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PRICE ONE PENNY.

# SOCIAL PROGRESS

AND

# INDIVIDUAL EFFORT.

BY

EDWARD CARPENTER.

*(Reprinted from TO-DAY, February, 1885.)*



**London :**  
THE MODERN PRESS,  
13, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

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1886.

1877

INDIAN

LONDON

W. H. & A. CO.

15, N. B. ST.



**T**HE Progress of Society is a subject which occupies much attention now-a-days. We hear the shouts and cries of reformers, and are inclined sometimes to be vexed at their noisy insistence and brandishing of panaceas; but when we come to look into the evils to which they draw our attention—under our very noses as it were—and see how serious they are: when we see the misery, the suffering all around us, and see too how directly in some cases this appears to be traceable to certain institutions, we can hardly be human if we do not make some effort to alter these institutions, and the state of society which goes with them; indeed at times we feel that it is our highest duty to agitate with the noisiest, and insist at all costs that justice should be done, the iniquity swept away.

And yet, on the other hand, when retiring from the heat and noise of conflict, we mount a little in thought and look out over the world, when we realise what indeed every day is becoming more abundantly clear—that Society is the gigantic growth of centuries, moving on in an irresistible and ordered march of its own, with the precision and atality of an astronomic orb—how absurd seem all our demonstrations! what an idle beating of the air! The huge beast comes on with elephantine tread. The Liberal sits on his head, and the Conservative sits on his tail; but both are borne along whether they will or no, and both are shaken off before long, inevitably, into the dust. One reformer shouts, "This way," and another shouts "That," but the great foot comes down and crushes them both, indifferent, crushes the one who thought he was right and the one who found he was wrong, crushes him who would facilitate its progress and him who would stop it, alike.

I confess that I am continually borne about between these two opposing views. On the one hand is Justice, here and now, which must and *shall* be done. On the other hand is Destiny indifferent, coming down from eternity, which cannot be altered.

Where does the truth lie? Is there any attainable truth in the matter? Perhaps not. The more I think of it, the more am I

persuaded that the true explanations, theories, of the social changes which we see around us, that the forces which produce them, that the purposes which they fulfil, lie deep, deep down unsuspected; that the profoundest hitherto Science (Buckle, Comte, Marx, Spencer, Morgan, and the rest) has hardly done more than touch the skirt of this great subject. The surface indications, currents, are elusive; the apparent purposes very different from the real ones; individuals, institutions, nations, more or less like puppets or pieces in a game;—the hand that moves them altogether unseen, screening itself effectually from observation.

Let me take an illustration. You see a young plant springing out of the ground. You are struck by the eager vital growth of it. What elasticity, energy! how it snatches contributions from the winds and sunlight, and the earth beneath, and rays itself out with hourly fresh adornment! You become interested to know what is the meaning of all this activity. You watch the plant. It unfolds. The leaf-bud breaks and discloses leaves. These, then, are what it has been aiming at.

But in the axils of the leaves are other leaf-buds, and from these more leaves! The young shoot branches and becomes a little tree or bush. The branching and budding go on, a repetition apparently of one formula. Presently, however, a flower-bud appears. Now we see the real object!

Have you then ever carefully examined a flower-bud? Take a rosebud for instance, or better still perhaps, a dahlia. When quite young the buds of these latter are mere green knobs. Cut one across with your pen-knife: you will see a green or whitish mass, apparently without organisation. Cut another open which is more advanced, and you will see traces of structural arrangement, even markings and lines faintly pencilled on its surface, like the markings that shoot thro' freezing water—sketches and outlines of what is to follow. Later, and your bud will disclose a distinct formation; beneath an outer husk or film—transparent in the case of the dahlia—the petals can already be distinguished, marked, though not actually separated from each other. Here they lie in block as it were, conceived yet not shapen, like the statue in the stone, or the thought in the brain of the sculptor. But they are growing momentarily and expanding. The outermost, or sepals, cohering form a husk, which for a time protects the young bud. But it also confines it. A struggle ensues, a strangulation, and then the husk gives way, falls off or passes into a secondary place, and the bud opens.

