

Ralph Waldo Emerson on Wealth and Economic Materialism

Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson has not only influenced the literature of America but also the humanitarian and reformatory studies of the world as he was pivotal in bringing about reformation in the society from its root level through his various lectures, addresses and essays. Emerson has made his mark not only in literature but also in religion, philosophy and social reform. His philosophy of transcendentalism inspired American idealism and instilled among its people a spirit of reform. He was criticized for his views on God and Christianity but he still preached against the orthodoxy of the religion. He believed in universal harmony and brotherhood. This article is a critical analysis on his views on wealth and economic materialism. Even though Emerson wanted every individual to possess some amount of money yet he was against the growing materialism and capitalistic importance that people attached, and this capitalism gradually seemed to have controlled America's social psyche.

Keywords: Wealth, Power, Property, Laissez Faire, Free Trade.

Introduction

Even though Emerson was not petrified of the evils present in the society yet he was keenly aware of its presence. The abundant reference in his writings to the social evils of nineteenth century, especially economic greed and materialism make it clear that the position taken by critics like Santayana who thought that to Emerson "the universe is perfect above our querulous tears" (Henfrey 124) is unjustifiable. Emerson was aware that in his age mankind gave emphasis to incorrect things and hence required reform and readjustment. But his Unitarian background prevented him from joining hands with the social reformers of the age to battle with the external social evils. In his article "The Rise of Transcendentalism, 1815-1860" Professor Alexander kern points out that the Transcendentalists sought to improve man but there was no agreement on the means required to improve them. But four different techniques were suggested which were: legislation of improvement, through voluntary association and education to self-reform and individual action. Emerson considered education to play a pivotal role in bringing about an improvement in man and at the same he emphasized on self-reform and individual actions too as he believed that legislative or outward reform would have no effect if man does not reform himself from within.

Review of Literature

A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (2011) by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk discusses Emerson's various political writings. The book has opened up new avenues for the scholars to focus on Emerson as a political writer and has debunked the myth that Emerson is just concerned with "individualism". This book re-evaluates Emerson as a political theorist. *Emerson and the Climates of History* (1997) by Eduardo Cadava brings together a wide range of information from history, religion, philosophy and politics to assert that Emerson expresses his understanding of history through the language of the weather. Like the weather, Emerson's writings happen with the pattern of the atmosphere in the society. *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* (1995) by Christina Zwarg bring forth the relationship between Emerson and Fuller in which the author renews the feminist conversation that had been missed earlier. In Zwarg's opinion, the personal yet controlled letters between the two writers is very important to face the challenges presented by gender and desire. In this book, Zwarg gives a thorough reading of Emerson's letters to Fuller.



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Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to bring forth Emerson's views on wealth. His essay 'Wealth' appeared in his collection of essays "The Conduct of Life" published in 1860. His essay gives a two-sided view on possessing wealth. On the one hand, he praises the America's free market economy while on the other he criticizes the consumer-capitalism in the society. This is mainly because he was a witness to the horrors of slavery that was brought about by the cotton manufacturers. He also wants that man should possess some amount of wealth as poverty always has a demoralizing and depressing power on men.

Emerson has often referred to the economical problems in his lectures and writings even though he was not primarily interested in it. He believed that the subject of economy often mixes itself with morals and that "true political economy is not mean, but liberal and on the pattern of the sun and sky" (152; vol.6). His views on economic question have caused a disparity between critics. On one hand some accuse him as a rank materialist and on the other he is praised enthusiastically as a great idealist. Lucy Hazard, for instance, in her book *The Frontier in American Literature* refers to Emerson's support of frontier individualism and believes him to be a friend "of those who want to annex a territory or corner a market" (152) V.F. Calverton in his *The Liberation of American Literature*, likewise considers that "the philosophic idealism embodied in the doctrine of self-reliance was but a subtle camouflage, however unconscious for the petty bourgeois materialism which was concealed beneath its inspiration". (254). Vernon Parrington and William Charvat, on the other hand, believed that Emerson was one of the most ardent critics of American materialism.

