

# OUR PRESENT DISCONTENTS

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MOST people would agree that it is the cursed spite of this generation to have been born to set right a world which is out of joint. It would be nearer the truth to say that setting right a disjointed world is the task of every generation, nearer still to say that the machine of human society never runs smoothly for very long at a time, and will not run at all without the constant care of the engineer. Or perhaps the metaphor should be changed, for society is not so much a machine as an organism, a living thing which has evolved over many centuries and which has all the complexity of flesh and blood. In the process of adapting itself to its environment, this organism, society, has developed so many new organs, and has grown so greatly in complexity and bulk, that it is very much harder to understand and manage than it once was. At least, so it seems to us; but doubtless our forebears found life just as puzzling as we do.

In any case, we have at present to deal with an illness, not with a mechanical defect; and we cannot expect, as we could with a machine, to be able to pull the patient apart and put him together again. Whether his complaints have become so involved and deep-seated of late as to defy our diagnosis and our remedies, is yet to be seen; but at any rate, after having been given up times without number in the past, he has managed to pull through and so perhaps he may do again.

Just at present the chief trouble with the organism is that it is choked with excess and unuseable cells, a condition which has been observed over a considerable period with much variation from time to time. Some examination of these variations should be of interest.

## I

Our medieval ancestors lived in a world very different from our own. They lived in small communities close to the land. Around their villages lay the fields in which they raised their wheat and on which they pastured their cattle. In the forest on the field's edge was their wood and fuel. Their clothing came from the sheep in meadow. A little honey, a very little, served them as sugar,—that and their home-brewed ales. Each neighborhood was self-contained, and the things it made and the crops it grew were for the direct use of those who made or grew them. When people

began to gather into towns, merchants and craftsmen gradually learned to organize themselves—"guilds" they called their societies—and, by guarding the entrance to a trade, managed nicely to adjust the supply of labour to the demand. In both town and country human intelligence had some chance of manipulating the simple medieval social machine. In keeping it down to a reasonable size, our forefathers had two assistants, neither of which is to the same extent available to-day,—the one war, the other pestilence. Over several centuries population seems to have remained almost stationary. Had it increased with one quarter of the rapidity with which it has grown in modern times, the fabric of medieval life would have been utterly destroyed.

As it was, there were many dislocations in the machine. Not every man in the Middle Ages had his secure place in society. But there was a means of dealing with the outcast. Much of the wealth of the time lay in the hands of the Church, and the Church was quite as conscious of its social obligations as it is to-day. It was at least the ideal of the age that no beggar should ever be turned away from the door of the monastery. Poverty was an opportunity for the religious man: it gave him an exercise in piety. In an age when nobody had very much, the beggar with his crust of bread and his night's shelter probably did not consider himself very badly off.

One of the shadows which Protestantism cast before it in England was Henry VIII's destruction of the monasteries. The opportunity to purchase support for his programme of nationalism, separation from Rome, and divorce, by distributing the spoils of the Church was too tempting, and consequently the religious houses and their property passed into private hands. Part of the price paid for Protestantism was the destruction of the medieval apparatus for taking up the slack in the social system, in other words, for dealing with unemployment.

Hence came the "sturdy beggars", who thronged the roads of Tudor England, much to the disturbance of respectable and comfortable people. Their condition and the treatment they received find reflection in the old rhyme:

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,  
 The beggars are coming to town,  
 Some in rags and some in tags and some in a silken gown.  
 Some gave them white bread and some gave them brown,  
 And some gave them a whipping and sent them out of town.

Here was the first unemployment crisis. It was not entirely the result of the cessation of monastic relief, which from its indis-

criminate nature had bred fraudulent beggars as well as relieved genuine. Its causes were deeper. The Tudor age saw a changing world, the break-up of the manorial system, and a social revolution which, even had the medieval Church remained unchanged, would have brought about much distress. For the first time the social problem had to be faced nationally, so that by the end of Elizabeth's reign a set of "Poor Laws" had been hammered out, which by recognizing the inevitability of poverty had gone some way to alleviate it. Foreign travellers were wont to remark on the fewness of beggars in England as compared with abroad.

The social machine was apparently still somewhat subject to human control.

