

Michail Bakunin

Equal Opportunity in Education

Contents

I	3
II	7

I

The first topic for consideration today is this: will it be feasible for the working masses to know complete emancipation as long as the education available to those masses continues to be inferior to that bestowed upon the bourgeois, or, in more general terms, as long as there exists any class, be it numerous or otherwise, which, by virtue of birth, is entitled to a superior education and a more complete instruction? Does not the question answer itself? Is it not self-evident that of any two persons endowed by nature with roughly equivalent intelligence, one will have the edge — the one whose mind will have been broadened by learning and who, having the better grasped the inter-relationships of natural and social phenomena (what we might term the laws of nature and of society) will the more readily and more fully grasp the nature of his surroundings? And that this one will feel, let us say, a greater liberty and, in practical terms, show a greater aptitude and capability than his fellow? It is natural that he who knows more will dominate him who knows less. And were this disparity of education and education and learning the only one to exist between two classes, would not all the others swiftly follow until the world of men itself in its present circumstances, that is, until it was again divided into a mass of slaves and a tiny number of rulers, the former labouring away as they do today, to the advantage of the latter?

Now we see why the bourgeois socialists demand only a little education for the people, a soupcon more than they currently receive; whereas we socialist democrats demand, on the people's behalf, complete and integral education, an education as full as the power of intellect today permits. So that, henceforth, there may not be any class over the workers by virtue of superior education and therefore able to dominate and exploit them. The bourgeois socialists want to see the retention of the class system each class, they contend, fulfilling a specific social function; one specialising, say, in learning, and the other in manual labour. We, on the other hand, seek the final and the utter abolition of classes; we seek a unification of society and equality of social and economic provision for every individual on this earth. The bourgeois socialists, whilst retaining the historic bases of the society of today, would like to see them become less stark, less harsh and more prettified. Whereas we should like to see their destruction. From which it follows that there can be no truce or compromise, let alone any coalition between the bourgeois socialists and us socialist democrats. But, I have heard it said and this is the argument most frequently raised against us and an argument which the dogmatists of every shade regard as irrefutable — it is impossible that the whole of mankind should devote itself to learning, for we should all die of starvation. Consequently while some study others must labour so that they can

produce what we need to live — not just producing for their own needs, but also for those men who devote themselves exclusively to intellectual pursuits; aside from expanding the horizons of human knowledge, the discoveries of these intellectuals improve the condition of all human beings, without exception, when applied to industry, agriculture and, generally, to political and social life; agreed? And do not their artistic creations enhance the lives of every one of us?

No, not at all. And the greatest reproach which we can level against science and the arts is precisely that they do not distribute their favours and do not exercise their influence, except upon a tiny fragment of society, to the exclusion and, thus, to the detriment of the vast majority. Today one might say of the advances of science and of the arts, just what has already and so properly been said of the prodigious progress of industry, trade, credit, and, in a word, of the wealth of society in the most civilised countries of the modern world. That wealth is quite exclusive, and the tendency is for it to become more so each day, as it becomes concentrated into an ever shrinking number of hands, shunning the lower echelons of the middle class and the petite bourgeoisie, depressing them into the proletariat, so that the growth of this wealth is the direct cause behind the growing misery of the labouring masses. Thus the outcome is that the gulf which yawns between the privileged, contented minority and millions of workers who earn their keep by the strength of their arm yawns ever wider and that the happier the contented — who -exploit the people's labour become the more unhappy the workers become. One has only to look at the fabulous opulence of the aristocratic, financier, commercial and industrial clique in England and compare it with the miserable condition of the workers of the same country; one has only to re-read the so naive and heartrending letter lately penned by an intelligent and upright goldsmith of London, one Walter Dugan, who has just voluntarily taken poison along with his wife and their six children, simply as a means of escape from the degradation's of poverty and the torments of hunger (1) — and one will find oneself obliged to concede that the much vaunted civilisation means, in material terms, to the people, only oppression and ruination. And the same holds true for the modern advances of science and the arts. Huge strides, indeed, it is true But the greater the advances, the more they foster intellectual servitude and thus, in material terms, foster misery and inferiority as the lot of the people; for these advances merely widen the gulf which already separates the people's level of understanding from the levels of the privileged classes. From the point of view of natural capacity, the intelligence of the former is, today, obviously less stunted, less exercised, less sophisticated and less corrupted by the need to defend unjust interests, and is, consequently, naturally of greater potency than the brain power of the bourgeoisie: but, then again, the brain power of the bourgeois does have at its disposal the complete arsenal of science filled with weapons that are indeed

