

Work and pay

By Bertrand Russell, published in 1918

*The following is chapter four of Bertrand Russell's 1920 book 'Proposed Roads To Freedom'.
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Work And Pay

THE man who seeks to create a better order of society has two resistances to contend with: one that of Nature, the other that of his fellow-men. Broadly speaking, it is science that deals with the resistance of Nature, while politics and social organization are the methods of overcoming the resistance of men.

The ultimate fact in economics is that Nature only yields commodities as the result of labor. The necessity of SOME labor for the satisfaction of our wants is not imposed by political systems or by the exploitation of the working classes; it is due to physical laws, which the reformer, like everyone else, must admit and study. Before any optimistic economic project can be accepted as feasible, we must examine whether the physical conditions of production impose an unalterable veto, or whether they are capable of being sufficiently modified by science and organization. Two connected doctrines must be considered in examining this question: First, Malthus' doctrine of population; and second, the vaguer, but very prevalent, view that any surplus above the bare necessities of life can only be produced if most men work long hours at monotonous or painful tasks, leaving little leisure for a civilized existence or rational enjoyment. I do not believe that either of these obstacles to optimism will survive a close scrutiny. The possibility of technical improvement in the methods of production is, I believe, so great that, at any rate for centuries to come, there will be no inevitable barrier to progress in the general well-being by the simultaneous increase of commodities and diminution of hours of labor.

This subject has been specially studied by **Kropotkin**, who, whatever may be thought of his general theories of politics, is remarkably instructive, concrete and convincing in all that he says

about the possibilities of agriculture. Socialists and Anarchists in the main are products of industrial life, and few among them have any practical knowledge on the subject of food production. But Kropotkin is an exception. His two books, "The Conquest of Bread" and "Fields, Factories and Workshops," are very full of detailed information, and, even making great allowances for an optimistic bias, I do not think it can be denied that they demonstrate possibilities in which few of us would otherwise have believed.

Malthus contended, in effect, that population always tends to increase up to the limit of subsistence, that the production of food becomes more expensive as its amount is increased, and that therefore, apart from short exceptional periods when new discoveries produce temporary alleviations, the bulk of mankind must always be at the lowest level consistent with survival and reproduction. As applied to the civilized races of the world, this doctrine is becoming untrue through the rapid decline in the birthrate; but, apart from this decline, there are many other reasons why the doctrine cannot be accepted, at any rate as regards the near future. The century which elapsed after Malthus wrote, saw a very great increase in the standard of comfort throughout the wage-earning classes, and, owing to the enormous increase in the productivity of labor, a far greater rise in the standard of comfort could have been effected if a more just system of distribution had been introduced. In former times, when one man's labor produced not very much more than was needed for one man's subsistence, it was impossible either greatly to reduce the normal hours of labor, or greatly to increase the proportion of the population who enjoyed more than the bare necessities of life. But this state of affairs has been overcome by modern methods of production. At the present moment, not only do many people enjoy a comfortable income derived from rent or interest, but about half the population of most of the civilized countries in the world is engaged, not in the production of commodities, but in fighting or in manufacturing munitions of war. In a time of peace the whole of this half might be kept in idleness without making the other half poorer than they would have been if the war had continued, and if, instead of being idle, they were productively employed, the whole of what they would produce would be a divisible surplus over and above present wages. The present productivity of labor in Great Britain would suffice to produce an income of about 1 pound per day for each family, even without any of those improvements in methods which are obviously immediately possible.

But, it will be said, as population increases, the price of food must ultimately increase also as the sources of supply in Canada, the Argentine, Australia and elsewhere are more and more used up. There must come a time, so pessimists will urge, when food becomes so dear that the ordinary wage-earner will have little surplus for expenditure upon other things. It may be admitted that this would be true in some very distant future if the population were to continue to increase without limit. If the whole surface of the world were as densely populated as London is now, it would, no doubt, require almost the whole labor of the population to produce the necessary food from the few spaces remaining for agriculture. But there is no reason to suppose that the population will continue to increase indefinitely, and in any case the prospect is so remote that it may be ignored in all practical considerations.

