hertfordshire rose in arms; from Sussex and Surrey the insurrection extended as far as Devon. But the actual outbreak began in Kent, where a tiler killed a tax-collector in vengeance for an outrage on his daughter. The country rose in arms."

The conflict went on for centuries. One hundred years later Hugh Latimer, one of the noblest characters in English history, tells us in one of his sermons that his "father was a yeoman and had no lands of his own, only he had a farm of three or four pounds a year at the utmost, and hereupon he tilled as much as kept half a dozen men. He had walk for one hundred sheep, and my mother milked thirty kine. He kept me to school; or else I had not been able to preach before the King's Majesty now. He married my sisters with five pounds, or twenty nobles apiece; so that he brought them up in

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godliness and the fear of God. He kept hospitality for his poor neighbours, and some alms he gave to the poor." That is how it was when Bishop Latimer was a boy. When he became a man the old farm had passed to a new tenant and so great was the economic change in that short time that Latimer tells us the new tenant "is not able to do anything for his prince, nor for his children, nor give a cup of drink to the poor." In that same sermon he gives some quaint advice to the clergy. "If you wish to paint and gild Christ in your Churches, see that before your eyes people die not for lack of meat, drink and clothing."

It may be just as well to point out here that it was not the introduction of machinery which brought about the extraordinary change in Latimer's lifetime. Neither was it the powerful attractions of the towns which enticed the people from the countryside. It was nothing more or less than wilfully destroying the economic principles which had for centuries been the basis of the English system of government. Freedom passed when equal opportunity was denied. The reign of Henry VIII yields us information which is indispensable to an understanding of economic change. The spoliation of the abbeys is undoubtedly the first chapter of the story of the monopolization of natural resources. Some of the greatest land owning families of England rose from obscurity through the enormous grants of church lands made by Henry VIII. It was in his reign that a commission was appointed, in 1517, to inquire into the question of enclosing land by force, but it was not until the time of Queen Anne that enclosure of land was legalized by Parliament. From that time on until this day the economic woe of the peo-

ple has dogged the heels of every British statesman.

There is nothing more discouraging to the reformer who would see the cost of living reduced than to turn back the pages of history and compare what is taking place today with the rise in prices and wages about the beginning of the sixteenth century. I have a balance sheet of a labourer before the vast enclosures and the spread of sheep farming, another balance sheet fifty years later, when that remarkable book entitled, *A Discourse of the Commonweal of the Realm of England*, was published. Let me set out the items of the labourers' budgets of four hundred years ago.

BEFORE THE RISE IN PRICES	AFTER THE RISE IN PRICES
Wages, 7 days at 4d.—2s. 4d.	Wages, 7 days at 6d.—3s. 6d.
Bread, 7 loaves at $\frac{1}{2}$ d.— $3\frac{1}{2}$ d.	Bread, 7 loaves at $1\frac{1}{2}$ d.— $10\frac{1}{2}$ d.
Butter, 1 lb. at 1d.—1d.	Butter, 1 lb. at 3d.
Cheese, 3 lbs. at $\frac{1}{2}$ d.— $1\frac{1}{2}$ d.	Cheese, 3 lbs. at $1\frac{1}{2}$ d.— $4\frac{1}{2}$ d.
Meat, 4 lbs. at $\frac{1}{4}$ d.—1d.	Meat, 4 lbs. at $\frac{3}{4}$ d.—3d.
Beer, 4 gall. at $\frac{1}{2}$ d.—2d.	Beer, 4 gall. at $1\frac{1}{2}$ d.—6d.
Rent and fuel 3d.	Rent and fuel 9 d.
Balance 1s. 4d.	Balance 6d.

What labourer in 1550 would not gladly have exchanged his lot for that of the labourer of 1500. Bernard Gilpin, when he preached before Edward VI in 1552, said:

“Be the poor man's cause never so manifest, the rich shall for money find six or seven Councillors that shall stand with subtleties and sophisms to cloak an evil matter and hide a known truth. Such boldness have the covetous cormorants that now their robberies, extortion and open oppression, have no end or limits. No banks can keep their violence. As for turning poor men out of their holdings, they take it for no offence, but say their land is their own, and they turn them out of their shrouds like mice. Thousands in England, through such, beg now from door to door, which once kept honest houses. Poor men are daily hunted

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out of their livings, there is no covert or den can keep them safe. They have such quick smelling hounds, they can lie in London, and turn men out of their farms and tenements, an hundred, some two hundred miles off. When wicked Ahab hunted after Naboth's vineyard he could not, though he were a King, obtain that prey until cursed Jezebel took the matter in hand, so hard a thing it was then to wring a poor man from his father's inheritance, which now a mean man will take in hand."

