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Problem of Poverty

By JOSEPH DANA MILLER



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The distribution of wealth follows a natural law. Admittedly—that is, admitted by most students of political economy—the problem of poverty is not one of a scarcity of production. It seems, indeed, to some that it is one of too much production—of “overproduction.” But this superficial explanation may be dismissed as containing its own refutation, though involving the admission at bottom that it is a matter of distribution after all.

Let us not beg the question at the outset by speaking of the unequal—using the term as it should be used, in the sense of inequitable—distribution. For if it is true that inequality of possession is due wholly to the possession of unequal abilities; if the poor are poor because of shiftlessness, intemperance, ignorance or improvidence—then inequality of possession is not inequitable. It is in accordance with the laws of ethics. Men are then only getting their deserts; rewards are in accordance with abilities. In fact, there is then no real problem of poverty at all, but only a problem of character. It would not be necessary to write essays about it. The problem for the Sociologist then would be the abolition of shiftlessness, improvidence and intemperance. And it is the chief indictment that may be brought against many writers on the condition of the poor that this is where they have mainly erred. They have missed the discovery of natural laws in the economic world because they have considered only the problem of the individual and have concluded that the inequality of distribution was due to the presence or absence of industry, application, and intelligence.

A WIDER QUESTION

These qualities have some bearing on the distribution of wealth, and in certain conceivable conditions of society would chiefly determine it. But the question really is much wider. At least they do not determine it now. They have almost as little real relation to the present state of society as to a slave-holding community—and of course the poverty of the slave was not due to the absence of any of the qualities that have been named.

In short, poverty—and this is vaguely recognized even by those who write about it after the manner of moralists—is institutional, not individual. For it is demonstrable that in the qualities of temperance, industry and thrift the majority—and it is the majority who are the poor and only the few who are the rich or even well-to-do—possess as individuals their fair share of these virtues. They are indeed known as the “homely traits.” One may look for them more confidently among the poor than among the rich. Some of these virtues are nurtured by poverty, some made necessary because of it, and some—like thrift, for example—may not be virtues at all. For the chief saint of Christendom was not thrifty; what he taught was the very reverse of the doctrine, and at all events the enforced parsimony of the poor is but the caricature of a reasonable and common prudence.

THE STANDARD OF LIVING

It is curious to contrast, in the writings of many who deal with social problems, felicitations on the higher standard of living that prevails in the United States with enforcement, *ad libitum*, *ad nauseum*, of the lesson of thrift. For every observance of such lesson must result in a lowering of the standard of living, a fact too obvious, one would think, to require mention.

It will help us in solving this question to realize the misery and degradation all around us. But it is not enough to realize it in our hearts—philanthropic impulses of themselves cannot solve the problem. Pity is a half pleasurable emotion and flatters our self-consciousness. It is well to feel it—that is, it is better than nothing. I always recall Lord Houghton's (Monckton Milnes') lines with a little pleasant sensation:

"A sense of earnest will
To help the lowly living,
And a terrible heart-thrill,
If you have no power of giving.
A helping hand to the weak,
A friendly word to the friendless;
Kind words, so simple to speak,
But whose echo is endless."

But all this intensity of the spirit of *noblesse oblige* will not solve the problem for us.

There is, too, another point of importance. What so many observers mean by poverty, what is in their mind's eye to the exclusion of so much else, is only the "submerged tenth." But the problem not only reaches downward, but upward. It includes in these United States a very great majority of all the people. Its phenomena are varying and pervading even when they are not spectacular. And the positive suffering is perhaps the keenest where poverty veils herself from prying eyes, keenest perhaps among the lower middle classes; and least poignant among those whose sense of suffering or mortification has been dulled by familiarity with the presence of poverty; least keen, curiously enough, among those with whom our sociologists, who are only ethical sermonizers, imagine the problem begins and ends.

