

May 8

The Forum.

MAY, 1889.

PERILS OF DEMOCRACY.

FOR a long time past all observers have been struck by the marked progress of democracy, and this progress has never been so rapid as during our own day. As early as the year 1821, M. Royer-Collard, an eminent French politician, quoted the Minister de Serre's famous phrase, "Democracy is overflowing its banks," and he added:

"Others may regret and bewail this, but for myself I can but thank heaven that a larger number of my fellow beings are thus permitted to enjoy some of the advantages of civilization. Either this state of things must be submitted to and accepted, or the middle, and more especially the lower classes will have to be destroyed, impoverished, brutalized, and kept quite in subjection. Democracy everywhere—in business, industry, trade, property, legislation, in men and in things—this is a fact which, it must be admitted, governs society at the present day, and by which our political course should be steered."

In the introduction to his work on "Democracy in America," Tocqueville expresses himself even more strongly:

"The gradual development of an equality of conditions is a providential fact. It has all the principal characteristics of this; it is universal, lasting; and it daily escapes farther from human control; both events and men serve to extend its sway and dominion. Is it likely that after having destroyed feudality and conquered royalty, democracy will draw back before mere wealth and opulence? Will it withhold now that it is so strong and its enemies so weak?"

Nevertheless it should be observed that the word "democracy" has two distinct meanings. Sometimes, in conformity with its etymology, it is intended to signify government by the people, and at others, as in the passage quoted from Tocqueville, equality of conditions. The movement now taking place, and apparently so irresistible, tends to a greater equality of condition; and it will most assuredly continue, because it is itself the result of influences of the economic order—the use of machinery, which lowers the price of manufactured articles and makes them attainable by a larger number, the division of inheritances, and a wider diffusion of knowledge through schools and the press. But the definite triumph of democracy in the sense of government by the people does not appear so assured. Many sagacious men are of opinion that an attempt to equalize conditions would induce a conflict of class against class, in which all free institutions would be likely to perish, and that thus despotism would probably be born of anarchy. The great danger threatening the future of democracy is this: Equality of right has been proclaimed and there is universal suffrage. The lot of the lower classes is far better than it used to be, but there is still inequality of conditions and immense fortunes are made. Hence arise the claims of the working classes. They enjoy political equality and now call for economic equality in addition. As Henry George says in his "Protection and Free Trade," equal admissibility to public offices does not suffice; the same principle must be applied to property.

See how the transformation in society now taking place before our eyes is productive of the peril I mention. In the first place, with what rapidity new ideas gain ground! Who could read in former days? In antiquity, the philosopher, who unrolled his rare manuscripts in his marble library, where they were carefully put away; and in the middle ages, the monks, who alone possessed some knowledge. When a written book represented two or three years of labor, neither the artisan nor even the middle classes ever thought of procuring such for themselves. Printing, by placing books, and more especially newspapers, within reach of all, spreads everywhere, at home and abroad, the views of those who are desirous of remodeling society on a reformed plan.

Popular education offered to all, even imposed upon all, completes the work of transformation operated by the press.

Formerly the peasant lived and died within sight of his church steeple, attached to his village like some inferior species to the rock upon which they are born. In everything he followed the traditions of his ancestors. He was perfectly ignorant of anything that might take place beyond the distance of fifty miles from his home. Now-a-days the workman can travel more easily than a sovereign a hundred years ago, and the steam-engine bears with it in its rapid flight the prince of finance and the humblest daily laborer, who reach their destination simultaneously. Special newspapers place the working classes of all lands in intimate and daily communication with each other, and keep them informed of everything that concerns their interests.

Until the close of the last century every class of society had its special mode of dress. As is still the case in the countries of eastern Europe, the peasant was attired in a sort of coarse raiment woven by his wife, not unfrequently from the coats of animals. Now the steam spool and loom produce materials at a very low cost, and on Sunday, when the workman lays aside his working clothes, he is dressed like his employer. Social equality manifests itself in a similarity of attire which, so to speak, symbolizes it. Wealthy men and nobles no longer wear velvet, satin, and lace; all such costly apparel and precious stones now adorn only feminine attire. The utmost simplicity constitutes the distinction of the present, and it seems really as if our age had instinctively adopted a style of dress within reach of the working-man.