formidable. It is very often the case that a highly intelligent worker is obliged to hold his tongue when confronted by a learned fool who defeats him, not by dint of intellect (of which he has none) but by dint of his education, an education denied the workingman but granted the fool because, while the fool was able to develop his foolishness scientifically in schools, the working man's labours were clothing, housing, feeding him and supplying his every need, his teachers and his books, everything necessary to his education.

Even within the bourgeois class, as we know only too well, the degree of learning imparted to each individual is not the same. There, too, there is a scale which is determined, not by the potential of the individual but by the amount of wealth of the social stratum to which he belongs by birth; for example, the instruction made available to the children of the lower petite bourgeoisie, whilst itself scarcely superior to that which workers manage to obtain for themselves, is next to nothing by comparison with the education that society makes readily available to the upper and middle bourgeoisie. What, then, do we find? The petite bourgeoisie, whose only attachment to the middle class is through a ridiculous vanity on the one hand, and its dependence upon the big capitalists on the other, finds itself most often in circumstances even more miserable and even more humiliating than those which afflict the proletariat. So when we talk of privileged classes, we never have in mind this poor petite bourgeoisie which, if it did but have a little more spirit and gumption, would not delay in joining forces with us to combat the big and medium bourgeoisie who crush it today no less than they crush the proletariat. And should society's current economic trends continue in the same direction for a further ten years (which we do, however, regard as impossible) we may yet see the bulk of the medium bourgeoisie tumble first of all into the current circumstances of the petite bourgeoisie only to slip a little later into the proletariat — as a result, of course, of this inevitable concentration of ownership into an ever smaller number of hands — the ineluctable consequences of which would be to partition society once and for all into a tiny, overweeningly opulent, educated, ruling minority and a vast majority of impoverished, ignorant, enslaved proletarians.

There is one fact which should make an impression upon every person of conscience, upon all who have at heart a concern for human dignity and justice; that is, for the liberty of each individual amid and through a setting of equality for all. That is the fact that all of the intelligentsia, all of the great applications of science to the purpose of industry, trade and to the life of society in general have thus far profited no one, save the privileged classes and the power of the State, that timeless champion of all political and social iniquity. Never, not once, have they brought any benefit to the masses of the people. We need only list the machines and every workingman and honest advocate of the emancipation of

labour would accept the justice of what we say. By what power do the privileged classes maintain themselves today, with all their insolent smugness and iniquitous pleasures, in defiance of the all too legitimate outrage felt by the masses of the people? Is it by some power inherent in their persons? No — it is solely through the power of the State, in whose apparatus today their offspring hold, always, every key position (and even every lower and middle range position) excepting that of soldier and worker. And in this day and age what is it that constitutes the principle underlying the power of the State? Why, it is science. Yes, science — Science of government, science of administration and financial science; the science of fleecing the flocks of the people without their bleating too loudly and, when they start to bleat, the science of urging silence, patience and obedience upon them by means of a scientifically organised force: the science of deceiving and dividing the masses of the people and keeping them allays in a salutary ignorance lest they ever become able, by helping one another and pooling their efforts, to conjure up a power capable of overturning States; and, above all, military science with all its tried and tested weaponry, these formidable instruments of destruction which ‘work wonders’ (2): and lastly, the science of genius which has conjured up steamships, railways and telegraphy which, by turning every government into a hundred armed, a thousand armed Briareos (3), giving it the power to be, act and arrest everywhere at once — has brought about the most formidable political centralisation the world has ever witnessed.

