

an essay published in Egalite

Mikhael Bakunin

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The first topic for consideration today is this: will it be feasible for the working masses to know complete emancipation as long as the education available to those masses continues to be inferior to that bestowed upon the bourgeois, or, in more general terms, as long as there exists any class, be it numerous or otherwise, which, by virtue of birth, is entitled to a superior education and a more complete instruction? Does not the question answer itself? Is it not self-evident that of any two persons endowed by nature with roughly equivalent intelligence, one will have the edge the one whose mind will have been broadened by learning and who, having the better grasped the inter-relationships of natural and social phenomena (what we might term the laws of nature and of society) will the more readily and more fully grasp the nature of his surroundings? And that this one will feel, let us say, a greater liberty and, in practical terms, show a greater aptitude and capability than his fellow? It is natural that he who knows more will dominate him who knows less. And were this disparity of education and education and learning the only one to exist between two classes, would not all the others swiftly follow until the world of men itself in its present circumstances, that is, until it was again divided into a mass of slaves and a tiny number of rulers, the former labouring away as they do today, to the advantage of the latter?

Now we see why the bourgeois socialists demand only a little education for the people, a soupcon more than they currently receive; whereas we socialist democrats demand, on the people's behalf, complete and integral education, an education as full as the power of intellect today permits, so that, henceforth, there may not be any class over the workers by virtue of superior education and therefore able to dominate and exploit them. The bourgeois socialists want to see the retention of the class system each class, they contend, fulfilling a specific social function; one specialising, say, in learning, and the other in manual labour. We, on the other hand, seek the final and the utter abolition of classes; we seek a unification of society and equality of social and economic provision for every individual on this earth. The bourgeois socialists, whilst retaining the historic bases of the society of today, would like to see them become less stark, less harsh and more prettified. Whereas we should like to see their destruction. From which it follows that there can be no truce or compromise, let alone any coalition between the bourgeois socialists and us socialist democrats. But, I have heard it said and this is the argument most frequently raised against us and an argument which the dogmatists of every shade regard as irrefutable it is impossible that the whole of mankind should devote itself to learning, for we should all die of starvation. Consequently while some study others must labour so that they can produce what we need to live not just producing for their own needs, but also for those men who devote themselves exclusively to intellectual pursuits; aside from expanding the horizons of human knowledge, the discoveries of these intellectuals improve the condition of all human beings, without exception, when applied to industry, agriculture and, generally, to political and social life; agreed? And do not their artistic creations enhance the lives of every one of us?

No, not at all. And the greatest reproach which we can level against science and the arts is precisely that they do not distribute their favours and do not exercise their influence, except upon a tiny fragment of society, to the exclusion and, thus, to the detriment of the vast majority. Today one might say of the advances of science and of the arts, just what has already and so properly been said of the prodigious progress of industry, trade, credit, and, in a word, of the wealth of society in the most civilised countries of the modern world. That wealth is quite exclusive, and the tendency is for it to become more so each day, as it becomes concentrated into an ever shrinking number of hands, shunning the lower echelons of the middle class and the petite bourgeoisie, depressing them into the proletariat, so that the growth of this wealth is the direct cause behind the growing misery of the

labouring masses. Thus the outcome is that the gulf which yawns between the privileged, contented minority and millions of workers who earn their keep by the strength of their arm yawns ever wider and that the happier the contented who –exploit the people's labour become the more unhappy the workers become. One has only to look at the fabulous opulence of the aristocratic, financier, commercial and industrial clique in England and compare it with the miserable condition of the workers of the same country; one has only to re-read the so naive and heartrending letter lately penned by an intelligent and upright goldsmith of London, one Walter Dugan, who has just voluntarily taken poison along with his wife and their six children, simply as a means of escape from the degradation's of poverty and the torments of hunger (1) and one will find oneself obliged to concede that the much vaunted civilisation means, in material terms, to the people, only oppression and ruination. And the same holds true for the modern advances of science and the arts. Huge strides, indeed, it is true But the greater the advances, the more they foster intellectual servitude and thus, in material terms, foster misery and inferiority as the lot of the people; for these advances merely widen the gulf which already separates the people's level of understanding from the levels of the privileged classes. From the point of view of natural capacity, the intelligence of the former is, today, obviously less stunted, less exercised, less sophisticated and less corrupted by the need to defend unjust interests, and is, consequently, naturally of greater potency than the brain power of the bourgeoisie: but, then again, the brain power of the bourgeois does have at its disposal the complete arsenal of science filled with weapons that are indeed formidable. It is very often the case that a highly intelligent worker is obliged to hold his tongue when confronted by a learned fool who defeats him, not by dint of intellect (of which he has none) but by dint of his education, an education denied the workingman but granted the fool because, while the fool was able to develop his foolishness scientifically in schools, the working man's labours were clothing, housing, feeding him and supplying his every need, his teachers and his books, everything necessary to his education.

