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ARTICLE

EASTERN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ITS BEARING ON AMERICAN LABOR.¹

By DANIEL DE LEON

Which I wish to remark—
And my language is plain—
That for ways that are dark,
And for tricks that are vain
The heathen Chinese is peculiar.
Which the same I would rise to explain.

That a poet of such deep penetration as Bret Harte was not likely to sacrifice sense to rhythm may be easily supposed. By the term “heathen Chinese” he meant not the denizen of the “Middle Kingdom” exclusively. There is more than one passage in the author’s short stories of Western pioneer life that indicates that the term was meant by him to cover the Eastern Asiatic in general; of course, the Japanese included—above all, that both the term and the poem, in this instance, were a bit of arch satire intended to sober up our Eastern (Western civilization) conceit, and thereby give timely warning to those who could take it. Poet satirists are not expected to be expert economists and sociologists. They give not reason for the faith that is in them: they have none to give. They project themselves into the future, lightly bounding over the intermediary steps. Slow-plodding Time comes limping up behind, and furnishes these steps. The following

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headlines and gists of news paragraphs that have appeared in American and European papers and magazines, the well-posted Paris *Revue des Deux Mondes* among the latter, since the sun-burst of Japanese might and genius in Manchuria, look at first blush like a chaotic jumble: “£75,000,000 secured in England by a Japanese promoter to establish manufacturing plants in Japan”; “Chinese boycott of American goods”; “The Japanese navy yards are now equipped to build and launch their own battleships”; “The Morgan syndicate received from China \$6,000,000 in consideration of its surrendering its railroad concession”; “In one month 29 ‘American’ mills were set up in Manchuria; they were ‘American’ only in original design; they were Japanese built and improved upon”; “The Chinese hostility to and suspicion of the Japanese is dying out fast; a large percentage of the students at the colleges of Japan, military and civil, are Chinese; Japanese drill-masters abound in the Chinese army, and also as administrative officers”; “A new national anthem has sprung up in China; it invokes the deity to raise China from subjection like a lion unfettered; it is sung like a hymn.” These headlines and passages be not a jumble. They are stepping-stones, or facts, or premises from which prose logic deducts conclusions, and arrives abreast of poetic flight.

Capitalist society is pivoted upon “production for sale.” Production for sale implies the existence of two classes—one that has taken and holds the necessities of production and, as a consequence, does not work; the other, the class from whom the necessities of production, together with the fruit thereof, have been taken and are held, and, as a consequence, must do all the work. Without going into all the other consequences of such a social system, as unnecessary to the subject in hand, one consequence it is well to grasp fully. In a measure, the development now going on in the Far East, as indicated by the above quoted passages from the press, may be termed “the Chinese-Japanese dust that comes from the American-European capitalist mud.” The particular consequence of capitalist society that must be grasped is that it smothers itself with its own goods. The working class, paid the pittance of wages for the plentiful wealth that it produces, can buy back but a small portion thereof. The surplus must find “foreign markets.” These foreign markets capitalist nations first seek to secure within one another’s boundaries. Effort in that direction is speedily blocked. “Tariff wars” mark the high-water line of the blockade

period. The congestion of wealth, originally affecting each capitalist nation separately, becomes international, spreads over them all like confluent small-pox. The “heathen’s” territory is thereupon jointly invaded. The outlet afforded relief. So successful were the “Christian” capitalists in their policy of intrigue, chicanery, rapine and even slaughter, applied to “heathen” nations, that they concluded the “heathen” was everywhere a providential article, placed there for the special purpose of enabling them to veil their one aspiration—the laying up of treasure on earth. Rendered giddy with blood and success in this direction, America-European capitalism forced open, fifty years ago, the doors of China and Japan. No chivalrous Spanish conqueror, in sight of the Incas’ or Montezuma’s glittering hoard, was more dazzled than was the vulgar American-European capitalist class at the vista of the illimitable Chinese-Japan “markets” that spread before their eyes and opened to their imagination. They chuckled and licked their chops. But they had overreached themselves. Many an American-European capitalist thinks to-day to himself, and if he does not yet, will soon do so: “Had we but let China and Japan alone!” If they had, they might have long, many, many more centuries been growing fat at the expense of other “heathens.” The Chinese-Japanese “heathen,” however, is typified in Bret Harte’s Ah Sin. Somewhere he was a “heathen” of a different calibre. While far behind in industrial development, there was behind his almond eyes a brain that could “see through the game.” He would have been happy to be let alone. Finding that was not to be, he quietly made up his mind not to be “heathened,” and to beat at their own game the American-European intruders, in turn, typified by Ah Sin’s adversary, Bill Nye. Japan took the lead and set the pace.

