

SECRET SOCIETIES IN POLITICS.

Their Antagonism to the Spirit of Popular Government.

(Washington Edition of the October Century.)

All free government is based upon free discussion. The motive power is public opinion, and public opinion is formed by public debate, by an open canvass of all measures proposed and candidates nominated. No other method is safe. The whole community ought to be thoroughly informed respecting all questions of public policy. The sovereignty resides in the whole people; the attempt of a portion of the people to impose their will upon the rest without consulting them is simple usurpation. The majority may rule, but not until the minority has had a fair chance, in open debate, to traverse the arguments of the majority and to utter its protest. The attempt to control government through secret organizations is a flat repudiation of the fundamental principle of a free republic.

AFRAID OF TRUTH.

Such a secret organization confesses by its very existence its lack of faith in truth. Its purpose are evidently such as would not prosper in a fair debate. This will be found true, I believe, of all secret political societies. Take the case of the one which is now very much in evidence—the anti Catholic society known as the "A.P.A." Its oath binds its members to two practical measures; to disfranchise, so far as office holding is concerned, all Roman Catholics, and to prevent, so far as possible, all Roman Catholics from getting an honest living by their labor. It is evident that these measures would not bear discussion. Any organization which came before the public to advocate them would be overwhelmed with popular indignation. But by covering all the operations of the society with the veil of secrecy, and prevaricating about these oaths, multitudes of men are induced to support this scheme. What men would be ashamed to do in the daylight, they can be persuaded to do in the darkness. In politics it is always those whose deeds are evil who prefer darkness to light. The conclusion is irresistible that any political organization whose methods are secret is cherishing nefarious purposes.

Those who adopt the method of secrecy thereby confess their belief that the people outside their pale can not be trusted with the truth. Such a belief will lead to a frugal dispensation of the truth within the pale. No fair discussion will be allowed in the secret conclave; a species of terrorism will enforce unanimity and stifle dissent. Under such a regimen the most grotesque falsehoods can be propagated. Secret political societies are always marvelous disseminators of delusion. Statements which would be blown to the winds if they were made in public can be kept in active circulation for months through the agency of such societies. As vehicles for the distribution of cowardly slander and defamation nothing could be more effective.

THEIR MOCK DEFENSE.

The point of view of those persons who adopt these methods may be best gained by considering the replies which they make to criticisms like the above. It is certainly worth while to give careful heed to these replies. They throw light upon the problem before us. They show what kind of elementary instruction in political ethics is needed, just now, by a million or more of American voters. Let me state some of these defensive arguments as they have come to me, with such answers as they seem to require.

One querist wishes to know whether, in a game of chess, I am in the habit of informing the man on the other side of the board of the move that I intend to make. Another suggests that such societies as I have described are no more secret than an army; that

armies operate secretly, that they have counter-signs, and the like. Those comparisons probably indicate the conceptions which underlie most secret political organizations. The notion is that in civil society we are all seeking to beat one another in a stupendous game, or that we are natural enemies, arrayed against one another and trying to exterminate one another. It is true that there is much in current politics which is based upon one or the other of these notions. But it is, perhaps, worth while to try to comprehend that this is not the real foundation of civil society. Not to discuss the analogy of the game, let us consider the other similitude. It is true that an army engaged in war, does resort to concealment and stratagem; but what is the business of an army? Its business is killing people. Therefore, when war is proclaimed, many of the ordinary social and moral laws are set aside. *Inter arma silent leges.* Truth, the fair bond of society, is banished; falsehood, deception, trickery are weapons freely used. The state of war is not the normal state of human society; the normal relations of human beings are discarded and reversed when people go to war. It is this abnormal and unsocial state of war to which appeal is made for the justification of secret societies in politics. It must be admitted that they do conform exactly to that analogy, and this fact seals their condemnation.

THE BASIS OF SOCIETY.

What is the real basis of civil society? I will not suggest a very lofty idea of these relations; but to put the matter on the lowest possible basis, we may say that the people of any town or city are business partners. There is a great company or corporation, and we are all members of it. A vast amount of property is owned in common—the streets, the parks, the markets, the city buildings, the school-houses, the water works, and a great deal more. We are partners, also, in the business of keeping the peace, in the business of making the ordinances by which the city is governed in the business of choosing the officers, in the business of keeping the water and the air free from infection, and of making the city where we live a healthy and pleasant place of residence. The same kind of partnership exists with regard to the interests of the State and the nation. All these great interests are ours in common. It is only by co operating with one another intelligently and harmoniously that we can secure them.

What, now, would be the consequence if, in any great partnership concern, part of the members should stealthily combine, holding secret meetings, and plotting against others; trying to deprive some or all of their co-partners of their fair share of the gains or advantages; secretly scheming to prevent others from holding any official position or having anything to do with the management? Would it be good policy, in a business partnership, to encourage that kind of secret plotting of members against one another? Would not a company afflicted with such intestine warfare speedily go to pieces?

THE LOWEST CONCEPTION.

The lowest conception that any man can form of civil society is that which we are considering; and such secret leagues as now exist in this country, by which citizens of one way of thinking are conspiring to take away the advantages of citizenship from citizens of another way of thinking, and to deprive them, so far as they can, not only of their civil rights, but also of the means of existence, are destructive of the very foundations of society; they are not only anti-social, they are inhuman; they are attempts to lead society back toward barbarism and anarchy.

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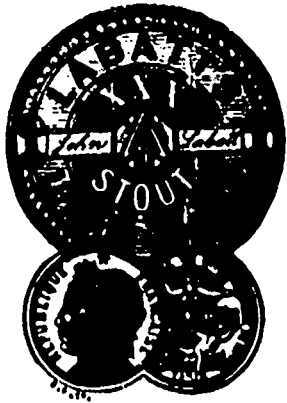


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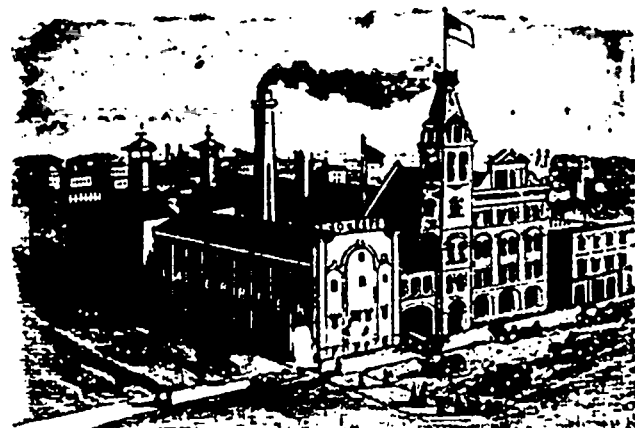
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