

# Thoughts on Education under Capitalism

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The other day I heard Mr Charles Leland (better known as Hans Breitman) speak on the teaching of the 'minor arts' (we wont trouble for the present as to what they are) and he told us he was engaged in carrying out a plan (in America) by which *all* children should be taught these arts and so gain an interest in handicrafts which he thought, and I heartily agree with him, would be a great gain to the art and consequently to the happiness of people generally. Mr Leland said that he had been engaged in this work of educating children's hands for many years, and he expected success to follow his efforts, a success which would mean, if it were worth speaking of, that the interest in sound workmanship combined with beauty would become general, and that a demand for such work would follow and compel the manufacturers to get such work turned out.

But such success is impossible even supposing that hundreds of persons were following Mr Charles Leland's laudable example. It would indeed be possible enough, nay it would be certain, if the capitalists the 'manufacturers' were the *servants* of society as they sometimes profess to be; but who shall force such a prodigious change upon them as success even in such a minor matter as this would indicate, so long as they are the masters of society, which is their real position? For Mr Leland's scheme means, if it were logically carried out, *ie.*, if it were successful, the substitution of handicraft for 'manufacturing' in all the wares of which art or beauty forms a party and which admit of being done by handicraft, in short to take us back to the Middle-Ages as far as these wares are concerned. But it is clear that the wares so produced will, if the labour on them is decently paid, cost so much more than the manufactured wares which they are intended to supplant, that only rich people with a whim for art will be able to buy them; they will not be produced in any great quantity, and if there should be a passing fashion for them, the 'manufacturers' would immediately imitate them by machinery and 'organized labour', and cheapen them out of existence; or indeed if the whim of rich people for the genuine article still went on, another process of cheapening would be resorted to; wholesale dealers in such articles would exploit the unfortunate handicraftsmen (or women, whose cheap work would certainly be largely used for such wares). They would take advantage of the competition for the most miserable livelihood between people in dire necessity to produce 'cheap art' for the swelling of their own purses; and if the thing grew it would be a favourite form

of exploitation, as it would require little capital and little managerial capacity, and would have a dash of philanthropy and ‘practical remedy’ about it, which would help to make such sweating an honourable as well as pleasant occupation. Cheap art indeed – and nasty! But in all probability the fashion for such articles would be limited and transitory, and all that would happen to the persons educated into a capacity for and a pleasure in refined handicraft would be that they would have to be used up in the mere mechanical drudgery of commercial production.

But it is not the matter of art that I wish to illustrate by the mention of this feeble attempt of Mr Leland and others (for the kind of futility is common enough). It is rather the relation of our capitalistic system to general education. For just as the capitalists would at once capture this education in craftsmanship, suck out what little advantage there is in it and then throw it away, so they do with all other education. A superstition still remains from the times when ‘education’ was a rarity that it is a means for earning a superior livelihood; but as soon as it has ceased to be a rarity, competition takes care that education shall not raise wages; that general education shall be worth nothing, and that special education shall be worth just no more than a tolerable return on the money and time spent in acquiring it; and, mind you, such special education must be very carefully directed towards the one aim of commercial success in the speciality, or it will miss, and be thrown into the mass of general education which earns nothing.

As to the pleasure to be derived from education at present by hard-working men, a bookish man is apt to think that even the almighty capitalist can hardly take that away from his slave if he has really learned to enjoy reading and to understand books, and that whatever happens he must have an hour in a day (or if it were only half an hour) to indulge himself in this pleasure. But then *does* the average hard-working man (of any grade) really acquire this capacity by means of the short period of education which he is painfully dragged through? I doubt it. Though even our mechanical school system cannot crush out a natural bent towards literature (with all the pleasures of thought and imagination which that word means) yet certainly its dull round will hardly implant such a taste in any one’s mind; and as for the *caput mortuum*, the dead mass of mere information which the worker comes away with when his ‘education’ is over, he will and must soon forget this when he finds out that it is of little use to him and gives him no pleasure.

I must say in passing that on the few occasions that I have been inside a Board-school, I have been much depressed by the mechanical drill that was too obviously being applied there to all the varying capacities and moods. My heart sank before Mr M’Choakumchild and his method, and I thought how much luckier I was to have been born well enough off to be sent to a school where I was *taught* – nothing; but *learned* archæology and romance on the Wiltshire downs.

And then supposing the worker to be really educated, to have acquired both the information and the taste for reading which Mr McChoakum-child’s (*sic*) dole will allow to him under the most favourable circumstances, how will this treasure of knowledge and sympathy accord with his daily life? Will it not make his dull task seem duller? Will it not increase the suffering of the workshop or the factory to him? And if so, must he not rather strive to forget than strive to remember? Will not nature force him to that? I cannot help thinking that as a rule it must be so, unless he has joined the ranks of the discontented; in which case he will gain something of pleasure

from mere bitterness and railing if he is not a Socialist, and how much more than that some of our readers know well, if he is one.

Now if I am told that this is *à priori* reasoning, I am prepared to fortify it by my own observation. I have often been told by working-men (Socialist and others) that they cannot read books; are too tired with the day's work to do so, and the like. Also amongst my middle-class acquaintances, who believe that they work hard, I meet with men who clearly *do* not read books, and therefore, I suppose, *cannot*; and I move in each case in a circle that has decided literary tendencies. So that other person's experiences will, I am sure, lead them to conclusions on this point not more favourable than mine.

Then there is the enormous mass of printed paper which is not books or literature, but which the public pays for every day, since I suppose a faculty once acquired produces a habit and must be exercised, even when it is the mechanical one of reading print. The quality of this joint product of paper-maker, compositor, and sub-editor, confirms my *à priori* reasoning remarkably, for no adventure in this kind of wares has any chance of success if it has more than the merest suspicion of a flavour of literature or thoughtfulness, as we have often been told when the prospects of the *Commonweal* have been under discussion. I will not say that the worse a periodical is the better chance it has of success, but that if it intends to succeed it must appeal to habits that are as much akin to the reasonable aims of education as is the twiddling of a bit of string by a fidgety person.

I believe, indeed, it is thought by some that this habit of the consumption of newspapers is the first step in education. Good! the second step, I take it, will be the cessation of that habit.

All this betokens that the end towards which our sham Society directs the means, 'education' is the one end which all its 'social' dealings are directed to, the sustaining and easy working of its usurpation of true Society. People are 'educated' to become workmen or the employers of workmen, or the hangers-on of the employers, they are not educated to become *men*. With this aim in view the conditions under which true education can go on are impossible. For the first and most necessary of them are leisure and deliberation; and leisure is a thing which the modern slave-holder will by no means grant to his slave as long as he grants him rations; when the leisure begins the rations end. Constant toil is the only terms on which they are to be had. Capitalism will not allow us the leisure, either for education or the use of it. Slave labour and true education are irreconcilable foes, for the latter means the continuous and duly balanced development of our faculties, whether in the school, the workshop, or the field, and how can that co-exist with the continuous, hopeless, mechanical drudgery of the man who whatever he produces will have all taken from him that exceeds a bare subsistence.

In short, our present education outside its uses to our enemies, the masters of Society, is good for one thing, the creation of discontent. I doubt it will serve us in no other way.