



COUSIN MARSHALL (ILLUSTRATIONS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY Book 8)

Harriet Martineau

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Summary of Principles Illustrated in This Volume.

In a society composed of a natural gradation of ranks, some must be poor; i. e. have nothing more than the means of present subsistence.

Any suspension of these means of subsistence, whether through disaster, sickness, or decrepitude, converts the poor into the indigent.

Since indigence occasions misery, and disposes to vice, the welfare of society requires the greatest possible reduction of the number of the indigent.

Charity, public and private, or an arbitrary distribution of the subsistence-fund, private, has hitherto failed to effect this object; the proportion of the indigent to the rest of the population having increased from age to age.

This is not surprising, since an arbitrary distribution of the subsistence-fund, besides rendering consumption unproductive, and encouraging a multiplication of consumers, does not meet the difficulty arising from a disproportion of numbers to the means of subsistence.

The small unproductive consumption occasioned by the relief of sudden accidents and rare infirmities is necessary, and may be justifiably provided for by charity, since such charity does not tend to the increase of numbers; but, with this exception, all arbitrary distribution of the necessaries of life is injurious to society, whether in the form of private almsgiving, public charitable institutions, or a legal pauper-system.

The tendency of all such modes of distribution having been found to be to encourage improvidence with all its attendant evils,—to injure the good while relieving the bad,—to extinguish the spirit of independence on one side,—and of charity on the other,—to encourage speculation, tyranny, and fraud,—and to increase perpetually the evil they are meant to remedy,—but one plea is now commonly urged in favour of a legal provision for the indigent.

This plea is that every individual born into a state has a right to subsistence from the state.

This plea, in its general application, is grounded on a false analogy between a state and its members, and a parent and his family.

A parent has a considerable influence over the subsistence-fund of his family, and an absolute control over the numbers to be supported by that fund; whereas the rulers of a state, from Whom a legal provision emanates, have little influence over its subsistence-fund, and no control whatever over the number of its members.

If the plea of right to subsistence be grounded on the faults of national institutions, the right ought rather to be superseded by the rectification of those institutions, than admitted at the cost of perpetuating an institution more hurtful than all the others combined.

What, then, must be done to lessen the number of the indigent, now so frightfully increasing?

The subsistence-fund must be employed productively, and capital and labour be allowed to take their natural course; i. e. the pauper system must, by some means or other, be extinguished.

The number of consumers must be proportioned to the subsistence-fund. To this end, all encouragements to the increase of population should be withdrawn, and every sanction given to the preventive check; i. e. charity must be directed to the enlightenment of the mind, instead of to the relief of bodily wants.

If not adopted speedily, all measures will be too late to prevent the universal prevalence of poverty in this kingdom, the legal provision for the indigent now operating the extinction of our national resources at a perpetually increasing rate.

An excerpt from the beginning of:

Chapter I.

A VERY HOT MORNING.

The gray light of a summer's morning was dawning on the cathedral towers of the city of——, when Mr. Burke, a surgeon, returned on horseback from tile country, where he had been detained by a patient till past midnight. It was Sunday morning, and he was therefore less surprised than grieved to see what kind of people they were who still loitered in the streets...

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