

# THE AMERICAN WORKMAN

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BY E. LEVASSEUR

STUDIES IN HISTORICAL & POLITICAL SCIENCE

# THE AMERICAN WORKMAN

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AMERICAN WORKMAN

BY

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AND IN THE CONSERVATORY OF ARTS AND CRAFTS

An American Translation

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Edited by

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Emile Levasseur, the author of the "American Workman," is a sincere and earnest man. The position he has occupied for more than a generation in the learned circles of Europe he owes not alone to his industry, knowledge and faculty for expression, but to a penetrating intellect and an unusual quality of final judgment of principles and events. It is valuable to have the vast material embraced in the present study pass through the mind of such a man, and to have his pronouncements upon the important questions raised. It will be found that he has brought to the task an admirable understanding of America and sympathy with it. His comprehensive knowledge of the past and of cotemporary conditions elsewhere and his long experience as a leader of thought in his own country enable him to give to the subject a proper perspective. Moreover the tribute he pays to American ingenuity and progress comes with better grace from him and bears a stamp of greater impartiality than if emanating from one of our own citizens.

The translator, Thomas S. Adams, is a thoroughly trained economist. His work has been faithfully and ably done. Added value has been given the study by the degree to which Mr. Adams has enlarged the statistics. So far as possible all statistics have been brought down to date. Where the early figures had no particular significance, they were simply replaced by later ones. In other cases a new note has been added or an old one expanded. The additions of the translator are noted thus: [Tr.]

Professor Richard T. Ely brings to the attention of the editor the fact that his "Labor Movement in America" referred to by Professor Levasseur was written nearly fifteen years ago, that not merely have conditions changed since then, but that he has modified somewhat the opinions expressed therein.

THEODORE MARBURG.

## AUTHOR'S LETTER TO THE TRANSLATOR

DEAR SIR AND COLLEAGUE:

Upon my first visit to America I was impressed from the beginning with the economic activity that appeared on every side. After having spent several months in visiting the Centennial Exposition, schools, manufacturing industries and several large cities, I came away with the conviction that the transformation of the immense territory of the United States into a rich and civilized country, settled and cultivated scarcely more than a century, was due less to the natural qualities of the soil, however great they might be, than to the genius of the American people. I felt that the moral causes of this magnificent development contained useful lessons for the rest of the world, and that they merited special study on this account.

In 1893 I returned to America with the design of undertaking the present study. "You will find great changes" remarked an eminent historian and philosopher before my departure.

And the changes did, indeed, seem very great. It is not in the American character to rest satisfied with past achievement; it is always pressing ahead. New lands brought under cultivation, a prodigious increase of mechanical power, of industrial concentration, and of products, a multiplication of the means of communication, of large associations of capital, wider organization of the laboring class, and extension of education: in all branches of social and economic activity I found remarkable development.

From the great number of subjects presented I had chosen in advance the organization of industry and the condition of the laborer, his relations with the entrepreneur and the state of his well-being considered as a private individual. The emphasis was placed upon the latter half of

the subject, and on my return to France I devoted four years to writing *The American Laborer*.

The United States constitutes the largest and most active laboratory of economic experiment in the world, and the so-called labor questions which agitate it, being the same as those which occupy the attention of Europe, I believed that such a publication would not only further the cause of science but that it might enlighten my own countrymen upon problems which they themselves have to settle, or at least to comprehend.

I also believed that such a study, grouping in one picture a multitude of facts usually scattered throughout a great number of different writings, and pursued in a spirit strictly scientific—with impartiality, but with sympathy—might be not without value to American readers. A foreigner sees the movement of a nation's life from a point of view different from that of the citizen interested and involved in the movement.

The difficulty in the way of interesting an American audience was the language and the length of a work in two volumes. To Mr. Theodore Marburg and yourself, my grateful acknowledgments are due for the solution of this difficulty; to Mr. Marburg for editing and providing for the publication of the English edition in the JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY STUDIES, and to you for the translation and condensation of the work into a single volume.

I have read your translation in manuscript, with pleasure, and at your suggestion have modified several statements of the original study. I am indebted to you also for the introduction of the more recent statistics.

If, as I have hoped, the book renders some service to economic study in America, our mutual labors will have been rewarded.

Sincerely,

E. LEVASSEUR,

*26 Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, Paris, September 12, 1900.*

## PREFACE

In 1893 the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* entrusted to me the economic inquiry annually assigned to some member, and instructed me to study the condition of the laboring classes in the United States.