Machinery is the great leveler. It is this which makes the triumph of democracy a certainty, while giving rise at the same time to the peril with which it is threatened. Not to speak of America, which is always considered to be the very high seat of democracy, France is now a republic; Germany, formerly feudal, elects her parliament by the universal voice of the nation; in Italy and Spain, where despotism reigned supreme, the representative system has now secured a firm footing; in England, every one living in a house to himself has the right to vote; in Austria, and even in Russia, universal suffrage is applied to all communal administration. If, indeed, we take into consideration

the changes which the advance in industry effects in social conditions, we shall at once perceive that these same economic influences which on the one hand contribute to social equality, on the other bring about a feeling of antagonism between masters and men; and thus the cause which leads to the triumph of democracy is also the source of the dangers accompanying it. Reflect a moment on the mode of labor in the middle ages. Let us take, for instance, the woolen industry in Flanders, the produce of which was exported over the whole world, and whose wide development was the origin of our powerful and populous communes. Occasional vignettes in some of the old manuscripts show us the interior of the artisan's abode. He is seated by the loom, engaged in weaving the cloth, while his children arrange the distaff and his wife spins at the wheel. All work was done in this way, at the domestic hearth. The master himself worked, assisted by his family and sometimes by apprentices. He needed only a small capital to establish himself in business. The education, condition, and manner of life and thought of the master and his men were all very similar. The privileges of certain corporations might perhaps occasion discontent; but this could never become an antagonism of class against class, because workman and employer belonged to the same condition. It is true that toward the close of the middle ages the growth of riches and inequality led in Flanders, and more particularly in Italy, to a struggle between the small and the great, the "fat" and the "lean"; but this was a mere trading rivalry, different guilds or companies disputing certain political privileges; it was not the radical antagonism of capitalist and laborer nor the dream of equality of conditions. At the present day production is carried on by the universal use of machinery on a totally different footing. Workmen are obliged to desert their homes and families. They must crowd into enormous workshops, around the steam power, which sets in motion the innumerable and admirable pieces of machinery which increase by ten and even a hundred-fold men's force. The factory workman, who has a merely automatic and muscular effort to accomplish, is far below the level of the journeyman and the apprentice of former days, and at the same time the director of the factory or works is infinitely

superior to the former master-workman. Whether the works are his own or he be only the manager, a large amount of capital must pass through his hands, and, like a general, he commands a whole army of workers. He is wealthy or he is handsomely paid for what he does. He must possess great technical knowledge, have the necessary energy and authority to insure the obedience of his subordinates, be well acquainted with the requirements of foreign countries and with the fluctuations of the export trade and with the balance of commerce, not only near home but in the entire world. For at the present day all countries are so closely connected by trade communications that a crisis in one or other hemisphere will produce ruin and failures all the world over. His education, position, and mode of life, the very necessity for the exercise of authority, place such a director in a totally different world from that in which his men live. His Christian or manly feelings may lead him to consider them as brothers, but actually the fact remains that they have nothing in common with each other. It is not in his power either to raise their wages or to improve their condition. Competition obliges him, in spite of himself, to reduce as much as possible the cost of production.

Hence as processes are further perfected, machinery more and more generally employed, and labor further subdivided, the workman's condition improves in a sense, because manufactured produce can be purchased at a lower cost; but this very fact increases the distance separating the capitalist from the workman. The artisan, the small contractor or tradesman, is absolutely swamped by these vast establishments. The wealthy barons of finance and industry are now the masters and rulers of the economic world.

Another danger threatening modern democracy is the instability of conditions, and the uneasiness, the boundless aspirations, resulting from this. This instability is attributable to the civil equality now enjoyed and to the freedom of action which is permitted to all. In the middle ages the lot of each individual was fixed, but it was also assured. The cultivator in the country lived near his glebe-land. Attached to it from his infancy, he had to submit to certain exactions, but he had always sufficient land

to supply him with the necessaries of existence on payment of a fixed yearly rent. He had no fear of this being suddenly raised or of exactions being put upon him without cause. The communal lands, everywhere extensive, supplied him, as in the present day in Switzerland and in the Belgian Ardennes, with pasturage for his cattle and with wood for his fire or to build or repair his abode. He could not hope ever to grow wealthy, but he had never to fear absolute want and abandonment. Communal ties bound him to his fellows, as one family, all working for the interest of the maternal soil owned collectively. His hopes were limited, but so also were his cares.

Corporations secured to the town workman the same sort of security that the commune gave to the agricultural laborer. He was protected from competition by the trades corporation privileges. There were few crises or stoppages. Labor could rely on tried customers who were ever the same. The position of the shopkeeper was quite as safe as that of the workman. Generation after generation succeeded each other at the same counter. Those merchants who traded with the continent, like Jaques Cœur in France, or great Italian bankers, such as the Peruzzi—who were first the friends and afterward the unpaid creditors of Edward III., of England—alone had a wider sphere of action and other means of making money. Far above all this the feudal nobility, protected by arms, strongholds, great wealth, and caste prejudices, led a life quite apart from the common herd of mankind.

