

CHAPTER IV

PRODUCTIVE AND UNPRODUCTIVE LABOUR

(a) According to Political Economy

This question as to which portions of the labours of man, of the services the individual renders to himself or to his fellows, should be regarded as "productive" and which as "unproductive," it would have been unnecessary for us to have considered, were it not for the special stress laid on it by other writers on kindred subjects. The old saying, "Finis coronat opus," manifestly finds here fitting application; for, no matter what may be regarded as the aim and end of man's activities, no labour can well be regarded as having been "productive" until the end to which it was directed has been attained. From our standpoint the question really requires but little consideration; for all exertion, all activity, all labour, all service, would have to be regarded as having been "productive" as soon as it had in any way ministered, or helped to minister, to human enjoyment, or increased the sum of human happiness; and all labour as had not promoted this end would have to be regarded as "unproductive," or wasted.

This, however, is far removed from the conclusion to which the basic assumptions of the orthodox Political Economy leads its votaries; hence a further consideration of the question will enable us to lay before our readers the essential difference between their standpoint and views, and those our inquiry has forced us to accept. As already pointed out, the fundamental assumption of the current Political Economy is, that mankind work, not in order to enjoy, but rather in order to produce or to acquire, or rather to possess "wealth" — that is, according to the definitions prevailing in that branch of human speculations, not things conducive to the well-being of man, which is the original and true meaning of the term, or things which tend to the use and enjoyment of man, but such things only as possess "exchange value," as are vendible, as can be bought and sold; in short, in Political Economy this term is used as synonymous with merchandise, and anything that cannot be included under this latter term is rigorously excluded in all the many carefully framed definitions of "wealth."¹ Moreover, Political Economy, in so far as it treats of man at all, and not solely of one class of material commodities, of "wealth," regards him solely in his relations to this assumed "universal object of human desires," and "concerns itself only with such of the phenomena of the social state as take place in consequence of the pursuit of wealth."²

1 In all Politico Economic works exchangeability is made the distinguishing attribute of "wealth"; this use of the term necessitates, however, most learned disquisitions on the essential distinction between individual and national "wealth," many things being included under the former which common sense demands should not be included

under the latter. Our aim, however, is not to ascertain what particular meaning can, might, could, or should be given to any particular term in general use, but to investigate facts; hence, to avoid confusion, we shall carefully avoid using this most ambiguous term.

2 "System of Logic," Book VI., chap, ix., p. 3 (J. S. Mill).

To show that this is no exaggeration, let us briefly consider the avowed position of John Stuart Mill, who may be accepted as a typical, as he is certainly the most logical, exponent of the orthodox Political Economy. In his "Principles of Political Economy" (Preliminary Remarks), after having told us that "everyone has a notion sufficiently correct for common purposes of what is meant by wealth," he defines "wealth" as "all useful or agreeable things which possess exchangeable value;" and lays it down that, "Everything forms a part of wealth which has a power of purchasing, for which anything useful or agreeable would be given in exchange. Things for which nothing could be obtained in exchange, however useful or necessary they may be, are not wealth in the sense in which the term is used in Political Economy."¹

1 (Italics are ours.) The evolution of this conception is very interesting and instructive. The Mercantile System of Political Economy regarded money, or rather the precious metals, as constituting the only "wealth" of a nation. The labours of the Physiocrats, the most philosophic of all economic schools, upset this crude fancy. They showed that this term could not well be restricted to money, but connoted all consumable things, and they, at least, restricted its use to material commodities. Today, however, in ordinary parlance, as in the pages of current economic works, it is used to denote anything and everything that possesses exchange value. As that typical economist, Macleod, expresses it: "The sole criterion of anything being wealth is, Can it be bought and sold? Can it be exchanged separately and independently of anything else? Can it be valued in money?" The current economy, built up as it is on such a conception, may well be termed, "The Commercial System of Political Economy." Tomorrow, however, we may hope that the term may be restored to its original meaning, and used to denote anything and everything conducive to well-being; and then it may form the subject of "The Rational System of Political Economy, which, however, has yet to be formulated.