## II

By the time of Elizabeth's death, England was reaching out across the sea; and seventy-five years after the defeat of the Armada, with English traders in India and English settlements in America, the foundations of the British Empire had been laid. The vast expansion of those years was to bring its own peculiar set of social problems. In America the settlers, confronted with the conquest of the forest, found that all the hands that could be obtained were too few for the task, and consequently a persistent demand arose for man-power. No talk of unemployment in the first century or two of the new world! How to get "hands across the sea" was the dominant difficulty. Luckily for the success of the new colonies, our ancestors were not squeamish. They went directly to their ends. The Old Country had inhabitants who were no asset to it, and the New Country wanted inhabitants of any sort. There therefore sprang up the practice of sending out undesirables, the criminal classes first and the poor and unfortunate next, "indentured" or bound to an American master for seven years, either by their own will or by that of the parish on which they were dependent. In the colony the dependent would work out his passage without wages and without freedom, buoyed up only by the prospect of liberty at the end of his time. The poor thus stood between the devil of the parish relief at home and the deep sea of serfdom.

A more extreme manifestation of the scarcity of labour was to come. The supply of unemployment in England tended to dry up with the wars of Cavalier and Roundhead, and in any case it was relatively small; but a new labour supply was at hand, the negro, and with the perfection of the African slave trade the labour problem of the American colonies, at least of the southern colonies, was solved.

It was the exploitation of the riches of the new continent that called forth slavery; it was the reaction of this on England that brought about the greatest of all social revolutions, the industrial revolution, the machine age. Supply in the halcyon days of the eighteenth century could hardly keep up with demand. Continentals and West Indians, every year producing more and more tobacco, rice and that delectable novelty, sugar, kept pouring orders into England for tools, clothing and what not. Men tried to meet the opportunity, humble men for the most part, and in the latter half of the century a series of mechanical inventions began to appear which rendered it much easier to produce goods in quantity and which were destined to change the face of the world. The men who invented the "spinning jenny," the power-loom and the steam engine little dreamed that they were ushering in a force to which humanity was one day to be chained even more effectively than were the Virginian slaves to their plantations.

It was the efficiency of the machine which captured the imagination of that age, just as it captures ours. But to those who had been earning their living by the skill of their hands, it was its darker side which came home. The machine was tireless and accurate. It could do what many men could not do. People began to starve because of its competition. Hence simple men looked upon it as their enemy, and on many a night in the days of our great-grandfathers displaced workmen gathered about the buildings where the new monsters lay and destroyed them. Machine-breaking, the "Luddite riots", went on for years, and the rioters had to be severely dealt with before order was restored.

If on the one hand the machine displaced men, on the other it provided more work for them. Machines were invented to make machines. The whole industrial structure increased enormously in complexity. New human desires were discovered, new wants began to be fulfilled. Instead of wearing clothing made from home-spun wool, people began to use the new product of the mills of Lancashire, a product raised far away in the Southern States by slave labour,—cotton. Sugar, coffee, tea, became no longer luxuries for the few but the necessities of everybody. People began to carry about on their persons articles which had passed through a dozen different stages of manufacture. Making things became suddenly easy. The results were unforeseen. Factories, hidden away in obscure corners, were not in touch with each other, and nobody had much idea of the capacity of the market for which he was manufacturing. Before the machine age, when almost every article had to be made to order, goods were always more or less scarce, but the

machine had abolished the inevitability of scarcity, and had interposed many links in the chain between producer and consumer. Consequently, a little over a hundred years ago, there occurred the first "crisis". Suddenly the market became glutted, factories got no orders and closed down. The modern problem of unemployment had emerged.

Hardship and social dislocation in previous ages had for the most part been local, but during the crisis of 1825 they became international. Thus in England, the shipping trade being at once involved, ships were laid up in every port. Many of the cheaper ships of Great Britain had been built in its colony of New Brunswick. In 1823-24, New Brunswick had been feverishly prosperous and the workmen in the shipyards had been earning high wages. Suddenly, mysterious events in Great Britain supervened, and in every little inlet in the Bay of Fundy life stopped. But the safety valve of empty and fertile land, which on this continent has never, up to the present period, failed to smooth out the worst effects of industrial crises, came to the rescue, and many of the unemployed shipwrights went on to pioneer farms in the western prairie States.

Obviously, even a hundred years ago, the social machine was becoming decidedly intricate.

