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THE SOCIAL FUTURE OF THE WORKING CLASS.

A Lecture

DELIVERED TO A MEETING OF TRADES UNIONISTS, MAY 7, 1868.

BY

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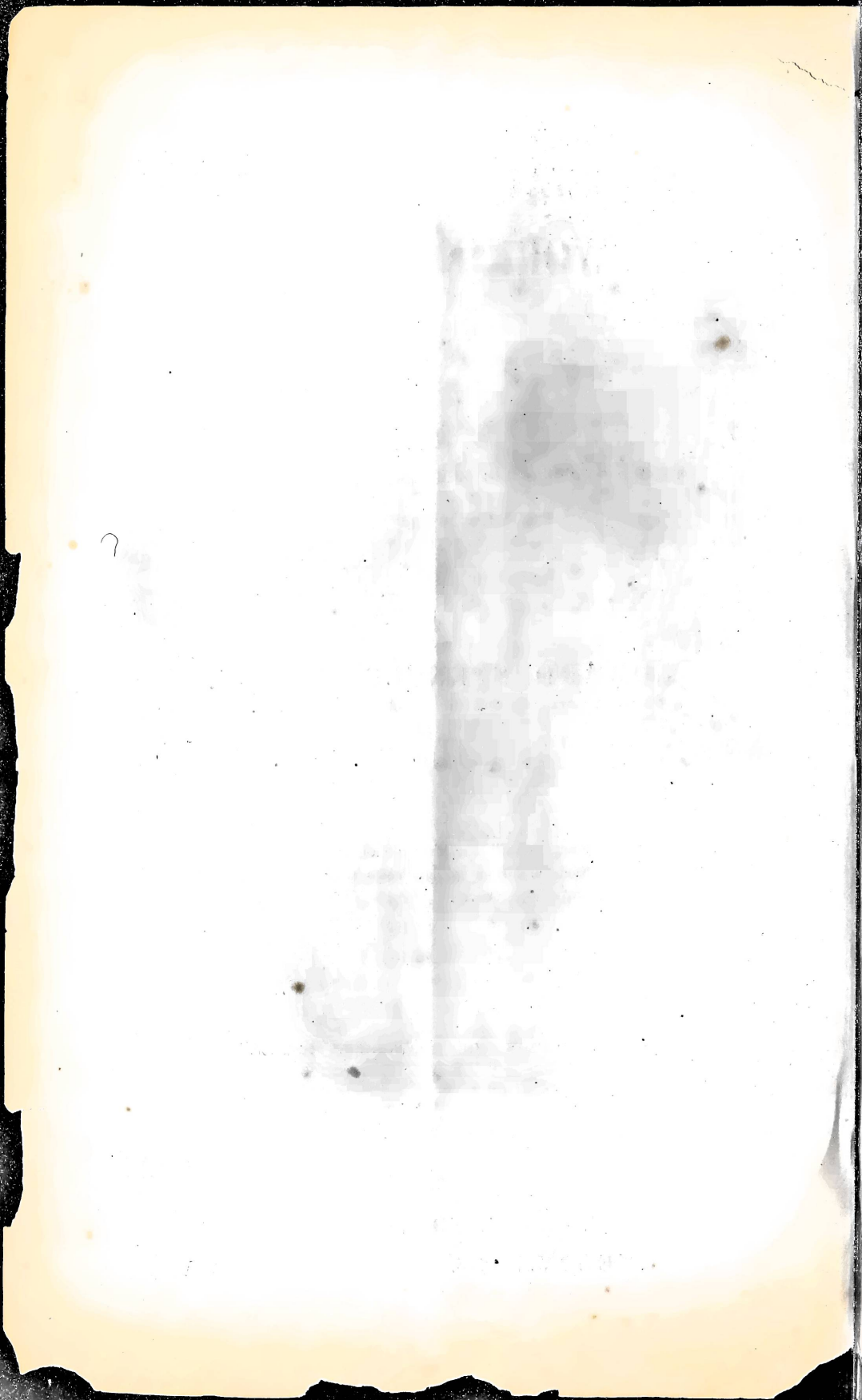
“The working class is not, properly speaking, a class at all, but constitutes the body of society. From it proceed the various special classes, which we may regard as organs necessary to that body.”—AUGUSTE COMTE.

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THE SOCIAL FUTURE OF THE WORKING CLASS.¹

WE live in a day when social questions are for the first time contesting precedence with political questions. In the first French revolution the distinction was not apparent; at all events it was not recognised even by sharp-sighted observers, though we, looking back to those times, can detect the signs of it. During the reign of Louis Philippe—from 1830, that is, to 1848—the distinction became every year more marked. It is the fashion to speak of the revolution of 1848 as a very small affair—as a feeble imitation of the old revolution. If looked at from a political point of view, in the narrowest sense of that term, it certainly was a much smaller affair than the old revolution. But to those who have realised in their minds that there has been in truth but one revolution, which began in 1789 and has been going on ever since, and that the year 1848 marks its transition from the purely political to the social phase,—to such persons, I say, the last epoch will seem even more momentous than the first. The attempt of 1848 was a failure, no doubt. But the history of the French revolution was not closed in 1848, as most of us here present will live to see.

In England we have travelled the same path, though hitherto without such violent shocks. We are all of us, French and English alike, moving rapidly towards the most fundamental revolution Europe has yet undergone; a revolution in comparison with which the great political changes in the time of our grandfathers, and even the great religious changes three centuries ago, were, I had almost said, insignificant. I will not pretend to say how far workmen may have clearly realised to themselves this prospect. I am inclined to think that not many of them have more than a vague conception of it, although they are instinctively working towards it. But the middle class have no conception of it at all. I am not speaking of the stupidly ignorant part of that body, but of its more enlightened and active members. They sincerely believe that the series of political changes which they commenced in England forty years ago is nearly completed. When they shall have abolished the State Church, reduced taxation somewhat, obtained the ballot and equal electoral districts or something like it, they think reform will be completed, and that England will enter upon a sort of golden age.

