

*Below is an edited extract of a chapter called 'The Great Money Trick' from the book 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist' by Robert Tressell. The setting is a large house being refurbished by painter decorators employed by an unscrupulous capitalist. The 'Professor' is the character Owen, a working class socialist who tries to teach his fellow workers about socialism and to persuade them about the futility of backing either Tories or Whigs as both are out to screw the working class.*

*A great working class novel 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist' examines the conditions, lives and mindsets of the working class in England circa 1910. It remains, however, pertinent and honest.*

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`Wot's become of the Professor?' asked the gentleman who sat on the upturned pail in the corner, referring to Owen, who had not yet come down from his work. `P'raps 'e's preparing 'is sermon,' remarked Harlow with a laugh. `We ain't 'ad no lectures from 'im lately, since 'e's been on that room,' observed Easton. `Ave we?'

`I'll take bloody good care I don't go worryin' myself to death like 'e's doin', about such dam rot as that.' `I do believe that's wot makes 'im look so bad as 'e does,' observed Harlow. `Several times this morning I couldn't help noticing the way 'e kept on coughing.'

`He's a funny sort of chap, ain't he?' said Bundy. `One day quite jolly, singing and cracking jokes and tellin' yarns, and the next you can't hardly get a word out of 'im.'

`Bloody rot, I call it,' chimed in the man on the pail. `Wot the 'ell's the use of the likes of us troublin' our 'eads about politics?' `Oh, I don't see that.' replied Harlow. `We've got votes and we're really the people what control the affairs of the country, so I reckon we ought to take SOME interest in it, but at the same time I can't see no sense in this 'ere Socialist wangle that Owen's always talkin' about.' `Nor nobody else neither,' said Crass with a jeering laugh.

`Even if all the bloody money in the world WAS divided out equal,'

said the man on the pail, profoundly, `it wouldn't do no good! In six months' time it would be all back in the same 'ands again.' `But 'e 'ad a cuff the other day about money bein' no good at all!' observed Easton. `Don't you remember 'e said as money was the principal cause of poverty?'

`So it is the principal cause of poverty,' said Owen, who entered at that moment. `Hooray!' shouted Philpot, leading off a cheer which the others took up. `The Professor 'as arrived and will now proceed to say a few remarks.'

A roar of merriment greeted this sally.

As Owen, having filled his cup with tea, sat down in his usual place, Philpot rose solemnly to his feet, and, looking round the company, said:

`Genelmen, with your kind permission, as soon as the Professor 'as finished 'is dinner 'e will deliver 'is well-known lecture, entitled, "Money the Principal Cause of being 'ard up", proving as money ain't no good to nobody. At the hend of the lecture a collection will be took up to provide the lecturer with a little encouragement.' Philpot resumed his seat amid cheers.

Usually most of the men went out for a walk after dinner, but as it happened to be raining that day they were determined, if possible, to make Owen fulfill the engagement made in his name by Philpot.

`Come on 'ere,' cried Philpot, putting his hand on Owen's shoulder. `Prove that money is the cause of poverty.'

`Money IS the real cause of poverty,' said Owen.

`Prove it,' repeated Crass.

`Money is the cause of poverty because it is the device by which those who are too lazy to work are enabled to rob the workers of the fruits of their labours.'

Owen slowly folded up the piece of newspaper he had been reading and put it into his pocket.

`All right,' he replied. `I'll show you how the Great Money Trick is worked.'

Owen opened his dinner basket and took from it two slices of bread but as these were not sufficient, he requested that anyone who had some bread left would give it to him. They gave him several pieces, which he placed in a heap on a clean piece of paper, and, having borrowed the pocket knives they used to cut and eat their dinners with from Easton, Harlow and Philpot, he addressed them as follows:

`These pieces of bread represent the raw materials which exist naturally in and on the earth for the use of mankind; they were not made by any human being, but were created by the Great Spirit for the benefit and sustenance of all, the same as were the air and the light of the sun.'

`You're about as fair-speakin' a man as I've met for some time,' said Harlow, winking at the others.

