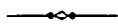


THE ENGLISH POOR



CHAPTER I

PROPERTY THE MAIN CONDITION OF SURVIVAL. THE GENERAL PROPOSITION STATED

THE INSTITUTION OF PROPERTY has been a principal condition of man's survival in the struggle for existence.

He has been able to produce more wealth than was needed to satisfy the wants of the passing hour. Relative to the surplus wealth so created, there has grown up in man's mind the instinct of appropriation, in its fuller development, the legalised principle of property. This has been man's most potent weapon of self-preservation. Ethnologists and jurists can supply us with some of the details of the process, for the instinct which has made property a necessity in all civilised society has been curiously interwoven with fictions of custom, religion, and law. Still out of the obscurity which surrounds the history of primitive ideas one

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fact stands clearly forth, namely, that property owes its origin mainly to the compulsion which is laid on men, as well as on other creatures, to defend themselves from each other and from the hostile forces of nature. At the very outset of his career, as presented to us in history, man appears to be relinquishing the hand-to-mouth life of the animal, and to be already armed with this instinct, which has raised about him the structure of modern civilisation. Each step in human progress has involved a further reliance on the industry which produces wealth, on the principle of property which protects it, and also a wider departure from the conditions which give to animals an uncertain survival in the struggle for existence.

The enormous gap which separates man from the lower animals is one of the principal difficulties in the theory of evolution. The difference is stupendous between the precarious life of the beasts that perish and the ease and certainty with which a civilised society obtains satisfaction of its daily wants. Yet how much of this depends on the familiar institution of property, and all that the term implies !

Let us next consider how this important condition of survival has been shared among the units which form organised and wealth-producing society. This may appear a cumbersome way of dressing up the familiar question, how wealth has been distri-

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buted among the men and women who create it. It enables us, however, to point out an analogy pregnant with meaning.

If we adopt the theory of evolution (and at the present time the lay public must bow to the almost unanimous opinion of scientific men), we must be struck by the fact that though the differentiation of species arises from the cumulative perpetuation of slight differences, yet throughout nature there exists among the members of the same species a large measure of equality. The powers, the instincts, and the important structural features which have enabled a species to survive, are common to the individuals of the species. The individuals who did not possess those powers, instincts, and features, were unfitted for survival and disappeared, and there remained species so clearly and distinctly defined, that for centuries the very idea of evolution and of intermediate varieties was inconceivable. The variations which in the course of biological time produce such stupendous results are in each generation infinitesimal, and only apparent to the very closest observation.

When we turn to man and view his relations to property, the most important condition of his survival, we find a totally different state of things. In most times and in most places property has been unequally divided.

The foregoing considerations appear to furnish

us with an hypothesis that if the ordinary course of evolution had proceeded without impediment, a more equal distribution of wealth might have been expected in human society. It is our object here to investigate and to explain what from our present point of view we may term this *unnatural* phenomenon of modern life.

One reason for this failure of nature to preserve her accustomed equality is very obvious. Among species of irrational beings in a state of nature, the weaklings and the stragglers perish. But man has, so to speak, put himself under his own domestication. Only in primitive society have famine, pestilence, and the other hostile forces of nature, been allowed free scope to gather the weeds from the human garden. In all civilised communities efficient steps have been taken to protect and to perpetuate the race of the unfittest. The unfittest, in the analogy which we are now following, are those who have not inherited, who cannot acquire, or who acquiring cannot keep enough to maintain themselves.

At this place we make no assumption that the laws of civilised society have been just and equitable. We are dealing with facts. It may be that the inheritance, acquisition, and keeping of property involve incidents which cannot be justified by religion or morality; but the truth remains that the unpropertied are those who, by reason of the

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superior strength of others or by reason of their own incompetence, have been unable to conform to the principal law of survival in civilised society.

In the natural course of events lower types have a tendency to disappear. In human society the existence of these lower types has been unnaturally prolonged. The life of the lowest stratum of our population would be just as precarious as the life of a savage, if it were not for the guarantee of maintenance given by our poor law. Below the savage the intermediate varieties have disappeared, and there is an enormous gap in the record of creation. Above the savage every single variety would seem to be preserved. Society at large will not allow any variety to die out, and it has thus perpetuated and extended by an artificial intervention forms of uneconomic existence which would otherwise have disappeared.

