

Partisan Social Club

Workshopping Study Manual

#1

**‘An Inquiry into the Principles of
the Distribution of Wealth Most
Conducive to Human Happiness,’
by William Thompson**

This Partisan Social Club Study Manual (#1) introduces the reader to the main tenants of Thompson's theory of distribution and provides an introduction to his programme of action. Below, we set out the key ideas from 'An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness,' We have edited the section entitled 'Preliminary Observations' and the final section, 'Concluding Observations' and we have reproduced them here. *Note, we have changed words, and updated phrases from Thompson's original.*

On Workshopping

'The Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness' is a Partisan Social Club (PSC) project for the Coventry Biennial, 2019. The project involves working with existing PSC members and calling forth new participants to explore ideas of labour, economy and the distribution of wealth as first expressed in the writing of Irish philosopher William Thompson (1775–1833). The results of the first workshop session by PSC members are pasted on the walls of a room in The Row building (2nd Floor) this space is the venue for ten forthcoming workshops that PSC members will host throughout the biennial exhibition. PSC aim to generate critical discussions and action through the process of workshopping. Members will come together to share their ideas and agree and disagree on conceptions of art and politics, calling forth new members as they go. The results will include language-based artworks in which people publish their ideas to each other and to exhibition visitors; the outcomes will take the formats of printed matter, texts, objects, events and games. The idea is to enable the development of an interest group, as is common to civil society, albeit in a move towards a radical, democratic and partisan conception of civil society.

On William Thompson

Thompson's *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth*, was first published in 1824. It was Thompson's first major work in political economy, and it contains his most comprehensive critique of capitalism as well as his proposals for a co-operative society as an alternative to the existing state of affairs, which saw acute poverty amongst the lower classes in Ireland and the UK. He condemned the narrow mechanical approach taken by political economists but also the naïvely utopian and moralist approach of philosophers and attempted to combine a scientific and ethical critique of the system, concentrating on how wealth is created and also how it is distributed.

'Let the Productive Power of the Collective Run Riot!'
(Partisan Social Club, 2019)

Thompson identified many of the themes and analysis Marx and Engels would tackle half a century later and elucidated these in a number of central principles:

- **Wealth is produced by labour.**
- **The aim of production should be to distribute its product to create the greatest possible happiness.**
- **This will be achieved by distributing wealth equally to the greatest number.**
- **The greatest incentive to work is to receive the entire use of the value you created**
- **Exchange should be voluntary to the producers of the articles.**

Marx read and was influenced by Thompson. Common to them both is the use of the labour theory of value and of exploitation in understanding the creation of surplus value, wealth, and consequently inequality and mass unhappiness. It is claimed that Thompson popularised the word 'competitive' as a description of capitalism and also the word 'socialism' in debates in London with such notable political economists as John Stuart Mill.

Preliminary Observations from Thompson

The distribution of wealth, is a hackneyed subject. But What subject important to human happiness is not hackneyed? The subject of wealth in general is indeed so: but it is conceived that the least hackneyed branch of the subject is the distribution. No bold hand, it is conceived, has yet presumed to lay down just principles on this all-sensitive subject. Force, fraud, chance, prescription, are almost everywhere; the main arbiters of distribution, and have almost frightened reason from daring to contemplate the mischiefs they have caused. Injustice in this momentous matter has everywhere prevailed; but the perennial source has not been unfolded.

In every nation, and in almost every age, of the world, the blessings of equal comforts to all, and the enormous evils of great inequality of wealth, have been dimly seen and recognised; and vain and ignorant efforts have been made to establish a just distribution. Force is the instrument employed by ignorance to accomplish everything, even justice itself: to establish equality therefore force was employed. But no sooner was force made use of than security fled, and consequently the means of happiness. Here, therefore is the cruel dilemma in which mankind has been placed. Here is the important problem of moral science to be solved, "how to reconcile equality with security; how to reconcile just distribution with continued production."

This problem is the object of the following pages to develop, to trace its consequences, and to point out those just and gentle means by which the natural laws of distribution may everywhere be introduced, and by which security, impartially applied to all, and not exclusively and hypocritically applied to a few, may become the firmest guarantee, instead of being the eternal opponent, of rational and healthful equality: as it is the

only sure basis of the continued reproduction and accumulation of wealth.

