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Social Justice and Mass Culture

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A FRIEND OF MINE has the misfortune of owning a number of stone cottages. I say "misfortune" because the cottages are in Scotland, and their rents are fixed at the level of 1914. The cottages were built long before 1914—some of them are eighteenth-century work, with their pantiled roofs and trick rubble walls and irregular little windows; but they are good to look upon still, with their white door-sills and their little gardens along the path to the road. The law compels my friend to keep them in tolerable repair, if they are tenanted, and to pay most of what rent he receives either to local authorities or to the Exchequer, in the form of rates and income-taxes. But the rent of each cottage amounts to a mere five shillings a week—seventy cents, at the present rate of exchange. This is not particularly depressing to my friend, for the rents of his farms are fixed at levels no higher than they were during the Napoleonic wars, let alone the First World War. The cottages are a cause of expense to him, of course, rather than a source of income; but persons of his station are now resigned to being ruined, and for some of his cottages he asks no rent at all, letting them to old people who can afford to pay next to nothing. Some of his tenants, however, are better off, according to their lights, than my friend himself: they have risen in the economic scale while he has descended. His income is still much greater than theirs, but his expenses are much greater, and his responsibilities. These tenants now have better wages and shorter hours than ever they did before; they can afford their little luxuries, extending sometimes to television-sets. Some of them have come to look upon rent as a luxury—for, after all, many of their neighbors are the recipients of my friend's charity, paying nothing for their cottages. Accordingly, my friend's agent occasionally has his difficulties when he goes from door to door, on Mondays, collecting five shillings here and five shillings there. One morning the agent knocked at the door of a tenant who was in good health and employed at good wages. The tenant came to the door and announced that he had decided to pay no more rent; he could not afford it; prices were high, and he could use that five shillings himself.

"Will you be honest with me?" the agent asked.

The tenant said he would.

"Well, then," said the agent, "how much do you spend a month on cigarettes?"

"Thirty shillin's," replied the tenant, in righteous defiance, "and not a penny more."

When a man feels that he is entitled to withhold his rent, though he spends on tobacco fifty per cent more per month than he does for his cottage, his notion of justice seems to be confused. This is not so serious a confusion, however, as the revolution of belief in nearly the whole of eastern Europe, where the possessor of property has come to be looked upon as an enemy of society, and is lucky if he escapes being driven out into the woods to die of pneumonia, or herded off to a labor camp. My friend is in no immediate danger of such a fate, though, as things are going, the old farms that have been in his family for two hundred years will have to be sold at auction when he dies, and perhaps the roof will be taken off the big handsome house that his fathers knew before him. In Scotland, fortunately for my friend, the destruction of old institutions is gradual, not violent. But at bottom the same force which has effaced traditional life in eastern Europe is ruining my Scottish friend: a confusion about first principles. Among these principles which have sustained our civilization and our very existence ever since man rose above the brutes, the principle of justice has been the great support of an orderly and law-abiding society.

From the time when first men began to reflect upon such matters, the nobler and more serious minds have been convinced that justice has some source and sanction more than human and more than natural. Either justice is ordained by some Power above us, or it is mere expediency, the power of the strong over the weak—

> ". . . the simple plan,
> That they shall take, who have the power,
> And they shall keep who can."

A great part of mankind, nowadays, has succumbed to this latter

concept of justice; and the consequence of that belief is plain to be seen in the violence and ruin that have overtaken most nations in this century.

Now our traditional idea of justice comes to us from two sources: the Judaic and Christian faith in a just God whom we fear and love, and whose commandments are expressed in unmistakable language; and the teachings of classical philosophy, in particular the principles expressed in Plato's *Republic* and incorporated into Roman jurisprudence by Cicero and his successors. The concept of justice upon earth which both these traditions inculcate is, in substance, this: the idea of justice is implanted in our minds by a Power that is more than human; and our mundane justice is our attempt to copy a perfect justice that abides in a realm beyond time and space; and the general rule by which we endeavor to determine just conduct and just reward may be expressed as "To each man, the things that are his own."

