



SOCIAL REDEMPTION

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How do you conceive "social redemption"?

I cannot understand why you ask questions the answers to which are obvious to everyone including yourself. The social problem can be solved only by causing the workers to become their own "employers", i.e. the means of production of the country, such as land, factories, and machines shall belong to the state and the citizens shall be their own employees. That will put an end to the exploitation of labor and the social problem will thus be solved.

My friend, you again fall into the same error. When we are discussing the social problem you bring up the workers' problem.

They are both one and the same thing. Eliminate the wage-earner's troubles and you have solved the social problem.

No sir. The social problem is much wider and deeper than the problem of the wage-earner, which is but one aspect of the general social problem, and by no means the most important one. This particular phase of the problem will become less and less important as time goes on.

Oh yes, I am quite familiar with your standpoint. You maintain that the wage-earners are not society's most poverty-stricken class.

That is true and you know that it is true. I say, therefore, he who is not a pauper is not "privileged". The only wards of society are the poor. They are the special objects of the social problem. The greater the destitution the more important looms the problem. The only function of social reform or social revolution is to eliminate poverty. There is another reason why the "wage-earner" has long ceased to



occupy the center of the social problem, and that is the fact that as a class, the wage-earners have a natural tendency to diminish constantly in number. Every step in the technological progress causes another thousand muscles and arms to become superfluous, for their work is done by a new mechanical device which requires only a dozen men to supervise it. Fifty years from now, or even less, we shall be faced with a situation when all the material needs of humanity will be produced by machines which will require at the most a few million attendants who will "work", perhaps, five hours a day, or perhaps three hours in a four-day week or a two-day, week. Their "work" will consist in pushing an electric button at certain intervals. You are, of course, aware of that though you do not believe that it will be that way. Nevertheless it is bound to be so, and it cannot be otherwise. If you are still unconvinced, I will refer you to the Bible. It is recognized even there that "work" in the sense of productive activity, the earning of bread and water by the sweat of the brow is a "curse". From the very inception of human culture mankind has struggled against this curse, seeking to harness nature and the machine to do the hard tasks. Now, man is not far from his goal and the "worker" will, in the very near future, become a rarity. No sociologist or social reformer will then bother his head with such an insignificant matter... The burning problem that will tax his ingenuity will be what to do with the preponderant majority of mankind which will not be "workers".

This prophecy I have heard before and I do not believe it. But assuming for the moment that it is true, that the "work" will be done by the machine, the robot as you call it, and the great majority of the people will be idle. How will you then solve the social problem? How will you adjust the social organism to the sacred principle (I trust that it is sacred to you as well) that he who does not work shall not share in the world's bounty?

May I state at the outset that I scoff at your "sacred" principle. It is not sacred at all. I can see no holiness in a situation where a man must labor by the sweat of his brow to receive the barest necessities of sustenance. Why must it be so? Has he requested society to bring him into the world? No one consulted him in the matter and he was brought without his consent into a world where the "passion for food" reigns supreme, and where it is hot during the summer and cold during the winter.



When we draft men to go to war, we must at best provide them with food and clothing and a roof over their heads – that is the only sacred part of the whole affair. A person is entitled to food, clothing and shelter, etc., simply because he is a human being. Whether he works or not has no bearing in the matter. I am convinced that this concept is nearer to holiness, to pure ethics and simple humanitarianism than your principle: He who does not work shall not eat.

What is then your prescription for solving the social problem, according to your doctrine of equal rights for all the idlers?

My prescription consists of two brief and simple rules. Firstly, every person who demands it shall receive from the state a fixed minimum for his needs – a satisfactory minimum which is to be determined in a given country during a given state of technological progress. Secondly, to assure this minimum, the state shall have the right to recruit men and requisition materials according to the particular needs of the time, and that is all.

Perhaps, that may be all. But to me the solution is not very clear.

I will try to make it clearer. I assume that what we term "elementary necessities" of the average person – the things for which he must now struggle and fight, and the lack of which makes him cry in despair – consists of five elements: food, shelter, clothing, the opportunity to educate his children and medical aid in case of illness. In Hebrew, they could be expressed briefly and euphoniously in five words, each beginning with the letter "m" - mazon (food), maon (shelter), malbush (clothing), mora (education), and marpe (medical assistance). Concerning each of these there exists in every country and in every era a concept of a fair standard. The duty of the state, according to "my scheme", is to provide each needy person the "five m's". That is the first of my two laws. It naturally follows from this that the state must at all times have the means of meeting the demand of its citizens for the "five m's"). How will the state secure these means? The answer is contained in "my" second law. The state obtains everything by requisition from the people just as it now collects taxes and conscripts young men to serve in the army. According to "my



scheme" the government will calculate on the basis of definite estimates – the probable demand – so many millions of people will have to be supplied with the "five m's" during the fiscal year, that is to say the government will require so many tons of food, material for clothing, housing facilities, etc. So much money will be required and so much human labor (not many hours, since the machine will do most of the work). In accordance with these needs the government will levy a sufficient tax upon its citizens, or requisition a certain number of factories, and mobilize for social service the required number of young people. I am not a very good statistician, but am certain that the aggregate cost will be less than what is now required by the army. In this manner we shall dispose of the entire social problem.

