

The Intellectual and the Worker

(Speech read on the 1st of May 1905 to the Bread Workers Federation)

Manuel González Prada

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Contents

II	4
III	6

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Don't laugh if we begin by translating the verses of a poet.

On a hot day's evening, Nature dozes off in the Sun's rays, like a woman exhausted by her lover's caresses.

A young farm worker, panting and bathed in sweat, drives his oxen. But all of a sudden, he stops to speak to a young man who arrives singing a song:

"Lucky you! You spend your life singing while I, from dawn until dusk, wear myself out plowing fields and planting wheat."

"Oh farmer, how you deceive yourself!" the young poet replies. "We both are of the same ilk and can call ourselves brothers; because if your work is planting seeds in the ground, mine is planting seeds in people's hearts. Your work is as fruitful as my own: grains of wheat to sustain the body, the poet's songs to delight and nourish the soul."

This poem teaches us that it is just as valuable to plant wheat in the fields as it is to spread ideas in our heads. Thinkers who work with their intelligence are not better than laborers who work with their hands. Instead of marching separately and thinking of each other as enemies, lawyers and factory workers should walk united in a bond that cannot be broken.

But, is there any work that is either purely intellectual or exclusively physical? Workers think and ponder: blacksmiths making locks, bricklayers leveling walls, printers making proofs, carpenters refining their handiwork, miners striking a vein – even potters think and ponder. There is only one kind of mindless physical work – that done by machines. Where workers use their hands, they also use their heads. The reverse is true with the tasks we call intellectual. The mental fatigue of creative and thoughtful minds goes hand in hand with the physical fatigue of those who perform physical labor. They get tired and overwhelmed: painters by their brushes, sculptors by their chisel, musicians by their instruments, and writers by their pens – even orators get tired and overwhelmed by the use of words. What could be less physical than prayer and ecstasy? Well, the mystic does give in to the effort of kneeling down and puts his arms on the cross.

Physical strength and mental energy create and sustain human works. In any set of railroad tracks, each cross tie represents the life of one person. As we travel along them, let us imagine that we coast in our car along rails nailed on the backs of a series of cadavers. However, as we travel through museums and libraries, let us also imagine that we pass through a kind of cemetery where stones, statues, and books contain not only the thoughts, but the life of each author.

You (we speak only to the bread bakers), you stay awake kneading flour and watching over the dough rising and the ovens heating. At the same time, many people who don't make bread also stay awake – sharpening their minds, using their pen and fighting off sleep's powerful advances. These are the journalists. When in the early hours of the morning the daily news leaves hot off the presses at the same time as the sweet-smelling and provocative bread rises up from the ovens, we should then ask ourselves: who made better use of the night, the reporter or the baker?

True, the newspaper contains the encyclopedia of the masses – knowledge given in small doses and science dressed in the simple language of the people. It is the book for those who do not have a library, the reading for those who hardly know or want to read. And what of bread? A

symbol of nutrition or of life, it is not happiness, but there is no happiness without it. Its absence brings darkness and creates discord at home. But its presence brings light and tranquility. When the fresh-baked bread arrives, children welcome it with cries of joy and the old with a smile of contented relief. Vegetarians, who loathe meat as unwholesome and reprehensible, bless bread as healthy and restorative food. Some things cannot be replaced – millionaires may expel pure crystal water from their table, but they have not been able to find a substitute for it or do without it. Water is absolutely required whether you're in Rothschild's home or a beggar's shack. In ancient times of myth and legend, queens used to bake bread and ration it out to hungry pilgrims. Today common people bake bread, and in Russia they offer it as a sign of hospitality to the czars when they visit the towns and cities. Yet Nicholas II and his whole line of tyrants respond to this offering with whips, sabers, and bullets.¹

If journalists claim that theirs is the greater task, we could reply: the mind cannot survive on thoughts alone; not everyone reads, but everyone has to eat.

II

When we extol the union or alliance of intelligence with manual labor we do not expect by way of an illusory hierarchy that the intellectual will act as a tutor or instructor for the worker. We owe the idea that the brain performs a more noble function than the muscle to the caste system. Ever since the grand empires of the East there have been men who claim for themselves the right to think, designating for the masses the obligation of believing and working.

Intellectuals make use of light; but they should not work as though leading the blind, especially in those tremendous social crises where hands carry out what the head thinks. True, the gust of rebellion that moves the multitudes today comes from solitary thinkers, like it always did. Justice is born of wisdom. An uneducated person does not know his or her own rights or the rights of anyone else, and believes that force is the law of the land. Constrained by this belief, humanity resigns itself to suffer in silence. But all of a sudden, the echo of a great word rings out and all of the resigned turn to the savior's word, as insects are drawn to a ray of sunlight that pierces the darkness of the forest.²

The biggest obstacle facing intellectuals is their belief that they alone possess the right answers and that everyone must walk where they want and as far as they command. Revolutions come from above and are fought from below. From the depths, the oppressed can see justice, illuminated by the light on the horizon, and they assume the task of conquering it without stopping to consider the means or the ends. While moderates and theorists picture geometric evolutions or involve themselves with accuracy and details of form, the multitudes simplify the issues, taking them down from obscure heights and placing them in the realm of everyday concerns. They follow the example of Alexander the Great: "Don't untie the knot; cut it with the stroke of the saber."

