
Cause and Effect

by Eugene V. Debs

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The *Chicago Times*, some weeks since, published a communication “designed to prove that a sad harvest of ruin is to follow such scenes of splendor and misery are constantly recorded in the daily papers.” The *Times*, commenting upon what it is pleased to characterize the “earnestness and sophistry” of its correspondent, says:

Because a Vanderbilt wedding occurs at one end of a street and a mother dies of starvation at the other, it is argued that there is a direct connection between these events. Because the cost of a single one of 295 diamonds in a gift to the Vanderbilt bride would have saved the life of a starving woman, therefore the many who are poor must rise against the few who are rich and overthrow the law which protects all. There has been surfeit of such sophistries. They have been the stock in trade of visionary would-be reformers who lace the capacity of logical thought and readily assume that because two events have been coincident they have also stood to each other in the relation of cause and effect.

Well, what argument within the entire range of logic has been or can be formulated to prove that the circumstances related by the *Times* did not “stand to each other in the relation of cause and effect?” The *Times* seeks to dismiss the statements of its correspondent as “senseless prattle” rather than bestow upon them the consideration their gravity merits. The communication refers to a diamond wedding gift and on the same day the death of a starving woman, and thereupon constructs an argument of cause and effect. The *Times* admits that the money squandered by the over-rich in New York would temporarily relieve the distress of the poor in that city; but, says the *Times*,

“it is also true that if every dollar spent by the Vanderbilts and other wealthy residents of New York were thrown into the lap of poverty, there would still be those in the slums of the metropolis dying in hunger and want. Nero fiddled while Rome burned, but there was never a serious pretense that fiddling burned the ancient city. If there be truth in history it may be accepted that not all the wealth of Nero poured out for the benefit of the populace would have saved the city from destruction. There had been causes at work for years which led up to the destruction of the Roman empire. In some respects they produced results akin to that rapid concentration of wealth which alarms observers of social progress in these days. But because the people of Rome knew not how to restore to the people their stolen rights, and because their failure was followed by scenes of rapine and desolation, it will not do to say that civilization has not progressed and that mankind are to pursue folly to their ruin after so many centuries of experience.”

In the foregoing the *Times* pays a high compliment to its correspondent — virtually admitting the assumption that the splendor at one end of the street in New York caused the starvation and death at the other end of the street. Nor could the *Times* have more cogently demonstrated cause and effect than by introducing Nero and his fiddle, and the conflagration of Rome.

Manifestly, the causes that produced Nero, and the condition of Rome in the time of that monster, were remote — but the logic of cause and effect is not weakened thereby. The wealth, the corruption, the ignorance and debaucheries of Rome, it is well said, are not unlike the condition of things in New York, and unfortunately in other cities, and still more unfortunately, over vast areas of the United States. The result in Rome was the destruction of the Roman empire; and just here comes in the plea of the *Times* — virtually admitting all that its correspondent affirms. It refers to our “civilization” as able to save the United States **<rest of line**

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...at the other there is squalor, starvation, and death. The virus is spreading in all directions. The Vanderbilts, the Astors, and the rest fiddle while the poor groan and die. Our “civilization” proceeds — our “experience” is absolutely worthless — finally the conflagration, or, if it does not occur, it must be because the working millions of

America will that it shall not occur — because by their fiat, *vox populi, vox Dei*,¹ the wealth at one end of the street shall be distributed that there shall be plenty, happiness, and contentment at the other end of the street, because the people in their sovereign majesty shall introduce new causes to produce more salutary effects.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ “The voice of the people, voice of God.”