

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Communism and the Wage System

Pëtr Kropotkin

Aug-Sep 1888

COMMUNISM AND THE WAGE SYSTEM

[Communism implies expropriation and a complete denial of the principle of private ownership, whereas Social Democracy implies only the transfer of the ownership of land and certain portions of capital to the State and by maintaining the wage system maintains the principle of private property and distribution according to deserts.]

I.—EXPROPRIATION.

Few Socialists doubt that if all owners of land and manufacturers, all shareholders of mines and railways emigrated to-morrow to New Guinea to "civilise" the Papua, railways would run, crops be grown and manufactures of necessaries carried on nevertheless. We are agreed as to the possibility of producing all necessaries for a community without having the soil, the machinery, the capital in short, in the hands of private owners. We all believe that free organisation of workers would be able to carry on production on the farm and in the factory, as well, and probably much better, than it is conducted now under the individual ownership of the capitalist.

Pëtr Kropotkin
Communism and the Wage System
Aug-Sep 1888

Retrieved on 05/16/2024 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu

theanarchistlibrary.org

But the same unanimity does not prevail with reference to the question: How would the workers share the produce of their labour? How would they exchange it? How many yards of cotton would be exchanged for one pair of boots? How many pairs of boots for a quarter of wheat? And so on.

To this question various Socialist schools give such various answers that the workers who are not very much accustomed to the economical slang used by these schools, are often at a loss to understand what is advocated by the different sections of the great Socialist movement. Let us try to throw some light on the question.

First of all let me tell out with full frankness what I believe to be the real cause of these discrepancies of opinion. It seems to me chiefly due to the ambiguous words which Socialists have introduced in order to please too many persons at once, including the capital owners. It is due to a want of frankness in expressing our thoughts and to the ambiguous formulas which we often use.

You often hear Socialists talking about Nationalisation of Land, Nationalisation of Capital, and you know that anything can be understood by these words, invented not distinctly to set forth an idea, but to conceal its real meaning.

Let us drop these words and plainly say what we want, what we expect to obtain. It will be the first step towards understanding one another better.

We Anarchists, we use the word *expropriation*. And by expropriation we mean that as soon as possible—and we hope it will be possible soon—the nation, the territory, or the commune, which have understood the necessity of this action, shall take possession of all the soil, the dwelling-houses, the manufactures, the mines and the means of communication, and organise themselves in order to share in the most equitable way all the riches accumulated within the commune, the region, or the nation by the work of the past and present generations.

Of course, when we see a peasant who is in possession of just the amount of land he can cultivate, we do not think it reasonable to

turn him off his little farm. He exploits nobody, and nobody would have the right to interfere with his work. But if he possesses under the capitalist law more than he can cultivate himself, we consider that we must not give him the right of keeping that soil for himself, leaving it uncultivated when it might be cultivated by others, or of making others cultivate it for his benefit.

Again, when we see a family inhabiting a house which affords them just as much space as under present average conditions of life, are considered necessary for that number of people, why should we interfere with that family and turn them out of their house? But when we see a palace inhabited by a Marquis and a Marchioness, while thousands of honest workers live in slums, we consider that the community has a right to interfere, and to see how far the palace may be rendered habitable for those over-crowded honest workers. Nay, we suppose that when the Marchioness can find no servants to keep her household in a palace, she herself will prefer a workman's house to her ball rooms which would soon be covered with mould and dust in the absence of housemaids.

And finally when we see a Sheffield cutler, or a Leeds clothier working with their own tools or handloom, we see no use in taking the tools or the handloom to give them to another worker. The clothier or cutler exploit nobody. But when we see a factory whose owners claim to keep to themselves the instruments of labour used by 1400 girls, and consequently exact from the labour of these girls the 22 1/2 per cent profit of which we have heard of late, we consider that the people of London are fully entitled to take possession of that factory and to let the girls produce matches for themselves and the rest of the community—a most useful product I dare say—and take what they need of house, room, food and clothing in return. As to the present owners of the factory, they may be invited each to make—not five gross of boxes a day—that would be too cruel—but, say one or two gross of those boxes.

Such are our ideas, and we suppose that the word expropriation tells all that very plainly, and needs but few commentaries to be understood.

Now, the first question which we must ask our Socialist friends from other schools than ours, is this: Are they prepared to endorse the above ideas of expropriation? And if not, to what extent are they prepared to abolish the private ownership of capital. At least, to what extent do they *aim* at abolishing it?

