

Materialism

A GAINST materialism, as a word or a principle, considerable prejudice exists because of imperfect knowledge of what it stands for. Generally speaking, materialism is supposed to mean everything sordid, selfish, sensual, criminal and degraded, as opposed to the noble, uplifting features of what is hazily described as idealism. Neither the one nor the other conception is satisfactorily complete.

As an acceptable philosophical tenet, materialism dates from the middle of the nineteenth century: its most original and brilliant exponents being the socialists, Marx and Engels with their generalisation known as the materialistic explanation of history, which regards the "bread and butter" conditions of any social period as determining the various thoughts and actions most strongly marking it off from any previous or subsequent one. Buckle, the English historian, was also a thinker along materialistic lines; but he inclines to explain national phenomena as arising from the environmental influences of natural factors, such as climate, earthquakes, etc., or the attacks of enemies, animals or human. Then there are the scientists who prove the dependence of mind upon body, from the effects upon the former of disease, accident, injury or growth development upon the latter. But at this stage of the game materialism may ignore both praise and blame for, as a proven hypothesis it is quite independent of either; and can be satisfactorily and correctly applied in many different ways.

For instance, the unscientific and bigoted religionist maintains that Protestantism arose victorious over Catholicism because the former harmonised with the revealed Divine truth, and the latter didn't. The materialist Socialist, however, can assure the Protestant that it was really the coming of the veritable age of "busy"-ness (business) which knocked the feet from under its rival, because, for one thing, the great number of Catholic religious holidays interfered too much with the newer regime. Even under Czarist Russian capitalist rule it was enacted, some twenty years ago, that instead of, as of old, the Greek church holidays being compulsory, they might, in future, be merely optional. And that Protestantism's objections to religious interference with "beesiness" are not confined to attacks upon its powerful rival, was once borne in upon the writer in a workshop where he gained a more or less useful honest livelihood in the classic land of John Knox.

His boss, who was a Bible-quoting, strict church-going Scot of the old school, employed in one of the departments a Jewish lad as an apprentice, who, in the fall of the year, required to take several separate days off, in order to dutifully fulfil parental wishes regarding religious observances. But his covenanting employer latterly raised such a terrific howl, especially as his bound apprentice could not be docked, that the lad had to cut his holidays down to even below the bare minimum necessary to keep on the right side of the God of Moses and Aaron, not to mention that of his pious gentile benefactor! So the Socialists are pretty sure of their ground when they avow themselves materialists; for on all sides, one can trace materialism's dominating influences; sometimes for progress, for good, at other times, like every natural or human force when unrestrained, crushing or crippling those who must submit to its yoke.

As regards that wage-slave class, the workers, in their present battle for existence; material conditions are, of course, their masters. It is when employed by typical large scale capitalism and in the enjoyment, as the poet says, of youthful prime or manhood's active might that they sometimes extract the greatest happiness out of life. Under such conditions, large numbers—a great socialised factory army—are brought together as a smoothly working, organized, disciplined mass; giving cheerfulness, comradeship and humor an opportunity to flourish. With productive and profitable efficiency as the aim,

and competition as the driving force, their employers, as far as they can, supply the best of machinery and equipment; and the bigger the concern, a la Henry Ford, unlike the small middle-class ones, the easier and the more pleasurable are the conditions of exploitation.

But that period is as comparatively short as is the career of a professional athlete. In many trades, the elderly worker is as rare a sight as is that of the proverbial dead donkey, because the older men never get a chance to remain on the job. In addition to these drawbacks the shadow of wholesale layoffs is ever present, for it is common to read press reports that thousands of workers at a time have been discharged from some large concerns, followed by the announcement that, on enquiry being made no definite reason therefor, could (or would) be given by those at the head of affairs.

Disgusted with these unexpected layoffs over which he has neither control nor protection, or discharged owing to the silent inroads made by increasing years; the worker gravitates to a smaller town and adapts himself to some calling where he may be "independent." He certainly becomes independent of his previous fate, but at what a cost! There are several kinds of competing "independents" to be found in such places, whose instruments for producing a livelihood are so feeble and deficient, that they have to beg, borrow, yes and steal, to complete their outfits! Who has not been impressed on seeing that significant and gloomy notice hung up—like Dante's "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" where it is most needed—"No tools lent." And as another result of such "independence" we meet with an expression which has secured an impregnable position amongst us, as strong as that famous irritating remark, "Well, is it hot enough for you?" Coming from a prospective patron, that expression is "Are you busy?" Upon analysis, the meaning is that the aforementioned independents who, upon the whole, can barely make ends meet, are sometimes idle for days, weeks or months, and at other times are so rushed with work and possess means and help so insufficient to cope with such "prosperity" developments, that neither they nor the community can be satisfactorily served. Under Socialism, efficient organisation and ample labor-force supply, would bury this idiotic "Are, you busy?" as deeply as the discarded and unnecessary "State" itself.

