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EDITORIAL

THE SECRET OF TOM WATSON'S IRRITATION.

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“IF the Socialists were capable of sane reasoning,” says Tom Watson in *The Jeffersonian* article, a part of which was commented upon last week in these columns, “they’d know that the term ‘surplus Value’ is pure nonsense. There may be *different kinds of value*—value in use, value in exchange, etc.—but there is not, never has been, and never can be such a thing as *Surplus Value*. You might as well speak of the surplus hide of the living horse, or the surplus horns of a live cow. When a pail is full of water or milk, *it is full*; and to speak of its being *fuller than full*, is to talk idiotic gibberish. The value of a thing, *is the full measure of its commercial worth*; in the very nature of things, there cannot be *surplus* to it.”

Assuming for the sake of argument, that the word “surplus” and the word “value” are mutually repellant, it does not follow that a combination of the two is “insanity” or “idiotic gibberish.” Technical language and usage present innumerable instances of terminology by that, dissected, will not bear scrutiny; and yet passes current as technical accuracy. The term “bittersweet,” used in botany, may cause a Watsonic ignoramus on botany to laugh out aloud: “A thing can not be bitter and yet sweet!” The word “tribe,” meaning originally a third of the Roman population, was later, when more gentes were introduced in the commonwealth, transferred to any of the main civic divisions of the Roman people: when Mommsen, the Roman historian refers to the “fourth tribe,” some Watsonic lump of cocksureness may say: “Idiotic gibberish! How can a ‘fourth’ be a ‘third’!” The word “umbrella” means literally “shade-giver,” and yet the thing is used when it rains: we have heard *Volkszeitung* Timbuctooers pronounce the word “umbrella” an evidence of “the duplicity of the English language,” and very probably some Watsonic shallow literateur may deny sanity to him who, the rain coming down and no sun shining,

would want a “shade-giver.” And so on. The etymologically absurdest of terms, may when it has acquired a technical meaning, become perfectly sane and sound. Mr. Watson’s literary effort in sweeping denunciation of “surplus value” is, accordingly, noise, and noise only. “Surplus value” being a technical term in economics, covers a specific thing, and is, as such, perfectly intelligible. Moreover, there is nothing in Mr. Watson’s philologic objections, which we pursue no further because we are not engaged in philology.

But why should Mr. Watson, a personage of literary attainments, be so nervous in his assault of “surplus value” as to misdirect the batteries of his indignant anti-Socialism against the philologic construction of the term, instead of directing them against what the term stands for? The fact is a charming illustration of “class instinct.” Last week the *Daily People* acquitted Mr. Watson of the veiled extortion involved in the capitalist’s appropriation of “surplus value,” by showing that, according to the gentleman’s own statements, he was still a hundred years behind, and practised the unveiled extortion that is the apanage of the feudal junker—lived on taxation. One touch of nature makes all exploiters kin. Hit the junker, and the capitalist will yell—we are seeing the spectacle in Great Britain in the matter of the House of Lords; hit the capitalist, and the junker will shriek—we are seeing the spectacle in Mr. Watson’s department. The term “surplus value” makes Exploiterdom squirm.

What is surplus value?

All desirable things have a quality. The quality of bread is to feed; the quality of clothing is to shelter; the quality of jack-knives is to cut; and so on. Labor-power, a desirable thing like those mentioned, has, like them, a quality of its own. What may that quality be? It is the quality of producing more wealth than, under any imaginable circumstances, it is itself worth, that is, may be required to reproduce it.

He who buys bread pays, normally, the exchange value of the bread, that is, the amount of socially necessary labor crystallized in its production, and, having purchased the bread, enjoys its quality—impartment of food.

He who buys clothing pays, normally, the exchange value of the article, and, having bought that, enjoys its quality—impartment of shelter.

He who buys a jack-knife pays, normally, the thing’s exchange value, and,

having bought it, enjoys its quality—the power to cut.

He who buys labor-power pays, normally, the exchange value of that commodity, and, having bought it, enjoys its quality—the capacity to produce more wealth than paid for.—That excess of wealth is known in economics as “surplus value,” or “surplus wealth.”

At this point economics and sociology merge. From the merger, together with the facts just examined, the conclusion follows—

Either the purchaser of labor-power is, and of right ought to be, and it is folly to deny him the right, entitled to appropriate the fruits of the quality of the purchased merchandise labor-power, on the same principle that he is entitled to enjoy the quality of the purchased bread, clothing and jack-knife;

Or, the purchaser of the merchandise labor-power, although entitled to enjoy the quality of the purchased bread, clothing and jack-knife, is not entitled to appropriate the fruits of the quality of the purchased merchandise labor-power.

One or the other—the decision of which turns upon the nature of the merchandise “labor-power.”

With bread, clothing, jack-knives, as with all other commodities, except one, the goods and the owner, or seller, are distinct beings; the one exception is the commodity labor-power: it is so inter-woven in every muscle, fibre and tissue of its owner that the two are inseparable. When the owner of the commodity labor-power that, it is himself he sells. Thus sociology steps in—

If the first of the above alternatives is to prevail, vesting in the purchaser of labor-power the “surplus value” yielded by his purchase, then it follows that human beings, and a growing majority of the population, at that, can be permanently held down to the status of bread, clothing, jack-knives, etc.;

If the second alternative is to prevail, denying the purchaser of labor-power the “surplus value” yielded by his purchase, then it follows that the appropriation of “surplus value” is extortion, a conclusion that involves the denial of the stability of a social system in which human beings are held in the status of bread, clothing and jack-knives.

The case needs but to be stated, and the secret is forthwith disclosed of why the term “surplus value” gets on the nerves of Mr. Watson, junker though he be.

“Surplus Value” is a term, whose crystallization into shape and sound, is a trumpet blast of the Day of Judgment to the Exploiter.

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