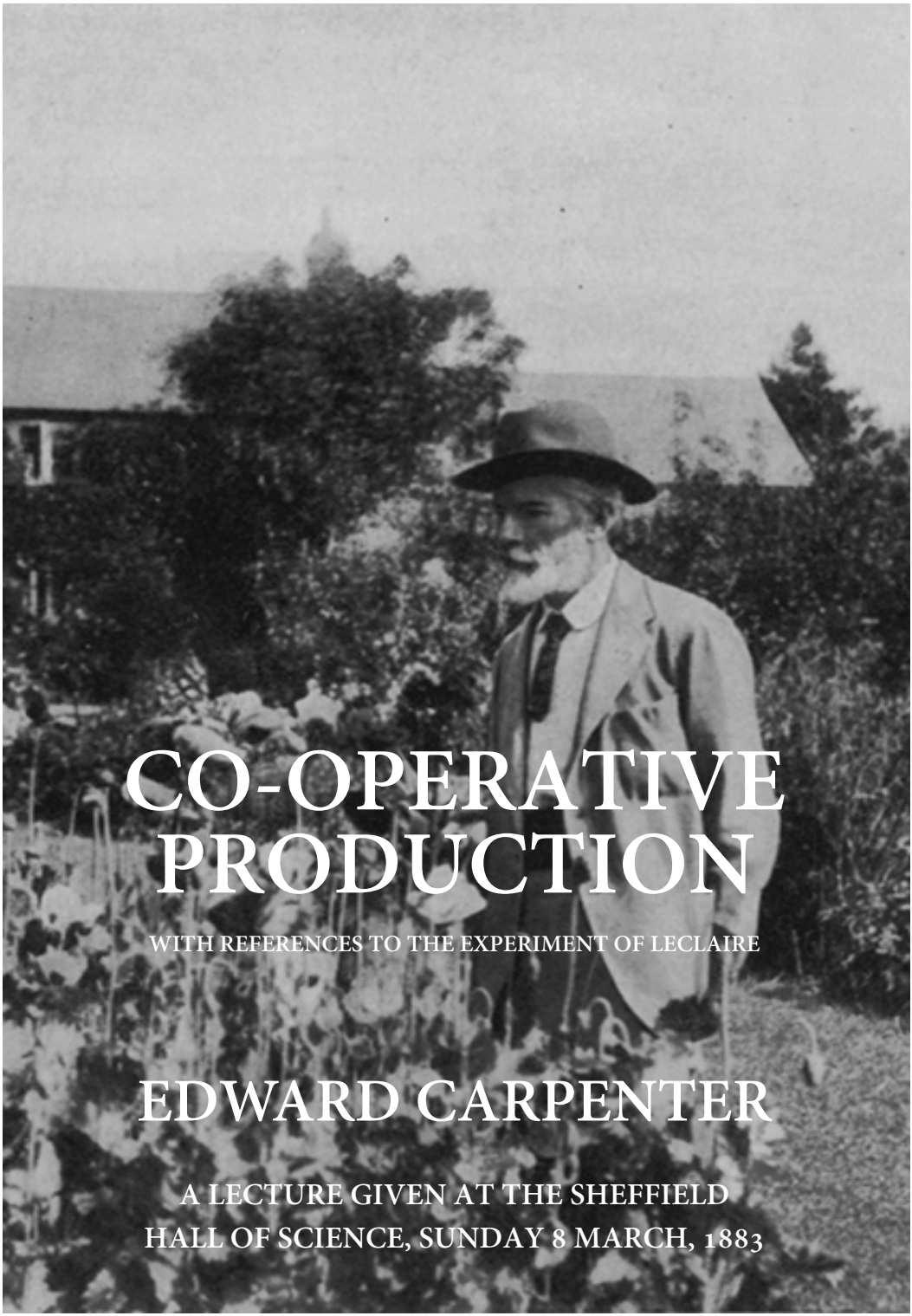

CO-OPERATIVE PRODUCTION

WITH REFERENCES TO THE EXPERIMENT OF LECLAIRE

EDWARD CARPENTER

A LECTURE GIVEN AT THE SHEFFIELD
HALL OF SCIENCE, SUNDAY 8 MARCH, 1883

CO-OPERATIVE PRODUCTION

by Edward Carpenter

Principle 5 Pamphlet No: 2

Published in 2021 by:
Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre
Aizlewood's Mill
Nursery Street
Sheffield
S3 8GG

Principle FIVE P5

Co-operative Production: With References to the Experiment of Leclaire was published as a pamphlet by John Heywood of Manchester, 1883.

The cover photograph is of Edward Carpenter, in his garden at Millthorpe.

Printed by Footprint Workers Co-operative, 16 Back Sholebroke Avenue, Leeds, LS7 3HB

PREFACE

The year 1882 was a pivotal year for Edward Carpenter. Following the death of this father, Carpenter decided that his career as an adult education lecturer was "over and done with". Desiring a life of manual work rather than "arm-chair intellectualising" he decided to use his inheritance to set himself up as a market gardener. "I felt the need directly and instinctively," he later explained "...not as a thing argued out and intellectually concluded... My thought was my own need." Scouring the countryside around Sheffield through the winter of 1882 and early 1883, he eventually settled on Millthorpe, near Chesterfield. His new home was completed by October 1883.