It has already been above said, that a strong prejudice exists against materialism; and it might be further remarked that many people can never realise, nor reconcile themselves to, material limitations. That applies particularly (as the comic strips remind us) to women who are divorced from and so have no practical knowledge of the daily economic struggle for filthy lucre. This applies even more so (alas! when these innocents suffer the pains of disillusionment) to children. Was it not Marie Antoinette who, when told that the poor of France could not get bread naively enquired "Then why don't they eat cake?" When a little child, the writer used to accompany his mother out shopping. At the bakers his parent would often hand him a bun, apparently without money and without price figuring in the transaction; but only accompanied by the invariable remark "Put it down to Mrs. —'s account"—of course, to be paid for at the week-end settling. So the youngster, having learned the trick successfully practised it alone on his own initiative upon himself, by merely adding the mystic and yet not unreasonable "open sesame" passwords about Mrs. —'s account; until investigations and explanations followed and he was informed that, after all it took real money to buy and enjoy a real bun—and then it was all over with his earthly paradise!

Similarly with those children of a larger growth—mankind. Has their career not been a continual chafing against and victory over the hampering brute forces of the material world? If not, what, then, do all these inventions for dominion upon

land, wafer, and now, over air signify? And yet, side by side with all such triumphs we still endure an irrational system of production with profit and not usefulness in view; the slaves of what we intended should be our servant—money. What this condition of things logically results in, was recently well illustrated by one of Ring Lardner's inimitable plebian, ungrammatical and ill-spelled stories, about a theatre proprietor who was persuaded to join his village volunteer fire-brigade. After waiting for long in vain for a fire alarm, the joyful sound was at last heard summoning them to the home of a (\$200,000) "millionaire;" only to find it a false alarm. However, that didn't worry the gallant heroes much, whom the theatre man discovered in every room, deliberately wrecking everything they could get a smash at. Finally, each volunteer member of the brigade, which comprised plumbers, furniture dealers, glaziers, etc., leaving more of their business cards with the "millionaire" than he could hold in both hands; quitted the house. But their latest member, being merely a theatre man with nothing saleable to fire victims, thought it about time he resigned from the bunch! A funny yarn, no doubt—but certainly no funnier nor sillier than its parent capitalism, of which it is a portrait in miniature. That Lardner's story really contained elements of truth is proved by an occurrence in connection with a Toronto volunteer fire brigade; three members of whom were arrested on September 29th, 1924, upon charges of "arson and conspiring to burn," the object of the fires being said to be a desire to show off efficiency and also to influence the community to purchase a more up-to-date equipment.

So, it would seem, there is something at the bottom of these illusions about impatience under and victories over materialism, which have for so long marked the career of the human race. There is something anticipatory in all this, something distinctly prophetic of overwhelming mastery. For thousands of years, mankind have been idealists; and, in the words of Hegel—himself the mighty idealist teacher of materialistic Marx—"everything which is real, is reasonable." It was only, as above remarked, towards the middle of the nineteenth century that materialism's claims were discovered and justified. If the age-long misconceptions were entirely without some basis in fact, why did the misconceptions prevail? Even the flat earth misconception is based on the fact that, relatively to its inhabitants, the rotundity is negligible—do we not use spirit-levels?

Let us consider another of man's illusions. As is well known, it was once the universal belief that it was the sun that journeyed around the earth; instead of the present view that, in both its daily and yearly progress, it is the earth that moves around the sun. And so we modern smart Alecks look down with pitying superiority upon our ignorant, simple-minded ancestors, who actually "saw" the sun's motions. Yet, maybe after all, our ancestors were not so much in the wrong as we imagine. Take the question of wages, for example. As the sun supports every earthly life-form, so the worker's wages is the sun of his capitalist existence, because it sustains and fructifies the entire life of him and his dependents. But wages are socialistically considered under three aspects. First—the nominal wage is the money-name of what the worker periodically gets. Second—the real wages is what that sum of money can periodically purchase in accordance with the rise or fall of the prices of commodities the worker needs. Third—the relative wage measures the changes that occur in the capitalists' profit receipts as compared with the share the worker receives of what he produces. Now, the worker's wage may apparently remain stationary at, say \$20, and yet all the time it may be continually fluctuating by rising or falling; as explained by the three terms, nominal, real and relative wage, as Marx shows in

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