(1) This lecture was the last of a series of three delivered last spring, by request of the London Trades' Council, to meetings convoked by that body. The first two were by Dr. Congreve and Mr. Frederic Harrison.

They do not contemplate any serious change, either political or industrial. Politically, we are still to be governed by Parliament. In industry we are to have the reign of unlimited competition.

Now we can all of us understand that some men, either from education or mental constitution, do not believe in progress at all. They think that all change is for the worse, unless it is a change backwards; and they are convinced that nothing but firmness is wanting to resist change. There always have been such men, and we can understand them. But what is less easy to understand is that there should be men who believe heartily in progress, and yet shut their eyes deliberately to the goal whither we are tending. The truth is that their belief in progress does not rest on any reasonable basis. It is nothing better than a superstitious optimism, a lazy semi-religious idea that the world must have a natural tendency to get better. As for what getting better means, that they settle by their own likes and dislikes. Consequently the middle-class man interprets it to mean a reign of unlimited competition and individual freedom; while the workman understands it to be a more equal division of the products of industry. Although the workman's circumstances have led him to a truer conception of progress, perhaps he has not arrived at it on much more reasonable grounds than those on which the middle-class man has arrived at his. For, after all, it does not follow because we long for a certain state of society that therefore we are tending towards it.

The lot of the poor is a hard lot; there is no denying that. With a very large number of them life is absolute misery from birth to death. Though they may not actually starve, they are more or less hungry from one week's end to another; their dull round of toil occupies the whole day; their homes are squalid and frightful, seldom free from disease, and the heartrending incidents of disease, when aggravated by poverty. For them life is joyless, changeless, hopeless. "They wait for death, but it cometh not; they rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they can find the grave." Those who have mixed with the very poor, and have been startled by the strange calmness with which they contemplate and speak of death, whether of themselves or their relatives, will not say that this picture is much over-drawn. But it is not of this poorest class that I now wish to speak. I say that the lot of the skilled artizan earning his 30s. or 35s. a week (when he is not out of employment) is a hard lot. Perhaps it may seldom or never happen to him to go for a day with his hunger only half satisfied. But his position compared with that of a non-workman is one of great discomfort. People often seem to forget this. It is not uncommon for rich men, when addressing an audience of workmen to say, "My friends, *I* am a working man. I have been a working man all my life. I have been working with

my brain as you have with your hands." Yes, but there is just that difference. The one man has risen, say, at eight in the morning, from a comfortable bed, has come down-stairs to a comfortable breakfast, read his newspaper, reached his place of business towards eleven o'clock, and then worked perhaps hard enough for some hours, but in a comfortable office, and with interest in his work so intense that he perhaps prefers it to any amusement, and then back to his comfortable dinner and bed. The other man has risen perhaps before daylight, has toiled ten or twelve hours, it may be under a broiling sun, or a chilling rain, or under other conditions equally disagreeable, and at work which cannot have very much interest for him, first, because it is monotonous, secondly, because the product will not be his when he has produced it. He has snatched his coarse food at intervals during the day, and has returned at night to an uncomfortable home. I think rich people are too apt to forget that, though habit counts for much, a poor man's muscles, lungs, and stomach, are, after all, not very unlike their own, and that no amount of custom makes such a life otherwise than disagreeable and even painful to him; and that the main question for him in reference to civilisation will be, how it alleviates his condition. How are we to answer that question? Everyone is familiar with the hymns of triumph that are raised from time to time on the platform and in the press. We need not enter into particulars, because no one disputes that, so far as they go, they do point to progress of a certain kind. No one disputes that the production and accumulation of wealth is an element of progress; but it is only one element, and if even this is confined to a comparatively small section of the community, it must be admitted either that society as a whole is not progressing, or that its progress must be proved by somewhat better evidence than the statistics paraded in budget speeches and newspaper articles.

There is no question about the material progress of the non-workman class. There are many thousands of houses in London infinitely more commodious and luxurious than the palaces of Plantagenet kings. But there is very great question whether the workmen generally have made any real progress in comfort. Some of them have, no doubt. The skilled artizan in London gets enough to eat. He is perhaps no better lodged than his forefathers, but he dresses better, and he has greater opportunities of enjoying himself and moving about to better himself. But among the agricultural labourers what state of things do we find? In many parts of England they are positively worse off than they were a hundred years ago. In the Eastern Counties, where agriculture is carried on by the newest lights of science, the horrible gang-system has come into existence within the present century. Nor is such misery confined

to agricultural labourers. It has been proved in official reports that the workmen in such extensive trades as shoe-making, silk-weaving, and stocking-weaving, are on an average worse fed than the Lancashire operatives were during the cotton famine.¹

Now, wretchedness of this terrible kind does not exist even among barbarous nations and savage tribes. The child of the North American Indian, or the Caffre, or the Esquimaux, does not begin to work in a mill or in an agricultural gang almost as soon as it can walk. It gets better food than the English child, and leads a healthier and more enjoyable life. The West Indian negro has been treated as an irreclaimable savage because he will not toil like an English labourer, and the reason assigned is that he has plenty to eat and drink without working hard for it. I fancy most English labourers wish they could say the same. Really, if progress and civilisation mean nothing but an increase of wealth, irrespective of its distribution, Rousseau had much reason to prefer the state of nature. It is childish to remind the poor man that his ancestor under the Plantagenet kings had no chimney to his hut, no glass in his windows, no paper on his walls, no cheap calico, no parliamentary trains, no penny newspapers. He was no worse off in these respects than the Plantagenet king himself, who was equally without chimneys, glass windows, calico, railways, and penny newspapers. There are parts of the world now where the labourer is still in that condition. But he gets sound and healthy sleep out of the straw spread on the floor of his windowless hut, which is more than three or four families huddled together in a single room in St. Giles's can do, though they may have a glazed window and a chimney. A poor Englishman might be ashamed to walk about in a good stout sheepskin; but he is often clad in garments much less warm and durable. What sort of progress is this, in which the larger part of the community remains as miserable, if not more miserable, than in a state of barbarism? If progress is necessarily so one-sided, it were better—I say it deliberately—it were better it ceased. It were better that all were poor together than that this frightful contrast should exist to shake men's faith in the eternal principles of justice.

