Pobedonostsev’s Criticism of Modern Society

The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 profoundly affected all aspects of Russian life. It contributed to the decline of the power of the nobility, discontent among the peasantry, restlessness among the workers, dissatisfaction among the intelligentsia, and increasing reaction among the advocates of autocracy. The principal spokesman of the latter from 1880 to 1905 was Constantine P. Pobedonostsev (1827–1907). A constitutional lawyer by training, Pobedonostsev taught civil law at Moscow University from 1860 to 1865. He left teaching to become first a member of the Senate (Russia’s Supreme Court), then a member of the Council of State (a consultative body that advised the tsar in legislative matters), and from 1880 to 1905 he acted as Procurator of the Holy Synod (lay administrator of the Orthodox Church). Since Pobedonostsev was also a tutor in law of Alexander III and Nicholas II, he was, between 1881 and 1905, the most influential member of the government and the prime inspirer of its reactionary policies.

The New Democracy

What is this freedom by which so many minds are agitated, which inspires so many insensate actions, so many wild speeches, which leads the people so often to misfortune? In the democratic sense of the word, freedom is the right of political power, or, to express it otherwise, the right to participate in the government of the State. This universal aspiration for a share in the government has no constant limitations, and seeks no definite issue, but incessantly extends, so that we might apply to it the words of the ancient poet about dropsies: crescit indulgens sibi.1 Forever extending its base, the new Democracy now aspires to universal suffrage—a fatal error, and one of the most remarkable in the history of mankind. By this means, the political power so passionately demanded by Democracy would be shattered into a number of infinitesimal bits, of which each citizen acquires a single one. What will he do with it, then? How will he employ it? In the result it has undoubtedly been shown

themselves inconceivable unities, acquire a value in the hands of dexterous agents. This value is realised by many means—mainly, by bribery in innumerable forms, from gifts of money and trifling articles, to the distribution of places in the services, the financial departments, and the administration. Little by little, a class of electors has been formed which lives by the sale of votes to one or another of the political organizations. So far this has gone in France, for instance, that serious, intelligent, and industrious citizens in immense numbers abstain from voting, through the difficulty of contending with the cliques of political agents. With bribery go violence and threats, and reigns of terror are organised at elections by the help of which the respective cliques advance their candidates; hence the stormy scenes at electoral demonstrations, in which arms have been used, and the field of battle strewn with the bodies of the killed and wounded.

Organization and bribery—these are the two mighty instruments which are employed with such success for the manipulation of the mass of electors. Such methods are in no way new. Thucydides depicts in vivid colors their employment in the ancient republics of Greece. The history of the Roman Republic presents monstrous examples of corruption as the chief instrument of factions at elections. But in our times a new means has been found of working the masses for political aims, and joining them in adventitious alliances by provoking a fictitious community of views. This is the art of rapid and dexterous generalization of ideas, the composition of phrase and formulas, disseminated with the confidence of burning conviction as the last word of science, as dogmas of politicology, as infallible appreciations of events, of men, and of institutions. At one time it was believed that the faculty of analyzing facts, and deducing general principles, was the privilege of a few enlightened minds and deep thinkers; now it is considered an universal attainment, and, under the name of convictions, the generalities of political science have become a sort of current money, coined by newspapers and rhetoricians....

The Greatest Falsehood of Our Time

That which is founded on falsehood cannot be right. Institutions founded on false principles cannot be other than false themselves. This truth has been demonstrated by the bitter experience of ages and generations.

Among the falsest of political principles is the principle of the sovereignty of the people, the principle that all power issues from the people, and is based upon the national will—a principle which has unhappily become more firmly established since the time of the French Revolution. Thence proceeds the theory of Parliamentarism, which, up to the present day, has deluded much of the so-called "intelligence," and unhappily infuriated certain foolish Rus-

sians. It continues to maintain its hold on many minds with the obstinacy of a narrow fanaticism, although every day its falsehood is exposed more clearly to the world.

In what does the theory of Parliamentarism consist? It is supposed that the people in its assemblies make their own laws, and elect responsible officers to execute their will. Such is the ideal conception. Its immediate realization is impossible. The historical development of society necessitates that local communities increase in numbers and complexity; that separate races be assimilated, or, retaining their polities and languages, unite under a single flag, that territory extend indefinitely. Under such conditions direct government by the people is impracticable. The people must, therefore, delegate its right of power to its representatives, and invest them with administrative autonomy. These representatives in turn cannot govern immediately, but are compelled to elect a still smaller number of trustworthy persons—ministers—to whom they entrust the preparation and execution of the laws, the apportionment and collection of taxes, the appointment of subordinate officials, and the disposition of the militant forces.