It was this process which sparked Carpenter's interest in co-operation. In "Co-operative Production", presented as a lecture at the Sheffield Hall of Science on Sunday, March 1883, Carpenter despaired at the current state of capitalist production, taking solace in the belief that the co-operative economy, as seen on the continent, could encourage high quality work. He used examples from the life-story of Edme-Jean Leclaire, who insisted on high quality workmanship in the contracts undertaken by his Parisian building company and had established a Society of Mutual Aid, an early example of profit sharing. The British, naturally slow to adopt new ideas, had much to learn from the Continent.

In later life, Carpenter grew wary about the trend in the socialist movement towards centralisation and bureaucracy. In a 1901 interview for *Co-operative News* he expressed hope that the "present industrial system would soon give place to a freer and more human social arrangement". In the early years of the movement to reform capitalism, "the Socialist State, with its dangers of bureaucracy and over-government" had seemed "the only way out of our present evils." Now however, Carpenter felt that worker managed co-operatives could build an alternative economic system that would work for all. Workers would take more pleasure in their vocations, just as they did in the co-operative societies and before those, under the craft guild system. Co-operative production held within it the potential to transform British society for the better.

- Sheffield, September 2021

THE HALL OF SCIENCE
ROCKINGHAM STREET
SHEFFIELD

‘Lectures are delivered every Sunday Evening, developing the principles on which to establish Home Colonies, which are the only remedy for the numerous evils that are now afflicting all classes of the community, and by which a proper direction will be given to machinery, which is now “a fiend to the poor,” and will then be “a beneficient angel.”

- *Sheffield Iris* - Tuesday 05 April 1842.

CO-OPERATIVE PRODUCTION
by Edward Carpenter

A Lecture Given at the Hall of Science, Sheffield
Sunday, March 18, 1883

The widespread presentiment of change which hovers like a cloud over our modern world – and which makes us feel that our present social and political forms, our customs, our religions even are in a state of transition, that they are not permanent but are leading forward to something perhaps more permanent in the future – this presentiment of change, I say, is in nothing more strongly felt than in the relations of Capital and Labour. These relations are in the present day so monstrous, so unnatural, so productive of manifold evil and suffering that it is felt to be impossible that they should continue; the only question is to what new form will they give place?

At this vast problem, what I may call 'Underground Europe' is working – that Europe which though it is comparatively unrepresented in our governments, though it is almost unexpressed in our newspapers, though it is ignored by the higher forms of society, is really the great active undercurrent of our modern life, and the source from which the forms of the future will spring. Nihilists in Russia, socialists in Germany, communists in the United States and in France, land-leaguers in Ireland, and in every place those who favour Co-operation, are essentially – however different their modes of work and the ground which they cover – working at this same problem: the problem namely, how to enfranchise Labour, how to give it it's just and equal rights in the face of Capital and how to bring it face to face and into direct contact with the land – the source of all production.

Certainly, you will all agree that nothing can be more desperate than the present evil. Every man who has done honest work knows that such

work is a pleasure – one of the greatest pleasures in life. Though it was pronounced as a curse upon Adam that "in the sweat of his brow he should eat bread," yet we must conclude that the force of evolution acting through centuries to adapt man to his environment has transmuted the curse into something like a blessing! For there is no doubt now that true Labour, rightly done, is a blessing and not a curse. In fact, to use your skill and your strength in producing that which is beneficial to yourself and to others, to look back afterwards on the work of your own hands, to see that as far as may be it has been well done, that it will serve its time and the purpose for which it was intended – these things in themselves cannot but be a pleasure. When we consider moreover that under existing conditions, a third of life at least is given to Labour, it becomes obvious to us that if such Labour might not be pleasurable life would indeed be a poor thing, and the question "Is life worth living" really worth asking.

But it does not surely require a great effort of imagination to picture to ourselves a state of things in which this idea should be realised. It does not, I say, require a great effort to picture to ourselves an island say – in some far sea – where the inhabitants favoured by a genial soil and climate are able to produce for themselves all that is necessary for their subsistence. Blessed with a tolerably contented disposition and simple tastes these good people find that their wants are few and that a few hours' Labour a day are amply sufficient to provide them collectively with all they need. Not being therefore hurried in their work they are able to do it thoroughly well and to enjoy all the more in consequence the doing of it. And not being hurried they are able to see to it that the conditions under which they work are favourable to heath, both of body and soul – that they are neither painful nor degrading. On the contrary each man as he rises in the morning looks forward with agreeable sentiments to the Labour of the day, and a fair amount of neighbourliness and mutual helpfulness among the inhabitant contribute to make this island a pleasant scene of harmonious and peaceful activity. It does not, I say, require a much-exaggerated effort of the imagination to picture such a state of affairs. Nor have I the least doubt that in its main outlines it has been realised over and over again in the past that it is realised in the present day in many parts of the globe.

Well, Great Britain is an island. It enjoys, whatever its detractors may say, a fair climate – the best perhaps for open air work in the world – and a varied and productive soil. Yet glance over this land today and what a

contrast to the picture I have just drawn! Go into any factory in Sheffield: and what do you see? I will tell you. You see depressed gloomy faces, pallid features, stunted sickly forms – on all sides' dirt, and thick polluted air – you see scrambling, hurried work, badly done, deceptively done, you see deception and hatred between workman and employer. I ask you, is it possible that there can be any pleasure in work here? It is impossible. Not long ago I was in a nailmaker's shop in Sheffield – they were making horse nails 2 ½ inches long or so. The operation requires some little skill. The nailmaker takes his rod heated from the fire and hammers it on an anvil, till he has drawn the end out into a long point; with two or three blows on a certain part of the anvil he fashions the head, and with a couple more blows with another instrument he severs the nail from the rod, and casts it on a heap with others, returning the rod to the fire and taking out another already heated in its place.

