

## Who will do the Dirty Work?

*Tony Gibson*

EVERYONE who speaks on the subject of anarchism meets the ever-recurring question, 'But in a social condition of anarchy, who will clean out the sewers?' There are variants of the question; sometimes the enquiry concerns those who will do the hardest work or the dirtiest work, but generally the sewers are mentioned specifically. It would seem that everyone wants to be sure that he will not have to work in the sewers in a free society. Perhaps the capitalist and authoritarian status quo derives the apathetic support it does conditional on the fact that only a tiny fraction of the working-class are economically forced to work in the sewers. I have had no contact with sewer-workers myself; perhaps, not having had the usual bogey before them, they are unafraid of the coming social revolution, for, after all, they work in the sewers, anyway.

I have for many years evaded this haunting question when speaking to public audiences, for I am convinced that the real motive that prompts it must be left to the psychoanalysts, who could tell us quite a lot about the basis of this sewer-dread in the unconscious mind. I feel that sense of embarrassment that we all feel when we are in danger of unearthing someone else's pet neurosis. However, I am now prepared to treat the question, in print, as though it were a rational one.

Before considering who, in fact, will clean out the sewers and do other work that is generally considered 'dirty', in a free society, let us first consider who does it now. Let us also enquire into the nature of 'dirty work'. The people who are now concerned with 'dirty work' are sewer-cleaners, dustmen, surgeons, housewives, slaughter-house men, hospital nurses, lawyers, soldiers, farmers, politicians, tannery workers, gutter-journalists, etc., etc. The first main distinction we may make is between those who can wash off the dirt of their trade at the end of the day's work, and those who cannot. Dirty work is not to everyone's taste. The smells of the sewer or tannery would revolt some people; others would be revolted by the things a surgeon, nurse or slaughter-house man does; others would prefer to do either of these things than touch the filth that lies in the province of the lawyer, politician and gutter-journalist. Our tastes vary.

What is notable about these different occupations is that some are highly paid and some poorly paid. This makes a great difference in our money-conscious society, but perhaps the social prestige attached to the job carries even more weight with many people. A great number of men would rather slave away at an underpaid clerking job with no hope of advancement than undertake the healthier and better paid work of dock-worker. Many girls will work ten hours a day toting bed-pans and dressing wounds rather than take work as a bar-maid. The question of pay and of the 'dirtiness' of the work does not always override considerations of social esteem (often called snobbery).

For a short while I happened to be cleaning the streets of Cardiff for my living; while attending an intellectual gathering a lady asked me what my work was. I told her. Perhaps she was right in thinking that I wished to be rude to her by telling her the truth. Had I wished to play up to the occasion and avoid paining her, I would have vaguely replied that I worked in an important occupation for the benefit of the municipality.

I have read with interest of the shift of social prestige connected with work in the newly organized state of Israel. There, owing to the peculiar nature of the immigrants, there is a huge surplus of professional men. Lawyers, doctors, professors, architects, etc., are far too numerous and there is no living to be made by the majority of them, but bricklayers, navvies, agricultural workers, etc., are in huge demand. Manual work therefore commands a high wage, and the professional men are taking

to it, but the important shift of emphasis is that now jobs that make your hands dirty are socially approved in Israel, in contrast to the social contempt in which such work is held in other capitalist countries. No doubt if capitalism persists in Israel the situation will deteriorate to match other countries, but while it lasts it is an interesting exposition of how a social attitude can quickly change towards 'dirty work'.

It has been pointed out time and again that in a sanely organized society there would be no problem of work which is intrinsically dirty, revolting and degrading to the average man. Such things as garbage collection, sewage disposal, rag picking, furnace stoking, etc., are unpleasant operations in contemporary society only because the men employed in them have not the power to alter their conditions of work. If there were not powerless and exploited beings who must accept filthy and unpleasant conditions of work, as there are to-day, these operations would have priority for the best scientific research and technical skill to be applied to them to make them not merely acceptable as occupations, but congenial. For the key to social harmony lies in the relation of human beings to their work. I would define a free society (that is a healthy society) as one in which there is no social coercion compelling the individual to work.

