

John Jay Chapman



*Practical
Agitation*

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PREFACE

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THIS book is an attempt to follow the track of personal influence across society. The first three chapters are taken up with discussions of political reform, the fourth chapter with contemporary journalism. The results of these discussions are then summarized in the chapters called "Principles."

I know that there are as many ways of stating the main idea of the book as there are minds in the world. That idea is, that we can always do more for mankind by following the good in a straight line than we can by making concessions to evil. The illusion that it is wise or necessary to suppress our instinctive love of truth comes from an imperfect understanding of what that instinctive love of truth represents, and of what damage happens both to ourselves and to others when we suppress it. The more closely we look at the facts, the more serious does this damage appear. And on the other hand, the more closely we look at the facts, the more trifling, inconsequent, and absurd do all those reasons appear which strive to make us accept, and thereby sanctify and preserve, some portion of the conceded evil in the world.

J. J. C.

NEW YORK, February 5, 1900.

PRACTICAL AGITATION

I ELECTION TIME

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It is the ambition of the agitator to use the machinery of government to make men more unselfish. In so far as he succeeds in this, he is creating a living church, the only sort of State church that would be entirely at one with our system, because it would be merely a representation in the formal government of a spirit abroad among the people.

Campaign platforms are merely creeds. "I believe in Civil Service Reform" is a way of saying "I do not believe in theft," and the phrase was a fragmentary and incomplete formulation of the greater truth. It was the sign that a movement was beginning among the people due to reawakening instinct, reawakening sensibility. It was the forerunner of all those changes for the better that have been spreading over our administrative government during the last thirty years. A quiet revolution has been going forward under our eyes, recorded step by step. It is only because our standards have been going up faster than the reforms came in that we believe the evils are growing worse. Such changes go on all the time all over the world, but the value and rarity of this one come from its unity and coherence. Such a thing might happen in Germany or in England, but you could not disentangle the forces.

Thirty years ago politics was thought to be no occupation for a gentleman. It was a matter of bar-rooms, ballot-box-

stuffing, rolls of dirty bills. You had as little to do with it as possible. You voted your party ticket, you paid your taxes. You bribed the ashman and the policeman at your uptown house, and the clerk of the court, the inspector, the custom-house agent, and the commissioner of jurors at your office.

That subtle change of attitude in the citizen towards his public duty which is now in progress, has in it something of the religious. The whole matter becomes comprehensible the moment we cease to think of it as politics, and see in it a widespread and perfectly natural reaction against an era of wickedness. Had our framework of government afforded no outlet to the force, had our ills been irremediably crystallized into formal tyranny, we should perhaps have witnessed great revivalist upheavals, sacraments, saints, prophets, prostrations, and adoration. As it is, we have seen deadly pamphlets, schedules, enactments, documents which it required our whole attention and our whole time to understand; and behind each of them a remorseless interrogator with a white cravat and a face of iron. What motive drives them on? What oil fills their lamps? Who feeds them? These horrid things they bring, these instruments forged by unremitting toil, technical, insufferable,—they are the cure. With such levers, and with them only, can the stones be lifted off the hearts of men. They are the alternatives of revolution.

“Reform” may have a thousand meanings, and be used to cover a thousand projects of doubtful utility. But with us it has a definite meaning. When the foreigner says, “Ah, but is your reform the right remedy?” he thinks it is a question of policy, or of the incidence of a tax. He supposes there is an

intellectual question. But with us the problem is how to protect an attorney against a dishonest judge; how to stop the sheriff from stealing a fund, pending the litigation.

What we want to do, what we are doing, is to get rid of gross malpractices, gross theft, gross abuse of public trust. It is waste of time to expend learned argument on a judge who has been bought. The litigants must join forces and get rid of that judge before they can talk. Of course we know that the real trouble with our politics is that these attorneys have themselves bribed the judge and share in the division of their clients' property. It is to questions of this kind that the conscience of the country has been drawn.

There is nothing peculiarly sacred about politics, but the history of reform movements during the last few years furnishes such striking and wonderful illustrations of human nature that it is worth study.

A few men have a desire, a hope of improving some evil. They stagger towards it and fall. The impulse is always good. The mistakes made are progressive. They record the past; they outline the future. If you draw an arrow through them, it will point north.

If you arrange the reform movements against Tammany Hall in a series, and consider them minutely, you will find that the earlier ones are comparatively corrupt, sporadic, disorganized, ignorant, and shortsighted in purpose. They have steadily become more honest, more frequent, more coherent, more intelligent and ambitious. If you examine any one of them, it would be impossible to misplace it in the series. Looking more closely, you see the reason. The earlier the movement, the more zealously do its leaders imitate the

methods of current politics. Each movement represents the philosophy of its era. We have had: 1. The frankly corrupt era (fighting the devil with fire). 2. The compromise era (buying reform). 3. The educational era, which began two years ago, after Low was defeated, when people said they were glad of the movement, in spite of the defeat. Note this, that Low did not lead a lost cause, nor was any belief in lost causes at the bottom of his movement. But in making the best of his defeat, many minds stumbled into philosophy. And this illustrates the progress of an idea. People will accept it as an explanation of the past before they will take it as a guide to the future. It glimmers before them at a moment when they need comfort, and vanishes in the light of a comfortable habit or prejudice. This apparition of the educational idea flitted across New York and took root in many minds.

