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The Voice of Madison

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The wrongs on which the social movement in this country has fixed attention have finally, thanks to unremitting agitation, become matters of such undisputed authenticity, that there is now a perceptible diminution of the refutations once attempted by those who, with book and candle, were, and to a certain extent still are, wont to formulate alleged scientific dicta in opposition to glaring facts. This sort of argument is now yielding to another which, in legal parlance, may be termed of confession and avoidance. It consists in admitting the ills complained of, but denying their connection with anything inherent in our economic system, and attributing them in some unexplained way to a departure from the wholesome lines originally laid down by the Revolutionary Fathers.¹ Accordingly, exhortations to return to old-time ways are becoming no uncommon thing; and, in proportion as this sort of declamation approaches the level of 4th of July orations, we find it festooned with flowery phrases on the fertility of our soil, with encomiums on the radical political advantages enjoyed by the inhabitants of this over those of any other country, and with random quotations from the Revolutionary Fathers intended to show that they considered the principles established by them sufficient to insure to American industry the rewards of its labor, and to free the American people from the afflictions and problems that disturb the happiness of others.

A study of the works left to us by the Revolutionary Fathers reveals, however, that they were not the visionary beings their well-meaning admirers would make them, but indeed the giant intellects Pitt pronounced them to be. Peculiarly interesting among these statesmen on the social conditions of their days, and the future problems with which they thought the people would come to be confronted was James Madison, whom to study is to revere. Madison was no hireling scribbler, catering to a self-seeking constituency; no sycophantic pedagogue talking for place or pelf. He was an honest, as well as earnest and profound thinker, peering deep into the future in order to foresee his country's trials, and, if possible, smooth her path. Let us

¹The centennial sermon of Bishop Potter is the latest, most notable, and curious instance of this new departure.

then enrich the discussion with the learning of this distinguished Revolutionary Father, and give ear to the voice of Madison.

The question of the suffrage was one to which Madison justly attached critical importance. He understood it to be the point where political and economic conditions meet and react one upon the other. With pains, himself and his contemporary statesmen had devised our present duplex system of small and large constituencies intended to be a check on popular impulses, and, at the same time, a concession to republican instincts. This system met with Madison's approval. His reliance on its efficacy was, however, grounded upon the actual distribution of property in the United States, and the universal hope of acquiring it.² Those conditions, Madison argued, lay at the root of, inspired, and nurtured among the people a sentiment of sympathy with the rights of property. Again and again he declared that sentiment essential to the stability of a republican government. And he pointed with gratification to that social and economic peculiarity as among the happiest contrasts in the situation of the new-born states to that of the Old World, where no anticipated change in that respect could generally inspire a like sentiment of sympathy with the rights of property. But would the principles established by the revolution insure the permanence of that happy contrast?—and Madison's face grew overcast with apprehension as, searching {for} the answer, his thoughts traveled whither economic and historic reasoning pointed the way.

Madison accepted the natural law touching the capacity of the earth to yield, under a civilized cultivation, subsistence for a large surplus of consumers beyond those who own the soil, or other equivalent property; he realized the great lengths to which improvements in agriculture, and other labor-saving arts were tending, and measured their effect upon the production of wealth; the laws of increasing population with the increasing productivity of labor were no secret to him; he succumbed to no hallucination on the score of the freedom of our political institutions; and, finally, gauging the effect of the individual system of production, or competitive struggle for existence, he drew from these combined premises, and declared the conclusions, that the class of the propertiless in the United States would increase from generation to generation; that, from being a minority, it would eventually swell into a majority; that it would be reduced to lower and lower wages affording the bare necessities of life; and that, thus gradually sinking in the scale of happiness and well-being, the large majority of the people of this country would finally touch the point where they would be, not only without property, but *without even the hope of acquiring it*.³

²Even as late as the year 1829, a majority of the people in the United States were property-holders, or the heirs and aspirants of property.

³It should be noted that in this reasoning Madison altogether leaves out of his calculation the additional cause of immigration. Without this cause, a cause of which our so-called statisticians love to turn with predilection, Madison justly arrives at the conclusion upon which the present social movement rests, and from which it starts.

