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The Products of Soil and Industry

(An Anarchist Concern)

Errico Malatesta

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.
Translated from “Los productos de la tierra y de la industria,” *El Productor* (Barcelona) 5, no. 278 (24 December 1891). The article was published during an extensive speaking tour that Malatesta undertook in Spain, together with the Barcelona anarchist Pedro Esteve, between November 1891 and January 1892. The tour was interrupted as a consequence of the repression that ensued following the anarchist uprising in the Andalusian town of Jerez on 8 January 1892. The claim that Malatesta had a role in the uprising is unsubstantiated.

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No longer in a position to deny the righteousness of socialist aspirations, the bourgeois say that the woes by which men are afflicted are attributable to a harsh necessity of nature, which has nothing to do with the way society is organized. Poverty can never be eradicated, they say, because poverty derives from an actual dearth of produce rather than faulty distribution; in any event, what is required is a boost to the amount of production, rather than any attempt to overthrow society as presently constituted, with an eye to replacing it with a different society based on different foundations.

And even as they talk about shortfalls in output, they have the land they have taken over worked according to the most irrational methods, without availing of the means being made available with every passing day by science for the purpose of boosting production, and, indeed, they leave enormous tracts of perfectly fertile soil fallow; and deploy machinery on the small scale that suits their private profit, and condemn legions of workers to perish from hunger and joblessness, workers

who require only free access to the means of production in order to generate tremendous wealth.

On the other hand, socialists, especially the anarchists, not paying enough attention to the difference between what could be produced and what actually is produced in today's society, have retorted that there is no shortage of produce and that the entire social question is simply a distribution issue. And, taking things to extremes, along come some comrades, basing their calculations upon statistics more or less well construed, to argue that, even under the current bourgeois system of production, twice as much foodstuffs are being produced as are needed and four times as many industrial products as science tells us people need to eat and wear, which is to say, for all of our needs to be met.¹

Nonsensical though it might seem to the disinterested observer, this claim was accepted without scrutiny and well nigh dogmatically—such is man's tendency to believe blindly in whatever pleases or suits him—and it is forever being repeated without inquiry into its veracity.

It is high time for an objective, critical scrutiny of it, free from all prejudice, in short, for an impartial evaluation; because if it were a mistake to claim such abundance of produce, as it seems to us, that belief would pose a very great threat to the

opportunity to increase and accelerate production, especially agricultural production.

That by itself can guarantee the revolution's victory.

¹ Malatesta is referring here to two pamphlets, *Les Produits de la Terre* and *Les Produits de l'Industrie*, respectively published in 1885 and 1887, to which his article's title makes explicit reference. The pamphlets had become especially popular among anarchist communists, as providing empirical evidence that taking from the "inexhaustible stockpile," and therefore communism, would be immediately practicable after the revolution. It should be noted that the Spanish controversy between anarchist collectivists and anarchists communists was not just about the future society, but also had tactical ramifications, with the collectivists advocating collective struggle and union involvement and the communists favoring autonomous action by small groups. Despite being a communist, Malatesta's tactical ideas were closer to those of the Spanish collectivists, and in fact, Pedro Esteve and *El Productor* belonged to this current.

reason for so many human beings perishing from hunger and all manner of suffering. From which it follows that, broadly speaking, in that society, the wealth already produced does not go to waste, but the means of production lie idle and men are prevented from producing and satisfying the natural demand completely. Which is rather worse.

Advances in machinery and technology have rendered man's productive capability all but boundless; and agronomic science has demonstrated with telling proof the possibility of extracting stunning quantities of produce from the land, from a small strip of land. It has been shown that, no matter what the climate and location around the world, any plant can be grown through artificially replicating the appropriate climate and soil conditions, producing up to four crops per year; and that, by rational farming methods and the use of the appropriate chemical fertiliser, countries such as France, which at present can barely sustain three dozen million inhabitants, might produce plenty of food for a hundred million, and through work that has been shortened, rendered hygienic, and agreeable too. But this will never come to pass as long as there is private ownership, because the capitalists have no interest in its coming to pass.

