

Enquiry Concerning Political Justice

By
William Godwin

Book VIII
Of Property

Chapter VI
Objection to this System from the Allurements of Sloth

Another objection which has been urged against the system which counteracts the accumulation of property, is, "that it would put an end to industry. We behold, in commercial countries, the miracles that are operated by the love of gain. Their inhabitants cover the sea with their fleets, astonish mankind by the refinements of their ingenuity, hold vast continents in subjection, in distant parts of the world, by their arms, are able to defy the most powerful confederacies, and, oppressed with taxes and debts, seem to acquire fresh prosperity under their accumulated burthens. Shall we lightly part with a motive which appears so great and stupendous in its influence? Once establish it as a principle in society, that no man apply to his personal use more than his necessities require; and every man will become indifferent to the exertions which now call forth the energy of his facilities. Once establish it as a principle, that each man, without being compelled to exert his own powers, is entitled to partake of the superfluity of his neighbour; and indolence will speedily become universal. Such a society must either starve, or be obliged, in its own defence, to return to that system of monopoly and sordid interest, which theoretical reasoners will for ever arraign to no purpose."

In reply to this objection, the reader must again be reminded that the equality for which we are pleading, is an equality which would succeed to a state of great intellectual improvement. So bold a revolution cannot take place in human affairs, till the general mind has been highly cultivated. Hasty and undigested tumults, may be produced by a superficial idea of equalization; but it is only a clear and calm conviction of justice, of justice mutually to be rendered and received, of happiness to be produced by the desertion of our most rooted habits, that can introduce an invariable system of this sort. Attempts, without this preparation, will be productive only of confusion. Their effect will be momentary, and a new and more barbarous inequality will succeed. Each man, with unaltered appetite, will watch the opportunity, to gratify his love of power or of distinction, by usurping on his inattentive neighbours.

Is it to be believed then that a state of so great intellectual improvement, can be the forerunner of universal ignorance and brutality? Savages, it is true, are subject to the weakness of indolence. But civilized and refined states are the theatre of a peculiar activity. It is thought, acuteness of disquisition, and ardour of pursuit, that set the corporeal faculties at work. Thought begets thought. Nothing perhaps can put a stop to the advances of mind but oppression. But here, so far from being oppressed, every man is equal, every man independent and at his case. It has been observed, that the introduction of a republican government, is attended with public enthusiasm and irresistible enterprise. Is it to be believed that equality, the true republicanism, will be less effectual? It is true, that in republics this spirit, sooner or later, is found to languish. Republicanism is not a remedy that strikes at the root of the evil. Injustice,

Space for Notes



oppression and misery can find an abode in those seeming happy seats. But what shall stop the progress of ardour and improvement where the monopoly of property is unknown?

This argument will be strengthened, if we reflect on the amount of labour that a state of equality will require. What is this quantity of exertion, from which the objection supposes many individuals to shrink? It is so light, as rather to assume the guise of agreeable relaxation and gentle exercise, than of labour. In such a community, scarcely anyone can be expected, in consequence of his situation or avocations, to consider himself as exempted from the obligation to manual industry. There will be no rich man to recline in indolence, and fatten upon the labour of his fellows. The mathematician, the poet and the philosopher will derive a new stock of cheerfulness and energy from the recurring labour that makes them feel they are men. There will be no persons devoted to the manufacture of trinkets and luxuries; and none whose office it should be to keep in motion the complicated machine of government, tax-gatherers, beadles, excise-men, tide-waiters, clerks and secretaries. There will be neither fleets nor armies, neither courtiers nor lacqueys. It is the unnecessary employments that, at present, occupy the great mass of every civilized nation, while the peasant labours incessantly to maintain them in a state more pernicious than idleness.

It may be computed that not more than one twentieth of the inhabitants of England, is substantially employed in the labours of agriculture. Add to this, that the nature of agriculture is such, as to give full occupation in some parts of the year, and to leave other parts comparatively vacant. We may consider the latter as equivalent to a labour, which, under the direction of sufficient skill, might suffice, in a simple state of society, for the fabrication of tools, for weaving, and the occupation of taylor, bakers and butchers. The object, in the present state of society, is to multiply labour; in another state, it will be to simplify it. A vast disproportion of the wealth of the community, has been thrown into the hands of a few; and ingenuity has been continually upon the stretch, to find ways in which it may be expended. In the feudal times, the great lord invited the poor to come and eat of the produce of his estate, upon condition of wearing his livery, and forming themselves in rank and file to do honour to his well born guests. Now that exchanges are more facilitated, he has quitted this inartificial mode, and obliges the men who are maintained from his income to exert their ingenuity and industry in return. Thus, in the instance just mentioned, he pays the taylor to cut his clothes to pieces that he may sew them together again, and to decorate them with stitching and various ornaments, without which they would be, in no respect, less convenient and useful. We are imagining, in the present case, a state of the most rigid simplicity.

