

MONTESORI AND SOCIAL PROGRESS.¹

"ANYONE who is seriously bent on personal fulfilment or on social or national reforms must discover sooner or later that all questions relating to these matters come down to the single problem of life-renewal. The liberation of the native vigour, richness and enjoyment of life, *i.e.*, of actual living, is at once the beginning and end of every such effort; it is the goal at which we aim; and is at the same time the only certain means by which we can make even the smallest advance.

WHO does not view the social life of to-day, and his own life too, as externally narrowed and oppressed; and as inwardly discordant and atrophied? Who does not ask for a freer, healthier and fuller life, both for himself and for his region and people? Is any study to be undertaken more earnestly than that of life-renewal, or is there any which promises more glorious results?" (SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW. January, 1927. "The College of Renewal: A New Year's Message": by G. Sandeman. p. 1.)

"PREVENTION is better than cure. We have not merely to re-educate ourselves, we have to see to it that the coming generations do not repeat our errors. Our wish is that our children should get to understand life—that is, the relation between man and the world. Very well: let them begin by getting into relation with the immediate part of the world about them. And this they will do for themselves to a large extent if allowed to." (HEALTH AND CONDUCT: by Dr. A. J. Brock. pp. 260-261.)

I AM not going to hazard a definition of "social progress." But, if we take as the ideal we aim at for the individual the old motto, "a sound mind in a sound body," perhaps we may say that the social progress we desire is in the direction of having sound and sane individuals in a sound and sane community, and sane communities in a sane world. A sane community, I take it, would be a fraternal community. A sane world would be a fraternal world—that is, all the world living as one happy family.

Is there such progress, or any hope of it? Bear with me for a few minutes while we take a glance at our present world; and I pray you to be indulgent if my views do not quite coincide with yours.

It seems that the optimism of the nineteenth century in regard to human progress has in this century been giving way to doubts as to whether the world does progress quite as steadily as was thought. And certainly in this century we have been receiving some shocks. But, quite irrespective of those shocks, a comparison, say, with the Greeks of some 24 or 25 centuries ago does not conduce to complacency. As has, no doubt, been pointed out many a time, we can hardly claim sounder bodies, or even sounder minds, than those of the Greeks of "classical" times—if as sound. But that very fact, it seems to me, brings out in stronger relief one important factor in the sound mind in which we surely may claim to have improved even

¹Revised from a lecture delivered in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Falkirk.

upon the Greeks, and that is sympathetic imagination, or, let us say shortly, sympathy. I think we may justly claim to have a wider and more sensitive sympathy than had any ancestors or predecessors of whom we have read in history. I say advisedly, "of whom we have read in history," for I am not sure whether in this respect we have made any advance, for instance, on some of those primitive peoples, found by Alfred Russel Wallace in the Malay Archipelago, who knew no war, whose chiefs seemed to be almost purely honorary or nominal. And then one remembers how, even towards the end of last century, the Burmans of a certain locality, as related in that interesting book, *THE SOUL OF A PEOPLE*, refused to use the conveyances of a diligence company because they considered that the horses were ill-treated. Still, with possible reservations, I think we can confidently assume that mankind has progressed in this quality of sympathy, surely an important factor in social progress. We even treat some kinds of cruelty to animals (alas! only some kinds) as crimes. Not that that is a good way of dealing with the matter, but doubtless it is a sign that a habit of more sensitive sympathy has in some measure permeated the body politic. And I think this is the main line along which progress has moved—that and a changed outlook on natural phenomena, our permeation with a faint leaven of the scientific mind.

BUT if we have so decidedly grown in sympathy does not that make all the more remarkable the fact that we still tolerate so much of "man's inhumanity to man"—that, for instance, we still permit destitution by the side of excessive riches. In this respect, instead of progressing, we would seem to have regressed from much earlier times. For I suppose it would not be far from the truth to say that with most primitive peoples if some go short all go short together; whereas with us a considerable section of the population always keeps well above the poverty line, leaving others to go short. And there are always many who do go short. With us a partial famine is continuous (except when there is a very great war on. Then the famine is stayed in the land.) Yet so enormous are our powers of production that obviously it would be quite easy to produce all that the poverty-stricken millions in the world need, if only people would not put profit-making before service, or mistake what they call "economic facts" for good economy.

THIS is no idle speculation; for surely it is one of the things that really was demonstrated during the war, when four or five million men were turned into warriors, and I know not how many more were set to making munitions, and yet the nation as a whole was better off materially, perhaps, than it had ever been before, unless in some dark age back beyond the records of history.

