

SOME IDEAS
ON
THE ORGANIZATION OF LABOR
AND FREE COMPETITION

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Recently, it was declared within the Academy that government intervention between employers and workers to regulate wages is a deplorable utopia. Nothing could be truer; and it is astonishing that people, otherwise of considerable merit, should have wasted their time on such a subject. But it was also declared that publishing a book on the organization of labor is like writing, for the fiftieth time, a treatise on squaring the circle or the philosopher's stone. So it is probable, I would even say certain, that the illustrious author of this proposition did not give the expression *organization of labor* a uniformly accepted meaning. What is undeniable is that the question of the organization of labor has become the basis of all those relating to the existence of order with regard to wealth, and that it is absolutely necessary to find a solution that everyone can be satisfied with.

When the solution to a social question becomes necessary, when this necessity begins to be felt by superior minds, and when it is debated at length, it is safe to bet against the smallest fraction that the problem is posed in an indeterminate way: which, in social science, means that one uses words whose meaning is not specified. Would the same be true for the expressions *organization of labor* and *free competition*? In any case, this is the first thing that must be examined.

Certainly, I will not apologize to the Academy if I begin by analyzing the value of expressions used constantly. The Academy knows that Destutt de Tracy, once one of its most illustrious members, complained bitterly, in his commentary on *The Spirit of the Laws*, that Montesquieu had left the word *liberty* undefined. Perhaps one could justifiably level the same reproach at the commentator, for he asserts that liberty is everything one desires, everything one loves, everything one wants, and it would be difficult to be more indeterminate.²

Let us begin with the word *labor*.

¹ The reading of this work at the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, scheduled for September 27, was postponed to October 4, 1845; but it did not take place. — The note was published in the *Revue de Droit français et étranger*.

² Commentary on *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu, by Count Destutt de Tracy. Paris, Desoer, 1822, pages 195 *et seq.*

Before proceeding, however, we should point out that in all sciences, and especially in social science, nothing is more dangerous than taking expressions sometimes literally and sometimes figuratively, without specifying the meaning in which their value should be understood.

For the word *labor*, the dictionary says: *the effort one takes, the fatigue one gives oneself*. Socially speaking, this is almost as indeterminate as the value Destutt de Tracy gave to the word *liberty*.

Let us try to be more precise, and above all, let us not put forward anything in this regard that could be contested.

We say that a horse labors, that a machine labor; we even say that money labors. But these expressions are merely figurative. Literally, only rational beings labor.

And can we separate the labor done with the muscles from the labor done with the brain?

Not at all. The muscles act only through the brain, and labor done with the brain belongs to society only through the use of the muscles of the voice or the hand.

Before the incompressibility of examination, a class of men could be considered as composed of machines. But that era is past. It is therefore not with regard to the Academy that I will attempt to prove that this separation is practically impossible. I will not abuse its shame.

What is labor, to speak plainly?

It is the characteristic of humanity.

And, morally speaking, what is humanity?

It is society.

The organization of labor is therefore nothing other than the organization of society.

Now, what is society composed of?

Of morality and physics, that is to say, of education and wealth.

The organization of society is thus composed of the organization of education and the organization of wealth.

And for order to exist, must these two systems be harmonious?

There is not one of you, gentlemen, who has not already answered in the affirmative.

Now, let us distinguish between ancient society, the society existing before the incompressibility of examination, and modern society, the society existing since this incompressibility.

I use, gentlemen, the expression the *incompressibility of examination* because the expression *free examination* is not precise enough. Examination has always been individually free; only it was socially constrained. Our era is characterized by the annihilation of this constraint.

Before the incompressibility of examination, education was organized in that it was *unified*, in that it was subject to revelation.

The truth of our revelation, like the truth of any other revelation, was a hypothesis, true or false, which is neither my subject nor my intention to examine at present. But, I repeat, it was a hypothesis.

Now, one does not base a society on a hypothesis; I could provide you with proof of this, gentlemen, if I did not fear the consequences.

It was therefore necessary that the hypothesis be accepted as truth.