While in another of his works² the same authority tells us that Political Economy is concerned with man, "solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end." Or again, "Political Economy considers mankind as occupied solely in acquiring and consuming wealth."³

2"Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy," p. 137.

3Ibid., p. 138.

As a necessary logical consequence of these premises, Economists have honoured with the rank "productive" such labour only as results in an increase of marketable commodities; and all other activities they have stigmatised as "unproductive." The patient student of their voluminous works is called upon to digest long disquisitions, not only on "productive and unproductive labour," but on "productive and unproductive consumption," together with fine distinctions as to which portions of the consumption of productive labourers can be regarded as "productive," and which must be denied this title.

This classification of labour owes its introduction into Political Economy to the speculations of that eminent and philosophic school of French Economists known as the Physiocrats. These regarded agriculture as the only productive labour, as the only labour which returned un produit net. They argued that the value added to or conferred on material by other labour only served to replace the value of the commodities consumed by those engaged in such industries; but that the reproductive forces of Nature returned to the labour of those engaged in agricultural pursuits a value more than equivalent to the value of the commodities these consumed; and hence, that theirs was the only "productive labour."

Adam Smith, who had closely studied the works of these authors, with some of whom he was on terms of friendship, whilst retaining these terms, put them to another use. In his great work¹ he lays it down that: "There is one sort of labour which adds to the value of the subject upon which it is bestowed; there is another which has no such effect. The former, as it produces a value, may be called productive; the latter, unproductive labour." In his subsequent elucidation of this distinction, he informs his readers that "the labour of some of the most respectable orders in the society is, like that of menial servants, unproductive of any value, and does not fix or realise itself in any permanent subject or vendible commodity, which endures after that labour is past, and for which an equal amount of labour could afterwards be procured." And he boldly includes "the sovereign, with all the officers of both justice and war who serve under him," together with "churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds, players, buffoons, musicians, etc.," under "unproductive labourers."¹

1 "Wealth of Nations," Book II., chap. iii. (Italics are ours.)

1 Adam Smith's great work was, and professed to be, nothing more than "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations." Under the term "wealth" he included only "vendible commodities"; accordingly, he was logically forced to class as "productive" only such labours as resulted in an increase in the "vendible commodities" at the command of the community. And that though he fully recognised that "consumption is the sole end and purpose of production."

John Stuart Mill follows closely in Smith's footsteps. He agrees that "productive labour means labour productive of wealth";² and that from an economic standpoint under "unproductive" must be classed all labour "which does not terminate in the creation of material wealth."³ He made, however, a sort of compromise by saying that, for his part, he would not refuse the appellation productive to labour which yields no material product as its direct result, provided that an increase of material products is its ultimate consequence."⁴ Thus the sovereign, soldiers, policemen, judges, et hoc genus omne, are squeezed in, as it were, amongst productive labourers, and are reconciled to their lot by the information that "to society at large they are part of the expense of production."

2 "Principles of Political Economy," Book I., chap. iii.

3 Ibid., §.2.

4 Ibid., p. 3. (Italics are ours.)

Even with this composition, however, the premises from which he was reasoning led this master logician to some very unpalatable and absurd conclusions. For example, his regard for logic and love of truth compelled him to admit, as a necessary consequence of the assumptions on which all the doctrines of the current Political Economy rest, that "The labour of saving a friend's life is not productive, unless the friend is a productive labourer, and produces more than he consumes."¹

1 Ibid., Book I., chap, iii., § 4.

What possible reliance can be placed on premises that lead to such conclusions? What can be the value to mankind of a school of thought that seriously advances such a contention? Imagine a man who had just enjoyed the exquisite felicity of having saved the life of a dear friend; imagine him walking home filled with joy at his good fortune, his breast seething with those generous emotions which tend to ennoble and elevate mankind; and imagine him accosted by an adherent of these teachings, and seriously informed that all his exertions had been "unproductive." And that because, forsooth, there was no probability of an increase in the stock of "vendible commodities" at the command of the community being the "ultimate consequence," for his friend had happened to be an unproductive labourer — say a Mazzini, a Darwin, or a Wilberforce — and consumed more than he produced!

