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The Thralldom of Names

IT behooves our people never to fall under the thralldom of names, and least of all to be misled by designing people who appeal to the reverence for, or antipathy toward, a given name in order to achieve some alien purpose. Of course such misuse of names is as old as the history of what we understand when we speak of civilized mankind. The rule of a mob may be every whit as tyrannical and oppressive as the rule of a single individual, whether or not called a dictator; and the rule of an oligarchy, whether this oligarchy is a plutocracy or a bureaucracy, or any other small set of powerful men, may in its turn be just as sordid and just as bloodthirsty as that of a mob. But the apologists for the mob or oligarchy or dictator, in justifying the tyranny, use different words. The mob leaders usually state that all that they are doing is necessary in order to advance the cause of "liberty," while the dictator and the oligarchy are usually defended upon the ground that the course they follow is absolutely necessary so as to secure "order." Many excellent people are taken in by the use of the word "liberty" at the one time, and the use of the word "order" at the other, and ignore the simple fact that despotism is despotism, tyranny tyranny, oppression oppression, whether committed by one individual or by many individuals, by a state or by a private corporation.

Moreover, tyranny exercised on behalf of one set of people is very apt in the long run to damage especially the representatives of that very class by the violence of the reaction which it invites. The course of the second republic in France was such, with its mobs, its bloody civil tumults, its national workshops, its bitter factional divisions, as to invite and indeed insure its overthrow and the establishment of a dictatorship; while it is needless to mention the innumerable instances in which the name of order has been invoked to sanction tyranny, until there has finally come a reaction so violent that both the tyranny and all public order have disappeared together. The second empire in France led straight up to the Paris Commune; and nothing so well shows how far the French people had advanced in fitness for self-government as the fact that the hideous atrocities of the Commune, which rendered it imperative that it should be rigorously repressed, nevertheless did not produce another violent reaction, but left the French republic standing, and the French people as resolute in their refusal to be ruled by a king as by a mob.

Of course when a great crisis actually comes, no matter how much people may have been misled by names, they promptly awaken to their unimportance. To the individual who suffered under the guillotine at Paris, or in the drownings in the Loire, or to the individual who a century before was expelled from his beloved country, or tortured, or sent to the galleys, it made no difference whatever that one set of acts was performed under Robespierre and Danton and Marat in the name of liberty and reason and the rights of the people, or that the other was performed in the name of order and authority and religion by the direction of the great monarch. Tyranny and cruelty were tyranny and cruelty just as much in one case as in the other, and just as much when

those guilty of them used one shibboleth as when they used another. All forms of tyranny and cruelty must alike be condemned by honest men.

We in this country have been very fortunate. Thanks to the teaching and the practice of the men whom we most revere as leaders, of the men like Washington and Lincoln, we have hitherto escaped the twin gulfs of despotism and mob rule, and we have never been in any danger from the worst forms of religious bitterness. But we should therefore be all the more careful, as we deal with our industrial and social problems, not to fall into mistakes similar to those which have brought lasting disaster on less fortunately situated peoples. We have achieved democracy in politics just because we have been able to steer a middle course between the rule of the mob and the rule of the dictator. We shall achieve industrial democracy because we shall steer a similar middle course between the extreme individualist and the Socialist, between the demagogue who attacks all wealth and who can see no wrong done anywhere unless it is perpetrated by a man of wealth, and the apologist for the plutocracy who rails against so much as a restatement of the eighth commandment upon the ground that it will "hurt business."

First and foremost, we must stand firmly on a basis of good sound ethics. We intend to do what is right for the ample and sufficient reason that it is right. If business is hurt by the stern exposure of crookedness and the result of efforts to punish the crooked man, then business must be hurt, even though good men are involved in the hurting, until it so adjusts itself that it is possible to prosecute wrong-doing without stampeding the business community into a terror-struck defence of the wrong-doers and an angry assault upon those who have exposed them. On the other hand, we must beware, above all things, of being misled by wicked or foolish men who would condone homicide and violence, and apologize for the dynamiter and the assassin because, forsooth, they choose to take the ground that crime is no crime if the wicked man happens also to have been a shiftless and unthrifty or lazy man who has never amassed property. It is essential that we should wrest the control of the government out of the hands of rich men who use it for unhealthy purposes, and should keep it out of their hands; and to this end the first requisite is to provide means adequately to deal with corporations, which are essential to modern business, but which, under the decisions of the courts, and because of the short-sightedness of the public, have become the chief factors in political and business debasement. But it would be just as bad to put the control of the government into the hands of demagogues and visionaries who seek to pander to ignorance and prejudice by penalizing thrift and business enterprise, and ruining all men of means, with, as an attendant result, the ruin of the entire community. The tyranny of politicians with a bureaucracy behind them and a mass of ignorant people supporting them would be just as insufferable as the tyranny of big corporations. The tyranny would be the same in each case, and it would make no more difference that one was called individualism and the other collectivism than it made in French history whether tyranny was exercised in the name of the Commune or of the Emperor, of a committee of national safety, or of a king.