In the abstract this mechanism is quite symmetrical; for its proper operation many conditions are essential. The working of the political machine is based on impersonal forces constantly acting and completely balanced. It may act successfully only when the delegates of the people abdicate their personalities; when on the benches of Parliament sit mechanical fillers of the people's behests; when the ministers of State remain impersonal, absolute executors of the will of the majority; when the elected representatives of the people are capable of understanding precisely, and executing conscientiously the programme of activity, mathematically expressed, which has been delivered to them. Given such conditions the machine would work exactly, and would accomplish its purpose. The law would actually embody the will of the people; administrative measures would actually emanate from Parliament; the pillars of the State would rest actually on the elective assemblies, and each citizen would directly and consciously participate in the management of public affairs.

Such is the theory. Let us look at the practice. Even in the classic countries of Parliamentarism it would satisfy not one of the conditions enumerated. The elections in no way express the will of the electors. The popular representatives are in no way restricted by the opinions of their constituents, but are guided by their own views and considerations, modified by the tactics of their opponents. In reality, ministers are autocratic, and they rule, rather than are ruled by, Parliament. They attain power, and lose power, not by virtue of the will of the people, but through immense personal influence, or the influence of a strong party which places them in power, or drives them from it. They dispose of the force and resources of the nation at will, they grant
immunities and favours, they maintain a multitude of idlers at the expense of the people, and they fear no censure while they enjoy the support in Parliament of a majority which they maintain by the distribution of bounties from the rich tables which the State has put at their disposal. In reality, the ministers are as irresponsible as the representatives of the people. Mistakes, abuse of power, and arbitrary acts, are of daily occurrence, yet how often do we hear of the grave responsibility of a minister? It may be once in fifty years a minister is tried for his crimes, with a result contemptible when compared with the celebrity gained by the solemn procedure.

Were we to attempt a true definition of Parliament, we should say that Parliament is an institution serving for the satisfaction of the personal ambition, vanity, and self-interest of its members. The institution of Parliament is indeed one of the greatest illustrations of human delusion. Enduring in the course of centuries the tyranny of autocratic and oligarchical governments, and ignoring that the evils of autocracy are the evils of society itself, men of intellect and knowledge have laid the responsibility for their misfortunes on their rulers and on their systems of government, and imagined that by substituting for these systems government by the will of the people, or representative government, society would be delivered from all the evils and violence which it endured. What is the result? The result is that, mutato nomine, all has remained essentially as before, and men, retaining the weaknesses and failings of their nature, have transfused in the new institutions their former impulses and tendencies. As before, they are ruled by personal will, and in the interests of privileged persons, but this personal will is no longer embodied in the person of the sovereign, but in the person of the leader of a party; and privilege no longer belongs to an aristocracy of birth, but to a majority ruling in Parliament and controlling the State.

On the pediment of this edifice is inscribed: "All for the Public Good." This is no more than a lying formula. Parliamentarism is the triumph of egoism—it is its highest expression. All here is calculated to the service of the ego. In the Parliamentary fiction, the representative, as such, surrenders his personality, and serves as the embodiment of the will and opinions of his constituents; in reality, the constituents in the very act of election surrender all their rights in favour of their representatives. In his addresses and speeches the candidate for election lays constant emphasis upon this fiction; he reiterates his phrases about the public welfare; he is nothing but a servant of the people; he will forget himself and his interests for its sake. But these are words, words, words alone—temporary steps of the staircase by which he climbs to the height he aspires to, and which he casts away when he needs them no longer. Then, so far from beginning to work for society, society becomes the instrument of his aims. To him his constituents are a herd, an aggregation of votes, and

he, as their possessor, resembles those rich nomads whose flocks constitute their whole capital—the foundation of their power and eminence in society. Thus is developed to perfection the art of playing on the instincts and passions of the mass, in order to attain the personal ends of ambition and power. The people lose all importance for its representative, until the time arrives when they are to be played upon again; then false and flattering and lying phrases are lavished as before; some are suborned by bribery. Others terrified by threats—the long chain of manoeuvres spun which forms an inviable factor of Parliamentarism. Yet this electoral force continues to deceive humanity, and to be regarded as an institution which crowns the edifice of State. Poor humanity! In truth may it be said, mundus vult decipi, decipiatur.3

Thus the representative principle works in practice. The ambitious man comes before his fellow-citizens, and strives by every means to convince them that he more than any other is worthy of their confidence. What motives impel him to this quest? It is hard to believe that he is impelled by disinterested zeal for the public good.

