

**PAUL
LAFARGUE**



**THE RIGHT
TO BE LAZY,
AND OTHER
STUDIES**



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Let us be lazy in everything, except in loving and drinking,
except in being lazy.

—Lessing.

I.

A DISASTROUS DOGMA.

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A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway. This delusion drags in its train the individual and social woes which for two centuries have tortured sad humanity. This delusion is the love of work, the furious passion for work, pushed even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and his progeny. Instead of opposing this mental aberration, the priests, the economists and the moralists have cast a sacred halo over work. Blind and finite men, they have wished to be wiser than their God; weak and contemptible men, they have presumed to rehabilitate what their God had cursed. I, who do not profess to be a Christian, an economist or a moralist, I appeal from their judgement to that of their God; from the preachings of their religious, economics or free-thought ethics, to the frightful consequences of work in capitalist society.

In capitalist society work is the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity. Compare the thoroughbred in Rothschild's stables, served by a retinue of bipeds, with the heavy brute of the Norman farms which plows the earth, carts the manure, hauls the crops. Look at the noble savage whom the missionaries of trade and the traders of religion have not yet corrupted with Christianity, syphilis

and the dogma of work, and then look at our miserable slaves of machines. [4]

When, in our civilized Europe, we would find a trace of the native beauty of man, we must go seek it in the nations where economic prejudices have not yet uprooted the hatred of work. Spain, which, alas, is degenerating, may still boast of possessing fewer factories than we have of prisons and barracks; but the artist rejoices in his admiration of the hardy Andalusian, brown as his native chestnuts, straight and flexible as a steel rod; and the heart leaps at hearing the beggar, superbly draped in his ragged *capa*, parleying on terms of equality with the duke of Ossuna. For the Spaniard, in whom the primitive animal has not been atrophied, work is the worst sort of slavery. [5] The Greeks in their era of greatness had only contempt for work: their slaves alone were permitted to labor: the free man knew only exercises for the body and mind. And so it was in this era that men like Aristotle, Phidias, Aristophanes moved and breathed among the people; it was the time when a handful of heroes at Marathon crushed the hordes of Asia, soon to be subdued by Alexander. The philosophers of antiquity taught contempt for work, that degradation of the free man, the poets sang of idleness, that gift from the Gods:

O Melibae Deus nobis haec otia fecit. [6]

Jesus, in his sermon on the Mount, preached idleness: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." Jehovah the bearded and angry god, gave his worshipers

the supreme example of ideal laziness; after six days of work, he rests for all eternity.

On the other hand, what are the races for which work is an organic necessity? The Auvergnians; the Scotch, those Auvergnians of the British Isles; the Galicians, those Auvergnians of Spain; the Pomeranians, those Auvergnians of Germany; the Chinese, those Auvergnians of Asia. In our society, which are the classes that love work for work's sake? The peasant proprietors, the little shop-keepers; the former bent double over their fields, the latter crouched in their shops, burrow like the mole in his subterranean passage and never stand up to look at nature leisurely.

And meanwhile the proletariat, the great class embracing all the producers of civilized nations, the class which in freeing itself will free humanity from servile toil and will make of the human animal a free being,—the proletariat, betraying its instincts, despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work. Rude and terrible has been its punishment. All its individual and social woes are born of its passion for work.

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[4] European explorers pause in wonder before the physical beauty and the proud bearing of the men of primitive races, not soiled by what Paepig calls "the poisonous breath of civilization." Speaking of the aborigines of the Oceanic Islands, Lord George Campbell writes: "There is not a people in the world which strikes one more favorably at first sight. Their smooth skin of a light copper tint, their hair golden and curly, their beautiful and happy faces. In a word, their whole person formed a new and splendid specimen of the 'genus homo'; their physical appearance gave the impression of a race superior to ours." The civilized men of ancient Rome, witness Caesar and Tacitus, regarded with the

same admiration the Germans of the communist tribes which invaded the Roman empire. Following Tacitus, Salvien, the priest of the fifth century who received the surname of master of the Bishops, held up the barbarians as an example to civilized Christians: "We are immodest before the barbarians, who are more chaste than we. Even more the barbarians are wounded at our lack of modesty; the Goths do not permit debauchees of their own nation to remain among them; alone in the midst of them, by the sad privilege of their nationality and their name, the Romans have the right to be impure. (Pederasty was then the height of the fashion among both pagans and Christians.) The oppressed fly to the barbarians to seek for mercy and a shelter." (*De Gubernatione Dei*.) The old civilization and the rising Christianity corrupted the barbarians of the ancient world, as the old Christianity and the modern capitalist civilization are corrupting the savages of the new world.

