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Fabian Tract No. 159.

THE NECESSARY BASIS OF SOCIETY.

By SIDNEY WEBB.

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THE NECESSARY BASIS OF SOCIETY.[1]

IN choosing for my subject "The Necessary Basis of Society," I shall not deal with any plank of the platform of the Liberal, the Conservative, or the Labor Party. Nor is it my intention to argue the more fashionable thesis of to-day, that either Socialism or Individualism, according to taste, is the more desirable principle on which to organize society. My aim is the more limited and, I venture to hope, the more practically useful one of bringing to your notice certain considerations on which all political parties can agree; considerations without attention to which, I believe, it is impossible to expect to have, on any principles whatsoever, even a decently successful social order. However much the rival partisans may quarrel among themselves as to what sort of social order they wish to have —however much in this respect the Liberal may differ from the Conservative, the Republican from the Royalist, the Democrat from the Aristocrat, the Trade Unionist from the Capitalist, the Socialist from the Individualist—there are, as I venture to believe, certain fundamental matters of social organization which they can (and, if they are well-informed, reasonable beings, must) accept as indispensable to any successful carrying out of their own projects and ideas.

I invite you, in the first place, to consider for a moment some of the characteristics of popular government. It has been, in a sense, the special task of the nineteenth century, in our conceptions of social organization, to bring into prominence the claims, and needs, and rights of the average man, the typical citizen, the normal human being. I do not need to expatiate on the triumphant progress round the world of what we may call the ideas of 1789; on the rout and extermination of the notion that society ought or can even properly be governed for the advantage of a privileged class; or on the universal acceptance of the Democratic assumption that it is by its results upon the life of the whole body of citizens that every government must stand or fall. One effect of this triumph of Democracy has been to influence us all in favor of large and sweeping applications of governmental administration. That which is used or enjoyed or participated in by every citizen alike has necessarily come to seem much more "Democratic" than that which can only be used or enjoyed or participated in by a few people. Seeing that all have to pay for governmental action, we get into the habit of thinking it exceptionally appropriate—even, we may say, specially fair—to employ the forces of government in such ways only, and for

[1] These pages contain the substance of an Address given to the Social and Political Education League in London, May 14th, 1908, and of an article in the *Contemporary Review* for June, 1908.

such ends only, as concern us all. So much is this the case that there are actually people to-day, thinking themselves educated, who make this a test of legislation. If a measure does not extend to the whole population they denounce it as "class legislation," the implication being that "class legislation" is bad, or wicked, or, at any rate, undemocratic. It is characteristic of the infantile condition of American political thought that in some of the United States "class legislation" is actually forbidden by the State Constitution. The result of this conception has been that the work of government, so far as it has been based on Democratic ideas, has so far reminded us rather of the crude and clumsy proceedings of an army of occupation than of any fine adjustment of services to needs. It has, even in the most advanced countries, progressed little further—to use a pregnant phrase of Mr. H. G. Wells—than dealing with things in a wholesale sort of way. But the wholesale method of supplying human needs is very far from ensuring accurate adjustment. We are apt to forget that the average citizen or the normal human being is a mere abstraction, who does not exist. You and I have never seen him in the flesh. So varied is our individuality that whatever is handed out to all alike must necessarily fail to meet our requirements with any exactness. This is not a valid objection to nineteenth century achievements. A regiment of naked men needs clothing too urgently to allow us to grumble that the standard sizes of the regimental contractor make all the uniforms, if closely scrutinized, nothing better than misfits. The Early Victorian community, bare of schools, or drains, or Factory Acts, had to get itself supplied with the common article of standard pattern, so to speak, by wholesale, in order to be able to survive at all. But this necessity ought not to blind us to the fact that, when we come to scrutinize them closely, all these governmental products, supplied on the conception of Democracy as necessarily a wholesale provider, are, one and all, like the army contractors' uniforms, nothing better than misfits.