I had made one visit to America in 1876. I made a second in 1893, in order to accomplish this mission, and spent five months in visiting factories, workshops and the homes of workingmen. During this time I endeavored to instruct myself by making the acquaintance of manufacturers, economists, and statisticians, to gather information by conversation and reading, and to collect the literature relating to my subject. Since my return I have devoted more than three years to elaborating this and other material which has been sent to me, as it was published, by my order or through the courtesy of obliging colleagues. I thank them for their invaluable co-operation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My acknowledgments are due, first of all, to the Hon. Carroll D. Wright, Commissioner of Labor, who while I was in America had the kindness to place me in communication with prominent manufacturers and with his colleagues, the chiefs of the State labor bureaus. Since my return he has aided me not only by sending me the important publications of his department, but by generously providing for the revision of the proofs of these two volumes. I include in my acknowledgments Mr. W. F. Willoughby, who was in immediate charge of this revision, and whose counsel has been most helpful. I wish to thank, also, Professor Mayo-Smith of Columbia University, who, happening to be at the same watering place as myself, kindly consented to read over the second and third parts; Mr. Sullivan, a member of the American Federation of Labor, who read the proof sheets of several chapters while he was in Paris towards the close of 1896, and gave me the benefit of his wide knowledge of labor problems; Mr. Gerin Lajoie, a Canadian physician whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Nashua, and later, in Paris; and Mr. Schaefer, an Alsatian, now living in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Several times while the book was being written, I made the economic condition of the United States the subject of my course of lectures at the *Collège de France*, and I thus found it necessary not only to study the subject in detail, but to present my results as clearly as possible. During this time I contributed several extracts from the work to the reviews, particularly American reviews, in the hope of evoking criticisms which would help me to improve the work; several chapters, as they were written, I read before the Academy. I now present, in these two volumes, the complete result of my study of the American laborer.

The work is divided into three parts. In the first, the *Laborer at Work*, I have considered the toiler. I have treated him in connection with the employer, and with the workshop where he spends his working day; in his relations to production, of which he is an agent, and with whose increase his interests are intimately connected; as a member of those associations by which he hopes to regulate to his advantage the conditions of the wage-contract. I have illustrated and discussed factory legislation, described the strike, and examined the various questions that arise in this connection; the rate and variation of wages, non-employment caused by crises and slack seasons, competition with American labor created by immigration. From this study of facts I have attempted to evolve the law of wages and discover the causes which regulate the price of labor, purposely confining myself to a statement of the opinions of American writers who have treated the subject.

In the second part, the *Laborer at Home*, I have considered the man. I have described his manner of life, his food, dress, dwelling, recreations, habits. In the first part, the investigation centered around the workshop. Here, the family is the center of the investigation. The *Laborer at Work* ends with a study of nominal wages. The *Laborer at Home* ends with a study of real wages—the sum of well-being which the laborer as a man procures with the money he receives as a workman.

If the first two parts are devoted to facts, the third part, I may almost say, is devoted to theories. In this part, *Labor Problems*, I have considered the antagonism between capital and labor, the perpetual contrast between poverty and luxury, the dependence of the employee upon the employer, the precarious livelihood and the scant comfort of the masses that live by their daily toil; finally, the causes which array one part of the laboring classes against the existing organization of society, inspire generous spirits with the desire of assisting their fellows, and to curious or speculative minds, suggest theories of social transformation by which they hope to eradicate positive evils. This is why I have found it necessary to describe the work of poor-relief, public and private, to examine the various forms of co-operation and employers' relief—particularly profit-sharing and productive co-operation—to investigate the extent to which arbitration and conciliation have proved useful in industrial disputes, to discuss the assertion that the protective tariff is the bulwark of high wages, to describe the experiments of socialistic settlements and depict the diverse theories and working policy of socialism. In the last chapter I have briefly recapitulated the principal conclusions to which the study of facts has led me, and have ventured to cast a glance into the future which presents conditions seeming to promise for American industry and American labor.

I have adopted this plan because it seemed clear and logical for a work which is essentially an economic history.

Economic truths possess an interest of their own, independent of the inferences that can be drawn from them. One must have facts to grasp a situation or discuss a question with authority. The author's task is to gather accurately the greatest possible number of facts; to select, soberly and critically, those most fitted to characterize the situation; and finally, to group and exhibit them in an orderly arrangement so as to form, where possible, an instructive picture.

Furthermore, these facts have causes and consequences. It is another duty of the author to present them in such a way that cause and consequence will appear in their proper relation, or at least be distinguishable.

In economic history, as I understand it, the author is not a mere annalist; he is philosopher as well, who draws a moral from experience and attempts to enlighten economic practice by quoting the past at the same time that he labors to improve economic theory by investigating the laws which govern facts. Hence, while yielding the principal place to facts, he must review and pass judgment upon them. To be sincere and well informed, to possess the judicial mind and a knowledge of the general principles of political economy, these are the essential qualifications for the writer who would treat questions of this nature.

