

CHAPTER V

GROUP MORALITY IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

This generation is constantly confronted by radical industrial changes, from which the community as a whole profits, but which must inevitably bring difficulty of adjustment and disaster to men of certain trades. In all fairness, these difficulties should be distributed and should not be allowed to fall completely upon the group of working-people whose labor is displaced as a result of the changes and who are obliged to learn anew their method of work and mode of life.

If the great industrial changes could be considered as belonging to the community as a whole and could be reasonably dealt with, the situation would then be difficult enough, but it is enormously complicated by the fact that society has become divided into camps in relation to the industrial system and that many times the factions break out into active hostility. These two camps inevitably develop group morality--the employers tending toward the legal and contractual development of morality, the workingmen toward the [end page 124] sympathetic and human. Among our contemporaries, these two are typified by the employers associations and the trades unions.

It is always difficult to judge a contemporaneous movement with any degree of fairness, and it is perennially perplexing to distinguish what is merely adventitious and temporary from that which represents essential and permanent tendencies. This discrimination is made much more difficult when a movement exhibits various stages of development contemporaneously, when a dozen historic phases are going on at the same time. Yet every historic movement towards

democracy, which constantly gathers to itself large bodies of raw recruits while the older groups are moving on, presents this peculiar difficulty. In the case of trades unions, certain groups are marked by lawlessness and disorder, others by most decorous business methods, and still others are fairly decadent in their desire for monopolistic control. It is a long cry from the Chartists of 1839, burning hayricks, to John Burns of 1902, pleading in the House of Commons with well-reasoned eloquence for an extension of the workingmen's franchise. Nevertheless they are both manifestations of the same movement towards universal suffrage and show no greater difference than that between the Chica- [end page 125] go teamsters, who were blocking commerce and almost barricading the streets in 1902 when at the same moment John Mitchell made his well-considered statement that he would rather lose the coal strike, with all that that loss implied, than gain it at the cost of violence. Students of industrial history will point out the sequence and development of the political movement from the Chartist to the Independent Labor party. They will tell us that the same desire burned in the hearts of the ignorant farmers which fired the distinguished parliamentarian, but they give no help to our bewildered minds when we would fain discover some order and sequence between the widely separated events of the contemporaneous labor movement.

We must first get down to the question, In what does "the inevitably destined rise of the men of labor" consist? What are we trying to solve in this "most hazardous problem of the age"? Is progress in the labor movement to come, as we are told progress comes in the non-moral world, by the blind, brute struggle of individual interests; or is it to come, as its earlier leaders believed, through the operation of the human will? Is it a question of morals which must depend upon educators and apostles; or is it merely a conflict of opposing rights which may [end page 126] legitimately use coercion? The question, from the very nature of the case, is confusing; for, of necessity, the labor movement has perfectly legitimate economic and business aspects, which loom large and easily overshadow the ethical. We would all agree that only when men have education, a margin of leisure, and a decent home can they find room to develop the moral life.

Before that, there are too many chances that it will be crushed out by ignorance, by grinding weariness, and by indecency. But the danger lies in the conviction that these advantages are to be secured by any means, moral or non-moral, and in holding them paramount to the inner life which they are supposed to nourish. The labor movement is confronted by that inevitable problem which confronts every movement and every individual. How far shall the compromise be made between the inner concept and the outer act? How may we concede what it is necessary to concede, without conceding all?

We constantly forget that, in the last analysis, the spiritual growth of one social group is conditioned by the reaction of other social groups upon it. We ignore the fact that the worship of success, so long dominant in America, has taught the majority of our citizens to count only accomplishment and to make little inquiry concerning [end page 127] methods. Success has become the sole standard in regard to business enterprises and political parties, but it is evident that the public intends to call a halt before it is willing to apply the same standard to labor organizations.

It is clear that the present moment is one of unusual crisis--that many of the trades unions of America have reached a transitional period, when they can no longer be mere propagandists, but are called upon to deal with concrete and difficult situations. When they were small and persecuted, they held to the faith and its implication of idealism. As they become larger and more powerful, they make terms with the life about them, and compromise as best they may with actual conditions.

