

CHAPTER IX

INDIVIDUALISM

THE poverty of the masses of the people, as well as all other social and industrial evils which disgrace our civilisation, are attributed by socialists to an alleged "rampant individualism." Individualism, they teach, superseded the comparatively beneficent, though primitive, mediæval Socialism, and, substituting the will of the individual for the reign of State law, culminated in the degradation of the masses of the people, and the oppression practised by employers during the second half of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Its excesses have been curtailed since, and some slight alleviation of social injustice has been achieved by a partial return to Socialism, *i.e.* by the enactment of laws limiting individual freedom both of employers and employed, such as Factory Acts, Mines Regulation Acts, and others. A perusal of the essays "Historic" and "Transition to Social Democracy" in *Fabian Essays* clearly yields the above results. The following quotations are from the former of these two. On page 30 it is stated:—

"The record of the century in English social history begins with the trial and hopeless failure of an almost complete industrial individualism."

On page 60 this allegation is repeated in similar form:—

"With the masses painfully conscious of the failure of individualism to create a decent social life for four-fifths of the people, it might have been foreseen that individualism could not survive their advent to power."

This allegation, that "almost complete individualism" was the condition recently existing and, but slightly modified, continuing at the present time; that Individualism is responsible, actively or passively, for existing social injustice and the degradation of the masses of the people, is repeated *ad nauseam* throughout the literature of Socialism, and forms the burden of its popular lectures. The conclusion invariably drawn is, that the failure of Individualism compels the adoption of the only alternative system, Socialism. This antithesis imposes on many besides the unthinking, yet it is based on a misconception of the existing system. Individualism, as a social organisation, has not so far had a trial, because it has not yet existed. Advance there has been from the primitive Socialism of earlier times, in the direction of Individualism;—an advance which has largely substituted voluntary co-operation for compulsory co-operation; which has freed industrial activities from the minute supervision of State officials; and has substituted a partial recognition of individual rights for their total denial. But Individualism, the full freedom of each individual, limited only by the equal freedom of all others, has never yet been reached, and the social injustice now prevailing exists, not on account, nor in spite, of Individualism, but through limitations of Individualism imposed or acquiesced in by the State.

Social evolution in the past exhibits a concurrent course of political and industrial emancipation. The political ascendancy of chiefs among savage and barbarian tribes is accompanied by their industrial ascendancy. Industrial operations are carried on under their directions; the political authority controls the industrial activities of the community, supervises or monopolises exchanges with other tribes, and fixes prices. In many, somewhat more advanced, communities, the agency exercising this industrial control is to some extent separated from that exercising political control. Special "trading-chiefs" evolve, who direct the industry and trade of the society. Still later, the "trading-chief" evolves into the government officer, selling permission to produce, superintending culti-

vation, fixing markets and prices, grading goods, and generally exercising strict supervision over all industrial activities.

In France, during the feudal period, the territorial nobles, lay and clerical, being the political heads, exercised control and supervision over the industrial activities of the cultivators and artisans, of the slave and the serf, and even the partially free classes. Apart from such direct control as was exercised by their bailiffs over the cultivators and others engaged on their estates, apart also from the industrial monopolies which they reserved to themselves, they sold industrial and commercial licences. This system was continued by the State, when the subsequent growth of the royal power concentrated the government, to such an extent that it became a legal maxim that "the right to labour is a royal right, which the prince may sell and subjects can buy." Organised on a comprehensive basis by Colbert, the authorisation of occupations, dictation of industrial processes, examination of products, and their destruction if not approved of by State officials, lasted down to the Revolution.

England, Germany, and the Low Countries, besides exhibiting similar features of control by the central political authority, show a specially great development of industrial control by local political authorities. The heads of guilds were identical with the local political heads, and the guilds themselves were partly political bodies taking part in municipal government. The guilds, in their political capacity, restricted the right to labour at their respective occupations to their own members; admission was sold for money-payments and services. Infractions of the monopoly of the guild were punished by fines and other penalties, and the guild-master dictated processes, controlled production, and examined products. Purchases and bargains were made in the presence of officials, and manufacturing processes were controlled by law.