THE war was a sufficient stimulus to set us (some of us) to work supporting one another—and supporting the war into the bargain—or rather, to induce the national taskmasters to pay people to work ; for there is generally work where money is forthcoming to pay for it. But when the war was over we fell back into our usual inert, half-alive condition. We have not, as a community, in ordinary times, enough sense, will or energy to support ourselves decently, to provide a full living for all our members. We let things drift, and allow some to wallow in a surfeit of riches while others go short of necessities.

AND, while so many are in want there are at the same time, in the same country, thousands of idle people who would gladly work at supplying their wants, if only laws and what are called “ economic facts ” did not prevent them. Moreover, it is very largely the people who do some of the most indispensable work, when they are allowed to do it, who live in poverty, as well as insecurity. Any day one or other of them may slip into the ranks of the unemployed. Not much sympathy here ; not much sanity !

THE other day a lecturer, speaking in Glasgow on a kindred subject, alluded to the miners’ slogan in the late disastrous coal dispute, “ not a penny off the wage, not a second on the day,” as an instance of a formula which was expected to work magic irrespective of facts. I am not sure what magic effect was expected beyond heartening those who used it and impressing others with their determination. Doubtless such slogans are foolish, and are a poor substitute for hard thinking and reasoned persuasion. But surely the sad thing about that matter was that the whole nation did not recognise that, after all, in view of the findings of repeated government inquiries, this slogan represented something less than bare justice to the miners and that the whole nation did not insist on seeing justice done. And what shall we say of a nation that stood by and watched a million men and their families being starved into submission, a nation now apparently content to have their coal at the price of the poverty and depressed lives of those who hew and fetch it out of the earth ? I know that many people are not so content. But, as a nation, we hold back ; we cannot act. Where is our sympathy ? Not much of it in evidence ; nor much sanity !

PERHAPS, however, there is nothing very extraordinary in this ; for ever since the beginning of history, and even before, mankind has been accustomed to the battenning of one race, or people, or class on another. The result, in civilised lands, is what some people call “ the class war.” Others call it law and order, or even peace and goodwill, as long as no one ventures to complain. Nowadays there is some complaint, or “ unrest,” as it is called. Hence our industrial life is to a considerable extent a life of strife, of war.

TURN to politics. The object of political activity presumably is to maintain or bring about justice, peace and general welfare. But our politics also has this characteristic of strife, and consists largely of warring factions who try to persuade people that they (that is, their own party) are better and wiser than their opponents. So that there has come about an organised system of fault-finding and self-praise. What could be more demoralising, or less helpful? How can we hope to set our house in order by such means?

As for religion—perhaps I need say no more than that here also we are divided. We seem to be far as yet from fulfilment of the prayer “that they all may be one.”

So, then, it appears that we live in a world of division and strife, with much injustice. The kingdom of this world is divided against itself.

MANY of us, perhaps most of us, see that there is something wrong. Every one in his senses who thinks of such things must recognise that. Yet we cannot move. Some sigh for a great man, or complain of agitators, and say they ought to be shot, or deported or locked up. Others become resigned and apathetic, cynical, or pessimistic. Others, again, may think they see a way out and work for it. But, as a people, as a community, we seem for the time being, to be helpless. I want to emphasise this point. Never mind if you disagree with my statement of conditions. You will agree that much needs to be put right. Indeed, nobody likes to see people unemployed, poverty-stricken, ragged, unkempt or miserable. The coalowners themselves protest that they would like to see the miners earning good wages. But the majority—especially those with influence—do not move. They have not the will, the imagination, the energy, the urgent incentive (such an incentive, for instance, as those in power would have if their own children or friends were directly in danger). The community as a whole is helpless.

AND I suspect that a helpless community is, in large proportion, made up of helpless individuals.

WHAT is the cause of all this? There are economic defects, political defects, religious defects, all of which are certainly in urgent need of attention. But I wish to-night to point out what seems to me to be an underlying defect, which perhaps receives less recognition, the removal of which might, I submit, lead to the removal of the others. I ask you, do not all this stupidity and inertia, all this strife and ill-will, arise out of the fact that man has not yet attained to understanding of himself, has not yet gained self-mastery?

Is not this twofold achievement—self-knowledge and self-mastery—the road, and the goal, both of individual and of social human development—of social progress?

AND now, at last, I come to Montessori ; for it is here, I think, that Dr. Montessori can help us. It is obvious that the current education of the day is not calculated to lead either to self-knowledge or to self-mastery. The Montessori method opens the way towards both.