Plato perceived that there are two aspects of this justice: justice in private character, and justice in society. Personal or private justice is attained by that balance and harmony in character which shines out from those persons we call "just men"—men who cannot be swayed from the path of rectitude by private interest, and who are masters of their own passions, and who deal impartially and honestly with everyone they meet. The other aspect of justice, *social* justice, is similarly marked by harmony and balance; it is the communal equivalent of that right proportion and government of reason, will, and appetite which the just man displays in his private character. Socrates says to Glaucon, "And is not the creation of justice the institution of a natural order and government of one faculty by another in the parts of the soul? And is not the creation of injustice the production of a state of things at variance with the natural order?" The happy man, Socrates maintains, is the just man; and the happy society is the just society. It is the society in which every man minds his own business, and receives always the rewards which are his due. The division of labor is a part of this social justice; for true justice requires that "the carpenter and the shoemaker and the rest of the citizens to do each his own business, and not another's." Injustice in society comes when men try to undertake roles for which they are not fitted, and claim rewards to which they are not entitled,

and deny other men what really belongs to them. Quite as an unjust man is a being whose reason, will, and appetite are at war with one another, so an unjust society is a state characterized by "meddlesomeness, and interference, and the rising up of a part of the soul against the whole, an assertion of unlawful authority, which is made by a rebellious subject against a true prince, of whom he is the natural vassal—what is all this confusion and delusion but injustice, and intemperance and cowardice and ignorance, and every form of vice?"

It is perfectly true, then, both in the eyes of the religious man and the eyes of the philosopher, that there is a real meaning to the term "social justice." The Christian concepts of charity and obedience are bound up with the Christian idea of a just society; while for the Platonic and Ciceronian philosopher, no government is righteous unless it conforms to the same standards of conduct as those which the just man respects. We all have real obligations toward our fellow-men, for it was ordained by Omniscience that men should live together in charity and brotherhood. A just society, guided by these lights, will endeavor to provide that every man be free to do the work for which he is best suited, and that he receive the rewards which that work deserves, and that no one meddle with him. Thus cooperation, not strife, will be the governing influence in the state; class will not turn against class, but all men will realize, instead, that a variety of occupations, duties, and rewards is necessary to civilization and the rule of law.

As classical philosophy merged with Christian faith to form modern civilization, scholars came to distinguish between two types or applications of justice—not divine and human justice, not private and social justice, precisely, but what we call "commutative" justice and "distributive" justice. "Commutative" justice, in the words of old Jeremy Taylor, three centuries ago, is "that justice which supposes exchange of things profitable for things profitable." It is that righteous relationship by which one man gives his goods or services to another man and receives an equivalent benefit, to the betterment of both. Now "distributive" justice, again in Jeremy Taylor's words, "is commanded in this rule, 'Render to all their dues.'" Distributive justice, in short, is that arrangement in society by which each man obtains what his nature and his labor entitle him to, without oppression or evasion. Com-

mutative justice is righteous dealing between particular individuals; distributive justice is the general system of rewarding each man according to his deserts. Both concepts of justice have been badly misunderstood in our time, but distributive justice has fared the worse.

Edmund Burke, a hundred and sixty-five years ago, perceived that radical reformers suffered from a disastrous misconception of the idea of justice. The followers of Rousseau, asserting that society is simply a compact for mutual benefit among the men and women who make up a nation, declared that therefore no man has any greater rights than his fellows, and that property is the source of all evil. Burke turned all the power of his rhetoric against this delusion. Men do indeed have natural rights, he answered; but those rights are not what Rousseau's disciples think they are. The foremost of our *true* natural rights is the right to justice and order, which the radical fancies of the French revolutionaries would abolish:

> Men have a right to the fruits of their industry, and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have a right to the acquisitions of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to instruction in life, and to consolation in death. Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself; and he has a right to all which society, with all its combinations of skill and force, can do in his favour. In this partnership all men have equal rights; but not to equal things. He that has but five shillings in the partnership, has as good a right to it, as he that has five hundred pounds has to his larger proportion. But he has not a right to an equal dividend in the product of the joint stock; and as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society; for I have in my contemplation the civil social man, and no other. It is a thing to be settled by convention.

