

Two Texts

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I HAVE come across two announcements during the last week upon which I feel moved to write, for they are closely allied in spirit and both (in my judgement) heretical — and therefore calculated to do harm to the social philosophy which I have most at heart. The first I found in an article which appeared in *THE AMERICAN REVIEW* from the pen of the late Mr. Penty.* The second I read under I know not what authorship in a general article which appeared in one of the American papers a few weeks ago.

The first pronouncement was to the effect that we could hardly restore economic freedom and re-establish private property, which is the sole guarantee of economic freedom, in the modern world unless we got rid of machinery; or at any rate modified the present wide use of machinery. The second pronouncement, briefer and of much narrower scope, was a protest against the resistance offered (by those who seek the restoration of economic freedom) to the power of modern capitalist organization — individual capitalist controllers, whether as managers or controllers, or millionaire owners of stock. The writer said that instead of criticizing and opposing concentrated capitalist control of production we should do better to fix our attention upon good wages, secure

* "The Restoration of Property" by A. J. Penty, *THE AMERICAN REVIEW*, February, 1937.

employment, and so forth, "*leaving the management of capital to those who handle it best*".

I will take the second and least important of these two judgements first. It is a very general attitude of mind even among those who desire a return to sane living. It is universal in the mass of industrialized men, outside the comparatively small group of reformers.

It takes all sorts of forms; among others the form of presupposing that the man who has made a large fortune by handling large concentrations of capital in a particular fashion is to be admired as the superior of his fellows; as a man endowed with special gifts like those of the great artist or the great poet or the great strategist.

Another form it takes is part of the presupposition that high concentration of capital is inevitable nowadays. Since it is inevitable, since there must be a huge mechanism to be dealt with, we had better leave the handling of it to the few special men whose minds correspond to such a task.

Another form it takes is using the words "success" or "failure" in connection with human enterprise as though they were equivalent to the success or failure of the accumulation of wealth in a single hand, by which criterion no saint or poet or mother of a family would be successful in his or her own function — for this use of "success" and "failure" virtually presupposes that there is *no function worthy of special attention* save the accumulation of wealth. Another form it takes is pointing out that the handling of very large concentrations of capital has created a technique of its own, and that an attempt to handle capital in any

other fashion is not only fatal but certain to be destroyed by competition.

Now the whole of this talk shows ignorance of three main things: first, of man's own inner nature; secondly, of history; and thirdly, of the society about us. We all know by looking within ourselves that a man possesses this or that aptitude and correspondingly lacks this or that other aptitude. For instance, I know by looking within myself that I have a good memory and a good ear for verse; but I also know that I am bad at learning languages and at some forms of athletics, such as cricket. I know from the experience of a long lifetime (and I should have thought that most men would know before they were thirty) that individual aptitudes of all kinds have each their proper place, and only by recognizing each and using it can society be well served.

For instance, I have known in my time a politician who was put at the head of the gang by the other politicians because he was universally regarded as the most inept among them, so that his promotion could give rise to no jealousies. He was a stop-gap and universally taken to be a complete fool — even as politicians go. Well, this man turned out to be an excellent chess-player!

I knew another man who had an hereditary position of great wealth and consequence, involving (in the society to which he belonged) very important duties. He also was universally regarded as deficient, in the full sense of that word. Yet I discovered quite by accident that he was a first-rate fisherman. He was high in his class among those who pull salmon out of the water.

I have further discovered from evidence, and so, should I think, has any man who meets a fair number of his fellows, that the men who conduct great capitalist enterprises and become rich thereby have each their own aptitudes, but *not one special aptitude for handling large masses of capital*. Some are dull, mechanical, simple monsters, jabbed forward or suddenly tripped up by pure accident. A friend of mine who had vast experience in looking after a large works in the North of England said to me that he knew of no post in his factory which could not be well filled at a salary of two thousand dollars a year. What commanded a higher salary (said he) was not the "organizing power", which most intelligent people have got in a sufficient degree, but knowing the ropes, so that one could get the better of rivals; relationships; and the power of putting on what is called "pressure" — of which the less said the better. He might have added, I think, that sort of routine superstition whereby to a particular job there is attached a particular salary, the size of which has very little connection with the real value of the job.

The use of history leads to just the same conclusion. The people who have creative effect upon the lives of their contemporaries and the development of society have often been men given up to avarice; but they have often also been men who cared nothing for money — and the greater part of them were of that last sort, best for social purposes if not for individual sanctity, which is content with a strong middle-class position and a life free from anxiety upon the one hand or ambition upon the other. Plato for instance, and probably Aristotle, were like that. The concep-

tion that there is some particular type of wonderful man who can do things better than others because he has got rich through the modern concentration of capital is a superstition peculiar to this time in which hardly any other activity is thought worth while. If ever the arts revive, if our civilization should be saved from the gulf into which it is plunging, the superstition will disappear.