Even within the bourgeois class, as we know only too well, the degree of learning imparted to each individual is not the same. There, too, there is a scale which is determined, not by the potential of the individual but by the amount of wealth of the social stratum to which he belongs by birth; for example, the instruction made available to the children of the lower petite bourgeoisie, whilst itself scarcely superior to that which workers manage to obtain for themselves, is next to nothing by comparison with the education that society makes readily available to the upper and middle bourgeoisie. What, then, do we find? The petite bourgeoisie, whose only attachment to the middle class is through a ridiculous vanity on the one hand, and its dependence upon the big capitalists on the other, finds itself most often in circumstances even more miserable and even more humiliating than those which afflict the proletariat. So when we talk of privileged classes, we never have in mind this poor petite bourgeoisie which, if it did but have a little more spirit and gumption, would not delay in joining forces with us to combat the big and medium bourgeoisie who crush it today no less than they crush the proletariat. And should society's current economic trends continue in the same direction for a further ten years (which we do, however, regard as impossible) we may yet see the bulk of the medium bourgeoisie tumble first of all into the current circumstances of the petite bourgeoisie only to slip a little later into the proletariat as a result, of course, of this inevitable concentration of ownership into an ever smaller number of hands the ineluctable consequences of which would be to partition society once and for all into a tiny, overweeningly opulent, educated, ruling minority and a vast majority of impoverished, ignorant, enslaved proletarians.

There is one fact which should make an impression upon every person of conscience, upon all who have at heart a concern for human dignity and justice; that is, for the liberty of each individual amid and through a setting of equality for all. That is the fact that all of the intelligentsia, all of the great applications of science to the purpose of industry, trade and to the life of society in general have thus far profited no one, save the privileged classes and the power of the State, that timeless champion of all political and social iniquity. Never, not once, have they brought any benefit to the masses of the people. We need only list the machines and every workingman and honest advocate of the emancipation of labour would accept the justice of what we say. By what power do the privileged classes maintain themselves today, with all their insolent smugness and iniquitous pleasures, in defiance of the all too legitimate outrage felt by the masses of the people? Is it by some power inherent in their persons? No it is solely through the power of the State, in whose apparatus today their offspring hold, always,

every key position (and even every lower and middle range position) excepting that of soldier and worker. And in this day and age what is it that constitutes the principle underlying the power of the State? Why, it is science. Yes, science Science of government, science of administration and financial science; the science of fleecing the flocks of the people without their bleating too loudly and, when they start to bleat, the science of urging silence, patience and obedience upon them by means of a scientifically organised force: the science of deceiving and dividing the masses of the people and keeping them allays in a salutary ignorance lest they ever become able, by helping one another and pooling their efforts, to conjure up a power capable of overturning States; and, above all, military science with all its tried and tested weaponry, these formidable instruments of destruction which 'work wonders' (2): and lastly, the science of genius which has conjured up steamships, railways and telegraphy which, by turning every government into a hundred armed, a thousand armed Briareos (3), giving it the power to be, act and arrest everywhere at once has brought about the most formidable political centralisation the world has ever witnessed.

Who, then, will deny that, without exception, all of the advances made by science have thus far brought nothing, save a boosting of the wealth of the privileged classes and of the power of the State, to the detriment of the well-being and liberty of the masses of the people, of the proletariat? But, we will hear the objection, do not the masses of the people profit by this also? Are they not much more civilised in this society of ours than they were in the societies of bygone centuries?

We shall reply to that with an observation borrowed from the noted German socialist, Lassalle. In measuring the progress made by the working masses, in terms of their political and social emancipation, one should not compare their intellectual state in this century with what it may have been in centuries gone by. Instead, one ought to consider whether, by comparison with some given time, the gap which then existed between the working masses and the privileged classes having been noted, the masses have progressed to the same extent as these privileged classes. For, if the progress made by both has been roughly equivalent, the intellectual gap which separates the masses from the privileged in today's world will be the same as it ever was; but if the proletariat has progressed further and more rapidly than the privileged, then the gap must necessarily have narrowed; but if, on the other hand, the worker's rate of progress has been slower and, consequently, less than that of a representative of the ruling classes over the same period, then that gap will have grown. The gulf which separates them will have increased and the man of privilege grown more powerful and the worker's circumstances more abject, more slave like than at the date one chose as the point of departure. If the two of us set off from two different points at the same time and you have a lead of one hundred paces over me and you move at a rate of sixty paces per minute, and I at only thirty paces per minute, then after one hour the distance which separates us will not be just over one hundred paces, but just over one thousand nine hundred paces.

That example gives a roughly accurate notion of the respective advances made by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Thus far the bourgeoisie has raced along the track of civilisation at a quicker rate than the proletariat, not because they are intellectually more powerful than the latter indeed one might properly argue the contrary case but because the political and economic organisation of society has been such that, hitherto, the bourgeoisie alone have enjoyed access to learning and science has existed only for them, and the proletariat has found itself doomed to a forced ignorance, so that if the proletariat has, nevertheless, made progress (and there is no denying it has) then that progress was made not thanks to society, but rather in spite of it. To sum up. In society as presently constituted, the advances of science have been at the root of the relative ignorance of the proletariat, just as the progress of industry and commerce have been at the root of its relative impoverishment. Thus, intellectual progress and material progress have contributed in equal measure towards the exacerbation of the slavery of the proletariat. Meaning what? Meaning that we have a duty to reject and resist that bourgeois science, just as we have a duty to reject and resist bourgeois wealth. And reject and resist them in this sense that in destroying the social order which turns it into the preserve of one or of several classes, we must lay claim to it as the common inheritance of all the world.