We need to get it across to the people, then, that they suffer because of the bourgeois' seizure of all the means of production and their preventing of any more production than suits them; we have to get the people to understand that if they are to be emancipated, they have no option other than a general expropriation for the good of all, with society's wealth harnessed for the whole of humanity and their looking to their own interests. But the people need to be made to understand that taking over the means of production is not enough, and that they need to put these to work as a matter of urgency; and, for that to happen, on the very day the bourgeoisie surrenders, the people simply must get back promptly to work and search for every

revolution's success. Indeed, if revolutionaries believe that produce galore is available, and that vast quantities of food are already held in our warehouses, plus enough other consumer goods to meet the needs of the entire human race for several years to come, then it is only natural that they should not regard the matter of production and of the organization of work as pressing, nor would they regard the proper administration of existing goods as a matter of importance; and so the initial phase of revolution would be frittered away on a lot of palaver and waste, with work and the registering of the real assets available being left until later. Is it not true that there are revolutionaries who contend that all that matters in the revolution is destruction and that there will be more than enough time later for arranging production? Well if, in actual fact, it turns out that stocks of produce are very low and the only thing in plentiful supply is the means of production, then unless those means of production are promptly turned to use and output wisely husbanded, within a few months of the revolution scarcity and impoverishment due to falling output would make themselves felt, and the people, oblivious of the true reason for the shortage, would lose any taste for revolution and their disgust may well drive them to the extreme of letting themselves be placed under the yoke again by the first adventurer to promise them bread.

We do not at the moment have to hand the means of backing our opinion up with figures to prove that stocks of produce in existence are very low and that, if everybody was to have his needs met in terms of consumption, they would last for only a few months; but we can back it up right here and now with a few reasoned considerations, putting off a more prolonged scrutiny of the matter until such time as we have the tools for the job. Anyway, we are making no claim now to offer definite and finished results, but can instead offer comrades a brief to be studied and we will be satisfied if we manage to get across

its transcendental importance as far as the success of our ideals in concerned.

Let us all look into this matter and ferret out the truth, let us actively publicize it, because only through truth can mankind make progress, and only through truth can the revolution succeed.

They say that every year much more is produced than might be needed, even if everyone were to have all his needs met; meaning that as the vast majority of the human race cannot have even its more vital needs met, every year's output must far exceed what is consumed. But where are all the goods, of which vast quantities must have built up over a few years? And how come the haves and the capitalists of every sort, being the ones who control the means of production, ordain the production of that which they could neither sell nor give away?

Being under the control of capitalists, all current production is governed, not by the broader interest, but by its profitability as far as the capitalists are concerned. So the capitalists drive production, deploying machinery and scientific advances to the extent that abundant supply and cheapness of product can boost their earnings; but once such abundance and cheapness seem to pose a threat to their profits, production is halted.

Actually, because of the complete randomness of production and inter-capitalist competition, it is sometimes the case that some capitalists produce far in excess of what is consumed and what they can market, but then, once the products have piled up in warehouses over a period of time, crisis strikes and workers find themselves jobless and breadless until such time as the previously stockpiled products have been sold off.

The fact is that sometimes those very same capitalists destroy a portion of the harvest in order to keep the prices for the rest high, or some harvest are left to rot in new territories for want of transport; but if that happens one year, come the following year the landowner sees to it that he does not pay wages unnecessarily and cancels production.

The owner is never going to produce more than he can sell at a profit. Once America and Australia began shipping wheat to Europe, lots of European landowners, especially in England, seeing no further profit in its production, switched their arable land over to pasture or left them fallow. And even now, so that landowners in Europe can carry on making profits from their land, there is nothing for it but for them to be protected by means of tariffs; and plainly, once American landowners can no longer market their wheat in Europe, they will cut back on production of it; and the amount of wheat produced in a year will normally not exceed consumer demand.

So we cannot understand how all this over-production they talk to us about has come to pass. Some contend that the surplus production is used up by the rich, but that just goes to prove that no such surplus exists. The rich are a tiny minority and their consumption cannot be that significant when set alongside the overall consumption; and anyway no one believes that the purpose of the revolution is to cut back on the consumption by the rich for now so as to align it with the consumption level of the poor; instead, our purpose is to boost everybody's consumption to the highest possible level.

Right now, we in Europe have an example of a real lack of produce: the scarcity in Russia. A single poor harvest has been enough to inflict a terrifying shortage upon the people, even relative to the normal circumstances of the Russian workers, namely, a state of continual dearth. And Russia is Europe's bread-basket! True, the avarice displayed by the monopolists who seized the grain for shipment to Russia or for later re-sale within Russia at exorbitant prices was a big factor in worsening the people's conditions. But obviously monopoly would be an impossibility and pointless had there really been surplus food.

Not that that is any argument in favor of bourgeois society. It is very clear to see that the poverty issue is a matter of social organization, and that the private ownership arrangement upon which the whole of contemporary social life rests, is the