The sinister and adroit reactionary, the sinister and violent radical, are alike in this, that each works in the end for the destruction of the cause that he professedly champions. If the one is left to his own devices he will make such an exhibition of brutal and selfish greed as to utterly discredit the entire system of government by individual initiative; and if the other is allowed to work his will he, in his turn, will make men so loathe interference and control by the state that any abuses connected with the untrammelled control of all business by private individuals will seem small by comparison. We can not afford to be empirical. We must judge each case on its merits. It is absolutely indispensable to foster the spirit of individual initiative, of self-reliance, of self-help; but this does not mean that we are to refuse to face facts and to recognize that the

growth of our complex civilization necessitates an increase in the exercise of the functions of the state. It has been shown beyond power of refutation that unrestricted individualism, for instance, means the destruction of our forests and our water supply. The dogma of "individualism" can not be permitted to interfere with the duty of a great city to see that householders, small as well as big, live in decent and healthy buildings, drink good water, and have the streets adequately lighted and kept clean. Individual initiative, the reign of individualism, may be crushed out just as effectively by the unchecked growth of private monopoly, if the state does not interfere at all, as it would be crushed out under communism, or as it would disappear, together with everything else that makes life worth living, if we adopted the tenets of the extreme Socialists.

In 1896 the party of discontent met with a smashing defeat for the very reason that, together with legitimate attacks on real abuses, they combined wholly illegitimate advocacy even of the methods of dealing with these real abuses, and in addition stood for abuses of their own which, in far-reaching damage, would have cast quite into the shade the effects of the abuses against which they warred. It was essential both to the material and moral progress of the country that these forces should be beaten; and beaten they were, overwhelmingly. But the genuine ethical revolt against these forces was aided by a very ugly materialism, and this materialism at one time claimed the victory as exclusively its own, and advanced it as a warrant and license for the refusal to interfere with any misdeeds on the part of men of wealth. What such an attitude meant was set forth as early as 1896 by an English visitor, the journalist Steevens, a man of marked insight. Mr. Steevens did not see with entire clearness of vision into the complex American character; it would have been marvellous if a stranger of his slight experience here could so have seen; but it would be difficult to put certain important facts more clearly than he put them. Immediately after the election he wrote as follows (I condense slightly):

"In the United States legal organization of industry has been left wholly wanting. Little is done by the state. All is left to the initiative of the individual. The apparent negligence is explained partly by the American horror of retarding mechanical progress, and partly by their reliance on competition. They have cast overboard the law as the safeguard of individual rights, and have put themselves under the protection of competition, and of it alone. Now a trust in its exacter acceptation is the flat negation of competition. It is certain that commercial concerns make frequent, powerful, and successful combinations to override the public interest. All such corporations are left unfettered in a way that to an Englishman appears almost a return to savagery. The defencelessness of individual liberty against the encroachment of the railway companies, tramway companies, nuisance-committing manure companies, and the like, is little less than horrible. Where regulating acts are proposed, the companies unite to oppose them; where such acts exist, they bribe corrupt officials to ignore them. When they want any act for themselves, it can always be bought for cash. [This is of course a gross exaggeration; and allusion should have been made to the violent and demagogic attacks upon corporations, which are even more common than and are quite as noxious as acts of oppression by corporations.] They maintain their own members in the legislative bodies—pocket assemblymen, pocket representatives, pocket senators. In the name of individual freedom and industrial progress they have become the tyrants of the whole community. Lawless greed on one side and lawless brutality on the other—the outlook frowns. On the wisdom of the rulers of the country in salving or imbittering these antagonisms—still more, on the fortune of the people in either modifying or hardening their present conviction that to get dollars is the one end of life—it depends whether the future of the United States is to be of eminent beneficence or unspeakable disaster. It may

stretch out the light of liberty to the whole world. It may become the devil's drill-ground where the cohorts of anarchy will furnish themselves against the social Armageddon."

Mr. Steevens here clearly points out, what every one ought to recognize, that if individualism is left absolutely uncontrolled as a modern business condition the curious result will follow that all power of individual achievement and individual effort in the average man will be crushed out just as effectively as if the state took absolute control of everything. It would be easy to name several big corporations each one of which has within its sphere crushed out all competition so as to make, not only its rivals, but its customers as dependent upon it as if the government had assumed complete charge of the product. It would, in my judgment, be a very unhealthy thing for the government thus to assume complete charge; but it is even more unhealthy to permit a private monopoly thus to assume it. The simple truth is that the defenders of the theory of unregulated lawlessness in the business world are either insincere or blind to the facts when they speak of their system as permitting a healthy individualism and individual initiative. On the contrary, it crushes out individualism, save in a very few able and powerful men who tend to become dictators in the business world precisely as in the old days a Spanish-American president tended to become a dictator in the political world.

