



## The Social Unrest of the Soldier

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THE SOCIAL UNREST OF THE SOLDIER.<sup>1</sup>

RALPH M. EATON.

THERE has been a great deal of casting the white light of realism upon war now that the world has settled into a state of semi-peace. This was not fashionable during the War. It was defeatism. But now we are relieved of looking upon the bright side of things, and can add up accounts. The sentiments and emotions of the War are stale. People no longer care for them. They put them aside as hateful dreams and deceptions to be wiped from honest memories. The soldier has come back. For the most part the world has been sadly disappointed in him. It has recognized its idealization of him—its extravagant praise of heroism, devotion, sacrifice, consecration to the ideal, etc.—as a passing phase of its war psychosis. A popular novel announces in its foreword that, although it mentions the War, it “should not be dismissed, should not even be characterized as a ‘war book.’” This is an index to the temper of the age.

Mr. Procter in the *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHICS* for November speaks in this vein of disillusionment. After giving an admirable and realistic analysis of the soldier’s motives, he concludes: “My general verdict on war is that it leaves us infinitely poorer morally.” “War is the business of killing,” he says. “. . . War is the direct opposite of civilization and the direct opposite of morality.” He pictures the returned soldier as “drained emotionally” and as unfit to enter again into the peaceful business of society.

What Mr. Procter says of the returned soldier is true. The last two years have witnessed a steady process of pulling to pieces the war heroes. The idols have been found to have feet of clay. We hear no more of the regenerated

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<sup>1</sup> In reply to T. H. Procter, “The Motives of the Soldier,” in the *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHICS* for October, 1920.

soldier, of purgation by fire and sword, of the strange light of vision in the eyes of the men who have stood face to face with death. All this belongs to another age.

The returned soldier has consistently been the social misfit. In many cases he was unwilling to go back to his old job. He wanted something different, something new. If he did go back to his job, he was lazy; and often in the end he gave it up. A banker told me regretfully of a young man whom he had taken at fourteen and trained in the ways of office work and business success. The War ruined him. He stayed in the office only a month after he came back from France. He preferred to return to France without any prospect of business success, without even a means of livelihood. The men from the country were unwilling to stay on the farms. The returned soldiers flocked to the cities. It was evident that something had happened to the men who went through the baptism of fire; something which instead of uplifting them, made them unwilling and unfit, without great effort, to take their place in society. The many employment agencies and reconstruction bureaus often worked in vain at finding places for the soldiers. Business and industry are run on a profit and loss basis. They cannot take inefficient workers even if their services to their country do give them some claim to employment. The soldier became in a great many instances an object of charity. A Boston paper published recently the following announcement: "6,000 ex-service men and families of Greater Boston are depending upon Boston Metropolitan Chapter, American Red Cross, for help. Unless \$200,000 is raised our obligation to those who fought for us will be unfulfilled."

The extent to which the soldier has been willing to capitalize this obligation of society to him has been another noticeable feature of his post-war psychology. In both the United States and Canada the soldier has demanded a large bonus. He has become a thorn in the side of the politicians. Through ex-service organizations he can hold a club over some of the policies of nations. This is par-

ticularly true of the United States, where the American Legion is daily gaining strength.

The soldiers have created these powerful ex-service organizations for several reasons. First, they want to perpetuate the comradeship and solidarity which the War developed. Then, they want to wield some measure of control in the society for which they fought. There is also the very strong desire to uphold the feelings, the prejudices, and the cause for which they stood. It is this motive which has caused the American Legion to be on the reactionary side of almost every social issue. They are carrying on the war attitude. They are looking backward to the days when free speech was dangerous as giving succor to the enemy, when political opinions were punishable under the Espionage Act, when labor agitation stood in the way of winning the War.

But I believe that the most important of all motives in the formation of these ex-service organizations is a distrust of the society to which the soldier has come back. The soldier sensed that the society which was with him as long as he was fighting was likely to be against him when the War was over. Alone he would be powerless against the social order which would try to suck him in again. In union was strength to resist the pressure which must immediately be brought to bear upon him when he ceased to be a soldier.

What happened to the soldier? Why did he become a social misfit? Why did he distrust and fear the society for which he fought? I do not think that Mr. Procter's explanation is adequate. I do not think it is because he "is infinitely poorer morally" or because he is "drained emotionally."

The War was a release of social pressure in certain directions. At the same time it applied a much heavier military pressure in other directions. The return to civil life has brought about a readjustment of these pressures. But the complex tendencies to action which the War unchained, the restlessness, the adventurous spirit, the return to prim-

itive methods of life, are not so easily bound up. The soldier's life, having gathered an initial momentum in a new direction, refuses to go back into the old grooves.