From the sketch which has been given, it seems by no means impossible, that the labour of every twentieth man in the community, would be sufficient to supply to the rest all the absolute necessaries of life. If then this labour, instead of performed by so small a number, were amicably divided among the whole, it would occupy the twentieth part of every man's time. Let us compute that the industry of a labouring man, engrosses ten hours in every day, which, when we have deducted his hours of rest, recreation and meals, seems an ample allowance. It follows that half an hour a day employed in manual labour by every member of the community would sufficiently supply the whole with necessaries. Who is there that would shrink from this degree of industry? Who is there, that sees the incessant industry exerted in this city and island, and would believe, that, with half an hour's industry per diem, the sum of happiness

to the community at large might be much greater than at present? Is it possible to contemplate this fair and generous picture of independence and virtue, where every man would have ample leisure for the noblest energies of mind, without feeling our very souls refreshed with admiration and hope?

When we talk of men's sinking into idleness, if they be not excited by the stimulus of gain, we seem to have little considered the motives that, at present, govern the human mind. We are deceived by the apparent mercenariness of mankind, and imagine that the accumulation of wealth is their great object. But it has sufficiently appeared that the present ruling passion of man is the love of distinction.(1*) There is, no doubt, a class in society that is perpetually urged by hunger and need, and has no leisure for motives less gross and material. But is the class next above them less industrious than they? Will any man affirm that the mind of the peasant is as far removed from inaction and sloth, as the mind of the general or statesman, of the natural philosopher who macerates himself with perpetual study, or the poet, the bard of Mantua for example, who can never believe that he has sufficiently revised, reconsidered and polished his compositions?

In reality, those by whom this reasoning has been urged, have mistaken the nature of their own objection. They did not suppose, that men could be roused into action only by the love of gain; but they conceived that, in a state of equality, men would have nothing to occupy their attention. What degree of truth there is in this idea we shall presently have occasion to estimate.(2*)

Meanwhile, it is sufficiently obvious, that the motives which arise from the love of distinction, are by no means cut off, by a state of society incompatible with the accumulation of property. Men, no longer able to acquire the esteem, or avoid the contempt, of their neighbours, by circumstances of dress and furniture, will divert the passion for distinction into another channel. They will avoid the reproach of indolence, as carefully as they now avoid the reproach of poverty. The only persons who, at present, neglect the effect which their appearance and manners may produce are those whose faces are ground with famine and distress. But, in a state of equal society, no man will be oppressed, and, of consequence, the more delicate affections will have time to expand themselves. The general mind having, as we have already shown, arrived at a high degree of improvement, the impulse that carries it into action, will be stronger. The fervour of public spirit will be great. Leisure will be multiplied; and the leisure of a cultivated understanding, is the precise period in which great designs, designs the tendency of which is to secure applause and esteem, are conceived. In tranquil leisure, it is impossible for any but the sublimest mind, to exist, without the passion for distinction. This passion, no longer permitted to lose itself in indirect channels and useless wanderings, will seek the noblest course, and perpetually fructify the seeds of public good. Mind, though it will perhaps at no time arrive at the termination of its possible discoveries and improvements, will nevertheless advance with a rapidity and firmness of progression of which we are, at present, unable to conceive the idea.

The love of fame is no doubt a delusion. This, like every other delusion, will take its turn to be detected and abjured. It is an airy phantom, which will indeed afford us an imperfect pleasure so long as we worship it, but will always, in a considerable degree, disappoint us, and will not stand the test of examination. We ought to love nothing but a substantial happiness, that happiness which will bear the test of recollection, and which no clearness of perception, and improvement of understanding, will tend to undermine. If there

be any principle more substantial than the rest, it is justice, a principle that rests upon this single postulatam, that man and man are beings of the same nature, and susceptible, under certain limitations, of the same advantages. Whether the benefit which is added to the common flock, proceed from you or me, is a pitiful distinction. Fame therefore is an unsubstantial and delusive pursuit. If it signify an opinion entertained of me greater than I deserve, to desire it is vicious. If it be the precise mirror of my character, it is valuable only as a means, in as much as I shall be able most essentially to benefit those, who best know the extent of my capacity, and the rectitude of my intentions.

The love of fame, when it perishes in minds formed under the present system, often gives place to a principle still more reprehensible. Selfishness is the habit that grows out of monopoly. When therefore selfishness ceases to seek its gratification in public exertion, it too often narrows into some frigid conception of personal pleasure, perhaps sensual, perhaps intellectual. But this cannot be the process where monopoly is banished. Selfishness has there no kindly circumstances to foster it. Truth, the overpowering truth of general good, then seizes its irresistibly. It is impossible we should want motives, so long as we see clearly how multitudes and ages may be benefited by our exertions, how causes and effects are connected in an endless chain, so that no honest effort can be lost, but will operate to good, centuries after its author is consigned to the grave.(3*) This will be the general passion, and all will be animated by the example of all.

Footnotes

1. Book VIII, Chap. I.
2. Book VIII, Chap. VII, VIII.
3. Book IV, Chap. X.