

CHAPTER V

PRODUCTIVE AND UNPRODUCTIVE LABOUR

(b) According to Common Sense

Rejecting then, as we must do, the conclusions arrived at by reasoning from the basic, but most unwarranted, assumptions of the current Political Economy, let us now again briefly consider the facts, and see what they will teach us concerning this much discussed question, a further consideration of which, moreover, may help us a step forward in our inquiry.

We have seen that enjoyment is the mainspring that constantly prompts men to activity; from which it follows that all labour which in any way promotes this end, which furthers the well-being, satisfies the wants, or ministers to the desires of man, must be regarded as "productive"; and such labour as from any cause fails to promote this end must be regarded as "unproductive," or as wasted.

A man living isolated from his fellows would, of course, have to rely entirely on his own activities. If he found leisure to reflect on the subject at all, he would be forced to regard such of his labour as had ministered to his wants, augmented his comforts, increased his leisure, or in any way added to the sum of his enjoyments, as having been "productive" — that is, as having attained the end to which all his exertions would necessarily be directed. On the other hand, such of his labour as failed to contribute toward this end, as had from any cause been expended fruitlessly, he would regard as "unproductive," or wasted labour.

Society, as we have seen, practically consists of an indefinite number of individuals associating and co-operating one with the other, in order better to minister to the wants of all, the essential principle of all such co-operation being the reciprocal exchange of services; and what has just been said of the isolated individual applies, and for the same reasons, to society taken as a whole. From the standpoint of society taken as a whole, as a unit composed of different parts co-operating to attain a common end, all the labours of its members which directly or indirectly add to the sum of enjoyment at its command can be regarded as having been "productive" as soon as this end has been attained. And all such labour as does not contribute to this end can be regarded as "unproductive," or wasted. Moreover, just as the isolated individual would be "poorer" — that is, have less comfort at his command — in exact proportion to the quantity of his labour which is expended unproductively or fruitlessly; so, too, any given community is "poorer" — that is, has less enjoyment at its command — in exact proportion to the quantity of its labour which is expended

"unproductively," or fruitlessly.

For instance: Suppose that a number of its members were condemned to the labour of Sisyphus; or, let us say, were continually engaged stacking, unstacking, and restacking a pile of bricks; and that not because they derived any enjoyment from the exercise, nor anyone else from the sight of their toil, but solely, as they might express it, "to earn a living," or, in other words, in order to be able to command some of the services and of the results of the more productive activities of their fellow-citizens. Then all such labour — of which, as we shall see, there is an enormous proportion in every civilised community of the present day — might well be classed as "unproductive," if this word is to be used to convey any definite meaning. No end would be thereby attained; differently employed, their activities might have augmented the enjoyment at the command of the community, which, as employed, would have remained unaffected had they been allowed a respite from all labour.

From this it follows that, as members of society — that is, as partners, shareholders, or co-operating workers in an indefinitely extended co-operative concern — each one of us is directly interested in seeing that no labour is unnecessarily expended or wasted. This is, in truth, the case. Under present conditions, however, the exigencies of our every-day life are such that our individual interests overshadow our interests as citizens. As individuals, our desire is to minister to our own wants and of those dependent on us; our tendency is to secure for ourselves and them as large a share of comfort as possible, and that at the least cost of discomfort. To this end we naturally seek any employment open to us, and, of two or more available outlets to our activities, select the one that will secure us the largest share in the comforts at the command of the community, the one that will best enable us to keep our heads above water in the bitter and degrading struggle for existence between man and man which characterises and degrades our present civilisation. Whether our activities are necessary or beneficial, or the reverse; whether they will tend to increase or to diminish the sum of happiness of the community of which we form a part, are questions which seldom, if ever, occur to us — questions, moreover, that most of us would be quite incapable of answering. All we know is, that we desire to live; that to do so peaceably we have to adapt ourselves to the requirements of the society of which we form an insignificant fraction; that such and such an employment is either the only one open to us, or the most remunerative of those available; and that we engage in it in the expectation that by so doing we shall be able to command some share of the services and of the results to the industry of our fellows.