This is the Christian and classical idea of distributive justice. Men have a right to the product of their labors, and to the benefits of good government and of the progress of civilization. But they have no right to the property and the labor of others. The sincere Christian will do everything in his power to relieve the distresses of men and women who suffer privation or injury; but the

virtue of charity is a world away from the abstract *right* of equality which the French radicals claimed. The merit of charity is that it is voluntary, a gift from the man who has to the man who has not; while the radicals' claim of a *right* to appropriate the goods of their more prosperous neighbors is a vice—the vice of covetousness. True justice secures every man in the possession of what is his own, and provides that he will receive the reward of his talents; but true justice also ensures that no man shall seize the property and the rights that belong to other classes and persons, on the pretext of an abstract equality. The just man knows that men differ in strength, in intelligence, in energy, in beauty, in dexterity, in discipline, in inheritance, in particular talents; and he sets his face, therefore, against any scheme of pretended "social justice" which would treat all men alike. There could be no greater injustice to society than to give the good, the industrious, and the frugal the same rewards as the vicious, the indolent, and the spendthrift. Besides, different types of character deserve different types of reward. The best reward of the scholar is contemplative leisure; the best reward of the soldier is public honor; the best reward of the quiet man is the secure routine of domestic existence; the best reward of the statesman is just influence; the best reward of the skilled craftsman is the opportunity to make fine things; the best reward of the farmer is a decent rural competence; the best reward of the industrialist is the sight of what his own industry has built; the best reward of the good wife is the goodness of her children. To reduce all these varieties of talent and aspiration, with many more, to the dull nexus of cash payment, is the act of a dull and envious mind; and then to make that cash payment the same for every individual is an act calculated to make society one everlasting frustration for the best men and women.

How was it that this traditional concept of social justice, which took into account the diversity of human needs and wishes, came to be supplanted, in the minds of many people, by the delusion that social justice consists in treating every man as if he were an identical cog in a social machine, with precisely the same qualities and hopes as his neighbor? One can trace the fallacy that justice is identical with equality of condition far back into antiquity, for human folly is as old as human wisdom. But the modern form of this notion arose late in the eighteenth century, and Burke and

John Adams and other conservative thinkers foresaw that it was destined to do immense mischief in our world. Condorcet, for example, eminent among the philosophers who ushered in the French Revolution, proclaimed that "Not only equality of right, but equality of fact, is the goal of the socialist art"; he declared that the whole aim of all social institutions should be to benefit physically, intellectually, and morally the poorest classes. Now the Christian concept of charity enjoins constant endeavor to improve the lot of the poor; but the Christian faith, which Burke and Adams held in their different ways, does not command the sacrifice of the welfare of one class to that of another class; instead, Christian teaching looks upon the rich and powerful as the elder brothers of the poor and weak, given their privileges that they may help to improve the character and the condition of all humanity. Instead of abolishing class and private rights in the name of an abstract equality, Christian thinkers hope to employ commutative and distributive justice for the realization of the peculiar talents and hopes of each individual, not the confounding of all personality in one collective monotony.