You would not perhaps think a minute too much for this operation. Probably it is not, to perform it well. But if the nailmaker were to make only one nail a minute he would not be able to earn sufficient to support himself and family. He therefore makes one in half a minute. By dint of scrambling through his work and not being very particular how it is done he finds he can just manage this. A thousand times a day does this wretched man scramble through this one operation – and this is the Labour of his life, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. I ask you, what sort of scramble is this to form the life of a human being? What sort of training is this for body and soul? Whither does it naturally tend – except to the beershop?

Many of you are familiar with the interior of file-cutters' shops in this neighbourhood. You know the file-cutter sits on a high stool, bending with cramped spine and contracted chest over a bench on which his file is bedded – in lead. The poisonous lead dust flies all about the shop. In his hand he holds a hammer, sometimes 7lbs, or 9lbs, in weight, with which be repeated blows on a chisel held between the thumb and fingers of the left hand he cuts the teeth of the file. The trade is soon learnt; it is not well paid; women often work at it. To make a living you must cut from fifty thousand to one hundred and fifty thousand teeth a day, each with a sharp blow of your hammer. There is no variety, or change; each blow is like the last.

What wonder if to the evils of a cramped contracted body, and lead poi-

soning, are added frequent paralysis of the thumb and wrist of the left hand, which holds the chisel, and sometimes also I believe of the other arm and shoulder. And this is the life to which a whole useful section of the community is condemned to which it partly condemns itself. Yet there is nothing necessarily evil in file cutting. The conditions might be improved, and the monotony of the work obviated by seeing to it that each man took part in the other processes of making, tempering and hardening as well as in the cutting.

Let me take another instance. An important branch in carriage works is the painting. The coach-painters' shop is large, roomy and well lighted; in it a number of painters are at work on various carriages. On entering you are met by a stifling atmosphere laden with the warm poison-smell of paints and varnishes. You wonder that a man can do a single day's work in such a place; you do not wonder that his life is shortened, and disease rapidly induced by continuance in it. But why is there no ventilation! There are plenty of windows – why is there not one open? Because if one window were open ever so little, even only enough to provide air for one man – or if a system of ventilation were organised (as might easily be done) to supply the whole shop on the most approved principles – still even with all care, a little dust – not much, but a little – would be sure to get in. And for this little dust many men must be sacrificed. In order that grand people may drive about in carriages stainless of any speck, other people (not so grand, but possibly more useful) must spend their lives under conditions which take all heart and enjoyment out of their Labour, and which threaten them continually with disease and premature death. Mind, there is no one who thinks more of perfect and stainless work than I do; and I would be the last to encourage bad and slovenly work. But surely the cost at which these carriages are painted is rather too great.

Meanwhile the Capitalist – we have spoken of the Labourer – does the Capitalist have any pleasure in his work, does he encourage good work? On the contrary he winks at the bad so long as it sells. That is his one standard. Nor do I blame him – for he is engaged in a tremendous battle, a fratricidal battle in which every other consideration must be sacrificed. What a curious spectacle is this! When we organise a military force, it has a duty to fulfil. Its captains have to lead it against the common enemy and drive him from our shores.

So, when a nation organises a great industrial army, it has a duty to fulfil.

What is that? It has to win for the nation those products of toil which are necessary for its use; it has to drive the common enemies of Poverty and Hunger from the nation's shores. What should we say if in that other army the captains instead of allying with each other against the invader, turned their regiments against each other and engaged in a fierce and fratricidal battle? Yet this is exactly what our captains of industry do – turning their forces against each other to cripple and maim in every possible way, and absolutely allying themselves with poverty and hunger their friends, nor ever so well pleased as when these make prices high for them.

To carry out this warfare, they go to enormous expense – all wasted. For this, hundreds of thousands of pounds spent in advertisements – all wasted; for this, the Labour of thousands of commercial travellers – all wasted; for whatever one firm gains by its advertisements, its travellers, another firm inevitably loses. For this, rubbishy articles poured out upon the market, all wasted, cast away almost as soon as bought; for this, wages rammed down to the lowest pittance which will support life. It is a fight for life or death, that the Capitalist is engaged in, and for this all honour, all justice and equity, every sentiment of pity, gentleness, common humanity even, must be sacrificed.

Meanwhile someone makes a great discovery. Some Capitalist, more ingenious and less scrupulous than his fellows, makes the great discovery that he can carry on his firm almost practically speaking, without paying any wages. He finds that with the aid of machinery and one or two experienced workmen as overlookers, he can for the rest get on by employing only boys and girls. These receive a merely nominal wage for their work. As apprentices (the boys at least) they are supposed, in consideration of the low wages, to be taught the trade. But, as you know, in the present day, they are not taught. Instead of being carried on through all the operations of the trade, a boy is taught one operation, and kept to that.

