



SECOND EDITORIAL

FALSE BASES.

By DANIEL DE LEON

WE commented last week upon an interesting essay by the Rev. Harry C. Vrooman, and gave some extracts from its best passages. To-day we undertake the less pleasant, though important, task, of pointing out the basic error that underlies the whole essay, and that has been, and may yet be a source of much evil to the movement in America.

Mr. Vrooman says: "I know of no better basis for classifying the champions of peace than that of the familiar ethical distinctions." There is no worse, because no more unreliable basis, than the ethical or moral.

Material facts are reducible to the domain of positive science. There is no multiplication table for Jones and another for Brown; there is no geology according to Tom, and another geology according to Dick. On the other hand, the moral views, like the views upon justice, can be, and are, varied, and have been and will be as varied as the material conditions that at a given time surround man.

Ethics and morality would seem to dictate a mother's love for her child; yet history makes mention of more than one instance in which material conditions put a very different face upon the subject. In more than one beleaguered town did mothers gladly sacrifice their children as food for the soldiers, who, the mothers thought, were defending a paramount cause.

Nor is there an exception. The history of America in particular offers some of the most striking proofs of the principle that the basis of feeling are the material conditions under which man may happen to be. The neglected but most valuable novels of Daniel DeFoe—*Robinson Crusoe* is not a circumstance to any of them—tell us of the branded British criminals—criminals because driven by want—becoming

in the American colonies the most exemplary citizens—exemplary because their material conditions insured them against want. Owen’s New Lanark was populated with a riotous, drunken, thieving set of operatives; yet when Owen’s plan was established, when want and the fear of want were driven out of the place, the inhabitants of New Lanark were transformed.

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely, all proving that man’s conduct is a result of his material conditions, and not vice versa.

The importance of this distinction lies in the methods it points out as necessary to be pursued, in order to reach a desired end.

He who proceeds from the ethical basis in nine cases out of ten will adopt false tactics, and not infrequently will accept disastrous results. Being idealists, such people are apt to become the victims of their own visions. Again, American history furnishes a striking proof of this. Who does not admire Wendell Phillips, his abnegation, his constancy, his devotion to the cause of human freedom? Yet Phillips, when this country was in the throes of civil war, said: “Wayward sisters, go in peace!” Had the Rebellion triumphed not only would slavery be yet in the South, but the now United States would look more like Europe or South America, disrupted between hostile sections, and the cause of civilization would have been set back for centuries. To Wendell Phillips the question was purely ethical, proceeding from such premises, his practical conclusions were disastrous.

His feet firmly set upon the rock of facts, the Socialist’s ideal will never send him into the ditch. To him the basic distinctions are the material and economic principles and aspirations of a man. Are these such as will not remove the spectre of want from man’s threshold, then his “ethics,” whatever their label, are worthless, and are bound to sink deeper and deeper to that of the brute, with all its accompaniment of deception; are, however, those principles and aspirations such as are certain to drive away the spectre of want, then his ethics will unfold to their fullest and best.

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

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