If the machine disturbed the constancy of employment, it at the same time multiplied the means by which life could be sustained. Thus just about a century ago the invention of the mechanical reaper greatly augmented the supply of wheat. The response of humanity to more wheat was exactly the same as the response of any other species of animal to an addition to the available food; it began to increase in numbers. Nothing is more notable in human annals than the enormous growth of population which occurred in the white world in the nineteenth century. The teeming populations of to-day in Europe and America are very literally machine-made products; for without the new opportunities for life which the machine afforded, while the number of children born would have been just as great, most of them would have had to die in infancy or of pestilence later on. In the eighteenth century huge families were the rule. Good old Queen Anne was the mother of fifteen, all of whom died in infancy. John Wesley came of a family of eighteen, and his rugged old age may be put down to the rule that the fittest survive, for of the eighteen only four grew up. In the nineteenth century there was more food, more clothing, not much more sanitation until the latter half, but in general it had greater opportunities for life. Hence our present dense populations.

## III

It looks as if the present century were to see just as dramatic a change in the rate of growth of the species as did the last, but in the opposite direction, for the birth rate is becoming lower every year, and some countries, notably England, France and Germany, are within sight of a stationary or even a declining population. England to-day is faced with a declining population simply because her economic position will not allow her to support the people she already has. Luckily the modern world is so completely the master of nature that she can look upon her position with a certain degree of equanimity, for so easy has the production of wealth become that she is still able to support her surplus people from her surplus wealth. There being fewer persons born every year than in the year before, in another generation they will not be there to support. Humanity in England, as elsewhere, is in the grip of forces over which it has very little real control.

One of these forces is the machine. It created the modern world by destroying the old world, and now it seems as if it were going to destroy our world and create another. While for a century machines begat machines, and the snowball of production and employment got bigger and bigger as it rolled, nowadays invention is destroying employment faster than it creates it. The "combine" on the western wheat fields has destroyed the need for the harvest hand. Harvesters' excursions have ceased. That opportunity for life is destroyed. A short time ago, a machine used for digging the trenches in connection with the installation of a central-heating system proved itself so effective that all the ordinary pick and shovel work disappeared. History repeated itself, and a crowd of unemployed gathered and tried to smash it up,—another Luddite riot. A century ago these men would have been reabsorbed into industry because of the work that the invention of still another machine would have created. To-day that occurs in steadily decreasing degree, and one of these days we shall come to the point where the machine will do virtually all our work. That is, to-day the machine is destroying men. Until our social organization advances far beyond its present point, the wear and tear on the men who are unemployed, their poor conditions of life, will operate to thin them out. Their death rate will doubtless increase, and their marriage rate decrease. They will respond to an altered environment in exactly the same way, if somewhat more slowly than that in which the wild animal responds to a hard winter; they will decrease in numbers, and the weakest will go under.



It is a logical, if lurid, picture of the displacement of men by machines which is painted by the dramatist Carol Capek in his play "*R. U. R.*" The great discovery by which there is rendered possible the production of mechanical men, "robots", who can do everything that human beings can do, except reproduce their kind, has unforeseen results. The "robots" are so much stronger and cheaper than ordinary human beings that every employer wants them, Governments want them for soldiers, and so on. Soon, except for a few managers at the top, they displace men everywhere, no ordinary incentive to life remains, in endless leisure the human race consumes itself and ceases to procreate. At least the "robots" realize their strength, and in smoke and carnage humanity disappears. The mechanical man, the last supreme word of human ingenuity, has displaced mankind everywhere, and man's own creation has destroyed him.

Capek's is a fearful and fantastic vision, but there may be an uncomfortable element of truth in it. While our machines can never come to life, they can control life and prescribe the conditions under which we live. They are good servants but bad masters, and just at present one would think they are as much the latter as the former. Machine production has conferred infinite material blessings on the race—and perhaps some spiritual blessings also—but it has brought curses with it as well. It gives us the freedom of the country in the motor car, but it condemns us to labour ceaselessly in noisy factories at trifling tasks, monotonous repetitions of the same dull thing. And if at one period the machine creates men to serve it, at another, when it has become independent of them, it destroys them.

