

THE NEW INDIVIDUALISM.

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SINCE the time when the first adventurous European set sail for the newly discovered land to the far west, critics have said that the predominant American characteristic has been individualism. There are others, but this one overtops them all. That old spirit of initiative and aggression—that something which is forever calling us out of the old and on to the new, this has been called the spirit of the American race.

And rightly so. Our national character—so far as we have any—supports the assertion without further discussion, and our history furnishes ample explanation of it. Indeed, America was born from out a long battle of individualism. The reactionary conflict in Europe which started with the rebellion against the extreme institutionalism of the medieval church and ended with the extreme individualism of the French Revolution could not but have its effect upon America. Seeking freedom from the oppression of outworn institutions, Spanish, English and French individualists came in rapid succession to the new land. Some came ostensibly for gold, some for adventure, some for religious liberty,—but deeper than these surface reasons, they all came that they might leave behind forever that old world where individual thought and action was held to be synonymous with political crime, if not indeed with anarchy. These men were truly no exception to the general rule that it is only those who are self-reliant and self-centered that sever their home ties, migrate to a new land, largely unknown, and risk their all on an uncertain venture. “The twenty-seven odd million immigrants who have come to this country since it was discovered by Europeans have thus left a strong individualistic impress upon their descendants.” And the natural conditions with which the adventurous settler found himself surrounded, far from lessening this inherent trait, served rather to deepen it.

Alone in a seemingly limitless wilderness, the pioneer found nothing to restrain him and nothing to guide. That spirit of individualism, born in a desperate struggle, was vivified and strengthened in him as he encountered a strange climate, rocky barriers, and relentless foes. Naturally, this spirit grew deeper as he met these new difficulties and overcame them. Forced to depend entirely upon himself for subsistence and protection, expecting nothing from the loose government of the time, contemptuous of any suggestion of legal restraint, whether good or bad,—all this laid the foundation for that “excessive individualism which made him independent and resourceful, it is true, but which was destined later to make him partial to the spoils system, tolerant of lynch law and labor violence, and indifferent to waste and weakness in the administration of his government.” In due time this roving pioneer acquired land, settled down with his family, and became a private land owner—a thing well-nigh impossible in his older home across the sea—and had still more strengthened in himself and his children all those individualistic traits of character which the private ownership of land engenders. Steadily the population increased, and instead of widely isolated farms, cities and villages sprang up, and other institutions of a political and social nature began to appear. Yet with individualism ever rampant, it seemed at times impossible to secure the unity of action among the colonists essential for the establishment of these very necessary institutions save under the pressure of most urgent circumstances, as in the case of war. Note how the Articles of Confederation were forced upon the states by the ultra-individualistic members of that early convention. When the Constitution was finally adopted, the spirit that had been nurtured since the beginning was made the keynote of that famous document.

Naturally, as the country developed, the people that had founded their nation upon this one dominant principle continued to foster it. In time the Congregational movement, so called, swept away what little vestige remained of Puritanical domination in New England. Political enfranchisement was widened. In 1823 the Munroe Doctrine was announced, proclaiming to the world that hereafter the western hemisphere was to stand alone. Yet with these gains of individualism the states of the South were not content. They had lagged behind the North in their economic development and were far more individualistic after the type of the early pioneer. The climatic and geographic conditions made the towns fewer and smaller, farms larger, farther apart, and more independent in their management, and manufacturing centers practically unknown. Hence

the Southern people were not so quick to see the inevitableness of the curtailment of "personal liberty" in the interests of the many and of the supreme need of a strong central government as were their Northern neighbors where geographic conditions compelled men to live closer together and to pay more heed to the rights of others. So it was but natural that the men of the South clung to the old conception of State Rights until all the nation saw that the logical outcome of this extremely individualistic principle was anarchy.

Since that memorable conflict, the attention of men has been turned more or less away from the consideration of political matters and has centered upon industrial and financial enterprises. Here, too, the spirit of individualism was made manifest and it was only a matter of time before cut-throat competition was superseded by industrial combination. But more of this later. The point now is, that we of the present day have sprung from an intensely individualistic stock, natural conditions have strengthened this spirit in every possible way, and the result is that it has manifested itself in all our social and political relations. True, the pressure of an increasing population has altered its form, but its presence and strength have never been doubted.

