WORLD PROBLEMS

MR. BRYAN'S FORTY-FOURTH LETTER

Each locality has its questions of interest; each state has subjects which arouse discussion; each nation has its issues of paramount importance, and the world has its problems. There are transient questions which come and go and questions which, like Tennyson's brook, "go on forever." Each generation, in each country, meets the issues presented by conditions, but all the nations of the earth are constantly grappling with problems universal in their scope and everlasting in duration. In his famous oration at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln spoke of an "unfinished work" which those buried there had promoted and to which the living should dedicate themselves. Every generation finds an unfinished work when it enters upon life's stage and leaves the work unfinished when it departs. The work of civilization is ever an unfinished one for the reason that new problems present themselves as soon as present ones have been solved. In our trip around the world we have had an opportunity to note some of the problems which most concern all peoples at all times. The first concerns the legitimate sphere of the government—what should the government, acting for all the people, do, and what should be left to the individual? This subject is under consideration in every civilized nation, and no two nations have reached the same solution. At the two extremes stand the individualist and the socialist—the former jealously guarding the individual and opposing any encroachments upon his sphere of action, the latter emphasizing the work of the state and seeking to convert the work of production and the work of distribution into state functions. Between these extremes stand the mass of the people, governed more by the exigencies of each individual case than by the theories put forward by individualist and socialist. In some directions the countries of Europe and Asia have extended the sphere of government beyond anything known in the United States; in some respects our government has enlarged the sphere of the state beyond anything attempted in the old world, but everywhere the tendency is to extend rather than to diminish the sphere of the state's activities.

In the United States the public school is probably the best illustration of extensive co-operation on the part of the public. We regard the education of the people as a matter of public importance—so vital a matter, in fact, that we no longer depend upon the private school. The private school has its place, and its establishment is encouraged by localities and regarded with favor by the government, but the people acting as a whole insist that the school door shall be open to every child born into the country. In the last quarter of a century much advance has been made in the establishment by the public of technical schools, such as law schools, medical colleges, dentistry schools, industrial schools and agricultural colleges. Probably the greatest comparative advance has been made in the matter of agricultural colleges and experiment stations. In Europe the public school system is spreading, more rapidly in northern than in southern Europe, but not less surely in southern Europe. In Asia the people are just beginning to recognize education as a public function—a part of the state's work. In Japan public instruction has for some years been modeled after the systems employed in the United States and Europe. In Asia the public school is of a more modern origin, but some idea of the rapidity with which the public school is spreading in China may be known from the fact that four thousand public schools have been established within five years in the district of one of the viceroys.

Municipal ownership presents another phase of this subject; a century ago comparatively few cities in this country or Europe owned their own waterworks; now it is the exception that any city of any size relies upon a private corporation for its water supply. City lighting is having the same history although municipalization began later than with the waterworks. Now comes the question of street car lines, and as the same principles apply, the same inevitable trend toward municipal ownership is noticeable. The experience of all the cities has been practically the same; first, liberal franchises to induce the establishment of water, light or street car plants; second, efforts at regulation and restriction, made futile by the corrupt influence of the franchise companies; third, municipal ownership as a protection to the people and as a means of purifying politics. In the extent to which municipal ownership has been carried Great Britain leads the world, although in other countries some cities like Vienna have rivalled the cities of Great Britain.

In nearly all of the countries of Europe and Asia the telegraph lines are now owned by the government, and in most of the cities the telephone system is also owned by the public. It is hardly necessary to say that in all countries of any standing the mail service is now in the hands of the government. There is very noticeable growth in the government ownership of railroads. Many years ago the government ownership of railroads was tested in various European nations and the tendency toward the extension of government mileage and the diminution of the mileage of privately owned roads has been constant. In some countries there is still competition between the government lines and the lines owned by private corporations, but experience leaves no doubt that the lines owned by the government will ultimately supplant the roads in private hands. Switzerland has within four years purchased the main railroad system within her territory; Japan has within a year extended the government railroads by purchasing some of the roads in private hands, and the Indian government is planning to absorb more of the privately owned lines. In France a number of the railroads hold fifty year charters, which have now more than half expired, and which provide for the surrender of the lines to the government at the end of that period—the government in the meantime guaranteeing a fixed interest and an annual contribution to the sinking fund.

While local considerations and local conditions have much to do in the determination of each case, there is one general principle which is becoming more and more clearly outlined as the question of government ownership is discussed, namely, that when a monopoly becomes necessary it must be government monopoly and not monopoly in private hands. In other words, the principle now most familiarly applied is, "competition where competition is possible; government monopoly where competition is impossible." I have not space for the discussion of details; many different methods have been employed in different countries for the acquiring of private plants by the city or state, and different methods have been employed in different countries for the elimination of the political element from public service. Those who have faith in the intelligence and capacity of the people have confidence that they will be able to reduce to a minimum any dangers attendant upon a course which they believe to be necessary to their own welfare. The fact that after more than a quarter of a century of experience no retrograde movement is to be observed furnishes some proof that the dangers anticipated have not in practice been shown to be insurmountable.