Returning from these dim speculations to the facts set forth by Kropotkin, we find it proved in his writings that, by methods of intensive cultivation, which are already in actual operation, the amount of food produced on a given area can be increased far beyond anything that most

uninformed persons suppose possible. Speaking of the market-gardeners in Great Britain, in the neighborhood of Paris, and in other places, he says:

They have created a totally new agriculture. They smile when we boast about the rotation system having permitted us to take from the field one crop every year, or four crops each three years, because their ambition is to have six and nine crops from the very same plot of land during the twelve months. They do not understand our talk about good and bad soils, because they make the soil themselves, and make it in such quantities as to be compelled yearly to sell some of it; otherwise it would raise up the level of their gardens by half an inch every year. They aim at cropping, not five or six tons of grass on the acre, as we do, but from 50 to 100 tons of various vegetables on the same space; not 5 pound sworth of hay, but 100 pounds worth of vegetables, of the plainest description, cabbage and carrots.[38]

As regards cattle, he mentions that Mr. Champion at Whitby grows on each acre the food of two or three head of cattle, whereas under ordinary high farming it takes two or three acres to keep each head of cattle in Great Britain. Even more astonishing are the achievements of the Culture Maraicheres round Paris. It is impossible to summarize these achievements, but we may note the general conclusion:

There are now practical Maraichers who venture to maintain that if all the food, animal and vegetable, necessary for the 3,500,000 inhabitants of the Departments of Seine and Seine-et-Oise had to be grown on their own territory (3250 square miles), it could be grown without resorting to any other methods of culture than those already in use-- methods already tested on a large scale and proved successful.[39]

It must be remembered that these two departments include the whole population of Paris.

Kropotkin proceeds to point out methods by which the same result could be achieved without long hours of labor. Indeed, he contends that the great bulk of agricultural work could be carried on by people whose main occupations are sedentary, and with only such a number of hours as would serve to keep them in health and produce a pleasant diversification. He protests against the theory of excessive division of labor. What he wants is INTEGRATION, "a society where each individual is a producer of both manual and intellectual work; where each able-bodied human being is a worker, and where each worker works both in the field and in the industrial workshop." [40]

These views as to production have no essential connection with Kropotkin's advocacy of Anarchism. They would be equally possible under State Socialism, and under certain circumstances they might even be carried out in a capitalistic regime. They are important for our present purpose, not from any argument which they afford in favor of one economic system as against another, but from the fact that they remove the veto upon our hopes which might otherwise result from a doubt as to the productive capacity of labor. I have dwelt upon agriculture rather than industry, since it is in regard to agriculture that the difficulties are chiefly supposed to arise. Broadly speaking, industrial production tends to be cheaper when it is carried on on a large scale, and therefore there is no reason in industry why an increase in the demand should lead to an increased cost of supply.

Passing now from the purely technical and material side of the problem of production, we come to the human factor, the motives leading men to work, the possibilities of efficient organization of production, and the connection of production with distribution. Defenders of the existing system maintain that efficient work would be impossible without the economic stimulus, and that if the wage system were abolished men would cease to do enough work to keep the community in tolerable comfort. Through the alleged necessity of the economic motive, the problems of production and distribution become intertwined. The desire for a more just distribution of the world's goods is the main inspiration of most Socialism and Anarchism. We must, therefore, consider whether the system of distribution which they propose would be likely to lead to a diminished production.