The real "social problem" is far simpler than you can imagine. You are under the impression that the task of social reform is extremely complex: every incident of the ten thousand different social relationships and groups must be supervised and controlled. I tell you all that is superfluous. The state has but one social duty, viz., not to allow people to go hungry, to sleep in the street, and to walk about bare-backed and barefoot – in brief to outlaw poverty. There is but one way to accomplish that: to guarantee to each individual the "five m's" – not through complicated and involved regulations, but simply, directly and concretely, to provide and that is all there is to it.

How is that all? Are we going to leave the rich wealthy and expect the poor to be content with your minimum? What about the problems of protecting the worker, and limiting the exploitation of labor? What will become of all those things for which generations of social dreamers have struggled?

The social dreamers (with one exception) have all fallen into the same error. They all planned how to change the entire economic structure of society, instead of considering the only important matter – how to eliminate poverty. We could illustrate this fallacy by imagining a park or garden where children come to play every day. In the park are located five dangerous pitfalls into which anyone is liable to fall and break his neck. Your social reformers (with the single exception which I will consider later) all propose that we regulate minutely and strictly every move of the children : to turn right, to move left, not to exceed twenty paces a minute while



running, and countless other regulations. I say all that is superfluous. My suggestion is simply to fill up the trenches and let the children run and play as they please. The only thing that society must not tolerate is starvation, starvation in its wider sense of the "five m's", or if you find a sixth one, I will not quarrel over it. So long as everyone is supplied with the "m's", it is no concern of the state that Mr. X dwells in a palatial mansion and Mr. Y. is grumbling why he too, cannot occupy an equally luxurious palace. Who cares about that? Miss A is a famous beauty, while Miss B is not so blessed. Naturally, that may be unpleasant for Miss A, perhaps, it may even be tragic, but it is not one of the tragedies for which the state must provide relief. One may possess talent, another may lack it; one be successful, the other a failure. Innumerable "tragedies" arise daily because of these inequalities (perhaps much more profound ones, or at least more refined ones than the tragedy of coveting the palace of one's neighbor), but they are not our concern, as long as the peril of dying of starvation is removed. I mentioned before that there is but one exception, but one social dreamer who really understood that our concern should be to eliminate starvation and not to expunge jealousy.

Well, who is that exception, that great sage? Perhaps it is you, yourself, with your "five m's"?

No. The exception is – the Jewish Torah. The primitive thinkers had a great advantage over us. The world that they found while it already contained in embryo all the important problems of collective life, was at the same time simple and not as complex as to-day, and, therefore, they could easily perceive what was essential. If, in addition, the thinkers belonged to a people whom the Almighty blessed (or cursed) with a keen social conscience, it is not surprising that they were able to discern the real wrong and the real remedy. The remedy is called: Peah – he who runs a field must leave part of it unharvested for the benefit of those who have nothing, so that they, too, may come and eat. Later Jewish thinkers have broadened the concept. Cheder children know all the implications of Peah as applied to agriculture and similar provisions applied to owners of fruit trees. If I recall aright there is a passage in the tractate of Zroim that states that in a bad year the area to be left unharvested by the owner must be larger. All that is formulated very primitively, but the essence is



correct and complete. That is the solution. We must only adapt it to the exigencies of modern life, and that is all. Here terminates the social responsibility of society and the state.

Is that all? What about legislation for the protection of the workers, minimum wage laws, the eight hour day, and...

I hereby grant you permission to perpetuate for ever all the labor laws that are on the statute books of the most progressive countries and to enact seventy-seven new chapters in the same vein forever and aye. But I doubt whether under "my scheme" they will be necessary. Why do we need to-day social legislation? Because every propertyless person is in constant danger of starvation. This situation enables the rich to exploit them and to compel them to accept a wage barely sufficient for subsistence. But create a condition where there is no longer the fear of hunger – and who could compel me to work under bad conditions. On the contrary the employer will be forced to offer me a standard that is higher than the minimum under the "five m's" Otherwise , I will refuse to work . The most effective protection to the worker is to free the poor man from the fear of poverty; the rest will take care of itself.

If what you suggest should be adopted and put into practice, a new danger would appear, even more menacing than the exploitation of labor. Who will be willing to work, if one can be idle and yet enjoy the "five m's". It would bring about such a state of affairs that only those who had been conscripted under your system of social military duty would engage in work.

It is obvious that my concept of "labor" is higher and more noble than yours. According to your view, the average person will work only if and when driven by the whip of the peril of starvation. I maintain that the self-assertive instinct, the creative drive to produce and fashion things is the strongest factor in history and economics. When I said that man has always struggled against working in the sweat of his brow, I had in mind the compulsion: work or else you will starve together with your wife and children. That is a curse, against this man will fight until he is freed of the bondage of



bread. But once liberated he will discover that the joy of work, the pleasure of creative effort transcends his fear of hunger. Assure him the "five m's" and you will see how eager he will be to work. What the work will consist of (taking into consideration the role to be played in the future by the machine) I cannot foretell. But doubtless the future man will find channels of creative endeavor that we cannot even visualize. The pathos of work will be revealed in its pristine glory only when work will be divorced from necessity.