This definition of anarchy may call forth considerable protest from some anarchists, but I mean it in its most literal sense. Superficially, such an idea seems completely unrealistic, and to be dismissed out of hand as foolish idealism by those who have some experience of life. Let me disassociate myself from all idealism. I have had practical experience of idealists who had such faith in and love of 'Man' that they would let themselves be exploited by work-shy layabouts rather than face the fact that they were supporting parasites to no good purpose. But I also want to make it clear that there is no freedom, nor stability, nor health in any community of people, large or small, where the socially necessary work is carried out merely from a sense of social duty which is imposed upon the individual. The only justification for work is the fact that we enjoy it. Any society which relies upon political, economic or moral coercion as the mainspring of its productive process is doomed to unhealth and some form of servitude.

Work may be defined as the expenditure of energy in a productive process, as distinct from play which is the expenditure of energy without productive result. Work is characteristic of the healthy adult being, play of the healthy child whose energies are occupied in developing his own capacities. Significantly enough, the play of the children of humans, and of other mammals, is generally a rehearsal of adult work-activities.

It is generally realized that work is a necessity for every adult. Those people who have no economic need to work, by reason of their wealth, have to seek work-substitutes to preserve their mental and physical health. They remain, as it were, permanent children, playing at fishing, hunting, sailing boats, gardening and farming, and often find satisfaction in quite strenuous work-play. The lower mammals are no different from humans; they need to work when they are adult. Being less troubled by intellectual doubt, they pursue their occupations with wholehearted satisfaction. In studying creatures simpler than ourselves there can be no doubt as to what gives them pleasure: the otter likes to fish, the beaver to build dams, the squirrel to collect nuts, the rabbit to burrow. Some people may point to their domestic Pussy, 'corrupted by a thousand years of unnatural living', who prefers to lap milk by the fireside than to hunt mice in the cellar, and draw the analogy that modern man is an unnatural animal and needs to be kicked before he will work. In this common analogy there is a biological fallacy. Neither Pussy, nor you, nor I, is a thousand years old: we are not instinctually conditioned by the experiences of our ancestors. We have a certain instinctual endowment which is pretty much the same as when our species first originated, and our behaviour is conditioned by the environment we encounter in our own life span. Turn pampered Pussy loose in the woods and she will revert to a natural feline way of life; remove the pressure of neurotic 20th century civilization

from you and me and we will have the chance of reverting to a natural human way of life which, I contend, includes as spontaneous a wish for and enjoyment of work as the way of life of any other animal species. At present, many of the civilized varieties of our species appear to be unique in the animal kingdom in that their productive process expresses no joy of life. The position is even worse than this: we take it for granted that all animals enjoy the procreative process, but among many of our species even this function has lost its pleasure.

Do we have to look further for the roots of all the social disharmony and individual misery of our time? With us, work is generally regarded as a regrettable necessity, an activity to be endured only for the sake of the material goods produced, or rather for the wage packet which bears no obvious relationship to the work done. The best that the reformers, social planners and even social revolutionaries can suggest is that we may make the working day shorter and shorter, so that there will be less pain (work) and more pleasure (idleness) in our lives. I have even heard an anarchist meeting discussing whether in the great and glorious by-and-by we should have to do three hours work a day or three hours work a week. This is strictly comparable to the following extract from an American sex-instruction manual:

‘Question. How long does the penis have to stay in the vagina? Answer. Only a few minutes.’ Another regrettable necessity!

I do not care if in a social state of anarchy we work a great deal longer than we do today under capitalism. What I am concerned about is that the work itself shall be intrinsically satisfying. I see no other way of ensuring this than the abandonment of coercion as the mainspring of production.

