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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

The Atheistic Platform.

XI.

THE CURSE
OF CAPITAL.

BY

EDWARD B. AVELING, D.Sc.



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THE ATHEISTIC PLATFORM.

UNDER this title is being issued a fortnightly publication, each number of which consists of a lecture delivered by a well-known Freethought advocate. Any question may be selected, provided that it has formed the subject of a lecture delivered from the platform by an Atheist. It is desired to show that the Atheistic platform is used for the service of humanity, and that Atheists war against tyranny of every kind, tyranny of king and god, political, social, and theological.

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THE CURSE OF CAPITAL.

For the first time in speaking in this hall, I feel to-night that I shall not have my audience thoroughly with me. I am so used to talking upon a subject upon which we are all quite agreed—that is, on the subject of religion—that I am conscious to-night—more conscious, perhaps, than anybody else here—that I am speaking to an audience which, on this particular topic with which I shall deal this evening, is not at one with me. We have been so used to discussing the position of Christianity and other creeds, and have come to the same conclusions with such a startling and noticeable unanimity, that I am conscious, and I doubt not many of you are conscious, of a certain amount of embarrassment in dealing with the subject before us. I know that I am in a minority, not quite of one, but at all events in a minority with this audience. But that very feeling prompts me to speak more openly to you, because I know that I shall get from you just as patient a hearing in respect to a subject on which you and I are antagonistic, as I should have if I spoke on a subject on which we were all thoroughly agreed. I am going to ask you to listen to me not only patiently, but even silently. I mean that I would rather speak to you on the subject to-night, and make my position as plain to you as I can, without any interruption even of the kindly order with which you generally favor me. The subject is a difficult one, an intricate one. It wants very carefully placing before you, and wants careful attention. Having said so much, I may at once plunge into the discussion of what I have called “The Curse of Capital.”

I think that there are two great curses under which the present society is laboring—the one is Christianity, and the other is Capital. Last Sunday night I discussed the former; to-night I will discuss the latter. These are, to my thinking, the two great curses of this modern civilisation of ours; and I have come to conclusions in respect to both of these that I put before you as the result of my studies as scientific student. Last week I told you I could not

accept Christianity because I was a student of science. My hatred of the capitalistic system of to-day is based on the same methods, the same employment of scientific study, as in the former case. I am an evolutionist, and as an evolutionist I have come to the conclusion that Christianity is a bane and not a blessing. Equally, as an evolutionist, I have come to the conclusion that the present system of production—the capitalistic system of production—is a bane and not a blessing to the world at large. It is only a blessing to a comparatively few people. It is a distinct evil to anybody but that comparatively few. I am an Evolutionist, an Atheist, and a Socialist.

Of these two curses I think capitalism is the greater curse and the greater danger to us. Christianity you and I hold to be bad alike for the society and for the individual—upon that we are thoroughly agreed. Now, capitalism is clearly, to my thinking at least, bad for society, but, unfortunately, not bad for certain individuals. Everyone of you desires—righteously desires—to be a capitalist. In the present condition of society you are perfectly right to desire it. Everyone of you desires to be a capitalist. I should be very pleased to be a capitalist. Nothing would give me better pleasure than to have a certain amount of capital at my disposal; but nothing would give me greater pain than to get it in the way that some people get it. The great difficulty is this. Here is a system we know to be distinctly bad for the race, and yet to get capital for the individual is a distinct pleasure to him and a distinct good. Christianity we hold to be alike bad for the race and for everybody who takes part in it; but the capitalistic system, though it is bad for the mass, is good for certain individuals. That makes the question complex, and people who cannot see beyond the limits of their own life cannot understand that a system out of which they themselves may get some benefit is a bad system intrinsically none the less. Thus we want you to subscribe capital for this hall and this company, to find funds for an Atheistic hall, and we are justified under the present existing conditions in doing this. It is absolutely necessary. If any work is to be done there should be an individual capitalist or company, but that does not vouch for the goodness of the system nevertheless. Often we are reproached for being individually capitalists, though we are fighting against the system. I hope we are not inconsistent in this. It is a question of self-preservation.

