

Intellectual Proletarians

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February 1914

The proletarianization of our time reaches far beyond the field of manual labor; indeed, in the larger sense all those who work for their living, whether with hand or brain, all those who must sell their skill, knowledge, experience and ability, are proletarians. From this point of view, our entire system, excepting a very limited class, has been proletarianized.

Our whole social fabric is maintained by the efforts of mental and physical labor. In return for that, the intellectual proletarians, even as the workers in shop and mine, eke out an insecure and pitiful existence, and are more dependent upon the masters than those who work with their hands.

No doubt there is a difference between the yearly income of a Brisbane and a Pennsylvania mine worker. The former, with his colleagues in the newspaper office, in the theater, college and university, may enjoy material comfort and social position, but with it all they are proletarians, inasmuch as they are slavishly dependent upon the Hearsts, the Pulitzers, the Theater Trusts, the publishers and, above all, upon a stupid and vulgar public opinion. This terrible dependence upon those who can make the price and dictate the terms of intellectual activities, is more degrading than the position of the worker in any trade. The pathos of it is that those who are engaged in intellectual occupations, no matter how sensitive they might have been in the beginning, grow callous, cynical and indifferent to their degradation. That has certainly happened to Brisbane, whose parents were idealists working with Fourier in the early cooperative ventures. Brisbane, who himself began as a man of ideals, but who has become so enmeshed by material success that he has forsworn and betrayed every principle of his youth.

Naturally so. Success achieved by the most contemptible means cannot but destroy the soul. Yet that is the goal of our day. It helps to cover up the inner corruption and gradually dulls one's scruples, so that those who begin with some high ambition cannot, even if they would, create anything out of themselves.

In other words, those who are placed in positions which demand the surrender of personality, which insist on strict conformity to definite political policies and opinions, must deteriorate, must become mechanical, must lose all capacity to give anything really vital. The world is full of such unfortunate cripples. Their dream is to "arrive," no matter at what cost. If only we would stop to consider what it means to "arrive," we would pity the unfortunate victim. Instead of that, we look to the artist, the poet, the writer, the dramatist and thinker who have "arrived," as the final authority on all matters, whereas in reality their "arrival" is synonymous with mediocrity, with

the denial and betrayal of what might in the beginning have meant something real and ideal. The “arrived” artists are dead souls upon the intellectual horizon. The uncompromising and daring spirits never “arrive.” Their life represents an endless battle with the stupidity and the dullness of their time. They must remain what Nietzsche calls “untimely,” because everything that strives for new form, new expression or new values, is always doomed to be untimely.

The real pioneers in ideas, in art and in literature have remained aliens to their time, misunderstood and repudiated. And if, as in the case of Zola, Ibsen and Tolstoy, they compelled their time to accept them, it was due to their extraordinary genius and even more so to the awakening and seeking of a small minority for new truths, to whom these men were the inspiration and intellectual support. Yet even to this day Ibsen is unpopular, while Poe, Whitman and Strindberg have never “arrived.”

The logical conclusion is this: those who will not worship at the shrine of money, need not hope for recognition. On the other hand, they will also not have to think other people’s thoughts or wear other people’s political clothes. They will not have to proclaim as true that which is false, nor praise that as humanitarian which is brutal. I realize that those who have the courage to defy the economic and social whip are among the few, and we have to deal with the many.

Now, it is a fact that the majority of the intellectual proletarians are in the economic treadmill and have less freedom than those who work in the shops or mines. Unlike the latter, they cannot put on overalls, and ride the bumpers to the next town in search of a job. In the first place, they have spent a lifetime on a profession, at the expense of all their other faculties. They are therefore unfitted for any other work except the one thing which, parrot-like, they have learned to repeat. We all know how cruelly difficult it is to find a job in any given trade. But to come to a new town without connections and find a position as teacher, writer, musician, bookkeeper, actress or nurse, is almost impossible. If, however, the intellectual proletarian has connections, he must come to them in a presentable shape; he must keep up appearances. And that requires means, of which most professional people have as little as the workers, because even in their “good times” they rarely earn enough to make ends meet.

Then there are the traditions, the habits of the intellectual proletarians, the fact that they must live in a certain district, that they must have certain comforts, that they must buy clothes of a certain quality. All that has emasculated them, has made them unfit for the stress and strain of the life of the bohemian. If he or she drink coffee at night, they cannot sleep. If they stay up a little later than usual, they are unfitted for the next day’s work. In short, they have no vitality and cannot, like the manual worker, meet the hardships of the road. Therefore they are tied in a thousand ways to the most galling, humiliating conditions. But so blind are they to their own lot that they consider themselves superior, better, and more fortunate than their fellow-comrades in the ranks of labor.

