

TEN BLIND LEADERS OF THE BLIND

By

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VI.(capitolo)

Max Stirner.

One of the most, universally accepted proverbs is that which says, "It is the unexpected which happens." Herbert Spencer, arguing against what he conceived to be the Socialist tendencies of his day, elevated this idea to the position of a general principle. So important does it seem to him that it is invoked as a great sociological law.

He calls attention to the mass of laws which had to be repealed because they failed to have the expected effect or had an opposite effect to the one expected. He fails to see that many of these laws were only experiments in certain directions and were in reality abandoned, not for the reason he assigns, but because they were then supplanted by other laws based on riper experience, which accomplished the same end more effectively.

Spencer's argument is that the attempt to remedy social abuses by "meddling" legislation, not only fails in the great majority of cases, but that it very often aggravates the very evil it was intended to cure.

One of his most striking illustrations is the case of a certain early English king who undertook to reduce the drunkenness among his subjects by special legislation. He enacted that all the tankards used in the alehouses should be fitted with pegs on the inside at a certain distance from each other. The quantity of beer contained between two of these pegs was to be the maximum for a legal draught. Anyone imbibing more than one peg at one swig became a criminal before the law.

For a time this law had the desired effect. Presently, however, a very strong public sentiment grew up against those persons who gave information to the authorities. Like the publicans of old, these "informers" became largely social

outcasts. As there was no commensurate compensation, evidence ceased to be obtainable and the law fell into disuse.

Like rudimentary organs, however, the pegs remained and eventually entered upon a new career of usefulness. It became a practice to test one's drinking capacity by swallowing the greatest possible number of pegs of beer at one effort. Men who valued this kind of celebrity became known by the number of pegs they could dispose of at one draught. This even developed a new aristocracy, as Six-Peg Bill would put on airs before Four-Peg Tom, who belonged to an inferior social stratum. Then it became popular to hold contests in the alehouses, in which prizes were given to those who gulped down the most pegs without stopping.

As an example of how missionary *attività* sometimes miscarried, Spencer cites the Malaysians, who when they were expostulated with for their barbarous practice of crucifixion, explained they had learned it from the sacred books of the English.

To the long list of unexpected developments compiled by Spencer, history has added at least one more. The anarchists of all schools have always been impatient of the slow and non-revolutionary methods of all Social Democrats. They were to be the revolutionists par excellence. All revolutionary pretensions that did not carry the anarchist brand were only pretensions.

And now, alas! the anarchist movement — what there is left of it—has become, as was its destiny, one of the most hopelessly reactionary forces in society. Tolstoy, the Christian communist anarchist, with his doctrine of non-resistance, becomes a chief buttress of the Russian Autocracy. The individualist anarchist who follows Stirner, learns to sneer at the unemployed or unfortunate workers as incompetent egos who should be weeded out because they are not able to "stand on nothing but themselves."

In order to trace Stirner's philosophical genealogy and at the same time that of Marx, we will begin at 1830.

In the world of philosophy from 1830 to 1840 the scepter was held by Hegel. Hegel's philosophy was taught in the German universities, and had the approval of the Prussian throne.

Frederick William III regarded it as a very excellent philosophy— in fact, an intellectual bulwark of the crown. He reached that complacent conclusion in a very simple way. Hegel said : "All that is real is reasonable, and all that is reasonable is real." The Emperor interpreted this as follows: All that exists is real, therefore reasonable, therefore right. As Alexander Pope, the English poet, put it, "Whatever is, is right."

As this seemed to be a philosophical justification of police-government, the censorship, and the star-chamber, the Hegelian philosophy flourished under royal patronage. The Liberals, who claimed to be progressive, were greatly exercised that the country should fall under the spell of a philosophy so thoroughly reactionary.

And yet all these wise persons were deceived. That seeming benediction of the existing regime hid a revolutionary principle, chic in the hands of Marx became the fundament of the Socialist philosophy.

Hegel's idea as to what constituted reality differed very widely from the Emperor's. With him reality included necessity— that only was real which was at the same time necessary.