Another world problem is to be found in the effort to fix woman's place in the social economy. No one can travel around the world without noting the wide difference that exists between the treatment of woman in different countries. In the Orient woman has, until comparatively recent years, occupied a very inferior position. In no respect has the influence of the west upon the east been more marked than in the elevation of woman. Even in Japan, where for half a century the ideas of America and Europe have found vigorous growth, woman's position is not yet equal to man's. The education of boys received attention before the education of the girls, but the girls' schools are now multiplying in number and in attendance. Traveling in the country one still sees the blackened teeth, it formerly having been regarded as the proper thing for a woman to make her teeth black after marriage but among the young generation the custom is unknown. In China woman has not only lagged behind man in education, but she has been subjected to a torture known as foot-binding which is to be found nowhere else. Societies are now being formed to discourage the practice but it is sad to learn how slowly this reform has grown. In both Japan and China plural marriage, or what has been equivalent to plural marriage, has been common. The man has been allowed to take unto himself as many wives as he could support without asking the consent of former wives—a practice which seems strange to those who have been brought up to regard the marriage vows as mutually binding and to consider man and woman as standing upon an equal plane when entering upon the relation of husband and wife.

In India child marriage is one of the worst customs that has afflicted these unhappy people. Girls have been given in marriage when only nine or ten years old, and a widow of twelve or thirteen is not unusual. Re-marriage of widows is not permitted under Hindu custom, suttee, or the burning of the widow, formerly being regarded as the proper thing. In both India and Arabia the women are still veiled and excluded from the society of men. It is difficult to estimate the loss that has come to society from the failure to recognize the mutual stimulus which man and woman find in co-operation in the work of civilization.

Even in Europe woman's position is not as good as it is in the United States, although in the Christian countries her rights are more respected and her good influence more appreciated. Max O'Rell, the witty French lecturer, used to say that if he was going to be born a woman, he would pray to be born in the United States. It was a happy expression, for surely there is no other country in which so high an estimate is placed upon woman or where she more fully shares in both the joys and responsibilities of life. For the superiority of her position she has Christianity and education to thank; Christianity has ever recognized woman's equality with man and education has fitted her to be a real helpmate in life.

A third question which one meets everywhere is the labor question. In Europe it is a question between labor and capital and the laborer is organizing for the advancement of his welfare. The guild and the labor organization have long sought to enlarge the laborer's share of the joint profit of labor and capital and to improve the conditions which form his environment. The efforts of these societies have mainly been directed, first, toward the improvement of sanitary conditions; second, toward the shortening of hours; and third, toward an increase in wages. It looks like a reflection on mankind in general to say that laboring men should have to ask legislation to protect their lives while at work. It would seem that employers would of their own accord regard the safety and the health of employes as of paramount importance, and yet, it has been necessary even in the United States to compel the building of air-shafts in mines and to force the use of safety appliances on railroads and street car lines and in the operation of machinery. Still more strange is it that it should be necessary to fix a minimum age at which children can be employed. The very sight of little boys and girls working in factories at the expense of their physical growth and their mental development is so revolting that one can hardly understand how such legislation can be necessary, and yet, throughout Europe and the United States laboring men through their organizations have been compelled to fight for the protection of the children of the poor. In Asia the inauguration of factories has not yet been followed by the protection of the children.

Reforms advance in groups. It is seldom that one real reform is achieved alone, so the limitation of hours of labor has, as a rule, accompanied legislation for the protection of children and for the improvement of sanitary conditions in mines and work shops. Those who now enjoy an eight-hour day can remember the nine-hour day and the ten-hour day, but can hardly recall the days of twelve or fourteen hours. In the factories that are starting up in the Orient long hours are the rule and with long hours there is the attendant degradation of the toiler. The demand for the eight-hour day is an international one and the laboring man is gradually winning his fight, partly by an appeal to conscience and partly by proof that the highest efficiency is inconsistent with long hours.

In the raising of wages two factors have been at work—the labor organization and the higher efficiency that has come with more universal education. The educated workman can earn more than the ignorant one and he soon demands a compensation commensurate with his services.

The labor saving machine has played no unimportant part in increasing the workman's compensation. It has raised the quality of the work done and has brought into use a higher grade of skill than was formerly employed. While the labor saving machine is by some regarded as antagonistic to the welfare of the laborer, no far-sighted observer can fail to note that it has increased rather than diminished the number employed at the work into which it has been introduced, while it has introduced a higher skill which, in turn, has secured a higher compensation. The handling of a railroad locomotive requires more skill than the handling of a freight team and