`Yes, mate,' said Philpot. `Anyone would agree to that much! It's as clear as mud.'

`Now,' continued Owen, `I am a capitalist; or, rather, I represent the landlord and capitalist class. That is to say, all these raw materials belong to me. It does not matter for our present argument how I obtained possession of them, or whether I have any real right to them; the only thing that matters now is the admitted fact that all the raw materials which are necessary for the production of the necessaries of life are now the property of the Landlord and Capitalist class. I am that class: all these raw materials belong to me.'

`Good enough!' agreed Philpot.

`Now you three represent the Working class: you have nothing - and

for my part, although I have all these raw materials, they are of no use to me - what need is - the things that can be made out of these raw materials by Work: but as I am too lazy to work myself, I have invented the Money Trick to make you work FOR me. But first I must explain that I possess something else beside the raw materials. These three knives represent - all the machinery of production; the factories, tools, railways, and so forth, without which the necessaries of life cannot be produced in abundance. And these three coins' - taking three halfpennies from his pocket - `represent my Money Capital.'

`But before we go any further,' said Owen, interrupting himself, `it is most important that you remember that I am not supposed to be merely "a" capitalist. I represent the whole Capitalist Class. You are not supposed to be just three workers - you represent the whole Working Class.'

`All right, all right,' said Crass, impatiently, `we all understand that. Git on with it.'

Owen proceeded to cut up one of the slices of bread into a number of little square blocks.

`These represent the things which are produced by labour, aided by machinery, from the raw materials. We will suppose that three of these blocks represent - a week's work. We will suppose that a week's work is worth - one pound: and we will suppose that each of these ha'pennies is a sovereign. We'd be able to do the trick better if we had real sovereigns, but I forgot to bring any with me.'

`Now this is the way the trick works -'

Owen now addressed himself to the working classes as represented by Philpot, Harlow and Easton.

`You say that you are all in need of employment, and as I am the kind-hearted capitalist class I am going to invest all my money in various industries, so as to give you Plenty of Work. I shall pay each

of you one pound per week, and a week's work is - you must each produce three of these square blocks. For doing this work you will each receive your wages; the money will be your own, to do as you like with, and the things you produce will of course be mine, to do as I like with. You will each take one of these machines and as soon as you have done a week's work, you shall have your money.'

The Working Classes accordingly set to work, and the Capitalist class sat down and watched them. As soon as they had finished, they passed the nine little blocks to Owen, who placed them on a piece of paper by his side and paid the workers their wages.

'These blocks represent the necessaries of life. You can't live without some of these things, but as they belong to me, you will have to buy them from me: my price for these blocks is - one pound each.

As the working classes were in need of the necessaries of life and as they could not eat, drink or wear the useless money, they were compelled to agree to the kind Capitalist's terms. They each bought back and at once consumed one-third of the produce of their labour. The capitalist class also devoured two of the square blocks, and so the net result of the week's work was that the kind capitalist had consumed two pounds worth of the things produced by the labour of the others, and reckoning the squares at their market value of one pound each, he had more than doubled his capital, for he still possessed the three pounds in money and in addition four pounds worth of goods. As for the working classes, Philpot, Harlow and Easton, having each consumed the pound's worth of necessaries they had bought with their wages, they were again in precisely the same condition as when they started work - they had nothing.

This process was repeated several times: for each week's work the producers were paid their wages. They kept on working and spending all their earnings. The kind-hearted capitalist consumed twice as much as any one of them and his pile of wealth continually increased. In a little while - reckoning the little squares at their market value of one pound each - he was worth about one hundred pounds, and the working classes were still in the same condition as when they began, and were still tearing into their work as if their

lives depended upon it.

After a while the rest of the crowd began to laugh, and their merriment increased when the kind-hearted capitalist, just after having sold a pound's worth of necessaries to each of his workers, suddenly took their tools - the Machinery of Production - the knives away from them, and informed them that as owing to Over Production all his store-houses were glutted with the necessaries of life, he had decided to close down the works.

'Well, and wot the bloody 'ell are we to do now?' demanded Philpot.