It is quickly learnt; his work thus is most remunerative to the employer; his employer, in fact steals the extra advantage; and the boy loses it. He grows up; and at the age of 21, when he should know his trade well, he is an untaught and crippled workman; and then – when he should in increased wages be reaping the fruits of his years of apprenticeship – he is turned away to make room for another boy in his place!

Delightful, is it not? The ingenious grinder of bodies and souls can now

produce an article at less cost than before; he can undersell other Capitalists; and they, willing or not, are forced to adopt the same treacherous and wicked practices as he. Such is the result of our present wretched system of production which as far as I can see, leaves no choice to humane and just-minded Capitalists (of whom there are many) but to level them down to the standard of the most unscrupulous and degraded among their body. What a spectacle does all this present? Half-taught boys and girls doing half the work of the country – scrambling through it amid dirt and ill-health; vast mud-floods of rubbish poured out over the land, adulteration and deception in everything; Capitalists flying at each other's throats, intent only to kill and slay one another, shareholders screaming for dividends, regardless how they are got; able-bodied men and women on tramp up and down the country, unable to obtain employment – complaints of insufficient work in every direction – and all the while the land – the source of all production – staring them in the face, half-cultivated, undrained, uncared for, reverting to ruin and to waste!

From this miserable picture let us turn to something more hopeful. That such a state of things should continue is impossible. It is sufficient to say that it must not, and it shall not be. Underground Europe, as I have said, is working at this vast problem – has been working at it for some time. There have been many trials already, for the establishment of a better system, many failures, many successes too. But we must not expect so great a matter to be worked out all at once. The revolution of the industrial organisation of society may perhaps take centuries to complete itself. When nature creates a new species among the animals it appears that she throws out thousands of tentative forms before one arises that is fitted to survive and supplant the old; and so when it is a question of a new form of society shall we not expect that there shall be many tentative, many failures, a long period of evolution, before the forms (be they one or many) of the future are finally produced and established?

It is not my purpose, however, in the present lecture, to present you with anything like a history of men's efforts, so far, in this direction. I desire rather, out of many successful experiments in Co-operation, to single out just one – one that has been talked about a good deal lately – that namely of Leclaire – as an example for our encouragement and instruction, and to show (what cannot now be doubted) that success in this direction is abundantly possible.

Leclaire was born – of poor parentage – in the year 1801, in Central France. His father was a shoemaker, but Leclaire did not learn the trade. He received a poor education, and to the end of his life was not a good scholar. At the age of 17 he left home to try his fortune in Paris, and there after a time became apprenticed to a house painter. He got on well, saved a little money, married when he was 22, and at the age of 26 was able to set up in business for himself.

He struck out boldly from the first. Leclaire had a "royal" mind –straight and true. From the first he went on the principle of good wages and good work. He determined that all the work connected with his firm should be thoroughly well done, and to arrive at this he saw it was necessary to employ good workmen well paid. He did so, and the result justified his expectations. He became known and sought out. The government officials employed him, and by the year 1835 he had realised a neat little fortune.

It was then that he actually (is it not surprising?) set himself to solve the problem of Co-operation. Finding that he had amply sufficient for his own wants and those of his small household (for he had no children) he actually, instead of spending the rest of his life in the accumulation of more (to him) useless money, set about trying to better the condition of the men connected with his firm. And I must say it surprises me to think that out of the hundreds and thousands of Capitalists who at one time or another have been similarly situated to Leclaire, there have been so few – so very few – to whom it has occurred to follow a similar course. Let us however do all honour to his noble wife who instead of drawing him back, as so many would have done, with all manner of petty and domestic doubts, urged him generously forward, and was to the end his trusted and helpful counsellor in his great enterprise.

The form in which the problem presented itself to him is expressed in the following paragraph.[1] "I asked myself," said Leclaire, "could a workman in our business by putting more heart into his work produce in the same lapse of time – i.e., a day – a surplus of work equivalent to the value of an hour's pay, i.e., 6d? Could he, besides, save 2½ a day by avoiding all waste of the materials entrusted to him, and by taking greater care of his tools?' Everyone would answer he could. Well then, if a single workman could arrive at the result of realising for the benefit of the concern an

1 Quoted from Mr. W. H. Hall's pamphlet on Leclaire, published by the Central Co-operative Board, Manchester.

additional 8½d a day, in 300 working days that would amount to a gain of £10. 4s. 2d. per man, or upwards of £3,000 a year in a business like Leclaire's, which at the time employed 300 men on the average. Here would be a handsome profit to be shared with his men and gained as it were out of nothing.'"[2]

In 1838 then Leclaire took his first step in this direction by establishing what he called a Mutual Help Association. This was practically a benefit club (with a subscription of 1s. 8d. a month) which provided not only medical attendance but reading rooms and education facilities, and ultimately became in its corporate capacity a partner in the firm. In 1840 Leclaire held a meeting of workmen interested in the subject, to discuss certain plans of Co-operation, and in 1842 another meeting was organised for carrying these into practice; but this latter was vetoed by the Police who thought they scented Socialism somewhat strongly! Leclaire however, who saw it was necessary above all things to convince his workmen that his scheme was practical, took a bag of gold one day containing £475 and divided it among a number, 44, of his workmen who were in favour of his plans. In the next year, 1843, calculating again on the basis of his profits for the year, he divided £490 among 44 men. The effect was irresistible. In 1844 there was £788 to divide amongst 82, and from that time forward large bonuses were every year divided, the average value of these during the last decade, 1870-80, having been as much as 15% on the total wages earned.