Who, then, will deny that, without exception, all of the advances made by science have thus far brought nothing, save a boosting of the wealth of the privileged classes and of the power of the State, to the detriment of the well-being and liberty of the masses of the people, of the proletariat? But, we will hear the objection, do not the masses of the people profit by this also? Are they not much more civilised in this society of ours than they were in the societies of bygone centuries?

We shall reply to that with an observation borrowed from the noted German socialist, Lassalle. In measuring the progress made by the working masses, in terms of their political and social emancipation, one should not compare their intellectual state in this century with what it may have been in centuries gone by. Instead, one ought to consider whether, by comparison with some given time, the gap which then existed between the working masses and the privileged classes having been noted, the masses have progressed to the same extent as these privileged classes. For, if the progress made by both has been roughly equivalent, the intellectual gap which separates the masses from the privileged in today’s world will be the same as it ever was; but if the proletariat has progressed further and more rapidly than the privileged, then the gap must necessarily have narrowed; but if, on the other hand, the worker’s rate of progress has been slower

and, consequently, less than that of a representative of the ruling classes over the same period, then that gap will have grown. The gulf which separates them will have increased and the man of privilege grown more powerful and the worker's circumstances more abject, more slave like than at the date one chose as the point of departure. If the two of us set off from two different points at the same time and you have a lead of one hundred paces over me and you move at a rate of sixty paces per minute, and I at only thirty paces per minute, then after one hour the distance which separates us will not be just over one hundred paces, but just over one thousand nine hundred paces.

That example gives a roughly accurate notion of the respective advances made by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Thus far the bourgeoisie has raced along the track of civilisation at a quicker rate than the proletariat, not because they are intellectually more powerful than the latter indeed one might properly argue the contrary case — but because the political and economic organisation of society has been such that, hitherto, the bourgeoisie alone have enjoyed access to learning and science has existed only for them, and the proletariat has found itself doomed to a forced ignorance, so that if the proletariat has, nevertheless, made progress (and there is no denying it has) then that progress was made not thanks to society, but rather in spite of it. To sum up. In society as presently constituted, the advances of science have been at the root of the relative ignorance of the proletariat, just as the progress of industry and commerce have been at the root of its relative impoverishment. Thus, intellectual progress and material progress have contributed in equal measure towards the exacerbation of the slavery of the proletariat. Meaning what? Meaning that we have a duty to reject and resist that bourgeois science, just as we have a duty to reject and resist bourgeois wealth. And reject and resist them in this sense — that in destroying the social order which turns it into the preserve of one or of several classes, we must lay claim to it as the common inheritance of all the world.

L'Égalité, 31 July 1869

II

We have shown how, as long as there are two or more degrees of instruction for the various strata of society, there must, of necessity, be classes, that is, economic and political privilege for a small number of the contented and slavery and misery for the lot of the generality of men.

As members of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA/AIT), we seek equality and, because we seek it, we must also seek integral education, the same education for everyone.

But if everyone is schooled who will want to work? we hear someone ask. Our answer to that is a simple one: everyone must work and everyone must receive education. To this, it is very often objected that this mixing of industrial with intellectual labour cannot be, except one or the other suffer by it. The manual workers will make poor scholars, and the scholars will never be more than quite pathetic workers. True, in the society of today where manual labour and intellectual labour are equally distorted by the quite artificial isolation in which both are kept. But we are quite persuaded that in the rounded human being, each of these pursuits, the muscular and the nervous, must be developed in equal measure and that far from being inimical each must lean upon, enhance and reinforce the other. The science of the sage will become more fruitful, more useful and more expansive when the sage is no longer a stranger to manual labour, and the labours of the workmen, when he is educated, will be more intelligent and thus more productive than those of an ignorant workman. From which it follows that, for work's sake as much as for the sake of science, there must no longer be this division into workers and scholars and henceforth there must be only men.