Happily, we are not shut up to so discouraging a conclusion. If we look at the whole history of our race in Western Europe, instead of studying one short chapter of it alone, we shall soon see what its progress has been. The labouring class have steadily advanced in dignity and influence. Once they were slaves, with no more rights than horses and oxen. Then they were serfs, with certain rights, but still subject to grievous oppression and indignities. Then they became free hired labourers, nominally equal with the upper class before the law, but in practice treated as an inferior race, and them-

(1) Public Health; Sixth Report, for 1863, pp. 13, 14.

selves looking on the rich with much deference and awe. *Now* we have come to a time when the workmen are almost everywhere standing on their rights, and resisting what they deem unfair or oppressive. They have learnt the secret of combination. With freedom and dignity has come confidence—confidence in each other. They have grasped the idea that the main object of government and industrial organisation should be *their* comfort and happiness. What is more, everybody is beginning to hold the same language. Every proposal publicly made, whether to destroy or to create, is represented as for the good of the lower classes. The very employers who are trying to destroy your trade societies profess to be doing it out of pure love for you. How astonishing and incomprehensible would all this have been—I do not say to the ancient slave-owner, or to the mediæval baron—but to the wealthy men of the last century. Is not this progress? What if a minority only of the workmen have as yet derived any benefit from the increased production of wealth? Is it nothing that the arms are being forged with which all shall at length get their share? Material improvement has always begun, and always will begin, not with those who need it most, but with those who need it least; and the higher classes of workmen are now making the experiment which the lowest will repeat after them.

Once firmly grasped, this truth throws a flood of light on history, and makes clear what at first sight is so obscure—the unbroken, continuous progress of society. We see that even in the so-called dark ages, when the splendour of Roman civilisation appeared to be extinguished by the barbarian—when science, art, and literature were lost and forgotten, and the world seemed to have retrograded ten centuries—even then, in that dark hour, our race was accomplishing the most decided step forward that it has ever made. When the philosophers and poets and artists of Greece were lavishing their immortal works on small communities of free men—when the warriors and statesmen of Rome were building up the most splendid political fabric that the world has seen—the masses were sunk in a state of brutal slavery. But when savage tribes, with uncouth names and rude manners, had poured over Europe, when a squalid barbarism had superseded the elegance and luxury of ancient society, when kings could not read, and priests could not write, when trade and commerce had relapsed into Oriental simplicity, when men thought that the end of a decayed and dying world was surely near—then were the masses, the working men, accomplishing unnoticed their first great step from slavery to serfdom.

What I have already said amounts to this: that the improvement of the condition of the working class is the most important element of human progress—so important that even if we were to make it

the sole object and test of our public life we could not justly be said to be taking a one-sided view of political and social questions. I shall endeavour presently to draw a picture of the workman's life, as it ought to be, and, as I believe, it will be in the future. But I must first examine some of the means by which the transition is being effected.

I will put aside the various schemes of Socialists and Communists, which have found so many supporters on the Continent. Widely as they differ from one another, I believe they all agree in demanding that the State shall intervene, more or less, in the direction of industry. Now that opinion has never found much favour in England, nor is there at the present time any large body of workmen who support it. In France the first idea of every reformer or innovator is to act through the Government. This tendency arises partly from the jealousy with which all Governments in that country have repressed voluntary association, but partly also from the logical and orderly character of the French mind, which abhors anything partial or patchy either in thought or action. But in England, where there has always been considerable facility for private and associated action, it is our way rather to depend upon ourselves than to wait till we have a Government of our way of thinking. Hence the only two methods which have any serious pretensions to promote the elevation of workmen in England have both of them sprung, not from the brains of philosophers, but from the practical efforts of workmen themselves. This is shown by the very language we employ to describe them. In France the labour question has meant the discussion of the rival schools, the Economic School, the school of Fourier, the school of Proudhon, the school of Louis Blanc, of Cabet, of Pierre Leroux, and so on. In England we do not talk of schools, but of Unionism and Co-operation, which began in a practical form, and have continued practical. There can be no doubt that all workmen who care for the future of their class are looking to one of these two methods for the realisation of their hopes. Here, as on the Continent, there is no lack of thinkers with elaborate schemes which, in the opinion of their authors, would ensure universal happiness. But whereas the French philosophers, whom I have mentioned, had each his thousands of ardent disciples among the workmen, our theorists cannot count their disciples by dozens, and are therefore not worth taking into account. But Co-operation and Unionism are real forces, and to pass them over in silence would be to deprive this lecture of all practical value and interest for such an audience as I am addressing.

The first thing to be noticed about Co-operation is that the word is used for two very different things. There is the theory, and there is the practice. The theory, as you know, is that there should be no

employer-class, that the workmen should divide the profits of production amongst themselves, and that whatever management is necessary should be done by salaried officers and committees. Co-operation, nowever, in that sense, does not get beyond a theory. The noble-minded men who founded the celebrated mill at Rochdale did indeed for some years manage to put their principles in practice; but even their own society at length fell away from them, and began to employ workmen who were not shareholders at the market-rate of wages; and I believe there is not in England, at the present moment, a single co-operative society in which workmen divide the profits irrespective of their being shareholders. Co-operation, in this sense, then, may be dismissed from consideration with as little ceremony as the Socialist and Communist theories before alluded to. Like them it supposes a degree of unselfishness and devotion which we do not find in average men, and it does not attempt to create those qualities, or supply their place by the only influence that can keep societies of men for any length of time to a high standard of morality, the influence of an organised religion.