There is a fundamental difference between Socialism and Anarchism as regards the question of distribution. Socialism, at any rate in most of its forms, would retain payment for work done or for willingness to work, and, except in the case of persons incapacitated by age or infirmity, would make willingness to work a condition of subsistence, or at any rate of subsistence above a certain very low minimum. Anarchism, on the other hand, aims at granting to everyone, without any conditions whatever, just as much of all ordinary commodities as he or she may care to consume, while the rarer commodities, of which the supply cannot easily be indefinitely increased, would be rationed and divided equally among the population. Thus Anarchism would not impose any OBLIGATIONS of work, though Anarchists believe that the necessary work could be made sufficiently agreeable for the vast majority of the population to undertake it voluntarily. Socialists, on the other hand, would exact work. Some of them would make the incomes of all workers equal, while others would retain higher pay for the work which is considered more valuable. All these different systems are compatible with the common ownership of land and capital, though they differ greatly as regards the kind of society which they would produce.

Socialism with inequality of income would not differ greatly as regards the economic stimulus to work from the society in which we live. Such differences as it would entail would undoubtedly be to the good from our present point of view. Under the existing system many people enjoy idleness and affluence through the mere accident of inheriting land or capital. Many others, through their activities in industry or finance, enjoy an income which is certainly very far in excess of anything to which their social utility entitles them. On the other hand, it often happens that inventors and discoverers, whose work has the very greatest social utility, are robbed of their reward either by capitalists or by the failure of the public to appreciate their work until too late. The better paid work is only open to those who have been able to afford an expensive training, and these men are selected in the main not by merit but by luck. The wage earner is not paid for his willingness to work, but only for his utility to the employer. Consequently, he may be plunged into destitution by causes over which he has no control. Such destitution is a constant fear, and when it occurs it produces undeserved suffering, and often deterioration in the social value of the sufferer. These are a few among the evils of our existing system from the standpoint of production. All these evils we might expect to see remedied under any system of Socialism.

There are two questions which need to be considered when we are discussing how far work requires the economic motive. The first question is: Must society give higher pay for the more skilled or socially more valuable work, if such work is to be done in sufficient quantities? The second question is: Could work be made so attractive that enough of it would be done even if

idlers received just as much of the produce of work? The first of these questions concerns the division between two schools of Socialists: the more moderate Socialists sometimes concede that even under Socialism it would be well to retain unequal pay for different kinds of work, while the more thoroughgoing Socialists advocate equal incomes for all workers. The second question, on the other hand, forms a division between Socialists and Anarchists; the latter would not deprive a man of commodities if he did not work, while the former in general would.

Our second question is so much more fundamental than our first that it must be discussed at once, and in the course of this discussion what needs to be said on our first question will find its place naturally.

Wages or Free Sharing?

"Abolition of the wages system" is one of the watchwords common to Anarchists and advanced Socialists. But in its most natural sense it is a watchword to which only the Anarchists have a right. In the Anarchist conception of society all the commoner commodities will be available to everyone without stint, in the kind of way in which water is available at present.[41] Advocates of this system point out that it applies already to many things which formerly had to be paid for, e.g., roads and bridges. They point out that it might very easily be extended to trams and local trains. They proceed to argue--as Kropotkin does by means of his proofs that the soil might be made indefinitely more productive--that all the commoner kinds of food could be given away to all who demanded them, since it would be easy to produce them in quantities adequate to any possible demand. If this system were extended to all the necessaries of life, everyone's bare livelihood would be secured, quite regardless of the way in which he might choose to spend his time. As for commodities which cannot be produced in indefinite quantities, such as luxuries and delicacies, they also, according to the Anarchists, are to be distributed without payment, but on a system of rations, the amount available being divided equally among the population. No doubt, though this is not said, something like a price will have to be put upon these luxuries, so that a man may be free to choose how he will take his share: one man will prefer good wine, another the finest Havana cigars, another pictures or beautiful furniture. Presumably, every man will be allowed to take such luxuries as are his due in whatever form he prefers, the relative prices being fixed so as to equalize the demand. In such a world as this, the economic stimulus to production will have wholly disappeared, and if work is to continue it must be from other motives.[42]

Is such a system possible? First, is it technically possible to provide the necessaries of life in such large quantities as would be needed if every man and woman could take as much of them from the public stores as he or she might desire?