M. F. LePlay, whose talent for observation must be recognized, even if we reject his sociological conclusions, tainted with philanthropic and Christian pharisaism, says in his book "*Les Ouvriers Européens*" (1885): "The Propensity of the Bachkirs for laziness (the Bachkirs are semi-nomadic shepherds of the Asiatic slope of the Ural mountains); the leisure of nomadic life, the habit of meditation which this engenders in the best endowed individuals—all this often gives them a distinction of manner, a fineness of intelligence and judgement which is rarely to be observed on the same social level in a more developed civilization.... The thing most repugnant to them is agricultural labor: they will do anything rather than accept the trade of a farmer." Agriculture is in fact the first example of servile labor in the history of man. According to biblical tradition, the first criminal, Cain, is a farmer.

[5] The Spanish proverb says: *Descanzar es salud*. (Rest is healthful.)

[6] O Melibaeus! a god has granted us this idleness. Virgil's *Bucolics*. (See appendix.)

II.

BLESSINGS OF WORK.

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In 1770 at London, an anonymous pamphlet appeared under the title, "An Essay on Trade and Commerce". It made some stir in its time. The author, a great philanthropist, was indignant that "the factory population of England had taken into its head the fixed idea that in their quality of Englishmen all the individuals composing it have by right of birth the privilege of being freer and more independent than the laborers of any country in Europa. This idea may have its usefulness for soldiers, since it stimulates their valor, but the less the factory workers are imbued with it the better for themselves and the state. Laborers ought never to look on themselves as independent of their superiors. It is extremely dangerous to encourage such infatuations in a commercial state like ours, where perhaps seven-eighths of the population have little or no property. The cure will not be complete until our industrial laborers are contented to work six days for the same sum which they now earn in four." Thus, nearly a century before Guizot, work was openly preached in London as a curb to the noble passions of man. "The more my people work, the less vices they will have", wrote Napoleon on May 5th, 1807, from Osterod. "I am the authority ... and I should be disposed to order that on Sunday after the hour of service be past, the shops be

opened and the laborers return to their work." To root out laziness and curb the sentiments of pride and independence which arise from it, the author of the "Essay on Trade" proposed to imprison the poor in ideal "work-houses", which should become "houses of terror, where they should work fourteen hours a day in such fashion that when meal time was deducted there should remain twelve hours of work full and complete".

Twelve hours of work a day, that is the ideal of the philanthropists and moralists of the eighteenth century. How have we outdone this *nec plus ultra*! Modern factories have become ideal houses of correction in which the toiling masses are imprisoned, in which they are condemned to compulsory work for twelve or fourteen hours, not the men only but also women and children. [7] And to think that the sons of the heroes of the Terror have allowed themselves to be degraded by the religion of work, to the point of accepting, since 1848, as a revolutionary conquest, the law limiting factory labor to twelve hours. They proclaim as a revolutionary principle the Right to Work. Shame to the French proletariat! Only slaves would have been capable of such baseness. A Greek of the heroic times would have required twenty years of capitalist civilization before he could have conceived such vileness.

And if the miseries of compulsory work and the tortures of hunger have descended upon the proletariat more in number than the locusts of the Bible, it is because the proletariat itself invited them. This work, which in June 1848 the laborers demanded with arms in their hands, this they have imposed on their families; they have delivered up to

the barons of industry their wives and children. With their own hands they have demolished their domestic hearths. With their own hands they have dried up the milk of their wives. The unhappy women carrying and nursing their babes have been obliged to go into the mines and factories to bend their backs and exhaust their nerves. With their own hands they have broken the life and the vigor of their children. Shame on the proletarians! Where are those neighborly housewives told of in our fables and in our old tales, bold and frank of speech, lovers of Bacchus? Where are those buxom girls, always on the move, always cooking, always singing, always spreading life, engendering life's joy, giving painless birth to healthy and vigorous children?... Today we have factory girls and women, pale drooping flowers, with impoverished blood, with disordered stomachs, with languid limbs.... They have never known the pleasure of a healthful passion, nor would they be capable of telling of it merrily! And the children? Twelve hours of work for children! O, misery. But not all the Jules Simon of the Academy of Moral and Political Science, not all the Germinys of jesuitism, could have invented a vice more degrading to the intelligence of the children, more corrupting of their instincts, more destructive of their organism than work in the vitiated atmosphere of the capitalist factory.

Our epoch has been called the century of work. It is in fact the century of pain, misery and corruption.

And all the while the philosophers, the bourgeois economists—from the painfully confused August Comte to the ludicrously clear Leroy-Beaulieu; the people of bourgeois literature—from the quackishly romantic Victor Hugo to the