The Co-operation which actually exists, and is an important feature of modern industry, is something very different. We must strip it mercilessly of the credit it borrows from its name, and its supposed connection with the theory above described. It is nothing more than an extension of the joint-stock principle. In what respect does the Rochdale mill differ from any other joint-stock company? A considerable number of its shares are already held by persons who do not work in it, and it is very possible that in course of time all, or most of the workmen employed in it, will be earning simply the market-rate of wages. A certain number of men, by the exercise of industry, prudence, and frugality, will have risen from the working class into the class above. How is the working class the better for that? What sort of solution is that for the industrial problem? We set out with the inquiry how the working class was to be improved, not how a few persons, or even many persons, were to be enabled to get out of it. We want to discover how workmen may obtain a larger share of the profits of production, and the Rochdale Co-operative Mill, which pays workmen the market-rate, has certainly not made the discovery. The world is not to be regenerated by the old dogma of the economists masquerading in Socialist dress.

The history of Co-operation is this. The noble-minded men who first preached the theory in its purity, were deeply impressed with the immoral and mischievous way in which capital is too often employed by its possessors, and instead of inquiring how moral influence might be brought to bear on capitalists, they leaped to the conclusion that capitalists as a separate class ought not to exist. In making this assumption they overlooked the distinction between the

accidental and the permanent conditions of industry. Collective activity among men has had two types—the military and the industrial, the latter of which has gradually almost superseded the former. Military organisation has undergone many and great changes, from the earliest shape in which we find it among savage tribes down to its most elaborate form in our own time. But its one leading characteristic has remained unchanged. There has never been a time when armies were not commanded by generals with great power and great responsibility. Wherever there has been the slightest attempt to weaken that power and diminish that responsibility, there it is admitted that the army has suffered and the work has been so much less efficiently done. Whether the soldiers were mere slaves as in Eastern countries, or free citizens as in the republics of Greece and Rome and America, or mercenaries fighting for hire as has often been the case in modern Europe, the principle of management has always been the same. Discipline was as sharp among the citizen soldiers of Grant and Sherman as among the conscripts of Frederick and Napoleon. Such a thing as the co-operative management of an army has never been heard of.

Now in the other type of collective activity—the industrial—a similar organisation has constantly prevailed. The analogy is striking, and it is not accidental, for the conditions are fundamentally the same. Fighting and working are the two great forms of activity, and if you have to organise them on a large scale, it is not strange that the same method should be found best for both. And workmen will do well to notice this analogy, and insist on pressing it home to the utmost of their power; for the more logically it is carried out, the more striking and overwhelming are the arguments it supplies for their side of the labour controversy. There is not a phase of that controversy which it does not illustrate, and invariably to their advantage. As one instance out of many, I may mention the sanction afforded by military practice for a uniform rate of wages to the rank-and-file of labour—an argument which was put by one of the Trades' Union Inquiry Commissioners to the Secretary of the Master Builders' Association, and which completely shut his mouth on that question. But it is for another purpose that I am now referring to this analogy. Special skill and training, unity of purpose, promptitude, and, occasionally, even secrecy, are necessary for a successful direction of industry just as much as of war. "A council of war never fights" is a maxim which has passed into a proverb, as stamping the worthlessness of such councils. Yet councils of war are not composed of private soldiers, but of skilful and experienced officers. They are more analogous to our boards of railway directors, whose incapacity, I must admit, does not take exactly that form. Whether the efficiency of our railway management would be improved

by an infusion of stokers and plate-layers into the direction, I will leave it to the advocates of Co-operation to say.

Another no less important advantage of the old industrial system over Co-operation is that it transfers the risk from the workman to the employer. Capital is the reserved fund which enables the employer to carry on his business with due enterprise, and yet to give a steady rate of wages to the workman. Great as have been the changes through which industry has passed—slavery, serfdom, and free labour—this fundamental characteristic has remained unaltered. In all ages of the world, since industry began to be organised at all, the accumulated savings which we call capital have been in the hands of comparatively few persons, who have provided subsistence for the labourer while engaged in production. The employer has borne the risk and taken the profits. The labourer has had no risk and no share of the profits. Though in modern times there appears to be some desire on the part of the master to make the workman share the risk, he will soon come to see that such a policy destroys the only justification of capital, and thus strikes at the root of property itself. The workmen will help him to see this by their combinations, if he shows any indisposition to open his eyes. It is one among many ways in which they will teach him in spite of himself what is for his own good. In point of fact, in the best organised trade—that of the engineers—the rate of wages is subject to little if any fluctuation.

The separation, then, between employers and employed, between capitalist and labourer, is a natural and fundamental condition of society, characteristic of its normal state, no less than its preparatory stages. We may alter many things, but we shall not alter that. We may change our forms of government, our religions, our language, our fashion of dress, our cooking, but the relation of employer and employed is no more likely to be superseded in the future by Communism in any of its shapes, than is another institution much menaced at the present time—that of husband and wife. It suits human nature in a civilised state. Its aptitude to supply the wants of man is such that nothing can compete with it. There may be fifty ways of getting from Temple Bar to Charing Cross; but the natural route is by the Strand; and along the Strand the bulk of the traffic will always lie. And so, though we may have trifling exceptions, the great mass of workmen will always be employed by capitalists.