And now the petals uncurl and free themselves like living things to the light. But the process is not finished. Each petal expanding shows another beneath, and these younger ones as they open push the older ones outwards, and while these latter are fading there are still new ones appearing in the centre. Envelope after envelope exfoliated—such is the law of life.



At last however within the most intimate petals appears the central galaxy—the group of the sexual organs! And now the flower (the petal-flower) which just before in all its glory of form, colour and fragrance seemed to be the culminating expression and purpose of the plant's life, appears only as a means, an introduction, a secondary thing—a mere advertisement and lure to wandering insects. Within it lies the golden circle of the stamens, the magic staff of the pistil, and the precious ark or *seed-vessel*.

Now then we know what it has all been for! But the appearance of the seed-vessel is not the end, it is only a beginning. The flower, the petals, now drop off withered and useless; their work is done. But the seed-vessel begins to swell, to take on structure and form—just as the formless bud did before—there is something at work within. And now it bursts, opens, and falls away. It too is a husk, and no longer of any importance—for within it appear the *seeds*, the objects of all this long toil!

Is the investigation finished? is the process at an end?—No.

Here within this tiny seed lies the promise, the purpose, the vital principle, the law, the inspiration—whatever you like to call it—of this plant's life. Can you find it?

The seed falls to the ground. It swells and takes on form and structure—just as the seed-vessel which enclosed it took on form and structure before—and as the flower-bud (which enclosed the seed-vessel) did before that—and as the leaf-bud (which enclosed the flower-bud) did before that. The seed falls to the ground; it throws off a *husk* (always husks thrown off!)—and discloses an embryo plant—radicle, plumule and cotyledons—root-shoot, stem-shoot and seed leaves—complete. And the circle begins again.\*

We are baffled after all! We have followed this extraordinary process, we have seen each stage of the plant-growth appearing first as final, and then only as the envelope of a later stage. We have stripped off, so to speak, husk after husk, in our search for the inner secret of the plant-life—we have got down to the tiny seed. But the seed we have found turns out (like every other stage) to be itself only an envelope—to be thrown away in its turn—what we want lies still deeper down. The plant-life begins again—or rather it never ends—but *it does not repeat itself*. The young plant is not the same as the parent, and the next generation varies again from this. When the envelopes have been thrown off a thousand and a hundred thousand times more, a *new form will appear*; will this be a nearer and more perfect expression than before of that within-lying secret—or otherwise?

To return to Society: I began by noting the contrast, often drawn, between the stern inexorable march of this as a whole, and the

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\* Though not really a circle any more than the paths of the planets are really ellipses.

equally imperious determination of the individual to interfere with its march—a determination excited by the contemplation of what is called evil, and shapen by an ideal of something better arising within him. Think what a commotion there must be within the bud when the petals of a rose are forming! Think what arguments, what divisions, what recriminations, even among the atoms. An organization has to be constructed and completed. It is finished at last, and a petal is formed. It rays itself out in the sun, is beautiful and unimpeachable for a day; then it fades, is pushed off, its work is done—another from within takes its place.

One social movement succeeds another, the completion of one is the signal for the commencement of the next. Hence there can be no stereotyping: *not* to change is to die—this is the rule of Life; because (and the reason is simple enough) *one* form is not enough to express the secret of life. To express *that* require an infinite series of forms.

Even a crab cannot get on without changing its shell. It outgrows it. It feels very uncomfortable—pent, sullen and irritable (much as the bud did before the bursting of the husk, or as society does when dead forms and institutions—generally represented by a class in power—confine its growth)—anxious, too, and oppressed with fears. It—the crab—retires under a rock, out of harm's way, and presently, crack! the shell scales off, and with quietude and patience from within another more suited to it forms. Yet this latter is not final. It is merely the prelude to another.

