

The Social Ideal of the Modern World

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I wish to state at the outset just what I want to say in this paper. When one speaks of bettering or changing the social order, the answer most often made is that all these ideals of an order in which there shall be social justice, are but the dreams of a wild and impractical imagination; that they have no basis in the facts of history or the nature of things; and have no place in human society. I want to show to you that the social ideal of the modern world is a very real and very powerful thing; that it rests on certain very clearly defined principles; and that it has been the motive of all social progress during the last five hundred years or more; that it is establishing itself very rapidly, and that its progress can no more be stopped than the circuit of the sun through the heavens can be stopped.

The phrase, "the Modern World," has come to mean a certain historical development, in which there appear certain well-defined principles. These principles, and the nature of that system of thought, and those institutions in which these principles are embodied, are so clear-cut and distinctive as to stand out in sharp with the historical development which we speak of as the ancient world. The modern world is not modern simply because it belongs to recent times, but because its development follows along the line of these principles to which I shall refer later. The phrase "modern world," as it has come to be used, refers to a growing tendency in the social order, which is to be distinguished from the ancient world not only in point of time, but also by its very nature and character.

In order to bring out more clearly and definitely the principles which are at the foundation of all the thinking and constructive effort of the modern world, I wish to present a rough outline of the social ideal of the ancient world. In doing so I shall use Plato's Republic as the basis. I know that this

¹ While this manuscript is undated, it was bound together with several manuscripts on similar topics that can be dated to 1910.

is regarded as utopian, but beneath its utopian dress are the flesh and bones of the social ideal of the ancient world, and moreover I think that his ideal found a rather complete realization in the social order of the Holy Roman Empire.

According to Plato's way of thinking, the ideal republic was to be the very embodiment of justice. That was the end and aim of it all. In order to attain that justice, society must be divided into three classes, distinct and clearly defined. The first and ruling class was the intellectual class or philosophers as he called them. It must be their prerogative to rule for they alone know what was just, and how it could be attained. The second was the warrior class, who, obedient to the wishes of the philosophers, were to perform the duty of protecting the state and maintaining order. Then, in the third place, there was the common people, who should do the work of the state, and support the two upper classes, and live in unquestioning obedience to the upper class.

This, briefly stated, is the social ideal of the ancient world, and the principles at the bottom of this ideal were the accepted principles of all the ancient world's constructive attempts, and remained the dominating principles of society until the dawn of the modern world.

I want to speak of these principles now so that we may contrast them later with the principles of the modern world. The first accepted principle to be noted is that of a recognized class distinction, a ruling class, and a working class, the one supported and maintained by the labor of the other. The supporting class is to continue in submission to the will and decrees of the ruling class. That is the first principle of the social ideal of the ancient world.

The second principle relates to the basis in theory upon which rests [the] principle of class distinction. It rests upon the claim of the ruling class to some kind of a special capacity for knowing truth. Their right as a class to rule, depends upon the fact that they have access to truth and knowledge from which the other classes are debarred, and to which the working class must submit in unquestioning obedience.

The third principle is readily deduced from the first two. Given a ruling class, with its special privileges and monopoly

upon truth and knowledge, and a working class, obedient in all things to the ruling class, what, from the point of view of the working class, is truth and knowledge? It is plain to see that it can be nothing else than that which the class of philosophers told them was true. The obedient class could not in theory think, or act beyond that which the ruling class saw fit to deliver to them. To observe, to experiment, to think and arrive at conclusions, was not the function of the working class. That was the special privilege of the rulers. Truth, then, for the working class, became simply that which was delivered to them by the class which had a monopoly upon truth. They depended upon the truth of authority.

These are the three important points to be noted concerning the social ideal of the ancient world. In one way or another they have found their way into the foundations of the entire social order of the ancient world.

If you wish to study a social order in which these principles find a practical expression in society, turn to the feudal system of Europe. In theory at least, and to a remarkable degree in the actual practice of the times, we have the most complete realization of this ancient ideal in the social order of the Holy Roman Empire. In the constitution of society under the Holy Roman Empire, we have the three classes. The philosophical class is represented by the Church. The warrior class is represented by the feudal lords and their princes, and the third, [the] common people, who do the work, and support their masters, is represented by the serfs.