For example : If the monarchy was a "necessary" part of feudal society, its necessity made it real and therefore reasonable, and in that sense, right. If, on the other hand, when feudalism began to break up, the monarchy ceased to be a necessity, it thereby lost its attribute of reality and ceased to be either reasonable or right. About the only man who saw the immense significance of this besides Marx was Heinrich Heine.

At one time the government of America by England was real because at that time it possessed the element of necessity; but by 1776 its necessity had disappeared and its reality went with it.

The trouble with Hegel, however, was that this revolutionary principle was confined to, his method and could not penetrate his system. His system of philosophy, being idealistic, could not absorb this evolutionary concept without committing logical suicide. In Hegel's system the material world is derived from the idea—the absolute idea. This problem, as is well known now, is at bottom theological. Hegel's system is the presentation in philosophical garb of the theological view that the material universe is the realization of the idea of Deity.

On the other hand, according to Hegel's method, the "idea" of reasonableness grows out of material reality. This constitutes the Hegelian contradiction.

This contradiction caused the Hegelians to split into two camps — the left, and the right. The right held to the idealistic system and were reactionary. The left took the revolutionary method, which culminated in the historical materialism of Marx.

The immortal honor of solving the Hegelian contradiction fell, not to Marx but to Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach, in his "Essence of Christianity," showed that, as Engels states it, "Outside man and nature nothing exists, and the higher beings which our religious phantasies have created are only the fantastic reflections of our individuality."

Philosophically stated, this means that the idea grows out of the material world. This solution by Feuerbach of the Hegelian contradiction greatly rejoiced Marx and Engels. Engels says of it: "It placed materialism on the throne again without any circumlocution. . . . The cord was broken, the system was scattered and destroyed, the contradiction, since it had only existed in the imagination, was solved. One must have felt the deliberative power of this book to get a clear idea of it. The enthusiasm was universal; we were all for the moment followers of Feuerbach. How enthusiastically Marx

greeted the new idea, and how he was influenced by it, in spite of all his critical reservations, one may read in his 'Holy Family.'

Feuerbach had gone as far as he could go; the work of carrying his great discovery to its ultimate and fruitful conclusion, fell to Marx.

This Marx at once did. As the material world gave forth the idea, theological or philosophical, the material world is the only reality. Man is a product of the material world — nature. Society is the product of two material causes — man, and nature. The foundation of society consists of the material means by which it produces the material things by which it satisfies its material needs. Therefore, if one section of society has exclusive ownership or control of the material means of producing material wealth, those who are shut out will only be able to supply their material needs as the owners may dictate — a material slavery. As the intellectual grows out of the material, this material slavery carries with it intellectual slavery.

This material slavery, and the intellectual slavery growing out of it, can only be abolished by the removal of its material cause, the abolition of that limited ownership and control of the material means of producing material things, and the establishment in its place of ownership and control by the whole of society, social democracy, in one word — Socialism.

Such is the pedigree of the Socialist, philosophy.

Now, let us trace the development of Stirner's Egoism. Stirner accepts Feuerbach's explanation of the imaginary origin of the theological idea. But he complains that as Feuerbach only abolishes one abstraction — Deity— to set up in its place another abstraction —humanity—we are really no better off than we were before. We are rescued from the tyranny of one abstraction to be under the obedient slavery of another.

Says Stirner: "Let us, in brief, set Feuerbach's theological view and our contradiction over against each other ! 'The essence of man is man's supreme being; now by religion, to be sure, the supreme being is called God and regarded as an objective essence, but in truth it is only man's own essence; and therefore the turning point of the world's history [according to Feuerbach] is that henceforth no longer God, but man, is to appear to man as God.'"

Stirner contends that this, instead of abolishing the slavery of the individual, only gives him a new master. Although this new master is conceived as being inside the individual, it is no more the individual than the master who was outside: "It is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me."

Nay even this distinction breaks down : "For the 'Spirit of God' is, according to the Christian view, also 'our spirit,' and 'dwells in us.' "

And so, where Marx and Engels saw a great liberation, Stirner saw only the exchange of one theological myth for another.

