

# How Civilization May Decline

By HENRY GEORGE

A civilization like ours must either advance or go back; it cannot stand still. It is not like those homogeneous civilizations, such as that of the Nile Valley, which molded men for their places and put them in it like bricks in a pyramid. It much more resembles that civilization whose rise and fall is within historic times, and from which it sprung.

There is just now a disposition to scoff at any implication that we are not progressing. Yet it is evident that there have been times of decline, just as there have been times of advance; and it is further evident that these epochs of decline could not at first have been generally recognized.

He would have been a rash man who, when Augustus was changing the Rome of brick to the Rome of marble and victorious legions were extending the frontier, would have said that Rome was entering her decline. Yet such was the case. And whoever will look may see that the same cause which turned Roman progress into retrogression is operating now.

What has destroyed every previous civilization has been the tendency to the unequal distribution of wealth and power. This tendency is observable to-day, with greater intensity the more progressive the community. Wages tend constantly to fall, rent to rise, the rich to become very much richer, the poor to become more helpless and hopeless, and the middle class to be swept away. Unless this tendency is arrested, progress must turn to decadence, and modern civilization decline to barbarism.

The conditions of social progress are association and equality. The history of advances in this direction is of struggles and triumphs of personal, political and religious freedom. And the general law is shown by the fact that just as this tendency has asserted itself civilization has advanced, while just as it has been repressed or forced back civili-

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Every classic loses something of its grandeur in condensation. In presenting this digest of Chapter IV, Book 10 of "Progress and Poverty," we aim not only to call attention to the prophetic vision of Henry George in relation to current events, but also to direct the reader to the complete text. Its reading or re-reading at this time is most appropriate. —Ed.

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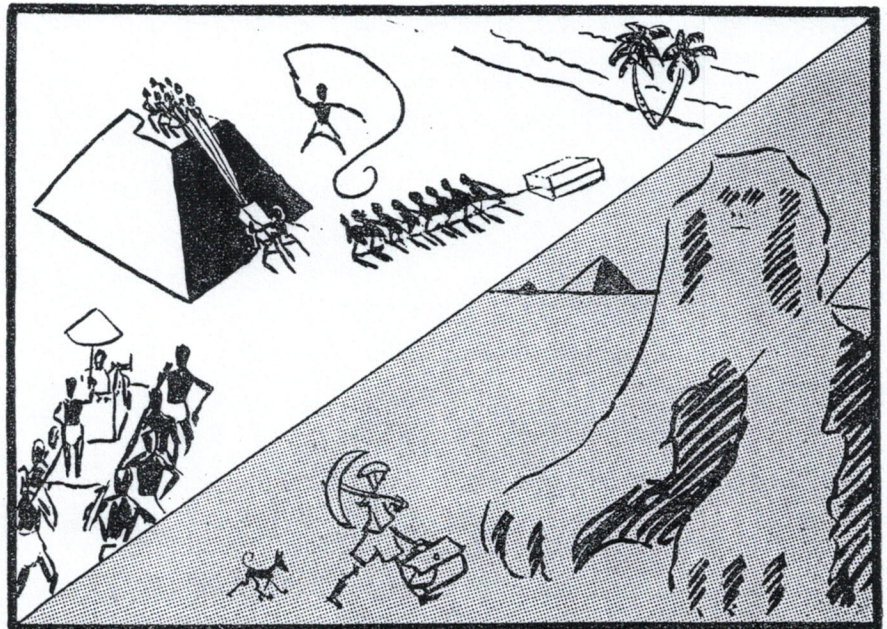
Now, the first effect of the tendency to political equality was to the more equal distribution of wealth and power; for, while population is comparatively sparse, inequality in the distribution of wealth is principally due to the inequality of personal rights. But it is now manifest that political equality does not in itself prevent the tendency to economic inequality, and it is further evident that political equality, co-existing with an increasing tendency to the unequal distribution of wealth, must ultimately beget either the despotism of organized tyranny or the worse despotism of anarchy.

