

Manual labour, intellectual labour, equality and diversity

Mikhail Bakunin

14 August 1869

We have shown how, as long as there are two or more degrees of instruction for the various strata of society, there must, of necessity, be classes, that is, economic and political privilege for a small number of the contented and slavery and misery for the lot of the generality of men.

As members of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA/AIT), we seek equality and, because we seek it, we must also seek integral education, the same education for everyone.

But if everyone is schooled who will want to work? we hear someone ask. Our answer to that is a simple one: everyone must work and everyone must receive education. To this, it is very often objected that this mixing of industrial with intellectual labour cannot be, except one or the other suffer by it. The manual workers will make poor scholars, and the scholars will never be more than quite pathetic workers. True, in the society of today where manual labour and intellectual labour are equally distorted by the quite artificial isolation in which both are kept. But we are quite persuaded that in the rounded human being, each of these pursuits, the muscular and the nervous, must be developed in equal measure and that far from being inimical each must lean upon, enhance and reinforce the other. The science of the sage will become more fruitful, more useful and more expansive when the sage is no longer a stranger to manual labour, and the labours of the workmen, when he is educated, will be more intelligent and thus more productive than those of an ignorant workman. From which it follows that, for work's sake as much as for the sake of science, there must no longer be this division into workers and scholars and henceforth there must be only men.

The result of this is that those men who are today, on account of their superior intellects, caught up in the ivory towers of science and who, once they have established themselves in this world, yield to the need for a thoroughly bourgeois position and bend their every invention to the exclusive use of the privileged class to which they themselves belong. These men, I say, once they become truly the fellows of everyone, fellows not just in their imagination nor just in their speech but in fact, in their work, will just as necessarily convert their inventions and applications of their learning to the benefit of all, and especially apply themselves to the task of making work (the basis, the only real and rightful basis of human society) lighter and more dignified.

It is quite possible and, indeed, likely that during the period of fairly lengthy transition which will, naturally, succeed the great crisis of society, the loftiest sciences will fall considerably below

their current levels. Equally, it is not to be doubted that luxury and everything constituting the refinements of life will have to disappear from the social scene for quite a long time and will not be able to reappear as the exclusive amusements of a few, but will have to return as ways of dignifying life for everybody, and then only once society has conquered need in all of us. But would this temporary eclipse of the lofty sciences be such a misfortune? Whatever science may lose in terms of sublime elevation, will it not win through the extension of its base? Doubtless there will be fewer illustrious sages, but at the same time there will be fewer ignoramuses too. There will be no more of these men who can touch the skies, but, on the other hand, millions of men who may be degraded and crushed today will be able to tread the earth as human beings: no demigods, but no slaves either. Both the slave and the demigods will achieve human-ness, the one by rising a lot, the other by stooping a little. Thus no longer will there be a place for deification, nor for contumely. Everyone will shake hands with his neighbour and, once reunited, we shall all march with a new spring in our steps, onwards to new conquests, in the realm of science as in the realm of life itself.

So, far from having any misgivings about that eclipse of science — which will be in any case only a fleeting one we ought to call for it with all our powers since its effect will be to humanise both scholar and manual labourer and to reconcile science and life. And we are convinced that, once we have achieved this new foundation, the progress of mankind, in the realm of science as elsewhere in life, will very quickly outstrip everything that we have seen and everything we might conjure up in our imaginations today. But here another question crops up: will every individual have an equal capacity for absorbing education to the same degree? Let us imagine a society organised along the most egalitarian lines, a society in which children will, from birth onwards, start out with the same circumstances economically, socially and politically, which is to say the same upkeep, the same education, the same instruction: among these thousands of tiny individuals will there not be an infinite variety of enthusiasms, natural inclinations and aptitudes?

Such is the big argument advanced by our adversaries, the bourgeois pure and simple, and the bourgeois socialists as well. They imagine it to be unanswerable. So let us try to prove the opposite. Well, to begin with, by what right do they make their stand for the principle of individual capabilities? Is there room for the development of capabilities in society as at present constituted? Can there be room for that development in a society which continues to have the right of inheritance as its foundation? Self-evidently not; for, from the moment that the right of inheritance applies, the career of children will never be determined by their individual gifts and application: it will be determined primarily by their economic circumstances, by the wealth or poverty of their families. Wealthy but empty-headed heirs will receive a superior education; the most intelligent children of the proletariat will receive ignorance as their inheritance, just as happens at present. So, is it not hypocritical, when speaking not only of society as it is today but even of a reformed society which would still have as its fundamentals private property ownership and the right of inheritance — Is it not sordid sophistry to talk about individual rights based on individual capabilities? There is such a lot of talk today of individual liberty, yet what prevails is not the individual person, nor the individual in general, but the individual upon whom privilege is conferred by his social position. Thus what counts is position and class. Just let one intelligent individual from the ranks of the bourgeoisie dare to take a stand against the economic privileges of that respectable class and you will see how much these good bourgeois, forever prattling about individual liberty today, respect his liberty as an individual. Don't talk to us about individual abil-