William M. Salter in his article *Emerson's Views of Society and Reform* states that: Emerson had no prejudices against wealth. He said, "Man is by constitution expensive and needs to be rich." He liked the merchants he met with in his lecture-trips to the West- they seemed to have more manly power of all kinds, he remarked, than scholars. At the same time he thought the question of how wealth was got, legitimate. He could not agree to our American contraction of ethics to the one duty of paying money- so that if you pay it, you may play the tyrant at discretion and never look back to the fatal question, Where had you the money that you paid? Wealth got by denying freedom stirred him to the core. (415)

Emerson's approval of the acquisition of wealth and property and his adoration for the frontier spirit may seem materialistic on surface but a close study of his lecture on "Wealth" exposes his approach to economic problems was idealistic and moral. Wealth is always interesting, "since from wealth power cannot be divorced," Emerson states in his lecture on "Boston". In his Lecture on "Wealth" in *The Complete Works* he argues:

Poverty demoralizes. A man in debt is so far a slave, and Wall Street thinks it easy for a millionaire to be a man of his word, a man of honor, but that in failing circumstances no man can be relied on to keep his integrity. And when one observes in the hotels and

palaces our Atlantic Capitals, the habit of expense, the riot of the senses, the absence of bonds, clanship, fellow feeling of any kind- he feels that when a man or a woman is driven to the Wall, the chance of integrity are frightfully diminished as if virtue were coming to be a luxury which few could afford, or, as Burke said, "at a market almost too high for humanity". (90-91; vol. 6)

Emerson believed that amassing wealth is desirable as it secured a man's independence and protected him from moral demoralization. Wealth is also a sign of man's power and domination over the material world. Franklin had also held the similar thought that a man cannot be morally strong if he has no money. Emerson observes:

To be rich is it to have a ticket of admission to the master-works and chief men of each race. It is to have the sea by voyaging; to visit the mountains; Niagara, the Nile, the desert, Rome, Paris, Constantinople; to see galleries, libraries, arsenals manufactories ... The world is his who has money to go over it. He arrives at a sea-shore and a sumptuous ship has floored and carpeted for him the stormy Atlantic and made it a luxurious hotel, amid the horrors of tempest. (94-95; vol. 6)

According to Emerson, the desire to be moderately rich is legitimate. His self-reliant individualism prompts him to view wealth as a sign of man's independence, industry, thrift and intelligent application of man to nature. He observes: "Success consists in close appliance to the laws of the world, and since those laws are intellectual and moral, an intellectual and moral obedience. Political Economy is as good a book wherein to read the life of man and the ascendancy of laws over all private and hostile influences, as any Bible which has come down to us" (100-101; vol.6).

Emerson's optimism, fostered by his faith in an all pervading, conscious law of beneficent force was reinforced by the frontier spirit which was abundantly evident in the America of his time. Mr. Marchand in his article "Emerson and the Frontier" argue that "Emerson found concrete, material basis for optimism in the amazing natural wealth of America with its resultant stimulus to the energy, ingenuity and enterprise of the people" (Ramakrsnaravu 88). Emerson welcomed the rail-road as it gave the Americans an increased acquaintance with the boundless resources of their own soil. America became another word for opportunity and "manifest destiny" stood for "the sense, all men have of the prodigious energy and opportunity lying idle here." (299; vol. 11)

Even though Emerson often spoke of the benefits and importance of wealth and believed that the expanding frontier offered the Americans to practice self-reliant individualism, he was by no means blind to the mindless materialism of the very rich. At first, Emerson concentrated his attack on the uneducated masses who blindly supported Jackson and Van Buren and next by 1840 he began to show doubts about the integrity of the wealthy groups as well. He writes in *The Journals*: "Jackson party is the Bad party in the cities in general in the country- except in secluded districts where a single newspaper has

deceived a well disposed community" (356-357; vol. 3). He finally concluded in his Journal that the Democratic Party had the best cause and the Whig had the best men.