Moreover, where there is absolute lawlessness, absolute failure by the state to control or supervise these great corporations, the inevitable result is to favor, among these very able men of business, the man who is unscrupulous and cunning. The unscrupulous big man who gets complete control of a given forest tract, or of a network of railways which alone give access to a certain region, or who, in combination with his fellows, acquires control of a certain industry, may crush out in the great mass of citizens affected all individual initiative quite as much as it would be crushed out by state control. The very reason why we object to state ownership, that it puts a stop to individual initiative and to the healthy development of personal responsibility, is the reason why we object to an unsupervised, unchecked monopolistic control in private hands. We urge control and supervision by the nation as an antidote to the movement for state socialism. Those who advocate total lack of regulation, those who advocate lawlessness in the business world, themselves give the strongest impulse to what I believe would be the deadening movement toward unadulterated state socialism.

There must be law to control the big men, and therefore especially the big corporations, in the industrial world in the interest of our industrial democracy of to-day. This law must be efficient, and therefore it must be administered by executive officers and not by lawsuits in the courts. If this is not done the agitation to increase out of all measure the share of the government in this work will receive an enormous impetus. The movement for government control of the great business corporations is no more a movement against liberty than a movement to put a stop to violence is a movement against liberty. On the contrary, in each case alike it is a movement for liberty; in the one case a movement on behalf of the hard-working man of small means, just as in the other case it is a movement on behalf of the peaceable citizen who does not wish a "liberty" which puts him at the mercy of any rowdy who is stronger than he is. The huge, irresponsible corporation which demands liberty from the supervision of government agents stands on the same ground as the less dangerous criminal of the streets who wishes liberty from police interference.

But there is an even more important lesson for us Americans to learn, and this also is touched upon in what I have quoted above. It is not true, as Mr. Steevens says, that Americans feel that the one end of life is to get dollars; but the statement contains a very unpleasant element of truth. The hard materialism of greed is just as objectionable as the hard materialism of

brutality, and the greed of the “haves” is just as objectionable as the greed of the “have-nots,” and no more so. The envious and sinister creature who declaims against a great corporation because he really desires himself to enjoy what in hard, selfish, brutal fashion the head of that great corporation enjoys, offers a spectacle which is both sad and repellent. The brutal arrogance and grasping greed of the one man are in reality the same thing as the bitter envy and hatred and grasping greed of the other. That kind of “have” and that kind of “have-not” stand on the same eminence of infamy. It is as important for the one as for the other to learn the lesson of the true relations of life. Of course, the first duty of any man is to pay his own way, to be able to earn his own livelihood, to support himself and his wife and his children and those dependent upon him. He must be able to give those for whom it is his duty to care food and clothing, shelter, medicine, an education, a legitimate chance for reasonable and healthy amusements, and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and power which will fit them in their turn to do good work in the world. When once a man has reached this point, which, of course, will vary greatly under different conditions, then he has reached the point where other things become immensely more important than adding to his wealth. It is emphatically right, indeed, I am tempted to say, it is emphatically the first duty of each American, “to get dollars,” as Mr. Steevens contemptuously phrased it; for this is only another way of saying that it is his first duty to earn his own living. But it is not his only duty, by a great deal; and after the living has been earned getting dollars should come far behind many other duties.

Yet another thing. No movement ever has done or ever will do good in this country, where assault is made, not upon evil wherever found, but simply upon evil as it happens to be found in a particular class. The big newspaper, owned or controlled in Wall Street, which is everlastingly preaching about the iniquity of laboring men, which is quite willing to hound politicians for their misdeeds, but which with raving fury defends all the malefactors of great wealth, stands on an exact level with, and neither above nor below, that other newspaper whose whole attack is upon men of wealth, which declines to condemn, or else condemns in apologetic, perfunctory, and wholly inefficient manner, outrages committed by labor. This is the kind of paper which by torrents of foul abuse seeks to stir up a bitter class hatred against every man of means simply because he is a man of means, against every man of wealth, whether he is an honest man who by industry and ability has honorably won his wealth, and who honorably spends it, or a man whose wealth represents robbery and whose life represents either profligacy or at best an inane, useless, and tasteless extravagance. This country can not afford to let its conscience grow warped and twisted, as it must grow if it takes either one of these two positions. We must draw the line, not on wealth nor on poverty, but on conduct. We must stand for the good citizen because he is a good citizen, whether he be rich or whether he be poor, and we must mercilessly attack the man who does evil, wholly without regard to whether the evil is done in high or low places, whether it takes the form of homicidal violence among members of a federation of miners, or of unscrupulous craft and greed in the head of some great Wall Street corporation.