ities! Is it not an everyday thing for us to see the greatest abilities of working men and bourgeois forced to give way and even to kowtow before the crass stupidity of the heirs to the golden calf? Individual liberty — not privileged liberty but human liberty, and the real potential of individuals — will only be able to enjoy full expansion in a regime of complete equality. When there exists an equality of origins for all men on this earth then, and only then (with safeguards, of course, for the superior calls of fellowship or solidarity, which is and ever shall remain the greatest producer of all social phenomena, from human intelligence to material wealth) only then will one be able to say, with more reason than one can today, that every individual is a self-made man. Hence our conclusion is that, if individual talents are to prosper and no longer be thwarted in bringing forth their full fruits, the first precondition is that all individual privileges, economic as well as political, must disappear, which is to say that all class distinctions must be abolished. That requires that private property rights and the rights of inheritance must go, and equality must triumph economically, politically and socially.

But once equality has triumphed and is well established, will there be no longer any difference in the talents and degree of application of the various individuals? There will be a difference, not so many as exist today, perhaps, but there will always be differences. Of that there can be no doubt. This is a proverbial truth which will probably never cease to be true — that no tree ever brings forth two leaves that are exactly identical. How much more will this be true of men, men being much more complicated creatures than leaves. But such diversity, far from constituting an affliction is, as the German philosopher Feuerbach has forcefully noted, one of the assets of mankind. Thanks to it, the human race is a collective whole wherein each human being complements the rest and has need of them; so that this infinite variation in human beings is the very cause and chief basis of their solidarity — an important argument in favour of equality.

Basically, even in today's society, if one excepts two categories of men — men of genius and idiots — and provided one abstracts conjured up artificially through the influence of a thousand social factors such as education, instruction, economic and political status which create differences not merely within each social stratum, but in almost every family unit, one will concede that from the point of view of intellectual gifts and moral energy the vast majority of men are very much alike or, at least, are worth about the same — weakness in one regard being almost always counterbalanced by an equivalent strength in another, so that it becomes impossible to say whether one man chosen from this mass is much the superior or the inferior of his neighbour. The vast majority of men are not identical but equivalent and thus equal.

Which means that the line of argument pursued by our adversaries is left with nothing but the geniuses and the idiots.

As we know, idiocy is a psychological and social affliction. Thus, it should be treated not in the schools but in the hospitals and one is entitled to expect that a more rational system of social hygiene — above all, one that cares more for the physical and moral well-being of the individual than the current system — will some day be introduced and that together with a new society organised along egalitarian lines it will eventually eradicate from the surface of the earth this affliction of idiocy, such a humiliation to the human race. As for the men of genius, one should note first of all that, happily or unhappily, according to one's main point of view, such men have not featured in the history of mankind except as the extremely rare exceptions to all of the rules known to us and one cannot organise to cater for exceptions. Even so, it is our hope that the society of the future will be able to discover, through a truly practical popular organisation of its collective assets the means by which to render such geniuses less necessary, less intimidating

and more truly the benefactors of us all. For we must never lose sight of Voltaire's great dictum: *'There is someone with more wit than the greatest geniuses, and that is everyone'*. So it is merely a question of organising this everyone for the sake of the fullest liberty rooted in the most complete economic, political and social equality, and one need no longer fear the dictatorial ambitions and despotic inclinations of the men of genius.

As for turning out such men of genius through education, one ought to banish the thought from one's mind. Moreover, of all the men of genius we have known thus far, none or almost none ever displayed their genius while yet in their childhood, nor in their adolescence nor yet in their early youth. Only in their mature years did they ever reveal themselves geniuses and several were not recognised as such until after their death whereas many supposedly great men having had their praises sung while youths by better men have finished their careers in the most absolute obscurity. So it is never in the childhood years, nor even in the adolescent years that one can discern and determine the comparative excellencies and shortcomings of men, nor the extent of their talents, nor their inborn aptitudes. All of these things only become obvious and are governed by the development of the individual person and, just as there are some natures precocious and some very slow – although the latter are by no means inferior and, indeed, are often superior – so no schoolmaster will ever be in a position to specify in advance the career or nature of the occupations which his charges will choose once they attain the age when they have the freedom to choose.

From which it follows that society, disregarding any real or imagined differences in aptitudes or abilities and possessed of no means of determining these in any event and of no right to allot the future career of children owes them all, without a single exception, an absolutely equal education and instruction.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Mikhail Bakunin
Manual labour, intellectual labour, equality and diversity
14 August 1869

Retrieved on November 16, 2007 from web.archive.org
Originally published in *Egalite*, the paper of the Swiss Section of the IWMA / 1st International.
Spunk press, referenced to *Integral Education* Michael Bakunin Folio 2, March 1986 ISSN
0267-6141.

theanarchistlibrary.org