¹ Nicholas II, Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov, became Tsar in Russia at the height of González Prada's most reflective period, when he was living in Europe, in 1894. On January 22 1905, just two months before González Prada offered this speech, a large group of workers was gunned down in St. Petersburg by the Tsar's Imperial Guard. Nicholas would abdicate and be murdered by the Bolsheviks the same year González Prada died of a heart attack, in 1918 [TW].

² The idea of the writer as savior, is indicative of a common rhetorical strategy in González Prada's writing, that is to say the secularization of Christian, theology, [TW].

What do revolutionaries seek? To influence the masses, shake them up, wake them up and hurl them into action. But it happens that people, once shaken from their repose, are not content with following the initial movement. Instead they put their latent strength into play and march; and they continue marching until exceeding anything that their instigators thought or wanted. Those who saw themselves as moving an inert mass discover a vigorous organism with a will of its own.³ The members of this organism are of another mind, radiating their own light and setting down their own laws. From that point something very common in history occurs: people who were once bold and progressive at the start of revolution become overly timid and reactionary in the clamor of the fight and in the hours of triumph. Thus Luther cowers as his doctrine prompts an uprising of German peasants. French revolutionaries guillotine each other because there are a few who advance beyond the rest. Almost all revolutionaries and reformers resemble children: they tremble before the apparition of the ogre that they alone evoked with their cries. It has been said that once it gets moving, Humanity begins by beheading its leaders; it does not begin with sacrifice but usually ends with execution, since friends become enemies and what was once the driving force becomes the greatest obstacle.

All revolutions, once achieved, tend to turn into authoritarian governments, and every triumphant revolutionary lapses into conservatism. What idea is not debased in application? What reformer does not give up his good name for power? People (especially politicians) do not make good on their promises, nor does reality match the hopes and dreams of the destitute. Revolution is discredited the same day it triumphs, and the dishonorable are their own caudillos.

Once given the impulse, true revolutionaries should follow it through the whole process. But people have a hard time letting go of their old convictions. To embrace new ideas goes against human nature – each person believes that he or she has a monopoly on the truth. We grow old without feeling it and get left behind without noticing it, imagining that we stay young and innovative and refusing to admit the broader perspective of those who come after us. Almost all of our lives revolve around coffins that we take for cradles; or we die like caterpillars, without making a cocoon or transforming ourselves into butterflies. We resemble the sailors who, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, told Christopher Columbus, “We will not continue the voyage because there is nothing more out there.” However, out there lay the shores of America.

But, while speaking of intellectuals and workers, we have slipped into a discussion about revolution. What’s so strange about that? We reflect under the shadow of a flag that waves amidst fire and smoke from the barricades. We see ourselves surrounded by people who sooner or later will cry out in protest against the social order. We talk about the first of May, a day that has become a kind of easter for revolutionaries.⁴ The celebration of this easter, not only here but in the entire civilized world, shows us that Humanity is capable of setting aside its petty concerns in order to demand radical change. No one expects Parliament to provide for the well-being of the unfortunate, nor does anyone believe that government will provide the manna to relieve everyone’s hunger. Parliament enacts outrageous laws and institutes taxes that take more from

³ The idea of society as an organism was common during the late nineteenth century, for example in Krausist philosophy, a philosophy with which González Prada was familiar [TW].

⁴ The idea of a revolutionary easter is an even more blatant example of Prada’s secularization of Christian theology [TW].

those who have less; the machine of government does not work for the benefit of nations, but rather to the advantage of the dominant factions.⁵

Upon recognizing the insufficiency of politics to bring out the best in an individual, controversies and struggles about forms of government and government officials become relegated to a level of secondary concern, or better said, they disappear. What endures is the social question, the greatest question that the proletariat will resolve by the only means capable of effecting change— revolution.⁶ This is not about a local revolution that overthrows presidents or czars and converts a republic into a monarchy or an autocracy into a representative government; but rather a global revolution that erases borders and eliminates nationalities and calls Humanity to the stewardship and cultivation of the earth.

III

Before concluding, if it were necessary to summarize in two words the substance of our thoughts; if we should choose one brilliant idea to guide us with sound reason through the intricacies of life, we should say: “let us be just.” Just towards Humanity, just towards the town where we live, just towards our family, and just towards ourselves, we can contribute so that everyone captures and savors their piece of happiness, but not allowing anyone to pursue our share and take it for themselves.