In the relationship which these classes of the feudal system bear to each other, we have to note the claims of the Church to supremacy, both in theory and in practice. The theoretical claims of the Church to the prerogative of privileged intellectual class are most concisely stated in that famous document, which was found among the private papers of Pope Gregory VII. Prof. Emerton says that it might well be called Gregory's platform. I will quote a few of the most interesting planks from that platform so as to show that the Church laid claims to being the privileged intellectual class of the social order.

1. That the Roman Church was founded by God alone.

8. That he (the pope) alone may use the insignia of office.
9. That the pope is the only person whose feet are kissed by all princes.
10. That he bears a name which is unique in the world.
12. That he may depose emperors.
18. That his decree may be annulled by no one, but that he alone may annul the decrees of all.²

To state the same thing in other words, here is a class or an institution, that claims to have special authority over all the rest of the social order. Princes are to do the bidding of this class, and obey its commands. This is the philosophical class of Plato, whose claims to the right to rule rest upon monopolistic privileges over divine truth.

If you stop to consider the situation for a moment, you will see that the role that the secular princes, who must submit to the authority of the head of the Church, was simply that which Plato allotted to the Warrior class, viz., the defense and support of society at the bidding of the intellectual class or the Church. In the serfs, we have the common people who did the work and obeyed, submitting to the authority of the Church directly, through the priests, and indirectly through the secular princes.

The history of the Holy Roman Empire is but the record of the events in which the attempt was being made to establish this ideal. Prof. Emerton says, "From this scheme it is clear that the aim of Gregory's policy was nothing short of the complete subjugation of every earthly power to the final arbitration of Rome."³ Of course, the princes did not submit to this program without protest, and it never was fully and completely accepted by them, but the fact remains that many a prince did kiss the feet of the head of the Church, and did obey the commands of the Church. As a matter of historical fact the papacy for many years

² Ephraim Emerton (1851-1935), author of *Mediaeval Europe (814-1300)*, Boston: Ginn & Co., 1895. This quote is from page 244.

³ Ephraim Emerton, *Mediaeval Europe (814-1300)*, Boston: Ginn & Co., 1895, p. 245.

was the ruling power of Europe, and dictated not alone the ecclesiastical, but the secular activities.

You will see that in this social order of feudalism, with its intellectual ruling class in the Church, and its warrior class in the princes and feudal lords, and its common people in the serfs, we have a rough outline of Plato's ideal of social justice. Also you will note that we have here the three principles, which I said were characteristic of the ancient world ideal. First, a privileged class, whose ruling power depended upon the second principle, some special class monopoly upon truth and knowledge, and third, from the point of view of the lower classes at least, truth was that system of ideas served to the lower classes by the ruling class.

As very often happens, just at the time when a thing for which we have been working for a long time is near to being realized, some new turn comes which sends all our best laid plans askew. So it happened at the close of the middle ages. For years that had been developing in obscure corners and in unexpected persons, certain ideas that were not easily adjusted to this old ideal. In spite of the claims of this philosophical class to a monopoly on truth and thinking, they were never quite able to corner the market. In out-of-the-way places obscure persons were doing a little business in the thinking line themselves. It is not necessary, nor is it possible, to go into these earlier manifestations of the independent modern world thinking, which was destined to cause so much trouble to this ancient world ideal. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that this obscure thinking began to grow quite common, and to demand that it be heard. The best illustration of its development into a real, vital, and powerful force, and accomplishing its aim, is to be found in the Peasants Revolt in England in the latter part of the fourteenth century.

The Peasants Revolt may well be used as an illustration of the first of a long series of events which are not yet accomplished whose fundamental purpose was to overthrow the social order of the ancient world, and establish the social order of the modern world, founded upon the three principles to which I have called your attention. Under conditions which existed at the close of the middle ages, the vast body of men, the common people, or the serfs, were held prisoners within a vast enclosure which the ruling classes had erected about them. The institutions and

accepted principles of society constituted a series of walls which surrounded them, and shut them out from the proper opportunities of freedom, and life. One after [another] of these walls has been stormed and carried and almost completely destroyed. As these obscure men began to think the thought of the modern world, they soon discovered that they must destroy feudalism, that the great wall of the middle ages which held them prisoners to the land. In the dramatic and heroic incidents of the Peasants Revolt, we see the child of the modern world battering away at feudalism, with the weapons that are now known to be characteristic of modern society.