Then, too, there are the women who boast of their wonderful economic achievements, and that they can now be self-supporting. Every year our schools and colleges turn out thousands of competitors in the intellectual market, and everywhere the supply is greater than the demand. In order to exist, they must cringe and crawl and beg for a position. Professional women crowd the offices, sit around for hours, grow weary and faint with the search for employment, and yet deceive themselves with the delusion that they are superior to the working girl, or that they are economically independent.

The years of their youth are swallowed up in the acquisition of a profession, in the end to be dependent upon the board of education, the city editor, the publisher or the theatrical manager.

The emancipated woman runs away from a stifling home atmosphere, only to rush from employment bureau to the literary broker, and back again. She points with moral disgust to the girl of the redlight district, and is not aware that she too must sing, dance, write or play, and otherwise sell herself a thousand times in return for her living. Indeed, the only difference between the working girl and the intellectual female or male proletarian is a matter of four hours. At 5 a. m. the former stands in line waiting to be called to the job and often face to face with a sign, "No hands wanted." At 9 a. m. the professional woman must face the sign, "No brains wanted."

Under such a state of affairs, what becomes of the high mission of the intellectuals, the poets, the writers, the composers and what not? What are they doing to cut loose from their chains, and how dare they boast that they are helping the masses? Yet you know that they are engaged in uplift work. What a farce! They, so pitiful and low in their slavery themselves, so dependent and helpless! The truth is, the people have nothing to learn from this class of intellectuals, while they have everything to give to them. If only the intellectuals would come down from their lofty pedestal and realize how closely related they are to the people! But they will not do that, not even the radical and liberal intellectuals.

Within the last ten years the intellectual proletarians of advanced tendencies have entered every radical movement. They could, if they would, be of tremendous importance to the workers. But so far they have remained without clarity of vision, without depth of conviction, and without real daring to face the world. It is not because they do not feel deeply the mind- and soul-destroying effects of compromise, or that they do not know the corruption, the degradation in our social, political, business, and family life. Talk to them in private gatherings, or when you get them alone, and they will admit that there isn't a single institution worth preserving. But only privately. Publicly they continue in the same rut as their conservative colleagues. They write the stuff that will sell, and do not go an inch farther than public taste will permit. They speak their thoughts, careful not to offend anyone, and live according to the most stupid conventions of the day. Thus we find men in the legal profession, intellectually emancipated from the belief in government, yet looking to the fleshpots of a judgeship; men who know the corruption of politics, yet belonging to political parties and championing Mr. Roosevelt. Men who realize the prostitution of mind in the newspaper profession, yet holding responsible positions therein. Women who deeply feel the fetters of the marital institution and the indignity of our moral precepts, who yet submit to both; who either stifle their nature or have clandestine relations — but God forbid they should face the world and say, "Mind your own damned business!"

Even in their sympathies for labor — and some of them have genuine sympathies — the intellectual proletarians do not cease to be middle-class, respectable and aloof. This may seem sweeping and unfair, but those who know the various groups will understand that I am not exaggerating. Women of every profession have flocked to Lawrence, to Little Falls, of Paterson, and to the strike districts in this city. Partly out of curiosity, often out of interest. But always they have remained rooted to their middle-class traditions. Always they have deceived themselves and the workers with the notion that they must give the strike respectable prestige, to help the cause.

In the shirtwaistmakers' strike professional women were told to rig themselves out in their best furs and most expensive jewelry, if they wanted to help the girls. Is it necessary to say that while scores of girls were man-handled and brutally hustled into the patrol wagons, the well-dressed pickets were treated with deference and allowed to go home? Thus they had their excitement, and only hurt the cause of labor.

The police are indeed stupid, but not so stupid as not to know the difference in the danger to themselves and their masters from those who are driven to strike by necessity, and those who go into the strike for pastime or "copy." This difference doesn't come from the degree of feeling, nor even the cut of clothes, but from the degree of incentive and courage; and those who still compromise with appearances have no courage.

The police, the courts, the prison authorities and the newspaper owners know perfectly well that the liberal intellectuals, even as the conservatives, are slaves to appearances. That is why their muckraking, their investigations, their sympathies with the workers are never taken seriously. Indeed, they are welcomed by the press, because the reading public loves sensation, hence the muckraker represents a good investment for the concern and for himself. But as far as danger to the ruling class is concerned, it is like the babbling of an infant.

Mr. Sinclair would have died in obscurity but for "The Jungle," which didn't move a hair upon the heads of the Armours, but netted the author a large sum and a reputation. He may now write the most stupid stuff, sure of finding a market. Yet there is not a workingman anywhere so cringing before respectability as Mr. Sinclair.