He was not cast into prison for preaching in that manner, he suffered no injury from the State; indeed, he was given a license as a general preacher for the lifetime of the King. It may perhaps interest those who enjoy church history to set out the official prayer in the church prayerbook of Edward VI.

"We heartily pray Thee to send Thy Holy Spirit into the hearts of them that possess the grounds and pastures of the earth, that they, remembering themselves to be Thy tenants, may not rack or stretch out the rents of their houses or lands, nor yet take unreasonable fines or monies, after the manner of covetous worldlings, but to so let them out that the inhabitants thereof may be able to pay the rents, and to live and assist their families and remember the poor. Give them grace also to consider that they are but strangers and pilgrims in this world, having here no dwelling place but seeking one to come; that they remembering the short continuance of this life, may be content with that which is sufficient, and not to join house to house or land to land to the impoverishment of others, but to so behave themselves in letting their tenements, lands and pastures, that after this life they may be received into everlasting habitations."

According to the estimate of Froude, the historian, Ministers of the Crown and their friends had appropriated estates worth in modern currency about five million sterling, and divided them among themselves; yet it was about this time an act was passed by Parliament against "idleness and vagabondrie."

The Act states that "idleness and vagabondrie is the mother and root of all thefts, robberies, and all evil acts and other mischiefs." In this phrase we notice how far Parliament has departed from its tradition and procedure. The wording of the Statutes of Labourers was straightforward, and cantless, though they were undoubtedly iniquitous measures. Further, the Act states that "the multitude of people given thereto hath always been within this realm very great." This on the face of it is a preposterous misstatement of the facts. If we compare the language of this act with that of Gilpin's sermon and the prayer of Edward VI we cannot fail to notice some extraordinary discrepancies. I wish to point out the way this act is worded and drawn up, because it marks the time when the great conspiracy against the English people was revealed in the legislative acts of the ruling class. For a long period before this enactment many attempts had been made to use the political means — legislation — to the full in the landlord's interest to enslave the people; but it was not, despite the Statutes of Labourers, and the revolts of the peasants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, shown until now to be a fullfledged political conspiracy of a Parliament of landlords determined to wrest all common land from the people and enclose and add it to their estates. They saw then that so long as the serfs were free to use the common fields and wastes, wages must be high and prices low. So long as the peasants had an alternative they would not enter the labour market and compete with one another for jobs and depress wages. This consciousness of the economic power of labour over landlords, so long as the peasants were free to use the land, is most notice-

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able in the uprisings of the middle of the sixteenth century. In the year 1549 we see the nobles in strife with the Lord Protector, Somerset. The King and Somerset had striven to avert the dangers of rebellion. Green says: "The agrarian discontent, now heightened by economic changes, woke again in the general disorder. Twenty thousand men gathered round the 'oak of Reformation' near Norwich, and repulsing the royal troops in a desperate engagement renewed the old cries for the removal of evil counsellors, a prohibition of enclosures, and redress for the grievances of the poor. Revolt was stamped out in blood; but the weakness which the Protector had shown in presence of the danger, his tampering with popular demands, and the anger of the nobles at his resolve to enforce the laws against enclosures and evictions, ended in his fall."

Although Sir Thomas More, Gilpin and others realized there was a conspiracy afoot to deprive the peasant of his natural rights, it is, however, to Thorold Rogers, Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, Professor of Statistics and Economic Science at King's College, London, that we owe a great debt for clearly indicating the conspiracy in his minute and masterly work, entitled, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*. He says:

"I contend that from 1563 to 1824 a conspiracy, concocted by the law and carried out by parties interested in its success, was entered into to cheat the English workman of his wages, to tie him to the soil, to deprive him of hope, and to degrade him into irremediable poverty. For more than two centuries and a half the English law, and those who administered the law, were engaged in grinding the English workman down to the lowest pittance, in stamping down every oppression or act which indicated any organized

discontent, and in multiplying penalties upon him when he thought of his natural rights."

