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# Fatal Fallacies

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It has been the purpose of this Magazine to call things by their right names. A word is the sign of an idea — or should be. Webster says a “word is the spoken sign of a conception or idea.” The purpose of lexicographers is to find out the correct “conception or idea” of which a word is the sign. It is prudent to be particular. We are discussing fatal fallacies. Some words are more important than others. Taking a full survey of the vocabulary field, we conjecture, all things considered, that the term Labor has a significance high in the list. Efforts have been made to dwarf it. It has been stigmatized. We hear men, statesmen (?), politicians, political economists, lawyers, clergymen, philanthropists, men claiming scholarly attainments, talk about “pauper labor.” Manifestly a pauper is a “poor person,” “especially, one so indigent as to depend upon charity,” but “pauper labor” is a misnomer. Paupers do not work, do not labor. Paupers are supported by men who do work. Labor supports all the paupers of the country — as it does everything else.

The crowned heads of the earth are paupers, they live off the products of labor. The term “pauper” ought never to be applied to a laboring man, the beaded sweat on his sun-browned or toil-wrinkled brow should forever exempt him from the stigma of pauper. He does not ask for charity. He is not a burden upon society. He may be the victim of oppression, he may be robbed and degraded, but he is not a pauper; on the contrary, the kings, the aristocrats, the trusts, the monopolies that crush him, grow rich and fat by their robberies from his limited resources.

But of late it has become common to speak of labor as “a commodity,” and we find the following in a labor paper of recent date:

That labor is a commodity, and sells in the market as such, the prices being governed by quality, supply and demand, is a proposition so well understood that no one but a knave, a fool or

a demagogue will attempt to dispute or controvert it. And as the first two are the chief ingredients in the composition of the demagogue we might say that no one would dispute the proposition but a knave or a fool. That it should be different, no one with a particle of love or sympathy for his fellows will dispute; but as long as labor is subject to existing conditions it must be considered a commodity. Only through cooperation can it be made anything else. If this is not true why is it that wages differ so greatly in different states of the union? And differ widely in the same locality at different periods?

We ask for the foregoing a careful perusal because it has found its way to the eyes of a large number of laboring men. To poison thought at the fountain head of the stream, we regard as a far more reprehensible proceeding than to throw in the deadly drug where the current is wider, deeper and stronger. The quotation we have used is fatal enough anywhere, but to send it to a workingman's home to be perused by his wife and children is an exhibition of such stupendous stupidity as to defy exaggeration.

We are told that "labor is a commodity and sells in the market as such." This extraordinary declaration brings into prominence the words, "labor," "commodity," and "sells." What "conception or idea" is the word "labor" a sign of? Webster says, "physical toil or bodily exertion," "hard, muscular effort directed to some useful end." The great lexicographer nowhere says "labor is a commodity." Nor has any English or American lexicographer or philologist ever intimated that labor is a "commodity." The highest authority says the "word labor comes from the Latin *labo*, to falter, to faint, because labor causes faintness." Certainly if labor were a "commodity" it would not faint. It would not become weary — become hungry and thirsty, starve and die. Commodities do not get married, have children and homes. A commodity does not have high ambitions to better its condition. It does not laugh and weep. But what is a commodity? Webster says it includes "everything movable that is bought and sold — goods, wares, merchandise, produce of land and manufactories," etc. "But," says a writer of distinction, "the terms commodity, goods, wares, merchandise agree in expressing articles of trade under various circumstances. A country has its commodities, a shopkeeper his goods, a merchant his merchandise and a manufacturer his wares." It is nowhere hinted that labor is a "commodity" to be bought and sold, like hides and hair and hemp, bacon and beef, coal and codfish, timber

and tar, pig iron and pig lead, guano and gutta percha. In a word, labor is not, never was, and can never be a commodity.

But the writer we have quoted says labor "sells in the market" as a commodity. Webster says to sell is to transfer to another, to give up for a consideration, to dispose of in return for something, especially for money. Sell is correlative to buy, as one party buys what the other sells." And to buy is "to acquire the property, right or title to, by paying a consideration or an equivalent, usually in money."