#### IV

Until quite recently our own country, like other pioneer lands, has been reasonably free of the tyranny of the machine, and its imperative demand has been for men. When settlement began in earnest, say just after the American Revolution, development went on slowly, and the settlers along with their families and a few immigrants managed well enough. Luckily, they were in a country adapted only to small scale agriculture, where a man must work his own land and not depend on the labour of others, so Canada escaped the scourge that at that time was being rivetted on the southern United States,—slavery. If there had been opportunity for raising some staple crop, such as cotton, there is very little doubt but that

slaves would have been used to produce it. Moral scruples would not have stood in the way, for in Canada, as elsewhere, they scarcely existed.

When our labour demand did increase—just about one hundred years ago—we had a supply in the dispossessed artizans of England and Scotland, and in the paupers of those countries and of Ireland. Those of these people who were not able to lead the pioneer life of the settler—and most of them were not—came in handy, especially the Catholic Irish among them, to build the public works of the day, the Rideau, St. Lawrence and other canals, and later on the railroads. When the country got more of them than it could use, much of the surplus flowed off to the States. The enormous problem presented by the descent on their shores between the years 1830 and 1850 of clouds of Irish paupers, naked, starving and diseased, was solved by what, except for the unfortunate results upon themselves, must have seemed to the inhabitants interpositions of Providence, violent outbreaks of cholera which carried off the poor immigrants by the thousands. Thus by emigration and disease, equilibrium was restored between the demand for human labour and its supply.

The later story of the western half of the country has not been dissimilar. A vast area of vacant land awaited settlement; people rushed in, settling to their cost bad land and good land alike. Then railroads were built; and their building, joined to the intense energy with which the West was being created, attracted millions of immigrants. They could not all be used, so most of them had to go away again. There being no cholera, they took the easier route of emigration, either returning to their own country or going south. Much of the surplus that then remained, and which was beginning to appear in the depression of 1913, chiefly English-speaking, found its outlet in the war. At any rate Western Canada did not suffer by having to maintain idle hands; they took care of themselves. But nevertheless, in building the West, this country imported far more man-power than it could permanently use.

After the war, every thoughtless person in the country thought that the intervening years could simply be wiped out, and that we could return to the good old times of 1911 and 1912. There were still supposed to be illimitable spaces open for settlement in the West, and we still thought that we could digest an immigration of three or four hundred thousand a year. The railway and steamship companies encouraged us in the belief; in fact they insisted—in the right quarters—that this was the only belief, and the result was that we again began to have a flood of newcomers.



In 1921 there came another breakdown in the social machine, a "crisis" in which prices crashed and industry was at a stand-still. But as in preceding periods of the sort, we did not hear very much about unemployment, the reason being simple; that is, persons who could not get work here went to the United States. Since the newcomers here would take lower wages than the native-born, and since our people would take lower wages in the United States than the American-born, what occurred was largely a substitution of the newcomer for the native-born Canadian. We are such a hopelessly individualistic lot in Canada that when we hear of some Canadian who is forging ahead in the States, we rather congratulate ourselves on having had the good judgment to exile him. We seem to think it a very creditable and sensible thing to equip the pick of our youth with an expensive education, to send them south to enrich the life of our neighbours, and then to put in their place European peasants with whom the whole process will have to be begun over again. When some ex-Canadian springs to fame abroad as scientist or author, or in some other capacity, it is hardly a matter of pride on the part of the Canadian people, but rather of shame for the fact that his own country has not known how to avail itself of him. Until in some way we can retain and use our able sons, the status of this country will be little different from what it is to-day, that of a producer of mere material things, a sort of drudge among nations (or a strident *nouveau-riche*), and there will be, as there is, little other than mechanical originality among us, little national culture, few of those spiritual attributes which justify the existence of a nation.

Under the influence of the present hard times, immigration has been suspended; but we may be sure it is lying in wait for us, and that the interests which flooded the country before will, unless the voice of the people is emphatically heard, do so again. Emigration to the United States, from the same reason, has also dried up, with the consequence that we are feeling the full force of this depression, a new experience for us. For the first time we have to shoulder all our own population burdens, and indeed more than our own, since many of the persons who went to the United States a few years ago and there "did well" have now lost their jobs and have come back to live on their relatives. As soon as times become good again, they will be off, the cry of labour scarcity will go up, and more people with unpronounceable names will be brought in from Europe.

It need occasion no surprise that many of the unemployed are recent immigrants. With much the same motives as formerly

caused the negro to be brought into the South, these people have been brought here to be exploited, and they are exploited. They are given low wages when they arrive, and the moment that industry slackens down they are turned adrift. It is true that human beings no longer can be sold. But are they much better off because they cannot be? Is the lot of the man who lives in hourly fear of losing his job much to be preferred to that of the slave who knew that, come good times or come bad times, his master had at least to see that he was fed and housed? The chief difference is that modern industry in bad times can unload the slave on the State.