Now this was what the founders of Co-operation refused to see; and in their enthusiasm they fancied they could establish societies, the shareholders of which would voluntarily surrender to non-shareholders a large part of the profits which their capital would naturally command. But the shareholders were most of them only average

men ; they were not enthusiastic, or their enthusiasm cooled as the money-making habit crept over them. The co-operative theory was not bound up with any religious system, or supported by any spiritual discipline ; and they soon fell into the vulgar practice of making the most of their capital. What is the lesson to be learnt ? Whatever there was of good in the movement belonged not to the industrial theory, but to the social spirit of the men who started it. If those men had been employers, or if any employers had had their spirit, the workmen would have reaped the same advantages without any machinery of co-operation. Therefore we must look for improvement, not to this or that new-fangled industrial system, but to the creation of a moral and religious influence which may bend all in obedience to duty. When we have created such an influence, we shall find that it will act more certainly and effectually on a small body of capitalists than it would on a loose multitudinous mob of co-operative shareholders.

Before leaving the subject of Co-operation, let me say that, while I cannot recognise its claims to be the true solution of the industrial question, I heartily acknowledge the many important services it may render to the working class. Even as applied to production, in which I contend it can never play an important part, it will do good for a time by throwing light on the profits of business. As applied to distribution in the shape, that is to say, of co-operative stores, its services can hardly be exaggerated. It not only increases the comfort of workmen, by furnishing them with genuine goods and making their money go further, but it gives them dignity and independence by emancipating them from a degrading load of debt. Moreover, it sets free, for the purpose of reproduction, a large amount of labour and capital which had before been wasted in a badly arranged system of distribution.

If we turn now to the other agency by which the labouring class in this country is being elevated, I mean Trades Unions, we shall find more enlightened ideas combined with greater practical utility. Unionism distinctly recognises the great cardinal truth which Co-operation shirks—namely, that workmen must be benefited as workmen, not as something else. It does not offer to any of them opportunities for raising themselves into little capitalists, but it offers to all an amelioration of their position. Co-operation is a fine thing for men who are naturally indefatigable, thrifty, and ambitious—not always the finest type of character, be it observed in passing—but it does nothing for the less energetic, for the men who take life easily, and are content to live and die in the station in which they were born. Yet these are just the men we want to elevate, for they form the bulk of the working class. They are in very bad odour with the preachers of the Manchester school, the apostles of self-help.

To my mind there is not a more degrading cant than that which incessantly pours from the lips and pens of these wretched instructors. Men professing to be Christians, and very strict Christians too—Protestant Christians who have cleansed their faith of all mediæval corruptions and restored it according to the primitive model of apostolic times, when, we are told, “all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need”—these teachers, I say, are not ashamed to talk of making money and getting on in the world, as if it were the whole duty of a working man. Thus it comes to pass, that while they are bitter opponents and calumniators of Unionism,¹ they patronise Co-operation, because it enables their model workman to raise himself, as Lord Shaftesbury expressed it not long ago, “*into a good and even affluent citizen,*” a moral elevation to which it is clear a primitive Christian never attained. But you who are workmen, and have a little practical experience of the thing, you do not want me or anyone else to tell you that the men who raise themselves from the ranks are very often not distinguished by fine dispositions or even by great abilities. What is wanted for success of that sort is industry, perseverance, and a certain sharpness, often of a low kind. I am far from saying that those who raise themselves are not often admirable men; but you know very well that they are sometimes very much the reverse—that they are morally very inferior to the average workman who is content with his position, and only desires that his work may be regular and his wages fair. Now the merit of Unionism is that it meets the case of this average workman. Instead of addressing itself to the sharp, shifty men, who are pretty certain to take care of themselves in any case, it undertakes to do the best that can be done for the average man. And not only so, but it attends to the man below the average in industry and worthiness: it finds him work, and insists on his working; it fortifies his good resolutions; it strengthens him against temptation; it binds him to his fellows;—in short, it regulates him generally, and looks after him. Nor is even this the full extent of the difference in this respect between Co-operation and Unionism. While the benefits of the former are exclusively reaped by shareholders, the union wins its victories in the interest of non-unionists just as much as of its own members..

I noticed as a fatal error of Co-operation that it regards the relation of employer and employed as a transient and temporary arrangement which may and will be superseded, whereas it is permanent, and

(1) “God grant that the work-people may be emancipated from the tightest thralldom they have ever yet endured. All the single despots, and all the aristocracies that ever were or will be, are as puffs of wind compared with these tornadoes of Trades Unions. But I have small hope. The masses seem to me to have less common-sense than they had a year ago.”—*Letter of Lord Shaftesbury to Colonel Maude.*

destined to survive all attacks. It is an eminent merit of Unionism that it recognises this important truth. The practical good sense of workmen has here shown itself superior to all the cleverness of philosophers. They have instinctively grasped the maxim that we shall best serve the cause of progress, whether political or social, by striving not to displace the actual possessors of power, but to teach them to use their power for the interests of society.¹ And there is this further advantage of a practical kind, that Unionism is not obliged, like the schemes of the philosophers, to hover impotently in the air, as a mere speculative phantom, till such time as it can command the assistance of the State to get itself tried in practice. A few dozen men can commence the application of it in their own trade any day they please. Nor is it a cut-and-dried scheme in which every detail is settled beforehand with mathematical exactness; it is of infinite elasticity, and can adapt itself spontaneously to the circumstances of each case.

