

Why We Waste Our Time

POLITICAL economy ought not to be a subject for study. Its objective is to ascertain how men in an exchange economy make a living, and why they don't succeed. The fatuity of delving into this matter lies in the fact that making a living should be, like living itself, the simple concern of each individual.

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Having chosen a particular mode of making his living, every man should perfect his knowledge of that particular technique; and in proportion to his mastery of it he should enjoy both the material advantages which his specialty brings in the market and the pleasure derived from doing anything well.

Thus we should learn how to make a living as grocers or doctors or farmers or mechanics. But, to spend as much effort as we do in trying to find out how man, as distinguished from the beast, makes a living, or rather fails to do so, seems to be sheer mental waste. Why should there be any problem of making a living?

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As a matter of fact people concern themselves very little with political economy until the making of a living becomes a widespread problem. And since the making of some sort of living is usually possible, or has been until recent years, the study of this subject is neglected, as it should ordinarily be. It is a bore. Why waste time with such recondite matters as the law of rent, or the meaning of wealth, or diminishing returns, when there is a concert to hear, a baseball game to see?

Reading a good book before an open fire, fishing, courting, arguing over some very intricate and utterly useless point in metaphysics—of such are the primary components of living.

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Quite secondary is one's productive occupation. Our work is obviously an unwanted means to an end. Political economy rears its ugly head only when work, the means, becomes life, the end. Then we want to know the cause for the reversal of the ordinary, sensible process. We marvel that mere employment becomes the goal of living.

Even then it is doubtful whether the study of political economy would concern us much if the

problem of making a living did not involve other problems affecting our social life. Crime, prostitution, hunger, strikes, occupational disease, bankruptcies, wars—all these things are unpleasant, interfere with living as it should be.

We label these things "social problems," and somehow we feel that they spring from poverty—the inability of men to make a living. And we dig into the study of political economy with the hope of finding there the cause for poverty, in order that we might remove the unpleasant cancer from our midst, and then go on living.

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This we could very easily do if we kept in mind what making a living is. It is merely the making and exchanging of things people want. This we do naturally, by applying our minds and bodies to the modifying and moving of natural products so as to fit them for human consumption. The whole trouble is that by some hocus-pocus we prevent men from doing just that. The hocus-pocus is our legal fiction of a title deed to land, by virtue of which a few people lock out the rest of us from the only place where production can start, or take away from us so much of what we produce for mere permission to work that we haven't sufficient left to get along on. So, the thing to do, it seems so clear, is to destroy the fiction of a title deed to the earth.

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The reason we don't do exactly that is that our simple job has been obfuscated by the lawyers and the learned men who have found their living dependent upon the maintenance of the fiction. Perhaps not consciously or with malice, but through custom and that mental quirk called rationalization. As a result the simple facts and rules of political economy are lost in a mess of obscurantism.

Books are written. Courses are given. Statistics are laboriously compiled. Theories are piled upon theories, and nobody—particularly the professors—knows what it's all about.

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Students of political economy, if you would abolish this boring and unnecessary subject, abolish the fiction which prevents men from making a living, so that we can all go about the pleasant business of living!