

The New Leisured Class

By Francis Neilson

By all appearances, we are rapidly approaching the time when the "leisured class," that waxes fat on rent and interest, will become the helots of the bureaucratic class, if, indeed, we are not there already. If so, the old theory of the leisured class will soon be on its way to limbo, and with it will go innumerable theories and ideas such as the notion of the exploitation of producers by landlords, or the socialist's theory of the exploitation of the laborer by the capitalist class.

The private appropriation of rent and the ownership of the tools of production have done long service in the revolutionary armaments of the individualist and socialist, but all without making any considerable dent in the existing economic system. The unequal distribution of wealth has not been checked; the leisured class has diligently gone on owning and exploiting; the producing class, which includes labour and capital, has diligently gone on being exploited. But now there seems every possibility of a new, large element, a distinct class, coming in with a view to a most rapacious exploitation of both the leisured class and the producing class, and possessed of unlimited powers of exploitation.

In short, it appears that the producers and the leisured class have entered upon a fierce struggle for existence with office holders; and the former do not stand the ghost of a show, for all the weapons are in the hands of the latter, except the irresistible weapon of the boycott, which the former have neither the sense to understand nor the courage to use. Indeed, the producers and the leisured class are devoid even of a sense of protest, for the laws made by the office holders do not permit protest.

The Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest seems in for profound disparagement, for the fitness of the fittest is being speedily nullified. The law of the jungle has been superseded, and the law of the bureaucratic parasite is in a way to

The prescience which characterizes certain writings is not an evidence of revealed knowledge or supernatural understanding. It merely indicates the author's ability to reason logically from fundamental principles. The incidence of experience must fit into the pattern so devised.

Francis Neilson wrote many editorials for the original Freeman, the brilliant publication which flourished from 1920 to 1924. We have selected this one for reprint (by permission of the author and B. W. Huebsch, Inc., publishers of The Freeman Book) because of its applicability to current socio-political trends. It appeared first in 1922. It might have been written today. It seems to foretell the future.

rule every activity of life.

How long a time it seems since the day of Herbert Spencer, a solitary voice crying in the wilderness of economic heresy! How long a time it seems since he told us what we were in for! Few paid any attention to him. He was a highbrow, a philosopher, an impractical person; devoid of business experience, a calamity-howler, an alarmist, he put incendiary notions into the heads of ignorant men, and tended to make them dissatisfied with that station in life unto which it had pleased God to call them. Indeed it might be said that in "Social Statics" and "Man Versus the State," Spencer was something dangerously and reprehensibly akin to a bolshevik. He was 'agin' the government. Well, but for all that, here we are, just where he said we would be! The state has just about absorbed the man. The office holders have become all-powerful, and the producers—labour and capital—and the leisured class alike, stand before their indiscriminate voracity, helpless and appalled, like a litter of guinea pigs before a python.

The new leisured class, the bureaucracy, has an immense fecundity. It multiplies its kind like rabbits, nay, like shad, like houseflies. Nothing, moreover, stimulates this reproductive power like a state of war. Many of us remember Washington twenty years ago; many of us remember it in the days of the famous

"billion-dollar Congress." Think of it now! No, there is nothing like a war for making a bureaucracy truly prolific, for multiplying departments of the state, and making a horde of office holders thrive where a handful thrived before. In France, according to a current newspaper item, one person out of every forty in the population is an office holder! Every item of paternalistic legislation foisted upon a country by office holders—housing laws, labor laws, laws providing for this or that commission, this or that board—every such item means a new litter of officials, inspectors and what not; and a consequent new creation of vested interested in office holding, and a new lot of insatiable mouths set sucking at the veins of the producing class and the leisured class.

The office holder unfortunately has not, as far as we can see, a single quality to justify his parasitism. The leisured class that battered on rent and interest had, by and large, some virtues, some sense of obligation, often imperfectly and capriciously expressed, no doubt, but present and active. Its members played a more or less beneficent part in the communal life; a part which, at any rate, was meant to be beneficent. They maintained a kind of official interest, sometimes a genuine and fruitful interest, in the things of the spirit, in literature, art and science. As a whole, the leisured class had some culture, and there is no doubt that under the existing economic system, culture was almost wholly dependent upon the leisured class for such promotion as it got. The leisured class, too, was useful for the service—too little recognized or appreciated—of setting a standard of social life and manners which was for the most part agreeable and becoming.

Of the new leisured class, however, nothing of the sort can be said. It is notably characterized by ignorance, stupidity and venality. Its activities benefit no one but itself. It cares nothing for culture. As for manners, it seems to have been born with a genius for offence. If it is possible

to do a thing either civilly or rudely, the office holder may be depended on to do it rudely. As far as one can see, in short, the office holding class is devoid of any sense of responsibility to anything but its own maintenance in place and power.

As a result of the office holder's pernicious activity, industry has everywhere today become largely a routine matter of cutting losses, reducing staffs and closing plants. Great numbers of producers, the world over, have lost interest in the business of production. Many of them freely say that they have decided to work no longer for the

benefit of government; they are tired of sweating out the wherewithal to feed office holders; and they have shut up shop, taken out what fragments of their capital they could salvage, and retired. As for the leisured class, there is precious little left of it, and what is left is in an immediate way to be less.

Perhaps, after all, the extinction of the producer and the leisured class, is, from their own point of view, not greatly to be dreaded or deplored. The office holders have, as the slang of the ring-side goes, "got them where they want them," but what of

it? True, they might rebel, but they will not, because there are laws against rebellion, and we must all respect these laws because office holders have made them, and because the bar association frowns on disrespect for law. So there seems really nothing for the producer of wealth—the laborer and the capitalist—and the leisured class as well, but to face extinction; and again what of it?

Extinction is preferable, anything is preferable, to the continuance of a condition in which the producer is the helot of the office holder, the servile creature of a dominant state.