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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

# POVERTY :

ITS EFFECTS ON THE

POLITICAL CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE.

BY

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LONDON :

FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,

63 FLEET STREET, E.C.

1890.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

SINCE this little pamphlet was first issued, nearly twenty-five years ago, there have been enormous changes. The Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884 have placed the suffrage in town and country in the hands of the very lowest. The working of the Elementary Education Act, 1870, has developed in the masses a higher and more acute sense of suffering as well as capacity for happiness. The incitements to the poorest to require from the legislature and the executive remedies for all wrongs are loud and frequent. There are fairly good people, as well as very wild ones, who seem to think that an Act of Parliament or an Order in Council can provide food for the hungry and work for the unemployed. In 1877, I was indicted for trying to place within the reach of the very poor the knowledge necessary to the application of the arguments here outlined. From 1877 until now I have, on this ground, been the object of coarsest assailment and grossest misrepresentation. Yet, at least, I have the satisfaction of knowing that the birth-rate in this country has sensibly diminished; that an association of Church clergymen and others in the East End of London has helped in this direction; and that a respectable journal, the *Weekly Times and Echo*, has boldly taken the very course for which I was nearly sent to gaol. I have had, too, the advantage of reading a judicial deliverance at the Antipodes, which more than outweighs many of the hard things said of me here. My co-defendant in 1877 has, in her "Law of Population", dealt with details necessary to be known by the very poor. This pamphlet is, as it was at first intended, only a finger-post to a possible road.

1890.

## POVERTY, AND ITS EFFECT ON THE POLITICAL CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE.

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“Political Economy does not itself instruct how to make a nation rich, but whoever would be qualified to judge of the means of making a nation rich must first be a political economist.”—JOHN STUART MILL.

“The object of political economy is to secure the means of subsistence of all the inhabitants, to obviate every circumstance which might render this precarious, to provide everything necessary for supplying the wants of society, and to employ the inhabitants so as to make their several interests accord with their supplying each other’s wants.”—SIR JAMES STEWART.

At the close of the eighteenth century, a people rose searching for upright life, who had previously, for several generations, depressed by poverty and its attendant handmaidens of misery, prowled hunger-stricken and disconsolate, stooping and stumbling through the byways of existence. A terrible revolution resulted in much rough justice and some brutal vengeance, much rude right, and some terrific wrong. Amongst the writers who have since narrated the history of this people’s struggle, some penmen have been assiduous and eager to search for, and chronicle the errors, and have even not hesitated to magnify the crimes, of the rebels; while they have been very slow to recognise the previous demoralising and dehumanising tendency of the system rebelled against. In very briefly dealing with the state of the people in France immediately prior to the grand convulsion which destroyed the Bastille Monarchy, and set a glorious example of the vindication of the rights of man against opposition the most formidable that can be conceived; I hold that in this illustration of the condition of the masses in France who sought to erect on the ruins of arbitrary power the glorious edifice of civil and religious liberty, an answer may be found to the question—“What is the effect of poverty on the political condition of the people?”

In taking the instance of France, it is not that the writer for one moment imagines that poverty is a word without meaning in our own lands. In some of the huge aggregations making up our great cities there are extremes of poverty and squalor difficult to equal in any part of the

civilized world. But in England poverty is happily partial, while in France in the eighteenth century outside the palaces of the nobles and the mansions of the church, where luxury, voluptuousness, and effeminacy were supreme, poverty was universal. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries travellers in France could learn from "the sadness, the solitude, the miserable poverty, the dismal nakedness of the empty cottages, and the starving, ragged population, how much men could endure without dying". On the one side a discontented, wretched, hungry mass of tax-providing slaves, and on the other a rapacious, pampered, licentious, spendthrift monarchy. This culminated in the refusal of the laborers to cultivate the fertile soil, because the tax-gatherer's rapacity left an insufficient remnant to provide the cultivator with the merest necessities of life. Then followed "uncultivated fields, unpeopled villages, and houses dropping to decay;" the great cities—as Paris, Lyons, and Bordeaux—crowded with begging skeletons, frightful in their squalid disease and loathsome aspect. Even after the National Assembly had passed some measures of temporary alleviation, the distress in Paris itself was so great that at the gratuitous distributions of bread "old people have been seen to expire with their hands stretched out to receive the loaf, and women waiting their turn in front of the baker's shop were prematurely delivered of dead children in the open street". The great mass of the people were as ignorant as they were poor; were ignorant indeed because they were poor. Ignorance is the pauper's inalienable heritage. Partial education to a badly fed and worse housed population is only the stimulus to the expression of discontent and disaffection. When the struggle is for the means of subsistence, and these are only partially obtained, there is little hope for the luxury of a leisure hour in which other emotions can be cultivated than those of the mere desires for food and rest—sole results of the laborious monotonousness of machine work; a round of toil and sleep closing in death—the only certain refuge for the worn-out laborer. Without the opportunity afforded by the possession of more than will satisfy the immediate wants, there can be little or no culture of the mental faculties. The toiler, when badly paid and ill-fed, is separated from the thinker. Nobly-gifted, highly-cultured though the poet may be, his poesy has no charms for the father to whom one hour's leisure means short