The result of this is that those men who are today, on account of their superior intellects, caught up in the ivory towers of science and who, once they have established themselves in this world, yield to the need for a thoroughly bourgeois position and bend their every invention to the exclusive use of the privileged class to which they themselves belong. These men, I say, once they become truly the fellows of everyone, fellows not just in their imagination nor just in their speech but in fact, in their work, will just as necessarily convert their inventions and applications of their learning to the benefit of all, and especially apply themselves to the task of making work (the basis, the only real and rightful basis of human society) lighter and more dignified.

It is quite possible and, indeed, likely that during the period of fairly lengthy transition which will, naturally, succeed the great crisis of society, the loftiest sciences will fall considerably below their current levels. Equally, it is not to be doubted that luxury and everything constituting the refinements of life will have to disappear from the social scene for quite a long time and will not be able to reappear as the exclusive amusements of a few, but will have to return as ways of dignifying life for everybody, and then only once society has conquered need in all of us. But would this temporary eclipse of the lofty sciences be such a misfortune? Whatever science may lose in terms of sublime elevation, will it not win through the extension of its base? Doubtless there will be fewer illustrious sages, but at the same time there will be fewer ignoramuses too. There will be no more of these men who can touch the skies, but, on the other hand, millions of men who may be degraded and crushed today will be able to tread the earth as human beings: no demigods, but no slaves either. Both the slave and the demigods will achieve

human-ness, the one by rising a lot, the other by stooping a little. Thus no longer will there be a place for deification, nor for contumely. Everyone will shake hands with his neighbour and, once reunited, we shall all march with a new spring in our steps, onwards to new conquests, in the realm of science as in the realm of life itself.

So, far from having any misgivings about that eclipse of science – which will be in any case only a fleeting one we ought to call for it with all our powers since its effect will be to humanise both scholar and manual labourer and to reconcile science and life. And we are convinced that, once we have achieved this new foundation, the progress of mankind, in the realm of science as elsewhere in life, will very quickly outstrip everything that we have seen and everything we might conjure up in our imaginations today. But here another question crops up: will every individual have an equal capacity for absorbing education to the same degree? Let us imagine a society organised along the most egalitarian lines, a society in which children will, from birth onwards, start out with the same circumstances economically, socially and politically, which is to say the same upkeep, the same education, the same instruction: among these thousands of tiny individuals will there not be an infinite variety of enthusiasms, natural inclinations and aptitudes?

Such is the big argument advanced by our adversaries, the bourgeois pure and simple, and the bourgeois socialists as well. They imagine it to be unanswerable. So let us try to prove the opposite. Well, to begin with, by what right do they make their stand for the principle of individual capabilities? Is there room for the development of capabilities in society as at present constituted? Can there be room for that development in a society which continues to have the right of inheritance as its foundation? Self-evidently not; for, from the moment that the right of inheritance applies, the career of children will never be determined by their individual gifts and application: it will be determined primarily by their economic circumstances, by the wealth or poverty of their families. Wealthy but empty-headed heirs will receive a superior education; the most intelligent children of the proletariat will receive ignorance as their inheritance, just as happens at present. So, is it not hypocritical, when speaking not only of society as it is today but even of a reformed society which would still have as its fundamentals private property ownership and the right of inheritance – Is it not sordid sophistry to talk about individual rights based on individual capabilities? There is such a lot of talk today of individual liberty, yet what prevails is not the individual person, nor the individual in general, but the individual upon whom privilege is conferred by his social position. Thus what counts is position and class. Just let one intelligent individual from the ranks of the bourgeoisie dare to take a stand against the economic privileges of that respectable class and you will see how much these

good bourgeois, forever prattling about individual liberty today, respect his liberty as an individual Don't talk to us about individual abilities! Is it not an everyday thing for us to see the greatest abilities of working men and bourgeois forced to give way and even to kowtow before the crass stupidity of the heirs to the golden calf? Individual liberty — not privileged liberty but human liberty, and the real potential of individuals — will only be able to enjoy full expansion in a regime of complete equality. When there exists an equality of origins for all men on this earth then, and only then (with safeguards, of course, for the superior calls of fellowship or solidarity, which is and ever shall remain the greatest producer of all social phenomena, from human intelligence to material wealth) only then will one be able to say, with more reason than one can today, that every individual is a self-made man. Hence our conclusion is that, if individual talents are to prosper and no longer be thwarted in bringing forth their full fruits, the first precondition is that all individual privileges, economic as well as political, must disappear, which is to say that all class distinctions must be abolished. That requires that private property rights and the rights of inheritance must go, and equality must triumph economically, politically and socially.