My first proposition is, therefore, the paradoxical one that, whilst it may have been the most pressing business of nineteenth century governments to deal with the whole people, or, at any rate, with majorities, by far the most important business of twentieth century governments must be to provide not only for minorities, but even for quite small minorities, and actually for individuals. We are no longer content with the army contractors' standard sizes. The regimental boots and uniforms must be made to fit each individual soldier. This, when you come to think of it, is just as "Democratic" in any sense whatsoever, as the merely wholesale method. "Class legislation," in short, is not only not bad, or wicked, or undemocratic, but actually the only good, the only useful, and the only really effective legislation. Of course, it is not necessary to confine legislative advantages to one minority any more than to one individual. Every minority—every citizen, in fact—has to be supplied, under the one system as under the other, just as every soldier in the regiment has to have his suit of clothing and his pair of marching

boots. Only, on the one method, the fit is so bad that the soldier is galled, and his marching and fighting capacity falls far short of what can be attained. On the other method, an improved fit so much increases freedom of action that both comfort and efficiency are greatly increased.

An actual example of progressive government action may serve to make my meaning clearer. A century ago the provision of schools formed in England no part of governmental activity. The first need was to get supplied in sufficient quantity the most universal and least specialized type of school. The Democratic program was simply "schools for all." The ideal of advanced reformers was the universal provision of the "common school," the school common to all, in which, in every group of a few hundred families, all the boys or girls—some said all the boys *and* girls—should sit side by side, receiving whatever their intellects, whatever their idiosyncracies, whatever their opportunities, the same kind and degree of education. We may agree that these enthusiastic Democrats were right in desiring to get rid of purely artificial class distinctions in education. Moreover, a lonely village, like the cluster of homesteads in the early American backwoods, has necessarily got to put up with a single undifferentiated school. But we do not to-day, in any highly organized community, provide or expect to have provided, any monotonous array of such "common schools." We recognize now that children have infinitely varied needs and capacities in education. Where many thousands of children are together in the same locality, we have learnt how to avoid the more atrocious of the misfits that were involved in the "common school." And thus an Education Authority such as that of London already provides not one kind of school, but several dozen different kinds—not merely the ordinary boys' school and girls' schools and infants' schools, but also special schools for the quick and precocious, and special schools for the backward and feeble-minded ; blind schools and deaf schools and cripple schools ; day schools and boarding schools ; truant schools and industrial schools ; domestic economy schools and three or four kinds of trade schools ; and half-a-dozen different types of secondary schools. The "schools for all," for which Bentham and James Mill and Francis Place strove a century ago, have become differentiated into these dozens of different kinds of school for differently situated groups of children. What was originally a common universal provision has become a highly specialized meeting of the needs of a series of minorities—many of them quite small minorities. And the end is not yet. We don't yet know how to provide each individual child with exactly the kind and grade and amount of education that its individuality requires. This, however, and not "common schools," has already become, in education, the Democratic ideal.

Or consider, in another sphere of government, how far we have already travelled in a quite analogous differentiation and specialization of Poor Relief. Originally the dominant conception of the Poor Law was the relief of destitution, visualized as the handing out

