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EDITORIAL

FATHER GASSONIANA.

By DANIEL DE LEON

XV.

THAT Socialism would do away with “human incentive” was one of the direct charges made by Father Thomas I. Gasson in his Boston address of last February.

Already we have demonstrated in a previous article of this series that, if, indeed, Socialism made against incentive, the charge came with poor grace from the lips of an upholder of capitalism—an incentive destroyer. Over that field we need not go again. Neither is it here necessary to enlarge upon the droll sight of a preacher of the gospel of the meek and lowly Nazarene holding the language of “the survival of the fittest.” This article will dislodge the Jesuit Father and his Jesuit charge with a front attack.

“Incentive” is no technical term. It means different things in different mouths. In the mouth of the Anti-Socialist the word is used in one sense, and is meant to convey another sense. In the mouth of the Anti-Socialist, by “Incentive” is meant “the father of Competition,” but the meaning that the term is meant by him to convey is “the father of Emulation.” Thus the Anti-Socialist juggles with words. His purpose being to uphold an evil—“Competition”—, he shields the evil with a good—“Emulation.”

What is Competition? What is Emulation?

An illustration will define the two terms.

Consider a mining camp—say, Bret Harte’s “Roaring Camp.”

At Roaring Camp each man’s hand was raised against all others’ throats. Not a member of the camp but was a walking arsenal of pistols, bowie-knives and daggers, ready for instant use. Between these men and their savage ancestors of some 20,000 years before there was only one difference—a difference great, no doubt, as the forward march of many thousand years was bound to bring about—it was the difference of Association. While 20,000 years earlier the ancestors of those men, that is, the ancestors of us all, were at the race’s infancy, hence, truly individualists,

each pursuing individualistically his own individual purposes; hence, while 20,000 years earlier the capabilities of their ancestors were still fettered, 20,000 years later, at Roaring Camp, their capabilities were unfettered to the extent that they practiced the elemental collectiveness of Association. This was progress, however rudimentary. For the rest the men at Roaring Camp remained savage, that is individualist. Competition, in all its pristine purity, was their rule of conduct. Conditions decreed the rule. As children of the 19th Century, the men of Roaring Camp could not wholly relapse into savagery. The march of the race had purged them of the race's original Individualism sufficiently to cause them to hold together in community; nevertheless, the material conditions into which the rush for gold threw them in early days of the Far West, counteracted the progress of the Ages upon them to the extent of wiping out the veneer with which the civilization of the Eastern States covered and covers to-day the rawness of that lingering feature of savagery—Competition. Each sought to outwit, to circumvent the other; to “get there.” He who did not compete to the full extent of the occasion was left behind; he who did survive. The misfortune of one was the opportunity of others; and the opportunity had to be and was seized. Such is the law of conduct decreed by the Facts that compel a struggle for existence.

Thus stood and ran things at Roaring Camp when its “Luck” was born; and when, what with the simultaneous death of the one woman in the camp and the sight of the helpless babe, the semi-savage men were transformed. Competition ceased instanter. Did those men collapse like so many dish-clouts? Did the death of Competition signify the simultaneous death of Incentive? Far from it. Incentive remained and immediately manifested itself in manner and style in keeping with the transformation wrought in the men. The place of Competition was taken instanter by Emulation. The former semi-savages thenceforth vied with one another in works of kindness.

It matters not that the transformation of Roaring Camp was a purely local, sporadic, exceptional, sentimental event. Even without the torrential rains that poured down the hills and swept Roaring Camp out of existence, the place could not have long survived. The vastly more torrential stream of capitalism would have done its work, sooner or later. Nevertheless, the experience of Roaring Camp points the moral.

Competition is an evil. Like slavery, which was harmful to the slave-holder and the slave alike, Competition injures him who practices it, and him upon whom it is

practiced. Emulation is a blessing. Like mercy, that blesseth him that gives and him that takes, Emulation ennobles him that indulges it and all with whom it is indulged.

Incentive is not to be judged by its offspring Competition—the child begotten from the mother of material hardship, of precarious living, of the Struggle for Existence, in short, of the brute's condition. The same father also begets another child—Emulation—a child begotten from the mother of material well-being, assured existence, abundant production, in short, Socialist existence.

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