In the short space of this article details must be omitted. Suffice to say that Japan sent her best young men to European and American schools, colleges, technical, civil and military institutes. There they imbibed all the mechanical knowledge that capitalism had stored up. Laden therewith they returned home and unloaded. The result was instantaneous. Already by 1889 Japan had 35,000 spindles; ten years ago she had come up to 380,000; three years ago to a million. Hand in hand with this increase in capitalism, Japanese importations of raw materials, like cotton, increased by leaps and bounds from 31,000,000 pounds of raw cotton in 1889 to 67,000,000 in 1891, and to over 100,000,000 three years ago. Nor

did that, which this development theoretically indicates, remain absent—in even tempo with the increase of Japan’s importations of raw material did her importations of manufactured articles decrease, and her exportations of these manufactures to Asiatic markets, once controlled by American and European capitalism exclusively, increase. Ah Sin was quietly getting in his innings; the innings he, more lately, scored in Manchuria paralleled on the military and supplemented the innings that he was scoring on the industrial field; if even the first were phenomenal and the second startling, the innings that are imminent, and the shadows of which are cast before them by the press items already quoted, indicative of China’s having taken the Japanese contagion, may be expected to be phenomenally startling and startlingly phenomenal.

The conclusions, immediately deductible, from the preceding sketch, rough-drawn though it is, are obvious. No laws need be passed in the Eastern Asiatic nations to cause deep commotion in America. The tremendous impulse that capitalist production is taking in China under Japanese guidance will of itself act as a blockade against American goods. American-European capitalist mechanism, coupled to Chinese-Japanese patience, perseverance, genius and nimbleness, above all to a mass of ready-made proletarians, in such actual and immediately available numbers as to out-run the wildest cravings of the American capitalist class, will throw up manufactures in heaps so mountain-high that they will over-top the tallest high-tariff walls. None such would be needed in China and Japan. The outlet hitherto enjoyed by American goods, and the still broader and deeper outlet which Chinese-Japanese markets were expected to afford and upon which American capitalism was counting, will be cut off. England has been able to stave off labor troubles through the outlet of vast colonies. America has none such. With tariff wars by Germany, threatened ones from England, and, on top of all, China-Japan producing, to the extent that inevitably they will be producing, the blockade of American goods, is translatable into “industrial crisis,” probably also “financial panic” in America. The phenomenon will then be seen here, on a scale never seen before, of stores bursting with goods, and yet clothesless, shoeless, foodless workingmen; of mechanical appliances of first order and magnitude ready for operation, and millions of arms ready to operate them, yet one and the other

smitten lame.

The vista, opened by such a prospect, and due to the causes sketched above, points to a multitude of further possibilities. It is not merely Chinese-Japanese capitalism that is about to enter upon its stage of virility. The sense of outrages, long endured at the hand of American-European governments, has sunk deep in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. They have had the opium trade forced upon them; they have had their ports seized upon by the foreigner; the smirking missionary—the advance agent of the merchant, who, in turn, ever was the precursor of armed occupation—has chicaned under the pretext of Christianizing them. Under the plea that expatriation and emigration was a cardinal right of man, and a sacred duty of Christianity to safeguard, their territory was bombarded open by the combined gunboats of America and Europe, and yet, as the Tsen-li-Yamen derisively observed to the American diplomats who sought subsequently to negotiate treaties preventing the emigration of Chinese to America, “when the first treaty which you forced upon us was signed, you in America clapped your hands with joy, and now you are the first to try to escape its consequences, to abrogate it, and to violate what you called the ‘sacred right of emigration!’” America will be the first country with which Chinese capitalism, inspired by pent-up resentment, will settle old scores. Plugugly though Roosevelt is, it is no mere plugugliness that has recently caused him to hurry troops to the Philippines. The time is not yet for the clash. But the clash seems inevitable. American capitalist interests, wounded in their vitals by the economic development of China, will resort to the methods of old. It will not, then, be old China that will be assailed. The conflict will bear an aspect squaring with the new economic power of the “heathen.” When this happens Japan will be, can be, no neuter. Her recent treaty with Great Britain covers her back and flanks from the side of Russia. Our American “contract-made” navy, along with its blustering crew of admiralty incompetents, will be swept from the Pacific.

Will the working class of America require the experience of the working class and peasantry of Russia to disillusion us touching the invincibility, wisdom and virtues of our own ruling class? Or will they, before matters come so far, be amply disillusioned on those heads by their economic experience at home—an economic experience that the economic development in the Far East will have helped to bring

home to them? Will they have grasped the fullness of the meaning of the declaration in the preamble of the Industrial Workers of the World, to the effect that their lot is bound to be one of decreasing well-being until they shall have joined their forces on the political as well as on the economic field and dethroned the capitalist class, whose rule is one of combined unfitness and bestiality? The heavy, brooding clouds that are gathering over the head of the American working class from the opposite shores of the Pacific do not threaten us with an influx of Chinese or Japanese immigration. The economic development that those clouds are the condensed vapors of, will rather tend to keep the Chinese and Japanese at home. While these clouds are big with evil to us, or with good,—good, if we understand their cause; evil if we don't—the myriad Ah Sin is working out his own destiny—

Which is why I remark,
 And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark,
 And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinese is peculiar—
 Which the same I am free to maintain.

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

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