Emerson condemned the New England financiers and cotton manufacturers as "Cotton Whigs" when they supported slavery to protect their investments. In 1854, Emerson on noticing the tendency of the rich to sacrifice just principles to protect their interests wrote:

The lesson of these days is the vulgarity of the rich. We know that wealth will vote for the same thing which the worst and meanest of the people vote for. Wealth will vote for rum, will vote for tyranny, will vote for slavery, will vote against the ballot, will vote against international copyright, will vote against schools, colleges or any high direction of public money.(449; vol. 8)

Discussing the worth of a dollar in his lecture on "Wealth" Emerson states that a dollar is not a value but representative of moral value. Money not only buys food and shelter but also culture and hence wealth is also mental and moral. The value of a dollar lies in buying well chosen items that can enlarge cultural opportunities. Further, money should be invested in just and fair items. Hence he writes in *The Complete Works*:

A dollar is not value, but representative of value, and, at last, of moral values. The value of a dollar is, to buy just things; a dollar goes on increasing in value with all the genius and all the virtue of the world. A dollar in a university is worth more than a dollar in a jail; in a temperate, schooled, law-abiding community than in some sink of crime, where dice, knives and arsenic are in constant play. (103; vol.6)

It should also be noted that Emerson's lecture on "Wealth" does not end on the material value of riches but with the philosophical thought that money should be spent on a higher plane. It should be invested in such a manner that it expands cultural and spiritual development of a person. Emerson recognized the importance of wealth hence he suggested to use it rightfully and denounced the immoral greed of the middle class which was slowly growing in America. Emerson regretted the fact that individuals grew in power and money but their moral progress was stunted.

Alexander Kern shows that Emerson believed in the laissez faire concept of Expansionism where the transactions between private parties are free from government interventions such as regulation, privileges, tariffs and subsidies. His faith in laissez faire and free competition is based on his doctrine of the harmonious correspondence, between the physical and the ethical and between physical and metaphysics. Emerson's support to the theory of laissez faire is based on his Individualism. He tells in his "Speech at the Kansas Relief Meeting" in Cambridge on September 10, 1856 that "I own I have little esteem for governments ... I set the private man first" (258; vol.11). In his lecture on "Wealth", he explained clearly his belief in the concept of laissez faire. He stated:

Wealth brings with it, its own checks and balances. The base of political economy is non-interference. The only safe rule is found in the self adjusting meter of demand and supply. Do not legislate. Meddle and you snap the sinews with your sumptuary laws. Give no bounties, make equal laws, secure life and property and you need not give alms. Open the doors of opportunity to talent and virtue and they will do themselves justice, and property will not be in bad hands. In a free and just commonwealth, property rushed from the idle and imbecile to the industrious, brave and persevering.(105-106; vol.6)

Because of his belief in the doctrine of laissez faire, Emerson opposed tariffs that were enforced. He opposed the heavy fine that was imposed on the growers of tropical fruits. He believed that America will progress economically if free trade is continued rather than imposing norms by the government. He recognized that free trade was certainly the interest of the nation. Hence he writes in *The Journals*: "free trade with all the world, without toll or custom-house" (228; vol.10)

Even though Emerson believed in the system of laissez faire and free trade but if he was given a choice he would have undoubtedly preferred the agricultural state to the industrialized one. In 1840, he wrote to his brother William: "I am grown a little impatient of seeing the inequalities all around me, am a little of a agrarian at heart and wish sometimes that I had a smaller house or else that it sheltered more persons" (*The Emerson Brothers* 340). Emerson viewed farming as a means to establish primary relationship with the natural forces of earth.

Conclusion

Of the three divergent developments out of Adam Smith's theories – Utilitarianism, Pessimism and Optimism – Emerson approved of only the third. He considered Utilitarian as a "stinking philosophy". Emerson disliked both the exponents of Utilitarianism like Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and also the chief thinkers of pessimistic school of classical economy such as Malthus and Ricardo. He could not support their views as they failed to take into consideration the element of human character and moral laws. Emerson was well aware of the economic socialism which was resulting in experimental communities. In place of cooperation, generosity and thoughtfulness among the people, an element of greed, competition and a sense of unconcern were highly visible. He found it difficult to bring together the socialist principle with his self-reliant individualism. Emerson's ideal economic system was a combination of capitalistic means with socialist end and a capitalistic order with the competitive sting removed.

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