Social evolution in the field of industry, therefore, as well as elsewhere, has been from a primitive Socialism in the direction of Individualism. The advance made in this

particular sphere has been great, but its beneficial effects, great and obvious as they are, have been counteracted by the persistence of restrictions in other directions.

The inquiry pursued in the preceding chapters has shown the contrasting characters of Individualism and Socialism. The essential ethical difference between these two systems of social organisation we saw to be as follows:—

Socialism, denying the existence of individual, natural rights, seeks to reconstruct society in a direction opposite to its past evolution; to make the individual absolutely subservient to the State; to deprive him of his equal right with all others of exercising his industrial faculties as he will, and to compel him to exercise them in such manner, time, and place as he is directed; to annul his right to benefit by his own beneficial acts; and to allot him a reward bearing no reference to the service rendered by him.

Individualism, affirming the existence of equal, natural, individual rights, seeks the further evolution of society in the direction of its past evolution until society shall have become fully subservient to the welfare of the individuals composing it; seeking to attain such general welfare through the removal of the remaining infractions of the natural and equal rights of all individuals—"the freedom of each to exercise all his faculties as he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other"; the right of each to the fullest opportunities for the exercise of his faculties, limited only by the equal right of all others; and the unlimited right of each to benefit by his own beneficial acts, reward being proportioned to service rendered.

The prevailing condition of the vast majority of every people, so far from being that at which Individualism aims, is practically identical with that which Socialism proposes to make general. They are not free to choose their occupations, because in the one direction private ownership of land, in the other the cost of a suitable education, closes many occupations to the masses of the people; they have no full and equal opportunity, frequently no opportunity at all, for the exercise of all their faculties, for the same reasons; and private ownership of land and monopolies

deprives them of the beneficial results of their acts, and reduces their reward to below the value of the services which they render. Individual freedom exists, but, far from being equal and general, it is confined to a small minority of every people, to whom the rest have been subjected and made tributary by organised society—the State. Organised society having established these infractions of equal rights, likewise now maintains them, and it is, therefore, social action, the unjust action of the State, which is responsible for the evils which flow from them. Not such approach to Individualism as has arisen in the slow evolution of social organisation, but the survival of primitive Socialism, is the cause of existing social injustice.

Individualism, regarding the State as a means towards an end; holding that end to be, not the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but the greatest possible happiness of all the members of the State; holding further that this end can be subserved by the State in no other way than by the maintenance of “the freedom of every one to do all he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other,”—accuses the State of sins of omission as well as of sins of commission. Interfering where its interference infringes upon the equal rights of all, the State fails to interfere where such interference is necessary to maintain the equal rights of all. It fails to carry on some of the industries which rest upon special privileges, and to procure adequate compensation for the community with regard to others; it fails to establish equal opportunities of justice by making judicial trials free of charge; it fails to procure equal opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge by making education free in all its branches; in these and in hundreds of minor ways the State has so far failed to assume the functions incumbent on it for the maintenance of equal rights and freedom, while in many other ways, the most important of which alone have been examined, it has assumed functions which unjustly curtail individual freedom and establish inequality of rights.

Social injustice, therefore, prevails, not on account, nor in spite, of Individualism, but through the absence of Individualism, through the active and passive disregard of

equal individual freedom by the State. The removal of social injustice, therefore, is not to be obtained by still further interference with equal individual freedom, and still less by the abolition of individual freedom which Socialism contemplates; it can be obtained only by the removal of all interference with individual freedom which exceeds that necessary for the maintenance of equal freedom for all.