of bread or other necessaries of life, just to keep people from dying of starvation. Nowadays we ought not to think of dealing with our million of paupers in any such simple and uniform way. When you come to think of it, there is no average pauper any more than there is an average man. Hence the very notion of the simple undifferentiated "relief" of the destitute—the very conception of herding them all together in one common institution—is to-day quite comically obsolete, though we still find dear, good people, who really date back to before 1834, unable to imagine anything else, and still discussing little details about the horribly demoralizing mixed general workhouse poorhouse, as if it were not a scandal and a disgrace to us that this dreadful building, unknown in any other country, has not long ago been razed to the ground. What the modern enlightened administrator has learnt, though the average Poor Law Guardian cannot understand what it means, is that there is no category of the destitute ; that the people with whom he has to deal do not, in fact, form a single class at all, but a whole series of distinct classes, differing widely in their requirements. Thus, what we have to aim at providing to-day is not relief at all, but appropriate treatment for each class—foster parents or nurseries for such of the destitute persons as are infants, schools for such of them as are children, specialized infirmaries for such of them as are sick, highly equipped asylums for such of them as are of unsound mind, pensions or suitable homes for such of them as are permanently invalided or merely aged, farm colonies or training homes for the able-bodied for whom work cannot be found, and of dozens of more minutely specialized forms of treatment appropriate to such sub-classes as the blind, the deaf, the crippled, the candidates for migration or emigration, the feeble-minded, the sane epileptics, the chronic inebriates, and so on, most of which are actually now being undertaken, in rivalry with the Poor Law Authority, by the specialized Local Authorities established in connection with the Town or County Council. It is really ludicrous to think that, in this twentieth century, there are still people who think that all these different services, each requiring its own specialized technique, can be administered in each locality by a single body, the Board of Guardians in England and Ireland, and the Parish Council in Scotland, which can thus never possess either the knowledge or the competent staff to deal properly with any one of them. The survival down to the present day of such an anomaly as a special Poor Law Authority, with such an entirely obsolete institution as the mixed general workhouse, established to deal in an undifferentiated way with such an unreal abstraction as the "destitute," is a striking example of how imperfectly we have yet realized that government action of this "universal" character is entirely out of date.

From my fundamental paradox that governmental action, to be successful, must henceforth necessarily take the form, more and more, of provision for minorities, various inferences follow. We see at once how needful becomes, in every branch of administration and legislation, a high degree of specialized knowledge and expertness.

The provision for the average man, whether in the way of prohibitions or in matters of supply, is a comparatively simple matter. The draughtsmen of the American Declaration of Independence and the author of the "Rights of Man," writing as they did for the Political Man—quite as unreal a being as the Economic Man—found no difficulty in deducing from first principles all the government that they contemplated. I sometimes think that those who object to any other kind of legislation are often unconsciously biassed by a haunting suspicion that they, at any rate, are unequipped for it. In our own time it does not require much knowledge to draw up, let us say, a Factory Law on the lines of universal application still customary in the legislation of France. "Clause 1: The hours of labor shall not exceed eight per day. Clause 2: The Minister of the Interior is charged with the execution of this law." This is scarcely an exaggeration of the type of legislation to which the conception of governmental action as concerned with the whole people inevitably leads. What we in England have learnt is that not until factory legislation has been broken up and sub-divided into highly specialized regulations, each affecting a particular trade or a group of trades—in short, not until government becomes a matter of dealing with minorities—becomes, in fact, nothing but "class legislation"—does it become either effective in itself or other than a clanking fetter and incumbrance upon our personal freedom. But well-fitting clothes involve skilled tailoring. Accordingly legislation and governmental administration necessarily become, in all highly organized communities—however Democratic they may be—more and more the business of persons elaborately trained and set apart for the task, and less and less the immediate outcome of popular feeling. Nothing was more inexact than the forecast that so alarmed our fathers, that Democracy meant government by the mob. The more strong and effective becomes the Democratic feeling, the more will legislatures and governments be driven to grapple seriously with the real grievances and needs, not of the people in the abstract, but of the people as they really are; the more will it become clear that the only way to do this is to provide what is actually required by the series of small minorities of which the people as a whole is composed; and the more this continuous series of class legislation, dealing successively with every class in the community, will necessarily involve, not the sweeping generalities and political abstractions which mark to-day the political thinking both of mobs and college common-rooms, nor even the comparatively simple, broad general issues that can be submitted to direct popular vote, or formulated by the merely amateur member of Parliament, but the highly elaborated technicalities by which the really experienced departmental administrator seeks to carry out the orders of the legislature. Already we come to recognize that it is neither the street-corner orator nor the Fellow of All Souls who makes the most successful member of a twentieth century Cabinet.