It was about the year 1842 that Leclaire also published some pamphlets on the Tricks of the Trade. Having determined in his own mind that all the work connected with his firm should be thoroughly good and honest,

2 The 500 employees of a Newark (New Jersey) firm which does a large business in the manufacture of fertilisers were pleasantly surprised the other day by the distribution among them of sums of money, ranging from $1,000 for the three most responsible persons to $7 for the lowest grade of labourers. The money represented a certain percentage of the earnings during 1882, which the firm decided a year ago to divide among their hands annually thereafter, according to the skill and value of their labour. Alfred and Edwin Lister, who compose this firm, are canny Scotchmen, and they adopt this system from motives of business quite as much as from philanthropic impulses, believing that their employees will do enough better work to make up for the sum required if they know that they are virtually sharers in the profits of the manufacture. The only wonder is that more of our shrewd businessmen do not appreciate the wisdom of such a policy." –Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, February 3rd, 1883. New York.

and seeing that in that case it would have to compete at a disadvantage with much dishonest and superficial work commonly done, he set himself about to esponse some of the false practices current in his trade (as they are current in every trade), yet which were then unknown to the general public. Was ever such a thing done before by a man engaged in business? Imagine the sensation it produced, and the indignation of his competitors in the same trade – who attacked him in return with all manner of calumnious accusations, and doubtless were the cause of police interference with his plans!

There was another point to which Leclaire turned his attention, and which must not be passed over. He saw with grief and exceedingly injurious effect which the white of lead used in painting had upon his workmen. He could not rest till he had investigated the subject. With the aid of a chemist, he went into it thoroughly, and the result was the discovery of a similar preparation, the white of zinc, which is perfectly innocuous, and which Leclaire substituted the other thenceforward throughout his firm. Now I think I hear someone saying, "Ah, but the white of zinc is not so good, is not so durable, as the white of lead!" Well, that is just the point that I want to face. I do not know enough of the subject to have any opinion of my own. Perhaps someone here can supply some practical information. But let us suppose for a moment that the white of zinc is not so durable, let us suppose that with this preparation a house has to be painted, say, once in four years, to once in five the other way, still the question in my mind to whether for the sake of this gain we have any right to sacrifice a whole useful class of the community, to shorten their lives and to render their daily work penal and repulsive to them.[3] Or, rather, there is no question about it in my mind. Nor does there seem to have been any question in Leclaire's, for he banished the poisonous material; and it is reported, I am glad to say, that in Paris the white of zinc is now used in 75% of house painting jobs.

Thus, for many years Leclaire kept on working at and elaborating his scheme of Co-operation. He granted large subventions to the Mutual Help Association, and in 1860 made its Capital up to £4,000. This was

3 As a matter of fact, the contrary seems to be the case. For Mr. Sedley Taylor, in his article on Leclaire in the Nineteenth Century, for September 1880, writes as follows: "I am assured by M. Marquot that the white of zinc, now exclusively used by the house, is not only perfectly innocuous to the painters, but that work executed with it is both fresher and more durable than that done with the old deleterious ingredient."

equivalent to making the men, corporately, shareholders in the business; for the Mutual Help Association received 5% on its Capital, invested in the concern. Of the remaining annual profits, 20% went to the Mutual Help Association, 30% was divided individually among the men, and 50% went to Leclaire and the other partners.

In 1865 Leclaire sustained a great blow in the death of his wife. Weary of the turmoil of the great city he retired for repose to the village of Herblay, a few miles west of Paris. But he was not destined to rest long. He was made Mayor and becoming interested in philanthropic schemes in his new neighbourhood – amongst which was one of agricultural Co-operation – he worked harder than ever. His object now with regard to the Paris business was to teach the firm to go on of itself, without his supervision; and in fact, in 1869 he retired – all but in name. In this year the final organisation was drawn up, and deeds of incorporation were signed. Printed lists of questions had been sent round to all the workmen, and two hundred answers that had been sent up had been analysed and reported on, and the final scheme was approved at a general meeting.

It was as follows. The kernel of the constitution was a body of workmen (it numbered 122 in 1880) chosen by their fellows, on account of their superior character, education, and skill, to be the governing body of the concern. It was called the noyau, and candidates for admission to it had to be between the ages of 23 and 40 at the time of election. The advantages of belonging to this body were higher pay, and prior claim to employment in slack times; the duties consisted in the election of foremen, and of the general managers, and in the trial (by a committee) of all cases of misconduct. The noyau was thus, it will be seen, the supreme power in the firm – whose constitution was (and is) therefore thoroughly democratic. Yet it is most important to observe that the two managing partners once elected were unfettered in the business work actually committed to them – a most wise arrangement, without which the democratic tendencies would probably have brought about their own ruin.

The Capital was at this time fixed at £16,000; of which Leclaire owned £4,000. M. Defourneaux the acting manager £4,000, and the M.H.A. £8,000. There was a first charge on the whole profits of 10%for a reserve fund and 5% for interest on Capital; of the remainder, 25% was to go to the acting manager, 50% to the officials and workmen individually, and 25% to the Mutual Help Association.

