

4

The Iniquity of Civilization

by

J. B. Chamberlain

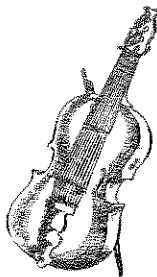
Radio Station W. O. L. Washington

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The Iniquity of Civilization

That we should do unto others as we would have them do to us -- that we should respect the rights of others as we would have our own rights respected, is not a mere counsel of perfection to the individual, but it is The Law to which we must conform our social institutions and national policy if we would secure the blessings of abundance and peace.

Every intelligent and thoughtful person knows that the house-keeping of the nation -- American political economy, is wicked and wasteful. Never has America been so entangled in the wiles of foes or in such dire need of friends. She might easily excel in achievement but America is complacent with its virtuous pretense. There are eight countries where the death rate is lower than here and there is no country where motherhood is such serious undertaking. ~~Here, men die of starvation and women of overwork, in a sorry contrast to the pictures from jungle land in the National Geographic, of contented, indolent men, happy babies and happy mothers.~~ There are more ofime, more murders and suicides in any one of our great cities than in some of the European countries. Our jails, prisons and institutions are like some frightful oubliette, and our courts deserve the contempt bestowed upon them. Our newspapers maintain a barrage of fictitious news, designed to divert attention from the truth. In our schools and colleges, youth is deceived and deluded and so thoroughly mal-educated that fact material seems too preposterous to merit a place in economic discussion.



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It is related that once upon a time, in the days of square-rigged ships, a traveler made very favorable impression on a king in Siam. They became quite chummy and the king was greatly interested in the marvelous things of the outside world, ^{the traveler related} of which little was known in Siam. One day there was ~~some~~ mention ~~made~~ of its being cold and the traveler told the king that it was so cold part of the year in his country that water became solid and that an elephant could safely walk across a river without breaking thru its solid surface. Now ice was something the king had never seen but he knew his elephants and all this was preposterous, so he concluded, and logically, that the traveler had been having fun at his expense right along -- and that spelled t r o u b l e for the traveler.

Everyone has, at one time or another, found himself in an uncomfortable predicament because he had truth to tell, and, as everybody knows, there have been times when truth-telling was a perilous undertaking. We reiterate at every opportunity that political economy is the most important subject for studious consideration that confronts the individual, but fundamental truth seems to be a liability rather than an asset in introducing reform suggestions.

Most good people "know", just as the king "knew" that what we relate about existing conditions as a starting point for discussion is the preposterous, wicked, radical effusion of a rattle-brained mal-content. This is more than a misfortune, it is a tragedy, because good people who think wrong do more harm in the housekeeping of the nation than the knaves, of



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whom there are comparatively few.

Our great, great grandfathers made a living with few and crude tools, no machinery, slow and laborious methods and no advantageous interchange of product, so that it seems reasonable to assume that in this generation, with the help of marvelous inventions, inspired and stimulated by social contact, directed by the accumulated knowledge of the ages, all of us ought to have sufficient, most of us abundance, the few, physically unable to make social contribution, find themselves well provided for by spontaneous, sympathetic and graceful charity, and our prisons empty -- a picture existing conditions do not reflect. If such a conclusion is reasonable, and it surely is, it seems worth while to discover why most of us are so unreasonably poor and a few so unreasonably rich, why in the midst of plenty, we find the poverty that pinches and hurts and all the evils that flow from want and the fear of want.

A vast majority of us are reasonably honest and unreasonably gullible as young people, tight-minded and conservative by the time we are influential, and it is with such majority that logical reform must contend. It is comparatively easy to assail the knaves of the opposition and discredit them, but it is difficult to enlist good people in an effort to reform things they have been brought up to consider inevitable or right. We have habits in thought, as in other things and it is difficult to let go of an old idea, we have flattered with our confidence, when confronted with a new one that conflicts with it.



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4.

A week ago there was an economic conference contemplating slum elimination, and in all the talk and discussion and resolutions there was but one glimpse of a radical suggestion, -- that is the elimination of the cause that produces the slum environment, into which people are driven by their poverty.

If we take any one of our social ills and diagnose it carefully, thread our way back thru all the intricacies of the social fabric, we will find that poverty is the largest contributing factor. The people that "we" the rich and honorable, the philanthropic and the sanctimonious are so solicitous about are the poverty stricken. That particular "we" assumes evil institutions and customs to be a part of Divine Providence and cheerfully or tearfully makes a lot of fuss over the wreckage. They remind one of

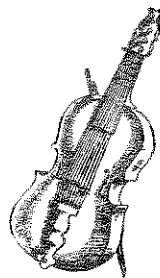
The considerate crocodile
That lay on the bank of the river Nile,
And he swallowed a fish, with a face of woe
While his tears flowed fast as the river below.

