

# The Standard of Living

## PART II.

A Standard of living is a definite thing, as definite as any other symbol of weight or measure. That it is vague in social definition, is only because it is vague in social concept. And it is vague in social concept because to advance the purpose of class dominion it is overlaid with the verbal fatuity of class metaphysic. The confusion of social classes and the gradual shading off of their differing standards of life produces the overlapping indeterminism of imaginary condition. Hence the inanities of social misconception acquire substance, and the abstract adventures of speculation, reality. The clear cut and divergent economy of the two social economic classes is lost sight of—is even denied existence—even when their operation, in a drab and dingy world, forces their fateful consequences into immediate relief. The premises being so unclear, it is impossible the conclusions can be certain. Certainty can exist only in the realisation of actual fact. It is much too plain a figure to consort with the phantasms of egoist preconception.

That is why there is such "to-do" about the improved standard of modern living. Being (now) the product of the merchant and manufacturing classes, it is evolved from their conditions of life; and expresses, more or less actually, their living conditions. As they are—or were until very lately—the real ruling class of the world, their concepts of life are engraven on the world. They naturally express the conduct and condition of life as they find it and, as naturally, strive to perpetuate a condition of life which, to them, is good and comely. As they are the possessors of the necessary means of life, to them accrues the advantages of that possession. As the owners of socially produced wealth they exchange that wealth for, and in, the products of the world, which constitutes the "higher" standards of life; and revel in a condition of life and welfare that is forever barred to the proletarian producers of that wealth. As they see, they think: as they find, they believe. Hence logic and argument are of little avail, while the actual fact of commercial life appears to operate in a direction contrary to the trend of the argument. It is only in the strangulating coils of the Capitalist economic, when the centralisation of wealth provokes the distribution of impotent poverty, that sure conviction can be forced upon the social mind.

Economically, the distance between wealth and poverty is precarious. But socially, the difference is wide as the poles apart. The class standard of life is by no means a measuring rod of the common standard of living. This is obvious enough when we get behind the class vagaries of social distinction. Then we see the two socially distinct and opposing classes of political society—the ruler and the ruled; the owner and worker; the master and slave. Then it becomes apparent that the living conditions of each are governed and determined by separate standards, and amenable only to its own special circumstances. Amidst the social chaos of petty distinction and the deceptive equality of legal investiture, we can see the prime law of capitalist economy distributing to ownership the usury of social production, based on an ancient standard of life and labor; and giving to dispossessed labor the competitive market price of modern commercialism, based on ancient concepts of individualist labor and ownership. That difference wholly and completely vitiates any communion in the life standards of modern society. The legal equalities of capital are the legal enactments of a class whose concepts and aspirations had birth in the petty production and irksome restrictions of handicraft labor; whose social equalities are the distorted reflexes of the "naturalism of the physiocrats" of revolutionary times; but whose commercial practice—the purely commodity production, and private ownership of machine industry, wholly negatives and destroys the social concepts of their

nativity. Ancient inheritance, legal fiction, social equality, natural freedom, linger anaemically, side by side with the lusty giant of the greater industry; but the complete political dominion and economic necessity of the latter entirely preclude whatever advantage once derived from the former.

Thus the concepts of life and living, of a dominant class, whose ideation is the preconception of class interest, and whose greatest good is the figment of commercial prosperity, do not, and cannot, represent the actualities of general society. Their concepts are the stimuli of self preferment; the crude image of a parasite prosperity whose roots plunge down to the depths of a broken and degraded society and whose artificial welfare is the sapped life of exploited humanity. Their "self-made" exemplars of industry are not the normal index of social opportunity, nor their chosen figures of success the average lot of common life. They look on failure—and appraise their higher superiority; on the wrecks of misapplied energy,—and commend their greater sense or responsibility. Their standards of life, drawn from the abnormal conditions of commercial exploitation, and whose day is already done, are not coincident with the sub-normal issues of the world of production, whose forces are gathering to the climax. The hazy notions of liberalist idealism reflect the competitive conditions of class society as grotesquely as the mirage reflects the scenery of its occasion. In science and art; literature and education; comfort and security; in craftsmanship and ideal; in aim and interest, the two classes are wholly divergent. Their science is but the paid handmaid of trade and technology; their art the vulgar imitation of dead symbols. Their literature is the flattery of "success"; their education the perpetuation of Dominion. Their craftsmanship is the standardisation of cheap—and yet cheaper—production; their ideal the eternity of trafficking in contented slavery. Their aim is the suppression of all that militates against commercial supremacy; and their interest the corruption of all whose necessity or training has rendered them fit subjects for prostitution to the ulterior purposes of class. While in all those things the objective of the awakening society of socialised purpose is the exhaustive analysis of the actual relations of existence, the endowment of that analysis to the further service of society, the subordination of material to man, and the vivification of talent and art in the realities of living life.