The idea of purchase and payment is so familiar that the proposal to do away with it must be thought at first fantastic. Yet I do not believe it is nearly so fantastic as it seems. Even if we could all have bread for nothing, we should not want more than a quite limited amount. As things are, the cost of bread to the rich is so small a proportion of their income as to afford practically no check upon their consumption; yet the amount of bread that they consume could easily be supplied to the whole population by improved methods of agriculture (I am not speaking of war-time). The amount of food that people desire has natural limits, and the waste that would be incurred would probably not be very great. As the Anarchists point out, people at present enjoy an unlimited water supply but very few leave the taps running when they are not using them.

And one may assume that public opinion would be opposed to excessive waste. We may lay it down, I think, that the principle of unlimited supply could be adopted in regard to all commodities for which the demand has limits that fall short of what can be easily produced. And this would be the case, if production were efficiently organized, with the necessities of life, including not only commodities, but also such things as education. Even if all education were free up to the highest, young people, unless they were radically transformed by the Anarchist regime, would not want more than a certain amount of it. And the same applies to plain foods, plain clothes, and the rest of the things that supply our elementary needs.

I think we may conclude that there is no technical impossibility in the Anarchist plan of free sharing.

But would the necessary work be done if the individual were assured of the general standard of comfort even though he did no work?

Most people will answer this question unhesitatingly in the negative. Those employers in particular who are in the habit of denouncing their employees as a set of lazy, drunken louts, will feel quite certain that no work could be got out of them except under threat of dismissal and consequent starvation. But is this as certain as people are inclined to suppose at first sight? If work were to remain what most work is now, no doubt it would be very hard to induce people to undertake it except from fear of destitution. But there is no reason why work should remain the dreary drudgery in horrible conditions that most of it is now.[43] If men had to be tempted to work instead of driven to it, the obvious interest of the community would be to make work pleasant. So long as work is not made on the whole pleasant, it cannot be said that anything like a good state of society has been reached. Is the painfulness of work unavoidable?

At present, the better paid work, that of the business and professional classes, is for the most part enjoyable. I do not mean that every separate moment is agreeable, but that the life of a man who has work of this sort is on the whole happier than that of a man who enjoys an equal income without doing any work. A certain amount of effort, and something in the nature of a continuous career, are necessary to vigorous men if they are to preserve their mental health and their zest for life. A considerable amount of work is done without pay. People who take a rosy view of human nature might have supposed that the duties of a magistrate would be among disagreeable trades, like cleaning sewers; but a cynic might contend that the pleasures of vindictiveness and moral superiority are so great that there is no difficulty in finding well-to-do elderly gentlemen who are willing, without pay, to send helpless wretches to the torture of prison. And apart from enjoyment of the work itself, desire for the good opinion of neighbors and for the feeling of effectiveness is quite sufficient to keep many men active.

But, it will be said, the sort of work that a man would voluntarily choose must always be exceptional: the great bulk of necessary work can never be anything but painful. Who would choose, if an easy life were otherwise open to him, to be a coal-miner, or a stoker on an Atlantic liner? I think it must be conceded that much necessary work must always remain disagreeable or at least painfully monotonous, and that special privileges will have to be accorded to those who undertake it, if the Anarchist system is ever to be made workable. It is true that the introduction of such special privileges would somewhat mar the rounded logic of Anarchism, but it need not, I think, make any really vital breach in its system. Much of the work that needs doing could be

rendered agreeable, if thought and care were given to this object. Even now it is often only long hours that make work irksome. If the normal hours of work were reduced to, say, four, as they could be by better organization and more scientific methods, a very great deal of work which is now felt as a burden would quite cease to be so. If, as Kropotkin suggests, agricultural work, instead of being the lifelong drudgery of an ignorant laborer living very near the verge of abject poverty, were the occasional occupation of men and women normally employed in industry or brain-work; if, instead of being conducted by ancient traditional methods, without any possibility of intelligent participation by the wage-earner, it were alive with the search for new methods and new inventions, filled with the spirit of freedom, and inviting the mental as well as the physical cooperation of those who do the work, it might become a joy instead of a weariness, and a source of health and life to those engaged in it.