And how can a hypothesis be made socially accepted as truth?

To prevent the hypothesis from being examined by the masses: not only socially, through the communication of thought, but even individually, as far as possible without the use of force, which cannot prevent individual examination. This second condition is necessary, since the masses are composed of individuals.

And what means should be employed to ensure that the hypothetical social basis was not examined individually?

To establish the exploitation of the greatest possible majority by the smallest possible minority, and to regulate it in such a way that the masses would not have time to examine it.

In the old society, this was the organization of wealth.

An illustrious member of this Academy said that incessant labor is a restraint for the masses.

For the old society, this was unquestionably true, and the only restraint that could exist.

I have just, it seems to me, outlined and demonstrated the harmony that existed between the two organizations of the old society.

Let us turn to modern society.

In modern society, is there an organized system of education?

I beg your pardon, gentlemen, this question is almost impertinent; you have already answered that for us, education is like liberty for Destutt de Tracy. In moral science, education is whatever each individual desires; we have no education. If such education existed, a real one, recognized as such, by the very

fact of its existence it would be organized, and we would not be reduced to deciding by majority vote.

And the organization of wealth?

It is the same as that of the old society; the only change is the abolition of primogeniture, and this does not concern the masses who do not inherit; and the abolition of the guilds, which did not improve the lot of the masses.

Here, gentlemen, I need to rely on the decision of one of those whom Europe rightly considers the foremost authority in deciding this matter.

“It has seemed to me,” said M. Blanqui,³ “that the political economy of the ancients had no other claim than that of the moderns. In all revolutions, there have only ever been two parties present: that of the people who want to live from their own labor, and that of the people who want to live from the labor of others. Power and honors are contested only to rest in that realm of bliss where the vanquished party never lets the victorious party sleep peacefully. *Patricians* and *plebeians*, *slaves* and *freedmen*, *red roses* and *white roses*, *cavaliers* and *roundheads*, *knights* and *libertines*, *liberals* and *serviles* are but varieties of the same species. It is always the question of well-being that divides them, each wanting, if I may use a vulgar expression, to pull the blanket to their own advantage, at the risk of exposing their neighbor.”

And elsewhere:

“It is therefore not so far from the Greek and Roman political economy, which was cruel, insatiable and inexorable, to the political economy of more than one European country. In our beautiful France, so rich in vines and harvests, several million men do not eat bread and drink water. Salt abounds beneath their feet, but taxes weigh heavily on their heads, and the *gabelleur*,⁴ the odious tax collector of the Middle Ages, has merely changed his clothes. If a new plant is discovered, tobacco for example, its cultivation will be forbidden...; the poor girls of Lyon, whose fairy fingers weave satin and poplin, have no shirts; the silk weavers, who decorate our palaces and temples with their magnificent tapestries, often lack clogs.

“No,” cries M. Blanqui, “these are not the final words of Providence!”

And elsewhere:

“We have,” he says, “*emancipated labor*. Strange thing! And its condition, in many respects, has become harsher and more precarious.”

And elsewhere:

³ *History of Political Economy*.

⁴ Collector of the *gabelle* or salt tax. — TRANSLATOR.

“Another unfortunate consequence of the restrictive system was the subjugation of workers to capitalists, and the increase in individual misery in the face of general wealth. This terrible contrast has *not ceased* to terrify modern societies ever since.”

Speaking of Turgot’s edict that abolished guilds, M. Blanqui adds:

“Who would have told him that after half a century, competition among workers would lead to lower wages, pauperism and all the miseries that tarnish the brilliance of our civilization?”

And elsewhere, speaking of Adam Smith’s doctrine, according to which unfettered private interest should determine the use of capital most favorable to the community, since it was profitable to entrepreneurs, he adds:

“This doctrine, which prevailed in England and gave industry an extraordinary impetus, is nevertheless beginning to bear bitter fruit; it has created immense wealth alongside appalling *poverty*; it has enriched the nation while often treating a portion of its citizens quite cruelly. Is this the social goal of increasing wealth, or rather, is it not an unfortunate deviation from the social path? Can we truly call wealth this excess of profits extracted, according to M. de Sismondi, from the share of the poor, and, *according to us, by capital from labor?*”

And further on:

“The question has reached the point where we wonder whether to applaud or worry about the progress of a wealth that brings so many ills in its wake, that multiplies hospitals and prisons as much as palaces.”