food for his hungry children clamoring for bread. At best the song like that of the Corn Law Rhymer, or the *Ca Ira* of Paris, serves as a hymn of vengeance. The picture gallery, replete with the finest works of our greatest masters, is rarely trodden ground to the pitman, the ploughman, the poor pariahs to whom the conceptions of the highest art-treasures are impossible. The beauties of nature are almost equally inaccessible to the dwellers in the narrow lanes of great cities. Out of your narrow wynds in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and on to the moor and mountain side, ye poor, and breathe the pure life-renewing breezes. Not so; the moors are for the sportsmen and peers, not for peasants; and a Scotch Duke—emblem of the worst vices of a selfish, but fast decaying House of Lords—closes miles of heather against the pedestrian's foot. But even this paltry oppression is unheeded. Duke Despicable is in unholy alliance with King Poverty, who mocks at the poor mother and her wretched, ragged family, when from the garret or cellar in a great Babylon wilderness they set out to find green fields and new life. Work days are sacred to bread, and clothes, and rent; hunger, inclement weather, and pressing landlord forbid the study of nature 'twixt Monday morn and Saturday night, and on Sunday God's ministers require to teach a weary people how to die, as if the lesson were not unceasingly inculcated in their incessant toil. Oh! horrid mockery; men need teaching how to live. According to religionists, this world's bitter misery is a dark and certain preface, "just published," to a volume of eternal happiness, which for 2,000 years has been advertised as in the press and ready for publication, but which after all may never appear. And notwithstanding that everyday misery is so very potent, mankind seem to heed it but very little. The second edition of a paper containing the account of a battle in which some 5,000 were killed and wounded, is eagerly perused, but the battle in which poverty kills and maims hundreds of thousands, is allowed to rage with comparatively small expression of concern.

"If a war or a pestilence threatens us, every one is excited at the prospect of the misery which may result; prayers are put up, and every solemn and mournful feeling called forth; but these evils are to poverty but as a grain of sand in the desert, as the light waves that ruffle a dark sea of despair. Wars come, and go, and perhaps their greatest evils consist in their

aggravation of poverty by the high prices they cause; pestilences last a season and then leave us; but poverty, the grim tyrant of our race, abides with us through all ages and in all circumstances. For each victim that war and pestilence have slain, for each heart that they have racked with suffering, poverty has slain its millions whom it has first condemned to drag out wearily a life of bondage and degradation."

The poor in France were awakened by Rousseau's startling declaration that property was spoliation; they knew they had been spoiled, the logic of the stomach was conclusive; empty bellies and aching brains were the predecessors of a revolution which sought vengeance when justice was denied, but which full-stomached critics of later days have calumniated and denounced.

Warned by the past, ought we not to make some endeavor to give battle to that curse of all old countries—poverty? The fearful miseries of want of food and leisure which the poor have to endure seriously hinder their political enfranchisement. Those who desire that men and women shall have the rights of citizens, should be conscious how low the poor are trampled down, and how incapable poverty renders them for the performance of the duties of citizenship. The question of political freedom is really determined by the wealth or poverty of the masses; to this extent, at any rate, that a poverty-stricken people must, if that state of pauperism has long existed, necessarily be an ignorant and enslaved people.