For the rest I will finish these few words about Leclaire's experiment by a quotation for Mr. Hall's excellent pamphlet – to which I am so largely indebted. "In July 1872, the day before his death, Leclaire wrote to M. Defourneaux, 'All who have grown old with me have been more or less martyrs to me, but you especially have had most to suffer from my exactions in respect of the changes and modifications I found it necessary to introduce to the management of the business. Therefore, for you I shall entertain feelings of the liveliest gratitude all my life, and beyond the grave, if possible, I beseech you take care of yourself, and think of those who will still long have great need of you. Until sound learning replaced ignorance amongst the masses, until the disinherited shall have strength to raise themselves to us, we must hold out a hand to them. Otherwise, the rooted antagonism between the suffering classes and the more fortunate will never cease.'

"On July 13, 1872, Leclaire passed away, having enjoyed the rare felicity of seeing the dreams of his youth realised in his old age. He left a private fortune of £48,000, an inconsiderable amount to what he might have left had money, instead of men-making, had been his object in life. Had he left less, it might have been objected to him that he had sacrificed too completely his private interests to the good of others, and so discouraged imitators. For some years before his death, Leclaire was permitted the gratification of seeing not a few of the pensioners of the firm in the enjoyment of the retiring income of 1,000f, or £40, which enabled some of them to end their days, like himself, in a country retreat.

"His business in no way suffered by his death, as it had been the pre-occupation of his declining years to provide that it should not. On the contrary, it went on steadily increasing. In the year 1877, five years after Leclaire's death, as many as 284 workmen shared in the profits, of whom 450 on an average were at work at one time. In that year a trifle under £40,000 was paid in wages. Altogether, since 1842, £80,000 has been divided as the men's share of the profits. On September 1, 1877, the Capital of the firm had increased to £40,394, and the business done in that year to £80,009. In 1868 the Mutual Aid Society possessed a Capital of £13,000, £8,000 of which was invested in the firm. Its Capital has since considerably increased, and in 1877 it had depending on it twenty-four pensioners, receiving a yearly pension of £40 each, and eleven widows, pensions of £20.

"The principle of the election of the managing partners by the general assembly of the noyau is found to work admirably. In 1872, M. Redouly was unanimously chosen to succeed Leclaire, and in 1874 M. Marguot, with a single dissentient voice, was elected in the place of M. Defourneaux, who unhappily followed Leclaire to the grave within three years. From his death-bed, Leclaire sent this last message to his men, 'that he exhorts them to remember constantly that in working for the business, they not only work to improve their own condition, but that they set a noble example, and that this reflection ought to be an incessant encouragement to them to do their duty thoroughly, since by doing they contribute to the enfranchisement of those who have nothing but their Labour to live by."

In conclusion, let me say a few words by which of moral. I have taken just this one instance of Co-operation out of many that I might have taken. I might have taken other instances where the thing has been started and carried on from the Capitalist side, so to speak; and I might have taken instances where the workmen have joined together and with little or no Capital to begin with have yet succeeded in founding prosperous and even wealthy corporations. But I thought it would be better in the present lecture to keep to one example; and the example of Leclaire has the advantage of having been lately brought before the public more than once, and of affording some good lessons.

In the first place I would say to you, do not be discouraged in this matter by the finger of scorn. Remember that Leclaire took thirty years to work out his experiment, and that every good thing is of slow growth; and do not be discouraged if now and then your enemies can point to a case in which Co-operative production has failed. In France, I believe I may say, there are at least a hundred successful Co-operative firms at the present moment; but on this side of the Channel, we seem to be slower in taking the matter up. New ideas always make slow way amongst us; we are suspicious of them. Then we English are very independent; we like each to go our own way and are not ready to join with others in any movement; and this individualism – though a valuable quality in its way –hinders united action. Another thing against us in that the English Press – being almost entirely in the hands of the Capitalist class and representing the views and feelings of that class – has consistently and for many years done everything in its power to throw cold water on the Co-operative

movement and to represent it as of no importance. Still, these are only obstacles, which have to be to overcome, and which perhaps when overcome will render Co-operation all the firmer and sturdier in this country in the end. All we have to do is to determine that they shall be overcome – and then they will be. For the present let us consider what lessons are to be drawn from the case we have before us.

The first principle which underlies Leclaire's work seems to me plainly to lie in that passage which I quoted from Mr. Hall's pamphlet, in which Leclaire asks himself whether men working under a system of mutual help and confidence would produce more than they would under a system of mutual division and jealousy. The question answers itself in asking. Mutual helpfulness and trust underlie our human life; they are planted deep in the human breast if we would help on Co-operation one of the first things (perhaps the first thing) we should do is to help to spread abroad these principles of life.

Let no man call this a merely sentimental matter. If these things are sentiments, they are the sentiments which create society. The wonderful monuments of civilisation – great nations, cities, telegraphs, railroads, the huge machinery of commerce – are but so many expressions of that which is eternal here – in the human breast – the desire and the need of man for dependence on his fellow man; and the cry for Co-operation today is only another effort forwards in the long line which man has travelled since first he came to be a social animal. Remember always and always that these desires and needs, though hidden, are really, far more than laws and governments, the agents which construct and create our social life as it is; and neither be ashamed to confess them nor be inclined to pass them over as of little importance because they are not tangible or measurable.