Our interest at this time is not in the history, so much as the principles and ideas of this movement. In bringing these principles to your attention, I shall refer to two men, who, as leaders in the thought and action, give voice to the purpose and principles of the revolution that sealed the fate of feudalism.

The first of these men was a poet of the common people who gave expression to the unrest of the serfs, and their purposes. In that powerful and famous poem, *Piers the Plowman*, we find some startling doctrines disclosed. The poet, who is of the common people, lets his fancy take him away from the noise and turmoil of the town life, to the Malvern Hills, where he lies down to rest. He falls asleep, and has a dream, in which there appears before him all sorts and conditions of men. In this dream as it is written in the poem, he pictures the existing social conditions, the suffering, and evils of society. Then he awakes only to go to sleep again and have another dream in which Reason comes and preaches to the people. The preaching of Reason is so powerful that they all repent of their wickedness and determine to find truth. But just as soon as they attempt to find truth, they discover that they have no leader who is able to lead them to truth. In a half-blind search no one can find the citadel of truth. But at last there comes the one man who is able to lead them to truth. Strange to say in the eyes of this poet, the man who is called to lead the people back to truth, is not the philosopher, not the Church, not the prince, not the ruling class, but just the plain ordinary laboring man, Piers the Plowman. He is to lead men to truth by making workingmen of all. In short, in this poem there appears the doctrine of equality. The laboring man in to work, and all men are to become

laboring men, and thus come to truth. This poem was written about the year 1377.⁴

The second leader of this great revolution with whom we are interested now, is John Ball, commonly known as the mad priest of Kent. He began his preaching about 1360. He was an agitator, devoting all his time, when out of prison, to stirring up the peasants to revolt and revolution. There is preserved to us a famous passage which gives in very brief form the appeal which John Ball made to the peasants of England. The passage is as follows,

Good people, things will never be right in England so long as ... there be villeins and gentle folk. By what right are they, whom we call lords, greater folk than we? On what grounds have they deserved it? Why do they hold us in serfage? If we all came of one father and one mother, of Adam and Eve, how can they say or prove that they are better than we, if it be not that they make us gain for them by our toil, what they spend in their pride? They are clothed in velvet, and warm in their furs and ermines, while we are covered with rags. They have wine and spices, and fine bread; we have only oat cake and straw, and water to drink. They have leisure and fine horses; we have pain and labor, the rain and the wind in the fields. And yet it is of us and our toil that these men hold their estate.⁵

That is a passage worthy of serious consideration. It voices the moral vitality and the social ideal of the movement that broke the bonds of feudalism, and gave birth to the modern world. In this movement we have the modern world engaged in the first serious task of destroying the social order of the ancient world, and preparing the way for the development of the special order of the modern world that is even now working at its task.

⁴ William Longland (1332-1386), author of the poem, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, written in the mid- late-1300s.

⁵ Earl Davis gives no source for this quotation from John Ball. It can be found in *The Standard History of the World by Great Historians*, Vol. IV, Medieval History (Concluded), John Herbert Clifford, Managing Editor, New York: the University Society, Inc., 1907, p. 2305.

But we must remember that a social order that has been developing for centuries, is not going to be overthrown in a moment. The peasants revolt was only the first of a long series of struggles. It was necessary to throw off the shackles that bound men to the church, to the divine right of kings to rule and dictate, that bound men within the shackles of social and ecclesiastical dogma, of superstition, of slavery. We are still at the task, begun by those noble men of the fourteenth century. If you get down to the bottom of all the great movements in which the modern world has come into conflict with the ancient world, you will see that the essential purpose has been the same. Also you will find that at the bottom of them all are the three great principles which are characteristic of the social ideal of the modern world. These principles appear in the appeal of the peasants revolt. Note how sharply they stand out in contrast with the principles of the social ideal of the ancient world as expressed in Plato's *Republic*, and as embodied in the social order of the Holy Roman Empire. These three principles are the earmarks of the ideal of the modern world, and wherever you find any man standing for those principles, you find a man who belongs to the modern world, and is heart and soul with every effort to establish a social order of justice. Note these principles as they appear in the message of the author of *Piers the Plowman* and John Ball.