Time was when it was well that this self-centered, self-reliant spirit should predominate. So long as the national interests were chiefly agricultural this early form of individualism tended to develop those qualities in men which have made us as a nation what we are. It is true that in the past it has always been this spirit "that has extended our boundaries, developed our resources, and created our national institutions." Yet it is equally true that this same much-lauded spirit of the pioneer, because it has not been readjusted and adapted to the varying demands of the twentieth century, has become the first cause of many of the most serious problems which confront us as a nation to-day. This is true because individualism in the past has been essentially materialistic and self-centered, driving men into a desperate struggle for individual success and blinding them to the interests of their fellow-men—a question which becomes increasingly important as the population becomes more dense. Individualism of this type is synonymous with selfishness; personal welfare is everything, and the well-being of the many is so far crowded into the background as to be wholly forgotten. Evidences of this fact are everywhere.

For instance, to take a somewhat remote example, far up in the backwoods of Tennessee a rough mountaineer manufactures

illicit whiskey in his rude distillery, and defends his act on the plea that he has a right to produce what he pleases as he pleases, and that any attempt to restrain him is a violation of his personal liberty. Resisting what he firmly believes to be an encroachment upon his inherent, individual rights, he violates a national law, clashes with the federal officers, and is sent to the penitentiary. Down amid the tobacco fields of Kentucky, the Night Rider resorts even to the terrible tyranny of mob law to get and maintain what he pleases to call his "rights as an individual." Out among the mountains of Colorado, the cattle herder swoops down under cover of the night, kills a score of sheep herders, and finds his excuse likewise in the doctrine of individual rights. In the heart of a great city a cultured citizen of the commonwealth, disregarding the law, drives his automobile at a reckless rate of speed, thereby endangering the lives of hundreds of his fellow-men. Though he bitterly denounces the man who buys a seat in the Senate, he would not himself hesitate an instant to hide his dutiable goods out of the sight of the revenue collector. And the rest of us, though we may not be active violators of the law, but a short while ago each fought desperately for a tariff bill advantageous to ourselves, regardless of the effect upon others. Manufacturing in the East cared not a whit for the agriculture of the West, nor the lumber of the North for the cotton of the South. Too often we willfully misrepresent the amount of our taxable property to the tax-assessor, forgetful of the fact that we thereby breed contempt for the law and undermine our own real personal liberty. Nor do we always condemn as a Cain him who "murders with an adulterant instead of a bludgeon" because, somehow or other, we feel that a man's mercantile methods are solely his own business. Professor E. A. Ross, of the University of Wisconsin, is right. The sins of the modern age are none the less real and harmful because they are of a different character from those of two centuries ago. And most of these modern sins are due primarily to an individualism which is in its true place and sphere constructive, but, being outgrown, has become destructive instead.

Again in the labor question, the problem of the evils of an excessive individualism may be seen in its larger aspect. Labor, demanding that its rights be protected, terms all capital oppressive, and denounces indiscriminately all forms of organized industry as invariably evil. Capital, in its turn, unites and fights with its last effort the right of labor to organize, and only under the pressure of evolutionary tendencies, begrudgingly grants it a place. Each thinks

only of its own interests, regardless of those of the other party or of the public at large.

Nor is this all. Contemporary social critics universally turn upon the so-called "American plutocracy," regarding which so much has been said, as the personification of this selfish spirit. They bitterly denounce its members, condemn its methods, and proclaim its very existence a national menace. What has this "plutocracy" done to merit such abuse? It has entered and corrupted politics that it might better serve its own individual ends. It has perverted legislation to the interests of special privilege. It has repeatedly reorganized its business that it might thereby evade the law and better crush competition. It has been wastefully extravagant of our natural resources. It has evaded the written law whenever it might do so to its own advantage, and the spirit of the law, always. The customs fraud of the sugar trust, the much-commented-upon business methods of the Standard Oil Company, and of the others mentioned in Attorney General Wickersham's recent report on the cases before the Supreme Court, tell the story better than volumes of description. And yet, whatever accusations or condemnations may be brought against it, the "plutocracy" has done no more than to bring the unaltered spirit of the pioneer into modern complex society.

So this spirit of intense, extreme individualism—unchanged with the passing years—is endangering the sanctity of those very institutions it called into being. In its place it was good. The pioneer in the trackless forest might fire his rifle wheresoever he chose and take for his own whatever he found. For him there was no law save the law of his own desires, and no master but himself. Lawlessness for such a one was impossible. But when in the fulness of time that roving pioneer became a colonist, when institutions began to appear and men were forced to live together, that same individualism became selfishness and lawless greed. And so to-day we find that this perverted philosophy lies at the bottom of most of our national ills, and many an intelligent critic, seeing in our national life much that one wishes might be different, has turned to socialism and other radical systems of social reform because he could see no other way out.

