

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: Democracy and City Government

By far the most comprehensive treatment of the question of municipal reform, from the capitalist standpoint, is that contributed to this month's issue of *The Cosmopolitan* by Mr. Edwin A. Curley.

Mr. Curley's argument, in a nutshell, is to the effect that the administrative unit should be the Election district; that its residents find there their nearest family interests centered; that it is of dimensions sufficiently small to give scope to democratic rule; that it should be made a political entity; and that then from the chosen representatives of all these units there would be composed "a city legislature which, as a whole, could not be corrupted."

This mode of reasoning, together with this essay, proceeds, more clearly than any of its genus, upon the principle—a principle that tacitly underlies all capitalist reasoning—that laws and institutions are original causes; that forms and methods are original sources; and that, according as these are framed,—and here again the tacitly underlying principle is that these laws may be framed at will—so will the government be pure or impure.

The philosophy of history teaches a different lesson. Laws are causes only in the sense and in so far as effects may and do react upon their causes: aggravating these if they are bad, promoting these if they are good. Laws are in themselves effects, not causes. That of which laws are effects is the system

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under which a commonwealth's production and distribution are carried on. If a commonwealth's system of production and distribution promotes general well-being, its laws will further promote this, and the final result would be popular purity which would inevitably be reflected in its legislature; if on the contrary, general distress and want and, what is equally bad, fear of want, are the result of the system under which production and distribution are carried, the laws will be inoperative to restrain popular impurity, and do what one may, the legislature will reflect the demoralized condition of such a commonwealth. Where the laws are democratic in form, this evil result will be only all the more visible; where they are aristocratic in form, it will be none the less there, but would be kept concealed in corners, ready to leap forward at any time.

Our system of production and distribution is not a breeder of well-being but of the reverse, consequently it is a breeder of corruption. And as democratic institutions only tend to cause popular corruption to blossom more fully in sight, to democratize our legislatures still more would, so far from having the effect of purifying them, render corruption among them still more tangible. It is a noticeable fact that our Presidents, who have the whole country for their constituency, and consequently are more on the oligarchic plan, are as a rule less visibly corrupt than our Congressmen; that our Congressmen, who have larger constituencies than our Assemblymen, and consequently stand on a less democratic plan, are less visibly corrupt than the former. To still further democratize the government, and make the small election district a unit, a constituency, would be to uncover the popular corruption still more. We would then have the corner bummers in office.

The feature of the capitalist system of reasoning, that of failing to perceive the *causa causans* in things, and to attribute causal powers to effects, always aggravates the ills it seeks to remedy, and moves further and further away from the path of reform.

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The capitalist system of production is the cause of popular misery and of the fear of misery; these results inevitably bring forth corruption. To end corruption, the capitalist system of production must be substituted with the Socialist system. Want and the fear of want would not then be. Then, and only then,—whether the political unit be the Election, the Assembly, the Congressional or even larger Districts—popular purity would be reflected in the purity of legislatures.

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