

MEMOIR AND LETTERS  
OF  
FRANCIS W. NEWMAN

WITH TWENTY-EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS  
AND TWO ARTICLES (ONE UNPUBLISHED MS.)

BY  
I. GIBERNE SIEVEKING

*οὗτός γε ἄξιός ἐστιν ἐπαίνεσθαι ὅστις ἂν τοῖς ἐταίροις ὡς τέλειόν  
τι ὄν προτιθῆ τὸ εὖ νεωτερίζειν τὴν τῶν πολλῶν κατάστασιν*



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## CHAPTER XXI

### LANDOWNERS AND WAGE RECEIVERS

BY FRANCIS W. NEWMAN

CONTRIBUTED BY MR. WILLIAM JAMIESON

[Presumably written in 1886, when Newman was Vice-President of the "Land Nationalization Society." It was kindly sent me by Mr. William Jamieson, who was Hon. Sec. to the above Society at the time. I wish to express here my sense of gratitude to him for much help and information regarding his own work with Newman in 1886.]

**T**HE tendency of English industry for a long time back has been to exalt the *landlord*, or chief man in any locality, into *land owner* (a phrase implying that no one but he has legal right in the land), and to convert a larger and larger fraction of the nation into wage receivers, liable to be cast out of work either at the simple will, or by the imprudence or misfortune of their paymaster. In order to analyse the natural results of this juncture, we must follow the method received in Political Economy, of taking an imaginary case, far simpler than any which is actually met in human life, so as to make all the conditions of the problem known to us by hypotheses. Let us suppose an island, secluded commercially from the rest of the world, and peopled by a vast working lower class under three small ruling castes. The island is physically divisible into three parts: *first*, marshy coast land, abounding with shrubs, canes, rushes of many kinds, from which human garments of various sorts can be made; *secondly*, rolling

land, eminently suitable for the cultivation of grain, and of certain fruit trees and roots on which the whole population live; *thirdly*, the mountain land, on which are timber trees and copses affording firewood; also quarries of stone, gravel pits, lime rocks, and mines of copper and iron. Of the marshy coast land, the *second* lordly caste is acknowledged to be absolute owner; the first or highest caste owns the rolling land, which is the arable and cultivated portion; and the *third* caste owns the mountain land and its products. From the first comes the food of the native, from the second comes the clothing, from the third the houses. It is possible that gravel, lime, and stone can be found in rolling land, and that fruit trees either exist or if planted would bear fruit in the marsh land, some even in the mountains; but the ruling castes follow ancient custom, and the working caste has no right to innovate. They work *under* and *for* their masters, and receive wages *in kind*—that is, as an equivalent for their work, a definite but liberal supply of the three necessary articles—food, clothes, and house accommodation. Money does not exist, nor tame animals in our island. To add sharpness to our imaginary case, and to make argument intelligible, we must assign definite numbers to the working population; but from whatever numbers we start, the argument and the practical result will be the same. Let us suppose the first caste to employ *ten thousand* cultivators; the second caste to employ *three thousand* knitters and plaiters; the third caste *one thousand* masons, miners, and carpenters. Each of these castes furnishes to the workman such rude tools as are necessary, but these remain the property of the masters, not of the workmen.

The soil and climate being favourable, and the habits

of the people simple, a few hours of work suffice ; and like many barbarians, they have been accustomed to much idle time, which they employ in sport ; moreover, by the connivance or good of the superior caste, they have been accustomed to pick or steal largely the leaves of an intoxicating grass, and the masters to whom the whole produce of their labour belongs, have large superfluity after paying their wages ; hereby the lordlings easily feed domestic servants and exhibit themselves in gay clothing with superior dwellings.

But the tendency of the workers to drunkenness shocks a certain religious preacher, who traces the vice to idleness and sport. He goes about the island urging upon them a higher morality. They widely receive him as a divine messenger, and under his exhortation they become more industrious and more conscientious in their work ; not only working more hours, and curtailing their sport, but in every hour using more diligence. In consequence, the masters are enriched by stores somewhat embarrassing. Grain comes in, more than they want : their barns begin to overflow. Garments are too many for the warehouses. Huge piles of timber block up the yards, besides masses of stones, and heaps of other superfluous material. Before long, the masters conclude that their simplest course for checking supply is by lessening the number of the workmen. The increased diligence of the people (we may suppose) has made the work of three men on an average as efficient in all tasks as were *five* men previously. Thus sixty do the work of a hundred ; and the masters discover that what had been the normal average produce will be maintained, if they dismiss forty out of every hundred dependents. Not only so ; but retaining their usual surplus, which we may call their rent, at the

old level, they will be able to raise the wages to these workmen whom they still keep, since instead of a hundred they will have only sixty now to feed and clothe ; and only for these do they feel morally responsible. Forthwith they actually dismiss forty out of every hundred. Each landowner cares for his own workmen as by a sort of social duty ; but for those who are discharged he feels no responsibility. In the average result the landowners who had had a hundred workmen, but now only sixty, take as increased rent the food and clothes of ten, and use it to add ten servants to their domestic retinue, but add to the wage of the sixty whom they keep at work, the food and clothes previously received by thirty of the forty whom they have dismissed. Thus they raise wages by one half—that is, they pay in the proportion of one hundred and fifty instead of one hundred.

