

The People.

VOL. IV, NO. 24

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1894

PRICE 3 CENTS

EDITORIAL

Social Character of Machinery.

By DANIEL DE LEON

The only manner in which man can act upon nature is by motion. In this respect John Stuart Mill observed: "Man moves a seed into the ground; he moves an axe through a tree; he moves a spark to fuel; he moves water into a boiler over a fire; the properties of matter do the rest." In other words, "This one operation of putting things into fit places for being acted upon each other by their own internal forces is all that man does, or can do, with matter."

This is a statement of fundamental import, and John Stuart Mill so highly valued it that he claimed the credit of having first made it. Yet, with the usual shortsightedness of political economists, bounded in their views by their narrow, middle-class environment, he utterly fails to draw from it the only possible conclusion, viz., the social character of machinery and the stupendous wrong done to man, a social being, by the private ownership of the mechanical organs of motion.

Confined to the use of his own physical power, man is one of the most helpless animals. In proportion to his size and requirements, he is unquestionably very weak and slow. But the superiority of his organism consists precisely in the aptitude of his brain and the fitness of his hands for the contrivance and use of mechanical devices, through which he may take from nature, by artifice, those forces in which he is naturally wanting. Every such contrivance is to him like a new organ by which his power of motion is increased. But the point is soon reached in the development of these artificial organs, where a single individual can {can not?} produce or use them. Beyond the most primitive of hunting, fishing and cultivating implements, every tool, not to speak of the more complex machine, requires in its make {making?}, or in its handling, or in the purpose for which it is handled, the co-operation of several individuals. In other words, all the benefit of machinery lies in its social, co-operative use. Give a man all the knowledge and machinery of this age, and place him on the richest land in a country isolated from the rest of the world. Of what benefit will all

that be to him, as compared with the welfare which he can obtain among his fellows in exchange for what he can produce with an infinitesimal part of that knowledge and of that machinery? Mark, furthermore, that every tool, like every form or product of knowledge, is, in fact, a social growth, requiring the co-operation of successive generations. Show me a machine to-day whose patentee can claim freedom of indebtedness to some predecessors. From Archimedes to Watt; nay, from the first savage who made use of a stone axe to the most eminent of modern inventors, the social chain of observation, discovery and co-operation is unbroken.

From the comparative physical impotency of man in his natural state, and from his inability to invent, make and use, unaided by his fellows, all the tools he needs to multiply his power of motion in the degree required for his safety and welfare, comes the social state, in which the tool is necessarily a social organ; social in its origin, social in its growth, social in its purpose, social in its incorporation of natural forces which of right belong to all; set in motion by human muscles, for the good of the social body, under the direction of the social will. Hence the tendency of society itself to develop into a constantly higher organism as the differentiation, power and socialization of tools becomes more complete; while the social will, enlightened by a better knowledge of the requirements of the body in all its parts, becomes less uncertain, less undecided, less erratic, and, therefore, less arbitrary or tyrannical.

More evidence might be adduced to show the social character of machinery. Upon what precedes we may, however, safely rest the following generalization: "Each man has an equal social right to multiply his power of motion by all the social factors of civilization. Private property in any of these factors is inconsistent with this fundamental right; it must, obviously, prove a source of economic despotism and industrial slavery."

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded November 2002