How comes it that a nation abounding more than any other in the rude material of wealth, in machinery, dwellings and food, in intelligent and industrious producers, with all the apparent means of happiness, with all the outward semblances of happiness exhibited by a small and rich portion of the community; should still pine in privation? How comes it that the fruits of the labour of the industrious, after years of incessant and successful exertion, are mysteriously and without imputation of fault to them, without any convulsion of nature, swept away?

It is not for want of physical knowledge; it is not for want of abundant materials of wealth to make all comfortable, it is not for want of the capacity or inclination to abundant reproduction. To what then is this strange anomaly in human affairs to be attributed? This misery in the midst of all the means of happiness? To what but to a vicious distribution of wealth can this extraordinary phenomenon be attributed? What so natural as the cry of injustice, under such circumstances? What so natural and so usual as the imploring of the interference of the strong arm of power, to remedy such injustice? What so necessary as to ascertain the causes of this vicious distribution? Whether they are of a temporary or a deep-rooted and permanent nature? Whether present appearances are anything more than the full development, the maximum, of the evils inherent in long-established errors and radically vicious institutions, now brought to the crisis of their injurious operation? Whether there are in art or in nature any means to be found, excluding the use of force, which would make impossible the recurrence of similar calamity, and substitute a universally-benevolent, self-regulating, and self-preserving distribution for the present, engendering the evils notoriously experienced?

Can any inquiry be more called for, not with a view to mere topical, temporary, remedies, but to radical cure?

The tendency of the **existing** arrangement of things as to wealth, is to enrich a few at the expense of the mass of producers; to make the poverty of the poor more hopeless, to throw back the middling classes upon the poor, that a few may be enabled, not only to accumulate in perniciously large masses the real national, which is only the aggregate of individual, capital, but also, by means of such accumulations, to command the products of the yearly labour of the community. **Who is not alarmed at the everyday increasing tendency to poverty on the part of the many, to the ostentation of excessive wealth on the part of the few?** Who sees not the gradual undermining of the nation's resources, the sickening of the very spirit of industry on the part of her producers, if this progress cannot, by a recurrence to first principles, or otherwise, be arrested? Is it not time to inquire whether, by the laws of nature and society, we are doomed to submit to actual and anticipated evils such as these, under

the peril of enduring still greater, if we rashly attempt to remove them? All moral and political wisdom should tend mainly to this, the just distribution of the physical means of happiness

Should we find that the mode of distribution which political economy requires, militates against political utility, while general morality is silent, we must weigh the claims of wealth and politics and carefully adjudge the balance. Should we find the increase of wealth and supposed political utility calling for one mode of distribution, and universal morality prescribing another, we must, consistently with our principles of promoting the greatest happiness of the whole, compel both wealth and politics to bend to that distribution which ensures the greatest virtue, the greatest happiness. But should we be so fortunate as to find that that species of distribution of wealth which tends most to its production and accumulation, tends also to political utility more than any other possible distribution of it, and affords the grateful aspect of the widest diffusion of moral habits, while it is, at the same time, so simple as to require no cumbrous legal machinery, almost no machinery at all, for its support; ***we shall unite all impartial voices in approbation of a mode of distribution so recommended.***

Concluding Observations from Thompson

Declarations

1. Of all the causes which operate on the human character and human happiness, none is of so much importance as the distribution of wealth; because on that depend all those circumstances, those relations, on which the development of character and happiness depends. But, on the principle of utility, every existing generation having alone the means of judging correctly, possesses the same right, or in other words, would promote its own greatest happiness by exerting the power, of so distributing all the means of happiness it possesses, wealth included, as to ensure that greatest happiness; just as that same right was exercised by its predecessors.

2. No existing distribution ought to be upheld further than as it can be shown to promote preponderant good. If, therefore, it increased the mass of happiness of the whole community (all interests and consequences immediate and remote considered), to re-distribute in any possible way the accumulated wealth, land, houses, machinery, food, clothes, and other materials of the whole society, and to re-regulate the future direction of labour, that re-distribution and re-regulation ought to take place: inconvenience to any party being as much as possible removed or mitigated in effecting the change.

3. The mass of real accumulated wealth, in point of magnitude and influence on human happiness, is so utterly insignificant when compared with the powers of production of the same society in whatever state of civilization, or even compared with the actual consumption for even a few years of that society, that the great attention of legislators

and political economists should be directed to “productive powers” and their future free development, and not, as hitherto, to the mere accumulated wealth that strikes the eye.