The older unions, which have reached the second stage that may be described as that of business dealing, are constantly hampered and harassed by the actions of the younger unions which are still in the enthusiastic stage. This embarrassment is especially notable just now, for, during this last period of prosperity, trades unions have increased enormously in numbers; the State Federation of Minnesota, for instance, reported an increase of six hundred per cent. in one year.

Nearly all the well-established unions [end page 128] have been flooded by new members who are not yet assimilated and disciplined.

During this period of extraordinary growth, the labor movement has naturally attracted to itself hundreds of organizations which are yet in their infancy and exhibit all the weakness of "group morality." This doubtless tends to a conception of moral life which is as primitive as that which controlled the beginnings of patriotism, when the members of the newly conscious nation considered all those who were outside as possible oppressors and enemies, and were loyal only towards those whom their imagination included as belonging to the national life. They gave much, and demanded much, in the name of blood brothers, but were merciless to the rest of the world. In addition to its belligerent youth and its primitive morality, the newer union is prone to declare a strike, simply because the members have long suffered what they consider to be grievances, and the accumulated sense of unredressed wrong makes them eager for a chance to "fight for their rights." At the same time, the employer always attempts his most vigorous attack upon a new union, both because he does not wish organized labor to obtain a foothold in his factory, and because his chances for success are greater before his employees are well disciplined [end page 129] in unionism. Nevertheless in actual conflict a young union will often make a more reckless fight than an older one, like the rough rider in contrast with the disciplined soldier. The members of a newly organized group naturally respond first to a sense of loyalty to each other as against their employers, and then to the wider consciousness of organized labor as against capital. This stage of trades unionism is full of war phraseology, with its "pickets" and "battle-grounds," and is responsible for the most serious mistakes of the movement.

The sense of group loyalty holds trades unionists longer than is normal to other groups, doubtless because of the constant accessions of those who are newly conscious of its claims.

Those Chicago strikes, which, during the last few years, have been most notably characterized by disorder and the necessity for police interference, have almost universally been inaugurated by the newly organized unions. They have called to their aid the older organizations, and the latter have entered into the struggle many times under protest and most obviously against their best interests.

The Chicago Federation of Labor has often given its official indorsement to hot-headed strikes on the part of "baby unions" because the [end page 130] delegates from the newly organized or freshly recruited unions had the larger vote, and the appeal to loyalty and to fraternity carried the meeting against the judgment of the delegates from the older unions.

The members of newly organized unions more readily respond to the appeal to strike, in that it stirs memory of their "organization night," when they were admitted after solemn ceremonies into the American Federation of Labor. At the same time, the organizers themselves often hold out too large promises, on the sordid side, of what organization will be able to accomplish. They tell the newly initiated what other unions have done, without telling at the same time how long they have been organized and how steadily they have paid dues. Several years ago, when there seemed to be a veritable "strike fever" in Chicago among the younger trades unions, it was suggested in the Federation of Labor that no union be authorized to declare a strike until it had been organized for at least two years. The regulation was backed by some of the strongest and wisest trades unionists, but it failed to pass because the organizers were convinced that it would cripple them in forming new unions. They would be obliged to point to many months of patient payment of dues and humdrum meetings before any [end page 131] real gain could be secured. The organizers, in fact, are in the position of a recruiting officer who is obliged to tell his raw material of all the glories of war, but at the same time bid them remember

that warfare is always inexpedient. He must advise them to take a long and tedious training in the arts of diplomacy and in the most advanced methods of averting war before any action can possibly be considered.

In point of fact the organizers do not do this, and many men join unions expecting that a strike will be speedily declared which will settle all the difficulties of modern industrialism. It is, therefore, not so remarkable that strikes should occur often and should exhibit warlike features. What is remarkable is the attitude of the public which has certainly eliminated the tactics of war in other civil relations.

A tacit admission that a strike is war and that all the methods of warfare are permissible was made in Chicago during the teamsters' strike of 1905, when there was little protest against the war method of conducting a struggle between two private organizations, one of employer and one of employed. Why should the principles of legal adjustment have been thus complacently flung to the winds by the two millions of citizens who had no direct interest in this struggle, but [end page 132] whose pursuits in business were interfered with whose safety on the streets was imperiled, and whose moral sensibilities were outraged?

