
Andrew Carnegie on “Best Fields for Philanthropy”

by Eugene V. Debs

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In the December [1889] number of the *North American Review*, Andrew Carnegie, the millionaire, supplements his “Gospel of Wealth”¹ *flapdoodle* with a *poppycock* article on “The Best Fields for Philanthropy.”² We use the italicized slang phrases purposely and understandingly, as fitting and proper when discussing the pharisaical utterances of a man who, regardless of the ills inflicted, has become a millionaire by robbery (within the law) of thousands of American toilers. This man Carnegie, like Austin Corbin, has the golden key which unlocks the covers of the *North American Review*, whose late editor and proprietor was a millionaire, every dollar of whose wealth

¹ Carnegie's article “Wealth” first appeared as the lead essay in the June 1889 issue of *North American Review* (vol. 148, no. 391, pp. 653-664). Borrowing self-descriptive words from Carnegie's concluding paragraph the piece was at once widely touted in the bourgeois press as a new “Gospel of Wealth.” The essay was subsequently reprinted under that title, gaining permanence in 1901 as the feature of the eponymous book, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*. In his essay Carnegie dismissed the idea of “Communism” as a tried-and-failed theory, positing that instead “intense Individualism” had proven itself the motive power behind economic progress, driving down prices, raising living standards, and making former luxuries obtainable by all. He argued that accumulated wealth in a few hands constituted “a much more potent force for the elevation of our race than if it had been distributed in small sums to the people themselves,” and that it was the duty of the wealthy individual to live modestly, provide moderately for those providing service, and to disburse fortunes generously. Charitable aid was to be bestowed in such a way as “to help those who will help themselves; to provide part of the means by which those who desire to improve may do so; to give those who desire to rise the aids by which they may rise; to assist but rarely or never to do all.” The grim reality of the working masses living in poverty and squalor Carnegie dismissed as an unfortunate side effect of the unchangeable workings of the labor market.

² “The Best Fields of Philanthropy,” *North American Review*, vol. 149, no. 397 (Dec. 1889), pp. 682-699.

was inherited, and Carnegie, having enjoyed the friendship and fellowship of the millionaire editor, takes occasion to beslime his name with characteristic *rot*, in saying "he had played his part in life well" meaning, we suppose, that the dead millionaire liked his "Gospel of Wealth" because it proclaimed that the laws as they exist regarding "competition, accumulation, and distribution," should be "accepted and upheld," and that "great wealth must inevitably How into the hands of the few exceptional managers of men." And Carnegie, comprehending the value of the privilege to put his millionaire ideas in print, compliments the *Review*, saying it "shines on, a lamp still burning, to show the great army of humanity the pitfalls which it must avoid in order to retain what has been already conquered, and to light the paths which that army must tread on its way to future conquests."

It might be proper to wavy just here, to Andrew Carnegie, that the "army" of workingmen in the United States does not accept the laws of "competition, accumulation and distribution" as just, and will change them at the earliest day practicable. The industrial army believes that the laws are vicious, and have been fruitful of conditions of unparalleled injustice, of villainies which defy exaggeration, of robberies whose sum totals are told in the colossal fortunes of men like Andrew Carnegie. Why should the wealth created by workingmen "inevitably flow into the hands of the few exceptional managers of men"? There is no honest reason why. That it is the case is an arraignment of the Christian (?) civilization of the age. When Carnegie proclaims in his "Gospel of Wealth" that the "best obtainable conditions of competition, accumulation and distribution" have been reached, he endorses every conceivable form of robbery practiced by unscrupulous scoundrels to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. He endorses the land pirates and their aiders and abettors; he endorses the men who organize trusts, whereby "great wealth inevitably flows" into the hands of the few; he endorses every form of corporate robbery and monopolistic greed; he endorses the inhuman scamps whom it would be a compliment to call burglars, who corner food products and make it more difficult for the poor to obtain a sufficiency of food in a land that boasts of its ability to feed the world; and this he calls the "Gospel (the glad tidings) of Wealth."

Mr. Allen Thorndike Rice,³ the editor millionaire of the *North American Review* — according to Carnegie — was immensely pleased with Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth.” Austin Corbin, the man who has Russianized a portion of Pennsylvania, was also doubtless delighted with Carnegie’s “Gospel,” and we reckon the devil himself became hilarious over it, and if he has a fire-proof bookcase, Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth” is doubtless one of his textbooks. Carnegie desires to pose before the world as a pious fellow — one of the tribe of Pharisees, who not only made “long prayers,” but at the same time “devoured widows’ houses,” and made the poor bend their backs to “burdens grievous to be borne.” Carnegie takes exceptions to Christ’s Gospel because it says “that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven” and “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” Carnegie, while asserting that the “Gospel of wealth but echoes Christ’s words,” endeavors to wriggle out of the tight place in which Christ’s words place him. He says:

Time was when the words concerning the rich man entering heaven were regarded as a hard saying. Today, when all questions are probed to the bottom and the standards of faith receive the most liberal interpretations, the startling verse has been relegated to the rear to await the next kindly revision as one of those things which cannot be quite understood, but which, meanwhile, it is carefully to be observed, are not to be understood literally.

