

The Tendencies of American Progress

Thanksgiving sermon of Henry Ward Beecher, 1870

In Cherry, Conrad. *God's New Israel*. University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

IN looking upon our national condition it is not enough that we see unbounded prosperity on the farm, at the forge, in the shop: we must ask whether this prosperity lies in the line of intelligence, of real virtue [A]re things, *on the whole*, tending toward, or away from, moral elements? That will determine the question of prosperity. . . .

Our climate . . . is congenial to industry. . . . Our soil . . . is cultivatable throughout. . . . Our population is English-speaking, and homogeneous in ideas, though heterogeneous in origin. But all this . . . is useless – and, worse than useless, will be corrupting – if there are not other elements of prosperity than merely that which is given us, of territory.

. . . What now are the general tendencies of the material prosperity of America which are being developed . . . ? On the whole, are they toward intelligence, and morality, and a higher spiritual growth? The mass of our working population, I think, were never so well clothed, so bountifully fed and so well housed, as they are now; and the tendency is not backward, but forward. Our working population, to the very lowest stage and class, tend to more refinement in their food, more taste in their apparel, and more culture in their dwellings, year by year. . . .

Plainness of apparel, and of circumstances surrounding, are not signs and tokens either of civil growth or of Christianity. The general impression is, that, as nations are better, they will be economical. I think, on the contrary, they will be profuse, and have the means of being so. The impression is that they will be unadorned. I think they will be more glorious than Solomon was, in all his apparel. The impression is that the law of simplicity in the sense of littleness of having and using characterizes virtue and religion. Far from it. As you go toward the savage state, you go away from complexity, from multitudinous power, down toward simplicity, and when you come to the lowest state – to the simplicity of men that wear skins . . . and live in huts and caves – you come to the fool's ideal of prosperity.

But from that low animal condition starts development, and nations go on opening their faculties; and every faculty becomes a market, and demands supply. And the more culture a man has, the more parts of his nature there are which ask for material, for institutions, for raiment, for comforts of every kind And in looking upon the condition of the community, if you find that

they are increasing in the variety ... quality ... and in the excellence of cooking their food; if you find that their dwellings are growing better and better from period to period; if you find that their furniture is more beautiful, answering other ends than merely the mechanical and physical ends — ministering to taste, ministering, if you will, to luxury — ... they are signs of upward development and of growth.

... There are other signs of thrift. The great [industrial] combinations, everywhere pervading working men are full of promise — and vexation! They vex the present, but they will bless the future. ... Thus far men ... have not learned, that superiority is an ordination of God, and makes the superior class the nurses and helpers of the inferior. ... As soon as any class has had the power to rise, it has separated itself from the lower class, and called itself cream, and desired to be skimmed off! And so it has been that class after class, as we go down in society, have been obliged to fight their own battle, and largely to fight it against those who should have been their helpers... . Therefore when I behold [working men] ... gathering themselves into innumerable forms of association, and learning among themselves brotherhood, and forming habits of common thought, common purposes, and common government, whatever may be the inconvenience of the present, I regard such things as pre-eminently auspicious. They show that the laboring classes are not ... inert; that they are a living mass; and that they mean to live to some purpose, and are finding out the way to do it. My heart goes with these my fellow-citizens under such circumstances, even when my head does not.

Very significant, too, is the assimilative power of American institutions, as shown in the condition and the conduct of foreign labor in our midst. For it is not our native-born citizens alone that are laborious, that are enterprising, that are accumulating property, that are good citizens, and obedient to the law. There have been thrown upon our shores vast masses, now almost uncountable, of men born under other skies, other institutions, and other customs, with other ideas. ... Many have feared that they would change the color of the nation; that they would gradually undermine its laws. ... But they have not. Our institutions are stronger today, with all their population from abroad in them and under them

Except in a few cities, and, to be plain, except from one nationality, we have scarcely heard a word of lawlessness from the great throng of our foreign population. The Irish are an ingenuous people. They are very frank and open, ... and frequently act too openly and impulsively; and I must admit that there has been some trouble springing from them. Yet I say, without hesitation,

that in fifty years all the trouble will have been a cheap price to have paid for the good qualities which that stock will infuse into the Anglo-Saxon stock. It is *good* stock, though it is very hard to work up. But with this single exception good-naturedly named, where have we found trouble from our foreign population? ... They do not clog our courts; they do not mob our streets; they do not make aggression upon law nor upon civil liberty. Their virtues, their wisdom, and their industry we ought to recognize, both with surprise and with gratitude.

... [And] I am as little afraid of the Oriental as I am of the European. Coming with another tongue, not easily to be changed, and coming with a very different race-temperament, and with very different culture, it may take longer to digest them; but I think that even a Chinaman, when he has been thoroughly swallowed by American institutions, will ... be at last digested, and that he will make good blood withal. So that I am not afraid of the importation of Chinamen. ... The very thing that we need more now than almost anything of the lower interests of our land, is labor. ...

There are some who think that riches are always and only dangerous. ... But it is impossible to civilize a community without riches. I boldly affirm that no nation ever yet rose from a barbarous state except through the mediation of wealth earned. I affirm that the preaching of the Gospel to the heathen will be invalid and void if it does not make them active workmen, and teach them how to make money. And although the evidences of the conversion of the individual are not that he knows how to make money; yet in a nation no religion is a good religion that does not teach industry, and the thrift which comes from industry. ... [N]o community can develop into permanent civilization unless it has power ministered to it very largely through the civilizing influences of wealth. ...

Now, the dangers of wealth in America are very great. ... but it is because it is in the nascent stages. Great corporations are dangerous. They do not need to be. Scores of millionaires organized together in concert to accomplish great ends need not be any more dangerous than the State is. There may be an empyrean of wealth; and it may be mischievous; but it does not need to be. At present it is so, and is to be watched against. Wealth tends to control all other power in society. ... But it is not necessarily so. It is not necessary that riches should control courts and legislatures, and the franchise itself. It is not necessary that wealth, which owns the market, should also own the civil power... .

Is harm and danger, then, all that wealth is accomplishing in our midst? No. It is the almoner [charity-giver] of employment, as it is the almoner of bread. It is the almoner of the family. ... It is the almoner of independence. And are we to forget that capital—that is, wealth in activity – with all its friction, ... is money that is working that keeps men bright. Although working money is by various exigencies brought into circumstances where it must be limited, overruled, and curtailed, yet we are not to forget ... that at the same time it is that which is vivifying industry to the bottom of society, and that is carrying out on its broad hands and arms innumerable blessings to every part of the community. ... It is the blood that carries nutrition into every part of the whole system. ...

And when I hear men speaking bitterly against wealth, I notice that almost invariably they are men who have not got it. When I hear them deride moneyed men, ... it seems to me that they have not well considered the facts. [N]owhere else does wealth so directly point towards virtue in morality, and spirituality in religion, as in America.

So then, I am not afraid to rejoice. Get rich, if you can. ... And when you shall have amassed wealth, it will be God's power, if you are wise to use it, by which you can make your home happier, the community more refined, and the whole land more civilized.

... [O]n the whole, the general tendency of wealth is such as to lead me today to thank God for the increasing wealth of America. May it ever be sanctified. May it ever learn nobler uses, and aspire higher and higher, until the symbolism of the heavenly state, where the very streets are paved with gold, shall be reproduced in the realities and actualities of our life here on earth.