Mr. Kibbe Turner would have remained a penny-a-liner but for our political mudslingers, who used him to make capital against Tammany Hall. Yet the poorest-paid laborer is more independent than Mr. Turner, and certainly more honest than he.

Mr. Hillquit would have remained the struggling revolutionist I knew him twenty-four years ago, but for the workers who helped him to his legal success. Yet there is not a single Russian worker on the East Side so thoroughly bound to respectability and public opinion as Mr. Hillquit.

I could go on indefinitely proving that, though the intellectuals are really proletarians, they are so steeped in middle-class traditions and conventions, so tied and gagged by them, that they dare not move a step.

The cause of it is, I believe, to be sought in the fact that the intellectuals of America have not yet discovered their relation to the workers, to the revolutionary elements which at all times and in every country have been the inspiration of men and women who worked with their brains. They seem to think that they and not the workers represent the creators of culture. But that is a disastrous mistake, as proved in all countries. Only when the intellectual forces of Europe had made common cause with the struggling masses, when they came close to the depths of society, did they give to the world a real culture.

With us, this depth in the minds of our intellectuals is only a place for slumming, for newspaper copy, or on a very rare occasion for a little theoretic sympathy. Never was the latter strong or deep enough to pull them out of themselves, or make them break with their traditions and surroundings. Strikes, conflicts, the use of dynamite, or the efforts of the I. W. W. are exciting to our intellectual proletarians, but after all very foolish when considered in the light of the logical, cool-headed observer. Of course they feel with the I. W. W. when he is beaten and brutally treated, or with the MacNamaras, who cleared the horizon from the foggy belief that in America no one needed use violence. The intellectuals gall too much under their own dependence not to sympathize in such a case. But the sympathy is never strong enough to establish a bond, a solidarity between him and the disinherited. It is the sympathy of aloofness, of experiment.

In other words, it is a theoretic sympathy which all those have who still enjoy a certain amount of comfort and therefore do not see why anyone should break into a fashionable restaurant. It is the kind of sympathy Mrs. Belmont has when she goes to night courts. Or the sympathy of

the Osbornes, Dottys and Watsons when they had themselves locked up in prison for a few days. The sympathy of the millionaire Socialist who speaks of "economic determinism."

The intellectual proletarians who are radical and liberal are still so much of the bourgeois regime that their sympathy with the workers is dilettante and does not go farther than the parlor, the so-called salon, or Greenwich village. It may in a measure be compared to the early period of the awakening of the Russian intellectuals described by Turgenev in "Fathers and Sons."

The intellectuals of that time, while never so superficial as those I am talking about, indulged in revolutionary ideas, split hairs through the early morning hours, philosophized about all sorts of questions and carried their superior wisdom to the people with their feet deeply rooted in the old. Of course they failed. They were indignant with Turgenev and considered him a traitor to Russia. But he was right. Only when the Russian intellectuals completely broke with their traditions; only when they fully realized that society rests upon a lie, and that they must give themselves to the new completely and unreservedly, did they become a forceful factor in the life of the people. The Kropotkins, the Perovskayas, the Breshkovskayas, and hosts of others repudiated wealth and station and refused to serve King Mammon. They went among the people, not to lift them up but themselves to be lifted up, to be instructed, and in return to give themselves wholly to the people. That accounts for the heroism, the art, the literature of Russia, the unity between the people, the mujik and the intellectual. That to some extent explains the literature of all European countries, the fact that the Strindbergs, the Hauptmanns, the Wedekinds, the Brieux, the Mirbeaus, the Steinlins and Rodins have never dissociated themselves from the people.

Will that ever come to pass in America? Will the American intellectual proletarians ever love the ideal more than their comforts, ever be willing to give up external success for the sake of the vital issues of life? I think so, and that for two reasons. First, the proletarianization of the intellectuals will compel them to come closer to labor. Secondly, because of the rigid regime of puritanism, which is causing a tremendous reaction against conventions and narrow moral ties. Struggling artists, writers and dramatists who strive to create something worth while, aid in breaking down dominant conventions; scores of women who wish to live their lives are helping to undermine our morality of to-day in their proud defiance of the rules of Mrs. Grundy. Alone they cannot accomplish much. They need the bold indifference and courage of the revolutionary workers, who have broken with all the old rubbish. It is therefore through the cooperation of the intellectual proletarians, who try to find expression, and the revolutionary proletarians who seek to remold life, that we in America will establish a real unity and by means of it wage a successful war against present society.

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Retrieved on December 22, 2011 from libertarian-labyrinth.org. Proofread online source
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Mother Earth 8, no. 12 (February 1914): 363–370.

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