There must be a natural explanation of poverty—by which I mean an explanation that will predicate the existence of natural laws of distribution. If current explanations of poverty which assign as its origin such individual traits as improvidence and intemperance, are found inadequate, *then it follows that poverty must be due to the violation of natural laws of distribution.* Instead of poverty being inevitable, the conclusion must be that it is unnatural, and therefore to be abolished by obedience to natural laws of distribution. And this discovery is alike fatal to the ecclesiastical explanation of poverty and to the sociologist's plea for an artificial remedy.

WEAVING ROPES OF SAND IN RESCUE WORK

If it be true that poverty is due to violations of natural laws of distribution, then it is certain that measures of relief applied with a view to correct what is supposed to originate in improvidence and intemperance, must prove unavailing. And this is just what we find. To the truth of it every observant charity worker will bear witness, some with reluctance, some almost despairingly. For the chief occupation of most of them is the taxing of ingenuity to devise methods of relief that will not create new forms of pauperism. Charity is a Sisyphus, forever insatiate. The more we perform in her service, the more she demands. Infinitely varied are our forms of relief; we abandon now one method, now another; for each and every one there are authorities of standing who will tell you how impotent they all are. We offer charity, nevertheless, since if we did not men would die in our streets and alleys. Yet with increasing dole arise new shapes actually multiplied by our offerings. Systematic poor relief enables men to give their services to employers at lower wages; and others are forced out to become new charges upon charity. If we offer unemployed men work in our charity wood yards, somewhere in other wood yards men feel the competition in diminished employment. We open up our "bread lines," yet the need of "bread lines" increases rather than diminishes, and under the shadow of Grace Church the charity of a kindly Jew until recently gathered its nightly almoners to rebuke the builders of a Christian temple.

The same futility characterizes legislative and municipal measures of betterment. We pass employer's liability laws, only to have such recognized authorities as Mr. Edward T. Devine, secretary of the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York (*Misery and its Causes*) tell us that it is a serious question whether such laws as prevail in New York and Pennsylvania are not worse than no laws at all. We pass tenement house laws which in many cases would mean financial ruin to landlords who should conform to them. So they remain dead laws in the body of our statutes. Or we build small parks, and rents go up and the poor move away to herd in other quarters. Or we pass laws making it penal to employ children below a certain age in shops and factories—yet the employment of children, authorities tell us, is everywhere increasing.

ATTACKING SYMPTOMS

If we did not do all of these things conditions would perhaps be worse than they are. At least we must do them, since the heart demands it. Yet how futile is all the effort, how small the actual good. And that all we do is so unavailing is proof that we are attacking, not the disease itself, but only the symptoms of the disorder; that we are shallow practitioners in the presence of the economic man, mortally ill of a disorder that we are either too ignorant, or too thoughtless, or in some cases too fearful to diagnose correctly.

There are manifestations that should prove to even the purblind moralist posing as an economist that poverty is institutional, not individual, and that it must be considered in terms of political economy. Among the phenomena to be included in this department, and not referable to the shortcomings of the individual, are panics and industrial depressions which rain their miseries upon the thrifty and the unthrifty alike.

Four hundred years are but a short time in the history of the race. Yet that is the life time of the western continent, disregarding such civilizations as might have existed prior to the landing of Columbus. Yet while men have not changed, industry and art have undergone momentous transformations. Nor need we measure such changes by so long a period. Those that have transpired within the last fifty years have been startling enough. We have witnessed new regions broken by the hardy pioneer, the birth of communities that grew into flourishing commonwealths. We have seen wildernesses transformed into populous, seething towns, with all their wondrous mastery of productive forces, their intricate engineering of trade, their art and architecture—and their infinite misery. For in the neighborhood of the palace crouch the tenement and the slum—and the majority of the people of the great centers are always between moderate poverty and bitter want. Poverty and the fear of poverty haunt the vast majority of those who comprise the inhabitants of our cities where fabulous wealth is piled and land values advance as under the wand of some creative magician.

