
Public Opinion

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The public is the people, not a faction or a fraction, but the general body of a state or community; and opinion is conviction, belief, settled judgment; hence public opinion is public conviction, belief, and judgment of all the people.

The assumption is that public opinion is always right; and if it could be shown that at any time the people were a unit in conviction, belief, and judgment upon any proposition whatever, the conclusion would necessarily follow that the proposition thus endorsed by public opinion was right. But public opinion being the judgment of fallible men, does not create an infallible standard for men who choose to investigate subjects which bear upon the welfare of individuals or communities.

A moment's reflection discloses the fact that public opinion is often a mere craze, the result of some hue and cry; that it is manufactured for the occasion by demagogues and knaves for a purpose, and that in its operations often inflicts the most serious calamities. Like a stream swollen by cloudbursts, it sweeps along, resistless for a time in its course, without the power to remedy the wrongs it inflicts.

Public opinion often, however, settles down in the advocacy and approval of the most flagrant errors; indeed, it is seen, not infrequently, supporting stupendous outrages upon human rights, discarding justice and clamoring for the supremacy of iniquities which blotch civilization and intensify men's distrust of this accredited factor in human affairs.

Notwithstanding such facts, society is so constituted that public opinion, not necessarily the opinion of the entire body of the people, but of a majority of the people in a state or community, must be respected. It is a force of great and unquestioned power, and, right or wrong, upon any given proposition, makes itself felt.

We have said that public opinion is often a mere craze, brought about by a hue and cry for or against individuals or organizations, laws and institutions. Men engage in agitation, in the press and pulpit, on the rostrum, at all times, in all places, and by every means in their power, to create public opinion or change public opinion, and this work and warfare goes forward ceaselessly. This agitation, right or wrong, is inherent in free speech, untrammelled discussion, and it has been said that errors, even though they be embodied in laws, cannot long exist when there is free speech and a free press to combat them. As a general proposition, we think such conclusions are supported by the facts, but it must be said that some errors are so antiquated and have had the endorsement of public opinion so long that to uproot them approximates the impossible. They appall the great body of men. Only heroic souls attack them, only men who dare martyrdom by challenging vastly superior forces, are the *avant couriers* of reforms. Such is history, and history is forever repeating itself.

Take, for instance, public opinion in the United States touching chattel slavery, a crime of unspeakable enormity. Sixty years ago, aye, a far less number of years in the past, and public opinion endorsed the stupendous iniquity. The church of God and His Son favored it. Federal and state legislatures enacted laws to perpetuate it. The press lent its power to sustain it. The great body of the people was a unit in its support. But a few intrepid men and women assailed the infernal wickedness; a sin that had come down to the nation from past generations. The assault upon the institution, from small beginnings, grew steadily in force. Men dared and died, still the grand work went forward. It culminated in the bloodiest war of all the centuries, but when the last bugle blast, calling men to arms, was blown, when the war drum was hushed to silence, and the battle flags were furled and 5 million slaves stood forth emancipated and free, behold, public opinion had changed, and now there is not one of our 65 million people to approve of conditions that existed as late as 1860.

In the days of chattel slavery the negro slaves worked for their masters, for which they received food, clothes, and shelter; their surplus earnings went to enrich their masters. The slaves owned no land, no houses, nor any other description of property. They toiled, multiplied, and died, and public opinion approved. But as we have said, public opinion changed, and the slave went free, and now thousands of them own land and houses and are educated, and they are striding

on to still better conditions, and public opinion favors the new departure.

What do we hear nowadays on every hand? This: the cry of white slavery; not chattel slavery, not of the slave block and pen, but of white men's huts, far worse than the old time slave quarters. We hear of squalor and degradation to which the average plantation slave was a total stranger. We hear of great industries being carried forward by men and women whose compensation decrees their degradation, as certainly as if Jehovah had thundered it from his eternal throne. There is no disputing the facts, nor are they disputed, and with reference to them, what can be said of public opinion? This: there are valiant men and women who are discussing the situation as they have opportunities, and are creating public opinion. Those who are engaged in robbing wage-toilers of just compensation, and are forcing upon them conditions against which human nature revolts, feel moderately secure in their strongholds. They have wealth; the same was true of the slaveholder. They have pulpit, press, and legislatures to approve their course; the same was true of the slave owner. But the wage toilers are agitating. They have a press, occasionally a pulpit, and of themselves they have an army of evangelists, who, in lodges and shops, are creating public opinion. The work is going grandly forward and emancipation day is drawing nigh.

There need be no misgivings about results. The fact that traitors, apostates, sneaks, and scabs are found here and there, identified with the armies of labor, is the old, old story, but they cannot impede the triumphant march. The plutocrats, whose purpose is to enslave white men, reduce them to helots, is to be defeated, defeated by the patience, intelligence, and patriotism of organized labor and a wise public opinion true to conviction, belief, and judgment, or it is to be defeated as was the purpose of the South to perpetuate chattel slavery. This nation cannot exist with 6,000 millionaires and 60 million slaves, white or black, and public opinion will, in due time, shape itself to the mighty issue.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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