What is true of agriculture is said by Anarchists to be equally true of industry. They maintain that if the great economic organizations which are now managed by capitalists, without consideration for the lives of the wage-earners beyond what Trade Unions are able to exact, were turned gradually into self-governing communities, in which the producers could decide all questions of methods, conditions, hours of work, and so forth, there would be an almost boundless change for the better: grime and noise might be nearly eliminated, the hideousness of industrial regions might be turned into beauty, the interest in the scientific aspects of production might become diffused among all producers with any native intelligence, and something of the artist's joy in creation might inspire the whole of the work. All this, which is at present utterly remote from the reality, might be produced by economic self-government. We may concede that by such means a very large proportion of the necessary work of the world could ultimately be made sufficiently agreeable to be preferred before idleness even by men whose bare livelihood would be assured whether they worked or not. As to the residue let us admit that special rewards, whether in goods or honors or privileges, would have to be given to those who undertook it. But this need not cause any fundamental objection.

There would, of course, be a certain proportion of the population who would prefer idleness. Provided the proportion were small, this need not matter. And among those who would be classed as idlers might be included artists, writers of books, men devoted to abstract intellectual pursuits--in short, all those whom society despises while they are alive and honors when they are dead. To such men, the possibility of pursuing their own work regardless of any public recognition of its utility would be invaluable. Whoever will observe how many of our poets have been men of private means will realize how much poetic capacity must have remained undeveloped through poverty; for it would be absurd to suppose that the rich are better endowed by nature with the capacity for poetry. Freedom for such men, few as they are, must be set against the waste of the mere idlers.

So far, we have set forth the arguments in favor of the Anarchist plan. They are, to my mind, sufficient to make it seem possible that the plan might succeed, but not sufficient to make it so probable that it would be wise to try it.

The question of the feasibility of the Anarchist proposals in regard to distribution is, like so many other questions, a quantitative one. The Anarchist proposals consist of two parts: (1) That all the common commodities should be supplied ad lib. to all applicants; (2) That no obligation to work, or economic reward for work, should be imposed on anyone. These two proposals are

not necessarily inseparable, nor does either entail the whole system of Anarchism, though without them Anarchism would hardly be possible. As regards the first of these proposals, it can be carried out even now with regard to some commodities, and it could be carried out in no very distant future with regard to many more. It is a flexible plan, since this or that article of consumption could be placed on the free list or taken off as circumstances might dictate. Its advantages are many and various, and the practice of the world tends to develop in this direction. I think we may conclude that this part of the Anarchists' system might well be adopted bit by bit, reaching gradually the full extension that they desire.

But as regards the second proposal, that there should be no obligation to work, and no economic reward for work, the matter is much more doubtful. Anarchists always assume that if their schemes were put into operation practically everyone would work; but although there is very much more to be said for this view than most people would concede at first sight, yet it is questionable whether there is enough to be said to make it true for practical purposes. Perhaps, in a community where industry had become habitual through economic pressure, public opinion might be sufficiently powerful to compel most men to work;^[44] but it is always doubtful how far such a state of things would be permanent. If public opinion is to be really effective, it will be necessary to have some method of dividing the community into small groups, and to allow each group to consume only the equivalent of what it produces. This will make the economic motive operative upon the group, which, since we are supposing it small, will feel that its collective share is appreciably diminished by each idle individual. Such a system might be feasible, but it would be contrary to the whole spirit of Anarchism and would destroy the main lines of its economic system.

