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EDITORIAL

IMMORALITY BREEDS IMMORALITY.

By DANIEL DE LEON

“It must be clearly understood that there is no such thing as a Trust problem in itself. The Trust problem, as it is called, means the widespread tendency to do business on a wide scale.”—Prof. Richard T. Ely.

It is a fundamental maxim of morality that the lines must be drawn sharp between the several degrees of crime. That great work on ethics, and veritable Anatomy of Crime, Dante’s Inferno, exemplifies the point. Murder, theft, etc., are not of equal degree of turpitude. The manslayer in wrath, the highwayman whose trade is robbery, are not equally black with the manslayer or thief who uses



RICHARD T. ELY (1854–1943)

his fiduciary position as a point of vantage against his victim. To steal a cabbage is not equal to embezzling trust funds. The difference is such as to render the two generically different. In the weakness of the human flesh, prone to slip and fall, Experience, Wisdom, Morality have found it necessary to mark sharp the difference; while Immorality has with equal persistence ever sought to blur the line. The immoral soul argues “all crimes are equally crimes, THEREFORE, all are equal crimes,” and thus, by trying to pull down lighter offences to his own depth of infamy, seeks to impart a lighter dye to his own deep dyed misdeeds.

Against the above principle of Ethics, Prof. Ely sins in the passage quoted above from his latest contribution to the pending Social Question. He therein seeks to do for the ruling, bloodstained Capitalist Class or Plutocracy the very thing every defaulter of trust funds seeks to do when he

generalizes over his offence; claims for it a “widespread tendency{”}; and argues that “all crimes are equally crimes,” therefore, “all crimes are equal”, with no difference between him and the tramp who leaps over a fence and purloins a cabbage.

There IS a Trust problem; and it cannot be pecksniffed out of the way, with generalizations about “widespread tendencies to do business on a wide scale,” any more than the defaulter of trust funds could pecksniff out of the way the deep damnation of his action by generalizations about “widespread tendencies to purloin cabbages.” The “tendency to do business on a wide scale” can not, and does not bring the shoe-black boy, who hustles for shoes to shine, into the same social-economic category with the mammoth capitalist and privately-owned concern, the Trust, that is able to dictate prices, to shatter the independent existence of rafts of small concerns, to displace labor at wholesale and thereby reduce the earnings of the working class proportionally, to carry a Nation’s Government in its vest pocket, and dictate politics of “Expansion” whereby to dispose of its plunder at home by wading through carnage abroad.

The Trust problem is a new social-economic question that presents a distinct social problem, a social problem that has been maturing through the ages and is now at its fullest: Shall the tool of production continue to be private property after it has changed its character and become a public force, clothed with a public function?

Material interests are the necessary foundation of thought. Where the material interests make for progress, thought is elevated and moral; where the material interests make for reaction, thought is groveling and immoral. Capitalism has survived its usefulness. To-day its material interests block progress; consequently the thought grafted upon it is immoral.

Prof. Ely’s apology or plea for the Trust, forcing that apology or plea to resort to the manoeuvre of the criminal, is an illustration worthy of note, a warning not to be disregarded.

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