In our time, nothing is so rare as men imbued with a feeling of solidarity with the people, ready for labour and self-sacrifice for the public good; this is the ideal nature, but such natures are little inclined to come into contact with the baseness of the world. He who, in the consciousness of duty, is capable of disinterested service of the community does not descend to the soliciting of votes, or the crying of his own praise at election meetings in loud and vulgar phrases. Such men manifest their strength in their own work, in a circle of congenial friends, and scorn to seek popularity in the noisy market-place. If they approach the crowd, it is not to flatter it, or to pander to its basest instincts and tendencies, but to condemn its follies and expose its depravity. To men of duty and honour the procedure of elections is repellent; the only men who regard it without abhorrence are selfish, egoistic natures, which wish thereby to attain their personal ends. To acquire popularity such men have little scruple in assuming the mask of ardour for the public good. They cannot and must not be modest, for with modesty they would not be noticed or spoken of. By their positions, and by the parts which they have chosen, they are forced to be hypocrites and liars; they must cultivate, fraternize with, and be amiable to their opponents to gain their suffrages; they must lavish promises, knowing that they cannot fulfill them; and they must pander to the basest tendencies and prejudices of the masses to acquire majorities for themselves. What honourable nature would accept such a role? Describe it in a novel, the reader would be repelled, but in elections the same reader gives his vote to the living arist. in the same role.

Parliamentary elections are a matter of art, having, as the military art, their strategy and tactics. The candidate is not brought into direct relations with
his constituents. As intermediary stands the committee, a self-constituted institution, the chief weapon of which is impudence. The candidate, if he is unknown, begins by assembling a number of friends and patrons. Then all together organize a hunt among the rich and weak-minded aristocrats of the neighborhood, whom they convince that it is their duty, their prerogative, and their privilege to stand at the head as leaders of public opinion. There is little difficulty in finding stupid or idle people who are taken in by this trickery; and then, above their signatures, appear manifestos in the newspapers and on the walls and pillars, which seduce the mass, eager always in the pursuit of names, titles, and wealth. Thus are formed the committees which direct and control the elections. They resemble in much public companies. The composition of the committee is carefully elaborated: it contains some effective forces—energetic men who pursue at all costs the material ends; while simple and frivolous idlers constitute the ballast. The committees organize meetings, where speeches are delivered, where he who possesses a powerful voice, and can quickly and skillfully string phrases together, produces always an impression on the mass, and acquires notoriety—thus comes out the candidate for future election, who, with favoring conditions, may even supersede him whom he came to help. Phrases, and nothing but phrases, dominate these meetings. The crowd hears only him who cries the loudest, and who with impudence and with flattery conforms most artfully to the impulses and tendencies of the mob.

On the day of polling few give their votes intelligently: these are the individual, influential electors whom it has been worthwhile to convince in private. The mass of the electors, after the practice of the herd, votes for one of the candidates nominated by the committees. Not one exactly knows the man, or considers his character, his capacity, his convictions; all vote merely because they have heard his name so often. It would be vain to struggle against this herd. If a levelheaded elector wished to act intelligently in such a grave affair, and not to give way to the violence of the committee, he would have to abstain altogether, or to give his vote for his candidate according to his conviction. However he might act, he could not prevent the election of the candidate favoured by the mass of frivolous, indifferent, and prejudiced electors.

In theory, the elected candidate must be the favourite of the majority; in fact, he is the favourite of a minority, sometimes very small, but representing an organized force, while the majority, like sand, has no coherence, and is therefore incapable of resisting the clique and the faction. In theory, the election favours the intelligent and capable; in reality, it favours the pushing and impudent. It might be thought that education, experience, conscientiousness in work, and wisdom in affairs, would be essential requirements in the can-

didate; in reality, whether these qualities exist or not, they are in no way needed in the struggle of the election, where the essential qualities are audacity, a combination of impudence and oratory, and even some vulgarity, which invariably acts on the masses; modesty, in union with delicacy of feeling and thought, is worth nothing.

