

LETTER III

Capital is that on which your enemies, brethren, rely for your overthrow. It is in the name of capital that they are now secretly instigating the administration to interfere with your proceedings. The petty tyrants of Derby⁴ talk big of their capital and of its miraculous powers! These pigmy imps, upon their piles of pence, think they can command your destinies, my friends and brothers, and move you, as they please, from the mill to the workhouse. They, with the greater capitalists near them, have the ignorant impudence to call the partial personal riches, which they have scrapped together out of what ought to have been your fair share of profits, national capital! They speak in lofty terms of the benefits which the NATION (Heaven save the mark!) derives from the fraudulent deductions from your earnings. They are telling Earl Grey⁵ that, unless something is done by his legislature to break up your Unions, they shall be obliged to carry their capital to foreign countries; and by such means to assist – they have the audacity to say – “the rivals of our national greatness!” In God’s name, let them go. To believe them, we must conclude that capital is power; and the knowledge and labour, the creators of capital, are nothing. They mistake, brethren, the fruit for the tree – the produce for the producer!

Let us not be terrified, my friends, by such boasts and threats. Sorry am I to say that there are some few, even among yourselves, who still imagine that the difficulties that must arise from what is termed, *our want of capital*, are insurmountable. Where is there any capital that was not, in the first instance, an emanation from ourselves; the creation of our hands and our ingenuity; the very seed-pods of that fruit that sprung up and was ripened by our toil? For shame, – shall we want that which we can create by our labour, and preserve by our frugality?

Let us not confuse the idea of money with that of capital. We can do great things with very little of the former. Let us produce the plenty; we shall not be without sufficient money to represent it, and, as the representative credit of it, to convey it in exchange to distant producers and consumers. We are, even now, quite able to establish a bank and a circulating medium upon the solid principle of common unity and utility; but there does not exist a more mischievous evil in the old system than that of supposing an abundance of money conducive to the activity of production, or to the equitable distribution of produce. Permanent capital, which consists of mills, machinery, warehouses, &c., is the work of ourselves. Almost all the permanent capital of the kingdom is in possession of the capitalists; and I shall have much to say to you, in the course of these letters, with respect to the power with which we have been taught to consider it to be imbued. Fear it not, brethren. You are the soul and the life of it; and without you, its gigantic members are but the limbs of a mouldering carcass: which will again rise into existence, only when those who now claim the ownership of it shall cordially unite with us in all our consolidated efforts to render the plenty in our power the foundation of general comfort. In the meantime, as mechanists and builders come among us, we shall speedily have permanent capital of our own. With respect to the raw materials requisite for our various fabrics, the supply of them will be secured as our Union extends and embraces within its circle producers and cultivators, both at home and abroad.

4 A reference to the employers who perpetrated the lockout of silk weavers in 1833-34 to compel them to forswear trade union membership.

5 Charles Grey, second Earl Grey, 1764–1845, Whig Prime Minister, 1830-34.

But I am aware that, in the minds of many, a scheme of general trade unity, moving in all its various branches, as manufacturers, mechanics, agriculturists, and traders, to one great end – the general benefit, still appears to be extravagant. The conception say some, is too much in advance of the present era. This, brethren, is a weak and unmanly suggestion, which ought to be received with caution by those who love mankind, and wish sincerely the happiness of the race. Circumstances are far more frequently in the advance of the knowledge and the ideas of man, than men of the most extensive powers of foresight are in advance of the circumstances by which they are surrounded; and it is from the unprepared state of society to meet the constant series of changes to which it is unavoidably subjected, that a great portion of our difficulties and miseries continually proceed. The system of associated labour, into which, brethren, we are now so resolutely entering, is not a scheme or invention of any individual or body of individuals. There is no man can take upon himself to say that he has discovered it by the force of his vision, or that he has promulgated it through the impulse of his particular benevolence. No; the system of associated labour, is the natural and regular off-spring of the times in which we live; it is the unavoidable result of that concourse of circumstances which belong to the present state of civilization. By his particular position, and by his superior opportunities of observation and experiment, that eminent philanthropist, Robert Owen,⁶ has been enabled to announce the crisis of associated labour; but both he and associated labour itself, are the necessary consequences of events over which no powers on earth have any control. The time is arrived. Competition, if continued, must produce sanguinary revolution; it will not be continued, because the majority of the most powerful members of society, the productive classes, have become convinced that the interests of individuals can be secure only in the interests of the whole.

