

Ferdinand Lassalle

The Right to Revolution; The Duty of the Workers¹

(1862)

“We are all workers insofar as we have the will to make ourselves useful to human society in some way or other. This Fourth Estate,[a] which, therefore, contains in its heart-chambers not a germ of any new privilege, is for this very reason synonymous with the entire human race. Its cause is, therefore, the cause of humanity as a whole; its freedom is the freedom of humanity as a whole; its rule is the rule of all.

Anyone who appeals, therefore, to the idea of the working class as the dominant principle of society, in the sense in which I have just expounded this to you, will not utter a cry that will divide and separate the classes of society; he will rather utter a cry of conciliation, a cry that will embrace all of society, a cry for the abolition of all the contrasts in the social strata, a cry for union, in which all should join who are opposed to privileges and to suppression of the people by privileged classes, a cry of love, which, once it has forced its way from the heart of the people, will forever be the true slogan of the people, and which, for the sake of its content alone, will remain nonetheless a cry of love even when it resounds as the people’s battle cry. . . .

To be sure, the lower classes still retain more selfishness than they should. But this selfishness, where it is present in this case, is the defect of individuals, of certain persons, and not an essential defect of the class. Even a modicum of instinct will inform the members of the lower classes, that, insofar as every one of them thinks only of himself and acts only for himself, he can never hope for any essential improvement of his situation. But insofar as the lower classes of society aim at an improvement of their situation as a class, an improvement of their lot as a class, to precisely this extent will this personal interest — instead of opposing itself to the historical tendency and thus being condemned as a socially immoral act — will it coincide in direction with the development of the entire people, with the victory of the idea, with the advances of civilization, with the life principle of history itself, which is nothing more or less than the growth of freedom. Or, as we have already seen above, your cause is the cause of humanity as a whole.

You are, therefore, in the fortunate situation, gentlemen, of being — not dead to new ideas — but rather, owing to your own personal interest, extremely susceptible to them. You are in the fortunate situation in which that which constitutes your true personal, best interest actually coincides with the beating pulses of history, with the driving life force of moral evolution. You may, therefore, attach yourself with personal, with passionate feeling to the evolution of history, and be assured that your position will be the more impregnable, as this passion, in the pure sense in which we have thus depicted it, is the more ardent and consuming.

These are the reasons, gentlemen, why the rule of the Fourth Estate must bring to the nation an efflorescence of morality, of civilization and science, such as has never before been seen in history. . . .

The moral idea of the bourgeoisie holds that the individual is to be guaranteed nothing more than an exclusive right to the self-activity of his forces.

If we were all equally strong, equally intelligent, equally educated and equally wealthy, this idea might be considered as a sufficient and moral idea.

But as we do not and cannot enjoy such equality, this thought is insufficient, and in its consequences, therefore, necessarily leads to a profound immorality. For it leads to an exploitation of the weaker by the stronger, the more intelligent, the more wealthy; the stronger will put the weaker in his pocket.

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The moral idea of the working class, on the other hand, holds that the free and untrammelled activity of the powers of the individual by himself is of itself not sufficient, but that there must be added, in a morally well-ordered community, a solidarity of interests, and a common possession, a common mutuality of evolution.

In accordance with this difference, the bourgeoisie conceives the moral purpose of the State as consisting only in the duty to protect the personal liberty of the individual and his property.

This is a policeman's idea, gentlemen, a policeman's idea for the reason that it creates the State after the image of the policeman [nachtwächter], whose sole function consists — or should consist — in preventing theft and burglary.[b] I am sorry to say that this policeman notion is not only peculiar to the Liberals, but also to many alleged Democrats, owing to their insufficient mental training. If the bourgeoisie should consistently pronounce its last word, it would be obliged to admit that, according to these ideas of its own, there would be no reason for a State at all, if it were not for the existence of robbers and thieves. . . .

A State, therefore, which is placed under the dominion of the idea[s] of the working class, would no longer — as has been the case with all the States thus far — be driven about willy-nilly by the course of events and the compulsion of circumstances, but would elevate this moral character of the State into its chief task, with extreme clarity and in full consciousness. It would achieve with free vigor and complete consistency things that have thus far been achieved only piece-meal and in the faintest outline in opposition to reluctant concessions, and by this very means it would thus necessarily bring about an elevation of the spirit, the production of a sum total of happiness, culture, well-being and liberty that have had no parallel in the world's history, and as compared to which even the most highly lauded periods of earlier days will become mere shadows. . . .

But, for all those who are members of the working class, what I have just said should be a reminder of their duty to assume an entirely new attitude.

Nothing is better suited to impart to a certain class a dignified, profoundly moral character, than the consciousness that this class is destined to be the ruling class, that it is called upon to elevate the principle of its class as the principle of the generation in which it lives, to make its idea the dominant idea of the entire society and in turn, to reconstruct society in its own image.

The high world-historic privilege of having such a destiny must inspire all your ideas. It is no longer appropriate for you to retain the vices of the oppressed, or the idle distractions of the thoughtless, or even the harmless carelessness of the insignificant.

You are the rock on which the church of the future shall be built!"

Night watchman state:

Calque of German "Nachtwächterstaat", which was coined by German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle in an 1862 speech in Berlin. He used this term to criticize the idea of a state with minimal government, comparing it to a night watchman whose sole duty was preventing theft. A government with the least necessary power over its citizens²

Iron Law of Wages:

The inexorable tendency of real wages under capitalism to adhere to a level just sufficient to afford the bare necessities of life³

²-Naver dictionary, <https://english.dict.naver.com/english-dictionary/#/entry/enen/1f2367c4bbd5944df6dd2d230a60968c>

³-Mark Blaug, [Iron Law of Wages](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315352829_Iron_Law_of_Wages)