But this inference is not the one on which I want here to lay most stress. Nor do I wish to do more than glance in passing at

another consequence of government more and more concerning itself with minorities. It is almost impossible to get out of the heads of fastidious people of the last generation a shrinking terror of Democracy as involving the sacrifice of all that is delicate, all that is refined, all that is distinguished, to the needs and passions of the "vulgar herd." But the "vulgar herd" is, as we have now seen, no indissoluble whole, necessarily swamping any small minority. It is, in itself, nothing but a congeries of small minorities—each of them by itself quite as weak and powerless politically as the "remnant" of refined and distinguished folk, which may therefore quite comfortably reassure its timid soul. The most Democratic government of the ensuing century—based, as it must necessarily be, on the very idea of providing for each of the series of minorities of which the world is made up—is as capable of providing for one minority as for another, for its poets as for its apprentices, for its scientists as for its soldiers, for its artists as for its artificers, and with the advance of actual knowledge in the administration is even more likely to know how they can be fostered and really well provided for than the irresponsible plutocratic patron ever did.

And here I come at last to the proposition which I am more particularly concerned to press upon you to-night. As it is coming more and more to be the business of government to deal with minorities, to provide what is required for minorities, to legislate for minorities, because minorities are what the people as a whole is composed of, so we are discovering in one department of life after another, that it is upon the specialized scientific treatment of minorities—often of quite small minorities—that social well-being depends. It is curious to remember that practically all past Utopias seem to contemplate a world made up entirely of healthy adults! But it is not enough to provide the government that we might imagine would be required for a community of average, normal healthy citizens—that way, in the actual world in which we live, made up as it is entirely of citizens who are not average or normal at all, lie degeneration, disease and death. Consider first the case of physical health. If the community provides no exceptional provision for the sick—no special care of the tuberculous, no isolation hospitals for zymotic diseases, none of the social elaborations of modern preventive medicine—we know that disease will arise, and will spread, not to the weakly alone but also to the strong; that not only will the yearly toll of death be heavier than it need be, but that sickness will drag down and incapacitate also the average man, and abstract unnecessary days from social service; and, worse than all, even if it do not affect adversely that mysterious germ plasm on which the race depends, that it will, at any rate, generation after generation, impair the vitality and lower the efficiency of the community as a whole. Hence, every civilized government finds it imperative to provide elaborately for the quite small minority of the sick—to deal with them, in fact, individually, one by one—to insist on extensive precautions against disease; to press, indeed, upon everyone, so far as we yet know how, the obligation to be well—

that is to say, to promulgate and enforce what may be called a National Minimum of Health, below which, in the interest of the community as a whole, no one is permitted to fall.

Carry the conception a stage further. The past century has seen a gradual and empirical adoption of the principle of the segregation of persons of unsound mind—of special provision by appropriate institutions for even harmless lunatics and idiots, for epileptics and chronic inebriates, now about to be extended to the merely feeble-minded—partly, no doubt, out of humanity to the unfortunate individuals themselves, but more and more because of a recognition of the fact that their indiscriminate presence in the competitive world has a tendency to deteriorate the sane, to drag down the standard of intelligence and self-control, to lower the level of order as well as of intellect in the community as a whole. We now, in short, enforce a National Minimum of Sanity, below which no denizen of the world of free citizenship is allowed to fall.

And we have already gone much further. With the support—now unanimous, if somewhat belated—of the economists, we have recognized that the conditions of the wage contract can no more safely be left uncontrolled by law than any other department of civilized life, and we have the constantly growing series of Factory Acts, Mines Regulation Acts, Merchant Shipping Acts, Shop Hours Acts, Railways Regulation Acts, and now even a Trade Boards Act—all proceeding on the principle that it is absolutely necessary for social well-being that there should be an inflexible inferior limit below which the conditions of employment must not be permitted to fall.

And now at last the meaning of my title will, I hope, be clear. My thesis is that the Necessary Basis of Society, in the complications of modern industrial civilization, is the formulation and rigid enforcement in all spheres of social activity, of a National Minimum below which the individual, whether he likes it or not, cannot, in the interests of the well-being of the whole, ever be allowed to fall. It is this policy of a National Minimum which, in my judgment, is going to inspire and guide and explain the statesmanship and the politics of the twentieth century.