I look, then, upon Christianity as a minor curse to Capitalism. I am aware that I am speaking to an audience that is in the main a Radical audience. It is pleasant to think that in some respects we who differ as Socialists are at one as Radicals. To one or two points I will call attention where we are at one, and then I will deal with others where we are not at one. You are an advance upon Liberalism; as Liberalism is an advance upon Whiggism; Whiggism on Conservatism, Conservatism on Toryism. And as men progress from the lower to the higher, the next step from Radicalism is Socialism. The difference, however, between the position of Radicalism and that of Socialism is much greater than between either of the other classes.

Not a Radical or Socialist would say "no" to this statement: that the condition of the labor classes is at the present hour a disastrous one. There every thinker goes with me when I say that the condition of the labor classes is a most disastrous and unhappy one. In lives, in home, in every detail of life, the position of the labor classes is distinctly an injustice to them. I take it you will go further (and not fare worse) in another point. Not only is it that the labor classes are in a most unhappy condition, but further, the chief reason for this is that they are without power. They are without any social or political power. This is the cry of all political reformers—the labor classes have little or no social or political power. Why? Because all the means of production, *with one exception*, are not in their hands, are indeed out of their reach. You may say: "Well, but a man who is very thrifty and careful can by degrees lift himself out of his condition and make himself a small capitalist." It is possible that a unit out of thousands may do it; but I am speaking of the average laboring man, and I urge upon you that the means of production are not and never can be within reach of 999 out of every thousand of these men in existing conditions—*with one exception*. And mark what the exception is, because it is that upon which one of our fundamental doctrines rests. The exception is what we call labor-power. It is a truism to tell you that of all the means of production labor-power is the solitary essential one. It is the one essential beyond all others. Machinery is a means of production, but machinery without labor-power is perfectly useless. Natural objects are, in a sense, means of production; but they cannot be turned into commodities without labor-power. In short, whatever means of production you

take, all is of no avail without the one essential means—labor-power. What I am trying to urge upon you is this,—that the body of people in whom is resident the one essential, human labor-power, are the very body of people who have no other means of production at their disposal whatever. They are all out of their reach except this one, the most essential one. Upon that it seems that we are justified in charging a gross injustice upon our modern society. More than this. Other means of production, such as machinery, have been produced by this labor-power, and are now beyond the reach of the very class to whose labor they are due.

We have seen that the poor of the laboring classes are in an unhappy condition, and that the means of production are out of their reach. As a consequence, it is a familiar fact that every great discovery, whatever it may be, does not benefit the labor classes. Any great scientific discovery, any great advance—say the telegraph or the application of electricity—whom does it benefit? the productive classes? What are called the middle classes derive a considerable amount of benefit from it; but how many of the labor classes are in any sense better? How many working men or women's lives are made sweeter or happier by any of these scientific discoveries? Put the question to yourselves, and I think that the answer will be that, on the whole, any great discovery is not for the world at large, but for a comparatively limited class, and not for the class that most needs these discoveries and their advantages. Another illustration: I take the illustration of our schools and universities. Our universities have, every one of them, been founded by the labor of the labor classes. Every detail of the finances of our universities is entirely due to the labor of the labor classes. The scholarships that keep men at Cambridge, the various exhibitions that can be obtained there, the great endowments of "Chairs" of this science, and of that language, all these emoluments in your universities are the product of the labor classes. What benefit do they get from them? The answer is, evidently none! So also with your State schools. You will say they are supported by the rates, and that the rates come out of your pocket. You may speak feelingly; but economically every rate that you pay comes directly or indirectly out of the labor of the labor classes; and hence these schools are their property. You only are, as it were, trustees for them, and very badly you deal with your

trusteeship. When they clamor for free education they are asking a right, and not a favor. Whenever there is a cry for free schools they are simply asking for their own again.

