

LORD MACAULAY ASSAYS AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS

You are surprised to learn that I have not a high opinion of Mr. Jefferson, and I am surprised at your surprise. I am certain that I never wrote a line, and that I never in Parliament, in conversation, or even on the hustings - a place where it is the fashion to court the populace - uttered a word indicating the opinion that the supreme authority in a state ought to be instructed to the majority of citizens told by the head: in other words, to the poorest and most ignorant part of society. I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty or civilization, or both.

Democracies Bring Despotism

In Europe where the population is dense the effect of such institutions would be almost instantaneous. What happened in France lately is an example. In 1843 a pure democracy was established there. During a short time there was a strong reason to except a general spoliation, a national bankruptcy, a new partition of the soil, a maximum of prices, a ruinous load of taxation laid on the rich for the purpose of supporting the poor in idleness. Such a system would in twenty years have made France as poor and as barbarous as the France of the Carlovingians. Happily, the danger was averted; and now there is despotism, a silent tribune, an enslaved press, liberty gone, but civilization has been saved.

I have not the smallest doubt that if we had a purely democratic government here the effect would be the same. Either the poor would plunder the rich, and civilization would perish, or order and property would be saved by a strong military government, and liberty would perish. You need not think that your own country enjoys an exemption from these evils. I will frankly own to you that I am of a very different opinion. Your fate I believe to be certain, though it is deferred by a physical cause. As long as you have a boundless extent of fertile and unoccupied land, your laboring population will be far more at ease than the laboring population of the old world; and while that is the case the Jeffersonian policy may continue to exist without causing any fatal calamity.

But the time will come when New England will be as thickly peopled as Old England. Wages will be as low, and will fluctuate as much, with you as with us. You will have Manchesters and Birminghams. Hundreds and thousands of artisans will assuredly be sometimes out of work. Then your institutions will be fairly brought to the test. Distress everywhere makes the laborer mutinous and discontented, and inclines him to listen with eagerness to agitators who tell him that it is a monstrous iniquity that one man should have a million while another cannot get a full meal.

The Ruling Class

In bad years there is plenty of grumbling here, and sometimes a little rioting. But it matters little, for here the sufferers are not the rulers. The supreme power is in the hands of a

class, numerous, indeed, but selected, of the educated class, of a class which is, and knows itself to be, deeply interested in the security of property and the maintenance of order. Accordingly, the malcontents are firmly yet gently restrained. The bad time is got over without robbing the wealthy to relieve the indigent. The springs of national prosperity soon begin to flow again; work is plentiful; wages rise; and all is tranquility and cheerfulness. I have seen England three or four times pass through such critical seasons as I have described.

Outlook for U. S.

Through such seasons the United States will have to pass in the course of the next century, if not of this. How will you pass through them, I heartily wish you a good deliverance. But my reason and wishes are at war, and I cannot help foreboding the worst. It is quite plain that your Government will never be able to restrain a distressed and discontented majority. For with you the majority is the Government, and has the rich, who are always a minority, absolutely at its mercy. The day will come when, in the state of New York a multitude of people, none of whom has had more than half a breakfast, or expects to have more than half a dinner, will choose the legislature. It is possible to doubt what sort of legislature will be chosen? On one side is a statesman preaching patience, respect for vested rights, strict observance of public faith. On the other side is a demagogue ranting about the tyranny of capitalists and usurers, and asking why anybody should be permitted to drink champagne and to ride in a carriage while thousands of honest people are in want of necessities. Which of the two candidates is likely to be preferred by a workingman who hears his children cry for bread?

I seriously apprehend that you will, in some such season of adversity as I have described, do things which will prevent prosperity from returning; that you will act like people in a year of scarcity, devour all the seed corn, and thus make the next year a year, not of scarcity, but of absolutely a failure. There will be, I fear, spoliation. The spoliation will increase distress. The distress will produce fresh spoliation. There is nothing to stay you. Your Constitution is all sail and no anchor.

As I said before, when society has entered on this downward progress either civilization or liberty must perish. Either some Caesar or Napoleon will seize the reigns of government with a string hand, or your Republic will be as fearfully plundered and laid waste by barbarians in the Twentieth Century as the Roman Empire was in the Fifth; with this difference, that the Huns and Vandals who ravaged the Roman Empire came from without, and that your Huns and Vandals will have been engendered within your country by your own institutions.

Thinking this, of course, I cannot reckon Jefferson among the benefactors of mankind.

London, May 23, 1857