Society was thus completely enchained inside a complicated web of traditional customs. It was motionless, but perfectly stable. It was an administration of superposed classes similar to that which gave ancient Egypt so firm a basis and so protracted an existence, and which left there as here such prodigious monuments. The town-halls and cathedrals of the western world remind one in their indestructibility of the pyramids and temples of the Nile.

It is quite certain that the material condition of man is much improved at the present day. Formerly individual suffering was not unfrequently excessive from the violence of the great being uncurbed by the tutelary and all-powerful hand of the state, and because commerce and science were not there to combat famine

and sickness. Society was ceaselessly troubled with small local wars and frequently decimated by famine and pestilence, but, in a general way, men's minds were calm, and in times of trial they were resigned. The unfortunate consoled themselves with hopes of a better life beyond. Now they wish for happiness in this world, and are desirous of the destruction of all that can impede in any way the realization of an equal share of earthly pleasure and enjoyment.

All those institutions of the middle ages which were at once drawbacks and refuges have disappeared. Liberty and equality, proclaimed for all alike, have leveled the land for universal competition. We see the struggle for existence which, it is said, governs the animal creation, becoming the law also of the economic world. The highest places are for the strongest, the cleverest, and sometimes also, unfortunately, for the least scrupulous.

This general competition is the cause of all the progress made, the great source of industrial activity and of power; but it is also productive of a state of incessant agitation, of permanent uneasiness, and of universal instability. None are contented with their lot or feel safe as to their future. The rich are anxious to secure greater riches, and those who live on the fruits of their labor are fearful that this may, one day, fail them. Each one is free to frame his own destiny. No position is unattainable, no trade closed to any man. Equality as to rights is established, but inequality still exists as a fact, and it is the more irritating that each individual may aspire to the highest posts. There are greater disappointments as the hopes formed are higher; all may attain, but all do not, and those left behind envy and curse those who have outrun them.

Regulations as to wages, one of the most vehemently disputed questions at the present day, is a new danger for modern democracy. Formerly wages were settled by custom, and sometimes by an official tariff. Now there is free competition. The question depends entirely upon the number of hands and the amount of capital seeking employment. All is now subjected to Ricardo's famous law—the iron law, as the German socialists have named it—in virtue of which wages are generally reduced to the strict minimum requisite for the bare maintenance of life. This

once comprehended by the working-men, their response is: "Inasmuch as our pay depends upon the offer of our hands, we will not offer them unless we are paid more." Hence all the recent strikes. There is a ceaseless struggle going on between workmen and employers which entails all the hardship and misery of real warfare, and he who can the longest resist famine is the sure victor.

Socialism springs directly from the state of things here described. It was at first looked upon as a diseased condition of mind, a merely transitory outcome of political revolutions that a return to a proper order of things would speedily banish; but it is now acknowledged as a chronic evil invading all states, as a sort of cosmopolitan creed, uprooting natural affections and even love of country. Social agitations are not local, like political revolutions; they are universal, like religious fermentations, and like these, too, they fill the heart of their adherents and upholders with a sort of mystic fanaticism. When small farmers and the peasant population once begin to envy the lot of the wealthy, while cursing their own, as town workmen now do, the danger threatening modern democracy will be distinctly visible to all. This danger may be briefly summed up thus: The power of selecting legislators, and therefore of making laws, is vested in those who own no property, and whose wages are reduced to the utmost limit. Equality of right is proclaimed, but inequality continues as a fact, occasioning greater suffering than ever and producing more irritating effects.

Macaulay, in his well-known letter to an American, writes on May 23d, 1857, that the time will come when a choice will have to be made between liberty and civilization; and this prediction applied no less to America than to Europe. We should recollect that Grecian democracy fought and perished in just similar struggles. As soon as the spread of riches brought about inequality, the conflict between rich and poor commenced. All sorts of measures were employed to arrest it, including banquets to which all classes were bidden. Plato's reflection in the fourth book of "The Republic" describes the situation of today. "A Greek state," he writes, "is not one; it comprises two states, one composed of rich, the other of poor." As the

poor enjoyed the possession of political rights, they employed them for the establishment of equality. The conflict between classes was carried on until it brought about loss of liberty, of prosperity, and finally of the independence of the Grecian republics.