How did the public become hypnotized into a passive endurance of a street warfare in which two associations were engaged, like feudal chiefs with their recalcitrant retainers? In those similar cases, when blood grew too hot on both sides, the mediaeval emperor intervened and compelled peace. General public opinion is our hard-won substitute for the emperor's personal will. Public opinion, however, did not assert itself and interfere--on the contrary, the entire town acquiesced in the statement of the contestants that this method of warfare was the only one possible, and thereupon yielded to a tendency to overvalue physical force and to ignore the subtler and less obvious conditions on which the public welfare rests. At that time all methods of arbitration and legal redress were completely set aside.

There is no doubt but that ideas and words which at one time fill a community with enthusiasm may, after a few years, cease to be a moving force, apparently from no other reason than that they are spent and no longer fit into the temper of the hour. Such a fate has evidently befallen the word "arbitration," at least in Chicago, as it is applied to industrial struggles. [end page 133] Almost immediately following the labor disturbances of 1894 in Chicago, the agitation was begun for a State Board of Arbitration, resulting in legislation and the appointment of the Illinois Board. At that time the public believed that arbitration would go far towards securing industrial peace, or at least that it would provide the device through which labor troubles could be speedily adjusted, and during that period there was much talk concerning compulsory arbitration with reference to the successful attempts in New Zealand.

During the industrial struggles of later years, however, not only are the services of the State Board rejected, but voluntary bodies constantly find their efforts less satisfactory. Employers contend that arbitration implies the yielding of points on both sides. Since, however, most boards of arbitration provide that grievances must be submitted to them before the strike occurs, and the men are thus kept at work while the grievances are being considered, the men therefore have virtually nothing to lose by declaring a strike. They are subjected to a temptation to constantly formulate new demands, because, without losing time or pay, they are almost certain to secure some concession, however small, in their favor. The employers in the teamsters' strike thus explained their position when they de- [end page 134] clared that there was nothing which could be submitted to arbitration. These employers also contended that the ordinary court has no precedent for dealing with questions of hours and wages, of shop rules, and many other causes of trade-union disputes, because all these matters are new as questions of law and can be satisfactorily adjusted only through industrial courts in which tradition and precedent bearing upon modern industrial conditions have been accumulated. The rise and fall of wages affect not one firm only, but a national industry, and even the currents of international trade, so that it is

impossible to treat of them as matters in equity. With this explanation, the Chicago public rested content during the long weeks of the teamsters' strike, for no one pointed out that these arguments did not apply to this particular situation, so accustomed have we grown in Chicago to warfare as a method of settling labor disputes. The charges of the Employers' Association against the teamsters did not involve any points demanding adjustment through industrial courts. The charges the Employers' Association made were those of broken contracts, of blackmail, and of conspiracy, all of them points which are constantly adjudicated in Cook County courts.

It was constantly asserted that officers of the [end page 135] Teamsters' Union demanded money from employers in the height of the busy season in order to avert threatened strikes; that there was a disgraceful alliance between certain members of the Team Owners' Association and officers of the Teamsters' Union.

It would, of course, have been impossible to prove blackmail and the charges of "graft," unless the employers themselves or their representatives had borne testimony, which would inevitably have implicated themselves. During the first weeks of the strike, these charges were freely made, definite sums were named, and dates were given. There was also an offer on the part of various managers to make affidavits, but later they shrank from the publicity, and refused to give them, preferring apparently to throw the whole town into disorder rather than to "stand up" to the consequences of their own acts and to acknowledge the bribery to which they claim they were forced to resort. They demonstrated once more that a show of manliness and an appeal to arms may many times hide cowardice.

To throw affairs into a state of warfare is to put them where the moral aspect will not be scrutinized and where the mere interest of the game and a desire to watch it will be paramount.

The vicious combination represented by cer- [end page 136] tain men in the Team Owners' Association and in the Teamsters' Union, "the labor and capital hunting together" kind, is a public menace which can be abolished only by a combined effort on the part of the best employers and the best labor men. The "better element" certainly were in a majority, for the most dangerous members of this sinister combination were at last reduced to fifteen or twenty men. These very men, however, after a prolonged strike, became either victors or martyrs, and in either case were firmly established in power and influence for the succeeding two years. Why should an entire city of two million people have been put to such an amazing amount of inconvenience and financial loss, with their characters brutalized as well, in order to accomplish this? The traditional burning of the house in order to roast the pig is quite outdone by this overturning of a city in order to catch a "score of rascals," for in the end the rascals are not caught, and it is as if the house were burned and the pig had escaped. Was it not the result of acting tinder military fervor? Over and over again it has been found that organizations based upon a mutual sense of grievance or of outrage have always been militant, for while men cannot be formed permanently into associations whose chief bond is a sense of exasperation and wrong deal- [end page 137] ing, during the time they are thus held together they are committed to aggressive action.

