

SOME ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL POWER OF WEALTH

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Some Aspects of the Social Power of Wealth by Edwin Hellaby Willisford

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EDWIN HELLABY WILLISFORD

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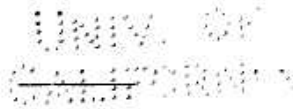
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BY

EDWIN HELLABY WILLISFORD, A. M., B. D.

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Some Aspects of the Social Power of Wealth.

INTRODUCTION.

Facts without theories are delusive; theories without facts are vain.—KANT.

In harmony with this thought of Kant, the scope of this thesis will assume a two-fold character; (1) the collection and comparison of facts, and, (2) the consideration of the deductions therefrom.

To study the customs and institutions of a people, is one of the best ways to learn their history. All peoples have certain well defined¹ and developed customs and institutions; among these are marriage, family, religion, military system, property, government and law. Attention will be given to the study of such customs and institutions, covering long periods of time, as will show the influence of wealth on social life; and the varying effect of wealth in the stages through which the race has passed; as the savage, barbaric, and civilized; also the effect of the economic and political forces, such as nomadic conditions, free land, proprietorship, feudal system, inheritance and entailed property.

The commercial aspect of wealth has received much attention, but the social power of wealth has had but scant consideration. Therefore the purpose of this thesis will be to prove that wealth plays an important social rôle and that the possession of wealth and its conspicuous consumption yields social prestige.

The social power of wealth lies in the fact that it enables the possessor (1) to satisfy his non-economic desires; (2) to enjoy immunity from many requirements which the man in general must meet, and (3) to ignore custom without loss of caste. The old is sacred, custom is law inexorable, possession of wealth permits a departure from, a disregard of custom, and law, not

¹Jevons. *An Introduction to the History of Religion*, 2.

only with impunity but such disregard and departure tends to increase the social power of the individual. Wealth helps to rive the sail of an opponent, to escape justice, to secure the favor of the gods—and of men.

To clearly discern between the social or non-economic and the economic aspects of wealth is not always easy. The latter has to do with the production of wealth while the former has to do with the consumption of wealth, particularly in those forms of consumption which satisfy the non-economic wants and desires of man.

The economist deals with the production of wealth, with profits, with dividends; the sociologist with the expenditure of wealth and especially its social effects. Commercial activity has too often been considered the end, when in fact, it is the means or highway to the end. "Broadly stated, economics may be said to benefit the producer while sociology benefits the consumer. But the term producer must be taken in its widest and really proper sense of any one who by any form of labor adds anything to the value, i. e. to the utility of a product. The term consumer, on the contrary must be taken irrespective of whether he is also a producer or not."¹ Commercially men seek to acquire wealth that they may transact a still larger business, socially men seek wealth that it may be expended, like that of the old Venetian, in palaces, and galleries, gathering therein the glories of the fine old world life. Many a man is goading himself on in the mad stampede for wealth in order that his bank account may allow him to enlarge and beautify his home, to enrich it with the paintings of the masters, with famous statuary, with rare books and renowned bric-a-brac; he well knows that such conspicuous display of wealth yields large returns in social prestige. There is a sense in which the economic man may be at the same time the non-economic man, for, "the economic man is not plain affinity for wealth. Sometimes he is a more expert and persistent scatterer than accumulator of wealth. Sometimes wealth is almost altogether a means with him, and scarcely to any appreciable degree an end. Sometimes he plays the economic game just as another plays whist or billiards or golf. Sometimes he wants wealth because his

¹Ward. *Outlines of Sociology*, 285.

wife wants society. Sometimes he wants wealth in order to propagate his creed, or to punish his enemy, or to win a maid, or to buy a title, or to control a party. In either case the economic man is a man of highly mixed motives."¹

Wealth as a social factor has too long been overlooked. The proper interpretation of its relation to society will serve to explain many of the problems which have long remained unsolved. Its study has revealed so many of the reasons for conditions as they now exist that it has come to be considered the magic key for revealing the secrets of the past.

NOTE.

In addition to the study already in evidence much research has been made and much material gathered on the following topics. 1. Wealth and Woman, including, wife purchase, free choice, marriage, divorce, birth rate, prostitution, economic and social status. 2. Wealth and Art, character of early art, deteriorating effect of wealth. 3. Wealth and Display, ceremonies, decoration, ornamentation, dress, insignia, titles, ancestors, national and race characteristics, as Negro, Spaniard, Italian, German, English, etc. 4. Amusements, sports, as reserves for game, special game laws for benefit of wealthy. 5. Origin and purpose of sumptuary laws. 6. Property, kinds, significance of, inheritance, primogeniture and dower, 7. Wealth and military service, equites, knights, etc. 8. Limitations of the Social Power of Wealth.

¹Small. *General Sociology*, 450.

PART I.

WEALTH AND SOCIAL PRESTIGE.

CHAPTER I.

WEALTH THE MEDIUM OF SOCIAL PROGRESS.

LARGE WEALTH ESSENTIAL.

The term "wealthy" is only relative. It cannot be given a definite value. When used to express the worth of an individual it must signify that he possesses goods in large quantities, in quantities, more than the majority of his fellows possess. To secure favor or prestige there must be relatively large possessions. For if, "all men were possessed of a great deal, but all of an equal amount, each would be compelled, in may be conjectured to be his own chimney sweep, his own scavenger and boot black. And how can anyone then be properly called wealthy? This is the social side of the idea of wealth. Hence a person, with the same resources might be very wealthy in a provincial town, while in the capital, he could enjoy only moderate comfort."¹

The kind of wealth is not so important. Among the early Greeks any product possessed in quantity constituted wealth. But when civilization is advanced far enough so that a state is formed, a symbol, representative of wealth is adopted, namely, money. This becomes the substitute for all forms of property and the pursuit of wealth becomes the pursuit for money.

The possession of large wealth and its relation to social prestige seems to suggest the following laws and corollary:—

1. Incomes that leave no margin for unproductive consumption and conspicuous display do not procure social prestige.
2. That any increase in incomes that leaves a margin confers social prestige.
3. That the amount of social prestige yielded by such surplus is not proportional with the increase. That is, any increase in the margin, yields more than a corresponding increase of social prestige.

¹Roscher. Principles of Political Economy, 1; 68-69.