This conclusion is not invalidated by the admission that remedial measures involving further restrictions of individual freedom, such as those already alluded to, may have had beneficial results. For if State limitations of individual and equal freedom have deprived the majority of the people of independence and power to resist capitalistic oppression, as they have done and are still doing, restrictions placed upon the oppressors, otherwise unnecessary, may to some extent alleviate the oppression. Nevertheless it is clear that such consequential interferences would be unnecessary if, through the removal of the original interferences, the balance of power were restored. At their best, moreover, they are merely attempts to alleviate symptoms without touching the cause of social disease.

A true view of social conditions and their causes, however, cannot be obtained by the examination of existing causes alone; past causes also must be taken into account. For in the evolution of social life, as in the evolution of life in general, results do not disappear with their causes, but persist beyond them, and may, in their turn, become causes of further results. The hereditary character of the race under the influence of external conditions produces its customs and laws; but these laws and customs in their turn modify character and conditions. Past infringements of equal freedom, therefore, join existing infringements, as still active causes of social injustice. Let us then glance at some of these past actions of the State in Great Britain, which, though now discontinued, have contributed to the existing degradation of the masses of the people in the mother country and in her colonies.

The origin of the modern machine industry is contemporaneous with the state of greatest degradation of the

working classes in Great Britain. For 400 years and more the State, in which first the great landowners and subsequently landowners and great capitalists held the dominant position, had been engaged in undermining the industrial independence of the peasant and artisan class, through the confiscation of their individual and collective property in the soil and of their trade-funds ; through depressing their wages and increasing the price of the necessaries and comforts of life ; through prohibiting their freedom of movement and combination.

Professor Thorold Rogers states :—

“The pauperism and the degradation of the English labourer were the result of a series of Acts of Parliament and acts of government, which were designed or adopted with the express purpose of compelling the labourer to work at the lowest rates of wages possible, and which succeeded at last in that purpose.”¹

And also :—

“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 expression or act which indicated any organised discontent, and in multiplying penalties upon him when he thought of his natural rights.”²

An enumeration of a few only of the principal measures designed to deprive the labouring classes of their rights, and to degrade them to virtual slavery, will show that these indignant statements are warranted by fact.

The right to accumulate land under settlements, dating from the Norman Conquest and prolonged as a consequence of the Wars of the Roses, as well as the ready acquiescence of corrupt judges in illegal conveyancing tricks, have made land artificially scarce and dear to the mass of the people who want to use it.

¹ *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, p. 6.

² *Ibid.* p. 398.

By successive Enclosure Acts the common land of England was handed over to the lords of the manor, and the people, deprived of their immemorial right to the rent-free use of the greater part of English soil, were made dependent upon wage-labour as their sole means of existence.¹

The confiscation of Church lands in 1536, 1539, and 1548, and their bestowal upon private persons, deprived the people of funds used to a considerable extent for educational and charitable purposes, and hastened the rise in the rental of agricultural land which first impoverished and ultimately extinguished the yeoman class.

By the substitution of excise for feudal dues, 12 Charles II. 1660, and the Redemption Acts of 1692 and 1798, the whole system of land tenure and taxation was revolutionised. Instead of tenants of the Crown, the landholders now became landowners; and instead of the expenditure of the government being defrayed out of the rent which they paid for their land, it was now met out of taxes placed on the labour and consumption of the whole people. As if to leave a permanent record of their turpitude, the landowners left upon the Statute-book the rudiment of their former obligations in a land-tax of 4s. in the pound of annual value—on the valuation of 1692.

The destruction of the guilds and confiscation of their property by Henry VIII. deprived the artisan class of the advantage of these "friendly society" funds, from which they had largely obtained support in youth and old age, loans, widows' allowances, and apprentice fees for their sons.

The debasement of the coinage by Henry VIII. and Edward VI. "was potent enough to dominate in the history of labour and wages from the sixteenth century to the present time, . . . for sixty years prices were more than doubled, while a very miserable increase was effected in the wages of labour."²

While these enactments deprived the labouring masses

¹ For a list (not full) of Enclosure Acts, see Cunningham, *England's Industry and Commerce*, p. 476. He enumerates 3431 separate Acts in addition to the general Act of 1801.