I am mourning, he said, the untimely fate
Of the dear little fish, I just now ate.

or, to put it more bluntly and quote Tolstoi who said:

"The rich and honorable are willing to do anything
for the poor -- except to get off their backs."

Rational radicals regard injustice everywhere, custom-buttressed and respected or not, as the work of the devil and have spunk enough to assail it. Slum surroundings do not entice people. They are driven into slums by monopolistic prices elsewhere that they are unable to pay and the slum congestion is the result of a co-operative endeavor to exist.



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5.

The money we call rent is not all rent. Part of it is for the use of the land and that is rent. The rest of it is for the use of the labor made building and is "interest". It seems obvious that a man who builds a house should get something for the use of it and that return for invested labor is interest, but that does not justify one man in collecting rent from another man for the use of a place to put a house because nature supplied such place.

Senator LaFollet recently said that the present depression with its jobless, homeless people was worse than others because we no longer had a frontier to absorb surplus labor. ~~One might think it never occurred to him that~~ ^{it seems to have} there was land a plenty, and close by, not in use, that would better meet the need.

Let any fair-minded person confront himself with the problem that confronts these slum people. His home-site is to be made a park-site. Tax payers money is to buy the land for ten times what it cost the present holder and next month he must move. Make this your question. Will you move into a better home in a better environment? Will you move up a notch or down a notch? Every social disturbance moves the few and the many, relatively, farther apart, and with the slum environment gone those who live there will, for the most part, find themselves dependent on charity. "The destruction of the poor is their poverty."

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

February 13, 1934

My dear Mr. Chamberlain:

Mrs. Roosevelt asks me to tell you she is sorry your letter of February 2nd did not reach her desk until too late for her to listen to your address.

She appreciates your thoughtfulness in letting her know about it.

Very sincerely yours,

Malvina T. Schneider

Secretary to
Mrs. Roosevelt

Mr. J. B. Chamberlain
Post Office Box 49
Washington, D. C.

6.

The single glimpse of fundamental truth and radical suggestion in the gathering a week ago yesterday was in the shortest address of the meeting by Mrs. Roosevelt. She said: "The economic thing which makes low cost housing so difficult is that most people who own property have looked upon land, not as a regular source of income, but as an investment on which to make a great deal of money. They have exploited their property expecting to get a great deal out of it more than they put into it. That situation will have to change. I feel that it will have to come about through public opinion. Holders of property who exploit human beings must be made to feel that they are bad citizens in their communities." End of quote

If she had said: "holders of property who exploit human beings should be deprived of their legal right to do so", that would have been the right answer and the way to eliminate the slums is to make slum holding unprofitable.

Nothing finer has been done than the President's birth-day party contribution to the Warm Springs Foundation but something far better might be done if the spark of suggestion in Mrs. Roosevelt's talk could be fanned into a flame of enthusiasm for economic righteousness.

It is lamentable that we have infantile paralysis to contend with but it is more lamentable that we have ten million hungry, ill-cared for children today and that there will be hungry children in all the tomorrows until land monopoly is eliminated -- and it can be done with a stroke of the pen.

Man, in civilized countries, is the only animal in the world that goes hungry and without shelter in the midst of abundance, a victim of that iniquity that permits the monopolization of his opportunity to build his own habitation and support himself.

The land of the world belongs to all the people of the world and the land of a state to all the people in the state. It is common property and those permitted the exclusive occupation of any portion of it should pay into a common fund whatever such permission is reasonably worth. That common fund should be used to defray the cost of governmental functions and theoretically it would be exactly enough to make taxation for such purpose unnecessary.

It would insure to all men access to natural resources and a livelihood, conform our civilization to the inexorable demands of justice, remove the cause of the unnatural inequality in the distribution of wealth and power, abolish poverty, terminate war -- more it would do, for them, with want destroyed, with greed changed to noble passion; with the fraternity that is born of equality taking the place of the jealousy and fear that now arrays men against each other; with the mental power loosened by conditions that give to the humblest comfort and leisure who shall measure the height to which our civilization may soar.

Surely then, "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf, the young lion and the fatling together -- and a little child shall lead them."