THE main Montessori criticisms, explicit or implicit, of current school methods are briefly, I imagine, somewhat as follows : (1) that they do not prepare a suitable environment for the child ; (2) that they are not based on study of the child, but seek rather to impose adult notions on him and interfere with his natural activities and growth ; (3) that intelligence is not nourished with reality and is deprived of its necessary activity. But the way to nourish intelligence and cultivate sane thought is to pay close attention to realities—to facts—and to let appropriate action follow. Dr. Montessori quotes Janet, who found that the one thing which differentiated insane from sane people was that insane people could not fix their attention intensely on external objects and note their particulars and characteristics with exactness.

Now, is it not possible that our apparent helplessness in face of great social evils, our constant failure to face facts, to test theories, to suit action to thought or to ideals—is it not more than likely that these sad defects of character result, at least partly, from these defects in our education, which, from early years, tend to divorce intelligence and thought from reality and from action, and thus tend to check the self-expression and growth of the soul.

THE people of the British Isles are on the whole, I suppose, a kindly and good-natured people. Yet every now and then they seem to tolerate with wonderful equanimity extraordinary outrages on the part of their representatives and agents, especially abroad. Often startling inhumanities are perpetrated by quite kindly people. These people are not expressing their better selves, just as the community is not expressing its better self through them. Could such things happen with a people whose members had been helped to grow in natural human grace, expressing their true selves and in the habit of suiting action to thought and knowledge ? Surely neither individuals nor community know the real self within. Therefore they cannot express it. " Let us realise," says Dr. Brock, " that circumstances are downing us, not so much because they are bad in themselves, as because, from the deficiencies of our education, we have never learned to face them."

MARK now in contrast some of the features and principles of the Montessori method.

THE child comes into a Montessori school probably in a state of internal disorder—much like many of us grown-ups, I fear. He

¹HEALTH AND CONDUCT. p. 286.

finds a carefully prepared environment. He is taught exercises of practical life with care and precision—keeping himself clean, dusting, sweeping, waiting at table, &c.—also how to use various “didactic” or “development” material found by scientific experiment to meet the needs—nourish the inner life—of children at different stages of growth. These latter he may use or not use, as he likes. At first, probably, none of them will interest him much. Perhaps he will play with one or another for a few minutes more or less listlessly. Or he may interfere with the other children at their occupations; or he may sit still, or loaf about, “doing nothing.” But there comes a time when one of the “didactic” apparatus engages his interest. He becomes absorbed, concentrates his attention on working it correctly and, having achieved that, repeats the exercise again and again, until at last he leaves off, looking “rested, satisfied and uplifted.” “This,” says Dr. Montessori, “is the first phenomenon to be expected, as initiatory to those acts with which spiritual growth is bound up.” It is truly a kind of conversion. The child becomes a new child. Probably he shows a new affection for his teacher and is friendly and considerate to the other children. He has attained to a measure of internal order. In time he gains the “work habit,” and goes from strength to strength as his inner life is nourished by work with various objects. I am open to correction, but I think the chief noticeable results of this training are poise, happy activity, restfulness, affection and consideration for others, besides, of course, the knowledge and skill gained. The child has become a sociable being. And mark here a point for social progress. By this method children become sociable, not by being gathered in a group and *taught* to be sociable, but by being helped to be themselves. In other words, look after the individual, and society, the social spirit, will look after itself. Man is by nature sociable.

AND what of the teacher, or directress? Her rôle is to observe, to watch, to be ready to help, but only when the child needs her help, lest she interfere with his physico-psychological processes. She teaches what she has to teach—exercises of practical life and the use of didactic material—with precision, and with economy of words, lest she confuse him with superfluous talk. The “offering” of this material is an art which requires training, experience and tact, to seize opportunities, to withdraw gracefully if the child does not “accept,” so that he shall not feel that he has refused anything, and, if he “accepts,” to teach him properly—in general, to be helpful without intervening between the child and the satisfaction of his inner need.

FOR what does the teacher watch? She watches for movements of the spirit within the child—what Dr. Montessori calls “the inner life”—seeking to evolve and express itself in each child entrusted to

her care. It is her task and her privilege to prepare a way and a welcome for the spirit in the child. That spirit is holy and righteous, and will do well if rightly ministered to and not thwarted. If thwarted, the same spirit—or something to which it gives way—will wreak a terrible vengeance. Perhaps this is what the theologians call the wrath of God. It is a dreadful thing. I see it daily in uncouth youths, or poor, dirty, ill-clad children, in ignorant and disorderly parents, and not least, I fear, in the disorder within myself.