To turn a republican government

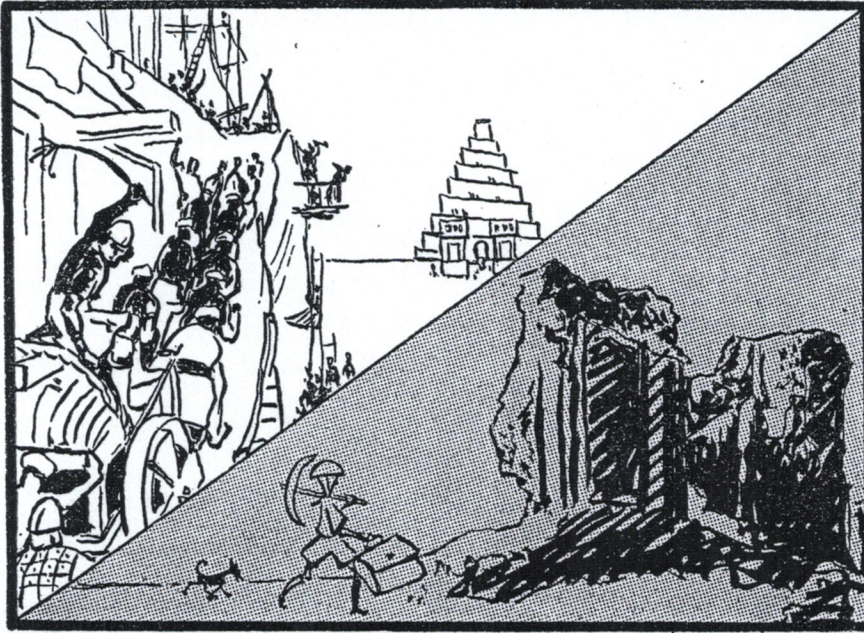
into a despotism the basest and most brutal, it is not necessary formally to change its constitution or abandon popular elections. It was centuries after Caesar before the absolute master of the Roman world pretended to rule other than by authority of a Senate that trembled before him.

Forms are nothing when substance has gone, and the forms of popular government are those from which the substance of freedom may most easily go. A government of universal suffrage and theoretical equality may, under conditions which impel the change, most readily become a despotism. For there despotism advances in the name and with the might of the people. Belted barons led by a mitred archbishop curbed the Plantagenet with Magna Charta; the middle classes broke the pride of the Stuarts; but a mere aristocracy of wealth will never struggle while it can hope to bribe a tyrant.

And when the disparity of condition increases, so does universal suffrage make it easy to seize the



**E G Y P T**



## BABYLON

source of power, for the greater is the proportion of power in the hands of those who feel no direct interest in the conduct of government; who, tortured by want and embruted by poverty, are ready to sell their votes to the highest bidder or follow the lead of the most blatant demagogue; who, made bitter by hardships, may even look upon profligate and tyrannous government with the satisfaction we may imagine the proletarians and slaves of Rome to have felt, as they saw a Caligula or Nero raging among the rich patricians. Given a community with republican institutions, in which the few roll in wealth and the many seethe with discontent, and power must pass into the hands of jobbers who will buy and sell it, or into the hands of demagogues who will seize and wield it for a time, only to be replaced by worse demagogues.

Where there is gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, the more democratic the government the worse it will be; for, while rotten democracy may not in itself be worse than rotten autocracy, its effects upon national character will be worse. To put political power in the hands of men embittered and degraded by poverty is to tie firebrands to foxes and turn them loose

amid the standing corn; it is to put out the eyes of a Samson and to twine his arms around the pillars of national life.

Even the accidents of hereditary succession or of selection by lot, the plan of some of the ancient republics, may sometimes place the wise and just in power; but in a corrupt democracy the tendency is always to give power to the worst. Honesty and patriotism are weighted, and unscrupulousness commands success. The best gravitate to the bottom, the worst float to the top, and the vile will only be ousted by the viler. While as national character must gradually assimilate to the qualities that win power, and consequently respect, that demoralization of opinion goes on which in the long panorama of history we may see over and over again transmuting races of freemen into races of slaves.