As to the third form of ignorance, ignorance of the people around us, I have wandered into the discussion of that already. But I will ask the reader again to look about him and see whether common observation does not amply confirm the statement that men of high aptitude in a vast number of directions are not to be found everywhere, apart from the particular function of accumulation of wealth or directing its accumulation.

There also underlies this heretical text a fundamentally false conception which I must mention before I leave it for Penty's more pregnant judgement.

The false conception is this: that small property cannot combine or be used in combination; that you can only have large concentrations of human power in the material world by a corresponding concentration of control in the hands of a few. That is not what has happened at all in the past, and there is no reason why it should happen in the future. The great enterprises of antiquity were undertaken for the most part by authoritative command: that of a monarch or a general; but those of the Middle Ages were undertaken by corporations.

If a man set out today to erect the Cathedral of Seville — supposing any man today should have the

vision of beauty required — he would get a contractor for the whole job. The contractor would concentrate on seeing how cheaply he could do it below the price of contract so that his profit should be as large as possible; the people who did the work would be wage-slaves. But when Seville Cathedral was built it was built by guilds, by cooperative effort, by the coming together of hundreds and perhaps thousands of men economically free and heads of families. There was a cooperation of effort, obviously, or the united perfect thing could never have arisen; but it was a coordination of great numbers of free men, an accepted coordination, not an imposed one — still less a coordination having for its motive the individual greed of one already far too wealthy man.

If ever we succeed in restoring property and its correlative, economic freedom, we need not trouble about any lack of talent for the administration of capital in great amounts used cooperatively; the talent is there on all sides.

When I turn to the other text, that of Mr. Penty, I confess I am dealing with something more serious. Ever since modern machinery began to interfere with human life (that is, roughly speaking, since about a hundred years ago; since the introduction of steam transport and large units of machinery dependent upon steam) the complaint has grown until it is now almost universal. Nearly all men who have the sense of beauty or even of justice, nearly all men who have a sense of right living, complain of the influence of the machine. In England where the disease arose and where its earliest effects were felt the protests were

as vigorous as they were futile. You have it in the exquisite prose of Ruskin, in the mediocre literary work but strong propaganda of William Morris. You have it of course in the warped but witty mind of Samuel Butler.

Now none of these men nor any of the host of others who proclaimed the same dissatisfactions were trained in philosophy. Nor had any of them a general religion such as gives to the average man a sufficient philosophy without any special training. Had they enjoyed that advantage, whether of religion at large or a special education, they would have considered first principles and discovered that the mind directs human affairs and is the master of material conditions, which men create for themselves and use.

No one denies of course that material conditions react upon the mind; but what everyone of sense will deny most vigorously is that the dead thing determines life. It is not so. It is the living thing which determines the dead material. "*Il suffit de vouloir.*" A society or even an individual determined upon this or that in the possible arrangement of material affairs will in some great measure attain his end. A man who cannot bear to read by electric light will manage to use candles; he will forego the advantages and cheapness of the more modern instrument. A man who is made ill by noise will manage somehow to get the opportunity of working without noise. A whole society to which noise was an abomination would build its houses and streets so that it was not troubled by that abomination.

You may take for a proof the way in which men deal with excessive heat. Look at the construction of

houses built upon ancient tradition in North Africa and Southern Spain. You will find that all the arrangements are directed towards warding off the inconvenience of heat. You will find internal spacious courtyards; the living rooms and especially the sleeping rooms turned inwards; the streets narrow, or if not narrow arcaded. The will of man has produced the material surroundings of man in a fashion consonant to his needs.

But there perhaps comes a designer, some northern contractor or architect, who attempts to build a new quarter of the city in the fashion of his own climate. He lays out broad streets, where the glare is intolerable, accentuated by the reverberation of heat from the great white walls. He puts the living rooms and bedrooms on the *outside* of the new houses—he does everything in the way it should not be done. Now this error is not the result of compulsion, it is the result of ignorance, and a sufficient time will certainly correct it.

It is so with our use of machinery. Machinery does us harm if we use it harmfully. When a man says, "Machine-made products are always monotonous", then the answer is, "Use them only to make products which can be monotonous without doing harm". Use your machinery for cutting up wood into certain sections, do not try to make it do the work of a carver.

As for the man who tells you that the machine-made thing must oust the thing less dependent upon machinery for its production and more dependent upon individual human effort, he is using the word "must" without considering the meaning of his terms.