Thus comes forth the representative of the people, thus he acquires his power. How does he employ it, how will he turn it to advantage? If energetic by nature, he will attempt to form a party; if he is of an ordinary nature, then he joins himself to one party or another. The leader of a party above all things requires a resolute will. This is an organic quality, like physical strength, and does not by any means inevitably accompany moral excellence. With limited intellect, with infinite egoism, and even wickedness, with base and dishonest tendencies, a man with a strong will may become a leader in Parliament, and may control the decisions of a party which contains men far surpassing him in moral and intellectual worth. Such may be the character of a ruling force in Parliament. To this should be joined another decisive force—eloquence. This also is a natural faculty, involving neither moral character, nor high intellectual culture. A man may be a deep thinker, a poet, a skilful general, a subtle jurist, an experienced legislator, and at the same time may not enjoy the gift of fluent speech, while, on the contrary, one with ordinary intellectual capacity and knowledge may possess a special gift of eloquence. The union of this gift with a plurality of intellectual power is a rare and exceptional phenomenon in Parliamentary life. The most brilliant improvisations, which have given glory to orators, and determined grave decisions, when read are as colourless and contemptible as descriptions of scenes enacted in former times by celebrated actors and singers. Experience shows that in great assemblies the decision does not belong to reason, but to daring and brilliancy; that the arguments most effective on the mass are not the most symmetrical—the most truly taken from the nature of things, but those expressed in sounding words and phrases, artfully selected, constantly reiterated, and calculated on the instinct of baseness always dominant in the people. The masses are easily drawn by outbursts of empty declamation, and under such influences often form sudden decisions, which they regret on cold-blooded consideration of the affair.

Therefore, when the leader of a party combines with a strong will the gift of eloquence, he assumes his first role on an open stage before the whole world. If he does not posses this gift he stands like a stage manager behind the scenes and directs thence all the movements of the Parliamentary spectacle, allotting the parts to others, appointing orators to speak for him, employing in his work all the rich but irresolute intellects of his party to do his thinking for him.
What is a Parliamentary party? In theory, it is an alliance of men with common convictions, joining forces for the realization of their views in legislation and administration. But this description applies only to small parties; the large party, which alone is an effective force in Parliament, is formed under the influence only of personal ambition, and centers itself around one commanding personality. By nature, men are divided into two classes—those who tolerate no power above them, and therefore of necessity strive to rule others; and those who by their nature dread the responsibility inseparable from independent action, and who shrink from any resolute exercise of will. These were born for submission, and together constitute a herd, which follows the men of will and resolution, who form the minority. Thus the most talented persons submit willingly, and gladly entrust to stronger hands the control of affairs and the moral responsibility for their direction. Instinctively they seek a leader, and become his obedient instruments, inspired by the conviction that he will lead them to victory—and, often, to spoil. Thus all the important actions of Parliament are controlled by the leaders of the party, who inspire all decisions, who lead in combat, and profit by victory. The public sessions are no more than a spectacle for the masses. Speeches are delivered to sustain the fiction of Parliamentarism, but seldom a speech by itself affects the decision of Parliament in a grave affair. Speech-making serves for the glory of orators, for the increase of their popularity, and the making of their careers; only on rare occasions does it affect the distribution of votes. Majorities and minorities are usually decided before the session begins.

Such is the complicated mechanism of the Parliamentary force; such is the great political lie which dominates our age. By the theory of Parliamentarism, the rational majority must rule; in practice, the party is ruled by five or six of its leaders who exercise all power. In theory, decisions are controlled by clear arguments in the course of Parliamentary debates; in practice, they in no wise depend from debates, but are determined by the wills of the leaders and the promptings of personal interest. In theory, the representatives of the people consider only the public welfare; in practice, their first consideration is their own advancement, and the interests of their friends. In theory, they must be the best citizens; in practice, they are the most ambitious and impudent. In theory, the elector gives his vote for his candidate because he knows him and trusts him; in practice the elector gives his vote for a man whom he seldom knows, but who has been forced on him by the speeches of an interested party. In theory, Parliamentary business is directed by experience, good sense, and unselfishness; in practice, the chief motive powers are a firm will, egoism, and eloquence.