This is by no means all. In addition to this abstraction Humanity, the

individual is to be enslaved by a host of others; justice, freedom, the fatherland, the good, the true, and the beautiful. All these have great causes which must be served. The only cause which a man must not serve is his own cause.

But, demands Stirner, do these tyrants practice any of the self-abnegation they require from us? Not in the least; they serve only themselves.

As this is the pith of Stirner's position, and as it is very strikingly presented in the prologue to his book, "The Ego and His Own," we will let him speak for himself by quoting it in full :

"What is not supposed to be my concern! First and foremost, the Good Cause, the God's cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally, even the cause of Mind, and a thousand other causes. Only my cause is never to be my concern. 'Shame on the egoist who thinks only of himself!'

"Let us look and see, then, how they manage their concerns—they for whose cause we are to labor, devote ourselves, and grow enthusiastic.

"You have much profound information to give about God, and have for thousands of years 'searched the depths of the Godhead,' and looked into its heart, so that you can doubtless tell us how God himself attends to 'God's cause,' which we are called to serve. And you do not conceal the Lord's doings, either. Now, what is his cause? Has he, as is demanded of us, made an alien cause, the cause of truth or love, his own? You are shocked by this misunderstanding, and you instruct, us that God's cause is indeed the cause of truth and love, but this cause cannot be called alien to him, because God is himself truth and love ; you are shocked by the assumption that God could be like us poor worms in furthering an alien cause as his own. 'Should God take up the cause of truth if he were not himself truth?' He cares only for his cause, but, because he is all in all, therefore all is his cause! But we, we are not all in all, and our cause is altogether little and contemptible ; therefore we must 'serve a high cause.' — Now it is clear, God cares only for what is his, busies himself only with himself, thinks only of himself, and has only himself before his eyes ; woe to all that is not well pleasing to him! He serves no higher person, and satisfies only himself. His cause is — a purely egoistic cause.

"How is it with mankind, whose cause we are to make our own? Is its cause that of another, and does mankind serve a high cause? No, mankind looks only at itself, mankind will promote the interests of mankind only, mankind is its own cause. That it may develop, it causes nations and individuals to wear themselves out in its service, and, when they have accomplished what mankind needs, it throws them on the dung-heap of history in gratitude. Is not mankind's cause — a purely egoistic cause? "I have no need to take up each thing that wants to throw its cause on us and show that it is occupied only with itself, not with us, only with its good, not with ours. Look at the rest

for yourselves. Do truth, freedom, humanity, justice, desire anything else than

that you grow enthusiastic and serve them? "They all have an admirable time of it when they receive zealous homage. Just observe the nation that is defended by devoted patriots. The patriots fall in bloody battle or in the fight with hunger and want; what does the nation care for that? By the manure of their corpses the nation comes to 'its bloom!' The individuals have died, 'for the great cause of the nation/ and the nation sends some words of thanks after them and — has the profit of it.

I call that a paying kind of egoism. "But only look at the Sultan who cares so lovingly for his people. Is he not pure unselfishness itself, and does he not hourly sacrifice himself for his people? Oh, yes, for 'his people/ Just try it; show yourself not as his, but as your own; for breaking away from his egoism you will take a trip to jail. The Sultan has set his cause on nothing but himself; he is to himself all in all, he is to himself the only one, and tolerates nobody who would dare not to be one of 'his people/

"And will you not learn by these brilliant examples that the egoist gets on best? I for my part take a lesson from them, and propose, instead of further unselfishly serving those great egoists, rather to be the egoist myself.

"God and mankind have concerned themselves for nothing, for nothing but themselves. Let me, then, likewise concern myself for myself, who am equally with God \hc nothing of all others, who am my all, who am the only one.

"If God, if mankind, as you affirm, have substance enough in themselves to be all in all to themselves, then I feel that I shall still less lack that, and that I shall have no complaint to make of my 'emptiness/ I am nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.