But once equality has triumphed and is well established, will there be no longer any difference in the talents and degree of application of the various individuals? There will be a difference, not so many as exist today, perhaps, but there will always be differences. Of that there can be no doubt. This is a proverbial truth which will probably never cease to be true — that no tree ever brings forth two leaves that are exactly identical. How much more will this be true of men, men being much more complicated creatures than leaves. But such diversity, far from constituting an affliction is, as the German philosopher Feuerbach has forcefully noted, one of the assets of mankind. Thanks to it, the human race is a collective whole wherein each human being complements the rest and has need of them; so that this infinite variation in human beings is the very cause and chief basis of their solidarity — an important argument in favour of equality.

Basically, even in today's society, if one excepts two categories of men — men of genius and idiots — and provided one abstracts conjured up artificially through the influence of a thousand social factors such as education, instruction, economic and political status which create differences not merely within each social stratum, but in almost every family unit, one will concede that from the point of view of intellectual gifts and moral energy the vast majority of men are very much alike or, at least, are worth about the same — weakness in one regard being almost always counterbalanced by an equivalent strength in another, so that it becomes impossible to say whether one man chosen from this mass is much the superior or the inferior of his neighbour. The vast majority of men are not identical but equivalent and thus equal.

Which means that the line of argument pursued by our adversaries is left with nothing but the geniuses and the idiots.

As we know, idiocy is a psychological and social affliction. Thus, it should be treated not in the schools but in the hospitals and one is entitled to expect that a more rational system of social hygiene — above all, one that cares more for the physical and moral well-being of the individual than the current system — will some day be introduced and that together with a new society organised along egalitarian lines it will eventually eradicate from the surface of the earth this affliction of idiocy, such a humiliation to the human race. As for the men of genius, one should note first of all that, happily or unhappily, according to one's main point of view, such men have not featured in the history of mankind except as the extremely rare exceptions to all of the rules known to us and one cannot organise to cater for exceptions. Even so, it is our hope that the society of the future will be able to discover, through a truly practical popular organisation of its collective assets the means by which to render such geniuses less necessary, less intimidating and more truly the benefactors of us all. For we must never lose sight of Voltaire's great dictum: 'There is someone with more wit than the greatest geniuses, and that is everyone'. So it is merely a question of organising this everyone for the sake of the fullest liberty rooted in the most complete economic, political and social equality, and one need no longer fear the dictatorial ambitions and despotic inclinations of the men of genius.

As for turning out such men of genius through education, one ought to banish the thought from one's mind. Moreover, of all the men of genius we have known thus far, none or almost none ever displayed their genius while yet in their childhood, nor in their adolescence nor yet in their early youth. Only in their mature years did they ever reveal themselves geniuses and several were not recognised as such until after their death whereas many supposedly great men having had their praises sung while youths by better men have finished their careers in the most absolute obscurity. So it is never in the childhood years, nor even in the adolescent years that one can discern and determine the comparative excellencies and shortcomings of men, nor the extent of their talents, nor their inborn aptitudes. All of these things only become obvious and are governed by the development of the individual person and, just as there are some natures precocious and some very slow — although the latter are by no means inferior and, indeed, are often superior — so no schoolmaster will ever be in a position to specify in advance the career or nature of the occupations which his charges will choose once they attain the age when they have the freedom to choose.

From which it follows that society, disregarding any real or imagined differences in aptitudes or abilities and possessed of no means of determining these

in any event and of no right to allot the future career of children owes them all,
without a single exception, an absolutely equal education and instruction.

L'Égalité, August 14 1869

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



Michail Bakunin
Equal Opportunity in Education
1869

Retrieved on February 24th, 2009 from flag.blackened.net