To elucidate these points, let us examine a typical branch of national industry, say soap-making. A certain amount of soap is required, and to secure an ample supply of the proper quality, and at the proper time, is the desideratum of the community taken

as a whole. To supply this, however, is not the determining motive of the individual soap-maker. With him it is solely a question of obtaining for himself the command of the necessary comforts of life; he would, in fact, as soon manufacture opium as soap. To minister to his own enjoyment is the mainspring of his activity; his manufacturing an article of utility is due to the fact that a supply of such articles is desired by his fellows, which affords him an opportunity, by ministering to their wants, to provide for his own individual requirements. Besides being manufactured, the soap has to be distributed; and all the different distributors are actuated by the same motives as the soap-maker. Each is striving, by rendering a service to his fellows, to be able to command a share of the services and commodities at the command of the community.

Thus soap-maker competes with soap-maker, soapseller with soap-seller. Each desires to get a share of the existing demand in order himself to live, and in such competition an ever-increasing portion of the labour of the community is expended "unproductively," or, from the standpoint of the community as a whole, is absolutely wasted. Besides soap-makers and soapsellers, numerous subsidiary industries spring into existence, in which a vast army of men are employed in printing, sticking, and distributing bills, leaflets, placards, etc., some proclaiming that Codlin, others that Short, is the man from whom alone soap should be procured. All such labour is obviously unproductive; it neither directly nor indirectly adds to the gratifications at the command of the community, nor ministers to the enjoyment of a single one of its members. Moreover, soap-making is but a typical case; the same facts prevail in almost every other industry, and to the extent that labour is devoted to such pursuits, which is far greater than appears at first sight, the activities of the community are wasted, and the cost of labour at which it supplies itself with the comforts and necessities of existence proportionately increased.

Again, from the window at which we are writing we daily see dozens of bakers', butchers', and grocers' carts driving to and fro, assisting in the distribution of provisions to the different households. Distribution generally is a necessary and direct consequence of the division of labour; hence the distribution of commodities forms an essential branch of the industry of the community, and all the necessary labour devoted to it can be regarded as "productive" in the true sense of the word. But if on inquiry it should be found, as most probably would be the case, that the necessary work could be as efficiently accomplished by, say, half the quantity of labour, then, from the standpoint of society, all the additional labour is as much wasted as that of the men employed in stacking, unstacking, and restacking bricks in our former illustration. As a matter of fact, it is well known that a man opens a shop, more especially such shops, not because the requirements of a district are not fully supplied, but because he himself wants to earn a living, and can find no better outlet for his activities. His main chance of success lies in his being able to attract customers from

those already engaged in the same industry. He competes with his neighbours, advertises, sends out travellers to districts already more than sufficiently scoured by such useful members of society, and in a thousand different ways strives to divert some of the trade of his neighbour to himself. Some of his labour, or the labour he controls, is employed, not in increasing the quantity or improving the quality of the commodities the community requires, but in making them appear other than they really are, in making them "more saleable," or even in adulterating them — all waste, unproductive labour. Those engaged in such pursuits may be enabled to share in the gratifications at the command of the community, but their labours in no way contribute to them.

Finally, another man, or group of men, buys up cotton, wheat, sugar, or any other commodity capable of satisfying human wants, not for the purpose of distributing and thus bringing it within the reach of those who require it, but rather in order to create an artificial famine, so that he shall be able to sell at famine prices.¹ Another group of men — the croupiers at our national gambling table, the Stock Exchange — are almost continuously engaged buying and selling claims on existing commodities, or on commodities yet to be produced by the labour of others. To such ends as these a large and increasing amount of labour is devoted in every civilised community; and it is all "unproductive," fruitless, wasted labour. In fact, though we rather shrink from publicly making the statement, it is our mature opinion that far more than 25 per cent of the entire labour of every civilised community — semi-civilised ones are forced to be more economical — is, from the standpoint of the community taken as a whole, expended "unproductively" — that is to say, however much it may benefit the individual, whatever claim it may give him over the labour and the fruits of the labour of his fellows, it in no way increases the sum of the gratifications at the command of all, and is as useless as the labours of those whom we have assumed continuously employed stacking, unstacking, and restacking bricks, without pleasure to themselves, and without service to others.¹

¹ Of course, if in consequence of such actions the money value of such commodities were increased, then, according to the notions inculcated by Political Economy, the "wealth" of the community would have been increased. But with conclusions based on such commercial notions Economics has nothing to do.