It is desirable that the workman's wages should be good, but it is still more desirable that they should be steady. A fluctuating income in any station of life is, as everyone knows, one of the most demoralising influences to which a man can be exposed. When an outcry is raised against the unions because they maintain that wages ought not to fall with every temporary depression of trade, it always seems to me that in so doing they are discharging precisely their most useful function. I have already alluded to the duty of the capitalist in this respect, and Unionism supplies exactly the machinery required for keeping him up to his duty, until a religious influence shall have been organised which will produce the same result in a more healthy and normal way. No doubt unions might offend deplorably on their side against this principle of a steady rate of wages. It is conceivable that they might screw out of the employer every year or every month wages to such an amount as would leave him only the bare profit which would make it worth his while to continue in business. It is manifest that on those terms he could not amass such a reserve fund as would enable him to tide over temporary depression without reducing wages. Every fluctuation in trade would cause a corresponding fluctuation in wages, which would vary from month to month. If Trades Unions were to act in this way they would lose their principal justification. They are charged with doing so now, but the charge is perfectly groundless. Probably in no case do they extract from the employer anything like the wages he could afford to give if he was disposed. I do not believe that unions, extend them as you will, will ever be strong enough to put such a pressure on the employers. I believe that an organised religious influence will hereafter induce employers to concede to their men, voluntarily, a larger

(1) Comte Pol. Pos. i. 163 (p. 173 of the translation by Dr. Bridges).

share of their profits than any Trades Union could extort from them. An additional security that unions will never go too far in this direction is to be found in the fact that some masters, whether from larger capital, greater business ability, or higher reputation, make much larger profits than others. But unions do not pretend to exact higher wages from such masters. The tariff, therefore, is evidently ruled by the profits of the least successful employers.

It might have been supposed at first sight that employers would have looked with more favour on Unionism, which leaves them in full possession of their capital, their authority, and their responsibility, than on Co-operation, which proposes to supersede them altogether. But, as you all know, the contrary is the case; and there could not be a more instructive test of the relative efficiency of the two methods. Unionism maintains that capital has its duties, and must be used for a social purpose. Co-operation shrinks from asserting a doctrine so distasteful to the propertied classes, and seeks to evade the necessity for it by the shallow fallacy that everyone is to become a capitalist. Although everyone will not become a capitalist, no doubt some will, and the net result of the co-operative movement will be that the army of capitalists will be considerably reinforced in its lower ranks. Will that army so reinforced be more easy to deal with? An exaggerated and superstitious reverence for the rights of property, and an indifference to its duties, is the chief obstacle to the elevation of the working class. The fewer the possessors in whose hands capital is concentrated, the more easy will it be to educate, discipline, and, if need be, gently coerce them. But when the larger capitalists have at their back an army of little capitalists, men who have sunk the co-operative workman in the co-operative shareholder, men who have invested their three or four hundred pounds in the concern, and are employing their less fortunate fellow-workmen at the market rate of wages, why, it stands to reason that the capital of the country will be less amenable to discipline than ever. A striking example is to be seen in France at the present time. You know that the immediate effect of the old revolution was to put the cultivators in possession of the soil. A vast number of small proprietors were created. Doubtless many advantages resulted from that change. France got rid of her aristocracy once and for good. The cultivators identified themselves with the revolution which had given them the soil, and defended it fiercely against the banded sovereigns of Europe. If the people had not been bribed with the land, the revolution might have been crushed. But there has been another result from it, of more doubtful advantage. The whole of this class of small proprietors is fanatically devoted to the idea of property; and in their fear that property should be attacked they have thrown their weight on the side of conservatism, and against further political and social progress. The wealthy

middle class plays on their ignorance and timidity. All who desire to initiate the smallest social reform, who express any opinion adverse to the tyrannical power exercised by capital, are denounced as Communists and apostles of confiscation. The small proprietors are worked up into a frenzy of apprehension, and fling themselves into the arms of any crafty impostor who talks big words about saving society. Thus the artizans and small proprietors, men whose interests must be essentially the same, for they are all alike workmen living by the sweat of their brow and the labour of their hands, are pitted against one another, and the middle class alone profits by the dissension. If the manufactures of this country were to get into the hands of a number of small shareholders, simple workmen would soon find the rein tighter and the load heavier. Their demand for the repeal of unjust laws would encounter a more stubborn resistance; the progress they have been making towards comfort and dignity would be abruptly checked. Fortunately, as I have already endeavoured to show, there is no likelihood that so-called Co-operation will ever drive the capitalist employer out of the field.

Such are the reasons for which I hold Unionism to be by far the most efficient of all the agencies that have as yet been largely advocated or put in practice for the purpose of elevating the working class, and preparing it for its future destinies. The French workmen have much to teach us; but I think in this matter they might take a lesson from our men with advantage. I hope they will signalise their next revolution—for which, by the way, I am getting rather impatient—by abolishing all those laws which so iniquitously obstruct their right to combine. Indeed, Unionism cannot be said to have had a fair trial in England until it is established in the other countries of Europe also.

It remains to consider what the destinies are for which our workmen are thus preparing themselves, and to picture to ourselves what their condition will be when society shall approximate more nearly to its normal state. We may do so without indulging in Utopias or extravagant estimates of our capacity to shape the course of human development, because we are not postulating springs of action in individuals, which, as a matter of fact, do not exist, or do not exist in sufficient strength—we are not spinning theories out of *à priori* notions of what society ought to be, but we are feeling our way by an examination, on the one hand, of the permanent facts of our nature, and the conditions imposed upon us by the external world; and, on the other hand, of the steady, continuous progress of society in the past. And if it has occurred to anyone that I have been a long time coming to what professed to be the subject of this lecture—namely, “the *future* of the working class”—I must plead, in justi-

fiction, that I have in effect been dealing with it all along, and that nothing now remains but to give some practical illustrations of the conclusions already arrived at.