Another point of agreement: for any remedy of a drastic nature, for any great change that is ever to be brought about, Parliament, as at present constituted, is practically useless. I know well enough my Radical friends with a sigh will repeat that after me, and will tell you that for any great change that is to be brought about with speed and completeness, Parliament, as at present constituted, is practically of no avail. It is not necessary to remind you how the men are elected, and how they conduct their business, or no business, as the case may be; but certain we are of the painful fact that Parliament is only a Board for the protection of vested interests.

There is a word used by politicians that covers a multitude of sins: that is, "government." Even those who feel that Parliament is largely effete, still cling to that shibboleth—"government." They say when you have such men as are now in the Cabinet, you have a Government of able and well-meaning benefactors to their species. I am not going to touch the question whether a Tory or a Liberal Government is the better; but I am going to remind you that every Government, like every Parliament, consists of a body of men who—at least nine out of ten—are of that very class of landlord and capitalist against whom we, as Socialists, are waging warfare. Our governments, whether in England, Germany, or America, are all governments of a small class, of the capitalist and landlord order; and they govern for the benefit of capitalists and landlords, and not for the benefit of the community at large. This is too true, no matter with what Government we deal.

We know that never, in the history of the past, has there been an example of one class legislating fairly and honestly for any other class; and yet this is what you expect with your panacea of a Liberal Government. In all these Government arrangements, you always have one class legislating for another; and whenever you have that you will have little or no real legislation done. You middle class people refused to allow the "upper class" to legislate for you, though you left them a little figment in the shape of a House of Lords, to remind you how foolish you were to leave them anything at all. Yet you middle-class people think you can legislate for the working-classes. It is impossible. There will never be honest and fair and

complete legislation for the community at large until all classes are legislating for themselves; or until there is no "class" at all, and the legislation is of the community for the community.

Some will say: "You Socialists are so unpractical. You are talking very finely to-night; but why can't you be patient? Why can't you help us when we try to get some measures passed—such as Municipal Bills or Franchise Bills?" We do; and are willing to help you. I am not of that imaginary school of Socialists who say it is not of the slightest good helping in any of these little measures of Extension of the Franchise and so on. I believe I am the mouthpiece of a great number of people who are quite willing to help you in these; but it must be understood that these are merely transition remedies; that they do not heal the sore at all; they do not get near it. I want to see the Franchise extended and two million more electors added to the suffrage-list; I want to see women on the suffrage-list; and I am perfectly anxious to work with you at it. So is it, I believe, with every thinker among the Socialist party. But these are *transition* remedies, and don't touch the vital point. They are interesting, and move in the right direction, but they are only transition remedies, and as they are such, you must forgive us if we work also for something which goes further. And this is where the Radical politician and the Socialist are so much at issue.

I may most fitly, here, before I turn to another point, speak for a moment of two schools of thought, each of whom is working, I believe, honestly and thoroughly in the right direction, but each of whom, again, is not what we should call a Socialist. I mean the Positivist school and the Radical school. I am a Positivist, but something more; and I am a Radical, but something much more. The Positivist aims at something, but does not go far enough. The Positivist says: "Moralise your individual; make him a better and more moral man, and then your great results will follow." The first part is excellent, but the second part contains, I think, a fallacy. By all means moralise your children; let them have as much intellectual training as possible; that is excellent. But when the Positivist says that all good results will follow, we do not go with him there. It is quite right to work from within outwards, but you must also work from without inwards. You must change not only the nature of the individual, but change, too, his

environment. It is of greater importance to change the environment, and make it a more moral environment. We say, work from within outwards, but work also from without inwards; and at length, the two labors meeting, you will obtain the desired effect.

