

CRIMES OF CHARITY

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649275915

Crimes of charity by Konrad Bercovici

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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KONRAD BERCOVICI

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OF CHARITY**

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BY
KONRAD BERCOVICI

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY JOHN REED



NEW YORK ALFRED A. KNOPF MCMXVII

INTRODUCTION

There is a literary power which might be called Russian — a style of bald narration which carries absolute conviction of human character, in simple words packed with atmosphere. Only the best writers have it; this book is full of it. I read the manuscript more than a year ago, and I remember it chiefly as a series of vivid pictures — a sort of epic of our City of Dreadful Day. Here we see and smell and hear the East Side; its crowded, gasping filth, the sour stench of its grinding poverty, the cries and groans and lamentations in many alien tongues of the hopeful peoples whose hope is broken in the Promised Land. Pale, undersized, violent children at play in the iron street; the brown, steamy warmth of Jewish coffee-houses on Grand Street; sick tenement rooms quivering and breathless in summer heat — starkly hungry with the December wind cutting through broken windows; poets, musicians, men and women with the blood of heroes and martyrs, babies who might grow up to be the world's great — stunted, weakened, murdered by the unfair struggle for bread. What human stories are

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in this book! What tremendous dramas of the soul!

It is as if we were under water, looking at the hidden hull of this civilization. Evil growths cling to it—houses of prostitution, sweat-shops which employ the poor in their bitter need at less than living wages, stores that sell them rotten food and shabby clothing at exorbitant prices, horrible rents, and all the tragi-comic manifestations of Organised Charity.

Every person of intelligence and humanity who has seen the workings of Organised Charity, knows what a deadening and life-sapping thing it is, how unnecessarily cruel, how uncomprehending. Yet it must not be criticised, investigated or attacked. Like patriotism, charity is respectable, an institution of the rich and great—like the high tariff, the open shop, Wall street, and Trinity Church. White slavery recruits itself from charity, industry grows bloated with it, landlords live off it; and it supports an army of officers, investigators, clerks and collectors, whom it systematically debauches. Its giving is made the excuse for lowering the recipients' standard of living, of depriving them of privacy and independence, or subjecting them to the cruelest mental and physical torture, of making them liars, cringers, thieves. The law, the police, the church are the accomplices of charity. And how could it be

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otherwise, considering those who give, how they give, and the terrible doctrine of "the deserving poor"? There is nothing of Christ the compassionate in the immense business of Organised Charity; its object is to get efficient results — and that means, in practise, to just keep alive vast numbers of servile, broken-spirited people.

I know of publishers who refused this book, not because it was untrue, or badly written; but because they themselves "believed in Organised Charity." One of them wrote that "there must be a bright side." I have never heard the "bright side." To those of us who know, even the Charity organisation reports — when they do not refuse to publish them — are unspeakably terrible. To them, Poverty is a crime, to be punished; to us, Organised Charity is a worse one.

JOHN REED.

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