

Poverty and the IWC

Ken Coates

*Empire is no more!
and now the lion & wolf
shall cease ...*

◀ A Song of Liberty, from
the Marriage of Heaven
and Hell by William Blake,
which Ken Coates chose
for the cover of his book,
Empire No More!

I spent a lot of time working on problems of poverty. Poverty was visible all around us in the 1960s and '70s, and became the object of a remarkable academic industry. Foremost among the scholars who initiated all this effort was Peter Townsend, who published a small brochure which detonated large explosions. *The Poor and the Poorest*, jointly written with Brian Abel-Smith, appeared in 1965. It offered a careful dissection of Ministry of Labour figures on household expenditure, and compared the actual incomes of people in 1953 and 1960 with the National Assistance scales which were operative at those times. Taking the official definitions, the authors found that 7.8 per cent of the population was living in poverty in 1953, and that the proportion was growing, so that by 1960, 14.2 per cent of the population was affected. This involved seven and a half million people, and the claim brought a decisive end to years of complacency about the material conditions of the British people.

I was teaching an adult class at Nottingham University at this time, and we looked at the findings of *The Poor and the Poorest* with some attention to detail. So impressed were my students that they decided to check out the work of these sociologists against actual conditions in an extended slum area of Nottingham, chosen because it began a short walk from the Adult Education Centre in which we were working. We recruited a second tutor, Richard or Bill Silburn, and started work. All that gave rise to a string of publications, and there is no need to rehearse them here. We conducted an extensive social survey over a number of years, and our findings

amply confirmed those of our teachers, Townsend and Abel-Smith.

All that is summed up in our first report, which I prepared with Richard Silburn, *St. Ann's: Poverty, Deprivation and Morale in a Nottingham Community*, and in the subsequent book, published by Penguin, *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen*.

But these publications, and the attendant public agitation to which they gave rise, distracted me from the fundamental insight to which I was beginning to devote myself in those days. This considered poverty as by no means simply a lack of material resources but also as mainly a want of spiritual development. True, we quoted in *The Forgotten Englishmen*, the wise words of Bernard Shaw.

‘Nothing, therefore, is really in question, or ever has been, but the differences between class incomes. Already there is economic equality between captains, and economic equality between cabin boys. What is at issue still is whether there shall be economic equality between captains and cabin boys. What would Jesus have said? Presumably he would have said that if your only object is to produce a captain and a cabin boy for the purpose of transferring you from Liverpool to New York, or to manoeuvre a fleet and carry powder from the magazine to the gun, then you need give no more than a shilling to the cabin boy for every pound you give to the more expensively trained captain. But if in addition to this you desire to allow the two human souls which are inseparable from the captain and the cabin boy and which alone differentiate them from the donkey-engine, to develop all their possibilities, then you may find the cabin boy costing rather more than the captain, because the cabin boy’s work does not do so much for the soul as captain’s work. Consequently you will have to give him at least as much as the captain unless you definitely wish him to be a lower creature, in which case the sooner you are hanged as an abortionist the better.’

It was this insight which gave rise to the efforts which we made to foster a movement to industrial democracy. Partly this turned around the question of human development in industry, and rejected the notion that the division of labour fostered the ultimate wisdom in the wealth of nations. It will be recalled that Adam Smith described the manufacture of pins.

The opening pages of *The Wealth of Nations* contain a careful description

‘of the trade of the pin-maker; a workman not educated to this business (which the division of labour has rendered a distinct trade) nor acquainted with the use of the machinery employed in it (to the invention of which the same division of labour has probably given occasion), could scarce, perhaps, with his utmost industry, make one pin in a day, and certainly could not make twenty. But in the way in which this business is now carried on, not only the whole work is a

peculiar trade, but it is divided into a number of branches, of which the greater part are likewise peculiar trades. One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on is a peculiar business, to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hands, though in others the same man will sometimes perform two or three of them. I have seen a small manufactory of this kind where ten men only were employed, and where some of them consequently performed two or three distinct operations. But though they were very poor, and therefore but indifferently accommodated with the necessary machinery, they could, when they exerted themselves, make among them about twelve pounds of pins in a day. There are in a pound upwards of four thousands pins of a middling size. Those ten persons, therefore, could make among them upwards of forty-eight thousand pins in a day. Each person, therefore, making a tenth part of forty-eight thousands pins, might be considered as making four thousand eight hundred pins in a day. But if they had all wrought separately and independently, and without any of them having been educated to this peculiar business, they certainly could not each of them have made twenty, perhaps not one pin in a day; that is, certainly, not the two hundred and fortieth, perhaps not the four thousand eight hundredth part of what they are at present capable of performing, in consequence of a proper division and combination of their different operations ...