The Radical says: "Change the nature of government—let us have a Republic." Strange, how many Radicals seem to think that the moment a Republic comes then the political millennium will be to hand. Look at France and America, and ask yourselves whether the condition of the community at large in those countries is in any degree better than it is in England. It needs no reading to know that under Republics the *exploiting* of the laboring classes is as bad as under monarchies, if not worse. Do not let us think that a Republic will change all the conditions. I think a monarchy is as evil a form of government as any you can have. But do not imagine that if you had a Republic tomorrow that you would have the community at large much happier. I cannot believe it; all evidence is against it.

What is it, then, at which we aim? We want, with the Positivist, to change the *morale* of the individual; we want, with the Radical, to get a better form of nominal government; but we want to do something else—to change the environment of the individual. I told you at the outset that I had come to these conclusions by way of science. From science, especially from your Darwinian science, you can learn so much. You that are students of Darwin, and have learned something of his views and of his great truths, will know what I mean by this idea of changing the environment, the surroundings, as well as changing the individual. As result of that variation that is so infinite in nature, on which natural selection works, you get an infinite diversity of plants and animals, on which evolution works. How is this variation brought about? Mainly by the changed conditions of the surrounding of the animal or plant. Why is it that a particular plant or animal varies? Largely because of the conditions in which it is placed. You who have learned the incalculable value of conditions on the individual, of the nature of the environment, will see what our meaning is when we say it is no good working on the individual alone; you must alter the condition of society as it is at the present time, and then you will get a reaction upon the individual.

Upon some of the chief words in economics you as Radical and I as Socialist part company. When I begin to

speak of labor, competition, thrift, wages, profit, we shall be to some extent at issue. You know that every one of those wants a lecture or a course of lectures; and as I am making a confession of faith to you, and trying to justify my position in this matter, you will bear with me if I say a word or two on each of these points.

Labor. There is a phrase often used about labor that the Socialist abhors. That is, "the dignity of labor." We hear so much said about the "dignity of labor," but it does not come from those who are laboring. We do not look upon labor—that is, upon human effort as devoted to the production of commodities—as in itself a desirable thing—as, *per se*, a thing that is to be regarded as a glory and a dignity. It is excellent to use your muscles for the good of the community, but it is a great mistake to talk at large upon the subject of the "glory and dignity of labor." We should try to reduce labor to a minimum. That can only be done by making the enormous number who never labor at all take their fair share in the labor of the community.

Then the word "competition." O competition! "cause of England's greatness." People who have given up the idea that the Bible is the cause of England's greatness have yet seriously come to the conclusion that competition is the great thing that has made England what it is. Competition is almost an unmitigated evil. For it always leads to two things—first, combination; and, secondly, monopoly. The whole history of the past and the history of to-day tells us that where we have unlimited competition you are sure to get, sooner or later, combination, and, as a result monopoly. I do not think that I need deal with the extraordinary statement that is often made, that all great discoveries are the outcome of the spirit of competition. I cannot understand how anybody can seriously make that statement. I am not about to traverse the history of discoveries. But I ask you to think of any discovery, and to reflect whether it has ever been the result of such competition, or whether it has not invariably been made by some man who has no need to compete perhaps; and certainly has no intention of competing. How is it all your great scientific work has to be done by men of means or holding sinecures?—your Darwins, your Huxleys—all these men who do all your best scientific work, but do it in no spirit of competition. We look forward to the time when not merely a few here and there will be able to give their attention to further discoveries, to the extension of know-

ledge, and when, by a more equitable division of work and play, there will be possibility for hundreds and thousands instead of units can give time and attention to work and discovery and the extension of human knowledge. We cannot understand that competition has brought about these great discoveries. It has brought about many great commercial successes—I do not deny that. But if you are going to measure the good of the world by the commercial success of the world, I draw back from you. If you are going to tell me that it is due to competition that you have such magnificent fortunes and such successes in certain lives, you must be reminded that you are measuring the world by such a little thing; English people measure all good by the purely commercial test. They can hardly help it in the present condition of society. They measure almost all good on the commercial basis, and there, of course, competition has been an advantage to individuals.