It will be observed that Carnegie believes that it will be easier for him to get into heaven than for “a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” But Carnegie ought to remember that Christ did not take his view of beggars — he did not denounce beggars, he took pity on them; they excited his sympathy, and he wrought miracles to feed them. Carnegie, in his “Gospel,” takes no stock in beggars. “Of every \$1,000 spent in so-called charity,” Mr. Carnegie thought “\$900 was unwisely spent,” and Mr. Thorndike Rice made it “950,” and Carnegie revised his figures to suit the millionaire editor’s views. In this connection, as Carnegie says that his “Gospel of wealth but echoes

³ **C. Allen Thorndike Rice** (1851-1889), the son of a prominent publishing family, purchased the venerable *North American Review* for \$3,000 in 1876. A prominent Republican who had been tapped as the next Ambassador to Russia by President Benjamin Harrison, Rice died at the age of 37, shortly before Debs wrote this piece.

Christ's words," it may be well to give him some of "Christ's words" in which rich men and beggars are given special prominence, as follows:

There was a certain rich man which was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass that the beggar died and was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried, and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torment.⁴

Does Carnegie's "Gospel of wealth but echo" the foregoing words of Christ? or, have Christ's words, in this case, as in the "camel" and the "eye of the needle," been "relegated to the rear" to give Carnegie, Corbin, *et al.*, a chance to escape?

Carnegie may fare better than the rich man who "dressed in purple and fine linen," and who, under his changed condition, would have been delighted to have had a little cold water. We hope he will, but while he is posing as a philanthropist, *par excellence*, he might read Christ's gospel, and the Bible generally, with great benefit.

It is not a little amusing to note Carnegie's survey of "the best fields for philanthropy." He has seven fields, as follows: First, founding universities; second, free libraries; third, founding hospitals, medical colleges and laboratories; fourth, founding public parks; fifth, public halls for meetings and concerts of elevating music; sixth, providing swimming baths; seventh, erecting church buildings.

In maintaining that the foregoing are "the best fields for philanthropy," Carnegie spreads himself like a green bay tree — and it is well enough to comment, briefly upon such subjects. Carnegie admits that great wealth, colossal fortunes, should be administered for the best good of the community *in which* and *from which* it had been acquired. Carnegie calls it "surplus wealth." In acquiring it from a "community" it had been taken from the people. What people? From workers who alone create wealth, taken by processes as infamous as ever disgraced human affairs, taken by processes of robbery, tinder the laws and conditions and decisions that the best thinkers of the age, not anarchists, but statesmen, say must be changed if the liberties of

⁴ Luke, chapter 16, verses 19-23.

the people are to be preserved. Carnegie says the present "conditions are the best that are obtainable," and therefore "that great wealth must inevitably flow into the hands of the few exceptional managers of men." Let us see. Assuming for illustration, that in the present population of the country there are 15 million men dependent upon their daily wages for subsistence, and that on an average, wages, by present "conditions," are 50 cents a day below just compensation. In that case, "the few exceptional managers of men" would rob labor daily of \$7.5 million, or for 300 working days in the year, of \$2.25 billion. Suppose wages are 25 cents a day less than justice demands? In that case the annual robbery would amount to \$1.125 billion. Suppose the robbery to amount to 10 cents a day, and even at this low figure, "the few exceptional managers of men," would lie enriched, at the expense of labor, to the amount of \$450 million annually, and this stupendous infamy, Carnegie says is "inevitable;" and the toilers, having been robbed, having been subjected to poverty, hunger and dirt, having been reduced to rags, and compelled in thousands of instances to inhabit dens, Carnegie and millionaires of his ilk look around for "fields for philanthropy" in which to bestow their swag, and he thinks universities, swimming pools, and music halls, all bearing the name of the philanthropic millionaire, is the direction the boodle ought to take, and this is the outcome of Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth." It is to fill the land with paupers by robbery, reduce workmen to serfs, create conditions which compel men to work at such wages as "the few exceptional managers of men" decree, or starve; and then take the "surplus wealth" thus obtained and found universities, lay out public parks, decorate "swimming holes," etc., and tell the victims of the piracies to graduate, master Latin and Greek, walk in the parks, bathe, feed on wind, and shout: "Long live Carnegie!"

Such is not the order of exercises. Carnegie's program will proceed for a time, and then the audience will demand a change. It will come. "The exceptional managers of men," the "few" who have been the beneficiaries of the "inevitable flow" of wealth into their hands, will find the "flow" immensely reduced, and the rich men who rob will find themselves calling for "water." Their "Gospel of Wealth" will be "relegated to the rear," and a gospel of justice will be enthroned. It requires patience to read Carnegie's slush about the "right modes of using immense fortunes" known to be the product of cool, Christless robbery. To read his slush about using "enormous fortunes" so they "shall not have a degrading, pauperizing tendency," when it is known

that the accumulation was secured by “degrading and pauperizing” the men whose skill, sweat and toil created the wealth that made the “enormous fortunes” possible, indicates unparalleled impudence.

The program is to stop the “inevitable flow” of wealth into the hands of the “few” and introduce new methods of “distribution.” It will be done. The organization of workingmen is not a meaningless movement; it is not a holiday parade. It means business. “The best field for philanthropy” just now, is where men of intelligence and courage demand simple justice for workingmen, and the “Gospel of Work” will, at no distant day, supersede Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth,” and relegate it everlastingly to the rear.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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