As the cities grow in wealth poverty is intensified. Great fortunes grow as if by magic, and more and more increase the number of those to whom, herded in miserable quarters, life seems barren of hope and promise. And we marvel at it all—and have not the wit or willingness to trace the phenomena to the source.

THE GENESIS OF THE PROBLEM

What is the meaning of the problem? It is easy to trace its genesis. We know how John Smith when the city was in the course of development bought a half dozen city lots; how land values rose and John Smith became a millionaire. For what he got he rendered nothing in return, added nothing to the store of wealth, gave no service to those whose service he now commands. Being possessed of wealth he did not earn it follows that others must be poorer by reason of having parted with this wealth, for wealth must be earned by labor—there is no other way. What John Smith did others did and are doing, and this concert of action inspired by the same motive produces all

the phenomena of a great city, determines the extent and direction of its development, regulates wages, makes panics and industrial depressions, and creates the extremes of wealth and poverty.

The only way to produce wealth is by access to the natural material of the universe—land. One of the ways—the most effective way—to establish slavery after the cruder form in which man is a chattel has passed away, is by the control of the natural element on which and from which men must live. In the complexities of modern life we lose sight of this. We are confused by the phenomena of trusts, combinations, the many processes of the middlemen, and by the office performed by money in these multifarious relations. But among them is the one primary relation—that of the worker who must use the land to him whose permission it is first necessary to obtain. It always involves a yielding of something for nothing, under the cruel goad of necessity.

As the population increases landowners diminish in numbers while the values of their holdings increase. And wherever land values are highest poverty is deepest. Natural opportunities being artificially restricted men fight among themselves for the chance to work, and a sort of unnatural auction characterizes what we know as the labor market, in which men bid against one another by offering more and more of their time and energy in a feverish contest to obtain employment.

And this is the real cause of the unnatural contest carried on by labor unions against employers. And one must be heartless indeed, who recognizing the nature of the struggle, would condemn labor unions for peaceable or arbitrary methods or judge them harshly when these measures are not peaceable. It is this unseen enemy against which they are organized—not for conciliation, fraternity or sympathy, not for the purpose of arriving at a more amicable understanding with the forces that employ them, as too many amiable theorists pretend. Not for any of these things is labor organized—but for war. None the less is it war because the forces of labor fight in the dark and advance against masked batteries. The imaginary enemy they strike at is the capitalist, the employer, himself at the mercy of those who control the natural opportunities, for if labor starves without land, capital wastes, and both must make equally necessitous bargains. Both must yield all above a bare subsistence. And thus we see what an intelligent knowledge of the forces at work would have enabled us to predict—*interest and wages stationary or falling and land values rising.*

SLAVERY AFTER ALL

The development at which we have glanced is world-wide. It is, too, almost identical in character. In the old world, however, it is, in a way, less obvious, having passed its first excesses. Poverty, too, in the old world is mitigated by a certain condescension on the part of the "upper classes," and a recognition owed by them to the "lower orders." Thus springs a spirit of helpfulness which reaches out and smoothes the rough edges of life for the miserably poor. What survives in Europe, especially in the rural communities, of the old relation of "Master and Man" helps to make poverty more bearable, just as the same element in the days of chattel slavery drew many a sympathetic tear from those who rebuked the abolitionists for their attacks upon the "peculiar institution" of the South. Of course, the wrong involved in any kind of slavery—that which constitutes its real offence, and without which it would not exist at all—is the taking of other men's labor without rendering an equivalent. This may be dignified by any name, or idealized in any way one chooses, but it is slavery still.