Now the smoky torch of reform has passed from hand to hand, and is beginning to burn brighter. How could the original darkness give forth more than a gleam? All progress is experimental. The architects discovered by practice that the arch would support itself. Their earlier efforts were tentative. You can see what notion they had in mind, as they very gradually learned how to subserve the laws of gravity and tension. Each improvement is qualified by its author's limitations, but shows a gain as toward the immediate past. You are following the steps of the groping and fumbling mind of man, fettered at every point by his own conceptions, moving each time towards a bolder generalization, each stride forward exactly proportionate to the breadth of thought on which it is calculated.

What other method is there? The men who fought the Tweed Ring did what passed for “politics” in their day. “Votes must be paid for, of course; but let the people vote right.”

The philosophy of the Strong movement in 1894 showed an advance. “The plunder must be divided, of course; but let *us* have it because we are virtuous.”

The Low movement in 1897 appealed to voters on the ground of self-interest. Labor had to be conciliated, local politicians of the worst sort subsidized; \$150,000 was spent, four-fifths of it in ways that did more harm than good. But the methods were delicate.

The battle of the standards goes forward ceaselessly; but all standards are going up. What the half-way reformer calls “politics,” the idealist calls chicanery; what the idealist calls politics, the half-way reformer calls Utopia. But in 1871 they are discussing whether or not the reformers shall falsify the returns; in 1894 they are discussing whether or not they shall expose fraud in their own camp.

The men engaged in all these struggles are in perfect ignorance that they are really leading a religious reaction. They think that since they are in politics the doctrines of compromise apply. They are drawn into politics by conscience, but once there, they have only their business training to guide them,—a training in the art of subserving material interests. Now if a piece of your land has an uncertain boundary, you have a right to compromise on any theory you like, because you own the land. But if you start out with the sole and avowed purpose of upholding honesty in politics, and you uphold anything else or subserve any

other interest whatever, you are a deceiver. When you began you did not say "I stand for a readjustment of political interests. There will be a continuation of many abuses under my administration, to be sure; but I hope they will not be quite so bad as heretofore. I shall not insist on the absolutely unselfish conduct of my office. It is not practical." If you had said this, you might have got the friendly support of a few doctrinaires. But you would never have got the support and approval of the great public. You would not have been elected. And therefore you did not say it. On the contrary, what our reformers do is this: They begin, before election, by promising an absolutely pure administration. They make proclamations of a new era, and after they have secured a certain following they proceed to chaffer over how much honesty they will demand and how much take, as if they were rescuing property.

These men are, then, in their desires a part of the future, and in their practices of the past. Their desires move society forward, their practices set it back; and so we have moved forward by jolts, until, like a people emerging from the deep sea, the water looks clearer above our heads and we can almost see the sky.

Every advance has cost great effort. It took as much courage for a Mugwump to renounce his party allegiance in 1884 as it does now for a man to denounce both national parties as dens of thieves. It took as much hard thinking some years ago for the leaders of the Reform Democrats to cut loose from Tammany Hall as it does now for the Independent to see that there is in all our politics only one

machine, held together by all the bosses and their heelers, and that the whole thing must be attacked at once.

How gradual has been the process of emancipation from intellectual bondage! How inevitably people are limited by the terms in which they think! A generation of men has been consumed by the shibboleth “reform within the party,”—a generation of educated and right-minded men, who accomplished in their day much good, and left the country better than they found it, but are floating to-day like hulks in the trough of the sea of politics, because all their mind and all their energy were exhausted in discovering certain superficial evils and in fighting them. Their analysis of political elements left the deeper causes mysterious. They did not see mere human nature. They still treated Republicanism and Democracy—empty superstitions—as ideas, and they handled with reverence the bones of bogus saints, and the whole apparatus of clap-trap by which they had been governed.

And yet it is owing to the activity of these men that the deeper political conditions became visible. Men cannot transcend their own analysis and see themselves under the microscope. The work we do transforms us into social factors. We are a part of the changes we bring in. Before we know it, we ourselves are the problem.

The Mugwumps revolt and defeat Blaine. They strengthen the Democratic party. They again revolt and defeat Bryan, and strengthen the Republican party. So in the little towns all over the country, on local issues the Democrats are put out for being dishonest, or the Republicans are put out for being dishonest. Through this