Justice is giving everyone what legitimately belongs to them; so then, give us our share of Earth’s goods. Being born obliges us to live, and this obligation gives us the right to take not only what is necessary, but what is pleasant and comfortable.⁷ Life is like a journey at sea. If Earth is a ship and we are its passengers, we would make it possible to travel in first class, taking for ourselves the good air, good cabins and good food. We would not confine ourselves to the depths far below deck, where a pestilent atmosphere breathes and hovers over wood rotting in the humidity and scraps from fortunate mouths waste away. Do provisions abound? How about if everyone eats according to their needs? Do supplies run short? How about if food is rationed for everyone, from the captain to the lowliest sailor?

Resignation and sacrifice, unnecessarily practiced, make us treat ourselves unjustly. True, it is because of heroic souls – their sacrifice and self-denial – that Humanity walks the path of justice. More than kings and conquerors, the simple individuals who put everyone else’s happiness before their own, those who flooded the deadly arena of egotism with the life-giving waters of love, deserve to live in history and in the hearts of the masses. If people could become superhuman, they would achieve it by sacrifice. But sacrifice has to be voluntary. It is not acceptable if the haves say to the have-nots: “Sacrifice and win your place in Heaven, while we take over the Earth.”

We should take what belongs to us because it is not likely that those who monopolize will concede it in good faith or by a random act. Every 4th of August involves more ostentation than

⁵ By differentiating government from the nation, González Prada makes an important contribution to political theory: the state and the people are separate from each other and the former does not necessarily respect the will of the latter [TW].

⁶ Here Prada is making an attempt to differentiate political activity from social activity, censuring the former and praising the latter [TW].

⁷ The idea of taking “what is pleasant and comfortable” suggests González Prada’s debt to classical liberalism. The quest for justice represents a radicalization of the liberal tradition [TW].

reality: nobles renounce one privilege, and immediately reclaim two; priests renounce tithes today, and tomorrow demand both tithes and the first harvest. As a symbol of property ownership, the ancient Romans chose the most important object – a spear. This symbol has to be interpreted as such: possession of a thing is not grounded in justice but in brute force; owners do not negotiate, they lash out. The hearts of landowners contain two ironclad qualities: durability and coldness. According to experts in the Hebrew language, Cain means the first landowner. We would not find it strange if a socialist of the 19th century, seeing in Cain the first squatter and the first fratricide, takes advantage of this coincidence in order to infer a terrifying conclusion: Owning property is murder.⁸

Well then: if some injure without reasoning, what will everyone else do? Since nations are not denied the right to overthrow bad governments, Humanity should be allowed the same right in order to shake off its inexorable exploiters. And today the granting of this right is a universal creed: theoretically, revolution is carried out because no one denies the inequities of the current regime, nor do they stop recognizing the need for reforms that improve the condition of the proletariat. (Is there not even a Catholic socialism?). In practice, this will not come about without fighting or bloodshed because the same people who admit the just cause of social protestations do not give up their contradictions: they carry words of justice on their lips but keep wicked deeds in their hearts.

However, many people turn a blind eye to the movement that operates in the background of modern societies. The death of their beliefs means nothing to them, nor does the diminishing of love for their homeland, or the solidarity of the proletariat who make no distinction of race or nationality. They cannot tell that the distant clamor is the cry of the hungry determined to win their bread; they feel the earth shake, but they do not understand that it is the march of revolution in motion breathing in an atmosphere saturated by the stench of cadavers; and they do not understand that, together with all the rest of the world's bourgeoisie, they are the ones giving off the odor of death.

Tomorrow, when waves of the proletariat rise up to charge against the walls of the old society, the plunderers and oppressors will sense that the hour of decisive battle has arrived and that it has come without mercy. They will appeal to their armies, but the soldiers will count in the number of the rebels; they will cry out to the sky, but their gods will remain deaf and mute. Then they will flee to fortify themselves in castles and palaces, believing that from some place help will come. Seeing that it does not and watching the ominous waves of the proletariat as they swarm over the four points of the horizon, they will look at each other and feel pity for themselves (those who never felt it for anyone else). In horror they will cry again and again: "It is the flood of barbarians!" But one voice, formed by the roar of innumerable voices, will respond: "We are not the flood of barbarity; we are the surge of justice."

1905

⁸ The idea of property being murder comes from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), the first Frenchman to declare, "I am an anarchist." Proudhon maintains that property is theft (I: 13) or in another context that property is a suicide (I: 223). Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 26 vols., Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1873 González Prada radicalizes this proposition by affirming that "property is murder". For more on the influence of Proudhon in González Prada, see Thomas Ward, *La anarquía inmanentista de Manuel González Prada*, Lima: Editorial Horizonte/ Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2001, p. 191 [TW].

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