But though mitigated in Europe by feudal survivals, features inherent in systems of land tenure and governmental paternalism, poverty in this country has none of these mitigations. We are a free and independent people, very jealous of our greatness as a nation—and this national sentiment communicates itself to us as individuals. The expectation, far more remote in the heart of the peasant of Europe, that he, too, may

some day become rich, makes the average American hold his head very high. He insists, with somewhat too pronounced an insistence, that a poor man is as good as a rich man anyhow—indeed, rather better, since one has only to read the newspapers for their daily records of marital infelicities among the wealthy. Nevertheless, rich and poor dwell far apart in this country. It is a thought often expressed by our sentimental sociologist that a closer acquaintance between them would result in a better understanding and the removal of long-surviving animosities. Hence, slumming parties are sometimes organized—with the only results that privacy is outraged, and enlightenment for those who stand so sorely in need of it deferred a little longer.

THE FARM AS REGULATOR

Having stated the problem in one way we now state it in another. This time in terms of political economy. The remuneration of a worker who engages himself to an employer must be equal to what he could obtain by working for himself, and this is determined by the dearth or cheapness of land. Wherever good land may be had for the asking wages are high. The farm has long been the regulator of wages in the United States. Because of our vast unappropriated and virgin territory, wages have always been higher in this country than in Europe. Adam Smith, writing more than a hundred years ago, noted the higher wages prevailing here, and with his usual intelligence assigned this as the true cause. But with the gradual appropriation of this territory, the falling into private hands of mineral lands, forests, and cattle ranges, empire after empire of fertile agricultural land, together with the work of the speculator in city lots who draws a cordon around the municipality, building his speculative wall ever higher and higher against the worker and in this way creating an artificial congestion—wages began to fall and poverty in the shape we know it to appear.

THE TRUE CAUSE

And to every cause but the true one—I had almost said the obvious one—is the poverty of the worker attributed. When we speak of poverty we think, of course, of the poverty of the workers, though the workers—using the term in its widest sense—are those who produce the wealth of the world, and are therefor entitled to all of it, a fact which never seems to occur to those who pose as economists. Many remedies are suggested, usually in the nature of restrictions, protective tariffs, currency legislation, a stopping or limiting of immigration, national ownership of railroads, co-operation and the like.

It is not to be a person of one idea to insist that these proposed palliatives be dismissed until one thing is tried—that we cease once for all from charging labor for permission to use the earth. We must do for the poor what Tolstoy insisted we were not willing to do though willing to do almost everything else—"get off their backs." We have a right to be impatient with any and all of these remedial measures which contemplate the retention of the system of enforced tribute from the workers. There may be much to be said in favor of ameliorative reforms, but there is only one thing that is really fundamental. Man's relation to the earth is a primary relation. It does not change. Man's equal right to land must first be recognized. Monopoly of its ownership must first be destroyed; all must be landowners—or, if you please, none must be. But no one must be permitted to charge another for the use of land; and such inequality of undisturbed possession as exists must be equalized by the payment of the value which comes to land by the presence of population into the common treasury.

THE LIGHT BREAKS

Here and there in the last three hundred years some solitary voice has been raised urging that the cause of low wages and unemployment is the divorce of man from the land, but it was as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Now it was Gerrard

Winstanley in England, later that group of Frenchmen, teachers of the *impot unique*, whose special doctrine, whatever its merit, was wrecked in the storm of fury that broke over France at the birth of the Revolution. Then in 1850 came Patrick Edward Dove, a wealthy landlord of Scotland, with his "Theory of Human Progression," which Charles Sumner hailed as an epoch-making book, but which was almost utterly forgotten till resurrected from obscurity by its republication a few years ago. Then in 1879 came the publication of "Progress and Poverty."

In this work was lit the spark that became a world-flaming torch, a torch whose light flames for a new civilization.

And what of the man who set these fires burning? The childish myth of David and Goliath seems to prefigure, though imperfectly and feebly, this later apparition. A giant wrong; a nobler David; friends frankly distrustful of the weapon he would employ against this most formidable of inequities.

Prophet, thinker, martyr! Closing a life of service in a supreme apotheosis of self-sacrifice. It is no small thing, it should be acclaimed with a peculiar pride wherever men and women of our faith shall gather, that the generation which bore Henry George selected its noblest spirit as the bearer of its most significant message!