What may happen during a revolutionary period—I mean during a period when old and rotten institutions are undergoing a rapid remodeling—what *may* happen during such a period? How far the reconstruction *will* go, nobody can foretell. But what we are bound to know is, How far are we ourselves prepared to go? For what shall we strive? For the expropriation on a grand scale of which I have just spoken, or for a few partial measures which may or may not be an approach to that.

We must exactly make up our minds upon that subject, because as long as we have not done so, it is no use to discuss about the remuneration of labour.

If somebody says, for instance, as many collectivists do, that the dwelling-houses must remain the private property of their present owners, then he is bound to advocate also the maintenance of the wage-system in one shape or another. The owner of the house will not permit a worker to dwell in his house unless the worker pays the owner in some kind of money—gold, bank-notes, or hours-of-labour cheques— which the owner may be able to exchange against any commodities he takes: Cape diamonds, Siberian sables, or fresh strawberries in January.

Maintain private ownership in any of the four great departments of necessities without which man cannot work—dwellings, clothes, food, and instruments of labour—and you are compelled to maintain the wage-system. And it would be a sheer loss of time if we Anarchist-Communists were to discuss with you about the advantages of Communism above the wage-system, as long as you

ers whom they trust, that Communist principles are not applicable, that intermediate stages must be gone through, and the like. That has been my personal impression, and the other day while looking through the new edition of the Manifesto of the Communist party published in 1848, I found a confirmation of that impression.

Indeed Engels writes in the preface to the Manifesto that before '48 the Socialists were all kind of middle-class dreamers who proposed all kinds of palliative measures; while the mass of the workers were Communists. It seems to me that the same holds good for the workers at the present moment. They were and have remained Communists, and Communism is precisely *the* society for which, with more or less complete consciousness they look in the future.

In doing so they are quite right. Those who have let themselves be persuaded by bourgeois economists that articles are exchanged according to the amount of labour necessary for their production, may fancy that a system of labour-cheques would afford an outlet from the present difficulties. But the mass of the people will never be induced to agree with that system. Such a system could not act for even a few days after the houses, the soil, the factories, the mines, and the means of communication have been recognised as common property

The very necessities of supplying food, clothes and shelter to *all* members of the community as soon as a revolutionary movement shall stop trade and commerce, will reduce the workers to resort at once to some

sort of partial Communism as far as the necessities of existence are concerned. And this first step towards Communism will compel them to go further in the same direction.

They will be compelled to abandon the wage-system under whatever new forms it may be reintroduced. They will be compelled to proclaim that the needs of each member of the community must be the real measure of his share of the common produce.

think it necessary to maintain in any form the private ownership of the necessaries for production.

With those who advocate the maintenance of private ownership, the discussion must first turn upon the advantages and disadvantages of that ownership. If a Land or Capital Nationaliser says that the organisation of society he will advocate will be the renting of soil, manufactures, and dwelling-houses by the State to private persons, or to associations of workers, then we shall lose our time in discussing how the produce of labour must be shared. The wage-system must be maintained under that system of private ownership and State property.

II.—THE NEW WAGE-SYSTEM; OR, PAYMENT BY RESULTS

UNDER the Social Democratic Commonwealth, "productive workers will each receive for every day's common labour a check entitling him to one day's common labour in return less his share of the impost (tax for rent) . . . Those engaged in unproductive vocations will receive similar salaries out of the rent or impost fund... A day's work will mean the simplest work of average efficiency of a normal working day... Both professional and skilled labour is multiplied common labour." Both are common labour plus the years of apprenticeship required to learn them, and will be remunerated at a proportionately higher rate. "The members of each branch of industry will be entitled as a body to the proceeds of all the labour they have embodied in the product they create, and that they distribute amongst themselves just as they please, subject to appeal to the commonwealth (or state) as arbitrator."

Such is the outline of the Social Democratic wage system as sketched out by Gronlund in his 'Co-operative Commonwealth.' It is a renewed attempt to secure to every man the fruits of his own labour, of substantially the same character as Owen's labour notes and Proudhon's mutual banking. A system that at first sight appears charmingly simple, but on a nearer view bristles with difficulties.

In the first place its seeming equality exists only on paper. The distinction between skilled and unskilled labour is treacherous and misleading. It would tend only to create a workmen's and scientists' aristocracy over the heads of the toiling masses. Already in the industrial countries of Western Europe we see class distinctions amongst the workers growing sharper and more accentuated. The distinction acknowledged by the Social Democratic state between skilled and unskilled labour would but serve to increase an existing evil.