In order that democracy may insure order and liberty, it is indispensable that all should receive a serious, and more especially a highly moral education, so that the working classes may learn to know the limit of their rights and the upper classes the extent of their duties. It is useless to tell the people that in our present social order everything is perfect; they will not believe this; they must be made to understand that the amelioration of their condition can be accomplished only very gradually, as moral and intellectual development attains a higher standard, and that consequently the progress would be intercepted by any employment of force. Aristotle and Montesquieu were right; democracy can flourish only if based on equality. For it to be lasting, the first error necessary to be eradicated is that the law should be the expression of the people's will. In all lands and at all times there are always certain regulations which are best adapted to the general interest. The important point is to ascertain what these regulations are and to make them into laws, political, civil, penal, administrative, and otherwise. This is a work of science, not of will. As Mirabeau says, "Reason ought to be the ruler of the world." The wisest men should govern.

It is true that a nation, like a king, may make decrees, but neither of them can prevent the results of these from being disastrous, if the measures in themselves are not prudent or advisable. Politics is in truth a science of observation. A man of sense will therefore argue: I wish for laws which shall be the most favorable to the general well-being and development; as I can not alone discover these, I will select such persons as are the most capable of doing so, just as I should apply to engineers for a railway or to shipbuilders for ships. Who can possibly believe that the proverbial "good sense of the common people" is a sure reliance in the midst of the ever-increasing difficulties and complications of modern life?

There has never been greater need than at the present time

for eminent men to govern states, beset as they are by dangers on every side. Science has overturned or reconstructed the whole edifice of truth of the past. Every one desires change, improvement, or progress; the bare idea of stopping by the way raises angry protestations. Exceptionally clever men are therefore requisite for the direction of affairs, not only to see the way to steer, but also with authority and ability to persuade legislatures to adopt their views. Are many such to be found anywhere? And can democrats suppose that they will be more abundant in the ranks of the common people? The best and greatest men the world has ever produced could scarcely save us from disaster. If the masses were addressed on the one hand by a man of philosophic mind clearly awake to existing difficulties and studious of explaining them fully, and on the other by an orator incapable of understanding the first principles of these questions but careful to flatter the instincts of the crowd, which would be listened to and elected? Clearly the second. Thus, as government becomes more and more difficult, it is left more and more in the hands of those least capable of exercising it.

It is quite true that democracy obtrudes itself, but the government of the democracy should be intrusted to the most intellectual members of society. All for the people, nothing by the people. As Cicero said, "*Ut in populo libero pauca per populum, pleraque senatus auctoritate gererentur.*" There is only one way of saving modern democracies, and that is to endow with predominant power a senate which shall include representatives of all the great social forces, including agriculture, trade, commerce, and especially science in all its branches. The Roman senate secured ten centuries of incomparable greatness to the Italian republic. Venice owed to her senate all her wealth and power and her long existence amidst numerous enemies by whom she was surrounded. It would be therefore wise to give science and experience a larger share in the democratic government.

An equally essential point is energetically to combat the corruption infesting political matters, as it always does under republican administrations; and to begin with, that abominable maxim, "To the victors belong the spoils," must be wholly abolished. The application of such a principle as this amply suffices to viti-

ate the representative system and to impede honest administration. It is as difficult to govern as to judge wisely. When once a state is possessed of a good administrator, it is only wisdom to keep him. Would not a landowner be considered mad if he changed his agent every four years? The remedy is clear. As in Germany, all government functionaries should be guaranteed against arbitrary removal from their posts.

It is equally indispensable that the elections should no longer be subjected to bribery and undue influences. The best way to obtain this would be to adopt a system of completely secret voting, similar to that practiced in Belgium, so that it would be to nobody's interest to purchase suffrages by money or promises, on account of the impossibility of knowing how an elector votes.

To conclude, the danger threatening modern democracy is in the contrast between the equality of rights proclaimed and the inequality in fact existing. Ancient democracies perished in the struggle between the rich and the poor. It is therefore imperative that this conflict should not recommence. If you give the right of suffrage to all, let all have a chance of becoming owners of property. Modern democracies will not perish in civil wars, like those of Greece, if they manage to realize the ideal revealed by Christ, true Christian brotherhood. But if the antagonism between capitalists and laborers continues and becomes fiercer, it is much to be dreaded that, in Europe at least, democracy will end in Cæsarism. Nations, tired of endless and issueless struggles, would sacrifice their liberty and seek rest under the shelter of despotism. This is the danger which is already threatening France.

ÉMILE DE LAVELEYE.