The second principle which underlay Leclaire's work is illustrated by the pamphlet he wrote on the 'tricks of the trade'. It is the principle of honest work Leclaire had to compete with bad; but he was far seeing enough to be sure that if his Labours were to be of permanent value, they must be founded on good work. He was determined that they should be so. The result proved that he was right. And we may be sure that if a new industrial system is to supplant the wretched chaos (it cannot be called a system) of today, it must be founded on the principle of good work, and on no other. It is impossible that a system founded on dishonest and bad work can succeed. Yet so corrupted are our modes of thought in the

present day that this idea is unfamiliar to most people, and it is generally supposed that the badness or goodness of work is merely a question (like everything else) of supply and demand – to be dismissed as soon as those deities are satisfied.

Let me, on this point, borrow a word from Mr. Ruskin. He says that every class of the committed has a duty to fulfil towards the community at large. The soldier for instance has a duty – it is to defend his country. The schoolmaster has a duty – it is to teach the young. Both these parties receive due payment for their services, but that fact does not modify the nature of the work they are bound to fulfil. The merchant (and with him the tradesman and artisan) has a duty to fulfil. What is it? It is to supply the nation with good things in the way of material produce – with goods, not with evils. What should we think of the schoolmaster who taught lies to his children, or of the soldier who ran way in the time of the nations' danger –and what do we think of the merchant who allows himself to supply the community with bad, dishonest, and useless articles?

It is no good. Until the industrial classes of this country shall have got back to the notion that they have a duty to the community at large – which they are bound to fulfil, at times even at the cost of personal loss – it is impossible that any good thing can come from them, it is impossible that any saving or redeeming faith can spread amongst them. No sophistry of political economy, no babble about supply and demand, can ever get over this point, or make what is essentially a lie into a fair and reasonable thing. Nor can any industrial organisation of the future find a permanent foundation in any principle other than that of good and honest work.

There is another point. I have said that no man can enjoy doing bad work. If we are to make work an enjoyable thing in the future, we must (if for that reason alone) see to it that our work is good and thorough. And if, for a time, such work should bring a less wage, a less material advantage, in consequence, still I maintain it would bring us more real advantage, more enjoyment and content, than the money we so lose.

The third principle which, to my mind, emerges from a study of Leclaire's work lies in that affair about the white of zinc. It is the question of men versus commodities. There is such a rage for cheap commodities in the present day – and a superficial view of political economy has so fostered it – that it seems to be the prevalent idea that the main glory and

advancement of a nation is to get its commodities, its crops, plentiful and cheap. Wherein it is forgotten that there is one commodity, one crop, which in importance entirely surpasses all the others, and on account of which only, in fact, the others are of value – I mean the crop of men and women over a country. Leclaire struck at the root of this matter. He said the community had no right to sacrifice its producers, their health and well-being, for the sake of the mere cheapness of the article produced. And anyone who looks calmly at the matter must agree with him.

But steam with its marvellous and unprecedented powers of production has for the time made us maniacs on this subject. We are deluged with commodities. "Cheap and nasty and plenty of them" is our motto. What if the kettle bottom comes out shortly after we have bought it. "Oh! But it is so cheap what can you expect!" Chairs give way when we sit upon them, shirts wear out, our houses tumble about our ears. "Oh! But they are so cheap – we can soon get new ones!"

So, we can, and so we do. Buying today and throwing away tomorrow we go on till our houses, our towns are surrounded by tracts of rubbish, and the whole land is one waste place and wilderness of old boots and salmon tins! And there sitting on the top of this our rubbish heap of civilisation we congratulate ourselves, crowing to the other nations to come and admire us, and sending forth our missionaries and our soldiers to improve them into our likeness.

Meanwhile shall we not rather ask, before we congratulate ourselves so freely, at what cost to the souls and bodies of men have these cheap goods been won? When we buy a file for the price of an old song, and six boxes of matches for a penny, shall we not first, before we glorify their cheapness, enquire how it is they are so cheap? And if we find that to produce this result men and women have been pinned down in squalor and wretchedness till the divine image in them has been blurred almost past recognition, if for this backs have been bowed and eyes grown dim, and all belief in human or divine goodness has gradually faded way – shall we not rather be ashamed to have bought things at such a price? Shall we not rather turn and cleanse first this Augæan dung-heap of our own iniquities, before we dare to improve others, or think ourselves worthy of imitation?

At the bottom of this whole matter, as I think, lies (what lies at the bottom

of so many things) the question of ideals. If we look into our own minds we shall, I think, generally find that there in the depths, consciously or not, lurks some figure: some personage or character that we have met, heard of, read of; whom we admire, envy, or desire to be like. This is our ideal. It shapes for the time being, our actions, our lives.

At the root of a nation's life, similarly, there lurks an ideal, which does perhaps more than anything else to shape its growth. What has been England's Ideal for the last twenty or thirty years? Shall I tell you? It can be said in two words. To get on. What does to get on mean? It means if you live in a cottage to get on to live in a house with a bay window; if you live in a house with a bay window to get on to live in one with a drawing-room; if you live in a house with a drawing room and dining-room, to add a coach-house and stables; finally, perhaps to land yourself in solitary grandeur in the midst of a large park. Now I have nothing to say against this ideal – if it amuses or pleases any one to take these successive steps, I have no objection to offer, and it would be the merest impertinence in me to do so –provided that in following out this plan of life you do not trample on the heads of other people. But if you do so, if in order to mount to a grand station in life it is necessary to kick someone else into the ditch, then I say this ideal is not worthy of our common humanity.