Can absurdity be carried farther? It can in this pseudo-science, as will presently be seen.

Amongst ordinary men, who have not had the dictates of reason and common sense distorted by the consideration of such doctrines as these, the art of ministering to the sick and afflicted is generally regarded as one of the most noble and useful professions to which a man can devote his activities. But in another passage Mill was

forced to admonish those who follow it that —

"The labour of a physician or surgeon, when made use of by persons engaged in industry, must be regarded in the economy of society as a sacrifice incurred, to preserve from perishing by death or infirmity that portion of the productive resources of society [Mark well the reason for which this sacrifice (?) must be regarded as having been incurred.] which is fixed in the lives and bodily or mental powers of its productive members."

But he admits that as the individual generally submits to such treatment from other than "economical motives," "this is, therefore, one of the cases of labour and outlay which, though conducive to production, yet not being incurred for that end, or for the sake of the returns arising from it, are out of the sphere of most of the general propositions which Political Economy has occasion to assert respecting productive labour; though when society and not the individuals are concerned, this labour and outlay must be regarded as part of the advance by which society affects its productive operations, and for which it is indemnified by the produce,"¹

1 Ibid, Book I., chap, ii., § 7. (Italics are ours.) These "musts" are, of course, only binding on those who accept the premises from which Mill is reasoning. The slave-owner must regard any such outlay on his chattel-slaves "as a sacrifice incurred to preserve from perishing that portion of his property which is fixed in the lives and bodily or mental powers" of his slaves. But that this reasoning applies, or can apply, to a society of free men is, to say the least, very doubtful.

And as a crowning absurdity, in the same paragraph we are gravely informed that — "To the community at large, the labour and expense of rearing its infant population form a part of the outlay which is a condition of production, and which is to be replaced with increase from the future produce of their labour."²

2 Ibid., Book I., chap, ii., § 7. Again we must protest that of a community of slave-owners this may be true, but not of a community of parents. The maternal solicitude of the hen, Political Economists deem to be inspired by a desire for the eggs her chickens may lay in the remote future.

What a monstrous assertion! What an inversion of facts! Is there anything in all human experience, outside the economy of the slave-owner, to correspond to or justify such conclusions?

From the standpoint of Political Economy, of that science (?) which now claims to regulate the interrelations of mankind, to society at large the labours of a physician are of service only in the same sense as those of the veterinary surgeon — that is, as preserving valuable chattels — and are only to be commended when there is a reasonable chance of their being "indemnified by the produce." While the care,

attention, and love parents lavish on their children "form but part of the outlay which is a condition of production, and which is to be replaced with increase (if only 5 per cent.) from the future produce of their labours." If there is a reasonable hope of this being the ultimate consequence, their labours meet with the approval of Political Economists, and may be ranked as "productive." If not — well, Economists do not avow what a rigid adherence to their doctrines would compel them to advise.

Out upon such a distortion of facts! Man's aim is not "wealth," not material commodities possessing exchange value, not anything and everything that gives him control over his fellows, and enables him "to claim from others a part of their stock of things useful or pleasant,"¹ but happiness! happiness!! happiness!!! The acquisition of "wealth" is but a means to this end; and the at present all but universal seeking after material "wealth" is but a perversion of the pure stream whence the desire for real wealth — that is, of things conducive to well-being — has sprung. The acquisition of such things has its use when regarded as a means to an end; it degenerates into an abuse when pursued for its own sake. And inasmuch as modern Political Economy considers the acquisition of "wealth" as the mainspring and end of all human activities, and avowedly considers man as solely animated by this desire, repudiating all other considerations, it can be held accountable for no small share of responsibility for this misdirection of an otherwise healthy tendency, and can only be regarded as a malignant development of man's intellectual activities, rather than as a science calculated to assist man in the struggle for existence and search for happiness.

1 Ibid., "Preliminary Remarks."