¹ Of the labour of what are known as the "middle classes," fully 75 per cent, is expended "unproductively" in the above sense.

Of course, with our present powers over Nature, we can afford to be extravagant and profuse in our expenditure. Today a comparatively insignificant fraction of the collective labour of the community would suffice to supply the whole of its members with all the necessaries and comforts of life, and the rest of the labour-force at its

command is directed into different channels, according to the prevailing social conditions, and the desires and demands of the community as a whole. Nor is it at all certain that under existing social conditions, seeing that it might increase the number of the unemployed, the community as a whole would be advantaged by such improved methods of production, trade, and distribution as would at once put an end to the existing waste of labour to which we have referred. To this aspect of the question we may return later on. Here, however, we would warn our readers that though this reckless waste of labour may be mainly attributable to the bitter competition to earn a living and to gain the best livelihood within the limits fixed by existing social customs, laws, and institutions, yet should it not rashly be attributed to competition per se. Competition in itself cannot well be characterised as good or evil; and whether its social results will be good or evil will be entirely determined by the social conditions under which it has play. Under existing social conditions, competition undoubtedly produces disastrous effects — effects far more disastrous than a mere waste of labour. But under different social conditions competition would necessarily produce different effects; and in a subsequent chapter we shall trace its function and effects under rigorously equitable conditions. Moreover, we should not allow ourselves to lose sight of the fact that competition or emulation has always been one of the main factors making for the progress and development of the race, constantly tending to counteract the general tendency to apathy and indolence, to be the slaves of habit, and to persist indefinitely in accustomed conditions of existence. As Mill expresses it:¹ "Competition may not be the best conceivable stimulus, but it is at present a necessary one, and no one can foresee the time when it will not be indispensable to progress." The desire for comfort and aversion to discomfort has undoubtedly been one of the main factors of social progress; but the tendency of mankind is to remain content, and to find their comfort in the conditions to which they have grown accustomed. Some few, however, more fortunately placed, or more active, enterprising, or energetic than the rest, become dissatisfied with these; they develop new desires, and endeavour to live under what they at least regard as better or more desirable conditions. These are the leaders, the path-breakers, the light-bearers, the true aristocrats among mankind, the men whose example inspire the race to renewed efforts in every sphere of human activity, preventing them from stagnation, degeneration, and decay. And manifestly social conditions that tended to crush out such examples, that did not allow the fullest scope to all to develop according to their desires, could not possibly be deemed conducive to the further development of mankind, or as likely to promote the highest interests of the race. The few are always in advance of the many; and the desire to compete with them, to emulate their example, provides the necessary incentive to induce others to endeavour to improve their condition, to broaden their understanding, to cultivate their intellect, to acquire knowledge, education, and culture, and to lead nobler, purer, and higher lives. Moreover, as we hope to be able to show later on, under rational and equitable social

conditions, self-interest would prompt mankind to compete one with the other, not dexterously to deceive or prey upon their fellows, but rather to render the highest and most valuable services, by which means alone the individual would be enabled to improve his own position amongst his fellows.

1 "Principles of Political Economy," Book IV., chap, vii., §. 7.

The drift of these last reflections will probably become more clear to our readers after they have read the chapters that are to follow. They were only inserted here to prevent them from drawing rash inferences as to the opinions we hold on the social problem generally. Our sole aim has been to illustrate and elucidate a fact of our present social life, and that as impartially as possible, without any intention to support or to combat the views of any of the many conflicting schools of political thought which may claim to be able to show how such waste of our labour and resources might be reduced to a minimum, or even entirely abolished. Of the causes producing this increasing competition for any and every opportunity to work and to live, directly encouraging those harmful and nefarious pursuits by which the individual may benefit, but by which the community as a whole is injured, we may have more to say in the closing chapters of this work. One thing seems to us certain: The decision as to what portions of the labours of man should be considered "productive" will in all cases necessarily be determined by the view taken as to the aims and ends inspiring the activity of the individual, of the community, of the race.