Such is the Parliamentary institution, exalted as the summit and crown of the edifice of State. It is sad to think that even in Russia there are men who aspire to the establishment of this falsehood among us; that our professors glorify to their young pupils representative government as the ideal of political science; that our newspapers pursue it in their articles and feuilletons, under the name of justice and order, without troubling to examine without prejudice the working of the parliamentary machine. Yet even where centuries have sanctified its existence, faith already decays; the Liberal intelligence exalts it, but the people groans under its despotism, and recognizes its falsehood. We may not see, but our children and grandchildren assuredly will see, the overthrow of this idol, which contemporary thought in its vanity continues still to worship.

The prevalent doctrine of the perfection of Democracy and of democratic government stands on the same delusive foundation. This doctrine presupposes the capacity of the people to understand subtleties of political science which have a clear and substantial existence in the minds of its apostles only. Precision of knowledge is attainable only by the few minds which constitute the aristocracy of intellect; the mass, always and everywhere, is vulgus, and its conceptions of necessity are vulgar.

Democracy is the most complicated and the most burdensome system of government recorded in the history of humanity. For this reason it has never appeared save as a transitory manifestation, with few exceptions giving place before long to other systems. It is in no way surprising. The duty of the State is to act and to ordain: its dispositions are manifestations of a single will; without this, government is inconceivable. But how can a multitude of men, or a popular assembly act with a single will? The upholder of Democracy takes little trouble over the decision of this question, but evades it by means of those favorite phrases and formulas: "The will of the people," "public opinion," "the supreme decision of the nation," "the voice of the people is the voice of God," and others of a like nature. All these phrases signify that a multitude of men on a multitude of questions may form a common conclusion, and, conformably with their conclusion, arrive at a common decision. This may be possible sometimes, but only on the simplest questions. Where questions present the slightest complexity their decision by a numerous assembly is possible only through the medium of men capable of judging them in all their details, and of persuading the people to accept their judgment. In the number of complex questions may be counted all political questions requiring great concentration of the intellectual forces of the most capable and experienced statesmen; on such questions it would be absurd to rely upon unanimity of thought and will in a numerous assembly; the decision of the people could only be ruinous to the State. The enthusiasts of Democracy contend that the people may manifest its will in affairs of State: this is a shallow theory. In reality, we find that popular assemblies are capable only
of accepting—through enthusiasm—the opinion expressed by individuals or by a small minority—the opinion, for instance, of the recognised leader of their party, of some local worker of repute, of some organised association, or the impersonal opinion of an influential journal. Thus the discussions which precede decision become an absurd comedy played on a vast stage by a multitude of hands and voices, the greater the multitude the more uninelligible is the comedy, and the more the dénouement depends upon fortuitous and disorderly impulses. . . .

The greatest evil of constitutional government lies in the formation of ministries on parliamentary or party principles. Each political party aspires to seize the reins of government at any cost. The chief of the State must submit to the party which commands a majority in Parliament; a ministry is formed from the members of this party, and to maintain itself in power, enters upon a contest with the Opposition, which, in its turn, puts forth its whole strength to overthrow its rivals and take their places. If the chief of the State were to favour the minority and nominate his own ministry from its ranks, the new ministry would dissolve Parliament, and direct all its strength towards gaining a majority at the general election—with the support of this majority being enabled to withstand the Opposition. The placemen of the ministerial party vote always for the Government, not for the sake of upholding authority, nor from intimate community of opinions, but because this Government in its turn supports the members of its party in power, and in its concomitant privileges, advantages, and emoluments. The natural instinct of all parties is to support their own in all circumstances, either on account of common interests, or simply by virtue of that gregarious instinct which impels mankind to unite in societies and to march into battle side by side.

It is evident, then, that unanimity of opinion has little influence, and that the pretended solicitude for the public welfare serves as the concealment of motives and instincts in no way related to it. This is the ideal of parliamentary government! It is a gross delusion to regard it as a guarantee of freedom. The absolute power of the sovereign is replaced by the absolute power of Parliament, with this difference only, that the person of the sovereign may embody a rational will, while in Parliament all depends upon accident, as the decisions of Parliament are brought about by the majority. But as, by the side of the majority constituted under the influence of party gambling, a powerful minority exists, the will of the majority is in no way the will of Parliament. Still less can it be regarded as the will of the people, the healthy mass of which abstains from participation in the comedy of parties, and turns away from it with abhorrence. On the other hand, the corrupt part of the population mingles willingly in politics, and thereby is driven to a worse corruption, for the chief motive of this comedy is appetite for power and plunder. Political freedom becomes a fiction maintained on paper by the paragraphs and phrases of the constitution; the principles of monarchical power disappear; the Liberal Democracy triumphs, bringing into society disorder and violence with the principles of infidelity and materialism, and proclaiming Liberty, Equality and Fraternity—where there is place neither for Liberty nor for Equality. Such conditions inevitably lead to anarchy, from which society can be saved alone by dictatorship—that is, by the rehabilitation of autocracy in the government of the world. . . .

