

EDITORIAL

AND THIS IS “ETHICS.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

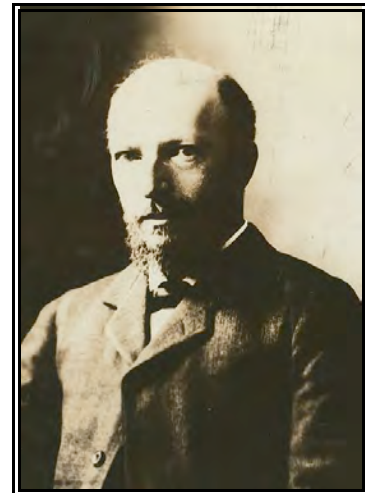
AMONG a collection of recent Sunday addresses, pronounced by Prof. Felix Adler before the Society for Ethical Culture and forwarded to this office, is one delivered on last January 14th at Carnegie Hall, in the course of which this passage occurs:

“The greatest evil of surplus wealth lies in the means of its accumulation.”

Not unless “ethics” spells “twaddle,” or unless “outrage” spells “ethics” is there any sense in such a passage, especially when reeled off an “ethical culture” platform.

“Surplus wealth” may mean two distinct things. It may simply mean an amount of wealth in excess of what is required—and then it should work no harm. It should be reason and signal for a wholesale vacation. The term, however, may also mean a superabundance of wealth in the hands of a privileged class, whose power to enslave the disinherited class is thereby magnified—and then the thing works evil. The connection in which the learned and ethical Professor used the term is obviously the latter. Obviously, there can be no evil, “greatest” or otherwise, in the first sort of “surplus wealth.” Evil being admitted to be detected in “surplus wealth,” the “surplus wealth” meant must be of the latter category, and the evil detected, and the evil “ethically” condemned, is not the power such wealth imparts to economic despotism, but the means by which such wealth is accumulated.

As well may our “ethical” apologists for capitalist guilt declare that “the



FELIX ADLER
(1851–1933)

greatest evil of murder lies in the taking away of life"; or, "the greatest evil of arson lies in the setting of property on fire"; or, "the greatest evil of forgery lies in the signing of another's signature"—as well may the modern debauchers of ethics and philosophy to the needs of capitalism say that as say that "the greatest evil of surplus wealth lies in the means of its accumulation." The reasoning would be as cogent; the subterfuge as transparent. Of course "the greatest evil of surplus wealth lies in the means of its accumulation," the implication, however, that surplus wealth can possibly be accumulated by means other than guilty is as viciously absurd, and absurdly vicious as would be the implication that murder, forgery or arson could possibly spring from ethical motives or acts.

"Surplus wealth"—that economic power lodged in the hands of one per cent of our people whereby this trifling minority can hold the mass of the population in subjection, and necessarily itself riot in all the crimes of the decalogue,—that wealth is unaccumulatable except by criminal means. The closing paragraph with which Marx sums up the genesis of the industrial capitalist—"if money, according to Augier, comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek, capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt"—applies literally to recurring "surplus wealth" down to our own days. Nor can any amount of incense, burnt around the monster, be the incense "atheistical" or "theistical," "Tammany" or "Ethical" or what not, remove or even conceal the blood, or down the stench the blood exhales, that "Surplus Wealth" comes into the world clotted with.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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