'That's not my business,' replied the kind-hearted capitalist. 'I've paid you your wages, and provided you with Plenty of Work for a long time past. I have no more work for you to do at present. Come round again in a few months' time and I'll see what I can do for you.'

'But what about the necessaries of life?' demanded Harlow. 'We must have something to eat.'

'Of course you must,' replied the capitalist, affably; 'and I shall be very pleased to sell you some.'

'But we ain't got no bloody money!'

'Well, you can't expect me to give you my goods for nothing! You didn't work for me for nothing, you know. I paid you for your work and you should have saved something: you should have been thrifty like me. Look how I have got on by being thrifty!'

The unemployed looked blankly at each other, but the rest of the crowd only laughed; and then the three unemployed began to abuse the kind-hearted Capitalist, demanding that he should give them some of the necessaries of life that he had piled up in his warehouses, or to be allowed to work and produce some more for their own needs; and even threatened to take some of the things by force if he did not comply with their demands. But the kind-hearted Capitalist told them not to be insolent, and spoke to them about honesty, and said if they were not careful he would have their faces battered in for them by the police, or if necessary he would call out

the military and have them shot down like dogs, the same as he had done before at Featherstone and Belfast.

`Of course,' continued the kind-hearted capitalist, `if it were not for foreign competition I should be able to sell these things that you have made, and then I should be able to give you Plenty of Work again: but until I have sold them to somebody or other, or until I have used them myself, you will have to remain idle.'

`Well, this takes the bloody biskit, don't it?' said Harlow.

`The only thing as I can see for it,' said Philpot mournfully, `is to 'ave a unemployed procession.'

`That's the idear,' said Harlow, and the three began to march about the room in Indian file, singing:

'We've got no work to do-oo-oo'  
We've got no work to do-oo-oo!  
Just because we've been workin' a dam sight too hard,  
Now we've got no work to do.'

As they marched round, the crowd jeered at them and made offensive remarks. Crass said that anyone could see that they were a lot of lazy, drunken loafers who had never done a fair day's work in their lives and never intended to.

The three unemployed accordingly resumed their march round the room, singing mournfully and imitating the usual whine of street-singers:

'Trim your fee-bil lamp me brither-in,  
Some poor sail-er tempest torst,  
Strugglin' 'ard to save the 'arb-er,  
Hin the dark-niss may be lorst,  
So let try lower lights be burning,  
Send 'er gleam acrost the wave,  
Some poor shipwrecked, struggling seaman,

You may rescue, you may save.'

`Kind frens,' said Philpot, removing his cap and addressing the crowd, `we're hall honest British workin' men, but we've been hout of work for the last twenty years on account of foreign competition and over-production. We don't come hout 'ere because we're too lazy to work; it's because we can't get a job. If it wasn't for foreign competition, the kind'earted Hinglish capitalists would be able to sell their goods and give us Plenty of Work, and if they could, I assure you that we should hall be perfectly willing and contented to go on workin' our bloody guts out for the benefit of our masters for the rest of our lives. We're quite willin' to work: that's hall we arst for - Plenty of Work - but as we can't get it we're forced to come out 'ere and arst you to spare a few coppers towards a crust of bread and a night's lodgin'.'

As Philpot held out his cap for subscriptions, some of them attempted to expectorate into it, but the more charitable put in pieces of cinder or dirt from the floor, and the kind-hearted capitalist was so affected by the sight of their misery that he gave them one of the sovereigns he had in us pocket: but as this was of no use to them they immediately returned it to him in exchange for one of the small squares of the necessaries of life, which they divided and greedily devoured. And when they had finished eating they gathered round the philanthropist and sang, `For he's a jolly good fellow,' and afterwards Harlow suggested that they should ask him if he would allow them to elect him to Parliament.

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*And so 'professor' Owen the working man proved to his working class colleagues that it is through the system of wage slavery that workers are exploited. We often view exploitation as only the most vile forms of abuses but we must remember that it is the very system of wage labour that exploits the vast majority of people on this planet. Only the destruction of capitalism and the building of socialism espoused by the writer of this novel Robert Tressell will end exploitation and free us all.*