It was then no immutable state of happiness, but a steady progress towards poverty that this eminent Revolutionary Father, for one, foresaw and foretold as the inevitable sequel of the forces at work under the economic system that lay at the foundation of the country. All the causes he enumerates as productive, by their combined agencies, of a majority of hopeless poor have been at work among us with an intensity beyond his forecast. The pitiable stage when the masses of the people would be, not only without property, but without even the hope of acquiring it, Madison calculated would be reached by the United States before the nation numbered a population greater than that of England or France. Our population is now double that of either; and Madison's gloomy prophecy is, accordingly, realized by us in its deepest colors. Our property holders have become an actual, ever decreasing minority; the propertiless are today the overwhelming majority; the wages of these have declined until they afford the bare means for a pinched subsistence; chance or intrigue, cautious crime or toadying, may, but no degree of honest toil can any longer, under the prevailing system, insure property or the just rewards of their labor to the myriad wealth-producing workers with brain or brawn; the few among them, with whom the spark of hope still glimmers, hold to a straw that must soon disabuse them; with most all hope in this direction is totally extinct; starvation, plus work, is creating by the thousands the genus "tramp," which prefers starvation minus work; and, as the certain consequence of grinding poverty and its concomitant extravagant wealth, immorality, as well as corruption, is rampant among the people, and breaks out in the government. Not, then, by reason of any degeneration, not by reason of any departure from, but closely adhering to the lines laid down by the Revolutionary Fathers, have the people reached the present shocking state against which the Nationalist movement is enlisted. The vulnerable point was the competitive system of production which the American revolution left extant. The present conditions are its logical result.⁴

On a notable occasion, John Adams, another Revolutionary Father, had uttered the sentence, that where the working poor were paid in return for their labor only as much money as would buy them the necessaries of life, their condition was identical with that of the slave, who received those necessaries at short hand; the former might be called "freemen", the latter "slaves," but the difference was imaginary only. Madison grasped the bearing of this profound thought in all its fullness. As his own reasoning revealed to him the eventual destitution of the masses, the conclusion was self-evident that their condition would become virtually that of slavery. A minority of slaves might be kept under; but a large majority—and that made up of the races to which the world owes its progress,—Madison realized would not long submit to the galling yoke. Accordingly, he descried in the not distant future a serious conflict between the class with and the class without property; the fated collapse of the system

⁴It does not necessarily follow from this that a blunder was committed by the Revolutionary Fathers. History seems to show that the competitive stage is a requisite step in the evolution of society. But whether this be so or not, today the competitive system is only productive of mischief.

of suffrage he had helped to rear; and, consequently, the distinct outlines of a grave national problem.

The solution of this problem, which presented itself to Madison in the guise of a question of suffrage, involved, however, the economic question: What should be done with that unfavored class, who toiling in hopeless poverty,—slaves in fact, if not in name—would constitute the majority of the body social? This question Madison proposed, but vainly labored to find in the various methods of checks and balances an answer that was either adequate to the threatened emergency, or satisfactory to his judgment. To exclude the class without property from the right of suffrage he promptly rejected, as no republican government could be expected to endure that rested upon a portion of the society having a numerical and physical force excluded from and liable to be turned against it, unless kept down by a standing military force fatal to all parties. To confine the right of suffrage for one branch of the legislature to those with, and for the other branch to those without property, he likewise set aside as a regulation calculated to lay the foundation for contests and antipathies not dissimilar to those between the patricians and plebeians at Rome. And again, he shrewdly detected dangers lurking in a mixture of the two classes in both branches.

Thus the question of the suffrage brought Madison unconsciously face to face with the social question. His talent saved him from falling into a reactionary plan, or even resorting to a temporary make-shift; but likewise did the limitations of his age prevent him from hitting upon the scheme which alone could solve both the problem that preoccupied him, and the graver one into which his spirit had projected. He gave the matter over; but not without first bestowing upon it a parting flash of genius by the significant avowal that the impending social changes would necessitate a proportionate change in the institutions and laws of the country, and would bespeak all the wisdom of the wisest patriot.

Karl Marx stops in the midst of his analysis of the law of values to render tribute to the genius of Aristotle for discovering in the expression of the value of commodities the central truth of political economy which only the peculiar system of society in which he lived prevented him from accepting and carrying to its logical conclusion. How much more brilliant and deserving of tribute the genius of Madison that enabled him to take so long a look ahead; calculate with such nicety the results of political and economic forces; foresee with such accuracy the great coming problem of our country, and state it with such clearness; weigh with such breadth of judgment the methods known to him in order to meet and solve it, and discard them one after the other with so much acumen; rise to such height of statesmanship by boldly declaring the problem could be dealt with in no way other than by adapting the laws and institutions of the country to the social changes that may take place; and, finally, commend the task to, and invoke for its performance, the wisdom of the future patriot!

That the wisdom of the Revolutionary Fathers and their teachings are not lost upon their successors, the appearance and growth of the Nationalist movement

demonstrate. The voice of Madison has reached our generation. The patriots in the revolution now impending and equally important with that of a hundred years ago will be on hand.

[Transcribed by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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