² Rogers, *Six Centuries*, pp. 345, 346.

of all power of independent employment, fastened the yoke of landlordism on their neck, and accustomed them to a lower standard of life, other measures, aiming more directly at their degradation, were devised in plenty.

The Statute of Labourers, 22 Edward III. 1349—constantly re-enacted in subsequent reigns with increased penalties both on labourer and employer—fixes the maximum wages of labour at those customary in 1347, both for agricultural labourers and artificers, and makes their refusal to accept employment at these wages a punishable offence.

Statutes of Henry VIII., Elizabeth, and James I. visit refusal to work for wages practically fixed by a council of employers, with slavery, branding, whipping at the cart-tail, and ultimately death.

The Acts of Settlement 13, 14 Charles II. and 8, 9 William III., forbidding the labourer to leave his parish, made him, for all practical purposes, once more the serf of the local landowners.

Numerous Acts, beginning with 33 Edward I. 1305, and continuing to the beginning of the nineteenth century, forbade labourers, under savage penalties, to combine for purposes which might affect the conditions under which their labour was sold and purchased.

While the wages of labour were thus depressed directly and indirectly by legislative enactments, the labourers' food, clothing, and all other necessities of life were largely increased in price by so-called protective legislation, of which the detested Corn Laws were only the most prominent.

These, as well as other long-continued efforts to enslave the working classes of England, bore fruit at last in their abject condition during the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Utterly impoverished and pauperised, starved physically and morally, they found themselves suddenly confronted with new industrial conditions which, substituting factory for home work, concentrated industry in the hands of a comparatively small number of employers. The State had done its work so well, that the workers had no power of resistance left; could not possibly raise themselves out of the abyss into

which they had been thrust by the State itself. The only hope of ameliorating their condition, therefore, lay in remedial action by the State, *i.e.* legislation which should remove some of the laws through which they had been enslaved, or which should mitigate some of the worst symptoms of this State-created slavery.

Fortunately for the peace of Great Britain, the rivalry between the capitalistic and landowning classes enabled a few far-seeing or philanthropic reformers to induce the State to thus mitigate the disasters which its own action had deliberately provoked. In Great Britain, where the earlier development of machine-industry had intensified these evils more than elsewhere, this reaction also found its earliest expression in Factory Laws, Mines Regulation Acts, Truck Acts, the repeal of Anti-Combination Laws, of laws fixing wages, and of laws of settlement, as well as in the re-establishment of Free Trade. But though these beneficial enactments have removed some of the causes and mitigated some of the symptoms of the degradation of the working classes, other and far more powerful causes of this degradation remain in full force, while others have been added since. The recovery, wonderful as it is, has therefore been partial, and cannot become complete till after the removal of the remaining limitations of and encroachments on equal individual rights. Moreover, as in social matters the removal of a cause is not followed at once by a cessation of its effects, the long-continued repressive action of the State has lowered the moral standard of the masses of the people, largely preventing the cooperative action now open to them, and has established a customary standard of wages and working hours which it has taken fifty years of comparative freedom to modify, but which has not yet been broken through.

The continued action of past interferences with the equal natural rights of all, thus combines with the interferences still maintained to produce the prevailing social injustice. Individualism, by removing the interferences still existing, seeks so to stimulate social life that it may, in due time, cast out the evil results which have flowed from both. As the past and partial social evolution has been

in the direction of better maintenance of equal individual rights, as a gradual diminution of social injustice and of the degradation of the people has accompanied this gradual approach towards Individualism, so further evolution in this direction must produce further amelioration ; and the complete organisation of society on individualistic lines, on the maintenance of the fullest freedom of each limited only by the equal freedom of all others, must ultimately remove social injustice and give to all the opportunity of leading higher and nobler lives.