The labourers, clothworkers, and builders who are dismissed (the remaining thirty out of every hundred) being without work and without houses, are at once in a state of beggary. Only by betaking themselves to some *new industry* will they be able to get a livelihood, and it rests with them to devise their new industries. Meanwhile they can only subsist on charity, which is doled out to them chiefly by the fellow feeling of those of their class who are still in work. The increased wages of these enable them to be liberal ; in fact, the increase has on an average been just what the discarded men previously earned.

A parliament of the higher classes is in due course assembled, and a member came (?) to the distress of so many men out of work. But a distinguished literary writer, member of a Politico-Economical Club . . . eases the consciences of the higher castes by pointing out that in fact the island is much increased in prosperity. Rents had, no doubt, risen, but only as one mark of

prosperity, for their increase was in a much smaller percentage than that of the rise of wages. These had increased by the very remarkable ratio of 50 per cent. It was true that many men were out of work. That was to be regretted ; but it was a *passing phenomenon*. They would before long find work somewhere or somehow.

The discarded workmen hitherto had had no great variety in their tasks, and were always set to work by others without exercise of their own inventive powers. Yet out of a large number of men there are always many of good talents, some of original genius. The idea of many new forms of industry springs up. Oil for food has been hitherto raised from the olive tree ; now an ingenious man would extract oil from several shrubs or trees, and make candles, or else oil for lamps. A second wishes to plait carpet socks, sandals, and umbrellas. A third would make boats, with ropes, and oars, and sails. A fourth would add wheelbarrows and casks to the baskets already in use. A fifth has noticed wild ponies on the mountains, and desires to catch them and make needful harness. A sixth would plant fruit trees in gardens, and not take the chance of wild fruit. But on every such plan they are at once checkmated : first, because all these natural products are accounted the absolute property of the upper castes, and must be bought ; next, most of their new schemes need a yard or a garden and right of access by a road, and workshops, beside a dwelling-house. But the land, as well as the raw produce, is inaccessible to them ; yet on them, hungry and destitute, is laid the task of originating the new trades. Can this seizure of the land and its natural products as the private property of a limited number of families be morally justified ? In its origin was it attained by violence and robbery ?

Else, has it grown up by gradual and cunning perversion of law? These three questions point at the principle of landowning. Another question rises: Is it good for a nation for *the great majority* to retain life only on condition that there is someone ready to pay wages for their work and able to discard them? In the imaginary case thus drawn the increased industry of the workers which produced superfluity is the beginning (to them) of change for the worse. Their spontaneous industry causes overproduction, and leads to the dismissal of many workmen. Our economists treat every increase of productiveness as an unalloyed good. It is good, provided that men are not kept idle by it. Evidently there is no national gain from sixty men doing the work of a hundred, if thereby forty men are tossed into unwilling idleness, and must live on charity, some of the forty losing all habits of industry, and perhaps becoming criminal. This is a national loss.

Further, our hypothesis that the men voluntarily become more industrious may be called an extreme and unlikely case. For that very reason it has been here adopted. The ordinary causes give us *a fortiori* argument, because they are ever in action. *Skill* naturally increases among men employed continuously on any work. In a settled, industrious nation small improvements accumulate. In modern Europe the cultivation of mechanics and chemistry conduces to a steady improvement in tools, a cheapening also of tools, and introduction of such more complex tools as we call "machines," by dint of all which human work constantly becomes more effective, so that fewer and fewer workmen are needed for *the same amount* of produce. Thus the normal and natural order of things, wherever *the wage-system exists*, tends to dispense with some, or

many, of the workmen. This is a clear gain if the men thus displaced *are instantly taken up for some other service*. But this seldom can happen; often their old skill is made useless, and before they can learn a new trade they become demoralized, and many perish. The loss of their industrial position is a grievance and a national mischief which our "Economists" are prone to undervalue, and pass unnoticed.