4. Of what is called accumulated wealth, by far the greater part is only nominal, consisting not of any real things, ships, houses, cottons, improvements on land, but of mere demands on the future annual productive powers of society, engendered and perpetuated by the expedients of institutions of insecurity. Therefore, without injury to future production and happiness, all accumulations of physical things, or real wealth, may be left in the hands of those who now possess them, to enjoy them as they may; the use of such articles as a mere means of appropriating to their possessors the wealth to be created by the future productive powers of society, being that alone of which the natural laws of distribution would, without force, gradually deprive them, or, if aided by co-productive labour, would in a very few years deprive them.

5. If nine-tenths of any society were persuaded that it would tend to the happiness of all, by means of the system of co-operative labour, or nay other modification of labour, under the shield of equal security, that all the existing accumulations of real wealth should be equally divided, so as **to make all capitalist labourers**; it would not be the interest to all to use compulsion towards the minority of one-tenth, being the possessors of the real wealth, to force this distribution; because, if force, instead of persuasion, were used in the formation of the new arrangements of society, what guarantee could be given that force would not be used by every succeeding majority, leading to the annihilation of industry and production? The unconvinced possessors of the real wealth would suffer more than the majority would gain, the sense of injustice neutralizing the pleasures of the majority, and increasing the pain of the privations of the oppressed.

6. The surplus produce of the productive powers of a few years of the majority of the whole society would repay this capital, if borrowed instead of being taken by force, to the satisfaction of all; or would soon produce a greater amount, without the obligation of borrowing; making their own houses, machinery, &c. themselves.

7. The small minority, possessors of the real capital, would be ultimately convinced to lend, or devote it, to such useful purposes – if proved to be useful; - or whether convinced or not, they would, whether from sympathy of prudence, or both, conform to the clearly expressed wished of those around them: where there is public opinion founded on knowledge, a minority can never long resist it: **‘tis only where there is not knowledge, no public opinion, that a minority can rule by force.**

8. The small minority, possessors of the real capital, whether convinced, sympathizing, prudential, or not, would, under such circumstances, find no other use for their capital than making it instrumental to bring about the new order of things

generally desired. Equal security not affording them the means of using it as an engine for extorting the bulk of the future products of labour from the producers, it must remain unproductive, or be employed to bring about, however reluctantly, the end desired.

9. If a mere majority of any society were persuaded that all producers should be capitalists, all the evils of the use of force would be so much greater. Equal security, and free discussion, one of its consequences, would speedily accomplish, without force, everything useful.

10. In a word, in order to produce the greater happiness derivable from wealth, the greatest equality reconcilable with security, every producer, whether agricultural, manufacturing, or in any other way affording a satisfactory equivalent for wealth, or to possess the faculty of freely directing his labour, with capital sufficient to secure to himself the whole products of his labour, whether producing on his own account alone, or co-operating in company with others; and along with this, knowledge to show him how to use and retain these advantages.

Programme!

The means to bring about this desirable distribution are:

- ***Simple representative institutions***
- ***The entire abolition, under these, of all the restraints of insecurity (entail, primogeniture, combination local and general, wages-regulation direct or indirect, monopolies of knowledge of professions, of trades, bounties, game, privilege laws, public plunder, with all other expedients incompatible with equal security or the natural laws of distribution), with a little inconvenience as possible to any individual; leaving untouched all past real accumulations, but guarding all future products of labour equally from all attacks of force or fraud, direct or indirect, public or private.***
- ***The progress and diffusion of knowledge, and all gradual perception of their real interests by all societies, would gradually effect the remainder; that is to say, everything useful as to wealth, as well as to every other means of producing happiness, in social arrangement.***

More on Thompson

Books

Thompson, W., *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth*, Longman, Hurst Rees, Orme, Brown & Green: London, 182

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Other useful websites for reference

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https://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=1555

<http://democracyandclassstruggle.blogspot.com/2012/05/william-thompson-first-irish-socialist.html>

“Women of England! Women in whatever country ye breathe - wherever ye breathe, degraded - awake! Awake to the contemplation of the happiness that awaits you when all your faculties of mind and body shall be fully cultivated and developed; when every path in which ye can exercise those improved faculties shall be laid open and rendered delightful to you, even as to them who now ignorantly enslave and degrade you.” (Thompson, 1825).

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