There is no "must" about it. Obviously the machine-made thing will be cheaper and may be enormously cheaper; but that does not imply the necessity for accepting it and living with it. It is cheaper to go about in a sack with a hole in it for one's head than to wear the complicated tubular clothes which I and my fellow males are wearing at this moment. The reason we do not go about in sacks with holes for our heads to come through is because we use our wills in another fashion, in the fashion which is the fashion for men's clothes today in what was once Christendom.

I remember an old gentleman of whom I was very fond, and who, having great wealth, lived in an enormous house (more like a palace than a house) in the middle of London. His wife, his physician, and his children all insisted upon his having a lift to go up to his bedroom. He said he would have no such vulgar thing as a lift (which is the London term for an elevator) and that he was not going to have his house turned into an hotel. At last, suffering from the weakness of age, he was overborne by the coalition against him, they put in a lift — and the very first time it was used it stuck between two floors. The shouts of triumph of the old gentleman during the half hour when he was imprisoned thus between earth and heaven did one's heart good to hear. He felt that wisdom and beauty had been justified in one of their children at least; he said that some god had interfered. And no doubt he was right.

There has never been a time in the history of the world in which it was not relatively easier and cheaper to make things all of one sort; there has never been a

time in the history of the world, no, not even our own time though it may be thought to have reached the last limits of degradation, in which there was not at work the strong human instinct for breaking the chains of monotony. Every innocent child which scratches letters with a nail on the enamel of an automobile bears witness to that truth. I defy any man not paralyzed in brain and body to live long in a room with what is called "modern furniture" without sooner or later impressing his personality upon it. Sooner or later even our rectangular blank spaces will get some kind of decoration forced upon them.

At any rate in so far as we submit to what is called "the tyranny of the machine" it is *we* that submit to sloth, not the machine that "conquers". The machine cannot feel, or think, and properly speaking, *is* not.

Mr. Penty adduces an instance which he thinks conclusive. When the Distributist acclaims the possibilities of the small motor he answers triumphantly that the small motor was only made accessible to the small man by mass production.

To begin with that is only partly true; you need not have these huge concentrations of production to make motors at a reasonable price; you must have a *considerable* concentration to do so, but you need not have a whole city full of wage-slaves all doing the same silly thing in the same inhuman way. And to go on with, if you wanted variety, you could have similarity in the basic things without similarity in the details; you could give opportunity for individual changes. What prevents that variability even in the automobile business is the lack of spontaneous free demand. There are any number of people for instance

who would still prefer a slower machine with more head-room to the type which the millionaire manufacturer puts before them with the label, "Take it or leave it". There are any number of people who prefer an automobile in which they can ride in the open air when they feel inclined; and have shut up when they feel inclined. I am one of those people myself, and by taking a little trouble I got exactly what I wanted at a very little increased expense.

Now my last consideration on this matter is to me personally a consoling one. After all, all this doesn't very much matter, because if men will not exercise the divine faculty of will, if they allow themselves indefinitely to be run by others under the illusion that they are being run by "the machine", that evil will correct itself after the usual fashion — by death. If they that take the sword perish by the sword (which, as the old Don said of Euclid, is roughly true) certainly those who take the machine will perish by the machine. They will not long maintain the multiple, diverse, organic, individual human being, doing merely mechanical work. It will kill him or he will kill it. The modern phase is still quite young; it is already showing signs of senile decay. If we do not reform ourselves, by emphasizing to the best of our individual abilities diversity and multiplicity, then nature will take her revenge by destroying our remaining culture, and our mechanized cities will become rubble. No great loss.

Morals and Poetry

A Defense of Both

GEOFFREY STONE

RECENT criticism of poetry, as is natural enough, has reflected the moral and philosophical confusion of the times, and in this it has also reflected recent poetry. But poetry has, to a large extent, been content to accept the confusion for what it is and consciously to mirror it, while criticism, out of the very nature of its task, has sought to bring some order, if not to its subject, at least to our understanding of it, and its confusions have not been conscious ones. The best critics of verse, from Philip Sidney to T. S. Eliot, have usually been poets themselves, so it is perhaps not odd that our present-day poet-critics have attempted to raise up poetry as a sort of absolute at the same time they have denied in their verses the possibility of any certainty at all. In a way, this is pardonable; for the professional man is inevitably disposed to attach a high value to his particular profession, and in a world where he is not very sure about anything but the details of his specialty, his evaluation will be correspondingly higher.

A chief figure in this exaltation of poetry — or one who is in many ways the most typical — is not, however, a poet, but a critic and a philosopher: I. A. Richards. Like so many modern doctrines, Mr. Richards's theories present paradoxical aspects, at once undermining the validity of poetry and seeking