First there shall be no class distinctions in this modern world. That has been, as it is now, the ideal towards which we have been working all these years and are now working. That dream of John Ball shall be realized. Things can never be well in England so long as there be villeins and lords, so long as there be a ruling class and an obedient class, so long as there be masters and servants. That was the key note of the challenge of John Ball to the peasants of the fourteenth century, and it is the fundamental thought of *Piers the Plowman*. All men are to be workers, and thus they come to know truth and right living and a just social order. You see that this social ideal of the modern world is in marked contrast with the social ideal of the ancient world. No class distinctions.

The second principle to which I wish to call your attention is one which is closely related to the first, and is not less important. In speaking of the social ideal, I called your attention to the fact that the ruling class maintained its position of authority by virtue of its claims to some special

class capacity for truth. It had a class monopoly upon truth, a private pipeline to the great storehouses of truth. No one else could know truth, except as they received it from this intellectual class. If you analyze the claims of capitalism today you will find that they are all reduced back to the same principle. Interest, surplus capital, etc. Are paid by society to this class because of their special brain capacity. In contrast to this, I wish to point out the principle of the modern world on this point. It is all implied in the teaching of *Piers the Plowman* and John Ball. According to the teaching of *Piers the Plowman* it is Reason who preaches to the people and brings them to repentance. After they have repented, they learn, not because the Church or any other class tells them so, but they learn in the school of experience that they do not have a leader capable of bringing them to truth. In the man who works, in the man who experiences life, in the man who knows a thing, not because someone has told him, but because he himself has learned it in the travail and pain of life, in *Piers the Plowman*, is found the man who can lead them to truth. How does he do this great task? He does it not by telling them what truth is, but by telling them to go to work and find out for themselves the truth that they seek. Since, according to this new dispensation, every man is to work, it follows that the ability to find and know truth is not the privilege of a class, but is the natural prerogative of every human being. That which we know of truth has come to us, not through the channel of some supernatural revelation, to any institution, but we have learned it through the travail and pain, the great labor of humanity in all the ages of history. By experience, by experiment and reason, we learn to the best of our capacity the truth that is in the nature of things. No person has any special monopoly upon truth. All men have the capacity, in varying degrees of development, of searching after truth, and learning the laws of the Universe in which they live. This is the second great principle of the social ideal of the modern world.

I want to take a moment to emphasize this principle, for upon this principle depends the greatest institutions of modern life, the institutions in which we have made the greatest progress towards the realization of the social ideal of the modern world. It means that no person, no institution has any right or authority in the nature of things to deal out for us to accept upon their say-so, that which we call truth. Truth is in the nature of things. We learn as much as we may of that truth

through the experiences of life. Upon this principle rests the fact of our extended suffrage, and the hope of universal suffrage. Men claim the right to vote, because they claim the capacity to understand the principles for which they are voting. This principle is at the bottom of all our ideals for a democratic institution. The failures of democracy, the evils of the social order, arise from the fact [that] men forego their inherent right of private knowledge, and accept the dictum of some boss. Upon this same principle rests our whole ideal of public education. We educate men, because we know that they have the capacity of knowledge, and, given the opportunity, will attain unto knowledge. I speak with much feeling upon this principle, for it is fundamental to the social ideal of the modern world. In the growing intensity of our times there [are] appearing many insidious attempts to abridge this principle of freedom, and revert to the old world ideal that knowledge and wisdom is the prerogative of a class. This principle, of freedom to think, freedom to express our thoughts, and freedom to hold to our convictions, must be maintained. Look with suspicion upon any institution that in the least claims for itself the prerogative of doing your thinking for you, and handing out to you ready-made the things that it thinks wise for you to know. This is the second great principle of the modern world. Defend it. Remember also, that the man who is fighting for this principle, even though he may not agree with you in what he thinks, is also working for the social ideal of the modern world. He may belong to another regiment, but his regiment is part of your army.