Moral rights and duties formed upon the relations of man to man are applicable to all situations, and to deny this applicability to a difficult case, is to beg the entire question. The consequences do not stop there, for we all know that to deny the validity of the moral principle in one relation is to sap its strength in all relations.

Employers often resent being obliged to have business relations with workingmen, although they no longer say that they will refuse to deal with them, as a woman still permits herself to say that she "will not argue with a servant." They nevertheless contend that the men are unreasonable, and that because it is impossible to establish contractual relations with them, they must be coerced. This contention goes far toward legitimatizing terrorism. It therefore seems to them

defensible to refuse to go into the courts and to insist upon war because they do it from a consciousness of rectitude, although this insensibly slips into a consciousness of power, as self-righteousness is so prone to do. But these are all the traits of militant youth, which in the teamsters' strike was indeed borne out by the facts in the case.

The Employers' Association of Chicago was largely composed of merchants whose experience [end page 138] with trades unionism was almost limited to the Teamsters' Union which has been in existence for only five years and, from the first, has been truculent and difficult. Had the employers involved been manufacturers instead of merchants, they would have had years of experience with unions of skilled men, and they would have more nearly learned to adjust their personal and business relations to trades unionism. When an entire class in a community confesses that without an appeal to arms they cannot deal with trades unions, who, after all, represent a national and international movement a hundred years old, they practically admit that they cannot manage their business under the existing conditions of modern life. To a very great extent it is a confession of weakness, to a very great extent a confession of frailty of temper. To make the adjustment to the peculiar problems of one's own surroundings is the crux of life's difficulties. "New organizations" and "new experiments in living" would not arise if there were not a certain inadequateness in existing organizations and ways of living. The new organizations and experiments may not point to the right mode of meeting the situation, but they do point to the existence of inadequateness and the need of readjustment. Changes in business methods have [end page 139] been multiform during the past fifteen years, and Chicago business men who have made those other adjustments would certainly be able to deal with labor in its present organized form if they were not inhibited by certain concepts of their "group morality."

In the meantime the public, which has been powerless to interfere, can only point to the consequences of grave social import which are sure to result from a prolonged period of disturbance.

First, there is the sharp division of the community into classes, with its inevitable hostility and misunderstanding. Capital lines up on one side, and labor on the other, until the "fair-minded public" disappears and Chicago loses her democratic spirit which has always been her most precious possession. In its place is substituted loyalty to the side to which each man belongs, irrespective of the merits of the case--the "my country right or wrong" sentiment which we call patriotism only in war times, the blind adherence by which a man is attached against his will, as it were, to the blunders of "his own kind."

During the first week of the strike, I talked with labor men who were willing to admit that there were grounds for indictment against at least two of the officers in the teamsters' locals. [end page 140] During the third week of the strike all that was swept aside, and one heard only that the situation must be taken quite by itself, with no references to the first causes, that it was a strike of organized capital against organized labor, and that we could have no peace in Chicago until it was "fought to a finish."

Second, there is an enormous increase in the feeling of race animosity, beginning with the imported negro strike-breakers, and easily extending to "Dagoes" and all other distinct nationalities. The principle of racial and class equality is at the basis of American political life, and to wantonly destroy it is one of the gravest outrages against the Republic.

Chicago is preeminently a city of mixed nationalities. It is our problem to learn to live together in forbearance and understanding and to fuse all the nations of men into the newest and perhaps, the highest type of citizenship. To accept this responsibility may constitute our finest contribution to the problems of American life, but we may also wantonly and

easily throw away such an opportunity by the stirring tip of race and national animosity which is so easily aroused and so reluctantly subsides.