Hireling labour has been upheld upon the narrow principle, that millions of human beings are brought into the world with no other right to eat (with no other ticket to the public dinners of society, says Malthus), except what they can obtain by hiring themselves out for the service of others; in other words, by selling their lives, piecemeal, by the day, the week, the month, or the year. The slave is a human being, sold by one man to another and generally for life. The hireling labourer is compelled by hunger to sell himself, and would scarcely be worse off than he frequently is, could he, indeed, sell himself for life; but the civilized buyers of civilized men know better than to make such bargains; they only buy so much of a man as they can make any profit of; they will have the best joints, the best days of his life; all the rest may be thrown to the dogs, or in a ditch, or a workhouse, just as it may happen.

This purchased or hired labour, produces far more than the purchasers and the purchased can together consume; and yet the former will, even then, scarcely acknowledge that the latter have a clear right to sit down with them to what Mr. Malthus terms the “table of society.” It is well if the unhappy beings, after having given the longest and the hardest labour for their ticket, are allowed the broken meat from the over-loaded board; it is well if the lordly labour-buyers do not turn round upon them, and, pointing to the enormous abundance before them, say, “go away, we don’t want you; there is an over-production; there is a glut; you must go and starve in the outhouses until we want you to produce a fresh quantity.”

Is this image of the wretchedness to which hireling labour is subject too strongly marked? Ask the politi-

⁶ Robert Owen, 1771-1858, was the foremost communitarian socialist in early-nineteenth-century Britain. In the period 1833-34 he engaged with the trade union movement as a means of furthering his own socialist objectives. He was, though, generally antipathetic to the kind of struggles in which the trade unions engaged. Nor did he view favourably the kind of combative rhetoric that characterized the *Letters on Associated Labour*.

cal economists. The political economists, champions as they are for the dreadful system, in the pay of the capitalists, admit every feature of the figure to be correct, they vindicate its evils as matters of necessity, and then, with a compassionate smile, warn the miserable labourer of the folly and unkindness of propagating his species under such circumstances. Reduce yourselves to mere machines, and then you will have some small chance of competing with machinery. Oh, if you had no more life in you than a steam engine, what a happy race you would be!

And what, brethren, is the object of a system so debasing, so opposed to reason, and to religion? Profit, permanent profit; the accumulation of individual riches, and consequently the selfish appropriation of the wealth of the community in partial heaps! But the profits, so long the boast of ignorant and unfeeling avarice, are approaching their termination. The combined forces of ingenuity and industry, of machinery and labour, are creating such plenty, that profits are nearly impossible. The capitalist perceives in the very plenty that flows from his mills into warehouses, an accumulation of goods which he cannot force into the market; and he then turns round and tells the operatives that he must reduce their wages. Hence the cause, brethren, of the array in which we stand; it is, as I have already said, a position which circumstances have forced upon us. The old system, with its rulers, its capitalists, its money brokers, its lords and its princes, would if it could, make laws to repress our efforts, to imprison us, and, upon charges of treason, to bring out their hireling armies to slaughter, us. The government of France has ventured to take the lead in the work of oppression. Let them beware. But this is a subject on which I have much to say. We do not fear force or violence, but we hate it. No force that can be brought against our Unions, the Union of labour, either abroad or at home, can change the course of those events that are the natural results of the present state of civilization; but it will necessarily produce evils that humanity must deplore.

SENEX.