
Caste

by Eugene V. Debs

Unsigned article published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*,
vol. 15, no. 9 (Sept. 1891), pp. 826-827.

If the question were seriously asked by one of such commanding intellect as would secure attention, "Is there any proof whatever that our much vaunted civilization is drifting backward?" the answer would be no with special emphasis. If there were those who should be so bold as to intimate that an affirmative reply to the interrogatory could be supported by so much as one fact, he would be required to produce the fact, or stand convicted of heresy, worthy of thumb-screws and faggots. Indeed, it is to be questioned if the bold, outspoken Christian would be permitted to present such facts as he might believe he had secured in support of his conclusions. He would simply be charged, arraigned, tried, and condemned without an opportunity to make a defense. The cry would at once go up and go forth, "Crucify him."

Is this sheer gammon? Is it vagary — a mere whim, a hallucination? Mr. B.O. Flower,¹ in *The Arena*, writes of "society's exiles" as follows:

It is difficult to overestimate the gravity of the problem presented by those compelled to exist in the slums of our populous cities, even when considered from a purely economic point of view. From the midst of this commonwealth of degradation there emanates a moral contagion, scourging society in all its ramifications, coupled with an atmosphere of physical decay — an atmosphere reeking with filth, heavy with foul odors, laden with disease. In time of any contagion the social cellar becomes the hotbed of death, sending forth myriads of fatal germs which

¹ **Benjamin Orange Flower** (1858-1918), son of a Disciples of Christ minister, was a leading public intellectual of the Progressive Era and editor of the Boston monthly *The Arena*. Flower later briefly served as co-editor of Charles H. Kerr's *The New Time* [1897-1898], forerunner of the *International Socialist Review*.

permeate the air for miles around, causing thousands to die because society is too short-sighted to understand that the interest of its humblest members is the interest of all. The slums of our cities are the reservoirs of physical and moral death, an enormous expense to the state, a constant menace to society, a reality whose shadow is at once colossal and portentous. In times of social upheavals they will prove magazines of destruction; for while revolution will not originate in them, once let a popular uprising take form and the cellars will reinforce it in a manner more terrible than words can portray.

Considered ethically, the problem is even more embarrassing and deplorable; here, as nowhere else in civilized society, thousands of our fellowmen are exiled from the enjoyments of civilization, forced into life's lowest strata of existence, branded with that fatal word scum. If they aspire to rise, society shrinks from them; they seem of another world; they are of another world; driven into the darkness of a hopeless existence, viewed much as were lepers in olden times. Over their heads perpetually rests the dread of eviction, of sickness, and of failure to obtain sufficient work to keep life in the forms of their loved ones, making existence a perpetual nightmare, from which death alone brings release.

Say not that they do not feel this; I have talked with them; I have seen the agony born of a fear that rests heavy on their souls stamped in their wrinkled faces and peering forth from great pathetic eyes. For them winter has real terror, for they possess neither clothes to keep comfortable the body, nor means with which to properly warm their miserable tenements. Summer is scarcely less frightful in their quarters, with the heat at once stifling, suffocating, almost intolerable; heat which acting on the myriad germs of disease produces fever, often ending in death, or, what is still more dreaded, chronic invalidism. Starvation, misery, and vice, trinity of despair, haunt their every step. The Golden Rule — the foundation of true civilization, the keynote of human happiness — reaches not their wretched quarters. Placed by society under the ban, life is one long and terrible night.

But tragic as is the fate of the present generation, still more appalling is the picture when we contemplate the thousands of little waves of life yearly washed into the cellar of being; fragile, helpless innocents, responsible in no way for their presence or environment, yet condemned to a fate more frightful than the beasts of the field; human beings wandering in the dark, existing in the sewer, ever feeling the crushing weight of the gay world above, which thinks little and cares less for them. Infinitely pathetic is their lot.

We invite the careful perusal of Mr. Flower's views. Are they true? Who so bold as to deny them? Who can disprove Mr. Flower's assertions? What is the inevitable conclusion? Is it not that a civilization, professedly based upon the precepts of Christ, is even now going backwards to Brahmanism, to caste, as taught and practiced by Hindu heathen? Is not the tendency in direct conflict with the declaration of the apostle Peter, that "God is no respecter of persons?"²

What is the condition of the lower castes in Brahmanism? Are they not exiles from society? To say that the miserable exiles from society in America may, if they will, rise by a sudden bound, or by regular gradations, to the higher castes is begging the question. The exiles cannot rise; with rare exceptions they sink to lower depths of degradation. It is the law of plutocracy. The cry of "room on top," is like the mirage of flowing fountains to the thirsty traveler in Sahara. Like the victim in the grasp of quicksand, the more he struggles the deeper he sinks. He is an exile. Only money can lift him out of his thralldoms and that is used to crush him.

What is there for the woman in the great cities, who sews with a "double stitch" a shroud or a shirt? Starvation, suicide, or a life worse than either. She is an exile. Amidst all the splendors of wealth, no hand is stretched forth to save her or her children — or, if here and there one is offered, there are ten thousand raised against her.

In the palatial churches the robed divine and jewel-bedizened audience wrangle over creeds and dogmas, fly at each other's throats with the fierceness of tigers endeavoring to make it appear that an infinite God has somewhere in this universe a place in reservation worse than New York, but the way of escape for the exiles is not via the aristocratic church.

The caste era is here already. The exiles from society are increasing. We hear of their "colonies" in cities. They are *planted* every year by thousands in the Potter's fields. They are the unknown dead, and still their number increases — and this is in the "land of the free and the home of the brave" — in the closing years of the 19th Century.

What can be done for the exiles, for the "lower castes" in this Christian land? Mr. Flower, in what we have quoted, suggests no remedy. What forces can be applied to bring the exiles back, to lift the apparently doomed castes to a level where they may realize that American institutions have some blessings in store for them?

² Acts, King James Version, chapter 10, verse 34.

The last hope is in the organization of workingmen and in the federation of such organizations. The power of the working class, the working caste unified, discipline, knowing the power of the ballot and wielding it discreetly could crush the power of the plutocrats and arrest the power of the growing plutocracy.

In some way this power is to be exerted. If legitimately, the revolution will be peaceful. It will come as the springtime comes, when the ice fetters are broken and the world rejoices. But come it will. The exiles will return, the castes will revolt. If the Pharaohs are stubborn, then their doom is another Red Sea.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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