The word "wages" ought, of course, to be spoken of in lecture after lecture. All I dare hint at here are just two things. We, as Socialists, desire that wages to the workers should be a fixed and a fair proportion at least of the products. Nothing of that kind exists to-day. In all probability, if changes come gradually, there will be first some fixed proportion, and later on there will be a fair proportion, coming as wage to the laborer. At present he has neither the one nor the other. We cannot go into a discussion as to what regulates wages, but clearly there is now nothing like a fixed, much less a fair, proportion of the produce going to labor. So far Radicals go with us; but when we say you will never get this in all probability until the existing condition of things is revolutionised, until the present relation between capital and labor is altogether done away with—you, as Radicals, will draw back. At present the proportion of the produce that goes to the worker is distinctly unfair; but we as Socialists say you will never get that fair proportion until the relationship between labor and capital is completely revolutionised.

Just another word, about profit. Production to-day is for three things. Production, that is, where by human power and the use of other means of production, natural objects are turned into commodities, is either for use directly, or for exchange, or for profit. It is that third kind of production to which we take exception. Production for use is excellent. Production for exchange is, also, a well-recognised form of production. But produc-

tion for profit is that against which Socialists set their face. It is this that is the cause of what is called the profit-mongering condition of society; and it is because the present condition of society is essentially a profit-mongering one, because the nature and aim of every one is to get profit somehow, that we have most of the ills that at present exist. Production for profit we look upon as an undesirable thing. There is another familiar phrase: "Has not a man a right to his own—to what he produces or makes?" The question frequently comes up, especially when we begin to study this question. If a man has produced so and so, and made a profit out of it, has not he a right to his own? It seems a strange and low form of morality that prompts one to such an enquiry. No, clearly not. There is something greater than the individual—that is, the community for which he works. A man has clearly no right to do as he pleases. That which a man produces in his present condition he must keep, as much as he can, or he would not live. But in the condition of things to which we look forward we hope it will be understood that a man produces not for himself but for the community. Take a case noticed in the papers recently. One man in a firm in Birmingham drew out of the firm £70,000 as one year's income. You and I are equally agreed that that man had clearly no right to that £70,000. He will tell you he invested so much, and so much came back as interest. But even if he carried on the business himself, I should dispute that he had a right to the money, because it is clearly profit, and profit is always made by the *exploiting* of somebody somewhere. But I read that there was a child of ten in that firm. He was also having laid up for him so many thousands per year. I hold that that child had distinctly no right to that money. You will say his father founded the business, and surely he has a right to leave it to the child. No; he has no such right. I know in the present state of society he must do it. But I say the society is wrong where such a thing is possible, where a child who has done nothing whatever for humanity should have an income of £10,000 or £20,000 a year. It is a crime.

I now come to the one word upon which everything depends, and that is the word "capital." It is upon the meaning of capital that the Socialistic and all other orders of thought are at daggers drawn. The one question is, what explanation do you offer of capital? I have used the