This is so self-evident that many collectivists have been compelled to deny the distinction between skilled and unskilled labour and accept "equality of wages" as a watchword. Every one's hour of labour, they now say, is to be considered equal to every other person's hour of labour, regardless of length of apprenticeship.

Quite right. But if you maintain the wage-system, do you know who will be the greatest adversaries of such a system of equality of wages? The skilled workmen, and all that immense class of workers who stand between the middle class and the labourer. Shall we deny that fact? Shall we imitate the ostrich who conceals its head in the sand in order not to see danger? And can we expect other results? Because, as soon as you try to introduce any exact valuation of the services rendered by everybody, you proclaim that services rendered to society *can* be precisely valued and *ought* to be paid according to their importance.

You introduce the distinction of *quantity* by saying that two hours of labour are worth more than one hour. How can you expect that men will not also measure the *quality* of the work and take account of its productivity? Once you say that two hours of labour are worth twice as much as one hour, you must be prepared to see men discriminating the amount of nervous energy spent during the two hours of skill, of brain energy, as well as the length of the apprenticeship required by each kind of work.

We are told that the average work of the average man is to be the criterion. But the average man does not exist, and real men

go woodcutting. If to-morrow some such circumstances occurred as would require an appeal to all the capacities of the Londoners for some public work, be persuaded that they would respond to the necessity, and immediately they would admit that the produce of their common toil must be shared according to every one's *needs*, not according to every one's share of *work*.

Work in common, with common tools, in a common building, and for the Commonwealth's sake, is a new form of work—an old one, I rather ought to say, from which humanity has been diverted by capitalism,— a new departure, at any rate, for the communities of our time.

This new organisation of work requires unavoidably a new form of political organisation which cannot be the Representative Government of the capitalist period.

And it requires also a new organisation of consumption, not a mere modification of the wage-system. The wage-system came into existence with Capitalism; it was its corollary or rather the very means of maintaining it. The wage-system means private ownership and private possession of the instruments of labour.

We are therefore of the opinion that those Socialists who refuse to recognise private ownership, but maintain the State, Representative Government, and the Wage-system, either commit a capital error in not perceiving that the wage-system (and representative government too) cannot be reconciled with the abolition of private property; or else, they do not foresee the abolition of private property to the extent we do, and, I must say, to the extent to which the workers mean to abolish it.

Permit me to conclude by a remark. As far as my own experience goes, I have always observed that workers with difficulty understand the possibility of a wage-system of labour-cheques and like artificial inventions of Socialists. But I have been struck on the contrary by the easiness with which they always accept Communist principles. If they do not always fully express and advocate these principles it is chiefly because they are always told by lead-

And this principle is so natural that, as soon as men are brought by stress of circumstances to do something in common, forgetting mine and thine, they immediately resort to *needs* as the measure of each one's share. Nay, one of the most striking features of even the present society is that it so much feels the impossibility of living under purely individualist principles, that it constantly resorts to communist principles in order to correct the vices of the individualist organisation.

Take, for instance, the friendly societies which assure to every member a certain income in case of inability to work. The instalments paid to the society are alike for all members. But the payments they receive in ease of disease or old age, are distributed according to needs.

Take public hospitals where for a uniform payment, or without any payment at all, each patient is again treated according to his needs.

During the earlier part of the medieval times each commune practised communist principles to a very great extent. The produce of the labour of every gild was sold by the Commune or, later on, by the gild as a whole, and the gild took measures to secure the existence of each of its members. The agricultural commune also undertook to repair to a certain amount the evil done by the individualist system of payment by coming to the aid of each member according to his needs. The system has degenerated into the Poor Law of our times, which also is nothing but a corrective to the abominable conditions created by individualism.

In fact, millions and millions of people are now living under practically communistic conditions. When the Russian *mir* work in common on some public piece of land, they share the produce of the common labour according to needs, admitting as a foregone conclusion that in common work each worker has done his best.

