

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 10, NO. 289.

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 1910.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

IS TOM WATSON “FIGARO’S” UNCONSCIOUS HUMORIST?

By DANIEL DE LEON

IN *Watson’s Jeffersonian Magazine* for this month Tom Watson asserts, amid caps and italics enough to superinduce delirium tremens, that “unwittingly” Marx himself “bears witness to the correctness of my [Mr. W.’s] position, which is that there is nothing wrong in Capitalism itself.” In proof of this Mr. Watson cites the following footnote in Marx’s *Capital*, where Marx quotes from Colonel R. Torrens’s *An Essay on the Production of Wealth*, as follows:

“In the first stone which he (the savage) flings at the wild animal he pursues, in the stick that he seizes to strike down the fruit which hangs above his reach, we see the appropriation of one article for the purpose of aiding in the acquisition of another, and thus discover the original of capital.”

Indeed the Torresnsian philosophy squares exactly with the Watsonian. It presents the genesis of Capital as an innocent, justifiable, and harmful-to-no-man process. If its inception is innocent, justifiable, and harmful-to-no-man, why apply to it the hard words that Socialists do? Whereupon Mr. Watson, in a state of mind of which some idea is given by the italics and caps literally reproduced in the following passages:

“These would-be philosophers [the Socialists] trace their dearest foe, capitalism, back to *the stone with which the savage kills a wild animal*, and thus obtains food for himself and kindred; *to the stick which brings wasting fruit to appease human hunger*—AND THEN HAVE THE ASTOUNDING OBTUSENESS TO ARGUE THAT CAPITALISM IS WRONG, IN ITSELF! Mercy on us! how one sided these doctrinaires become when laboring to find facts to support absurd theories!”

But, Mr. Watson, not so fast—

“Well, who *besides the hog* was damaged by the use of the rock? Wasn't it a good thing for the tribe to have its food supply increased, in that manner? Was the tribe injured when '*the original capitalist,*' whose stick brought down grapes, or nuts, added these luxuries to the provisions of the tribe? How was 'Society' damaged when those *original capitalists* learned how to make spears, javelins, stone hatchets, fish-hooks, bows and arrows, *and thus enormously increased their capacity for securing the flesh and hides of wild beasts, for food and clothing and tents?*”

But, Mr. Watson, we beg your pardon, the original capitalist—

“Then when those *original capitalists* learned how to use boats and nets, traps and pitfalls, to capture a vastly larger number of fish and wild animals, with very much more ease, *capitalism was going at tremendous speed*—in comparison with Colonel Torrens' rock and stick throwers. But can you see wherein this capitalism was doing any harm to 'Society'? When axes were used to fell trees, and implements employed to produce grain and vegetables, the capitalists had made another tremendous leap *onward, AND UPWARD.* And so on at each successive step, *in the natural process of evolution.*”

But, one minute, Mr. Watson, Marx—

“*Here was capitalism in full blast* according to Marx and his wonderful Colonel Torrens.”

Now, Mr. Watson, take a reef in your tongue! You have been going at the rate of 40 knots a minute. Stop, if for breath only. Man, you're off—from bottom up. Marx never said any such nonsense as you put into his mouth. The “original capitalist” is not Colonel Torrens's stone and stick throwing savage; nor is “original capital” the Colonel's stick and stone.

Capitalism, like all other institutions of man, is no bolt from a clear sky. Almost imperceptible are the gradations that lead to it. This notwithstanding, deep and wide is the chasm that separates the savage, whose property rests upon his own labor, and the person, or concern, whose property rests in the labor of others; deep and wide is the chasm, between the stick and stone of the savage, and the plant of the capitalist; deep and wide is the chasm that separates the social conditions under which the savage and those under which the capitalist produces.

The stick and stone of the savage are no more “original capital” than the sand of

the Ocean is "original fortress."—Marx emphasizes the point that, so long as the means of production and subsistence remain the property of the producer, they are not capital.

The savage who takes a stick or a stone to bring down a wild animal is no more "original capitalist" than the tightrope dancer is "original aeroplaneist"; nor is the system of the savage in question "original capitalism" any more than a lighted tallow candle is "original electric light."—Marx emphasizes that the capitalist and capitalism are impossibilities before the creation of something else, without which neither could breathe. What is that something else? That something else, essential to capitalism, is a mass of expropriated humanity, originally expropriated by being driven with fire and sword from their small landed tenures, and thereafter compelled to sell themselves in wage slavery—the proletariat. Upon this fact history is full; It is a fact which misleads the Single Taxer into the error of concluding that, because original expropriation from the land was the remote cause of proletarian misery, therefore, to-day, after capital has got into the saddle, land is all-sufficient for independence.

Even such utensils as hatchets, guns, saws, etc., articles far in advance of the savage's stone and stick, and use to-day for the acquisition of useful things, are not "capital," nor is their wielder a "capitalist" if he uses them himself for his own subsistence.

One is a capitalist only if the means production owned by him are operated, not by himself, exclusively, but by employes; and he can fill that capitalist role only when there are, ready to his hand, human beings who need just such means of production as he owns, and who are stripped of the opportunity to acquire them. The system under which this combination of circumstances is found is "capitalism." Hence, in the words with which Marx summarizes his treatise on the genesis of capitalism, "If money, according to Augier, 'comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,' capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."

This is what Marx says. Marx may be an ass, Mr. Watson, and false his history, and yours correct; in which event an expectant humanity will be happy to learn by sitting at your feet, under your drippings. But you will have to quote him correctly.

You may not put into Marx’s mouth your own views as anticipated by Colonel Torrens. You may do this all the less seeing that Marx did not leave to inference the opinion he entertained of people who see in the savage, using stones and sticks, or even in the modern self-employer, the “original capitalist,” and, in the implements of these, “original capital.” Innumerable and pointed are the shafts of Marx’s ridicule at the Colonel-Torrenes, at this very Colonel Torrens in particular.

At this point Mr. Watson may be seen rising majestically, and, triumphantly reading further down from his own article, say:

“Marx is quite rapturous in quoting R. Torrens to that effect. He calls Torrens’ discovery of the original capitalist, ‘a wonderful feat of logical acumen.’”

We are disarmed. Our indignation at what we took to be a recurrence of Mr. Watson’s malady of misquoting vanishes. We now can only roar. Mr. Watson must be the long sought-for Paris *Figaro’s* unconscious humorist.

The Paris *Figaro* tells this story: A book on America having appeared in which the author narrated as something new, some things about America that everybody knew before, and some other things that were simply absurd, the *Figaro* made an allusion to the author to the effect that Mr. So-and-So “had discovered America.” A day or two later the paper received a letter from an unknown correspondent informing the *Figaro* soberly and politely that it had made a mistake: Mr. So-and-So was not the discoverer of America: the discoverer of America was Cristoforo Colombo: see such and such authorities upon the subject.

Yes, Marx does call Colonel Torrens a “discoverer.” He introduces his foot note quotation from the Colonel with these words: “By a wonderful feat of logical acumen Colonel Torrens has discovered, in this stone of the savage the original of capital.” Mr. Watson, not having read the text, and his eyes accidentally alighting upon the footnote, he, like *Figaro’s* wooden-headed correspondent, missed the sarcasm, took it literally—and immortalized himself as an unconscious humorist.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded April 2011

slpns@slp.org