It is usually supposed that this release of pressure which war brings about is an unchaining of the beast. "War is the business of killing." We hear of blood-lust, of cruelty, of a return to the savage state. This is as much a fiction as the belief in the soldier's regeneration. We have only to read such faithful accounts of the psychology of the soldier as M. Barbusse's "Le Feu" and Phillip Gibbs' "Now It Can Be Told" to see that men do not take pleasure in killing. Only in tales of horror does the Mr. Hyde lurk beneath the Dr. Jekyll. Blood-lust is an uncommonly rare motive to action in war. It was so rare in the British Army that the military authorities, who thought it ought to be present, set about stimulating it in a systematic way. Mr. Procter describes the gruesome dummies on which the Tommy was taught to exercise his hate and his bayonet. This absurd artificial cursing, hating, lusting, all for a piece of lath and sacking, which was so essential a part of the British training, proves that it is difficult to teach men to kill in cold blood. I doubt very much if blood-lust is one of the innate tendencies of human nature.

If it is not the brute, what is it that war unchains in men?

First of all, war sets a premium on human ingenuity and skill of all sorts. It is not a man-to-man struggle calling for simple pugnacity and hate and anger. It is an exceedingly complex game. It summons men's constructive and inventive instincts. Of course all the construction and invention is bent, in the end, towards destruction and waste.

You may answer that war demands invention of the officer but not of the private. The private is a part of the machine and needs neither to construct nor invent, but only to obey orders. This is not true. If the private does not plan a campaign or invent a new poisonous gas, he does use skill and ingenuity in many forms. At the front the soldier is a kind of Robinson Crusoe, the army a

kind of Swiss Family Robinson. The soldier must be a jack-of-all-trades. He must scheme continually to make himself comfortable and life livable.

This is a part of the struggle with the physical elements. Man is, perhaps, the most completely and successfully adapted of all creatures to his environment. He can survive under almost any physical conditions which exist on the earth. He inherits from his ancestors vast reserves of ingenuity, power, nervous strength, and nervous co-ordination which have enabled the race to endure in the struggle for life. War calls upon these reserves. In the exercise of them man discovers that he is continuous with the generations who battled against the seas in thirty-foot ships and with the pioneers who tamed the wilderness.

Above all, war stimulates the social instincts. It is a common undertaking, demanding such mutual support as no peaceful pursuit demands. The soldiers are forced into close, often disgusting contact; crowded into freight cars; piled like wood on barrack or dug-out floors; huddled into a single blanket or mudhole. They must learn to despise, to pity, and to help their comrades. There is no escaping into privacy. From this springs that comradeship, that interaction of the cells of the army organism, of which Mr. Procter speaks.

Then there is the *Wanderlust*. The soldier is always going somewhere, and always wanting to be anywhere except the place in which his lot, for the time, puts him. The psychologists do not recognize any instinct of roving. I suppose the desire for change, for movement, is akin to curiosity and the tendency to reach out and grasp. Let us call it a developed and conscious form of that restlessness with which the tentacles of certain sea animals roam about in search of food.

The tendencies to action of which I have been speaking showed themselves in a most marked way in the American Army. Mr. Procter observed the war-wearied Briton. His motives were somewhat different from those of the American.

The American Army was a young army. It suffered from the defects of youth. The current criticism of it in the European mind was its rashness, its desire to rush beyond its objectives, to take chances, and blindly to throw regiment after regiment when the chance failed. A German officer once in my hearing called the Americans "brave fools." But if the Americans were young, they were, for that very reason, nearer to the type of original human nature. They had none of the apathetic, *blasé*, "fed-up" attitude which characterized the Tommy; nor any of the cynical resignation of the *poilu*, who summed up his reaction to everything in the phrase "c'est la guerre." They were as crude as they were ingenuous; proud of their birthright, which they conceived as liberty—liberty to trample on French gardens and French sentiments. They were generous and impulsive; they hated deception and loved strong drink. I have heard more than one Parisian call them "*grandes gosses*." They were thrilled with the belief that the War was the great adventure.

The spirit of exploration, of curiosity, of entering into the unknown which poured through the soul of the American soldier, is, I venture to say, the first and one of the most powerful reactions of original human nature to war.

It is not difficult to agree with Mr. Procter that as a motive for joining the army it is sub-moral. It is true that this call of the wild brought only a small proportion of the recruits. In the long run the British Army was most effectively replenished by compulsion of one sort or another. In America there was almost no appeal to this motive. The draft act swept all the available men into the War whether they wished it or not. The difficulty of voluntary enlistment in most wars seems to prove the comparative weakness of the call of adventure. In reality it proves nothing of the sort.

Our safe and peaceful civilization with its manifold devices for preventing pain and inconvenience, with its industrial ruts, with its machine processes, places a tre-

mendous initial inhibition in the way of the adventurous spirit. We are discouraged from being rash. It is only the socially immature—the bright and irresponsible youth, or the primitive, underdeveloped man, who rushes to the colors in search of the great adventure. But remove the initial inhibition, burn the bridges, and place the man, by whatever means, on the road to war, and he will begin to be stirred by it. It will begin to be an adventure.

The spirit of adventure is only a very general name for that release of pressure and the outpouring of complex tendencies to action of which I have spoken. It is like going on a camping trip or taking a journey to the North Pole. We visualize ourselves doing primitive and difficult things, and about the whole hangs the mystery of the unknown and the joy of discovery. A brief enough joy in the case of war!