THE Montessori method may, then, be called essentially a spiritual method. And for that very reason it respects and jealously guards the relation and the reactions between the inner life of the child and the material objects in his environment. The soul of the child looks out on the world and uses his senses to feel, to weigh, to hear, to see. It is, therefore, tremendously important that each sense, and the impulse behind it, should find the right material stimulus at the right time. At the time for clutching there must be something at hand to clutch. At the time for feeling let there be different surfaces at hand to feel. So may the soul be nourished progressively through the senses and through the intelligence, by contact with material things—with what, in this connection, Dr. Montessori calls “reality.”

HERE is a principle which applies throughout all education—that is, throughout life. For the child it requires a suitable environment furnished with the stimuli needed for his growth. He must be allowed to react naturally to these stimuli; that is, in his own way. “If each object has its own place,” says Dr. Montessori in one of her lectures, “it is interesting for the child to put them back, to wash and dry them carefully. The table being white invites the child to remove any spots of jam, &c. It is not necessary to draw his attention. *If we tell him we go ahead of his spontaneous activity.* A child of 3½ has plenty of time to learn. It is more important to see what he will do of his own accord than to correct him.” I should like to have that written up in letters of gold or of fire in every school and in every home where there are children. Well, no; perhaps it would be better that the children should not see it. It might spoil their spontaneity. It would be better to have it engraven in the minds of the parents and teachers.

EXPRESSION is important; but, to be fruitful, to promote healthy growth it must be self-expression; that is, it must come from within; it must not be dictated by another. If this self-expression does not appear as and when expected the educator must be patient. Until this spontaneous responsive action does take place the cycle is not complete, the harvest will not be gathered; but a hurried or dictated response prevents spontaneous activity, breaks the cycle, so to speak, and arrests soul-growth.

THUS the child must have what he needs. He must deal with it as his inner need dictates, not as someone else dictates. The child is not only receptive, as we seem all this time to have thought (at least we have acted as if we thought that was, or ought to be, the chief characteristic of a pupil); he is also reactive. And to grow healthily he must react for himself. No one else can do it for him, or even tell him how.

THEREFORE let us beware of checking spontaneous activity—the child's healthy reaction to any experience, any discovery, any knowledge he has gained. It may be through such early checking of our own activity that we have acquired the habit of being content with thought and theory—quasi-thought and still-born theory—without appropriate activity—to our undoing. Dr. Montessori illustrates this in a striking way, in criticism, particularly, of our British, or "Anglo-Saxon," cult of athletics. It is as though, she says, we had cut off its motor mechanism from our nervous system and attached it to the vegetative system, thus sterilising the brain and overtaxing the heart. Is that not just what we do seem to do? Is not that, perhaps, one reason why we are so helpless?

It is a common complaint that we separate our religious and business lives. The difference between Sunday sentiment and profession and weekday practice is a favourite subject of satire. But do not such contrasts and inconsistencies pervade our life in general? We condemn idleness and talk of the dignity of labour; but the hewing of wood and the drawing of water—the humbler tasks of life—are relegated to those who must needs sell their strength for money—the great thing being to get money enough to pay others to do such things for us. Thus brain and muscle are unnaturally separated, in the individual as well as in the community. We do not know ourselves and we are to one another strangers and oppressors. But Dr. Montessori really does recognise and foster the "dignity of labour," and makes a strong point of practical activities. Almost her first care in training the child is to teach him how to do things for himself, thus building up his "independence," by which she means his ability to do for himself things which so many people depend on others to do for them.

"THE task of the Montessori school," says Mrs. Radice,³ "is to slow the child down, not to drive it—to give it easy steps to climb instead of steep ones; peace and leisure for climbing them in the place of hurry and rush. It is also to give the child 'heaps to do.'"

Yes, heaps to do; for, as she quotes from Dr. Montessori, "the child, without occupation, is starved," and "the child ought not to be made

³THE NEW CHILDREN. p. 127.

to work, but it ought not to be shut out from helping if it wants to help."⁴ "The whole of the Montessori method," she says again, "is permeated with the sense of the joy of work, and also with the sense of the value of leisure." It is through such work and leisure that the inner life finds expression. Mr. Sandeman says, in the article from which I have already quoted, "it is only by expression that we get hold of truth; unless boy or man be expressing all the time, with all his being, what he knows and believes and feels, he makes no step further in knowledge or power. Expression is the expiration necessary to inspiration; it is freedom, satisfaction, and the very life of the spirit."