I have already described some of the ways in which this policy of a National Minimum has, usually without much comprehension of its bearing, influenced our social and industrial legislation. But it is clear that various other applications of the policy lie near at hand, to some of which we may, in conclusion, give our attention. In the Democratic politics of to-morrow we may expect to see the policy of the National Minimum translating itself into four main branches of legislative and executive activity. There will clearly have to be a legal minimum of wages, as there is already in Australasia, and as we have now, in the Trade Boards Act, already adopted in principle for the United Kingdom, with the general agreement of all parties. The employers will be under no legal obligation to employ any person whatsoever; but if they do employ him or her it will be a condition of every contract, not to be waived or ignored, that its

terms shall not be such as will impair the efficiency of the citizen or diminish the vitality of the race. To engage labor at wages insufficient to repair the waste of tissue caused by the employment is demonstrably to injure the community as a whole, and will be prosecuted as such in the criminal courts. Those whose labor, in the judgment of the employers, is not worth the National Minimum —the aged, the permanently invalided, the crippled and the blind, the mentally or morally deficient, the epileptic and the chronically feckless and feeble-minded—will be maintained by the community, as, indeed, they are now. But as every economist knows, of all the ways of maintaining those unable to earn a full livelihood, by far the most costly and injurious is to allow them to compete in the labor market, and thus to drag down by their very infirmity those who are whole. There are still people, of course, who simply cannot imagine how a legal minimum wage could possibly be enforced, just as there were, sixty years ago, economists who demonstrated the impossibility of factory laws. I don't think we need waste time tonight over their ignorance—for it is simply ignorance.

There will be a National Minimum of Leisure and recreation time secured by law to every wage earner. It will certainly be an implied condition of every contract of employment, rigidly enforced by law, that it shall leave untouched fourteen or sixteen hours out of each twenty-four, for needful sleep, recreation, exercise of mind or body, and the duties of citizenship and family life. Any attempt by man or woman to sell for wages any part of the fourteen or sixteen sacred hours will be blamed as virtual embezzlement, since this part of the twenty-four hours' day must be regarded as necessarily reserved for the purpose of maintaining unimpaired the efficiency of the race. Any employer purchasing them, or allowing them to be spent in his mill or mine, will be prosecuted and punished, just as if he had incited to embezzlement or had received stolen goods. This, indeed, is already law in principle, again with the general assent of all parties, though very imperfectly applied and enforced, in our Mines Regulation Acts, our Railway Regulation Acts, our Shop Hours Acts, and our Factory Acts. And with this will go the campaign for the actual prevention of Unemployment, and for securing to everyone full provision, along with training, whenever we have failed to prevent involuntary idleness.

There will be a National Minimum of Sanitation, enforced not merely on land or house owners or occupiers, but also on local governing authorities. The nation will find it preposterous that any parish or city, merely out of stupidity, or incapacity, or parsimony, should foster disease, or bring up its quota of citizens in a condition of impaired vitality. The power of the community as a whole will, somehow or other, be brought to bear upon every backward district, compelling it to bear its part in the constant campaign for the actual prevention of disease, to lay on pure water, to improve its drainage, and to take such action, even by municipal building, if need be, that no family in the land shall have less than "three rooms and a scullery" as the minimum required for health

and decency. Along with this must come the adequate provision of medical attendance, skilled nursing, and hospital accommodation for all the sick. White infants, in particular, are getting too scarce to be allowed to die at their present quite unnecessary rate. Within a generation of the adoption of such a policy the death-rate and sickness experience would show a reduction of one-third of what is at present endured as if it were the decree of Providence.