It is obvious that if the wages-system, which is the chief coercive force compelling men to work at their present jobs to-day, were to break down, the following situation would arise. A large number of people would be liberated but disorientated and they would immediately take the attitude of, ‘From now on it’s spiv and live for me – only mugs work!’ This is to be expected. Domesticated Pussy when first turned loose in the woods looks around for another house to sponge off; she does not immediately take on a natural feline way of life. It is this situation that most social revolutionaries are afraid of, and they seek to set up authoritarian machinery to substitute political coercion for the economic coercion of capitalism. It is true that political coercion is not always easy to apply to the productive processes; under Lenin’s dictatorship it was largely abandoned for the economic coercion of the N.E.P. However, if coercion is still resorted to after the breakdown of capitalism in order that men will still work, the ‘spiv and live’ attitude will be preserved as a permanent social attitude.

The problem is not one of ‘faith’ in human nature, it is one of understanding. Either one realizes that human beings are social animals with basically sound animal instincts for self-preservation, or one does not. Those who do not realize the potential animal health of their own kind are generally idealists who have some idealized concept of Man, and take it for granted that Tom, Dick and Harry must be bludgeoned into working, eating, sleeping, bedding with their wives, and cleaning their teeth in the approved manner or they will die from lack of knowing what Man should be. Tom, Dick and Harry are not always pretty creatures, but they are generally better social specimens than the do-gooders, the dangerous fools who would accept the responsibility for organizing their lives for them.

It is my purpose to draw particular attention to the anti-social nature of conscientious administrators. We all know about the harmful nature of conscious exploiters and racketeers under so-called laissez-faire capitalism, but it is the prophets of planned economy and super-government who are the harbingers of famine, war and desolation for the future.

If through a revolutionary breakdown of capitalist society, the compulsion to go to the accustomed place of wage-slavery is no longer operative, then the disorientated people will have the chance to turn to production for use to satisfy their own needs for work. It is usually assumed that the great problem is what ulterior incentives or compulsions to work must be instituted to satisfy the demands of the consumers. We tend to forget that it is as natural for men to produce as to consume. In any society where the producers of wealth are not subject to coercion, the demands of the consumers must follow what it is the nature of that society to produce, every adult being both producer and consumer. That this is hard for many people to realize, I know, for we are accustomed to think of there being a class of 'workers' in society, whose function it is to do as they are told. If the 'consumers' demand televisions, battleships, Coca-Cola and coal, then the 'workers' have no say in the matter: they must produce them. It is time we tried to conceive a society without the coercion of worker by consumer, for as long as we have this picture engraved on our minds it is impossible to think in terms of practical anarchy.

Anarchist writers have dealt at length with the fact that only a very small percentage of the people in this country are really producing anything useful or performing any socially useful function whatever, in spite of the vast degree of unpleasant activity around us. A gross dislocation of our industry would not therefore be a calamity at all. We need a breakdown of the present industrial system; we need revolution and real anarchy in which to reorganize our productive processes with workers in control of their work and motivated by their own need to work, instead of their need of a pay-packet.

The worst calamity that can take place after the breakdown of capitalism is the replacement of economic coercion by political coercion. We are already experiencing the thin edge of the wedge. Those workers who are no longer on the economic border of destitution sometimes choose to stay away from work. As the economic bludgeon fails to intimidate them, the State has recourse to the political bludgeon, and criminal proceedings are taken. How else would you coerce men to work? Either, the individual must be free to go to work or stay away, and Society can lump it, or Society must preserve its coercive machinery, the State. Anarchism is based on the recognition of the fact that, in freedom, men will choose to work.

'But surely some workers, the workers concerned with essential services – cleaning the sewers for instance – must be made to carry out their work, even under anarchy!'

Will you go down and clean out those sewers for the sake of Society, Madam? No? Then, Madam, you may have to use the yard. Or perhaps you will find that many people are less squeamish than you, and will take delight, yes delight, in tackling difficult projects, and they will take more interest in disposing of your sewage efficiently, hygienically and usefully than you do yourself. They may even send it back to you in the form of properly grown vegetables.

*(Reprinted from the pamphlet with the full title 'But Mr Speaker, in an anarchist society – "Who will do the dirty work?"' Published by Freedom Press in 1952.)*

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