

Chapter II.

Of Unproductive Labor.

§ 1. Definition of Productive and Unproductive Labor.

Labor is indispensable to production, but has not always production for its effect. There is much labor, and of a high order of usefulness, of which production is not the object. Labor has accordingly been distinguished into Productive and Unproductive. Productive labor means labor productive of wealth. We are recalled, therefore, to the question touched upon in our [Preliminary Remarks], what Wealth is.

By Unproductive Labor, on the contrary, will be understood labor which does not terminate in the creation of material wealth. And all labor, according to our present definition, must be classed as unproductive, which terminates in a permanent benefit, however important, provided that an increase of material products forms no part of that benefit. The labor of saving a friend's life is not productive, unless the friend is a productive laborer, and produces more than he consumes.

The principle on which the distinction is made is perfectly clear, but in many cases persons may be misled chiefly in regard to matters of fact. A clergyman may at first sight be classed as an unproductive laborer; but, until we know the facts, we can not apply the principle of our definition. Unless we know that no clergyman, by inculcating rules of morality and self-control, ever caused an idler or wrong-doer to become a steady laborer, we can not say that a clergyman is a laborer unproductive of material wealth. Likewise the army, or the officers of our government at Washington, may or may not have aided in producing material wealth according as they do or do not, in fact, accomplish the protective purposes for which they exist. So with teachers. There is, however, no disparagement implied in the word unproductive; it is merely an economic question, and has to do only with forces affecting the production of wealth.

Unproductive may be as useful as productive labor; it may be more useful, even in point of permanent advantage; or its use may consist only in pleasurable sensation, which when gone leaves no trace; or it may not afford even this, but may be absolute waste. In any case, society or mankind grow no richer by it, but poorer. All material products consumed by any one while he produces nothing are so much subtracted, for the time, from the material products which society would otherwise have possessed.

To be wasted, however, is a liability not confined to unproductive labor. Productive labor may equally be waste, if more of it is expended than really conduces to production. If defect of skill in laborers, or of judgment in those who direct them, causes a misapplication of productive industry, labor is wasted. Productive labor may render a nation poorer, if the wealth it produces, that is, the increase it makes in the stock of useful or agreeable things, be of a kind not immediately wanted: as when a commodity is unsalable, because produced in a quantity beyond the present demand; or when speculators build docks and warehouses before there is any trade.

§ 2. Productive and Unproductive Consumption.

The distinction of Productive and Unproductive is applicable to Consumption as well as to Labor. All the members of the community are not laborers, but all are consumers, and consume either unproductively or productively. Whoever contributes nothing directly or indirectly to production is an unproductive consumer. The only productive consumers are productive laborers; the labor of direction being of course included, as well as that of execution. But the consumption even of productive laborers is not all of it Productive Consumption. There is unproductive consumption by productive consumers. What they consume in keeping up or improving their health, strength, and capacities of work, or in rearing other productive laborers to succeed them, is Productive Consumption. But consumption on pleasures or luxuries, whether by the idle or by the industrious, since production is neither its object nor is in any way advanced by it, must be reckoned

Unproductive: with a reservation, perhaps, of a certain quantum of enjoyment which may be classed among necessities, since anything short of it would not be consistent with the greatest efficiency of labor. That alone is productive consumption which goes to maintain and increase the productive powers of the community; either those residing in its soil, in its materials, in the number and efficiency of its instruments of production, or in its people.

I grant that no labor really tends to the enrichment of society, which is employed in producing things for the use of unproductive consumers. The tailor who makes a coat for a man who produces nothing is a productive laborer; but in a few weeks or months the coat is worn out, while the wearer has not produced anything to replace it, and the community is then no richer by the labor of the tailor than if the same sum had been paid for a stall at the opera. Nevertheless, society has been richer by the labor while the coat lasted. These things also [such as lace and pine-apples] are wealth until they have been consumed.

§ 3. Distinction Between Labor for the Supply of Productive Consumption and Labor for the Supply of Unproductive Consumption.

We see, however, by this, that there is a distinction more important to the wealth of a community than even that between productive and unproductive labor; the distinction, namely, between labor for the supply of productive, and for the supply of unproductive, consumption; between labor employed in keeping up or in adding to the productive resources of the country, and that which is employed otherwise. Of the produce of the country, a part only is destined to be consumed productively; the remainder supplies the unproductive consumption of producers, and the entire consumption of the unproductive class. Suppose that the proportion of the annual produce applied to the first purpose amounts to half; then one half the productive laborers of the country are all that are employed in the operations on which the permanent wealth of the country depends. The other half are occupied from year to year and from generation to generation in producing things which are consumed and disappear without return; and whatever this half consume is as completely lost, as to any permanent effect on the national resources, as if it were consumed unproductively. Suppose that this second half of the laboring population ceased to work, and that the government maintained them in idleness for a whole year: the first half would suffice to produce, as they had done before, their own necessities and the necessities of the second half, and to keep the stock of materials and implements undiminished: the unproductive classes, indeed, would be either starved or obliged to produce their own subsistence, and the whole community would be reduced during a year to bare necessities; but the sources of production would be unimpaired, and the next year there would not necessarily be a smaller produce than if no such interval of inactivity had occurred; while if the case had been reversed, if the first half of the laborers had suspended their accustomed occupations, and the second half had continued theirs, the country at the end of the twelvemonth would have been entirely impoverished. It would be a great error to regret the large proportion of the annual produce, which in an opulent country goes to supply unproductive consumption. That so great a surplus should be available for such purposes, and that it should be applied to them, can only be a subject of congratulation.

This principle may be seen by the following classification:

(A) Idlers; or unproductive laborers--e.g., actors. (B) Productive laborers--e.g., farmers. (C) Producing wealth for productive consumption, one half the annual produce. (D) Producing wealth for unproductive consumption (A), one half the annual produce.

Group D are productive laborers, and their *own necessities* are productively consumed, but they are supplied by C, who keep themselves and D in existence. So long as C work, both C and D can go on producing. If D stopped working, they could be still subsisted as before by C; but A would be forced to produce for themselves. But, if C stopped working, D and C would be left without the necessities of life, and would be obliged to cease their usual work. In this way it may be seen how much more important to the increase of material wealth C are than D, who labor "for the supply of unproductive consumption." Of course, group D

are desirable on other than economic grounds, because their labor represents what can be enjoyed beyond the necessities of life.