Karl Marx, casting off the whole moral legacy of Christian and classical thought, carried the notion of "social justice" as pure equality further yet. Adapting Ricardo's labor theory of value to his own purposes, Marx insisted that since all value comes from "labor," all value must return to labor; and therefore all men must receive the same rewards, and live the same life. Justice, according to this view, is uniformity of existence. "In order to create equality," Marx wrote, "we must first create inequality." By this he meant that because men are *not* equal in strength, energy, intelligence, or any other natural endowment, we must take away from the superior and give to the inferior; we must depress the better to help the worse; and thus we will deliberately treat the strong, the energetic, and the intelligent unfairly, that we may make their natural inferiors their equals in condition. Now this doctrine is the callous repudiation of the classical and Christian idea of justice. "To each his own": such was the definition of justice in which Plato and Cicero and the fathers of the Church and the Schoolmen agreed. Each man should have the right to the fruit of his own labors, and the right to freedom from being meddled with; and each man should do that work for which

his nature and his inheritance best qualified him. But Marx was resolved to turn the world inside out, and a necessary preparation for this was the inversion of the idea of justice. Marx refused to recognize that there are various kinds and degrees of labor, each deserving its peculiar reward; and he ignored the fact that there is such a thing as the postponed reward of labor, in the form of bequest and inheritance. It is not simply the manual laborer who works: the statesman works, and so does the soldier, and so does the scholar, and so does the priest, and so does the banker, and so does the landed proprietor, and so does the inventor, and so does the manufacturer, and so does the clerk. The highest and most productive forms of labor, most beneficial to humanity both in spirit and in matter, commonly are those kinds of work least menial. Only in this sense is it true that all value comes from labor.

In the history of political and economic fanaticism, there are few fallacies more nearly transparent than the central principles of Marxism. But the publication of Marx's *Capital* coincided with the decay of established opinions in the modern world, and with all the confusion which the culmination of the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of European influence had brought in their train. Thus men who had repudiated both the old liberal educational disciplines and the bulk of Christian teaching embraced Marx's theories without reflection; for men long to believe in *something*, and the declaration that everyone is entitled by the laws of social justice to the possessions of his more prosperous neighbor was calculated to excite all the power of envy. The doctrinaire socialists and communists began to preach this new theory of justice—the dogma that everything belongs of right to everyone. That idea has been one of the chief causes of our modern upheaval and despair, throughout most of the world. In its milder aspect, it has led to the difficulties of my Scottish friend in collecting his rents; in its fiercer aspect, to the dehumanization of whole peoples and the wreck of ancient civilizations.

True distributive justice, which prescribes the rights and duties that connect the state, or community, and the citizen or private person, does not mean "distribution" in the sense of employing the power of the state to redistribute property among men. Pope Pius XI, in 1931, made it clear that this was not the Christian significance of the phrase. "Of its very nature the true aim of all

social activity," the Pope wrote, "should be to help individual members of the social body, but never to destroy or absorb them. The aim of social legislation must therefore be the re-establishment of vocational groups." This encyclical, in general, urges the restoration of *order*, through the encouragement or resurrection of all those voluntary associations which once interposed a barrier between the Leviathan state and the puny individual. The state ought to be an arbiter, intent upon justice, and not the servant of a particular class or interest. The late William A. Orton, in his last book, *The Economic Role of the State*, discussing commutative and distributive justice in the light of Papal encyclicals, reminds us of how sorely the concept of distributive justice has been corrupted:

> Distributive justice does not primarily refer, as does the economic theory of distribution, to the sharing-out of a given supply of goods and services, because the state has no such supply. Yet that is the conception which tends to develop in the late stages of all highly centralized societies, including our own: the notion that the masses can and ought to receive from the state goods and services beyond what they could otherwise earn for themselves. The popularity of this notion has obvious causes, ranging from genuine altruism through political expediency to undisguised class interest. It is noteworthy that, as organized labor becomes a major political force, it is no longer content — as Gompers might have been — to rely on the economic power of the trade-unions but goes on, while resisting all limits on that, to make demands for state action in the interests of wage-earners as a class. And the point is not whether those demands are justifiable as desiderata; quite possibly they are, since, like the king in wonder-working days of old, we would all like everybody to have everything. The point is that this whole notion of the providential state invokes and rests upon the coercive power, regarded solely from the standpoint of the beneficiaries. Furthermore, there are practical limits to this sort of procedure; and it is less painful to recognize them in advance than to run into them head on.

