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Tomaš G. Masaryk, Economic Democracy, 1927

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Economic Democracy
By Tomaš G. Masaryk*

Genuine democracy will be economic and social as well as political. Economic questions are so important to-day because war and revolution have, by destroying the wealth and the accumulated resources of nations, brought about a condition of want that is economically primitive. The crisis throughout Europe, nay, throughout the world, necessitates economic reconstruction, but it is a mistake to take this situation, which arose out of the war, as confirming the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism and as a sign that our task is solely economic. The war and the social and economic position which it entailed prove, on the contrary, that, as Marx rightly said, hunger is no policy. Indeed, the crisis of the war and post-war periods has involved Socialism itself in a crisis.

The very creation of new republics and democracies proves that the war stimulated rather than weakened the striving for social and economic justice. Democratic equality admits of no social nobility; but, as I said in speaking of Russian Bolshevism, I do not think Communism an ideal solution of the problem of economic equality. In the present stage of its evolution, democracy is seeking to get rid of misery and of the most glaring disparities of wealth. Yet, even in the economic domain, it must not merely level down. It must differentiate. The productive aspects of Capitalism are less open to criticism than its effects in enabling unproductive, non-earning, idle men to appropriate the fruit of others' hard and honest work.

The theorists of political economy, from Adam Smith onwards, deduce economic activity from selfishness, which is assuredly a potent motive. But they forget the human desire to exercise special aptitudes and faculties in various kinds of work and production. Inventors and men of enterprise are not merely selfish. The best of them are interested in their undertakings and inventions. They organize, direct and perfect the making of things. The social and economic anarchy, of which Marx rightly complains, arises in part because the right men are not put in the right places or given work, economic and other, according to their talents. Whether Socialism would mend matters remains to be seen. I am not opposed to the socialization of a number of undertakings—socialization, not merely nationalization or State control—such as railways, canals, coal mines and means of communication. I can imagine a gradual, evolutionary socialization for which the ground would be prepared by the education of workmen and of leaders in trade and industry. To this end well-ordered State finances will be needed and closer and apter control of the whole financial system, including the banks; and, above all, better social legislation, and unemployment insurance in particular.

One of our special problems is land reform. All parties demanded it before the war. During the Counter-Reformation the covetous Hapsburgs [sic] and their alien nobles built up huge estates by means of confiscation. Our country is rich and the social and economic task of our democracy is correspondingly great. It has also to care for the physical and mental health of the nation. Not in Czechoslovakia alone but in all belligerent countries the war weakened the vitality of the people. Most intensely were the effects of impoverishment and of psycho-physical exhaustion felt among the small nations. Some of them come within the range of ordinary observation, others are revealed by medical statistics. For instance, we are losing from tuberculosis nearly six times as many lives as are lost in England. In France and Serbia, two countries whose physical sufferings during the war were severest, the proportions are the same as among us. Moreover, our condition of public health and our high death-rate from tuberculosis have to be considered in conjunction with our big total of suicides, in respect of which we come fourth, if not third, among the nations.

Those who assume that health and longevity are assured by well being and by a sufficiency or a superfluity of nourishment need to be reminded that men do not live by bread alone. Wealth and food are not the only decisive factors. We are beginning to understand that it is as bad to eat too much as to eat too little. Experts in dietetics declare that too much meat is eaten, that we are suffering from albuminism as well as from alcoholism. Indeed, it is no paradox to say that civilized mankind does not yet know how to eat. Bodily and mental health are preserved by moderation and morality; and to live healthily a man must have a purpose in life, something to care for, someone to love, and must conquer the fear of death that assails him alike in moments of acute danger and at hours of petty anxiety about health. Civilized man is ever seeking health and happiness, yet is unhappy and unhealthy. With all his civilization he is pitifully lacking in culture.

Wide and weighty tasks await our Departments of Health and Social Welfare with whose work the problem of emigration is bound up. Since a high proportion of our people emigrate to America, particularly from Slovakia, we shall need a model Emigration Office, after the Italian pattern, to watch over our emigrants, inform them of the position in the countries to which they go and, generally, to manage and direct their movements. Study of the causes of emigration may show that it is possible to counteract them by colonization at home, by organizing labor and by checking excessive propaganda on the part of steamship companies. A truly educative policy will pay conscientious heed to every aspect of social welfare and public health.

*Biography of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, by T. Mills Kelly

Born: March 7, 1850

Died: September 14, 1937

First President of Czechoslovakia, 1918-1935

Member of Parliament (Austria), 1891-1914

Professor, Charles University

Perhaps no other figure in Czechoslovak history is as recognizable as Tomáš Masaryk. Born on 7 March 1850, Masaryk obtained a doctorate of philosophy and married Charlotte Garrigue, an American music student, in 1878. A professor at the Czech University of Prague, Masaryk was a social and political critic. From 1891 to 1893 he was a member of the Young Czech Party and from 1900 to 1914 the leader of the Realist (Progressive) Party and deputy to the Austrian Reichsrat from 1907-1914. During his political career in the Habsburg Monarchy, Masaryk worked hard for universal suffrage and the federalization of the empire. During World War I Masaryk worked abroad to secure Czech and Slovak independence, gaining Entente and American recognition for the Czechoslovak National Council. In 1918 Czechoslovakia gained its independence and Masaryk was elected the first president of the new state. He resigned in 1935 and died on 14 September 1937.

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