To what extent is this pessimistic observer of modern conditions justified in seeing only a picture of gloom? We are ever loath to admit that the future is utterly dark and devoid of a way out of the difficulties which we are forced to admit exist, and particularly is this true when the future has been painted as darkly as some reforming demagogues have colored it. So, without lessening in the least

the importance of the things we have just noted, we are not willing to accept the conclusions which these pessimists have drawn as inevitable. And if asked the reason for a belief to the contrary it would seem to be not far from right to say that the fundamental cause and reason is gradually disappearing, and hence it is safe to conclude that in due time the results will tend to disappear as well.

By this is not meant that individualism is ceasing to be the distinguishing characteristic of the American citizen, but rather that *it is being adapted to modern conditions through being directed to a new end*. It is surely an evil day for any people when that spirit of initiative and aggression—the eternal dissatisfaction with the present, the determined pushing on to something better—that have ever been and must ever continue to be, the essential characteristics of individualism, weaken and disappear. Yet Henry R. Seager of Columbia University voices the opinion of the vast majority of people to-day when he says that “the program of individualism is little better than a program of despair.” (*Survey*, April 2, 1910.) In fact, we are forced to grant that this expression of the current thought of the day is sound, if by the term “individualism” we mean just what it has of necessity meant in our earlier national history—pure selfishness. But is the individualism of the future to be of that kind? May not this spirit change—nay, is it not already re-adjusting itself in obedience to the new demand of an ever advancing civilization? Surely there are many evidences of a new individualism, or, as ex-president Eliot, of Harvard, put it in a recent lecture at the University of Virginia, “a new development of individualism.”

If this be true, it seems hardly fair to say that “the program of individualism is little better than a program of despair,” as some modern thinkers insist. The note of optimism which the more rational among them sound (and among them Professor Seager) finds its true base not in a new program of social reform based upon a new philosophy, but rather in a working out of the old. Paraphrasing, we may say that the cure for the present evils of individualism is in not less but in more individualism. Not in the old self-centered sort, to be sure, but in the old spirit adapted to the conditions of the present day and age. And, indeed, there can be little doubt but that the old spirit of the pioneer is changing to conform to the new demands of our rapidly evolving civilization. The restless, irresistible, impulsion of this mighty power is being directed, not to the self-centered interests of the individual alone, but to those of all society. It is throbbing with the same old vitality and purpose, but it is finding its truest expression and most

perfect development in the performance of social service. It is being followed as a matter of business if for no other reason, since men are learning that their own interests are better advanced by taking the humanitarian factor into consideration.

The thought thus expressed is by no means a new one, either in theory or in practice. Philosophers have long dreamed of it, but it seems to have remained for the present age to see its actual realization. We find it amply expressed in many of the political leaders of the present hour. The names of Folk, Lindsey, La Follette, Hughes, and Roosevelt need only be mentioned in this connection. Are they not individualists of a most pronounced type? Yet are they not the personification of progress and true reform? We may only surmise what the future has in store for us, but we may rest well assured that the individualism of this type will bring nothing to be feared. The so-called Insurgent movement attests its popularity.

Nor is this new individualism confined alone to the political world. It is sending its roots down deep into our industrial and social system. Every movement undertaken in the interests of humanity that is backed by active, aggressive men and women is an example of it. The great railroads are pensioning their old and faithful workmen, immense corporations are seeking the cooperation of their employees, the negro problem is being solved by industrial education, and the solid South is passing away before a renewed feeling of national unity. The white plague is being fought throughout the length and breadth of the land in the interests of the present and future generations. The temperance movement and the white slave agitation are national in their scope. Labor and capital are slowly learning that it is to the interests of both parties to conciliate and arbitrate rather than to war with each other. The nation is asserting its right as never before to control those industries upon which the welfare of the people depends. Special interests are being denied the right to monopolize and devastate our great natural resources. Social settlement work, university extension and circulating libraries are but further evidences of an individualism turned away from self-interest to the interests of others.

Momentous, indeed, are the great questions that lie before us for solution. None but a Utopian dreamer would think that our national problems are solved. Neither can our saving common sense permit us to think that through the application of any one rule or principle we can reach that millennium of which so many reformers

dream. Yet we are safe in holding to that spirit of which others say we are the best representatives—individualism—if by that term we mean the old spirit of Martin Luther, Lief Erickson, and the Puritans remade to meet the new demands of a growing civilization. With it for a philosophical basis we may safely proceed with practical, progressive measures for reform.