This great increase of the quantity of work which, in consequence of the division of labour, the same number of people are capable of performing, is owing to three different circumstances; first, to the increase of dexterity in every particular workman; secondly, to the saving of the time which is commonly lost in passing from one species of work to another; and lastly, to the invention of a great number of machines which facilitate and abridge labour, and enable one man to do the work of many.’ (Adam Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*, Volume One, publisher: J. M. Dent & Sons)

Adam Smith was not insensitive to the conditions which were endured by his pin-makers, but it took a much later analyst, John Ruskin, explicitly to tell us about the true implications of this condition.

‘We have much studied and perfected, of late, the great civilised invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail. Now it is a good and desirable thing, truly, to make many pins in a day; but if we could

only see with what crystal sand their points were polished – sand of human soul, much to be magnified before it can be discerned for what it is – we should think there might be some loss in it also. And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than the furnace blast, is all in very deed for this – that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages.’ (Ruskin: *The Stones of Venice*, Section II, chapter vi.)

In the 1960s and ’70s, notwithstanding the advance of technology, this admonition remained tellingly relevant. Things have indeed changed, but the crude division of labour still prevails over large parts of the globe, computers notwithstanding. An American scholar, writing in the 1980s, reported that car workers required greatly more skill to drive themselves to work than they did to perform their tasks on the assembly line. Of course, it was not simply the extension of repetitious drudgery that gave rise to the complaint that wage labour was ‘wage slavery’. The essential component of that condition was the subordination of one man’s will to another.

It was this insight which moved G. D. H. Cole to complain that there were two evils arising from modern capitalism, the least of which was poverty and the greater slavery.

In 1965 I was involved in convening the first seminar on this problem since the gradual forgetting of the messages of the guild socialists, the syndicalists, and other proponents of industrial democracy. This seminar, held in the Adult Education Department of Nottingham University, brought together trade union activists, politicians from various Parties, and a number of academics, mainly working in the field of Adult Education. It was followed by a string of other seminars, which were able to preoccupy themselves with greater and greater attention to the problems in specific industries. These meetings became a regular forum on Workers’ Control, and promoted a wide variety of publications.

The adult educationalists included senior members of the profession like Michael Barratt Brown, Tony Topham and a number of others. Their significance was that the current orthodoxy in the teaching of adults was an attempt to apply Socratic methods of teaching. Since adult students were all persons of considerable experience, and since the trade union students, in particular, were practised in a range of skills involving them in negotiations and the organisation of their working colleagues, a consensus had arisen that the delivery of set-piece lectures was likely to be a counterproductive form of tuition. Some of the older Socialist groups were sinners in this respect.

The Socialist Labour League, for instance, was giving ‘classes’ on Marxism to car workers, in which the lecturer, a doughty Scot from Glasgow, veteran of factional battles reaching back to antiquity, reeled off all the actual examples from volume one of *Capital*, learned by rote. John Daniels senior, who sat through some of these lectures, and knew a few things about pedagogy himself, described this teaching method as ‘Shit against the wall. You throw a lot and perhaps a little bit will stick.’ The IWC’s pedagogues sought to engage the working groups in which they involved themselves in developing their own schemes for democratising their workplaces. In this they were following the example of a previous generation of trade union militants.

In 1968 they resulted in the formation of the Institute for Workers’ Control, which had major trade union support, and promoted conferences with the President of the Engineers’ Union, Hugh Scanlon, and prominent leaders of the Transport Workers. The seminars, which had begun with fewer than a hundred participants, became major conferences of more than a thousand people.

A major area of concern was the administration of nationalised industries, and other public bodies. Various participatory arrangements had been considered in framing the constitutions of different public enterprises. But overall it was considered that there was too little difference between the status of workers in the public sector and their conditions in private companies. Various proposals had been drawn up, for instance by mineworkers, in the teens and twenties of the last century. These were lovingly disinterred and gave rise to complex proposals for the reform of the National Coal Board.

An extensive discussion took place among steel workers about the administration of their industry after it was renationalised. There were proposals for the democratic administration of the docks, the buses and other concerns. And there were detailed proposals of the extension of trade union powers in the private sector to foster accountability, job security and democratic involvement. Some part of this literature remains in print, and there is a case for reprinting more of it.

The British discussion was overtaken by proposals in Europe for the reform of company law, which gave rise to a public enquiry in Britain under the chairmanship of Lord Bullock. The findings of this investigation were kicked into touch by the Labour Government, after a short but embarrassing hiatus. Mrs. Thatcher was soon to put a stop to other official explorations of these subversive issues.

SONGS

OF

INNOCENCE

and Of

EXPERIENCE

*Showing the Two Contrary States
of the Human Soul*