Here Rogers has put the case clearly. He leaves no doubt as to methods the political means<sup>1</sup> used to exploit the economic means. It was the use of force and restrictive legislation which reduced the English labourer to "irremediable poverty." The legislative and administrative departments worked together to do this wrong. The Act against "idleness and vagabondrie" shows how desperately the political means were used to disinherit and degrade the peasants. The Act states, "that if any man or woman, able to work, should refuse to labour, and live idly for three days, that he or she should be branded with a red hot iron on the breast with the letter V and be adjudged a slave for two years, of any person who should inform against such idler." Then it goes on to direct the master to feed his slave with bread and water and such refuse meat as he should think proper, "and to cause his slave to work by beating, chaining or otherwise, in such work, however vile it be, as he should put him unto." Employers were empowered to sell, bequeath or let out on hire the services of their slaves. Furthermore, the act permitted employers, "to put a ring of iron about the neck, arm or leg of the slaves for the more knowledge of surety of the keeping of him." If a

<sup>1</sup>"There are two fundamentally opposed means whereby man, requiring sustenance, is impelled to obtain the necessary means for satisfying his desires. These are work and robbery, one's own labour and the forcible appropriation of the labour of others. . . . I propose in the following discussion to call one's own labour and the equivalent exchange of one's own labour for the labour of others, the 'economic means' for the satisfaction of needs, while the unrequited appropriation of the labour of others will be called the 'political means.'"

FRANZ OPPENHEIMER, *The State*, Ch. II, a.

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slave ran away from his master for fourteen days, he was to be branded on the cheek, and become a slave for life. If he ran away a second time, he, when caught, "was to suffer pains of death, as other felons ought to do." Magistrates had power given them "to look out for persons who had been idle for three days, brand them with a V on the breast, and to send them to the place of their birth, there to be kept in chains or otherwise, in amending highways or other service."

During Elizabeth's reign there was some reform and a slight attempt to force landlords back to tillage and employ more labourers upon the land. An act was passed ordering those in rural districts not "to build any manner of cottage or dwelling unless the same person do assign and lay to the same cottage or building four acres of ground at the least. Any one building a cottage without this provision shall be fined forty shillings for every month the cottage is so continued."

In Elizabeth's time many of the people of the European countries sought in England a refuge from religious tyranny and introduced arts and crafts to the people of their new home. This industrial change marks the beginning of a new epoch in production. During Elizabeth's reign vast improvements were made in agriculture and the foundations of England's maritime power were securely laid in a sea-faring class which has an unbroken record of building and manning the greatest fleets for war and commerce. These changes were bound to affect and better the conditions of labour, but it would be unwise to lose sight for a moment of the principle which had been at work affecting the economic condition of the people since the days of the land-free men. I

hope it has been shown clearly that it was not the introduction of machinery, a sudden change from agricultural to manufacturing pursuits, which caused the economic woe. It was the use of the political means by a ruling class to exploit labour, and long, hundreds of years indeed, before an act of Parliament legalized enclosure of land, the political means acted through restrictive legislation while enclosure was carried on by force. It is so necessary to understand this if we are sincere in our desire to grasp the fundamentals of this problem which we call labour and capital. I emphasize this point especially, for we have reached the period in our history when so many historians and economists lose sight of the great principle of English liberty — equal opportunity. Long before the introduction of the factory system, long before Boulton and Watt perfected their invention, and mill-owners "went steam engine mad," as Boulton said, the people had been driven from the land and vast hordes of them roamed the highways utterly destitute. There was labour enough and hunger enough to satisfy any and every demand the towns could make, and during the Commonwealth we read in the *Moderate Intelligencer* "that hundreds of thousands in England have a livelihood which gives them food in the summer and little or none in the winter; that a third part of the people in most of the parishes stand in need of relief, that thousands of families have no work, and those who have, can earn bread only. There are many thousands near to this city of London who have no other sustenance but beer meals — neither roots or other necessities are they able to buy, and of meal not sufficient." After the time of Cromwell the ruling class began to speed up the political