The Conservative may be wrong, but the Liberal is just as wrong who considers his reform as ultimate, both are right in so far as they look upon measures as transitory. Beware above all things of utopianism in *measures*! Beware, that is, of regarding any system or scheme of society whatever as final or permanent, whether it be the present, or one to come. The feudal arrangement of society succeeded the clannish and patriarchal, the commercial or competitive system succeeds the feudal, the socialistic succeeds the commercial, and the socialistic is succeeded in its turn by other stages; and each of these includes numerous minor developments. The politician or reformer who regards any of these stages or steps as containing the whole secret and redemption of society commits just the same mistake as the theologian who looks upon any one doctrine as necessary to salvation. He is betrayed into the most frightful harshness, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance—and if he has power will become a tyrant. Just the same danger has to be guarded against by every one of us in daily life. Who is there who (though his reason may contend against it) does not drop into the habit of regarding some one change in his life and surroundings as containing finally the secret of his happiness, and excited by this immense prospect does not do things which he afterwards regrets, and which end in disappointment? There is a millennium, but it

does not belong to any system of society that can be named, nor to any doctrine, belief, circumstance or surrounding of individual life. The secret of the plant-life does not tarry in any one phase of its growth; it eludes from one phase to another, still lying within and within the latest. It is within the grain of mustard seed; it is so small. Yet it rules and is the purpose of every stage, and is like the little leaven which, invisible in three measures of meal, yet leavened the whole lump.

Of the tendency, of which I have spoken, of social forms to stereotype themselves, Law is the most important and in some sense the most pernicious instance. Social progress is a continual fight against it. Popular customs get hardened into laws. Even thus they soon constitute evils. But in the more complex stages of society, when classes arise, the law-making is generally in the hands of a class, and the laws are hardened (often very hardened) class practices. These shells have to be thrown off and got rid of at all costs—or rather they *will* inevitably be thrown off when the growing life of the people underneath forces this liberation. It is a bad sign when a patient 'law-abiding' people submit like sheep to old forms which are really long out-worn. "Where the men and women think lightly of the laws. . . . there the great city stands," says Walt Whitman.

I remember once meeting with a pamphlet written by an Italian, whose name I have forgotten, member of a Secularist society, to prove that the Devil was the author of all human progress. Of course that, in his sense, is true. The spirit of opposition to established order, the war against the continuance (as a finality) of any institution or order, however good it may be for the time, is a necessary element of social progress, is a condition of the very life of Society. Without this it would die.

Law is a strangulation. Yet while it figures constantly as an evil in social life, it must not therefore be imagined to be bad or without use. On the contrary, its very appearance as an evil is part of its use. It is the husk which protects and strengthens the bud while it confines it. Possibly the very confinement and forcible repression which it exercises is one element in the more rapid organization of the bud within. It is the crab's shell which gives form and stability to the body of the creature, but which has to give way when a more extended form is wanted.

In the present day in modern society the strangulation of the growth of the people is effected by the capitalist class. This class together with its laws and institutions constitutes the husk which has to be thrown off just as itself threw off the husk of the feudal aristocracy in its time. The commercial and capitalist envelope has undoubtedly served to protect and give form to (and even nourish) the growing life of the people. But now its function in that respect is virtually at an end. It appears merely as an obstacle



and an evil—and will inevitably be removed, either by a violent disruption or possibly by a gradual absorption into the socialised proletariat beneath.

At all times, and from whatever points of view, it should be borne in mind that laws are made by the people, not the people by the laws. Modern European Society is cumbered by such a huge and complicated overgrowth of law, that the notion actually gets abroad that such machinery is necessary to keep the people in order—that without it the mass of the people would not live an orderly life; whereas all observation of the habits of primitive and savage tribes, destitute of laws and almost destitute of any authoritative institutions—and all observation of the habits of civilised people when freed from law (as in gold-mining and other backwood communities)—show just the reverse. The instinct of a man is to an orderly life, the law is but the result and expression of this. As well attribute the organization of a crab to the influence of its shell, as attribute the orderly life of a nation to the action of its laws. Law *has* a purpose and an influence—but the idea that it is to preserve order is elusive. All its machinery of police and prisons do not, cannot do this. At best in this sense it only preserves an order advantageous to a certain class; it is the weapon of a slow and deliberate warfare. It springs from hatred and rouses opposition, and so has a healthy influence.