The great historian of the revolution and the empire, Thiers, has compared the historical work to a perfectly transparent glass, through which every object is seen as in the plane of a perspective. To my mind, he asks at once too little and too much. The historian cannot show everything, nor should he attempt it. Composition always requires selection and arrangement, and every writer, whether he is conscious of it or not, is a judge. To continue the analogy, I should say that the glass through which he causes the objects to be seen, may distort the images. But if the narration has been sufficiently faithful, the reader will have enough facts at his command, will be able to view them without the lens of the author, and may accept or reject the author's interpretations.

There has been, and there will continue to be, much discussion as to the use of the historical method in political economy. Among economists, as in many other professions, there are a few narrow minds who are never able to see more than one side of a question. Some, starting from the principles that human society is in a state of unceasing evolution and that economic phenomena are mere

accidents of time and place, tell their story without caring to finish it and without attempting to look beneath the surface for the economic law in whose existence they do not believe. These are the annalists; they are not the real historians of political economy. Equally as unworthy of the title, are those who manipulate their facts as they would an army, bending the lines of history to fit the plan of their own preconceived campaign.

Others declare that political economy is a science which has need of only a very limited number of observations to establish its fundamental laws upon a solid basis. These maintain that the essence of phenomena is always the same; they are convinced that a multiplicity of historical detail adds nothing, in fact, that it has the actual disadvantage of obscuring the process of deduction by introducing differences based upon wholly accidental conditions. Holding their views, one would be at a loss to construct a system of natural laws from the conglomeration of abnormalities and economic errors which are so frequent in human societies. Such economists are pure theorists, and regard the science as wholly deductive and rational.

There undoubtedly exists a special order of facts known as *economic*, which, without being the single center whither all the interests, ideas, and passions of humanity gravitate, forms nevertheless one of the pivotal points of the social movement. But this class of facts is intimately commingled with other social phenomena, and, after it has been isolated for the purposes of analysis, it cannot be rightly understood until it is studied in connection with the whole social movement peculiar to each nation and each epoch. It may be the subject of special study: it should be and it is, precisely, the subject-matter of economic science. It may be asserted that this science is at present incapable of complete development, on the grounds that contradictory and irreconcilable judgments often manifest themselves in the interpretation of economic facts,

and that the social sciences, in conformity with the society they study, are in a state of perpetual becoming. But it cannot be doubted that we have here the subject-matter of a science.

In general, the economists of the first part of the nineteenth century were theorists: Ricardo and Rossi, for instance, belong to this category. During the second half of the century more attention has been paid to historical research, the observation of phenomena, the condition of the people; and while these researches have enlarged the horizon and confirmed certain laws, they have also shaken the faith that was once reposed in the universality of others. Roscher was one of the masters who blazed the new path, and it was in his footsteps, some forty years ago, that I entered the domain of economic science, through the door of history, by writing the *Recherches Historiques sur le Système de Law*, and afterwards, the *Histoire des Classes Ouvrières en France*.

In a field so vast as economics, the student may take up the work at many different points and still produce fruitful studies. It has been said that political economy is a physico-social science. I add that it is more social and moral than physical, because the content of the science consists principally of the relations established between men in the exchange of goods and services, even though its subject—wealth—is material. Having a definite scope and a number of solidly established principles, political economy seems to be more advanced than most of the moral sciences.

The theoretical school expounds the science, or some division of it, by a methodical concatenation of propositions, and arrives at simple and logical conclusions through the processes of deduction. The experimental school presents the subject in a more concrete way by endeavoring to found its demonstrations upon positive proofs; but, though resting upon history, it has a dogmatic doctrine of its own. Observation preserves this school from the dan-

ger of losing its qualities of reality and fruitfulness, allows it to test the doctrines of the deductive school, to penetrate the secrets of the life of nations, and thus to interpret the diversity of phenomena at a given epoch, or their variation from one epoch to another. As the material interests of society change, the experimental science may extend its researches and the bearing of its doctrines, and show the intimate relation that always exists between economic phenomena and the whole social being.

