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EDITORIAL

FROM NONSENSE TO COMMON SENSE.

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“**M**EN have to return to reality,” says Carlyle; “they cannot live on semblance.” True, very true. Yet, so did live on semblance, to this very day, some grandly, some miserably, the greater part of mankind; and very sore they felt and very angry when some adventurer in truth, rudely breaking the deceitful shell of things, bade the world stand in pure air and full light, free from fiction, prejudice, hypocrisy.

One shell burst, another grew; of thinner untruth, perhaps, and finer nonsense; opaque enough withal to shut out the light; and within the world continued to move, with its sham grandeurs on top, its squalid realities at the bottom.

What is there, then, in that precious shell of false pretense that mankind ever were so anxious to save from exposure? A thing, indeed, most unsightly—human servitude. The human-faced beast of burden, who tamely, painfully, hungrily, carries the world on his mighty shoulders—The Laboring Proletariat.

To keep this strong beast blindfolded and grimy, lest he might some day see himself a man, has been the chief work of rulers in past ages. It is the chief work to-day of our wisest heads; a work of imposture, made possible by the credulity of ignorance.

“It is easy to see how imposters proceed,” observed Bastiat. “If I, entertaining views of this kind, had in some way become the ruler of an ignorant population, I would forbid all examination of my claims; and as reason would be my most dangerous enemy, I would interdict the use of reason. I would taboo, as the savages say, all questions involving my vested rights and established authority. To agitate them, discuss them, or even think of them would be made an unpardonable offense.

Certainly it were the acme of art thus to put the barrier of taboo upon all intellectual avenues which might lead to the discovery of my imposture. What better guarantee of its perpetuity than to make even doubt sacrilege? Yet I would add accessory guarantees to this fundamental one. For instance, in order that knowledge might never be disseminated among the masses, I would appropriate to myself and my accomplices the monopoly of the sciences. But in so far as men need some education and moral teaching, I would be the source of both. Thus I would guide as I pleased the minds and hearts of my people. I would join morality to my authority by an indissoluble chain, and I would proclaim that one could not exist without the other; so that if any reckless individual attempted to meddle with a tabooed question, society, which cannot exist without morality, would feel the very earth tremble under its feet, and would turn its wrath upon the rash innovator. When things had come to this pass, it is plain enough that these people would be mine far more than if they were my slaves. The slave curses his chain, but my people would bless theirs, and I would have succeeded in stamping, not on their foreheads, but in the very centre of their consciences, the seal of slavery.”

Brave words, these! Yet he who spoke them was himself a blind victim of imposture. He was the apostle, not of the freedom of man, but of the freedom of trade upon man; just as others, who spoke as bravely, were the apostles of protection, not to man, but to speculators on the necessities of man. He, who once said, very boldly: “Workingmen, you are robbed!” hastened to add, “God forbid that the effect of my words should be to plant in your hearts the seed of discontent”; for in his opinion the profit system—in other words, robbery by trade—was legitimate anywhere outside of the custom house. A free fight between capitalists for the spoils of labor was the sum and substance of his social economy. The monstrous notion that the workers must enrich one small class, must give that class all the wealth which they produce, in order to get back a few crumbs called wages, was his whole notion of social right and distribute {distributive?} justice.

While ridiculing the superstition of those Spanish peasants, who by hard labor enriched the monasteries and received charity in return; while mocking their naive question, “Who would give us alms if there were no convents?” he seriously asked the skeptic workmen of France. “Who would pay your wages if there were no

capitalists?" There is, I apprehend, many a college in America where this sort of economic dogma is taught. And it must be granted that throughout the land the fallacy on which this teaching is based is still receiving superstitious acceptance. The original fetich of prehistoric times has evolved into a god of wealth, which, through its high priest, the capitalist, gives us our daily bread. And so we raise, carve, ornament and in many ways embellish the empty idol; we fill it with bags of silver and gold; we protect it from sacrilegious hands with all the machinery of law and government; we taboo all questions as to its legitimate authority and beneficent influence; we sternly repress all irreverent questioners as enemies of morality, and, therefore, of society, and in the intensity of our worship we immolate each other, we immolate women and children, on the altar of this great Mammon of our own creation.

Yet, as Carlyle intimates, men must some time detect imposture and strive at least to supplant it by truth, even if they do not quite succeed. History shows that to be the tendency. To those who can grasp its logical thread it shows plainly: 1. That under the influence of notions purely fetichic in their origin, social functions equally necessary to the existence and development of the social body became the means of dividing that {the?} people into unequal and antagonistic classes; 2. that from the moment this unnatural division took place the lower class evolved downward, while the upward evolution of the higher, whenever it occurred, merely increased the unnatural distance of the two; 3. that in the course of time this distance became so great as to threaten the social state itself with complete dissolution, and 4. that whenever this critical point was reached in the existence of a people, the violated law of social statics forcibly reasserted itself to an extent commensurate with the progress that knowledge had made. Of course, no revolution ever rises above the intellectual level of those who make it, and little is gained when a false notion supplants another. But we must some day, at last and forever, cross the line between nonsense and common sense. And on that day we shall pass from class paternalism, originally derived from the fetich fiction in times of universal ignorance, to human brotherhood in accordance with the nature of things and our growing knowledge of it; from political government to industrial administration; from competition in individualism to individuality in co-operation; from war and

despotism in any form to peace and liberty.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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