In saying this I do not mean that a man who exercises his right of freedom to think for himself, and thinks in advance of his times, is to escape the consequences of his thinking and his conduct. He must accept without whining the condemnation that will come to him from the conservative majority. It is a part of the essential tragedy of progress that John Ball and such as he must spend a part of their life in prison, and it is also a part of the heroic glory of progress that one of the leaders of the Peasants Revolt could stand before his townsmen as he was facing death in punishment for his activity, and say with calmness, "If I die, I shall die for the cause of freedom we have won, counting myself happy to end my life by such a martyrdom."⁶

⁶ Earl Davis gives no source for this quotation. It can be found in *The Standard History of the World by Great Historians*, Vol.

I will not suggest the forces of our times that are pressing against this principle. They will dawn upon us with sufficient clearness as time goes on. But the welfare of the social ideal of the modern world depends upon the integrity with which this principle is defended and maintained.

But let me just mention the third great principle of the social ideal of the modern world. It relates to truth. I said that in the ancient world, truth, to the common people at least, was that which the ruling class told them to believe. In the modern world we look upon truth as being that which, in the travail and pain of human life, we learn to be true. A proposition is not true because someone tells [us] that it is true, but because in the long experiences of human life, we have come to see that it is in the nature of things. Truth is the great reality in the midst of which we live. We discover it by experience, experiment, observation and reasoning.

Let me just briefly collect together these principles. The ancient world held to the principle of class distinction. The modern world holds that class distinction must be eliminated, that it rests upon injustice. The ancient world held that the ruling class had a special monopoly on truth. The modern world believes in the principle of freedom to think. The ancient world held that truth was that which the ruling class declared to be true. The modern world holds that truth is in the nature of things, and that we learn it through experience.

Now the great century-long task, of which the immediate work of our own generation is a part, is to destroy all that is left of the ancient world ideal of a social order, and to build up, as we go along, a social order in which shall be embodied these principles to which I have referred. The task of destruction is not all done. We have done much, as history shows, but there is much to do. We have this to assure us that the whole history of the past is with us, and many of the relics of the ancient world are more dead than alive, and need but little more than the reverent and careful work of the undertaker. Others are somewhat alive, but they are feeling the weakness of old age creep upon

them, and no amount of artificial stimulants can restore them to youth and vigor. The claims of capitalism are a survival of the old world ideal, dressed in modern clothes. That, and its allied forces, constitute the most formidable survival of the old world ideal of class privilege.

But the thing that is most interesting to note is what has been accomplished by this modern world in the way of building up a social order along the lines of these principles. For if you stop to think of it, you will see that we have made considerable progress in that direction, progress enough to give us the assurance that the lines along which we are working, are sound and in accord with the facts and principles of life.

The first institution, founded upon the principles of the social ideal of the modern world is that of the free public schools. I realize as keenly as anyone can the grave criticisms that may justly be made against our public school systems of today. But that is not the point which I have in mind. The significant thing is that we have to accept as essential some kind of a public school system. We have travelled a long distance from the ancient world ideal when we can think that it is the established conviction of society that we must have and maintain public instruction. In 1670, the people and ministers of Virginia made demands on Lord Berkeley, Governor of the Colony, asking for schools and greater freedom in the pulpit. His reply to them was characteristic of the ancient world, and yet betrayed the fact that he realized the dangerous weapons of the modern world. He said,

[The] ministers should pray oftener and preach less. But, I thank God, there are no free schools, nor printing; and I hope we shall not have these hundred years, for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against best government. God keep us from both.⁷

From 1670 to the present is a vast stride. Lord Berkeley was no fool in seeing in free education the dangerous menace to the old world ideals for which he stood. A comprehensive system of education upon the development of which we have entered, is the

⁷ Earl Davis gives no source for this quotation. It can be found in John Graham Brooks' *The Social Unrest: Studies in Labor and Socialist Movements*, New York: Macmillan Co., 1903, p. 73.

product of the modern world, and is potent for great results in the days that are to come.

Closely allied to this is the system of education beyond the public schools, which is each day becoming more and more important. Papers, magazines, books. That is the productive of modern society.