As in England in the last century, when Parliament was but a close corporation of the aristocracy, a corrupt oligarchy clearly fenced off from the masses may exist without much effect on national character, because in that case power is associated in the popular mind with other things than corruption. But where there are no hereditary distinctions, and men are habitually

seen to raise themselves by corrupt qualities from the lowest places to wealth and power, tolerance of these qualities finally becomes admiration. A corrupt democratic government must finally corrupt the people, and when a people become corrupt there is no resurrection. The life is gone, only the carcass remains; and it is left but for the plowshares of fate to bury it out of sight.

Now, this transformation of popular government into despotism of the most degrading kind, which must inevitably result from the unequal distribution of wealth, is not a thing of the far future. It has already begun in the United States, and is rapidly going on under our eyes. Our legislative bodies are steadily deteriorating in standard; men of the highest ability and character eschew politics; political differences are ceasing to be differences of principle, and parties are passing into the control of what in general government would be oligarchies and dictatorships.

The type of modern growth is the great city. Here are to be found the greatest wealth and the deepest poverty. And it is here that popular government has most clearly broken down. In all the great American cities there is today as clearly defined a ruling class as in the most aristocratic countries of the world. Its members carry wards in their pockets, make up the slates for nominating conventions, distribute offices as they bargain together, and—though they toil not, neither do they spin—wear the best of raiment and spend money lavishly. They are men of power, whose favor the ambitious must court and whose vengeance he must avoid. Who are these men? The wise, the good, the learned—men who have earned the confidence of their fellow-citizens by the purity of their lives, the splendor of their talents, their probity in public trusts, their deep study of the problems of government? No; they are gamblers, saloon keepers, pugilists, or worse, who have made a trade of controlling votes and of buying and selling offices and official acts. Why, there are many election districts in the United States

in which a George Washington, a Benjamin Franklin or a Thomas Jefferson could no more go to the lower house of a State Legislature than under the Ancient Régime a base-born peasant could become a marshal of France. Their very character would be an insuperable disqualification.

One of the characteristics of barbarism is the low regard for the rights of person and property. Our Anglo-Saxon ancestors imposed as penalty for murder a fine proportioned to the rank of the victim. Piracy, and robbery, and slave-trading, and blackmailing, were regarded as legitimate occupations by earlier peoples; and we take this fact as evidence of their barbarism and our civilization. But it is a matter of fact that, in spite of our laws, any one who has money enough and wants to kill another may gratify his desire with the chances as a hundred to one that he will suffer no great penalty. And if a man steals, even though he robbed those who trusted him; even though he robbed the widow and the fatherless, he has only to get enough, and he may safely flaunt his wealth in the eyes of day.

All this is a matter of common observation. The general faith in republican institutions is narrowing and weakening. Thoughtful men are beginning to see dangers, without seeing how to escape them. And where that course leads is clear. As public spirit is lost; as traditions of honor, virtue, and patriotism are weakened; as law is brought into contempt and reforms become hopeless; then in the festering mass will be generated volcanic forces, which shatter and rend when seeming accident gives them vent. Strong, unscrupulous men, rising up upon occasion, will become the exponents of blind popular desires or fierce popular passions, and dash aside forms that have lost their validity. The sword will again be mightier than the pen, and in carnivals of destruction brute force and wild frenzy will alternate with the lethargy of a declining civilization.