Third, there is the spirit of materialism which controls the city and confirms the belief that, after [end page 141] all, brute force, a trial of physical strength, is all that counts and the only thing worthy of admiration. Any check on the moral consciousness is paralyzed when the belief is once established that success is its own justification. When the stream of this belief joins the current of class interest, the spirit of the prize fighters' ring which cheers the best round and worships the winner, becomes paramount. It is exactly that which appeals to the so-called "hoodlum," and his sudden appearance upon the street at such times and in such surprising numbers demonstrates that he realizes that he has come to his own. At the moment we all forget that the determination to sacrifice all higher considerations to business efficiency, to make the machine move smoothly at any cost, "to stick at nothing," may easily make a breach in the ethical constitution of society which can be made good only by years of painful reparation.

Fourth, there is the effect upon the children and the youth of the entire city, for the furrow of class prejudice, which is so easily run through a plastic mind, often leaves a life-long mark. Each morning during the long weeks of the strike, thousands of children at the more comfortable breakfast tables learned to regard labor unions as the inciters of riot and the instruments of evil, thousands of children at the less comfortable [end page 142] breakfast tables shared the impotent rage of their parents that "law is always on the side of capital," and both sets of children added to the horrors of Manchuria and Warsaw, which were then taking place, the pleasurable excitement that war had become domesticated upon their own streets. We may well believe that these impressions and emotions will be kept by these children as part of their equipment in life and that their moral conceptions will permanently tend toward group moralities and will be cast into a coarser mold.

In illustration of this point I may, perhaps, cite my experience during the Spanish War.

For ten years I had lived in a neighborhood which is by no means criminal, and yet during October and November of 1898 we were startled by seven murders within a radius of ten blocks. A little investigation of details and motives, the accident of a personal acquaintance with two of the criminals, made it not in the least difficult to trace the murders back to the influence of the war. Simple people who read of carnage and bloodshed easily receive suggestions. Habits of self-control which have been but slowly and imperfectly acquired quickly break down when such a stress is put upon them.

Psychologists intimate that action is determined by the selection of the subject upon which [end page 143] the attention is habitually fixed. The newspapers, the theatrical posters, the street conversations for weeks, had to do with war and bloodshed. Day after day, the little children on the street played at war and at killing Spaniards. The humane instinct, which keeps in abeyance the tendency to cruelty, as well as the growing belief that the life of each human being, however hopeless or degraded, is still sacred, gives way, and the more primitive instinct asserts itself.

There is much the same social result during a strike, in addition to the fact that the effect of the prolonged warfare upon the labor movement itself is most disastrous. The unions at such times easily raise into power the unscrupulous "leader," so-called. In times of tumult, the aggressive man, the one who is of bellicose temper, and is reckless in his statements, is the one who becomes a leader. It is a vicious circle--the more warlike the times, the more reckless the leader who is demanded, and his reckless course prolongs the struggle. Such men make their appeal to loyalty for the union, to hatred and to contempt for the "non-union" man. Mutual hate towards a non-unionist may have in it the mere beginnings of

fellowship, the protoplasm of tribal fealty, but no more. When it is carried over into civilized [end page 144] life it becomes a social deterrent and an actual menace to social relations.

In a sense it is fair to hold every institution responsible for the type of man whom it tends to bring to the front, and the type of organization which clings to war methods must, of course, consider it nobler to yield to force than to justice. The earlier struggle of democracy was for its recognition as a possible form of government and the struggle is now on to prove democracy an efficient form of government. So the earlier struggles of trades unions were for mere existence, and the struggle has now passed into one for a recognition of contractual relations and collective bargaining which will make trades unions an effective industrial instrument. It is much less justifiable of course in the later effort than it was in the earlier to carry on the methods of primitive warfare.

This new effort, however, from the very nature of things, is bringing another type of union man into office and is modifying the entire situation. The old-time agitator is no longer useful and a cooler man is needed for collective bargaining. At the same time the employers must put forth a more democratic and a more reasonable type of man if they would bear their side of this new bargaining, so that it has come about quite [end page 145] recently that the first attempts have been made in Chicago towards controlling in the interests of business itself this natural tendency of group morality.

It may offer another example of business and commerce, affording us a larger morality than that which the moralists themselves teach. Certain it is that the industrial problems engendered by the industrial revolutions of the last century, and flung upon this century for solution, can never be solved by class warfare nor yet by ignoring their existence in the optimism of ignorance.