The attitude of orthodox Socialism on this question is quite different from that of Anarchism.^[45] Among the more immediate measures advocated in the "Communist Manifesto" is "equal liability of all to labor. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture." The Socialist theory is that, in general, work alone gives the right to the enjoyment of the produce of work. To this theory there will, of course, be exceptions: the old and the very young, the infirm and those whose work is temporarily not required through no fault of their own. But the fundamental conception of Socialism, in regard to our present question, is that all who can should be compelled to work, either by the threat of starvation or by the operation of the criminal law. And, of course, the only kind of work recognized will be such as commends itself to the authorities. Writing books against Socialism, or against any theory embodied in the government of the day, would certainly not be recognized as work. No more would the painting of pictures in a different style from that of the Royal Academy, or producing plays unpleasing to the censor. Any new line of thought would be banned, unless by influence or corruption the thinker could crawl into the good graces of the pundits. These results are not foreseen by Socialists, because they imagine that the Socialist State will be governed by men like those who now advocate it. This is, of course, a delusion. The rulers of the State then will bear as little resemblance to the present Socialists as the dignitaries of the Church after the time of Constantine bore to the Apostles. The men who advocate an unpopular reform are exceptional in disinterestedness and zeal for the public good; but those who hold power after the reform has been carried out are likely to belong, in the main, to the ambitious executive type which has in all ages possessed itself of the government of nations. And this type has never shown itself tolerant of opposition or friendly to freedom.

It would seem, then, that if the Anarchist plan has its dangers, the Socialist plan has at least equal dangers. It is true that the evils we have been foreseeing under Socialism exist at present, but the purpose of Socialists is to cure the evils of the world as it is; they cannot be content with the argument that they would make things no worse.

Anarchism has the advantage as regards liberty, Socialism as regards the inducements to work. Can we not find a method of combining these two advantages? It seems to me that we can.

We saw that, provided most people work in moderation, and their work is rendered as productive as science and organization can make it, there is no good reason why the necessities of life should not be supplied freely to all. Our only serious doubt was as to whether, in an Anarchist regime, the motives for work would be sufficiently powerful to prevent a dangerously large amount of idleness. But it would be easy to decree that, though necessities should be free to all, whatever went beyond necessities should only be given to those who were willing to work--not, as is usual at present, only to those in work at any moment, but also to all those who, when they happened not to be working, were idle through no fault of their own. We find at present that a man who has a small income from investments, just sufficient to keep him from actual want, almost always prefers to find some paid work in order to be able to afford luxuries. So it would be, presumably, in such a community as we are imagining. At the same time, the man who felt a vocation for some unrecognized work of art or science or thought would be free to follow his desire, provided he were willing to "scorn delights and live laborious days." And the comparatively small number of men with an invincible horror of work--the sort of men who now become tramps-- might lead a harmless existence, without any grave danger of their becoming sufficiently numerous to be a serious burden upon the more industrious. In this way the claims of freedom could be combined with the need of some economic stimulus to work. Such a system, it seems to me, would have a far greater chance of success than either pure Anarchism or pure orthodox Socialism.

Stated in more familiar terms, the plan we are advocating amounts essentially to this: that a certain small income, sufficient for necessities, should be secured to all, whether they work or not, and that a larger income, as much larger as might be warranted by the total amount of commodities produced, should be given to those who are willing to engage in some work which the community recognizes as useful. On this basis we may build further. I do not think it is always necessary to pay more highly work which is more skilled or regarded as socially more useful, since such work is more interesting and more respected than ordinary work, and will therefore often be preferred by those who are able to do it. But we might, for instance, give an intermediate income to those who are only willing to work half the usual number of hours, and an income above that of most workers to those who choose a specially disagreeable trade. Such a system is perfectly compatible with Socialism, though perhaps hardly with Anarchism. Of its advantages we shall have more to say at a later stage. For the present I am content to urge that it combines freedom with justice, and avoids those dangers to the community which we have found to lurk both in the proposals of the Anarchists and in those of orthodox Socialists.