Fichte said: "The object of all government is to render government superfluous." And certainly if external authority of any kind has a final purpose it must be to establish and consolidate an internal authority. Whitman adds to his description of "the great city," that it stands "Where outside authority enters always after the precedence of inside authority." When this process is complete government in the ordinary sense is already "rendered superfluous." Anyhow this external governmental power is obviously self-destructive. It has no permanence or finality about it, but in every period of history appears as a husk or shell preparing the force within which is to reject it.

Thus I have in a very fragmentary and imperfect way called attention to some general conditions of social progress, conditions by which the growth of Society is probably comparable with the growth of a plant or an animal or an astronomic organism, subject to laws and an order of its own, in face of which the individual would at first sight appear to count as nothing. But there is, as usual, a counter-truth which must not be overlooked. If Society moves by an ordered and irresistible march of its own, so also—as a part of Society, and beyond that as a part of Nature—does the individual. In his right place the individual is also irresistible.

Now then, when you have seized your life-inspiration, your absolute determination, *you* also are irresistible, the whole weight of this vast force is behind you. Huge as the institutions of Society

are, vast as is the sweep of its traditions and customs, yet in face of it all, the word "I will" is not out of place.

Let us take the law of the competitive struggle for existence—which has been looked upon by political economists (perhaps with some justice) as the base of social life. It is often pointed out that this law of competition rules throughout the animal and vegetable kingdoms as well as through the region of human society, and therefore, it is said, being evidently a universal law of Nature, it is useless and hopeless to expect that society can ever be founded on any other basis. Yet I say that granting this assumption—and in reality the same illusion underlies the application of the word "law" here, as we saw before in its social application—granting I say that competition has hitherto been the universal law, the last word, of Nature, still if only one man should stand up and say, "It shall be so no more," if he should say, "It is not the last word of *my* nature, and my acts and life declare that it is not,"—then that so-called law would be at an end. He being a part of Nature has as much right to speak as any other part, and as in the elementary law of hydrostatics a slender column of water can balance (being at the same height) against an ocean—so his Will (if he understand it aright) can balance all that can be arrayed against him. If only one man—with regard to social matters—speaking from the very depth of his heart says "This shall not be: behold something better;" his word is likely stronger than all institutions, all traditions. And why?—because in the deeps of his individual heart he touches also that of Society, of Man. Within himself, in quiet, he has beheld the secret, he has seen a fresh crown of petals, a golden circle of stamens, folded and slumbering in the bud. Man forms society, its laws and institutions, and Man can reform them. Somewhere within yourself be assured, the secret of that authority lies.

The fatal words spoken by individuals—the words of progress—are provoked by what is called *evil*. Every human institution is good in its time, and then becomes evil—yet it may be doubted whether it is really evil in itself, but rather because if it remained it would hinder the next step. Each petal is pushed out by the next one. A new growth of the moral sense takes place first within the individual—and this gives birth to a new ideal, something to love better than anything seen before. Then in the light of this new love, this more perfect desire, what has gone and the actually existing things appear wizened and *false* (*i.e.*, ready to *fall* like the petals). They become something to hate, they are evil; and the perception of evil is already the promise of something better.

Do not be misled so as to suppose that science and the intellect are or can be the sources of social progress or change. It is the moral births and outgrowths that originate, science and the intellect only give form to these. It is a common notion and one apparently