America is only beginning to realize, and has not yet formulated, all the implications of the factory system and of the conditions of living which this well-established system imposes upon the workers. As we feel it closing down upon us, moments of restlessness and resentment seize us all. The protest against John Mitchell's statement¹ that the American workingman has recognized that he is destined to remain a workingman, is a case in point. In their attempt to formulate and correct various industrial ills, trades unions are often blamed for what is inherent in the factory system itself and for those evils which can be cured only through a modification of that system. For instance, factory workers in gen- [end page 146] eral have for years exhibited a tendency to regulate the output of each worker to a certain amount which they consider a fair day's work, although to many a worker such a restricted output may prove to be less than a fair day's work. The result is, of course, disastrous to the workers themselves as well as to the factory management, for it doubtless is quite as injurious to a man's nervous system to retard his natural pace as it is to unduly accelerate it. The real trouble, which this "limitation" is an awkward attempt to correct, is involved in the fact that the intricate subdivision of factory work, and the lack of understanding on the part of employees of the finished product, has made an unnatural situation, in which the worker has no normal interest in his work and no direct relation to it. In the various makeshifts on the part of the manufacturer to supply motives which shall take the place of the natural ones so obviously missing, many devices have been resorted to, such as "speeding up" machinery, "setting the pace," and substituting "piece work" for day work. The manufacturers may justly say that they have been driven to these various expedients, not only by the factory conditions, but by the natural laziness of men. Nevertheless reaction from such a course is inevitably an uncompromising attempt on the part of the work- [end page 147] ers to protect themselves from overexertion and to regulate the output. The worst cases I have ever known have occurred in unorganized shops and have been unregulated and unaided by any trades union. The "pace setter" in such a shop is often driven out and treated with the same animosity which the "scab" receives in a union shop.

In the same spirit we blame trades unionists for that disgraceful attitude which they have from time to time taken against the introduction of improved machinery--a small group blindly attempting to defend what they consider their only chance to work. The economists have done surprisingly little to shed light upon this difficulty; indeed, they are somewhat responsible for its exaggeration. Their old theory of a "wage fund" which did not reach the rank and file of trades unionists until at least in its first form it had been abandoned by the leading economists, has been responsible both for much disorder along this line, and for the other mistaken attempt "to make work for more men."

A society which made some effort to secure an equitable distribution of the leisure and increased ease which new inventions imply would remove the temptations as well as the odium of such action from the men who are blinded by [end page 148] what they consider an infringement of their rights.

If the wonderful inventions of machinery, as they came along during the last century, could have been regarded as in some sense social possessions, the worst evils attending the factory system of production--starvation wages, exhausting hours, unnecessary monotony, child labor, and all the rest of the wretched list--might have been avoided in the interest of society itself. All this would have come about had human welfare been earlier regarded as a legitimate object of social interest.

But no such ethics had been developed in the beginning of this century. Society regarded machinery as the absolute possession of the man who owned it at the moment it became a finished product, quite irrespective of the long line of inventors and workmen who represented its gradual growth and development. Society was, therefore, destined to all the maladjustment which this century has encountered. Is it the militant spirit once more as over against the newer

humanitarianism? The possessor of the machine, like the possessor of arms who preceded him, regards it as a legitimate weapon for exploitation, as the former held his sword.

One of the exhibits in the Paris Exposition of [end page 149] 1900 presented a contrast between a mediaeval drawing of a castle towering above the hamlets of its protected serfs, and a modern photograph of the same hill covered with a huge factory which overlooked the villages of its dependent workmen. The two pictures of the same hill and of the same plain bore more than a geographic resemblance. This suggestion of modern exploitation would be impossible had we learned the first lessons which an enlarged industrialism might teach us. Class and group divisions with their divergent moralities become most dangerous when their members believe that the inferior group or class cannot be appealed to by reason and fair dealing, but must be treated upon a lower plane. Terrorism is considered necessary and legitimate that they may be inhibited by fear from committing certain acts. So far as employers exhibit this spirit toward workmen, or trades unionists toward non-unionists, they inevitably revert to the use of brute force--to the methods of warfare. [end page 150]

¹ Organized Labor, John Mitchell. Preface.