

FROM "ON THE ELEVATION OF THE LABORING CLASSES"

By William Ellery Channing

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But a more serious objection than any yet considered, to the intellectual elevation of the laboring class, remains to be stated. It is said, "that the laborer can gain subsistence for himself and his family only by a degree of labor which forbids the use of means of improvement. His necessary toils leave no time or strength for thought. Political economy, by showing that population outstrips the means of improvement, passes an irrepealable sentence of ignorance and degradation on the laborer. He can live but for one end, which is to keep himself alive. He cannot give time and strength to intellectual, social, and moral culture, without starving his family, and impoverishing the community. Nature has laid this heavy law on the mass of the people, and it is idle to set up our theories and dreams of improvement against nature."

This objection applies with great force to Europe, and is not without weight here. But it does not discourage me. I reply, first, to this objection, that it generally comes from a suspicious source. It comes generally from men who abound, and are at ease; who think more of property than of any other human interest; who have little concern for the mass of their fellow-creatures; who are willing that others should bear all the burdens of life, and that any social order should continue which secures to themselves personal comfort or gratification. The selfish epicure and

the thriving man of business easily discover a natural necessity for that state of things which accumulates on themselves all the blessings, and on their neighbor all the evils, of life. But no man can judge what is good or necessary for the multitude but he who feels for them, and whose equity and benevolence are shocked by the thought that all advantages are to be monopolized by one set of men, and all disadvantages by another. I wait for the judgment of profound thinkers and earnest philanthropists on this point,—a judgment formed after patient study of political economy, and human nature and human history; nor even on such authority shall I readily despair of the multitude of my race.

In the next place, the objection under consideration is very much a repetition of the old doctrine, that what has been must be; that the future is always to repeat the past, and society to tread for ever the beaten path. But can any thing be plainer than that the present condition of the world is peculiar, unprecedented? that new powers and new principles are at work? that the application of science to art is accomplishing a stupendous revolution? that the condition of the laborer is in many places greatly improved, and his intellectual aids increased? that abuses, once thought essential to society, and which seemed entwined with all its fibres, have been removed? Do the mass of men stand where they did a few centuries ago? And do not new circumstances, if they make us fearful, at the same time keep us from despair? The future, be it what it may, will not resemble the past. The present has new elements, which must work out new weal or woe. We have no right, then, on the ground of the immutableness of human affairs, to quench, as far as we have power, the hope of social progress.