And Orton proceeds to examine the necessity of re-asserting moral principles in the complex economic negotiations of our time. It is impossible to determine a "fair wage," or the proper relationship between employer and union, or the aims of social security, or the boundary between a just claim and extortion, or the proper regulation of prices, or the degree of freedom of competition,

without reference to certain definitions that depend upon moral sanctions. Of those definitions, "justice" is the cardinal term. The Benthamite delusion that politics and economics could be managed on considerations purely material has exposed us to a desolate individualism in which every man and every class looks upon all other men and classes as dangerous competitors, when in reality no man and no class can continue long in safety and prosperity without the bond of sympathy and the reign of justice. It is necessary to any high civilization that there be a great variety of human types and a variety of classes and functions.

A true understanding of what "social justice" means would do more than anything else to guard against that bitter resentment of superiority or differentiation which menaces the foundations of culture. We hear a good deal of talk, some of it sensible, some of it silly, about the "anti-intellectualism" of our time. But it is undeniably true that there exists among us a vague but ominous detestation of the life of the mind—apparently on the assumption that what one man has, all men must have; and if they are denied it, then they will deny it to the privileged man. The late C. E. M. Joad, a writer scarcely given to reactionary or anti-democratic opinions, noted with alarm this resentment of the masses against anything that they cannot share; and they now have it in their power, he suggested, to topple anything of which they disapprove. It is not even necessary for the masses to employ direct political action; the contagion of manners works for them: formerly a class of thinkers and artists could flourish in the midst of general ignorance, but now the mass-mind, juke-box culture, penetrates to every corner of the Western world, and the man of superior natural endowments is ashamed of being different; he feels, perhaps, that it is "unjust" to indulge tastes which the majority cannot appreciate. Tocqueville, more than a century ago, remarked that this silent tyranny of the masses, enforced only by the glowering disapproval of public opinion, tended even then to suppress high attainment of mind in democracies. Joad summarizes the problem thus:

> In all previous ages the masses were indeed uneducated and the influence of their tastes and desires was, therefore, negligible. There was no question of *their* concepts of the pleasant, the good.

> the beautiful and the true being imposed upon any but themselves. In our own day for the first time in history most human beings in Europe and the U.S.A. can read; they also have some money to spend and leisure in which to spend it. As a result there has sprung up for the first time in human history a vast industry devoted to stimulating and satisfying the untrained tastes of the masses. The mass products of this industry are novels of the two-penny library class, the cinema and 'light music' in all its forms, the first substituting for literature, the second for painting and poetry, the third for music. When people urge that public taste is lower today than it was in the eighteenth century, what they mean is not so much that the taste of the class which in our age is analogous to the class of the eighteenth-century scholars, critics and creative authors of Dr. Johnson's circle is lower; what they mean is that in our own time this class is set in the midst of an environment of bad literature, bad art and bad music which did not in the eighteenth century exist and which through the influence of the environment it sets up lowers the standard of the whole. . . . Pitch, we say, defiles what it touches; but it defiles in the aesthetic no less than in the moral sphere, and it may well be that it is impossible for men to live continually in an environment of cinema and radio and 'light music,' cheap magazines and sensational Sunday papers without being to some extent affected by that environment.

One could elaborate upon Joad's suggestion almost interminably. The gradual reduction of public libraries, intended for the elevation of the popular mind, to mere instruments for idle amusement at public expense; the cacophony of noise which fills almost all public places, converting even the unwilling into a part of the captive audience, so that only by spending a good deal of money and travelling some distance can one eat and drink without being oppressed by blatant vulgarity; the conversion of nominal institutions of learning to the popular ends of sociability and utilitarian training—all these things, and many others, are so many indications of the advance of the masses into the realm of culture. The nineteenth-century optimists believed that the masses would indeed make culture their own, by assimilating themselves to it; it scarcely occurred to the enthusiasts for popular schooling that the masses might assimilate culture to themselves. The magazine-rack of any drugstore in America would suffice to drive Robert Lowe or Horace Mann to distraction. Now we cannot undo the consequences of mass-schooling, even if we would; but what we can contend against is the spirit of vulgar intolerance which proclaims that if

