

## CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS.

BY CHAPIN C. PERRY.

OF all terms that, to the lay mind, suggest narrowness, bigotry, intolerance, hatred and defeat of purpose, the words class consciousness, as employed by, and narrowly applied to the interests of, the working class, probably take the front rank. The words are essentially belligerent and arbitrarily and at once place every person claiming other recognition in the enemy class. For an intelligent being, therefore, to ally himself with such mental attitude is, in the eyes of the world at large, to alienate himself from all that is intelligent and to make a wanton and useless sacrifice of the respect of whatever goes to make up that intelligence.

Mankind, to-day, is recognized as divided into three classes, the capitalist class, the producing class and the consuming class, popularly known as capital, labor and consumer; each with its peculiar material interests which it must subserve or perish notwithstanding that these may and do vitally interfere with, and antagonize, the material interests of one or both of the other two classes.

The word "class" rather implies the existence of one or more other classes whose interests are antagonistic to it. The capitalist class, in the eyes of the other two, is virtually regarded the enemy of both the producing and the consuming classes. It holds, or at least has hitherto held, the producing class down to the lowest wage and regards the consuming class as its ancient and legitimate prey. It is the wolf in the sheep fold.

Between the capitalist class and the consuming class the fight is ever on. The capitalist class wants as much as it can get and to that end uses every machination its cunning can devise. The consuming class wants to buy as cheaply as possible but it has never to the present day shown any great demonstration of fighting power. It is the sheep of the pasture.

Likewise the producing and the consuming classes have a fight of their own. The producing class demands what it can get regardless of the position the consuming class is put in and just now the

consuming class is prone to regard the producing class as a modern and implacable foe. The producing class is the goat of pronounced butting proclivities. To-day the war of classes is at its height.

Now class consciousness is an individual experience insinuating itself into the minds of men and women of all three classes. It is not primarily or essentially a feeling of antagonism, except that, as the words are caught up by members of the capitalist and consuming classes, or the socially unenlightened of the producing class, in their literal sense and seen to be applicable alike to whichever class may use them to further its material interests, it is prone to be so regarded by them. Class consciousness as a shibboleth was a discovery of the producer; the discovery that the producing class is the only real class and that any and all others are counterfeits and imposters to be treated as such. How do we deal with counterfeits and imposters? With suavity and in kid-glove fashion or with quick and decisive rejection? Pass to a bank teller with your deposit, even most innocently, a spurious coin and instantly he clips it in two and hands 'it back to you no longer a counterfeit and that without asking your pleasure in the matter. One would not knowingly harbor an insane or dangerous or evil person in his household, even though such one displayed throughout his stay an amiable and agreeable mood, but would eject him before his violent character manifested itself. Be it known, however, that evil masquerading as good is far more potent for ill among the socially unenlightened than are its hideous features with the counterfeiting mask removed.

It is to be observed at this point that whereas it is a simple thing to divide the world into classes with antagonistic material interests it is not so easy, once you try to do so, to place human beings definitely into one of these classes to the exclusion of the other two. You would have to resort to surgery to accomplish this because veritably a man's head may be the uncompromising enemy of his stomach, for while the former may be used altogether in the service of the capitalist class his stomach belongs irrefutably to the consuming class. The capitalist is an embodiment of conflicting and antagonistic interests. His flesh and blood are engaged in internecine strife. Similarly situated is the producer to-day for he is at the same time a consumer as well. His hands and feet act in concert to produce and a never-ending esophagus claims a considerable part of his product. Here is a case where both ends are bucking the middle. He is a house divided against itself and so indeed are all the members of the several classes in their turn. It is to be

emphasized that while the material interests of the three classes are sharply antagonistic the economic interests of the individuals composing these classes are not so.

Now who or what is a capitalist. A rich man? No, that is no test. Some producers are rich. Some capitalists are poor. Whether or not a man is a capitalist depends not at all upon his possessions of which he may have many or few but upon his mode of thinking. Of a truth the majority of poor persons are capitalists: that is, they look upon property and possessions as the prevailing system of ethics has taught them to do and are blind to the error that holds humanity—the entire three classes—in its mesmeric grip. Some rich people have had their eyes opened to this error and henceforward are no longer numbered with the capitalists regardless of the conventional methods of earning a livelihood they may pursue or the gains they may derive from them. The capitalist is he to whom the present-day estimate of morality and ethics is inflexible and standard.

Nor is the worker necessarily the producer. A vast amount of energy is spent foolishly and in vain, often in nerve-racking and soul-destroying employment, and all of it is paid for in sustenance wrought by the producer. One type of producer may all his life long have been considered by his friends an idle dreamer. He may even have had a great distaste for toil as it is known to-day and his activity, seemingly fruitless, may have been altogether mental and centered about an idea that, to him at least, must one day materialize and bear fruit. This type of producer is peculiar to the age, is judged harshly by the capitalist and oftentimes so by the consumer, but is recognized as altogether a legitimate charge on production by the class-conscious producer.

To the discerning the capitalist class must disappear. Its transient character is evidenced everywhere by a rapid and seemingly endless succession of social disruptions, wars, labor disturbances, legislative enactments framed to confiscate profits; all aiming at reform but blindly working out the behests of the social revolution that shall accomplish the industrial emancipation of the world. The passing of the capitalist class merely marks its transition into the proletariat, or working, or producing class and the moment this is accomplished the social miracle, the dream of all Utopias, the "plan of the ages," the "desire of all nations," has come to pass—the producing and the consuming classes have merged into one homogeneous unit with a common enthusiasm and but a single interest.