However, we do not stress political corruption, or social servility. They are both products of time conditions. Primarily, they are social elements. They become moral equations only secondarily, as they obtrude themselves more and more insistently on social altruism. And as such we must accept them. And accepting them as such, we strike directly at their abolition in the abolition of their generating cause.

But living standards are not engaged by class tests. Their validity is residual in social welfare. Not "rescue work," or charitable philanthropy, or uplift crusades, but the normal satisfaction of the common needs and aspirations of common life in its day and generation. To the extent that they fail in this, they fail the whole purpose of social life. And the extent in which social satisfaction is gratified merely through class necessities is the measure of social, and its subsequent expression in moral, degradation. For as class interest becomes more imperious, social life becomes more abject. And as imperiousness invariably begets violence and oppression, social life is laid under heavier burdens of service, and further sacrifice of its attenuated desires. If living standards do not express, over the general society the magnitude of social potentiality, they are implicit witness to a society in "bondage," and therefore of a society whose standards must continue to fall with the constantly lowering levels of bondage. If living standards are but the vagaries of "ranting senti-

mentalism" in brief liasance with fashionable philanthropy, if they are no more than the echo of interested suggestion, or the catch cries of office, or the calculating polemic of political purpose—if they are no more than this they testify to the colossal failure of the social organisation. The social organisation of society is the socialisation of the means of life. That is its meaning, its obligation, its incentive. And because, in the chaotic workings of unguided time and its consequent generation of egoist duplicities that incentive has been voided and defeated, we face the necessity of revolution, i.e., the retransformation of society in the perfect likeness of pristine intention. To be real, the life standard must be social, general, equal. To be true it must be not merely theoretically purposive, but purposively complete. If it is not, it is but an image of class obsessions, a shadow of an ideal whose visionary is yet entangled in the animalism of fortune hunting.

Thus it is the living standard falls; existence becomes more precarious; security more unstable; social life more distraught and impossible. The potentialities of life flow in more and more on the lords of ownership; less and less on the slaves of production. Gradually the evils of the social system are accentuated; continually the operation of its necessities are more vigorous and confined. The production of wealth, whose intention carried with it the certainty of existence, now carries with it the certainty of destitution. The material of resource, once inviting to opportunity, is now a threat to existence. The individual labor of ownership, once social, that originally existed, has developed into its complete opposite: the private ownership of social labor. Stage by stage with that development, changing and fluctuating with fugitive waves of circumstances, modified and reconstructed by the driven needs of time, the standard of life has been fashioned; its substance determined by the social facilities of production; its ethic and benefits governed by organised conventions; its concepts widening as the world widened with the social movements of man. Now modern society confronts a barrage of social usage, which can afford a normal standard of life only to the supervisory directorate of ownership, progressively disallowing to the disciplined wealth producers the meagre pittance of competitive wages.

Social standards, then, not class standards, are the vital determinants of activity. A standard of life merely subservient to class interest abrogates itself by its own enforced restrictions. By the law of its developing economic it dries up the stream of its life, and subverts the purpose and function of society, whose objects it once served. In the process of this development, it separates a continually increasing minority from the needful means of life and satisfaction; submerges a growing number in the abyss of social desolation, tightening the living conditions of general society; rendering a riotous luxury and imperious power to a lessening few, and lowering, notch by notch and by every expedient of social trickery and political force, to the frontiers of the intolerable, the subsistence status of the many.

The development of this process is the development of the particular economic of society. If we understand the fundamentals of that economic we can direct our efforts, undeviatingly, to the known cause of social inequality and political subservency—the private ownership of the social means of life. Without that understanding we do but flounder in the quagmires of political reform, distracted by every impulse that stirs its turged waters; and attracted by every device that flickers, like a shooting star across its treacherous waste of darkness.

But the energy of thought, like all cosmic energies, follows the line of least resistance. And it would seem that until what Marx calls the "expropriation of the expropriators" has been accomplished, i.e., until the possibilities of capital have

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