AN AGE OF SPECIALISATION

There is something of the phonograph in all of us, but in the sort of eminent person who makes public speeches about education and reading, and who gives away prizes and opens educational institutions, there seems to be little else but gramophone.

These people always say the same things, and say them in the same note. And why should they do that if they are really individuals?

There is, I cannot but suspect, in the mysterious activities that underlie life, some trade in records for these distinguished gramophones, and it is a trade conducted upon cheap and wholesale lines. There must be in these demiurgic profundities a rapid manufacture of innumerable thousands of that particular speech about "scrappy reading," and that contrast of "modern" with "serious" literature, that babbles about in the provinces so incessantly. Gramophones thinly disguised as bishops, gramophones still more thinly disguised as eminent statesmen, gramophones K.C.B. and gramophones F.R.S. have brazened it at us time after time, and will continue to brazen it to our grandchildren when we are dead and all our poor protests forgotten. And almost equally popular in their shameless mouths is the speech that declares this present age to be an age of specialisation. We all know the profound droop of the eminent person's eyelids as he produces that discovery, the edifying deductions or the solemn warnings he unfolds from this proposition, and

all the dignified, inconclusive rigmarole of that cylinder. And it is nonsense from beginning to end.

This is most distinctly not an age of specialisation. There has hardly been an age in the whole course of history less so than the present. A few moments of reflection will suffice to demonstrate that. This is beyond any precedent an age of change, change in the appliances of life, in the average length of life, in the general temper of life; and the two things are incompatible. It is only under fixed conditions that you can have men specialising.

They specialise extremely, for example, under such conditions as one had in Hindustan up to the coming of the present generation. There the metal worker or the cloth worker, the wheelwright or the druggist of yesterday did his work under almost exactly the same conditions as his predecessor did it five hundred years before. He had the same resources, the same tools, the same materials; he made the same objects for the same ends. Within the narrow limits thus set him he carried work to a fine perfection; his hand, his mental character were subdued to his medium. His dress and bearing even were distinctive; he was, in fact, a highly specialised man. He transmitted his difference to his sons. Caste was the logical expression in the social organisation of this state of high specialisation, and, indeed, what else is caste or any definite class distinctions but that? But the most obvious fact of the present time is the disappearance of caste and the fluctuating uncertainty of all class distinctions.

If one looks into the conditions of industrial employment specialisation will be found to linger just in proportion as a trade has remained unaffected by inventions and innovation. The building trade, for example, is a fairly conservative one. A brick wall is made to-day much as it was made two hundred years ago, and the bricklayer is in consequence a highly skilled and inadaptable specialist. No one who has not passed through a long and tedious training can lay bricks properly. And it needs a specialist to plough a field with horses or to drive a cab through the streets of London. Thatchers, old-fashioned cobblers, and hand workers are all specialised to a degree no new modern calling requires. With machinery skill disappears and unspecialised intelligence comes in. Any generally intelligent man can learn in a day or two to drive an electric tram, fix up an electric lighting installation, or guide a building machine or a steam plough. He must be, of course, much more generally intelligent than the average bricklayer, but he needs far less specialised skill. To repair machinery requires, of course, a special sort of knowledge, but not a special sort of training.

In no way is this disappearance of specialisation more marked than in military and naval affairs. In the great days of Greece and Rome war was a special calling, requiring a special type of man. In the Middle Ages war had an elaborate technique, in which the footman played the part of an unskilled labourer, and even within a period of a hundred years it took a long period of training and discipline before the common discursive man could be converted into the steady soldier. Even to-day

traditions work powerfully, through extravagance of uniform, and through survivals of that mechanical discipline that was so important in the days of hand-to-hand fighting, to keep the soldier something other than a man. For all the lessons of the Boer war we are still inclined to believe that the soldier has to be something severely parallel, carrying a rifle he fires under orders, obedient to the pitch of absolute abnegation of his private intelligence. We still think that our officers have, like some very elaborate and noble sort of performing animal, to be "trained." They learn to fight with certain specified "arms" and weapons, instead of developing intelligence enough to use anything that comes to hand.

But, indeed, when a really great European war does come and lets loose motor-cars, bicycles, wireless telegraphy, aeroplanes, new projectiles of every size and shape, and a multitude of ingenious persons upon the preposterously vast hosts of conscription, the military caste will be missing within three months of the beginning, and the inventive, versatile, intelligent man will have come to his own.

And what is true of a military caste is equally true of a special governing class such as our public schools maintain.

The misunderstanding that has given rise to this proposition that this is an age of specialisation, and through that no end of mischief in misdirected technical education and the like, is essentially a confusion between specialisation and the division of labour. No doubt this is an

age when everything makes for wider and wider co-operations. Work that was once done by one highly specialised man--the making of a watch, for example--is now turned out wholesale by elaborate machinery, or effected in great quantities by the contributed efforts of a number of people. Each of these people may bring a highly developed intelligence to bear for a time upon the special problem in hand, but that is quite a different thing from specialising to do that thing.

This is typically shown in scientific research. The problem or the parts of problems upon which the inquiry of an individual man is concentrated are often much narrower than the problems that occupied Faraday or Dalton, and yet the hard and fast lines that once divided physicist from chemist, or botanist from pathologist have long since gone. Professor Farmer, the botanist, investigates cancer, and the ordinary educated man, familiar though he is with their general results, would find it hard to say which were the chemists and which the physicists among Professors Dewar and Ramsey Lord Rayleigh and Curie. The classification of sciences that was such a solemn business to our grandfathers is now merely a mental obstruction.

It is interesting to glance for a moment at the possible source of this mischievous confusion between specialisation and the division of labour. I have already glanced at the possibility of a diabolical world manufacturing gramophone records for our bishops and statesmen and suchlike leaders of thought, but if we dismiss that as a merely elegant trope, I must confess I think it is the influence of Herbert Spencer.

His philosophy is pervaded by an insistence which is, I think, entirely without justification, that the universe, and every sort of thing in it, moves from the simple and homogeneous to the complex and heterogeneous. An unwary man obsessed with that idea would be very likely to assume without consideration that men were less specialised in a barbaric state of society than they are to-day. I think I have given reasons for believing that the reverse of this is nearer the truth.

IS THERE A PEOPLE?

Of all the great personifications that have dominated the mind of man, the greatest, the most marvellous, the most impossible and the most incredible, is surely the People, that impalpable monster to which the world has consecrated its political institutions for the last hundred years.

It is doubtful now whether this stupendous superstition has reached its grand climacteric, and there can be little or no dispute that it is destined to play a prominent part in the history of mankind for many years to come. There is a practical as well as a philosophical interest, therefore, in a note or so upon the attributes of this legendary being. I write "legendary," but thereby I display myself a sceptic. To a very