

EDITORIAL

## “SIN AND SOCIETY.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

**T**HAT is the title of a brilliantly written little book by a brilliant man, Prof. Edward Alsworth Ross of the University of Wisconsin.

It is true that Prof. Ross is no Socialist; it is true that he is even anti-Socialist; it is true that his purpose is “to establish the righteous by lifting the plane of competition.” All this is sadly true. Yet the book is not borne down by the weight of these errors, seeing that the errors are stated merely as conclusions more or less sentimentally expressed, and not argumentatively sustained. In view hereof, the grand succession of otherwise brilliant thoughts, which the book is otherwise freighted with, lose none of their brilliancy; and, seeing these thoughts are so many stinging lashes administered to the economic and political powers that be, they can be used by the Socialist, who knows that competition can bear no ultimate fruit other than those lashed by Prof. Ross himself, however much Prof. Ross may indulge the vision regarding morality’s self-sufficient efficiency to disinfect material facts that are miasmatic.

As sample of these thoughts or lashes the following will serve.

“The man who picks pockets with a railroad rebate, murders with an adulterant instead of a bludgeon, burglarizes with a ‘rake-off’ instead of a jimmy, cheats with a company prospectus instead of deck of cards, or scuttles his town instead of his ship, does not feel on his brow the brand of a malefactor.”

Again:—

What an abyss between the knife-play of brawlers and the law-defying neglect to fence dangerous machinery in a mill, or to furnish cars with safety couplers!”

Again:—

"The confidence man is to the promoter what the small shopkeeper was to the merchant prince."

Again:—

"Secure in his quilted armor of lawyer-spun sophistries, the criminaloid promulgates an ethics which the public hails as a disinterested contribution to the philosophy of conduct."

Again:—

"The American people finds itself to-day in the position of a man with dulled knife and broken cudgel in the midst of an ever-growing circle of wolves."

Again:—

"As for the courts, they seem to have nothing but blank cartridges for the bigger beasts of prey."

Again:—

"Just as in the South the senseless agitation of the race question is delivering that section into the hands of the railroad corporations; just as in the Far West Mormonism is a red herring to drag across the trail of some iniquity when the public is hot on the scent; just as 'Catholicism in the schools' raises a dust behind which franchise grabbers can operate; so the divisions and cross-purposes of decent people give the sinner his chance to get away."

Again:—

"As successful law-breaker, the monopolist takes from us more than money: he takes away our ideals, leaving us more ape and less man."

It matters not that these and many more epigrams are shot at "monopoly," as though competition could lead any whither else. It does not even matter that Prof. Ross is so mistaken in his sociologic synthesis that he introduces his book with a letter from Theodore Roosevelt, the individuality that, more than any other one, has

contributed to the lowering of our ideals as a people and "leaving us more ape and less man." All that matters not. *Sin and Society* is a valuable contribution to the revolution-pitched literature of our days.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
Uploaded November 2012

[slpns@slp.org](mailto:slpns@slp.org)