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means and for the next hundred years the work of destroying every vestige of economic liberty was carried on without much protest. The part played in the conspiracy of changing the system of taxation has never been fully appreciated. Richard Cobden, in the House of Commons in 1845, told the story of how the landlords of England had shirked taxation by shifting their burdens to the shoulders of the labouring class. He said:

“Honourable gentlemen claimed the privilege of taxing our bread on account of their peculiar burdens in paying the highway rates and the tithes. Why, the land had borne those burdens before Corn Laws had been thought of. The only peculiar State burden borne by the land was the Land Tax, and I will undertake to show that the mode of levying that tax is fraudulent and evasive, an example of legislative partiality and injustice second only to the Corn Law itself. . . . For a period of 150 years after the Conquest, the whole of the revenue of the country was derived from the land. During the next 150 years it yielded nineteen-twentieths of the revenue — for the next century down to the reign of Richard III it was nine-tenths. During the next seventy years to the time of Mary it fell to about three-fourths. From this time to the end of the Commonwealth, land appeared to have yielded one-half of the revenue. Down to the reign of Anne it was one-fourth. In the reign of George III it was one-sixth. For the first thirty years of his reign the land yielded one-seventh of the revenue. From 1793 to 1816 (during the period of the Land Tax), land contributed one-ninth. From which time to the present (1845) one-twenty-fifth only of the revenue had been derived directly from land. Thus the land which anciently paid the whole of taxation, paid now only a fraction or one-twenty-fifth, notwithstanding the immense increase that had taken place in the value of the rentals. The people had fared better under the despotic monarchs than when the powers of the State had fallen into the hands of a landed oligarchy, who had first exempted themselves from taxation, and next claimed compensation for themselves by a Corn Law for their heavy and peculiar burdens.”

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It was at the time of Charles II that indirect taxation took its place in the fiscal system. When Charles came to the throne he compounded the feudal rights of taxation and the authority over all young heirs and heiresses for a sum of £100,000 a year. To meet this sum a general excise was imposed. The system has been in vogue ever since.

It had taken nearly a thousand years to reduce the English labourer to slavery. And it must be remembered that the freeman was the basis of the old Anglo-Saxon society. "Land was the accompaniment of full freedom, for the landless man ceased for all practical purposes to be free, though he was no man's slave." It had been a long fight, a struggle that was not, however, closed. Two centuries after the days of Edward VI, the English labourer was to resume his struggle, with the landed aristocracy using the political means against him, and show in the last conflict how strong was the spirit of English liberty in the souls of English labourers. It endured all the privations and tortures imposed by as unmerciful a system of tyranny as the world has known, until at last it fell beneath the weight of the political machine.

If we earnestly desire the American labourer to know and feel that he can stand with his head in the air and say with pride, "I am an American citizen," we must recognize the evils of a vicious system of long lineage, unaffected by race, clime, or form of government, which defeat his better purpose at every turn. There is no wrong at work in our country which differs from the wrongs of other lands. In what essential respects does the American labourer enjoy better political opportunity than the English or the French labourer? Let it be said fearlessly

that with us, as with every country in Europe, the labour question is an economic one; and because the powers that use the political means to exploit labour desire no fundamental change, the problem is likely to grow much worse before there is a chance of its becoming the least bit better.

Consider for a moment the position of labour here since we became a belligerent. Two jobs for one man, and the urgent demand for labour sent nominal wage up soaring. Now, with the cessation of hostilities Mr. Schwab sounds an alarm; the situation is critical; we must prepare in some way for the period when we shall slip back to the conditions of two men for one job. In the past this did not alarm us particularly; we took the ups and downs of the labour market with perhaps less interest than we gave to the fluctuation of the stock market. Trade depression came in waves, "overproduction" could not be avoided, and so we smugly hoped for what we called the best. It is all different now. Somehow the idea has got into the minds of a good many people that this country is not so large as they thought it was, large in the sense that there was an unlimited supply of fertile land waiting for willing tillers, and that there would always be vast areas of natural resources unclaimed. Let us make quite sure while there is time of the real economic position of the American labourer, and carefully consider the point put by Mr. Schwab, consider it deeply, earnestly, and constantly. For it seems to me that there is a danger of the American labourer being faced with the problems which affected the English labourer four hundred years ago, the problems which he has had to face down to this day.