It is not surprising that some men regard labor as a "commodity" to be bought and sold in the market as a "raw material," goods, merchandise, and wares of any and every description, and hence, we hear of the "labor market" as we do of the "horse and mule market," the "wool market," the "cattle market," etc.

There was a time in the United States when we had a "slave market," slave blocks, where labor and the laborer were sold because they are inseparable. There were slave pens, where the laborer was corralled, awaiting a purchaser, and in those dark days of our country laborers were regarded as chattels, probably as a commodity, but the conception, the idea was false, and as a result the echo of Sumpter's gun had not ceased reverberating, had not died away until the slave had become a freeman. The block, the pen, the market disappeared and the "commodity," the "chattel" expanded to the citizen, and now the people hire labor — they do not buy and sell labor.

Now, we submit that the word "hire" is the sign of the correct conception or idea when discussing the employment of laborers. "To hire," says Webster, "is to engage in service for a stipulated reward, to contract with for wages." When a man buys he obtains a title to the thing bought, he takes possession, owns and controls it. This was the case in slave times when a man bought a negro — he got a title to him, took possession of him. The slave had no reserved rights. Not so now when he hires the negro. The distinction is sharply defined, the difference is as wide as that between slavery and freedom.

But the writer from whom we have quoted says labor is a "commodity and sells in the market as such." Certainly if labor is a commodity to be bought somewhere where it is bought and sold. Now, a market, according to Webster, is "a public place in a city or town where produce or cattle are exposed to sale," and if there is a labor market those who visit it find labor, and necessarily laborers, exposed to sale, as "cattle and provisions." We doubt if laboring men of intelligence and independence fall in with such theories, or adopt such

fatal fallacies. The man who in this age of the world attempts to educate workingmen into the belief that labor is a commodity that is bought and sold "in the market as such," may not be a "knave," or a "fool" in the most odious sense of such terms. We should incline to the opinion that he is incurably insane, or that he is totally ignorant of the meaning of words, and therefore disqualified to give instructions upon labor topics.

We are not disposed to apply epithets to the writer from whom we have quoted. His sins are by no means peculiar to him. He only clumsily repeats what the enemies of labor have said often in their efforts to create public opinion hostile to laboring men and in which they have made too much headway for the good of society. If labor is a commodity, what is a laboring man? If labor is bought and sold in the market like cattle and provisions, and its price is regulated solely by supply and demand, why may not employers treat labor and the laborer as the owners of the Pennsylvania mines treat their miners, or, as the managers of the CB&Q, treat their employees? If the "commodity" becomes restive and attempts to revolt because the price for which it was sold in the market does not give it sufficient food, clothing and shelter, why not call in the Pinkertons to quiet it with bullets and bayonets? Look at it as we may the terms "commodity," "buy" and "sell," when applied to labor are degrading, and ought never to be used in the discussion of labor in any of its relations to the body politic, social, financial, or industrial.

The writer we have quoted concludes that labor is a commodity under "existing conditions" and that "only through cooperation can it be made anything else." What else can it be made? Is cooperation to close the "market" and put an end to the selling? Is cooperation to remove the "supply and demand" basis of wages? All hail cooperation, anything that will eliminate from the discussion such fatal fallacies as that labor is a "commodity," that it is bought and sold in the market like cattle and provisions, fertilizers and fish, leather and liquors will be a gain of large consequence. It will be educating up instead of down.

To know that the occupation of the "knave," the "fool" and the "demagogue," as writers upon labor questions is gone forever, will be hailed with thanksgiving by those who fight fatal fallacies in such discussions. When that time comes we shall hear no more about the "market" where labor "sells," where it is bought and sold as a commodity. Then labor, the fashioning, building, preserving and enrich-

ing force of the world, will have its champions in high executive and judicial positions and its voice will be heard where men deliberate for the welfare and glory of the country. Then labor will have its equitable share of the wealth it creates, and hovels will give place to beautiful homes, men will cease to be overworked and underpaid, society will be secure and the nation prosperous. The good time is coming. Labor is organizing, labor is federating. Workingmen have their press, their books, their libraries, their lodges. Good seed is being sown, it is taking root in good ground, the harvest is to be abundant, and when the toilers, united harmoniously, with voices attuned to victory, join in the harvest-home shout, the world will listen to music such as has not been heard since the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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