I speak of the United States; what shall we say of Europe, where dams

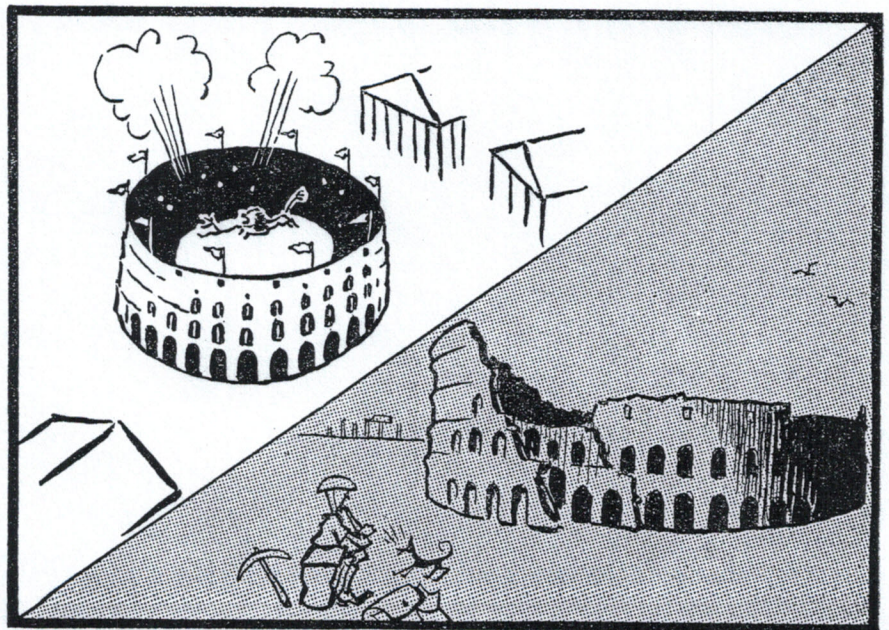
of ancient law and custom pen up the swelling waters and standing armies weigh down the safety valves, though year by year the fires grow hotter underneath? Europe tends to republicanism under conditions that will not admit of true republicanism—under conditions that substitute for the calm and august figure of Liberty the petroleuse and the guillotine!

Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges.

Yet to hint, today, that our civilization may possibly be tending to decline, seems like the wildness of pessimism. For in social development, as in everything else, motion tends to persist in straight lines, and therefore, where there has been a previous advance, it is extremely difficult to recognize decline, even when it has fully commenced; there is an almost irresistible tendency to believe that the movement is still advance. Communities do not go down by the same paths that they came up. The decline of civilization

as manifested in government would not take us back from republicanism to constitutional monarchy, and thence to the feudal system; it would take us into dictatorship and anarchy. As manifested in religion, it would not take us back into the faiths of our forefathers, but into new forms of superstition. As manifested in knowledge, it would not take us toward Bacon, but toward the literati of China.

And how the retrogression of civilization, following a period of advance, may be so gradual as to attract no attention at the time; nay, how that decline must necessarily, by the great majority of men, be mistaken for advance, is easily seen. For instance, there is an enormous difference between Grecian art of the classic period and that of the lower empire; yet the change was accompanied, or rather caused, by a change of taste. The artists who most quickly followed this change of taste were in their day regarded as the superior artists. And so, too, of religion; the superstitions which a superstitious people will add to it will be regarded by them as improvements. While, as the decline goes on, the return to barbarism, where it is not in itself regarded as



**ROME**

an advance, will seem necessary to meet the exigencies of the times.

For instance, flogging\* has been restored to the penal code of England, and has been strongly advocated on this side of the Atlantic. I express no opinion as to whether this is or is not a better punishment than imprisonment. I only point to the fact as illustrating how an increasing amount of crime and an increasing embarrassment as to the maintenance of the prisoners, both obvious tendencies at present, might lead to a fuller return to the physical cruelty of barbarous codes. The use of torture in judicial investigations, which steadily grew with the decline of the Roman civilization, it is thus easy to see, might, as manners brutalized and crime increased, be demanded as a necessary improvement of the criminal law.

There are many things which go to show that our civilization has reached a critical period. These industrial depressions, which cause as much waste and suffering as famines or wars, are like the twinges and shocks which precede paralysis. Everywhere the increasing intensity of the struggle to live, the increasing necessity for straining every nerve to prevent being thrown down and trodden under foot in the scramble for wealth, is draining the forces which gain and maintain improvements. In every civilized country pauperism, crime, insanity, and suicides are increasing. In every civilized country the diseases are increasing which come from overstrained nerves, from insufficient nourishment, from squalid lodgings, from unwholesome and monotonous occupations, from premature labor of children, from the tasks and crimes which poverty imposes upon women. In every highly civilized country the expectation of life, which gradually rose for several centuries, appears to be now diminishing.