Society has felt itself obliged to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves, and it has done so without much apparent inconvenience. For in his struggle with nature man has been beyond measure successful. He has cleared all competitors from his path. The rest of nature is no longer a rival, but a minister to his wants. He can support a rapidly increasing population, and he is in a position to maintain, if he wishes to do so, an army of the unfittest. Mr. Darwin has based his theory of the origin of species on the fact that

there is throughout nature a struggle for existence not only between different species, but between members of the same species. It is not too much to say that man has made all other species his ministers ; but the conflict still rages between the members of his own species ; and, as we have seen, philanthropy obliges him to provide for the unfittest that fall in the battle. This operation we may call the domestication of the unfittest by the fit. Now domestication has at its disposal valid forces for the production and preservation of new species and varieties, and if we pursue our argument to its logical conclusion, we may see reason to suspect that the 'unfit' are becoming specialised into a new parasitic variety of the human species, possessing different habits and different instincts to those which influence the rest of mankind. This action on the part of organised society springs from an instinct which is very deep-seated in the human mind. In its primitive aspect it is merely what we may call, for want of a better name, a gregarious instinct. This original and (if we may use the term without giving it any teleological significance) natural characteristic has been worked on by many forces which have arisen in the history of human progress. Religion and statecraft have seized upon it and turned it to many purposes. Nationality, philanthropy, centralised government, and socialism are all more or less manifestations

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of the same principle ; and throughout the whole history of the world there is a perpetual struggle between the two principles of individualism and socialism.

Very early in the controversy the socialistic instinct set on men's necks a central government, which acted in a narrow class spirit, and devoted itself according to the lights of the time to preserving class distinctions and to making each class perform the duties which an ill-informed legislature thought necessary or important. No affair of life was too trivial to escape the direction of the central authority. This policy has bred disorder. Individuals, and even classes, have been excluded from gaining property ; they have retained amid a growing civilisation the instincts of a savage condition. In the present day men have come to regard seriously the divorce of a portion of the masses from the blessings and advantages of civilisation. Thus the socialistic instinct which is itself responsible for the want of adjustment between property and numbers becomes imbued with a philanthropic zeal to repair the evils of its own creation. It is the business of the State, men argue, to make every one happy and to charge the cost on the rates. The older forms of state socialism were at least more logical. The State claimed the right of directing every act of the individual, he was bound to live in one place, to cultivate

the land in one particular way, to follow such occupation and to wear such dress as the State thought right for him, and, as already said, no affair of life was too trivial to escape the direction of custom and authority. During long centuries the individual has contrived to disentangle himself from the trammels of collectivist authority. At the present day there is in certain quarters a reaction, and state socialism is again in the ascendant. In the old days of state interference the central authority was in the hands of a governing class. They in their wisdom formed some ideal of what a state should be, and proceeded to stretch the whole community to fit this procrustean bed of their own imagining. By laws against usury and regrating of provisions, by sumptuary regulations, by giving each man his place in the vast conception of the feudal system, the central authority based on custom and law dominated and controlled the conduct of the entire population.

At the present day the State is urged to revert again to philanthropic legislation, with a view of attaining a certain ideal. There is no disposition, however, to permit the same restraint on individual liberty. The State is to undertake a more difficult problem ; it may not coerce its citizens, but it is bound to make them happy, and to do so at the charges of the community at large.

In the old days there was some attempt made

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by the central authority to control the rate at which individuals contracted responsibility. At present the only duty of the State is held to be the discharging of the responsibilities which have been incurred by the individual. Such, at least, is the argument of the socialistic dreamer. Individuals may spend their wages on the day they earn them, may marry when they please, may beget a horde of children, may be idle, imprudent, may spend their income in paying a voluntary tax—the State has been offered no right to control these proceedings ; such a claim would be deemed an attempt to return to the foolish sumptuary legislation of mediæval times. The reactionary cry of the present day has not proceeded to this extreme. Therein it appears to be illogical. If out of individual liberty the State is asked to guarantee individual happiness, work for all who are willing to work, and purchasers for all that workers under such conditions can produce, education for all children that may be born, maintenance in sickness and old age for all who have made other use of their income, it is surely-obvious that if it is to have any chance of fulfilling its guarantee it must also have the right to direct and control individual actions when these are engaged in creating responsibilities which they are under no obligation to discharge. It is a one-sided partnership, and one which is bound to result in insolvency, if individuals are to be free to

create liability while society has only the burden of discharging the debt which others have incurred.

Returning from this digression to our analogy, it would appear that the unit of life, out of which all development and evolution proceeds, is an individual unit. It is this unit of an individual man which, in the process of evolution, has to get itself fitted to its environment. It is not possible to say that the socialistic or gregarious instinct is a weapon which individualism may not use. The individualist's ideal of anarchy *plus* the police constable does not entirely banish a centralised authority from human affairs. It is, however, clear that the socialistic instinct is only secondary in importance, and that it is only valuable when it is auxiliary to the use and comfort of individual life. It is easy to realise this as an academic proposition, but returning to the world we find that abstract ideas of society and government as something apart from the individuals who compose them, have been elevated by common consent into realities of far-reaching influence. The collectivist fictions thus created have undertaken duties which they could not perform, have been in turn philanthropic and tyrannical, and have introduced a wide-spread confusion into human affairs. Not only have they permitted the unfittest to survive, but they have actually created and perpetuated uneconomic varieties of human life