When this release is new, when all the liberated tendencies to action are feeling their way into consciousness, the soldier is, like the American, eager and rash. Very few of the Americans got enough of the War to be really fed up. To the old and tired armies of France and Britain, the edges of all these released tendencies were dulled by suffering. The spirit of adventure was a motive left very far in the rear—as far back as the variety theatres of London and Paris. Mr. Procter is, of course, correct in saying that the motives which sustained the soldier were the moral ones, and, more important still, the mechanical ones of discipline and habit.

Discipline is the military pressure. It acts in an essentially different way from the pressure of society in civil life. It is impersonal. It has no regard for the individual. It demands, above all things, obedience to orders. Its aim is to create reflex arcs which will lead to the performance of certain acts at certain times. The soldier must become so knit to his rifle, to his squad, and to his officer that he will function automatically when they function. But discipline only vaguely and in a general way cares what the soldier is, or what he does, so long as these things do not interfere

with the performance of the reflex acts which make him a part of the mechanism.

The soldier resents discipline strenuously enough when he is in the army. He understands that it is a restriction of his freedom. He knows that it has to some extent mechanized him. But when we readjust the pressure, take off the military inhibitions and put on the civil inhibitions, then the soldier begins to feel that life is cramped and small. He becomes Kipling's soldier:

“ Me that 'ave been what I've been, . . .  
 'Ow can I ever take on,  
 With awful old England again. . . .”

This is why the returned soldier is a misfit. To go from the trenches to an office desk, from the seat of a lorry bumping along shell-swept roads to a factory, to be chained to a machine instead of to a squad of seven other human beings—it is not by any means easy.

Who is to be blamed, the soldier or society? And are we to agree that it all comes about because war leaves the soldier “infinitely poorer morally”?

William James proposes a “moral equivalent for war” because he believes that all the energies which war releases could be diverted and conserved and made to do work for the good of mankind, just as the physical energy of heat can be transformed into its mechanical equivalent of work. “Modern war is so expensive,” says James, “that we feel trade to be a better avenue to plunder; but modern man inherits all the innate pugnacity and all the love of glory of his ancestors. Showing war's irrationality and horror is of no effect upon him. The horrors make the fascination. War is the *strong* life; it is life *in extremis*; war-taxes are the only ones men never hesitate to pay, as the budgets of all nations show us.”<sup>2</sup>

If war shows us that there are vast reservoirs of human energy which civilization does not tap, the unrest of the

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<sup>2</sup> James, Wm., “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in *Memories and Studies*, p. 269.

returned soldier proves another thing. Civilization cuts off and balks some of the most important human tendencies to action. The soldier's inability to fit into society is due in some sense to the failure of society to fit original human nature.

Modern industry and business are the best illustrations of what I mean. And it is in fitting into industry and business that the soldier finds most difficulty.

The deadening effect of machine processes upon the life of the worker has formed one of the most important chapters in modern social thought. In the factory there is little scope for creation or invention. The spirit of adventure, the desire for change and novelty, make poor, not good workers. Industry does not let out any of that spontaneous flood of energy. But suppressions turn into perversions, and the spirit of adventure finds its realization in schemes of sabotage, in visions of violence and revolution. The unrest of the laborer in the coal fields and steel mills is of the same genus as the unrest of the returned soldier. They are both signs of revolt against a civilization which pinches human nature.

What of the relation of men to men in business and in the factory? In business, competition is far more important than co-operation. Every one is for himself; the emphasis is distinctly not on the social motives. In the factory fraternizing among the workers curtails production; the boss is present to prevent sociability. In the great cities we are impressed with the cold contempt of class for class, and the intensity with which every individual strives to take advantage of every other individual. Our society is unsocial. There is very little of that "interaction among the cells" of the social organism which was comradeship in the army.

Mr. Procter cites the prevalence of strikes and labor troubles as proof of the fleeting nature of the fraternity which appeared in the War. What opportunity had this spirit to endure with the great individualistic machine of civilization waiting to swallow up the soldier? With the

stay-at-homes doing their best to force the soldier back into the old unsocial tracks of competition, class struggle, mutual fear and distrust—and calling him morally degenerated when he refused to stay where he was put—how could the *camaraderie* of the War hold up?

No. The returned soldier is not as good as he was for the purposes of modern society. But that is not because he has become a brute. He has not fallen away from human standards. Some of the blame rests with society. If war is inhuman, so is industry. And if, as Mr. Procter says, the real effect of war is that “it cheapens life,” so do modern business and the modern factory cheapen life. It is too often not life, but the material means to life which society values.

Let us not say that war is good. And on the other hand, let us not say that the civilization to which the soldier has come back is without stain. To be thrown out of adjustment to a very imperfect society is not to become a moral degenerate. Even if the returned soldier is a social misfit perhaps there is still a place for him in Heaven.

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- Page 1 of 1 -



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### **[Footnotes]**

#### <sup>1</sup> **The Motives of the Soldier**

T. H. Procter

*International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 31, No. 1. (Oct., 1920), pp. 26-50.

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