

The evolution of society

By Eduoard Fortin

One single fact dominates the whole history of civilization. The different stages of this history (slavery, serfdom, wage-system) are marked by a division of mankind into distinct classes; masters and slaves in antiquity; lords and serfs in the middle ages; capitalists and wage-workers in our present epoch. The forms, aspects and degrees of this division change from country to country and from generation to generation, but at bottom the same fundamental fact remains—the exploitation of human labour.

A primordial and permanent necessity rests upon mankind, and dominates all manifestations of their existence: the necessity of labour, the necessity of production.

As long as the processes of labour (breeding, cultivation, handicrafts) are in such a low state of development as to barely permit the production of that which is absolutely necessary to the existence of each individual worker, there can be no question of the exploitation of the labour of others. The men go frequently into battle; but no one cares for the vanquished, they are killed on the spot. Their flesh furnishes a banquet for the victors. Cannibalism reigns without cant or hypocrisy.

But the productive forces are ever growing, and this growth forms the principle dynamic of history. As soon as man becomes able to produce a surplus beyond his absolute necessities, this surplus is taken by other men. The vanquished foe ceases to become the direct prey of the victor. He becomes instead his slave.

At this moment one class begins to work for another class as a horse is trained to go under the bridle and spur of the rider.

At this moment the great battle began between exploiters and exploited. It is not our purpose to tell the long story of this battle nor to picture its dramatic scenes. We are not here concerned with the heroic deeds, eloquent words, striking attitudes, or rallying cries of the principal religious, political and judicial actors.

Let us remember, however, that as long as possible the struggle was carried on outside the domain of actuality, outside the field of labour, in order to as long as possible keep within the “ideal” world of religion and politics—the realm of mysticism.

By this ultra-economic transposition the fact of the crime (*fait du crime*) did not change, but it remained concealed. The philosophies of antiquity sanctified slavery. The Bible deified surplus labour when it declared, “In the sweat of his brow shall man eat bread.” Religion legalized terrestrial suffering by the intangible promise of celestial joys. Only yesterday Guizot has dared to say “Labour is a bridle”, to-day Tolstoi intones with the mujik Bondareff: “In the sweat of the brow shalt thou knead bread.” If all this be true, to what purpose was the invention of mechanical mixers?

If mankind takes all these detours, and strays into all these vague and illusory roads, it will arrive but slowly or not at all at the actual problem, it is because the material conditions of the solution (the immense increase of productive forces and powerful concentration of all the means of communication) are realized but very slowly with the progress of history.

But the solution grows nearer, economic facts develop prodigiously and the view of the contradictions born of the capitalist regime grows clearer every day. The exploitation concealed beneath the veil of wages becomes every day more evident to an increasing number of workers. The material basis of the revolution of the workers is now in advance of the individual ideas, and it is utopian to seek to delay the hour of deliverance. This hour will sound whenever the proletariat demands it.

When one considers all the things consumed, utilized or put in reserve each year by the totality of any country, when these things are reduced to their constituent elements, they will be found in the last analysis to consist only of matter and energy supplied by nature and labour-power supplied by man, and nothing more. No one can lay any particular individual claim to the work of nature. It is human labour alone which gives social value to things. These things ought then to return exclusively to the world of the workers. But the most ignorant knows that the fruits of labour are not thus divided. The blindest can see that the most savoury of these fruits are consumed by an idle and privileged class. In modern society, as in the society of antiquity, and in the days of feudalism, the pain and toil of one class afford freedom and pleasure to another.

Labour manifests itself by an expenditure of energy—of muscles, of nerves. To consume the labour of a human being is to consume this energy—these muscles, these nerves; it is to eat his flesh and drink his blood. It is the perpetuation in a new form—a final and disguised form—of primitive Cannibalism.

The bourgeois, the high-flyers and the gluttons of the Bourse, are then exactly and without metaphor, but living vampires. Their profligacy, pleasures and voluptuousness are woven from the deep sorrows and afflictions of the oppressed class.

Under a regime of exploitation there are only three possible positions—either one receives more, less, or just as much as his labour creates. The excess of production, due to social co-operation, which properly belongs to no individual but should return equally to all, in no way alters this fact. There are three distinct classes: the great capitalist, the small capitalist and the wage worker. The first and last are alone radical. Any midway position is virtually theoretical: its equilibrium is as unstable as that of Blondin crossing the Niagara gorge; for one expert who passes, a multitude of inferior balancers fall into the depth of the foaming river.

Everyone knows that the intermediate class—the middle class—(the little manufacturers, property owners, merchants, etc.), which once constituted a buffer between these two extremes, is to-day buffeted to and fro until it is being pulverized by the competition of the great capitalist. The small capitalists are constantly being scattered to the four winds of heaven by failures and bankruptcies; no sooner do they rise in fortune than they fall again and roll hopelessly into the proletarian host of the damned. Soon there will remain but the two classes: capitalists and workers.

To each economic class there is a corresponding political party.

On top is the conservative governmental party, with all its factions gathered into one

capitalist mass. At the bottom is the revolutionizing Socialist Party. Between these is the wavering, disappearing party of the small capitalist, a party whose economic basis is continually crumbling away, and which, in spite of the names it may call itself, is incapable of playing any radical rôle.

Just as the middle class falls away with each recurring day, just so does every day see the radical party grow smaller and weaker. The most far-seeing of the radicals are moving towards the Socialists; the more cynical, such as Yves Guyot, like clowns in the circus, leap towards the capitalist party, bursting the stretched paper of their old programs as they bound through the hoop.

The undecided ones, the sheep, continue to stammer forth the old formulae in an indistinct murmur. The leader, the vigorous man of the party in France, Clemenceau, stalks on alone, in spite of the prestige of his double talent as writer and speaker, because he pretends to judge the movements of the social struggle from the super-human heights of the natural struggle.

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There remains, taking all in all, only two real parties: the party of exploitation and the party of the emancipation of labour.

Our existence gravitates around labour as the earth gravitates around the sun. No sun, no planetary life. No labour, no human life. No equal labour for all healthy men, no justice, no solidarity, no happiness.

The capitalist world and its partisans would perpetuate, universalise, increase the exploitation of human labour.

The Socialist world and its partisans would abolish the whole system of exploitation of human labour.

The first considers labour as a punishment, a muzzle, a disgrace. They do not wish to be punished, muzzled or disgraced. Their glory, their freedom, their honour rests upon the labour of others.

The second considers labour as the normal manifestation of life, as the indispensable condition of human existence, as the “medium of the material circulation between nature and man” (*Marx*), as the foundation for a harmonious development of body and mind, as a spice to enjoyment. They desire this work in an equal amount for all, and continually diminishing in accordance with the progress of technology and its practical applications.

There is no possible conciliation between these two worlds and the parties they represent. Choose between them! Join the ranks of one or the other of these two armies that are now confronting each other—the army of Capital or the army of Labour.

The battle will never cease until there is no more exploitation of labour.

Then there will be no more classes nor class antagonisms. “The government of men will give place to the administration of things”. in freeing itself the proletariat will have freed the whole of society.

(from the French of Edouard Fortin)

(September 1905)