And further on:

“Humanity demands that we cease sacrificing masses of people who do not benefit from it to the progress of public opulence. This is what the laws of justice and morality dictate, laws that have been ignored for too long in the social distribution of profits and punishments.”

Then he adds, with a prophetic voice that will most certainly be fulfilled:

“We will no longer agree to call *wealth* anything but the sum of the national product *equitably* distributed among all producers. This is the French political economy to which we profess to belong, and this will spread throughout the world.”

And regarding the destruction of the guilds, M. Blanqui adds:

“By emancipating men, they were left in chains; liberty was going to become more disastrous for them than servitude. Instead of waging war against their masters, they waged it against each other.”

Then, comparing modern society to ancient society, he exclaims:

“The tithe, nowadays, is levied in the workshops: our forges and spinning mills have become dungeons where, clad in their golden armor, sit the high and mighty lords of modern industry.”

You will forgive me, gentlemen, these quotations, but I like to pay homage to one who marches so firmly along this humanitarian path.

Now I will continue and I repeat:

With respect to wealth, the organization of modern society is the same as that of ancient society.

And is there harmony between a relative organization and an education that does not yet exist, and an organization relative to wealth, an organization whose sole purpose is to prevent examination at a time when examination cannot be prevented?

I leave this answer to your wisdom.

You have just stated that for modern society this harmony does not exist; which means that the organization of labor, the organization of society, does not exist.

And what is necessary for this organization to now exist in a way that is *rationaly* undeniable as it was *revelationally* for the ancient society, the incontestability of the organization's justice, whether in relation to faith or reason, being necessary for social order to exist?

With regard to the organization of education, knowledge must be coordinated to the point of demonstrating the reality of the religious bond, outside of which no society is possible.

And as a corollary to this principle, everyone must be socially empowered to understand the demonstration; otherwise, it would be as if it didn't exist.

Regarding the distribution of wealth: no one should be exploited, so that everyone has the time to examine it.

And as a corollary to this principle: everyone must be socially enabled to understand that, *rationaly*, they are doing as well as possible in terms of wealth, so that they can defend the social order in their own interest; otherwise, scrutiny will only serve to destroy order.

And how can these two organizations be established in such a way that they are harmonious?

This falls outside my current topic. I only wished to state, regarding what is necessary for the organization of labor to exist, ideas whose incontestability none of you, gentlemen, can deny. As for the organization itself, it will be easy for me to demonstrate that the time has not yet come to discuss it, *even within this Academy*.

The old society, the society based on the assumption and exploitation of the masses, dates back to the origin of humanity, to the origin of the ignorance that still persists, that will persist until education is *unified*.

Over such a long period, billions of prejudices have necessarily taken root. Thousands have vanished since the inevitability of scrutiny. Millions still exist out of fear of seeing them destroyed before they can be replaced by truth. Which of us is not still bristling with them? Prejudices, however, are the cataracts of science, and as long as they exist, if truth were to speak to us, we would mistake it for error.

But who will come to reduce these cataracts?

I told you, gentlemen, at our last meeting: it is anarchy that will render us this service.

I see that you are protesting against this proposal; so I appeal to yourselves.

If what I have just denounced is undeniable, here are its necessary consequences.

Divine right has become incapable of serving as the basis for the existence of order.

And the rule of the majority, or the admission of the lack of unity of instruction, is nothing but the path to anarchy.

Could such an admission, which each of you acknowledges in your conscience, be made collectively within this Academy? I deny its current possibility, and perhaps even its prudence.

And until then, what can be said in favor of true order?

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Let us turn to free competition.

Here, let us begin by examining a difficulty.

