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EDITORIAL

IS PALO ALTO SO FAR AWAY FROM NEW YORK?

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THE “Case of Prof. Ross” is taking unexpected developments: From being a mere local affair, it has become national; from being purely personal, it has gathered body and grown into a fact that sheds light upon “the other side of contemporaneous history” and the makers thereof.

As is well known, Prof. Ross taught political economy at Leland Stanford University, Palo Alto, Cal. During recent campaigns he uttered himself favorable to free silver, hostile to coolie immigration, and favorable to the Glasgow style of municipalization of street cars. The Dowager Stanford, sole proprietress of the University, did not share her employee’s views. A member of the Upper Plutocracy herself, she liked no silver “in hers”; an importer of coolies herself, as being more pliable and cheaper than American Labor, she saw and took offence at the “slur at her patriotism” implied in the opposition to coolie immigration; a holder of stock in street car companies, she felt her interests, as a direct exploiter of Labor, endangered by the suggestion of even the Glasgow system of indirect exploitation. The upshot was that the lady put down her foot, and Prof. Ross was dismissed.

If left there, the incident would have nothing particular about it. What difference is there between the mistress of an establishment dismissing her cook, or her gardener, and her dismissing her professor? Indeed, in so far as the Plutocracy itself was concerned, the incident could, and did bid fair to be turned into its favor: Wrong, as a rule, finds shelter behind the deeds it commits, provided the deeds are assailed on purely sentimental grounds, and thereby the matter-of-fact groundwork of Wrong is kept dark. It was thus in this instance. The sentimentalists took up the “Case of Prof. Ross,” and the more hysterically they howled, all the safer were the Plutocratic interests that had blossomed in his dismissal. But all this has now come to an end by the bungling conduct of a committee of a body that calls itself “American Economists,” backed by the New York *Evening Post*.

The society of “American Economists” consists of professors of political economy and kindred topics in the Universities of the land; they are, accordingly, the professorial police, that, day and night, watches the interests of the Capitalist Class, or Plutocracy. They are picked men, guarding the matter-of-fact Wrong of modern society with “intellectual” night-sticks. Of all men, these should have been the last to throw upon the sentimental outcry anent Prof. Ross the light that, by rendering it intelligent, rendered it practical, and, consequently, exposed to view the Wrong that they are the special guardians of. These “American Economists” met last December in Detroit; they were tactless enough to meddle with the “Case of Prof. Ross”; not satisfied with that, they put their foot into it still deeper by appointing a “committee to investigate the matter,” and capped their tactlessness by placing at the head of the committee a professor of Columbia University; thereupon this committee, no doubt partaking of the giddy-headedness of school girls rendered dizzy by a trust conferred upon them, wholly lost their heads, investigated, and published their findings condemning Mrs. Stanford and taking their stand by “academic freedom of speech,”—over the signature of the Columbia University professor. And the New York *Evening Post* ties the knot of this bungling proceeding by editorially adopting as its own the declaration that “no graver charge can be made against a University than that it denies its professors freedom of speech.” If the taking of such a stand by the “American Economists” would have been quite enough of a “give-away,” the placing of a Columbia University professor and the New York *Evening Post* as conspicuous supporters of such a stand becomes a “dead give-away” for Plutocratic interests.

The Mayoralty campaign of 1886 in this city witnessed the first sign of intelligence in the discontent of the working class. Strikes had failed, and the workers turned their minds in a body, as a working class, towards the hustings. It was the first glimmer of class-consciousness. An instructor and member of faculty at Columbia University, in the plenary exercise, not of freedom of speech only, but of the freedom of political activity, joined that Labor Movement. Forthwith the authorities of that identical Columbia University acted as if seized with an attack of St. Vitus’ Dance; the “culprit” was “hailed up;” etc., etc. Had that institution been wholly private property, like the Leland Stanford University, dismissal would have been instantaneous; but the upshot was the same, in the end. And in the meanwhile, of all the capitalist papers in this city, which was the one that expressed itself positively scandalized at the idea of one connected with Columbia

University daring to indulge in free speech and freedom of political conduct?—why, that identical *Evening Post*!

One is accustomed to the spectacle in New York of Irish landlords, anyone of whom dispossesses in one year more Irish tenants than a whole batch of English “absentee landlords” do in Ireland, appearing on the public platform and indignantly denouncing the English outrages committed in Ireland. Ireland is far away: the wrong done there may here be denounced with impunity. Is Palo Alto also so far away from New York?

No! That is not it. And herein lies the deep significance of a Columbia University professor plus an *Evening Post* vying with each other in denunciation of the denial of free speech to Prof. Ross.

What if Prof. Ross advocated free silver? What if he opposed coolie immigration? What if he fancied municipalizations on the Glasgow plan? What of it? The class-conscious capitalist of strong nerve is not upset by that: He knows that the free silver craze was the death-rattle of the dying Middle Class; he knows that the coolie can be got to supplant the American workingmen, without fetching him here, by grabbing the Philippine Islands and “opening the door” in China, or annexing Hawaii, or better yet, doing all the three things; and as to Glasgow municipalization plans, the level-headed capitalist knows that there are few toys better calculated to humor “reform” with. Accordingly, free speech in behalf of these ideas should not only not be curbed, it should be encouraged. It acts as a safety valve, and never can put in jeopardy the social system founded on the fleecing of the toilers by the idlers.

Wholly different was the case with free speech during the Mayoralty campaign of 1886. The class-conscious capitalists discounted the Georgeism of that movement. They rightly saw in the movement the first symptom of real danger to their dastardly rule. With its pen still quivering with the suggestion of wholesale murder, implied in the motto “the rifle diet for the working class,” the *Evening Post* shook with rage, and the capitalist interests, that then as they do now, ran Columbia University, felt instinctively the cold iron enter their superfluous souls when the working class of this city, uncowed by police clubbings and Barrett Court decisions, turned their thoughts, as a class, towards the hustings and thereby took the stand—never since abandoned, and to-day fully represented by the Socialist Labor Party,—that the Capitalist Class must, can, and shall be overthrown. That sort of free speech, running along the lines of social evolution and drawing its sap from the

fountain head of science, was a “horse of a different color;” that sort of free speech was intolerable,—and remains so.

The *Evening Post* and its Columbia University professor bungled badly when they took a stand, that can deceive only the idiots, and the only lasting service of which can but be to clarify the line that marks the boundaries between Tomfoolery and Seriousness, between safe and unsafe free speech.

This is the latest, certainly a valuable development in the “Case of Prof. Ross.”

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