The problem is, how to remove or at least to lessen poverty, as it is only by the diminution of poverty that the political emancipation of the nation can be rendered possible. Twenty years ago the average food of the agricultural laborer in England was about half that allotted by the gaol dietary to sustain criminal life. So that the peasant who built and guarded his master's haystack got worse fed and worse lodged than the incendiary convicted for burning it down. An anonymous writer, thirty years ago, said:—

"The rural population of many parts of England are, as a general rule, half-starved. They have to toil like bond-slaves, with no leisure for amusement, education, or any other blessing which elevates or sweetens human life; and after all, they have only half enough of the very first essential of life. The working classes in the towns, are also miserably paid, often half-starved; and are sweated to death in unhealthy sedentary drudgery, such as tailoring, cotton-spinning, weaving, etc."

How can such poverty be removed and prevented?

“There is but one possible mode of preventing any evil—namely, to seek for and remove its cause. The cause of low wages, or in other words of Poverty, is over-population; that is, the existence of too many people in proportion to the food, of too many laborers in proportion to the capital. It is of the very first importance, that the attention of all who seek to remove poverty, should never be diverted from this great truth. The disproportion between the numbers and the food is the *only real cause* of social poverty. Individual cases of poverty may be produced by individual misconduct, such as drunkenness, ignorance, laziness, or disease; but these of all other accidental influences must be wholly thrown out of the question in considering the permanent cause, and aiming at the prevention of poverty. Drunkenness and ignorance, moreover, are far more frequently the *effect* than the cause of poverty. Population and food, like two runners of unequal swiftness chained together, advance side by side; but the ratio of increase of the former is so immensely superior to that of the latter, that it is necessarily greatly *checked*; and the checks are of course either more deaths or fewer births—that is, either positive or preventive.”

Unless the *necessity* of the preventive or positive checks to population be perceived; unless it be clearly seen, that they must operate in one form, if not in another; and that *though individuals may escape them, the race cannot*; human society is a hopeless and insoluble riddle.

Quoting John Stuart Mill, the writer from whom the foregoing extracts have been made, proceeds—

“The great object of statesmanship should be to raise the habitual standard of comfort among the working classes, and to bring them into such a position as shows them most clearly that their welfare depends upon themselves. For this purpose he advises that there should be, first, an extended scheme of national emigration, so as to produce a striking and sudden improvement in the condition of the laborers left at home, and raise their standard of comfort; also that the population truths should be disseminated as widely as possible, so that a powerful public feeling should be awakened among the working classes against undue procreation on the part of any individual among them—a feeling which could not fail greatly to influence individual conduct; and also that we should use every endeavor to get rid of the present system of labor—namely, that of employers and employed, and adopt to a great extent that of independent or associated industry. His reason for this is, that a hired laborer, who has no personal interest in the work he is

engaged in, is generally reckless and without foresight, living from hand to mouth, and exerting little control over his powers of procreation; whereas the laborer who has a personal stake in his work, and the feeling of independence and self-reliance which the possession of property gives, as, for instance, the peasant proprietor, or member of a co-partnership, has far stronger motives for self-restraint, and can see much more clearly the evil effects of having a large family."

The end in view in all this is the attainment of a greater amount of happiness for humankind—the rendering life more worth the living, by distributing more equally than at present its love, its beauties, and its charms. In one of his latest publications, John Stuart Mill wrote—

"In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, every one who has a moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; and unless such a person, through bad laws, or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escape the possible evils of life, the great sources of physical and mental suffering, such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection. The main stress of the problem lies, therefore, in the contest with these calamities, from which it is a rare good fortune entirely to escape, which, as things now are, cannot be obviated, and often cannot be in any material degree mitigated. Yet no one whose opinion deserves a moment's consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits. Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society, combined with the good sense and providence of individuals. Even that most intractable of enemies, disease, may be indefinitely reduced in dimensions by good physical and moral education and proper control of noxious influences, while the progress of science holds out a promise for the future of still more direct conquests over this detestable foe."

My desire is to provoke discussion of this subject amongst all classes, and I affirm, therefore, as a proposition which I am prepared to support—"That the political condition of the people can never be permanently reformed until the cause of poverty has been discovered and the evil itself prevented and removed."