There will obviously be a National Minimum of Child Nurture —not merely of education in the sense of schooling, not merely in the provision of teaching, but in everything required for the healthy, happy rearing of the citizen that is to be. Besides schools and colleges of every grade, effectively open to all who can profit by them, there will have to be an adequate "scholarship ladder," securing maintenance as well as free tuition, right up to the post-graduate course, for every scholar proving himself or herself fitted for anything beyond ordinary schooling. And this provision will be enforced by the national power upon local school authorities, as well as upon parents and employers. What right has any part of the community to allow any part of its quota of citizens to be lost to the community by carelessness or neglect, or to be reared in ignorance, or to suffer even one potential genius to be snuffed out by hardship or privation? The next few years will see not only a great improvement in ordinary schooling, but also the doubling or trebling of our collective provision for child nurture from infancy to adolescence.

The lesson of economic and political science to the twentieth century is that only by such highly differentiated governmental action for all the several minorities that make up the community—only by the enforcement of some such policy of a National Minimum in Subsistence, Leisure, Sanitation, and Child Nurture—will modern industrial communities escape degeneration and decay. Where life is abandoned to unfettered competition, what is known to the economists as "Gresham's Law" of currency applies—the bad drives out the good: evolution means degeneration. To prevent this evil result is, as both Europe and America are discovering in the twentieth century, the main function of government.

Now, I dare say that some of you, knowing that I am a Socialist, will imagine that they see in this proposition nothing but a cunningly devized form of Socialism, put skilfully in a way not to shock the timid. On my honor I have no such guile. In my view, this policy of the National Minimum is a necessary condition of a healthy social order, whether you adopt the Individualist or the Collectivist principle in the organization of your State. You cannot have a successful and healthy Individualist State—whether of millionaires and wage slaves, or of peasant proprietors and small masters—without it. In fact, it is the necessary *basis* of Society, whether you intend the *superstructure* to remain Individualist or whether you wish it to become Collectivist. You will notice that to enforce the National Minimum will not interfere either with the pecuniary profits or with the power or the personal development of

the exceptional man. The illimitable realm of the upward remains, without restriction, open to him. The policy of the National Minimum does not involve any attack upon, or any diminution of, either rent or interest—the whole differential advantage of superior sites, and soils, and machines, and opportunities remains absolutely unaffected. That, by the way, is why I, as a Socialist, describe it only as the basis of social organization ; it does not, like the "nationalization of the means of production, distribution, and exchange," deal with the superstructure.

Nor does this Policy of the National Minimum abolish competition, which, as we may confidently reassure timid Individualists, can no more be abolished than gravitation. But in the wild anarchy of unregulated modern industry, competition is apt to be as indiscriminately destructive as was the fall of the Tower of Siloam. It is, I need hardly remind you, quite a mistake to suppose that the bracing and invigorating action of competition, or any other social force, is proportionate to its intensity. We do not nowadays plunge our babies into cold water in order to harden them, or deliberately bring up our sons—whatever we may do with those of the poor—between a gin-shop and a brothel, in order to strengthen their characters. In the domain of human experience and social organization generally, as I have read of biology, "Weak stimuli kindle life activity, medium stimuli promote it ; but strong stimuli impede it, and the strongest bring it altogether to an end."[1] What the enforcement of a policy of the National Minimum does to competition, as we see by a whole century of experience of factory legislation, is to change its form and shift its incidence. By fencing off the downward way, we divert the forces of competition along the upward way. We transfer the competitive pressure away from a degradation of the means of subsistence of the mass of the people (where it does little but harm), to the intellect of everyone who has any, in the degree that he has it (where it quite usefully sharpens the wits). Only by constructing this Necessary Basis can the twentieth century community go forward—only in this way, in fact, can it, whether Individualist or Collectivist in its leanings, avert social degradation and decay.[2]

[1] Rudolf Arndt.

[2] For further explanation of the Policy of the National Minimum and answers to economic and other objections, see "Industrial Democracy," by S. and B. Webb (Longmans, 12s. 6d.), or "Socialism and National Minimum" (Fabian Socialist Series : Fifield, 6d. and 1s.).

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