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‘Our Industrial System. Dr. Russel Wallace and His Social Theories.’

Social Environment and Moral Progress. By Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., F.R.S. (Cassell 3s. 6d. net.)

The Nestor of science whose name will always be inseparably linked with that of Darwin has so many claims on the respect and gratitude of his countrymen that anything in the nature of a harsh criticism of this work would be equally distasteful to the writer and the reader. Dr. Wallace, at an age when most men's thoughts are purely occupied with self, still burns with youthful enthusiasm. He loves his kind so well that he feels a sincere and holy indignation against all those features of our modern civilisation that tend to injure health, to depress character, and to stunt intellect. The inspiring motive of the book is so transparently honest and praiseworthy that we can only regret that the author had found himself unable to adopt a somewhat more patient and temperate tone. No doubt there is still, for example, much to be done in safeguarding the health of people employed in some of our great industries. But when Dr. Wallace says that "Parliament always allows its legislation to be made ineffective by the fear of diminishing the employers' profits, thus deliberately placing money-making above human life and human well-being," he is surely guilty of an exaggeration unworthy of a man whose whole life has been a training in exactness of thought and expression. Nor can we follow him when he submits that the mines of the country can be "both legally and equitably resumed by the country as public property, and worked for the good of the public and of posterity." Whatever happened at the Norman Conquest, the mines are now private property, for which valuable consideration has been paid, and in which immense private capital has been invested, and the same argument which would allow the State to resume them would permit of the confiscation of any other kind of property.

Dr. Wallace protests against the existence of "a large community of gamblers" who prey on every field of exchange or production. In a sense no doubt there is economic waste involved in the existence of the speculative middleman. The shopman and the distributor generally are equally non-productive. But they are none the less indispensable in the social system as we know it. The speculator is really a very useful person. His keen foresight, his constant anxiety to take advantage of every slight turn in the market, prevents violent fluctuations in prices, and minimises the risks, which would otherwise be considerable, of alternate gluts and deficiencies in supply.

That our administration of justice is "immoral" is one of Dr. Wallace's contentions. Judges never take bribes, he says, but "practically it comes to very nearly the same thing. No single step can be made for the purpose of getting justice without paying fees; while the whole process of bringing or defending an action at law is so absurdly complex as to be almost incredible." A philosopher in his arm-chair can easily pick holes in any human institution, and the law is as little perfect as any other feature of a very imperfect system. But what would Dr. Wallace have? Litigation without fees and without a lawyer class might be workable in a very simple state of society, but the prospect of such a state of things in the twentieth century is appalling. After all the law courts are not so much occupied in arbitrating between simple right and wrong as between different degrees of right; and it is quite impossible to deal with the immensely complicated questions which occupy many of our judges without the assistance of specially trained intellect. Dr. Wallace apparently would have no barristers at all. But, in default of a separate class of lawyers, where could judges, who presumably would be necessary in any society, get their training?

Turning to the broader aspects of Dr. Wallace's social theory, we find him protesting passionately against the competitive system. "Our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and the social environment, as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims is the worst the world has ever seen." This is mere rhetoric. Does Dr. Wallace seriously contend that there is now more social wrong, more physical and mental suffering, less happiness and security from physical and

moral evil than in the ages, say, from the death of Theodosius to the coronation of Charlemagne? Dr. Wallace's remedies are as doubtful as his diagnosis. They are, in fact, the ordinary nostrums of Collectivism. It is the duty of the Government to destroy monopoly and to "organise the labour of the whole community for the benefit of all." Dr. Wallace's assumption seems to be, like that of the Socialists generally, that "the State" is something altogether higher, nobler, and wiser than the average of educated people, whereas actual experience tends altogether in the other direction. We all know that in the worst Governments we have active corruption, and in the best a great deal of incompetence and stupidity. Dr. Wallace seems to have a very poor opinion of the most energetic spirits in our civilisation. They are all, according to him, partly knaves and partly fools. Is there any security whatever that the men who managed "the State" would be more favourable specimens of their race? At least there is some check now on the unscrupulous. But what check would there be on a governing class which held all the legislative power, wielded all administration, and controlled all property? it is easy to protest against our present system as an "immoral environment." It is far less easy to suggest an alternative which would be even workable. Still, honest thought directed to the very real social evils connected with the great problem of poverty is always welcome, and whatever else may be thought of Dr. Wallace's overcharged picture of modern society his book is at least sincere and inspired by no unworthy purpose. We can only regret that it may lend itself to exploitation by less single-minded enemies of the present social order.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2023.