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[p. 4f]

‘Mr. Holiday on Science and “Natural Selection.”’

(To the Editor of “The Daily News.”)

Sir,—Mr. W. Percy Winter’s admirable comment on the address of Professor Ridgeway to the British Association has drawn my attention to the address itself. Others beside Mr. Winter will be surprised at Professor Ridgeway’s adoption of the antiquated, long-exploded interpretation of the theory of natural selection, which would make it an excuse for the most inhuman social system.

The sociologists who adopt this view lose sight of the essence of Darwin’s and Wallace’s discovery, which is, that the struggle for existence secured the “survival of the fittest.” The individualist jumps to the conclusion that the fittest means the best; but it merely means fittest for its environment. In a certain stage of animal development the chief object of desire was to capture, tear to pieces, and devour on the one hand, or to escape capture on the other. The magnificent array of teeth and claws exhibited by the carnivora are, doubtless, due to their fitness for their purpose. They rendered their owners fit for their environment.

Now, the chief environment of man is man. He is environed by his own fellow creatures, and, therefore, by the ways and habits of these fellow creatures, and by the systems they establish. It follows that man can to a large extent determine his own environment, and whatsoever system he adopts, the fittest for that system will succeed and oust the unfit. But whether the fittest will be the best must depend absolutely on the purity and wholesomeness of the environment, that is, of the system in which they have to fit.

So far as I am aware, Darwin did not write on the application of the principle he discovered to sociology, but, happily, the surviving co-discoverer, Professor A. R. Wallace, did. In a highly-interesting article in “The Fortnightly Review” of September, 1890, he wrote:

“It is my firm conviction, for reasons which I shall state presently, that, when we have cleansed the Augean stable of our existing social organization, and have made such arrangements that all shall contribute their share of either physical or mental labour, and that all workers shall reap the full reward of their work, the future of the race will be ensured by those laws of human development that have led to the slow but continuous advance in the higher qualities of human nature. When men and women are alike free to follow their best impulses; when idleness and vicious or useless luxury on the one hand, oppressive labour and starvation on the other, are alike unknown; when all receive the best and most thorough education that the state of civilization and knowledge will admit; when the standard of public opinion is set by the wisest and best, and that standard is systematically inculcated on the young; then we shall find that a system of selection will come spontaneously into action, which will steadily tend to eliminate the lower and more degraded types of man, and thus continually raise the average standard of the race.”

‘Wastrels.’

We see, then, that Professor Ridgeway’s view is absolutely opposed to that of the highest authority on Natural Selection, as he expounded it 18 years ago.

But, as Mr. Winter points out, Professor Ridgeway has not the courage of his convictions, and, taking his proposals as they stand, a very little reflection will show to what absurd as well as revolting results they would lead. He protests against feeding or educating children at public expense, calling the parents who are too poor to pay “wastrels.” (I note that he applies this name only to the people who in most cases have worked hard at miserably low wages, until they are turned out of work owing to a slump in trade, but does not apply it to the absolutely idle rich, who do no work at all, but squander that money which is necessarily all derived from the work of others, since they produce nothing themselves.) So that the process would be this:

First, our precious individualist industrial system follows the tooth and claw example of the carnivora, by its maxim of buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest, i.e., by giving as little as possible and grasping all it can get. In other words, its rule is: “Every man for himself,” and it enables the man born with money to exploit the man born without, to pocket handsome profits out of him in a boom period and to turn him out in the slump. But here some unscientific people for whom the world has in vain “been ringing with the doctrine of Natural Selection,” as Professor Ridgeway puts it, feel deep sympathy with the victims of this cruel process, and would alleviate it; they would let society which has profited by their productions help them in their misery, and at least see that the minds and bodies of the children do not suffer more than can be helped. This shocks the man of science (we may well add “falsely so-called”) who invokes Natural Selection, and tells us to starve the children in body and mind for fear of lowering our “moral and physical standard.” Having robbed the parents of half the fruits of their toil in the name of Individualist economy, we must kill the children off in the name of Science and of a high “moral” standard. But “kill” sounds ugly, and has not the correct scientific ring:

‘Select’ the Wise it Call.

Herbert Spencer is perhaps the only eminent authority on evolution who applied the Darwinian theory to Sociology in this way, and it is curious that while I write this week’s “Nation” arrives, and one of the first things I note is an able article on the inadequacy of material laws to account for “phenomena where psychical difference comes in,” in which he says: “The crowning futility was reached by Herbert Spencer’s attempt to build a theory of ethical progress,” etc., etc.—referring to the point here dealt with.

But, as mentioned above, of course, neither Professor Ridgeway nor any other individualist actually recommends a massacre of innocents, they only satisfy their scientific consciences by deprecating all alleviation which would interfere with their elimination by the automatic action of natural selection; and it remains only to consider the effect of this treatment. Doubtless some would die under the cruel hardships which would follow, but a large number would survive, stunted and degraded physically and mentally, and, as Professor Wallace shows in the article referred to above, it is among the very poorest that the birth rate is highest, so that by this method we should ensure the fullest expansion of the degraded class which breeds vice, crime, and prostitution, and we should equally ensure the deepest moral degradation of the classes which tried to profit by such “scientific” savagery.

Our choice is between the elevating humanity of true science under such teaching as that of Professor Wallace, and the hell upon Earth which would result from following the quack science of the individualists. —Yours, etc.,

Henry Holiday, Oak Tree House, Hampstead, Sept. 12.