the masses cannot share in a taste, that taste shall not be suffered to exist. And this is closely bound up with the idea of social justice. If justice means uniformity, then the higher life of the mind which is confined to a few has no right to survival; but if justice means that each man has a right to his own, we ought to try to convince modern society that there is no injustice or deprivation in the fact that one man is skilled with his hands, and another with his head, or that one man enjoys baseball and another chamber music. We must go beyond the differences of taste, indeed, and remind modern society that differences of function are as necessary and beneficial as differences of opinion. That some men are richer than others, and that some have more leisure than others, and that some travel more than others, and that some inherit more than others, and that some are educated more than others, is no more unjust, in the great scheme of things, than that some undeniably are handsomer or stronger or quicker or healthier than others. This complex variety is the breath of life to society, not the triumph of injustice. Poverty, even absolute poverty, is not an evil; it is not evil to be a beggar; it is not evil to be ignorant; it is not evil to be stupid. All these things are either indifferent, or else are positive virtues, if accepted with a contrite heart. What really matters is that we should accept the station to which "a divine tactic" has appointed us with humility and a sense of consecration. Without inequality, there is no opportunity for charity, or for gratitude; without differences of mind and talent, the world would be one changeless expanse of uniformity.

I am inclined to believe, then, that the need of our time is not for greater progress toward equality of condition and distribution of wealth, but rather for the clear understanding of what commutative and distributive justice truly mean: "to each his own." It is very easy to run with the pack and howl for the attainment of absolute equality. But that equality would be the death of human liveliness, and probably the death of our economy. I know, of course, that we have all about us examples of wealth misspent and opportunities abused. In our fallen state, we cannot hope that all the members of any class will behave with perfect rectitude. But it would be no wiser to abolish classes, for that reason, than to abolish humanity. We do indeed have the duty of exhorting those who have been placed by a divine tactic in positions of responsi-

bility to do their part with charity and humility; and, before that, we have the more pressing duty of so exhorting ourselves. There are signs, in most of the countries of the Western world, that what remains of the old leading classes are learning to conduct themselves with courage and fortitude. If they are effaced utterly, we shall not be emancipated totally from leadership, but shall find ourselves, instead, at the mercy of the commissar. The delusion that justice consists in absolute equality ends in an absolute equality beneath the weight of a man or a party to whom justice is no more than a word.

At the back of the mind of the man who declined to pay his rent, I think, was the notion that under a just domination, all things would be supplied to him out of a common fund, without the necessity of any endeavor on his part. It is easy enough to describe the genesis of such concepts; it is much more difficult to remedy them. The real victim of injustice, in this particular case, was my friend the landed proprietor—though he never thought of complaining. No one subsidizes him; his garden lies choked with weeds; he has sold his Raeburns and Constables and his ancestors' furniture to keep up his farms and pay for his children's education; he continues to serve in local office at his own expense; he labors far longer hours than his own tenants; he can indulge, nowadays, very few of his tastes for books and music, though the cottagers can gratify theirs, in comparable matters, beyond anything they dreamed of in former days. My friend endures these things—and the prospect that when he is gone, everything that his family loved will pass away with him—because of the ascendancy of the idea that justice consists in levelling, that inherited wealth and superior station are reprehensible, and that society and culture can subsist and flourish without being rooted in the past. He himself, to some extent, is influenced by this body of opinion. Thus the unbought grace of life may be extinguished by the power of positive law within a single generation.

Probably the traditional leading classes of Europe were at their worst in the Russia of the czars. But what humane and rational man can maintain that the leading classes of Soviet Russia constitute an improvement upon their predecessors? Man was created not for equality, but for the struggle upward from brute nature toward the world that is more than terrestial. The principle of

justice, in consequence, is not enslavement to a uniform condition, but liberation from arbitrary restraints upon a man's right to fulfill his moral nature.