The Press

From the day that man first fell, falsehood has ruled the world—ruled it in human speech, in the practical business of life, in all its relations and institutions. But never did the Father of Lies spin such webs of falsehood of every kind as in this restless age when we hear so many falsehoods uttered everywhere on Truth. With the growing complexity of social problems increases the number of relations and institutions pervaded with falsehood through and through. At every step appears some splendid edifice bearing the legend, "Here is Truth." Do you enter—you tread on falsehoods at every step. Would you expose the falsehoods which have angered you, the world will turn on you with anger greater still, and bid you trust and preach that this is truth, and truth unassailable.

Thus we are bidden to believe that the judgments of newspapers and periodicals, the judgments of the so-called Press, are the expression of public opinion. This, too, is a falsehood. The Press is one of the falsest institutions of our time.

But who will dare to stand against the forces of opinion—the opinion of the world on men and institutions? Such is the nature of man that each one of us, whatever his words or actions may be, takes care that he shall conform with the opinions of the people. The man is yet unborn who can truly boast himself free from his servility.

In our age the judgment of others has assumed an organised form, and calls itself Public Opinion. Its organ and representative is the Press. In truth, the importance of the Press is immense, and may be regarded as the most characteristic fact of our time—more characteristic than our remarkable discoveries and inventions in the realm of technical science. No government, no law, no custom can withstand its destructive activity when, from day to day, through the course of years, the Press repeats and disseminates among the people its condemnations of institutions or of men.

What is the secret of this strength? Certainly not the novelties and sensations with which the newspaper is filled, but its declared policy—the political and
philosophical ideas propagated in its articles, the selection and classification of its news and rumors, and the peculiar illumination which it casts upon them. The newspaper has usurped the position of judicial observer of the events of the day; it judges not only the actions and words of men, but affects a knowledge of their unexpressed opinions, their intentions, and their enterprises; it praises and condemns at discretion; it incites some, threatens others; drags to the pillory one, and others exalts as idols to be adored as examples worthy of the emulation of all. In the name of Public Opinion it bestows rewards on some, and punishes others and the severity of excommunication. The question naturally occurs: Who are these representatives of this terrible power, Public Opinion? Whence is derived their right and authority to rule in the name of the community, to demolish existing institutions, and to proclaim new ideals of ethics and legislation?

But no one attempts to answer this question; all talk loudly of the liberty of the Press as the first and essential element of social well-being. Even in Russia, so libelled by the lying Press of Europe, such words are heard. Our so-called Slavophiles, with amazing inconsistency, share the same delusion, although their avowed object is to reform and renovate the institutions of their country upon a historic basis. Having joined the chorus of Liberals, in alliance with the propagandists of revolution, they proclaim exactly in the manner of the West: "Public Opinion—that is, the collective thought, guided by the natural love of right in all—is the final judge in all matters of public interest; therefore no restriction upon freedom of speech can be allowed, for such restriction can only express the tyranny of the minority over the will of the mass."

Such is the current proposition of the newest Liberalism. It is accepted by many in good faith, and there are few who, having troubled to analyse it, have discerned how it is based upon falsehood and self-deception.

It conflicts with the first principles of logic, for it is based on the fallacious premise that the opinions of the public and of the Press are identical.

To test the validity of this claim it is only needful to consider the origin of newspapers, and the characters of their makers.

