

THE ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

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The Acquisitive Society by R. H. Tawney

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R. H. TAWNEY

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R. H. TAWNEY

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THE ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

I

INTRODUCTORY

It is a commonplace that the characteristic virtue of Englishmen is their power of sustained practical activity, and their characteristic vice a reluctance to test the quality of that activity by reference to principles. They are incurious as to theory, take fundamentals for granted, and are more interested in the state of the roads than in their place on the map. And it might fairly be argued that in ordinary times that combination of intellectual tameness with practical energy is sufficiently serviceable to explain, if not to justify, the equanimity with which its possessors bear the criticism of more mentally adventurous nations. It is the mood of those who have made their bargain with fate and are content to take what it offers without re-opening the deal. It leaves the mind free to concentrate undisturbed upon profitable activities, because it is not distracted by a taste for unprofitable speculations. Most generations, it might be said, walk in a path which they neither make, nor discover, but accept; the main thing is that they should march. The blinkers worn by Englishmen enable them to trot all the more steadily along the beaten

road, without being disturbed by curiosity as to their destination.

But if the medicine of the constitution ought not to be made its daily food, neither can its daily food be made its medicine. There are times which are not ordinary, and in such times it is not enough to follow the road. It is necessary to know where it leads, and, if it leads nowhere, to follow another. The search for another involves reflection, which is uncongenial to the bustling people who describe themselves as practical, because they take things as they are and leave them as they are. But the practical thing for a traveler who is uncertain of his path is not to proceed with the utmost rapidity in the wrong direction: it is to consider how to find the right one. And the practical thing for a nation which has stumbled upon one of the turning-points of history is not to behave as though nothing very important were involved, as if it did not matter whether it turned to the right or to the left, went up hill or down dale, provided that it continued doing with a little more energy what it has done hitherto; but to consider whether what it has done hitherto is wise, and, if it is not wise, to alter it. When the broken ends of its industry, its politics, its social organization, have to be pieced together after a catastrophe, it must make a decision; for it makes a decision even if it refuses to decide. If it is to make a decision which will wear, it must travel beyond the philosophy momentarily in favor with the proprietors of its newspapers. Unless it is to move with the energetic futility of a squirrel in a revolving cage, it must have a clear apprehension both of the

deficiency of what is, and of the character of what ought to be. And to obtain this apprehension it must appeal to some standard more stable than the momentary exigencies of its commerce or industry or social life, and judge them by it. It must, in short, have recourse to Principles.

Such considerations are, perhaps, not altogether irrelevant at a time when facts have forced upon Englishmen the reconsideration of their social institutions which no appeal to theory could induce them to undertake. An appeal to principles is the condition of any considerable reconstruction of society, because social institutions are the visible expression of the scale of moral values which rules the minds of individuals, and it is impossible to alter institutions without altering that moral valuation. Parliament, industrial organizations, the whole complex machinery through which society expresses itself, is a mill which grinds only what is put into it, and when nothing is put into it grinds air. There are many, of course, who desire no alteration, and who, when it is attempted, will oppose it. They have found the existing economic order profitable in the past. They desire only such changes as will insure that it is equally profitable in the future. *Quand le Roi avait bu, la Pologne était ivre.* They are genuinely unable to understand why their countrymen cannot bask happily by the fire which warms themselves, and ask, like the French farmer-general:—“When everything goes so happily, why trouble to change it?” Such persons are to be pitied, for they lack the social quality which is

proper to man. But they do not need argument; for Heaven has denied them one of the faculties required to apprehend it.

There are others, however, who are conscious of the desire for a new social order, but who yet do not grasp the implications of their own desire. Men may genuinely sympathize with the demand for a radical change. They may be conscious of social evils and sincerely anxious to remove them. They may set up a new department, and appoint new officials, and invent a new name to express their resolution to effect something more drastic than reform, and less disturbing than revolution. But unless they will take the pains, not only to act, but to reflect, they end by effecting nothing. For they deliver themselves bound to those who think they are practical, because they take their philosophy so much for granted as to be unconscious of its implications, and directly they try to act, that philosophy re-asserts itself, and serves as an overruling force which presses their action more deeply into the old channels. "Unhappy man that I am; who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" When they desire to place their economic life on a better foundation, they repeat, like parrots, the word "Productivity," because that is the word that rises first in their minds; regardless of the fact that productivity is the foundation on which it is based already, that increased productivity is the one characteristic achievement of the age before the war, as religion was of the Middle Ages or art of classical Athens, and that it is precisely in the century which has seen the greatest increase in produc-