## V

There is no doubt that this generation is witnessing a fundamental change in human affairs. To put it in a word, the problem of production is solved. With the efficiency of modern machinery it is absurdly easy to make things, and indeed to grow things. We can make any quantity of goods in the twinkling of an eye, we can make any kind and, roughly, we can make anything out of anything. It is a sad commentary on the haphazard nature of humanity that one result of our consummate cleverness seems to be poverty and suffering all round.

But in reality this poverty is a growing pain, a surface showing. The real metal of human accomplishment lies underneath. It is just this: the age-old spectre of want, if it has not disappeared for certain unfortunate sections of the race, has, for the race collectively, ceased to exist. We have not yet learned how to distribute the things that we make, so that everybody will have a reasonable share, but we will learn how. When we do, there will have taken place the most remarkable change in humanity's affairs since we climbed down out of the trees. For the change will have been nothing short of the abolition of poverty.

Will it be a desirable goal when it has been achieved? From the dawn of history, man has earned his bread by the sweat of his brow. In the future he is going to earn his bread with less and less sweat. Everybody is going to have a great deal of leisure.

Will humanity be able to stand the strain? There are already two well-defined classes who have reached the haven, and no longer need to work for their living: the idle rich and the idle poor. In England, for example, as long as the State is solvent, the problem of living has been solved for the pauper just as truly as for the peer. Both are living on the surplus that the modern machine of

production so easily creates. But the record of neither class collectively is such as to make us rejoice over the same fate overtaking everybody.

It is quite likely that infinite leisure would be profitable for the chosen few, or at least, infinite freedom from the mere drudgery of life. There are lives devoted to the arts, or to philosophy, or to the graces of the spirit, which have little value by any conceivable market standard, but which are lives well and beautifully lived. Still, such lives are open only to the few, for there are only a few who by their natures are gifted for them. This may be called a purely pagan point of view, but is it not the paganism of Plato and the dictum of Christ? "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it".

For good or for evil, we are going to be increasingly confronted with this problem of leisure. Is it necessarily true that Satan finds mischief for idle hands? We are going to have more and more idle hands, so perhaps Satan's great opportunity is still to come. But one cannot help thinking that earning one's bread by the sweat of one's brow refers to a half-truth only. There are parts of the earth even now where brows do not need to sweat very much for livings to be earned. Is the native, for example, who finds he can get along with an occasional cocoanut, a particularly fit subject for Satan's wiles? Is his wickedness necessarily desperate? Is toil necessarily virtue? There was a time in the history of our race when life was not all labour. The villager of the Middle Ages had his feasting as well as his fasts. Centuries ago, England was Merry England. If the medieval Church exacted its pound of flesh, it returned something for it, and provided the villager in the form of innumerable saints' days with many times the holidays his modern representative enjoys. And it did not seem to think him damned because he danced on the village green.

It was a later Church which took away his holidays, and tried to turn merry England into gloomy England, the Calvinistic Church of the Puritans. It was Puritanism which, through its egregious tenet of "the elect", made life "real and earnest". If you were of the "elect", God would prosper you, would give you visible evidence of your election. You did not prove yourself of the "elect" by dancing on the village green; you did it by hard work. It must have been Puritanism which equated toil with virtue and leisure with sin. And it was no accident that when the machine age came in, it came in under the auspices of the descendants of Puritans. Puritanism, *plus* the machine, robbed us of our leisure and its innocent enjoyment. The question is, will the machine, which seems to be going to restore to us our leisure, rob us of our Puritanism?

Out of the discussion, if anything emerges, it is that in the future both rich and poor are going to have more leisure; that is, more of what we already have too much—unemployment. The mere probability is not in itself cause for despair. If mankind lets slip the opportunity with which it is presented, the opportunity to banish poverty and, with poverty, most suffering, if it allows the organism which has grown up over so long a period and with so much toil and bloodshed, the organism of western civilization, to languish and decline, then it will have deserved its fate. It will have deserved to be bound for ever to the curse of poverty and disease and all that renders life unbeautiful and unharmonious.

But surely mankind will not fail.