Any vagabond babbler or unacknowledged genius, any enterprising tradesman, with his own money or with the money of others, may found a newspaper, even a great newspaper. He may attract a host of writers and feabletonists, ready to deliver judgment on any subject at a moment's notice; he may hire illiterate reporters to keep him supplied with rumors and scandals. His staff is then complete. From that day he sits in judgment on all the world, on ministers and administrators, on literature and art, on finance and industry. It is true that the new journal becomes a power only when it is sold in the market—that is, when it circulates among the public. For this talent is needed and the matter published must be attractive and congenial for the readers. Here, we might think, was some guarantee of the moral value of the undertaking—men of talent will not serve a feeble or contemptible editor or publisher; the public will not support a newspaper which is not a faithful echo of public opinion. This guarantee is fictitious. Experience proves that money will attract talent under any conditions, and that talent is ready to write as its paymaster requires. Experience proves that the most contemptible persons—retired money lenders, Jewish factors, newsvendors, and bankrupt gamblers—may found newspapers, secure the services of talented writers, and place their editions on the market as organs of public opinion. The healthy taste of the public is not to be relied upon. The great mass of readers, idlers for the most part, is ruled less by a few healthy instincts than by a base and despicable hankering for idle amusement; and the support of the people may be secured by any editor who provides for the satisfaction of these hankering, for the love of scandal, and for intellectual pruriency of the basest kind. Of this we meet with evidence daily: even in our own capital no search is necessary to find it; it is enough to note the supply and demand at the newsvendors' shops, and at the railway stations. All of us have observed the triviality of conversation in society; in provincial towns, in the government capitals, the recreations of the people are well known—gambling, scandal, and anecdotes are the chief. Even conversation on the so-called social and political questions takes in a great measure the form of censure and aphorisms, plentifully supplemented with scandal and anecdote. This is a rich and fruitful soil for the tradesmen of literature, and there, as poisonous fungi, spring up organs of calumny, ephemeral and permanent, impudently extolling themselves as organs of public opinion. The great part which in the idle life of government towns is played by anonymous letters and lampoons, which unhappily, are so common among us, is played in the newspaper by "correspondence," sent from various quarters or composed in the editorial offices, by the reports and rumors invented by ignorant reporters, and by the atrocious practice of blackmailing, often the strongest weapon of the newspaper press. Such a paper may flourish, attain consideration as an organ of public opinion, and be immensely remunerative to its owners, while no paper conducted upon firm moral principles, or founded to meet the healthier instincts of the people, could compete with it for a moment.

This phenomenon is worthy of close inspection, for we find in it the most incongruous product of modern culture, the more incongruous where the principles of the new Liberalism have taken root, where the sanction of election, the authority of the popular will, is needed for every institution, where the ruling power is vested in the hands of individuals and derived from the suffrages of the majority in the representative assemblies. For the journalist
with a power comprehending all things, requires no sanction; he derives his authority from no election, he receives support from no one. His newspaper becomes an authority in the State, and for this authority no endorsement is required. The man in the street may establish such an organ, and exercise the concomitant authority with an irresponsibility enjoyed by no other power in the world. That this is in no way exaggeration there are innumerable proofs. How often have superficial and unscrupulous journalists paved the way for revolution, fomented irritation into enmity, and brought about desolating wars! For conduct such as this a monarch would lose his throne, a minister would be disgraced, impeached, and punished; but the journalist stands dry above the waters he has disturbed, from the ruin he has caused he rises triumphant, and briskly continues his destructive work.

This is by no means the worst. When a judge has power to dishonor us, to deprive us of our property and of our freedom, he receives his power from the hands of the State only after such prolonged labour and experience as qualify him for his calling. His power is restricted by rigorous laws, his judgments are subject to revision by higher powers, and his sentence may be altered or commuted. The journalist has the fullest power to defame and dishonour me, to injure my material interests, even to restrict my liberty by attacks which force me to leave my place of abode. These judicial powers he has usurped; no higher authority has conferred them upon him; he has never proven by examination his fitness to exercise them; he has in no way shown his trustworthiness or his impartiality; his court is ruled by no formal procedure; and from his judgment there lies no appeal. Its defenders assure us that the Press itself heals the wounds it has inflicted; but any thinking mind can see that these are mere idle words. The attacks of the Press on individuals may cause irreparable injury. Retractions and explanations can in no way give them full satisfaction. Not half of those who read the denunciatory article will read the apology or the explanation, and in the minds of the mass of frivolous readers insulting or calumnious suggestions leave behind an ineffaceable stain. Criminal prosecution for defamation is but the feeblest defense, and civil action seldom succeeds in exposing the offender, while it subjects the offended to fresh attack. The journalist, moreover, has a thousand means of wounding and terrifying individuals without furnishing them with sufficient grounds for legal prosecution.