Like all the moral sciences, political economy gives rise to various schools which sometimes succeed one another and sometimes exist side by side, struggling for the supremacy. I would class myself with the liberal school, the school which is sometimes called *classical*, sometimes *orthodox*, though both terms are unfortunate. Orthodoxy in science should be unknown, and there is nothing truly classical but the truth. No sincere effort to clear or cultivate the domain of economics is out of place. There is room for all: the narrator who is content to record facts; the statistician who enumerates them; the mathematician who, at a great risk of failure, attempts to fix in algebraic formulæ the relations resulting from exchange. "Each study supplements the other; there is no rivalry or opposition between them," Professor Marshall has said. I prefer this attitude to that of those economists who feel themselves obliged to tear preceding theories to pieces in order to call attention to their own innovations. They do not perceive that besides incurring the reproach of undue severity and lack of modesty, they discredit the authority of their own science. A small herb may be planted anew each year, but a great tree, that is to live through the centuries, retains its general form and develops by the gradual addition of branches and the slow renewal of its tissues.

Economic history has a prominent part in this harmonious development. It is true that the economist needs no history to establish certain simple notions, such as the axioms that production results from the co-operation of

three factors, and that value is a ratio fixed by exchange between two quantities of commodities, although these concepts, like others, were only gradually evolved and formulated in the works of the masters. But to differentiate accurately the rôles of the three factors in past and present combinations of human industry, or to ascertain the relation of the methods of exchange to the general social economy of nations, we must have recourse both to history and a minute analysis of a large number of facts.

The human mind has a natural inclination to simplify and generalize; it is one of its innate philosophical properties. The economist obeys this inclination when he seeks to find the explanation of his phenomena in a single cause and condense its expression in a brief formula. But economic like all social phenomena are often the resultants of complex and even conflicting forces which do not lend themselves to this reduction. Such, it seems to me, is the law of population. In a theoretical chapter of my work *La Population Française*, I have criticised the law which Malthus proposed, while eulogizing the author, and have tried to express it by a more flexible and comprehensive group of causes. In conformity with the same method, I have attempted in two chapters of the present work to enumerate and measure the influences affecting wages, and to gauge the interaction of the rate of wages and the standard of comfort of the laboring class. This is one of the principal theoretical subjects which I have proposed to myself in writing *The American Laborer*.

Every economic movement does not necessarily lead to a formula, though the common basis of all is theory. Many of these movements cannot be ignored by the economist, because they raise questions which are continually being thrust forward and which cannot be left unanswered. The labor problems are of this number: they have become social and political questions of the gravest importance. Many of those who concern themselves with these questions regard them as the greatest menace of our times;

others hail them as the prelude to a social regeneration. I prefer to see in them an evolutionary crisis which conflicting passions, rather than divergent interests, have in our day rendered acute. In all probability we shall be troubled with them for a long time. But from the very nature of things, the conflicting interests must finally be brought into harmony, passions be softened by a better provision for the contingencies that arise, and this without changing the basis of social organization necessary to the progress of civilization and the economical functioning of society. In this connection, without being absolutely optimistic, I gladly apply to Europe what I say of America at the end of this work: *Fata viam invenient*. For although it is manifest that the equilibrium between the political and economic powers of every nation must in time be disturbed, and that the relations between the social classes must be modified by the progress of democracy and the development of industry, it is impossible that the whole civilization of the world should suffer an eclipse so long as science, liberty and individual enterprise exist.

The transformation of small manufactures and the growth of the unit of industry, the regulation and inspection of factories, the employment of machinery and manual labor, the work of women and children, the competition between native and imported labor, apprenticeship and manual training, the mode of payment and the rate of wages, the causes and effects of the diversity of wages, profit-sharing and premiums for fast work, strikes and lock-outs, arbitration and conciliation, the conditions of living and the lodging of the working classes, the influence of the standard of comfort upon the rate of wages, saving and foresight in workingmen's families, pauperism and poor-relief, employers' aid, labor-unions and associations of employers, co-operative production and consumption, the propaganda of a spirit of antagonism between employer and employee, the desire for revolution common to all systems of socialism in spite of their diversity: these

are some of the facts, movements and problems which are to-day presented in the industrial world. They are often spoken of collectively as the *labor question* or the *social question*, but they are really distinct problems for the most part, incapable of settlement by a single solution. While we are not to lose sight of the bonds that unite them, we must study them one at a time, trace out the cause, the essence, the effect of each movement, and, where it is possible, the special solution of each problem. As a rule, this group of facts and ideas is the more varied, animated, and important as the industrial centers in which they manifest themselves are freer, larger and more active. In these three qualities the United States yield place to none. Thanks to the number of inhabitants, the spirit of enterprise and the industrial freedom which characterize them, they have come to be a laboratory for social and industrial experiments, vaster and more active than any other in the world.

It is fitting that we should study them; for their own sake, in the first place, that we may know the United States; in the second place, for the inspiring example they offer science in its task of solving similar problems in Europe. This is why I have written *The American Laborer*.

E. LEVASSEUR.

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