That the position of the workman will ever be as desirable as that of the wealthier classes seems, as far as we can see, highly improbable. Some people are shocked when such a proposition is plainly enunciated. They have a sort of hazy idea that the external conditions of our existence cannot be inconsistent with the perfection and happiness of man. They have been taught that this is a world where only *man* is vile, and it sounds to them immoral to talk as if there was any insurmountable obstacle to an ideal state of society except what they are accustomed to term our fallen nature. The fact is, however, that this is very far from being the best of all possible worlds, and we must look that fact in the face. Human society might arrive much nearer perfection, both moral and material, if there was not so much hard work to be done. It *must* be done by some; and those to whom it falls to do it will inevitably have a less pleasant life than others. But though to annul or entirely alter the influences of the world external to ourselves is beyond our humble powers, we can generally either modify them to some extent, or, what comes to the same thing, modify ourselves to suit them, if only successive generations of men address themselves wisely to the task; just as an individual may by care preserve his health in a pestilential climate, though he can do little or nothing to alter the climate. And so, though there will probably always be much to regret in the workman's lot, we may look forward to improvements which will give him a considerable amount of comfort and happiness. I will enumerate some of these which we may reasonably expect will be reached when present struggles are over, and when employers and workmen alike have learnt to shape their lives and conduct by the precepts of a rational religion.

Employers, though exercising their own judgment and free action in their industrial enterprises, will never forget that their first concern must be, not the acquisition of an enormous fortune, but the well-being and comfort of the labourers dependent on them. Hence there will be an end of that reckless speculation which sports with the happiness, and even the life, of workmen and their families—displacing them here, massing them there, treating them, in short, as mere food for powder in the reckless conflicts of industrial competition. We shall no longer see periods of spasmodic energy and frantic over-production first in one trade, then in another, followed by glutted markets, commercial depression, and cessation of employment. For capital being concentrated in comparatively few hands, it will be possible to employ it with wisdom and foresight for the general good; which is quite out of the question while the chieftains

of industry are a disorganised multitude, swaying to and fro in the markets of the world as blindly and irrationally as a street-mob at a fire. Thus the workman will be able to count on what is more precious to him than anything else—steady employment, and an income which, whether large or small, is, at all events, liable to little fluctuation. The demoralising effects of uncertainty in this respect can hardly be overrated. Large numbers of workmen at present, from no fault of their own, lead as feverish and reckless an existence as the gambler. When this state of things ceases, we may look forward with confidence to a remarkable development of social and domestic virtue among the working class.

To give the workman due independence, he ought to be the owner of his abode, or, at all events, to have a lease of it. In some instances at present we find men living in houses belonging to their employers, from which they can be ejected at a week's notice. This is often the case among colliers and agricultural labourers, and what grinding tyranny results from it, I need not tell you. It is not desirable in a healthy, industrial society that labour should be migratory. Ordinarily, the workman will continue in the same place, and with the same employer, for long periods, just as is the habit with other classes. Fixity of abode will naturally accompany fixity of wages and employment. Here, again, we may expect an admirable reaction on social and domestic morality.

A diminution of the hours of work is felt by all the best workmen to be even more desirable than an increase of wages. All of you, I am sure, have so thoroughly considered this question in all its bearings, that I am dispensed from dwelling on it at length. I merely mention it that it may not be supposed I undervalue it. If the working day could be fixed at eight hours for six days in the week, and a complete holiday on the seventh, the workman would have time to educate himself, to enjoy himself, and above all to see more of his family.

Let us next consider how far the State can intervene to render the position of the workman more tolerable. That ought to be the first and highest object of the State, and therefore we need have no scruple about taxing the other classes of the community to any extent for this purpose, provided we can really accomplish it.¹ But of course it must be borne in mind that by injudicious action in this direction

(1) As I have had some experience of the criticism (always anonymous) which seizes a detached passage and draws from it inferences directly excluded by the context, I desire by anticipation to protest against any quotation of the above sentence apart from at least the three which immediately succeed it. Taken by itself (although even so it is guarded by a strictly adequate proviso) it might be misunderstood. In the context the proviso is carefully and fully expanded into an argument on social grounds against excessive taxation of the rich. Arguments from the individualist point of view I entirely reject, as I trust my audience did.

we might easily defeat our own benevolent intentions. For instance, it is conceivable that such taxation might become so heavy as to approximate in effect to the establishment of Communism, and the springs of industry and frugality, in other words the creation of capital, would be proportionately affected. Again, the State must not afford help to workmen in such shape as directly or indirectly to encourage on the one hand idleness, and on the other a reckless increase of the population. For example, it must not interfere to lower the price of food or houses; because common sense and experience alike show us that such interference would rapidly pauperise the class it was intended to benefit. But there are, I believe, many ways in which it may add most materially to the comfort and happiness of the poor without at all relieving them from the necessity of exercising prudence and industry. As regards their physical comfort, it may carry out sanitary regulations on a scale hitherto not dreamt of. It may furnish them in London, and other large towns, with a copious supply of good water free of expense. It may provide medical assistance much more liberally than at present. I would add, it may exercise a close supervision over the weights and measures of the shopkeepers and the quality of the goods they supply, did I not hope that the spread of co-operative stores may render such supervision unnecessary. The State may also do much to make the lives of the poor brighter and happier. It may place education within their reach; it may furnish an adequate supply of free libraries, museums, and picture galleries; it may provide plenty of excellent music in the parks and other public places on Sundays and summer evenings.

I think that a London workman in steady employment, earning such wages as he does now, working eight hours a day, living in his own house, and with such means of instruction and amusement as I have described gratuitously afforded him, would not have an intolerable lot. His position would, it is true, be less brilliant than that of his employer. But it does not follow that the lot of the latter would be so very much more desirable. His income, of course, will be lessened in proportion as his workmen receive a larger share of the profits of production. He will live in greater luxury and elegance than they do, but within limits; for public opinion, guided by religious discipline, will not tolerate the insolent display of magnificence which at present lends an additional bitterness to the misery of the poor. His chief pleasure will consist, like that of the statesman, in the noble satisfaction of administering the interests of the industrial group over which he presides. But the responsibilities of this position will be so heavy, the anxiety and the strain on the mind so severe, that incompetent men will generally be glad to take the advice that will be freely given them, namely, to retire from it to some humbler occupation. The workmen, on the other hand,