There was a time doubtless when this ideal of material rank and grandeur was rightful and in place. In the old feudal society, which depended so much for its stability on gradations of class and caste, it was perhaps necessary that this kind of worship of class-position should exist. And in that time, it was practically impossible for a person to pass over from one class to another – so that the feeling did not disturb the relations of classes, but rather gave those relations solidity. But in the present day the invention of steam and the vast development of mercantile movement and machinery have entirely broken down these old class barriers – they have let loose the demon of worldly advancement – and the consequence is that in the last twenty or thirty years in England have witnessed a spectacle – that which if you were able to go all round the savage nations of the world I doubt if you could witness anything more degrading and disgusting – the spectacle of a whole nation (or nearly all of it) occupied in scrambling insanely up into high places of display and lucre over the tops of each other's heads! It is in fact the breakdown, it is nothing more nor less than the decay and putrefaction of Feudalism; it was a process inevitable, and the stench and mephitic vapour that arises from it are I

suppose no more than natural; but it is a process which, one must hope, will not last very long – will soon give place to something more hopeful and organic.

And in truth here and there, it seems to me, there are signs (like grass in spring) of a new life, a new ideal, arising out of the ground: an ideal which, as I think, is destined to be the central life of a new age of the world, and to inspire for centuries new forms of civilisation at least as permanent, fruitful and important as those old forms of Feudalism which are now passing away.

What is this new Ideal? It differs from the old one in this – its aim is not human grandeur, but human equality; it does not seek to be above others, but to be with and of them. This Ideal does not require for its satisfaction that a man should occupy a grand position in the world, that he should be the centre of many eyes, or that he should have acquired wealth, power, learning even; on the contrary it looks for its material, and finds it, in just the ordinary surroundings of human life. It sees in ordinary men and women, toiling, suffering, enjoying, the materials of heroes and heroines equal to all in history; it sees in some old woman sitting by her cottage door the equal of all the kings and queens that have ever lived; it beholds the ever-sacred face of our common humanity looking forth from the troubled and wandering eyes of the crazy and insane. This Ideal is not one which from the nature of the case can only be realised by the few; it does not turn a high light on just one small class or section and condemn the common crowd to obscurity and contempt.

On the contrary it takes the life of the masses – the ordinary human life as in its main outlines it has been and must ever be – and proclaims that this is in effect as worthy, as great and dignified as any form of life can be; perhaps after all, best of all. It says – This ordinary life is essentially grand, delightful, and enjoyable, and it shall be made so. We are going henceforth to make the common occupations honourable and enviable. We will have it so that the gardening, baking, carpentering, file-cutting, nail-making shall be a pleasure and an honour to work at. We will insist that the conditions under which all these trades are carried on are compatible with justice, health and self-respect. We will show in ourselves that the simplest life is as good as any, that we are not ashamed of it – and we will so adorn it that the rich and idle shall enviously leave their sofas and gilded saloons and come and join hands with us in it.

This is the drift of the new Ideal that I think I see springing up around us. We cannot all be Leclaire, but we can all, I believe, help forward the true cause of Co-operation (which in its essence is no other than the emancipation and redemption of Labour) by nourishing and cherishing this Ideal within us. There is many a hero today in the workshop who despite the jeers of his fellow-workmen and the solicitations of his employer still does honest and good work, because his soul abhors the bad. There is many a heroic mother in her cottage home who by gentleness and persuasion, courage and self-respect, casts a grace and brightness over the meanest of her occupations and converts her little household into a Paradise. I ask you above all, things to be practical – not merely to talk about schemes, but to act out in daily life these principles which underlie and precede the ripening of the schemes; above all to have done, in thought, word, or deed, with this ancient sham of fleeing from manual labour, of despising or pretending to despise it. If you thus create the raw material of Co-operation, you need not doubt I think but what the finished product – which you so desire – will swiftly appear among you.

Principle FIVE P5

Join Principle 5

An accessible co-operative learning and information resource for all:

Lending Library
Co-operative archive and information resource
Talks, study groups, visits and film screenings
Engagement with other co-operatives and libraries
Co-operative News available for members

Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre
Aizlewood's Mill, Nursery Street, Sheffield S3 8GG
Tel: 0114 282 3132 Web: https://www.principle5.coop

CO-OPERATIVE PRODUCTION

Principle 5 Pamphlet No: 2

In this lecture, delivered at the Sheffield Hall of Science in 1883, and later published as a pamphlet by John Heywood, Edward Carpenter discusses the ills of industrial capitalism, and proposes co-operation as an alternative system. Vital economic reforms, delivered on co-operative lines, Carpenter explains, would promote the undertaking of work to a high standard, as well as improving working conditions in industry, and enabling Britain to become more self-sufficient in manufacturing the necessities of life.

Published at a time of great change in his life - he would soon purchase land at Millthorpe and begin his new career as a market gardener - Carpenter's biting critique of laissez-faire capitalism remains as potent as ever. Why is it that so much of our natural resource is used to create products of low quality that are rarely, if ever, used? Why is it that inferior work, with corners cut at every turn, prospers, whilst good work is priced out of the market? Is this the way that things have to be? Extolling the virtues of co-operation, Edward Carpenter vehemently disagrees.

£2

Principle FIVE **P5**