gaining ground that science may as it were take Society by the hand and become its high priest and guide to a glorious kingdom. And this to a certain extent is true. Science may become high-priest, but the result of its priestly offices will entirely depend on what kind of deity it represents—what kind of god Society worships. Science will doubtless become its guide, but whither it leads Society will entirely depend on whither Society desires to be led. If Society worships a god of selfish curiosity the holy rites and priesthood of science will consist in vivisection and the torture of the loving animals; if Society believes above all things in material results, science will before long provide these things—it will surround men with machinery and machine-made products, it will whirl them about (behind steam-kettles as Mr. Ruskin says) from one end of the world to the other, it will lap them in every luxury and debility, and give them fifty thousand toys to play with where before they had only one—but through all the whistling of the kettles and the rattling of the toys it will not make the still small voice of God sound nearer. If Society, in short, worships the devil, science will lead it to the devil; and if Society worships God science will open up, and clear away much that encumbered the path to God. (And here I use these terms as lawyers say “without prejudice.”) No mere scientific adjustments will bring about the millenium. Granted that the problem is Happiness. there must be certain moral elements in the mass of mankind before they will even *desire* that kind of happiness which is attainable, let alone their capacity of reaching it—when these moral elements are present the intellectual or scientific solution of the problem will be soon found, without them there will not really be any serious attempt made to find it. That is—as I said at the head of this paragraph—science and the intellect are not, and never can be, the sources of social progress and change. It is the moral births and outgrowths that originate; the intellect stands in a secondary place as the tool and instrument of the moral faculty.

The commercial and competitive state of society indicates to my mind an upheaval from the feudal of a new (and perhaps grander) sentiment of human right and dignity. Arising simultaneously with Protestantism it meant—they both meant—individualism, the assertion of man's worth and dignity as man, and as against any feudal lordship or priestly hierarchy. It was an outburst of feeling first. It was the sense of equality spreading. It took the form of individualism—the equality of rights—Protestantism in religion, competition in commerce. It resulted in the social emancipation of a large class, the *bourgeoisie*. Feudalism, now dwindled to a husk, was thrown off; and for a time the glory, the life of society was in the new order.

But to-day a wider morality, or at least a fresh impulse, asserts itself. Competition in setting itself up as the symbol of human

equality, was (like all earthly representations of what is divine) only an imperfect symbol. It had the elements of mortality and dissolution in it. For while it destroyed the privilege of rank and emancipated a huge class, it ended after all by enslaving another class and creating the privilege of wealth. Competition in fact represented a portion of human equality but not the whole: insisting on individual rights all round, it overlooked the law of charity, turned sour with the acid of selfishness, and became as to-day the gospel of "the devil take the hindmost." Arising glorious as the representative of human equality and the opponent of iniquity in high places, it has ended by denying the very source from whence it sprung. It passes by, and like Moses on the rock we now behold the back parts of our divinity!

Competition is doomed. Once a good, it has now become an evil. But simultaneously (and probably as part of the same process) springs up, as I say, a new morality. Everywhere to-day signs of this may be seen, felt. It is *felt* that the relation which systematically allows the weaker to go to the wall is not *human*. Individualism, the mere separate pursuit, each of his own good, on the basis of equality, does not satisfy the heart. The *right* (undoubted though it may be) to take advantage of another's weakness or inferiority, does not please us any longer. Science and the intellect have nothing to say to this, for or against,—they can merely stand and look on—arguments may be brought on both sides. What I say is that as a fact a change is taking place in the general sentiment in this matter; some deeper feeling of human solidarity, brotherliness, charity, some more genuine and substantial apprehension of the meaning of the word equality, is arising—some broader and more determined sense of justice. Though making itself felt as yet only here and there, still there are indications that this new sentiment is spreading; and if it becomes anything like general, then inevitably (I say) it will bring a new state of society with it—will be in fact such new state of society.

Some years ago at Brighton I met with William Smith, the author of "Thorndale" and other works—a man who had thought much about society and human life. He was then quite an invalid, and indeed died only a week or two later. Talking one day about the current Political Economy he said: "They assume self-interest as the one guiding principle of human nature and so make it the basis of their science—but," he added, "even if it is so now it may not always be so, and that would entirely re-model their science." I do not know whether he was aware that even then a new school of political economy was in existence, the school of Marx, Engels, Lassalle, and others—founded really on just this new basis, taking as its point of departure a stricter sense of justice and a new conception of human right and equality. At any rate, whether aware or not, I contend that this dying man—even if he had been

alone in the world in his aspiration—*feeling within himself* a deeper, more intimate, principle of action than that expressed in the existing state of society, might have been confident that at some time or other—if not immediately—it would come to the surface and find its due interpretation and translation in a new order of things. And I contend that whoever to-day feels in himself that there is a better standard of life than the higgling of the market, and a juster scale of wages than “what A. or B. will *take*,” and a more important question in an undertaking than “how much per cent. it will pay”—contains or conceals *in himself* the germs of a new social order.