And even the individualistic society of Western Europe admits that principle, as soon as work is done in common. We see it in besieged cities during war, or amongst the Swiss peasants when they

of flesh and bone differ from one another by the amount of their *needs*. There is the young unmarried woman and the mother of a family of five or six children. For the employer of our days there is no consideration whatever of the *needs* of the materfamilias as compared with those of the girl of 19. If the girl can produce more than the mother of a family, she will be paid more by the capitalist employer. And the labour cheque of the economist acts in the same way, he does not care about the needs of the family, and pays twice as much to the girl who has worked twice as many hours as the mother, in total disregard of the fact that for society as a whole the mother is giving twice as much labour as the young girl. But we know where that system lands us. The family reduced to misery is precisely what the capitalist wants. A well-to-do workman does not suit his book, because it is the misery of the masses which makes the riches of the rich. Mr. Booth reckons that there are no less than one million poor in London, ready to work at any price, and therefore there are in London so many Bryants and Mays and so many Maples, who accumulate their hundreds of thousands.

You may say, of course, that all kinds of provisions may be made to enable the mother to bring up her children. You may quote the French municipal councils which already supply gratuitous food to all school children. But that is Communistic; and so, without perceiving it yourselves you advocate Communism. Communism as a corrective to the false system which you advocate. Were it not a hundred times better openly to say that there can be no equitable organisation of society without Communism?

In fact, each useful work performed, be it in the field, or in the factory, or on a railway engine, is a service rendered to the community. And any attempt at measuring and valuing these services necessarily will be a failure.

Let us take a mine. Here you have miners extracting the coal from the seam, men and boys conducting the waggons to the bottom of the shaft, and the engineer who manages the engine for lifting the cages with coal and men. He has in his hand the handle

of the engine, and for hours keeps his eye on an apparatus on the wall which shows him at what height or depth is the cage which runs at railway speed from the bottom of the shaft to its mouth and back. A second of negligence and the cage runs to the top of the wheel and destroys the whole machinery. Or let this man lose two or three seconds on each movement of the handle which he uses to stop the cage or to reverse its movement, and the daily output is reduced by from 50 to 100 tons. Well it seems as if he is the man who in the whole mine renders the greatest service. But will you value and remunerate his service ten times more highly than the service of the miner who is down in the mine and at every moment risks his life? Or, will you consider the man who gives the bell-signal for the movements of the cage as rendering the most useful service? Or may be the mining engineer who by making a slight error in his computations will lose the seam and make you extract stone instead of coal?

Whose services are greater? Those of the doctor at a typhoid patient's bed, or those of the nurse? Those of Eddison, or of the man in his laboratory who has discovered the best material for making the cylinder of the phonograph? Those of the engine-driver or of the signalman?

Look round you. Analyse each work performed in society, however small, and compare it with thousands of other kinds of work done, and try to find out the measure, the true value of each respective work. I defy you to find it out.

Of course there are some sorts of work which at a given moment are more necessary than others. We may say, for instance, that so much of bread, meat, butter, tea, sugar, salt, and so on, must be reckoned as absolutely necessary; so much clothing and 80 many cubic feet of house room. And we may say that musical instruments and performances, books of fiction and science, newspapers, works of art and telescopes and microscopes, are so many necessities, but less urgent than the preceding. And we may therefore agree, all of us, to work five hours a day on primary necessities first, leaving

the studies in art, science, and literature to the good will of each person, after having performed the most necessary work. Each community of peasants coming to cultivate a virgin soil would do this by free agreement. We see it constantly in Siberian colonies. The colonists say: Now we must first till and sow so many acres of land, and build our houses; and as the time presses, we must work, say, 1w hours a day until it is done. Later on, they say: Now let us agree to work 5 hours a day for our common needs, and in the rest of his time everybody is free to do what he likes: to embroider towels, or to decorate his house; to read the Bible, or to play the violin.

I understand that a community might thus agree to work 80 many hours for necessities, and to specify what must be considered as necessary at a given moment. When the crop is going to be spoiled from want of harvesting, the most necessary work is to get the crop in. And when there is an epidemic of scarlet fever, the most necessary work may be nursing and the cleaning of the sewers. One year, gardening will be the great work of the season, and another year the manufacture of rails may be considered as the most necessary work. That can be agreed upon. But I cannot understand how it is possible to measure and to value in any kind of money the services rendered to society by those who take part in these various kinds of work. The only equitable means of sharing the produce of common work is according to everybody's needs. And that method of distribution is so inherent in human nature that we see it applied everywhere where individual appropriation does not prevent it.

Our friend Cafiero has once pointed out that in the family which shares in common the produce of the work of all its members, the sharing according to needs is the rule. When bread and meat are in plenty, then everybody consumes just as much as he likes. But when there is scarcity, then the best piece is given not to him who has earned most, but on the contrary, to the feeblest; to the child who earns nothing yet, or to the old who earn nothing more.