It is hard to imagine a despotism more irresponsible and violent than the despotism of printed words. Is it not strange and irrational, then, that those who struggle most for the preservation of this despotism are the impassioned champions of freedom, the ferocious enemies of legal restrictions and of all interference by the established authority. We cannot help remembering those wise men who went mad because they knew of their wisdom...
uniformity the so-called public opinion, and weakening all independent development of thought, of will, and of character. Moreover, for many of the people the newspaper is the only source of education—a contemptible, pretended education—the varied mass of news and information found in the newspaper being taken by its readers as real knowledge, with which he proceeds to arm himself complacently. This we may take as one of the reasons why our age brings forth so few complete individuals, so few men of character. The modern Press is like the fabled hero who, having inscribed upon his visor some mysterious characters, the symbols of divine truth, struck all his enemies with terror, till one intrepid warrior rubbed from his helm the mysterious letters. On the visor of our Press today is written the legend "Public Opinion," and its influence is irresistible.

In the present constitution of society the Press has become an institution which cannot be ignored, but which must be considered side by side with the existing institutions which constitute the State and are subject to control and responsibility, for there is no institution which may be accounted uncontrolled and irresponsible. The greater the growth of the Press, the more clearly appear, side by side with the apparent advantages of rational and conscientious publicity, those social dangers which it creates. One of these dangers is the production and multiplication of a class of journalists, adventurers, and writers, who feed and grow fat upon the pen. The more serious workers on the serious Press never cease to complain bitterly of the multiplication of these fellows, with whom they are ashamed to be associated, even in name. In all the great States, in all the great markets, out of this rabble of scribbling brethren springs a class of men whom it is no exaggeration to describe as parasites on society.

In fact, these men stand on a special footing in relation to the general welfare, which should unite and inspire all institutions. They are in no way directly interested in the preservation of social order, in the reconciliation of opposing minds and contending parties. This is in the nature of things. The newspaper lives and is nourished by daily events and news. In troubled times its circulation increases; then its energies are expended in the dissemination of rumors and sensations which alarm and irritate the minds of the people; while on the other hand in times of quiescence its circulation is sensibly diminished. Hardly has trouble begun when the streets are flooded with new publications which discord nourishes till peace returns, when they vanish as quickly as they appeared. But even in quiet times some must live, and for that end, new agitations are fomented, new interests developed, and sensations invented or exaggerated.

Those journals which pretend to seriousness find matters in the consideration of political questions and in the frothy polemics which daily appear. The journalist is ready at a moment's notice to decide any imaginable political question; and by his position he is bound to consider and decide it immediately, for he is a servant not of thought, or of reason, but a servant of the actual day. No sooner does the thought occur than it flies to paper, thence to the printing press; there must be no delay, no time is allowed for the ripening of this thought. You ask these men are they ashamed. Not at all. They would laugh in your face at such a question; they are persuaded that they render great services to society. They resemble in this the ancient augurs who made merry both over themselves and over their dupes.

If the journalist is to attract attention, he must raise his voice to a scream. This his trade requires, and exaggeration capable of passing into pathos becomes for him his second nature. When he enters upon a controversy he is ready to denounce his adversary as a fool, a rascal, or a dunce, to heap upon him unimaginable insults—this costs his conscience nothing; it is required by journalistic etiquette. His cries resemble the protestations of a trader in the market-place when he cheats his customers.

These are the practices and qualities which unhappily flourish in the Press and among its workers. It would be very laughable were it not so harmful. It is harmful because the Press now occupies an arena in which are discussed and decided the gravest questions of internal and external policy—questions of economy and administration indissolubly bound with the vital interests of peoples. For all this passion is but a weak equipment; sage reasoning and maturity and sanity of thought are also needed; needed, too, is knowledge of the history of peoples, and of practical life. Yet in Europe things have gone so far that from the ranks of journalism rise orators and statesmen who, together with the advocates with whom they share the capacity for abusive language, constitute in Parliament an overwhelming force. In the French Chamber there are but twenty-two representatives of large and fifty of small property, while all the talking strength belongs to journalists, of whom there are fifty-nine, and to advocates, of whom there are a hundred and seven.

And these are the representatives of their country, and the judges of the lives and requirements of the people! The people groan at this confusion of legislators. But it cannot deliver itself. . . .

**Notes**

1. "It grows as it indulges itself."
2. "The world wishes to be deceived, let it be deceived."