Socialism, if that is to be the name of the next wave of social life, springs from and demands as its basis a new sentiment of humanity, a higher morality. That is the essential part of it. A science it is, but only secondarily; for we must remember that as the *bourgeois* political economy sprang from certain moral data, so the socialist political economy implies other moral data. Both are irrefragable on their own axioms. And when these axioms in course of time change again (as they infallibly will) another science of political economy, again irrefragable, will spring up, and socialist political economy will be false.

The morality being the essential part of the movement, it is important to keep that in view. If Socialism, as Mr. Matthew Arnold has pointed out, means merely a change of society without a change of its heart—if it merely means that those who grabbed all the good things before shall be displaced, and that those who were grabbed from shall now grab in their turn—it amounts to nothing, and is not in effect a change at all, except quite upon the surface. If it is to be a substantial movement, it must mean a changed ideal, a changed conception of daily life; it must mean some better conception of human dignity—such as shall scorn to claim anything for its own which has not been duly earned, and such as shall not find itself degraded by the doing of any work, however menial, which is useful to society; it must mean simplicity of life, defence of the weak, courage of one's own convictions, charity of the faults and failings of others. These things first, and a larger slice of pudding all round afterwards!

How can such morality be spread?—How does a plant grow?—It *grows*. There is some contagion of influence in these matters. Knowledge can be taught directly; but a new ideal, a new sentiment of life, can only pass by some indirect influence from one to another. Yet it does pass. There is no need to talk—perhaps the less said in any case about these matters the better—but if you have such new ideal within you, it is I believe your clearest duty, as well as your best interest, to act it out in your own life at all apparent costs. Then we must not forget that a wise order of society once established (by the strenuous action of a few) reacts on its members. To



a certain extent it is true, perhaps, that men and women can be *grown*—like cabbages. And this is a case of the indirect influence of the strenuous few upon the many.

Thus—in this matter of society's change and progress—(though I feel that the subject as a whole is far too deep for me)—I do think that the birth of new moral conceptions in the individual is at least a very important factor. It may be in one individual or in a hundred thousand. As a rule probably when one man feels any such impulse strongly, the hundred thousand are nearer to him than he suspects. (When one leaf, or petal, or stamen begins to form on a tree, or one plant begins to push its way above the ground in spring, there are hundreds of thousands all round just ready to form.) Anyhow, whether he is alone or not, the new moral birth is sacred—as sacred as the child within the mother's womb—it is a kind of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost to conceal it. And when I use the word "moral" here—or anywhere above—I do not, I hope, mean that dull pinch-lipped conventionality of negations which often goes under that name. The deep-lying ineradicable desires, fountains of human action, the life-long aspirations, the lightning-like revelations of right and justice, the treasured hidden ideals, born in flame and in darkness, in joy and sorrow, in tears and in triumph, within the heart—are as a rule anything but conventional. They may be, and often are, thought *immoral*. I don't care, they are sacred just the same. If they underlie a man's life, and are nearest to himself—they will underlie humanity. "To your own self be true . . . ."

Anyhow courage is better than conventionality: take your stand and let the world come round to you. Do not think you are right and everybody else wrong. If you think you are wrong then you may be right; but if you think you are right then you are certainly wrong. Your deepest highest moral conceptions are only for a time. They have to give place. They are the envelopes of Freedom—that eternal Freedom which cannot be represented—that peace which passes understanding. Somewhere here is the invisible vital principle, the seed within the seed. It may be held but not thought, felt but not represented—except by Life and History. Every individual so far as he touches this stands at the source of social progress—behind the screen on which the phantasmagoria play.

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