will lead a tranquil life, exempt from all serious anxiety; and although their position will be less splendid than that of the employers, it will not be less dignified. For in that future to which I look forward, the pressure of public opinion, directed, as I have several times said, by an organised religion, will not tolerate any idle class living by the sweat of others, and affecting to look down on all who have to gain their own bread. Every man, whether he is rich or poor, will be obliged to work regularly and steadily in some way or other as a duty to society; and when all work, the false shame which the industrious now feel in the presence of the idle will disappear for ever. I am addressing an audience, which, whether it calls itself Republican or not, has, I am sure, a thoroughly Republican spirit, and a keen sense of the insolent contempt with which labour is regarded by those whose circumstances exempt them from performing it. You will therefore agree with me that of all the changes in the workman's condition which I have enumerated as likely to be realised in the future, this is by far the most precious—that his function will be invested with as much dignity as that of any other citizen who is doing his duty to society.

There are some men who are inclined to be impatient when they are asked to contemplate a state of things which confessedly will not be of immediate realisation. They are burning for an immediate reformation of all wrong in their own time. They think it very poor work to talk of a golden age which is to bless the world long after they are dead, buried, and forgotten. They are even inclined to resent any attempt to interest them in it, as though dictated by a concealed desire to divert them from practical exertions. "Tell us," they say, "how *we* may taste some happiness. Why should we labour in the cause of progress if the fruits are to be reaped only by posterity?"

I do not wish to speak harshly of workmen who have this feeling. There has been too much of such hypocritical preaching in times past, and it is not strange if they have become suspicious of exhortations to fix their eyes on a remote future rather than on the present. So conspicuously unjust is their treatment by the more powerful classes, so hard and painful is the monotonous round of their daily life, that the wonder is, not that some men should rebel against it, but that most should bear it with calmness and resignation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to say firmly, and never to cease saying, that such language as I have alluded to belongs to a low morality. Moreover, it defeats its own object. For whatever may be the case with individuals, the people will not be stimulated to united action by arguments addressed to its selfishness. The people can only be moved to enthusiasm by an appeal to elevated sentiments. If leaders

of the worst causes find it necessary to invest them with some delusive semblance of virtue that may touch the popular heart, shall we who have put our hand to the sacred task of helping and accelerating social progress, shall we deal in cynical sophisms and play on selfish passions? We owe it to our race that we should leave this world in a better state than we found it. We must labour for posterity, because our ancestors laboured for us. What sacrifices have we to make compared with some that have been made for us? We are not called on to go to the gallows with John Brown and George William Gordon, the latest martyrs in the cause of labour; or to mount barricades, like the workmen who flung away their lives in Paris twenty years ago next month. Is their spirit extinct? Were they men of different mould from us? Or did they enter upon that terrible struggle on some calculation of their personal advantage? No! but so short a time had wrought them up to an heroic enthusiasm which made it seem a light thing to pour out their blood if they might inaugurate a happier future for their class. And shall we who live in times less stormy, but not less critical for the cause of labour, shall we complain if the fruits of such small sacrifices as we may make are reserved for another generation?

The worst of this unworthy spirit is, that the exhibition of it is an excuse to the self-indulgent and frivolous for their neglect of all serious thought and vigorous action. One is sometimes ready to despair of any good coming out of a populace which can fill so many public-houses and low music-halls; which demands such dull and vulgar rubbish in its newspapers; which devours the latest news from Newmarket, and stakes its shillings and pots of beer as eagerly as a duke or marquis puts on his thousands. This multitude, so frivolous and gross in its tastes, will not be regenerated by plying it with fierce declamation against the existing order of society. You will more easily move it by appealing to its purer feelings, obscured but not extinct, than by taunting it with a base submission to class injustice. The man whose ideas of happiness do not go much beyond his pipe and glass and comic song, knows that the sour envious agitator will never be a bit the better off for all the trouble he gives himself; and he sees nothing to gain by following in his steps. But there are few men so gross as not to be capable of feeling the beauty of devotion to the good of others, even when they are morally too weak to put it in practice. And though a man may lead an unsatisfactory life, it is something if, so far as his voice contributes to the formation of public opinion, it is heard on the right side. This is the ground we must take if we wish to raise the tone of workmen. We must place before them, without reserve, the highest motive of political and social action—the good of those who are to come after

us. We must hold out no prospect of individual advantage or reward other than the approval of their own consciences.

Those who complain most bitterly of the slow rate of progress towards an improved industrial state, would sometimes do well to reflect whether their own conduct does not contribute to retard it. The selfish spirit follows us even into our labours for others, and takes the form of vanity and ambition. Probably all of us have had frequent occasion to observe how the cause of labour has suffered from ignoble jealousies and personal rivalries. Yet it is the greatest spirits who are invariably most ready to take the subordinate position and to accept obscurity with a noble satisfaction. The finest type of theocratic government, the lawgiver of the Hebrew nation, was ready to be blotted out of God's book, so that the humblest and lowest, the rank-and-file of his people, might enter the promised land. The greatest of the apostles wished that he himself might be accursed from Christ, if at that price he might purchase salvation for an obscure mob of Jews. "Reputation," said the hero of the French revolution, "what is that? Blighted be my name, but let France be free." So speaks a Moses, a Paul, or a Danton, while petty ambitions are sticking for precedence, and posturing before the gaze of their contemporaries. Devotion, forgetfulness of self, a readiness to obey rather than an eagerness to command—if a man has not these qualities he is but common clay, he is not fit to lead his fellows. Let us school ourselves into a readiness not merely to storm the breach, but to lie down in the trench, that others may pass over our bodies as over a bridge to victory. It is a spirit which has never been found wanting whenever there has been a great cause to call it forth; and a greater cause than that of the workmen of Europe advancing to their final emancipation, this world is not likely to see again.