"Away, then, with every concern that is not altogether my concern! You think at least the 'good cause' must be my concern? What's good, what's bad? Why, I myself am my concern, and I am neither good nor bad. Neither has meaning for me.

"The divine is God's concern ; the human, man's. My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is mine, and it is not a general one, but is—unique, as I am unique.

"Nothing is more to me than myself."

This leads Stirner to preach "self-ownership." The individual should free himself from the domination of all things outside himself and serve himself alone.

And now we see how completely Stirner has severed himself from the world of real things — the world as it actually is. How would this self-owned, self-centered, self-dependent individual dress? Not in cloth, surely. The man who dresses in cloth does so because he is being "served" by thousands who toil in the textile industry, and instead of independently severing himself, he

interdependently serves them in return—or he is a social Parasite.

How would he learn the time of day? At least not by a watch. Watches cannot be made by independent egoists, but only by comperatine workers. A little reflection show that a watch, or a pair of shoes, or any other of the common articles that have become necessities in the twentietji century, so far from being individual productions, are the result of the labor of all society and of many generations.

In the midst of this great ever-increasing material and intellectual interdependence, Stirner's concept of a "self-owned individual" wanders like a homeless ghost. Of all the "abstractions" which he has contemptuously discarded, none were as thin and unreal as tris one.

This self-owned individual could be no better than a naked gibbering savage. Individual forces are nothing until by combination, they become social forces.

Apart from this fatal weakness of Egoism as an individual philosophy, it could have no application or force in a class society.

To a man who must work eight or ten hours a day for another man, any talk about selfownership is mockery. No man can really own his own mind so long as some other man owns his body. And how shall a man down his own body in a society where others down the means by which alone that body can be kept alive.

The truth there is in Egoism is not individualistic but Socialistic. Stirner blunders hopelessly when he thinks there is any difference in the principle which actuates the Sultan and that which actuates the meanest of his subjects.

The one is just as egoistic as the other. The reason for the apparent difference is due to the difference in their social condition. The subject abjectly serves the despot, not as a manifestation of altruism but because he believes he is thereby most effectively serving himself — under the conditions.

If Stirner wishes the subject to behave differently he should propose a change in the conditions.

The working man is just as egoistic in the principle of his action as anyone else. If, when he has produced \$10 in wealth he makes no protest against the confiscation of \$7 of it by useless loafers, it must not be construed as an act of altruistic generosity. This same worker will discuss at great length, and with much heat, the chances of increasing his part by a tiny fraction. He is egoistic enough as far as he can see. The reason he does not rise up in his egoism and stop the confiscation altogether is that the possibility of doing so has not yet come within the scope of his intelligence.

His slave condition is not due to any lack of desire for self-service or self-ownership eden in a rational sense. It is due to what Loria describes as the "perversion" of his ego by a vast army of teachers —unproductive laborers, Loria calls them —whose function in society is to surcharge his brain with the ideas of a class above him, so that he will act according to their interests

instead of his own.

Just in proportion as he escapes that "perversion" by establishing a press and platform of his own, he learns that the way to freedom lies, not in standing on himself, as individualism suggests, but in the victory of his class, as Socialism holds.

The worker who is of a student turn of mind and fails to perceive this great truth and becomes impregnated with the sterile ideas of individualist anarchism, ends by feeling himself isolated from the real pulsing world, and retiring into himself and leading thenceforth a life of morbid introspection, much after the fashion of a medieval devotee. He will tell you that he is above all forms of that vulgar thing called propaganda, and is devoting himself entirely to "art" —which usually means painting pictures nobody will hang, or writing verses nobody will print.

So far as the battle for future progress is concerned, you may count him out. Like his own philosophy, he has fallen by the wayside.

Walt Whitman, who represents individualism at its best, writes: "I sing the song of myself." To this the Socialist replies : "Inasmuch as my redemption is bound up in that of my class, 'I sing the song of my class.' And as my class has been called upon by destiny to be the instrument of liberation from the last form of human slavery, when I sing oppression and the dawn-song of the race."