It is not an advancing civilization that such figures show. It is a civilization which in its undercurrents has already begun to recede. When the tide turns in bay or river

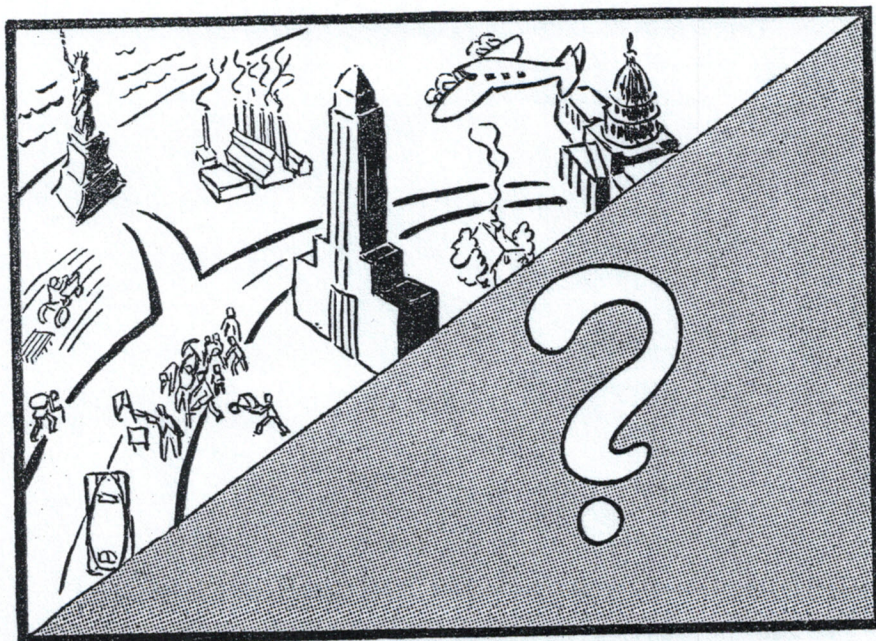
from flood to ebb, it is not all at once; but here it still runs on, though there it has begun to recede. But as sure as the turning tide must soon run full ebb, so sure is it, that though knowledge yet increases and invention marches on, and new states are being settled, and cities still expand, yet civilization has begun to wane when, in proportion to population, we must build more and more prisons, more and more almshouses, more and more insane asylums.

But there are evidences far more palpable than statistics. There is a vague but general feeling of disappointment; an increased bitterness among the working classes; a widespread feeling of unrest and brooding revolution. If this were accompanied by a definite idea of how relief is to be obtained, it would be a hopeful sign; but it is not. The reaction toward exploded fallacies of government shows this. And the vast change in religious ideas that is now sweeping over the civilized world may have most momentous relations. For what is going on is not a change, but the negation and destruction of the ideas from which religion springs. Christianity is not simply clearing itself of supersti-

tions, but in the popular mind it is dying at the root. And nothing arises to take its place.

Now, whether this may or may not be in itself an advance, the importance of the part which religion has played in the world's history shows the importance of the change that is now going on. Unless human nature has suddenly altered in what the universal history of the race shows to be its deepest characteristics, the mightiest actions and reactions are thus preparing. Such stages of thought have heretofore always marked periods of transition. On a smaller scale and to a less depth such a state of thought preceded the French Revolution. But the closest parallel to the wreck of religious ideas now going on is to be found in that period in which ancient civilization began to pass from splendor to decline.

What change may come, no mortal man can tell; but that some great change **must** come, thoughtful men begin to feel. The civilized world is trembling on the verge of a great movement. Either it must be a leap upward, which will open the way to advances as yet undreamed of, or it must be a plunge which will carry us back toward barbarism.



**AMERICA**

\* Delaware never did abolish the whipping post, and has used it many times within the past few years.—Ed.