

# The People.

VOL. IX, NO. 5

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MAY 1, 1899

PRICE 2 CENTS

EDITORIAL

## THE PARABLE OF THE TANK.

By DANIEL DE LEON

One of the most exquisite passages in Edward Bellamy's last work, *Equality*, is "The Parable of the Tank." It is exquisite in the neatness and simplicity of the presentation of an economic-social development that, carried on by extortion, must lead to collapse. Nevertheless, due, probably, to the very simplicity of the presentation, it omits mention of a certain vein that runs through the whole capitalist system, and that can not be omitted without rendering the presentation itself, not defective merely, but liable to foster, by insinuating, a serious popular delusion;—to wit, the fact that capitalism is corner-stoned on confiscation, and that confiscation is a prop and a boost to the capitalist class; consequently, that its vaunted "Sacredness of Property" is but a hoodoo.

The Parable starts with the capitalists in existence. How came they to be capitalists? "Their diligence and craft," is all the explanation given in the Parable, "had placed in their hands stores of water where others could find none." The least to be said against such a summing up of the genesis of capital is that it is "mild"; indeed, it is so mild as to be positively wrong. Capital cannot start without a "proletariat,"—a population stripped of all opportunities to support itself, and thus compelled to sell itself into wage slavery for a living. Such a proletariat, in sufficient numbers, was not ready at hand; it had to be produced forcibly. The process by which the proletarians were produced was mainly the physically tearing them away from the land, from their natural opportunities (whence the modern single tax vagary draws much of its historically illogic argumentation), and here and there by taxing them out of their social opportunities (whence similarly unscientific minds, reasoning with equally bad logic, raise to-day the hue-and-cry of taxation as a question that vitally affects the modern workers). With their property, social and natural opportunities, confiscated, large masses were rough-handedly proletarianized and capitalism could start. In his graphic chapter on the genesis of capital, in which the horrors of this process are described, Marx sums up the facts saying:

---

“If money, according to Augier, ‘comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,’ capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”

After thus lightly passing by the confiscatory genesis of capital, the Parable falls into an error that may be termed the logical sequence of its false start. At the recurring crises, the Parable causes the capitalists to exclaim: “Our gains do make us poor.” Here again, and even more so than before, the confiscatory character of capital is over-looked. It is a feature of the crisis that it is a period of rich harvest for the capitalist. During the crisis whole shoals of the smaller fry are swept out of existence; their competitive game, always difficult, then becomes impossible; and their property passes by virtual confiscation into the hands of the surviving capitalists. Individuals go down, and the capitalist class becomes smaller but infinitely richer;—the gains of these do not make them poorer; just the reverse; then it is that their character as CONFISCATORS steps forward into strong relief, swelling their gains.

This is no “fault-finding” criticism. Sufficiently thankless is the task of pointing out errors in the works of one who has contributed as much as Bellamy has done towards disarming opposition to Socialism. The criticism is needed. It is needed for this reason:

Among the leading obstacles that the Apostle of Socialism encounters in his path is the superstitious reverence of the proletariat for the “industry,” the “thrift,” the “abstinence” that produces the “original accumulation” of capital; for the “Rights” of Capital; in short, for the “Sanctity of Property,” as preached by capitalism, and its peaceful law-abiding nature. Again, quoting Marx:

“It is not enough that the conditions for work are concentrated in a mass, in the shape of capital, at the one pole of society, while at the other are grouped masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labor-power. Neither is it enough that these are compelled to sell it voluntarily. The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which, by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of nature.”

That mental poise that induces the masses, by education, tradition and habit to bow down before and accept things, as they are, as self-evident laws of nature and proper, is a most difficult one to overcome. Among the preposterous lies of the capitalist repertory of lies, the lie about its instincts of peacefulness, of order and of respect for property is the most preposterous. It must be torn to pieces. The confiscatory character of capitalism can not be too frequently repeated or too much

emphasized. Corner-stoned on down-right confiscation, capitalism thrives into tyrannous over-lordship by confiscation.

And this important fact “The Parable of the Tank” slurs over.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
Uploaded July 2004