Let us contrast the case of men who work not for a master, not for wages, but for themselves; holding their own little homestead, from which they cannot be driven out. Such is the case of back-settlers in the Far West of the United States. Each perhaps carries out with him a box of stout clothes, some agricultural tools and important seeds, and either *squats* on a bit of wild land, or by a very easy payment buys possession of the Federal Government. This bit of land the settler counts *his own*. With the aid of friendly neighbours he builds the rude log-hut. The felling of the trees needed to construct it makes an opening for small culture. In a very few years he raises more food than his family needs. If the season and the roads favour, he sends his superfluous barrels of corn and fruit eastward, and recovers an equivalent. But what happens if wide distance part him from civilized towns, if the roads are swampy and not made by art, and the conveyance of food be too onerous to remunerate him? All his neighbours being in like case, there is a local Overproduction of food; yet not one of the little community is thereby made a pauper. No one is able to expel them from their rude homes, or forbid their cultivation. They are not made outcasts or idlers. Simply they are kept poorer, than with access to a market they would have been; but they lessen their production of food, and either with the

females of the family work at clothing, or execute carpentering. In many ways they can use their time to produce articles which they could have bought in a better finished state had the market of the East been open to them. The present writer was informed by an Englishman who in the American Civil War had penetrated very far West, that he had seen with his own eyes a colonist *burning wheat as fuel*, because he had it in so great excess. Probably he had plenty of green maize for his horses and pigs.

Whenever a man retains a house of his own, and has neither rent to pay nor any excessive taxation, if only he have a moderate plot of land for workshop and garden, he is not made destitute, though he do not directly raise food for his household, but works at some domestic manufacture. Our "Spitalfields" poor who fought a long battle with the hand-loom against the loom driven by steam power, might not have been at length utterly ruined if they had had freehold houses and some small garden in a healthy country. If the system of huge factories had had to compete with domestic manufacture conducted by private families living in small freeholds, it is possible that the battle might simply have driven the independent workers either to buy small steam engines for their aid, or what now is more obvious, to hire power from some company, as from a Gas Company or Water Company, which had it in superfluity. Such, in the opinion of some far-sighted men, may very possibly be even now the solution of our difficulty.

At present the Trade Unions gravely mistake the end for which they ought to strive. They mischievously unite two objects. First, they are Benefit Societies. The funds of a Benefit Society ought to be forbidden

by law to be spent in warring against capitalists ; this enables the directors, or a majority of them, to confiscate the whole contributions of any member who disapproves of the war.

Next, the main effort to raise the status of the workmen is ill-directed towards raising or sustaining the *rate* of wages, else towards dictating concerning the management. This effort is ill-directed, first, because it is liable to aim at an impossibility—i.e. to extort from a master a wage so high that he prefers not to light his engine fires ; next, because to raise the *rate* of wages does not secure continuous work, and idle days neither tend to sobriety nor give pay. Strikes which inflict vast loss upon the workers cause loss to the masters also, and make them less able to pay high wages. But beyond all these, if the Unions were wise, they would struggle against the system of wage-earning, wherever it is new and needless ; that is, as far as possible, strive to recover the system of domestic manufacture. For certain new and peculiar industries undoubtedly combine, and large capital is essential ; even in them the effort ought to be towards uniting, *as far as possible*, the interests of each workman, and of the company, the opposite of which is in general the Union policy. But for every old trade independent work is physically possible, under the condition that the workman have a fixed homestead. To effect this ought to be the main effort of the Unions.

In the thirty-two years between the battle of Waterloo and the Irish famine, the farmers and manufacturers were like two buckets of a well ; when one was up, the other was down. But now, both at once are down. The causes are clearly separate.

Our manufacturers when allowed to accept payments

from abroad in wheat and sugar and foods and all raw produce, immensely increased their foreign sales ; and during the Cotton Famine, capital was largely invested in building new cotton mills, as if we were to supply all the world.

But the European Continent more and more chooses to compete with us, and from more causes than one deprive our merchants of their customers. Between us and our rivals more of *the same sort* is produced than the existing markets can take : this is again Overproduction. Hence stagnation in our manufacturing districts. Meanwhile, in near thirty years of manufacturing prosperity after 1847, the increased riches of these towns enriched the farmers and enabled the landlords to raise rents in England, and in consequence, by dint of landlord power, rent rose in the whole United Kingdom. At the same time, Englishmen found too little encouragement to invest their savings on English soil, and preferred to invest many millions on foreign railways and on foreign loans ; and the payment of their dividends is made largely by imported foreign food. Their investments at first were an advantage to our manufacturers, while they sent out railway plant and carriages and locomotives. Now foreigners compete with us even as to these, and the imported food competes with the farmers. Thus a double failure convulses us.

How much better, if instead of quarrelling for distant markets (and *it is said* conquering Burmah in the hope of advantage to our merchants) we had *a native population of small cultivators*, prosperous enough to be valuable as well as steady customers to our manufacturing towns, and gradually (in the course of several generations) another population of country folk, substituting domestic manufactures for those of factories with wage earners !