DR. MONTESSORI has made a valuable contribution to the study of freedom. Her discoveries seem to reveal two aspects: firstly, freedom of method. The child, as stated, is free to move about and to choose, or not choose, amongst the objects provided in an environment prepared to suit his needs and to work "in accordance with the natural wants of the inner life."⁵ Liberty is bestowed on him, "that is to say, that his calm and peaceful expansion should not be disturbed by the intervention of an untimely and disturbing influence; just as the body of the new-born infant should be left in peace to assimilate its nourishment and grow properly."⁶ Secondly, the freedom of achievement, when the individual has achieved internal order and control of his powers.

MAY we not with confidence assume that a community whose members have achieved this internal order and self-control will itself, by reason thereof, possess social order and freedom? And there appears to be no reason why all normal people should not attain to this stature if educated on these lines. Is this too much to claim? I think not, though I realise, and I want you all to realise, what a tremendous claim it is. That is the chief object of this paper.

ANOTHER principle I read in the Montessori method is that the best preparation for future stages of growth, future periods of life, is to deal appropriately and adequately with the present stage. Therefore each child is studied to learn his present need at each moment, and to meet it. As the child is father of the man, so to-day is father of to-morrow. This principle, I fancy, would make some difference if applied all round.

"SERVE the inner need"—that is the watchword. Consider a moment. Suppose we were to try this plan with delinquents and criminals. Suppose we studied their needs in a scientific and human way, and tried to provide for them in a scientific and human way. Do you

⁴Ibid., p. 128.

⁵THE ADVANCED METHOD. Vol. I., p. 109.

⁶Ibid., Vol. I., p. 71.

not think that they would be more likely to grow into useful citizens than they are while we just punish them without troubling about their inner needs ?

SUPPOSE we all took to dealing with one another like this, and, instead of getting angry with those with whom we clash in one way or another, or who resist our efforts to induce them to conform to our views, suppose we always looked for, and tried to serve, some " inner need " struggling for expression even in the most outrageous conduct or utterance. Do you not think that that would change the face of the world to our heart's desire rather more quickly, rather more safely and securely, than will the constant wrangling of what is called politics, the strife and competition and profit-hunting of industrialism, or the discord in much of what is called religion to-day.

So it seems that Montessori principles and methods are revolutionary, in the sense that, if faithfully observed, they will bring about what in our Bible is called " repentance." But the Greek word, *metanoia*, of course, means a revolutionary change in attitude of mind.

I DO not claim that none of the good points of Montessorianism have ever been heard of before in the world. Perhaps all of them have—at one time or another. Indeed its fundamental principle and faith are as old as Christianity, or older. I believe, moreover, that there are at the present time other workers in education, psychology, sociology, philosophy (I will not venture to name any for fear of omissions), who, in days to come, may be counted worthy co-operators in the same field. But I do claim that Dr. Montessori has made discoveries, enunciated principles, and worked out a method which, if intelligently accepted and faithfully applied, will meet much of the need, both in education and in social life, of this day and generation. She is not alone in advocating self-expression and freedom in education ; but she has invented a technique for securing them founded on scientific research. Moreover, the Montessori method is itself a method of continuous scientific research.

I FEAR I have dealt with controversial matters this evening in a rather dogmatic way, looking at them through my own dim and coloured spectacles. Perhaps I may be forgiven, for to me it all seems dreadfully urgent ; and I could only tell you what I myself seem to see, as I seem to see it. I have spoken out of the agony of my soul ; for daily I see children—such dear children—who are, or might be, all glorious within, stunted by ill-usage, cabined, cribbed, confined by circumstance, souls unfree in children of unfree parents, only partly alive—and my heart cries out " How long ? "

I WILL try to sum up. Our so-called economics, our so-called politics, much of what we call religion, and even our education—all seem to

conspire to produce stunted beings, not wholly alive, not wholly human, who cannot live or act according to their true nature, because that nature is mortified and hidden from them. They mistake for human nature the arrested and distorted characters thus fashioned. And, where they have energy enough to run at all, they mostly run after false pleasures and foolish ambitions, and quarrel over them. In the resulting scramble inevitably the majority fare badly, and, if we are to believe Ruskin, the devil takes the foremost. But here is a method by which the inner life, the true self, is studied scientifically and helped to express itself and grow according to its own nature. The children's feet are set on the path of self-knowledge, and their souls are nourished with the bread of life, that is with truth—truth in little things leading to truth in great things—and care is taken that their steps shall not be hindered on the way.

WELL, I have made but a small beginning of this great theme—taken, as it were, a first bite. But I hope that I have said enough to show that the message of Montessori is a call to repentance, to a reversal of our attitude towards the problems of life and growth. It calls on us to cease from imposing our own notions upon the child, or, indeed, upon any one; and it shows us how reverently to watch and wait, if so be that, by serving the Spirit, we might help to prepare the way of the New Man and make his paths straight.

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