

EDITORIAL

AN ECONOMIC PROBLEM.

By DANIEL DE LEON

ON the two-fold character of labor a Massachusetts correspondent presents a problem which he states in these words:

“I maintain that a barrel of flour in Minneapolis, valued at three dollars, has as much utility value as it has in Boston, where the value of the same barrel of flour is five dollars. I maintain that the labor expended in bringing the barrel of flour to Boston is abstract social labor necessary, and counts quantitatively; and that not one particle of the concrete useful labor has been expended from the time the barrel of flour left Minneapolis until it reached the consumer in Boston. And neither do I deny but that it has more utility to the consumer, in Boston, than it would have for him if left in Minneapolis, for which he pays the increased value of two dollars.”

The labor expended in turning the raw material in Minneapolis into a barrel of flour is concrete useful labor.

The labor expended in transporting the Minneapolis product to Boston is abstract labor.

The value, meaning exchange-value, of the Minneapolis product is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor crystallized in the Minneapolis product.

Into the exchange-value of that Minneapolis barrel of flour there enter three main factors:—

First—The socially necessary (concrete) labor of raising the agricultural raw product.—If that labor was performed by primitive plows together with other primitive contrivances, when improved agricultural implements were available, then the (concrete) labor expended was not socially necessary, but was, to some extent, socially superfluous, and, to the extent of its being socially superfluous, would be lost, would convey no exchange-value.

Second—The socially necessary (abstract) labor of transporting the raw

material to the Minneapolis mill.—If transportation was made by ox-teams, when the less laborious railway method is available, then the (abstract) labor expended was not socially necessary, but was, to some extent, socially superfluous, and, to the extent of its being socially superfluous, would add no additional exchange value to the exchange-value of the raw material on which it was expended.

Third—The socially necessary (concrete) labor of grinding the raw material into flour. If the grinding was made by the archaic method of the upper millstone worked by human muscle upon the nether millstone, when the less laborious machine-operated process is available, then the (concrete) labor expended was not socially necessary, but was, to some extent, socially superfluous, and, to the extent of its being socially superfluous, would add no additional exchange-value to the exchange-value of the material on which it was expended.

Into the exchange-value of the Minneapolis barrel of flour in Boston there enter, for the above reasons, four factors:—

First—The three factors that entered into the exchange-value of the barrel of flour in Minneapolis,

Second—The socially necessary (abstract) labor of transporting the finished product to Boston.

If we understand the problem presented by our Massachusetts correspondent, he gives to a distinction of secondary importance—the distinction between “production” and “transportation” or “exchange”—a sweep that is not in them, and that, when given, acts as a tangle-foot to reasoning.

The sum total of human efforts—“abstract” and “concrete” and of all shades of “concreteness” and “abstractness”—requisite to present a useful article to the consumer is PRODUCTION.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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