When it comes to determining the value of the expression *free competition*, one always begins by assuming that, in our modern society, free competition exists. Hence the necessity of harmonizing the value of the expression with a hypothesis. If someone then denies the reality of what is hypothesized, everything must be started again. We will free ourselves from this predicament by setting aside what we call our social organization, and then examine whether free competition exists in our society.

Free competition means the absence of any monopoly regarding the use of the power to labor. Do you realize, gentlemen, the labyrinth into which we are about to fall?

To write... is to labor.

To plead..., to heal... is to labor. But let us not increase our task, and let us confine ourselves to discussing what is generally understood when one speaks of the organization of labor: the re-establishment of the guilds or the maintenance of their abolition. And to avoid any ambiguity, we call a guild, corporation, etc., any institution which, in order to allow a person to labor, requires more than their own will and that of the person who wishes to employ them.

Having brought the question to this point of clarity, it is evident that every kind of corporation, guild, etc., is a monopoly, incompatible with free competition, with the freedom to work.

Such, I will be told, is the state of our society. Therefore, free competition exists.

It is as if one were to say: To be an honest man, one must not murder. Therefore, anyone who is not a murderer is an honest man.

Now, gentlemen, I am going to walk on hot coals. I will take care not to burn anyone and not to burn myself.

I repeat: For there to be free competition, there must be an absence of monopoly.

What is a monopoly for the one who enjoys it legally?

A privilege.

And is a social privilege a monopoly with respect to the one who is subjected to it?

Without a doubt.

Is a privilege of birth a monopoly, and is it compatible with free competition?

A privilege of birth, however legal it may be, is a monopoly. And this privilege is incompatible with free competition.

And is there a privilege of birth as long as it is not indifferent (with regard to the development of one's capacity for work, and with regard to all the utility that can be derived from it) to be born on the steps of the throne or in a gutter?

Undoubtedly.

And does this exist in our modern society?

One would have to be mad to ask without being sure of the answer.

Thus, free competition does not exist.

I know, gentlemen, that I will be accused of exaggeration. Once again, I appeal to those who will accuse me. Have I reasoned correctly, yes or no? To this question, I will not receive a direct answer. I will simply be told: You want social perfection; it is a chimera.

If it is a chimera, gentlemen, then either prevent the masses from examining it, for it was only at this price that the old society could exist; or prepare yourselves for all the horrors of anarchy. It is indeed strange that we boast of existing in an age dominated by reason; and as soon as a logician appears, even a logician by the admission of his adversaries, he is told that he is mad. But on whose side, then, does the madness lie?

What! Social perfection is a chimera! But what is this perfection?

It is the harmony between the organization of education and the organization of wealth.

Do those who accuse me of being a utopian want anarchy between these two systems? Certainly, such an accusation will not be leveled against me within the Academy; there is not one among those kind enough to listen to me who has not, in their writings, formulated in other terms what I now have the honor of stating.

And why then does the public not dare to admit what each member of this Academy recognizes in their own way?

It is because they fear addressing the problem of social organization frankly. Must I put it bluntly? It is because they fear offending prejudices.

And what will destroy prejudices in an age when they have become incompatible with the existence of order?

I will repeat it a thousand times: anarchy.

If I were to stop here, I would justly be told: If you have only misfortunes to announce, be silent. Let us spend the few remaining days of order in blissful ignorance. Do not make our society a hell where there is room for everything except hope.

So as not to deserve this reproach, I will repeat then equally:

That the first thing necessary to cure oneself is to recognize one's illness; that when the illness is social, it must be socially recognized; and that only the Academy has the distinct right not to *deny* the pathological state of society. I would add that this is all it is possible *at first* for it to do. Therefore, I hope it will receive my observations favorably.

To summarize.

The organization of labor is the organization of society.

When labor must be compressed because the social base is a hypothesis, majorities must be exploited by minorities.

When labor can no longer be compressed, anarchy must exist or no one must be exploited.

When no one is exploited, when society takes equal care of all its members, regardless of their birth, there is *real free competition*.

When this does not exist, free competition is illusory.

Paris, September 25, 1845.