The second important gain is the extension of the suffrage. The history of the suffrage extension throws a great light on the nature of the problems before us. It has always been opposed by vested interests and their allies. But it is based on the same principle as universal education, and carries with it great possibilities. It provides a mechanism through which, in theory at least, public opinion can register its changing convictions. In spite of corruption and mechanism, the great weapon of today, next to education, is the right of franchise. The evils from which we are suffering in our federal, local and state governments today, are not so much connected with the problem of franchise, as with the mechanism of government. These evils exist because we forego the right of private judgement. Our government is not elastic enough. It is so complicated and slow moving, that it does not respond to public opinion. Hence we are witnessing in Congress today action which not only betrays a public trust, but action which is running counter to manifest public opinion. One can only think that those who are responsible for it, are trusting to the permanency of the system to carry them past the next day of inspection. In spite of all the evils and limitations of conditions today, it is a long journey from the ideal of the divine right of kings to rule and dictate, down to the present. The suffrage extension, the ideal of democracy, is a great achievement.

The third great achievement of the modern world is the industrial development. We have made great strides, at the cost of great suffering to be sure, towards a system of production and distribution that shall enable men to supply the physical necessities at a cost of labor which is well within the possibilities of our capacities and needs. The development of this great industrial system, aside from its financial aspects, is of the very bone and fiber of the modern world. Each combination, each merger is an achievement of progress. We are learning how to produce and distribute the necessities of life. In viewing and criticizing the industrial conditions of today,

we must distinguish between the great constructive work of developing a system of production and distribution, and the entirely incidental element, the development of the capitalistic class. This latter is a mushroom growth, and will bide its day. The inventions, and the growth of a system of production and distribution, are permanent contributions to the social order of the modern world.

I now come to the immediate needs of the times. Perhaps you will feel that all I have said is entirely worthless, but I have said what I have for the purpose of showing that the movement of today has its roots deep in the history of the past, that it is not the mere vagary of some unbalanced imagination, but that it is the manifestation, and the face of the problems of today, of the same principles and purposes that have dominated the radical and constructive elements of human society since the birth of the social ideal of the modern world, at the close of the middle ages. The foundations upon which we rest, are not sand, but solid bedrock, and just as sure as that growing modern world has been able to solve its task as it has met it, century after century, and drive from the limits of the social order institution after institution, and establish in their places its own ideals, just so certain will we accomplish today that which we will. We have behind us the irrepressible momentum of human history, and its progress can no more be stayed, than can the progress of the great river.

My conviction upon this point grows out of the nature of the movement itself. The social unrest of our times does not have its origin among the disgruntled victims of the existing order. True, we may feel the pinch and grind of poverty, we may look with longing eyes upon the comforts and abundance of the rich, we may long for the day when we can plan at least two days ahead in the conduct of personal affairs, and feel sure that the money will be forthcoming to do what we plan, but that is not the reason why we are interested in the social ideal of the modern world. If our attitude were simply one of the wolf, yelping around the house of mirth, angered by the smell of good thing to eat, we could get all that. We know that the world is better today than it was in the days of the peasants. We know that it is better than it was in the times before the great industrial development began. And that is just the very reason why we are dissatisfied with it as it is at this moment. Had there been no change, no progress, no development towards a better and more

just social ideal, had there been no Peasants Revolt, no Puritan revolution, no French revolution, no Civil War, no fight for justice, and truth and honor among men, we would now be taking our hay and fodder in absolute content like the cow, and the ass, thanking God that we had even swale hay to eat. Just because we know that the world has developed towards a better social order, just because we know that it is not what it ought to be, just because we know that it can be better, we raise our cry of condemnation at existing conditions, and issue our appeal to fight for the world of righteousness tomorrow. Our unrest is due, not to the vague memory of some golden age in the past, but to the clear-cut ideal we have of the social order that shall be.

In all that we do, both in thought and action, we must be careful never to lose sight of the great principles that are at the bottom of the social ideal of the modern world. They are the sacred things above all others. In the conservation of these, as the great weapons of modern life, rests the welfare of the work we are doing. Another thing, we must not let the task of today shut from our mind the relationship which that task bears to what has already been done, and will be done after our particular task shall have been finished.