phrase "The Curse of Capital," I mean capital as it exists to-day. Capital itself is not a curse; it is only a curse as it is at this hour. What is this capital? The economist says it is the result of saving; and you who have made a little capital echo that and say "yes." I must ask you most carefully not to speak of capital only as an individual. Your own capital may be the result of saving. I want you to understand that I am not looking at these little cases, but I am thinking of great capitalistic fortunes. You must not rise in your place and tell me your little experience of how you saved something from your wages, and commenced to have capital. We must deal with the big questions of how the great capitals are formed. How? Oh, says the political economist, by saving, by self-denial, by the thrift of the individual. Now, I ask you, what saving, what self-denial, what thrift has any one of the great capitalists of the present day shown? It is fair to ask, what thrift or self-denial does a great capitalist show every year? The self-denial and thrift are shown by his workers. But they do not get the capital, they make it for him. Trace it wherever you will, and you will discover that capital is now scarcely ever the result of the self-denial of the individual who gets it. Of what is it the result? I made a distinction between the great capitalists and the small. I want to get beyond the latter. You small men are only bubbles on the great stream, that show neither the direction nor the depth of the stream. The Socialist says, it is the result of saving. It is, on the part of the laborer. It is a result of thrift, but on the part of the laborer. All the capital, as it is to-day, is the result of the laborer not being paid for more than a fraction of the work he does. That is the central position of Socialism; and I want antagonists of Socialism to assail that position. You may say you want to know about details, and how you are going to publish newspapers, and how you are going to get your watches, and so on. I am not going to deal with these details to-night. I am now dealing with the central question, what is the meaning of capital? and I am contending that the meaning of capital is that it is the result of labor that has never been remunerated.

Say we take a mill that starts working on Monday morning. Every man and woman works, let us suppose, ten hours a day. I wish the supposition were accurate. At the end of the week they are paid; and we contend

that the payment that they get is remuneration only really for some two or three or four hours out of every ten. The labor of the men receives a fraudulent payment. They had earned what they were paid early in the week, and had worked days and days absolutely for nothing, as far as they themselves are concerned.

I may here, if I have made the difficult question clear, just take one illustration from my own way of thinking. Did you not ask yourselves as a child where does all the wealth come from? I as a child did what I think some children of a larger growth do; and came to the conclusion that it all filtered down from the great millionaires at the top. I had only gone half way! I had not traced the wealth to the real source. I traced it up to the millionaires, these interest-mongers, and so forth; but I should have gone on. Then I should have found out that I had to retrace my steps, and that these men had exploited the class beneath them, and that class had exploited the men beneath them, and at last I come down to where there is the sound of hammers, of digging and delving. I should have come where I hear the sighs of the labor-class, and I should have heard that out of those sighs there grew the ring of gold; I should have seen these labor-men giving their lives night and day, year after year, and dying in the very act of handing on something to the class above them. Thus I might have traced the lessening exploitation upwards until I got to these colossal fortunes of men who do nothing at all.

What does Socialism propose? It says: You must nationalise the means of production and the land. Wealth shall only be enjoyed by the producers—by nobody else whatever. And to that end, first you must nationalise the land, and secondly you must nationalise something more important, the means of production. You must attack the landlord and also the capitalist. Both must go down. And the signs of the times show you the capitalistic forces are closing up with us against the landlord. Self-preservation is taking possession of them at last. But these two must be attacked simultaneously. Land and capital must become the property of the nation. What will the State be? you will ask. The organised capacity of the workers. What is it to-day? To-day it is the organised tyranny of the idlers. We desire to replace this by an organised capacity of the workers.

Nationalisation of the land and nationalisation of all the

means of production are to be brought about by a steady education of the working classes and of the middle classes to a due understanding of the condition of things and of the wrong that is done the workers. If we could make every working man understand what I have tried to make you understand to-night, a revolution would be brought about to-morrow morning. If once we could make them understand this key-note of Socialism the present system of things would end. This is to be brought about by education. That education is going on in other countries; but you English people have little conception of how Socialism is spreading. I believe there is no movement since the movement called Christianity that has anything like the hold upon the people that this Socialistic movement of to-day is gaining. In England you do not know that everyone of our schemes is based upon scientific reasoning of the keenest minds of years and centuries. You say our principles are fads and unsound ideas. You do not know that our Socialism is the outcome of the most patient investigation and study of the acutest minds upon past history and upon the signs of the coming future.

In every country except England the movement is growing immensely. It is growing in England, and I want you to take your part in a movement that is, without a doubt, the one movement of this century. This century will be known for the blowing away of most of the cobwebs of supernaturalism. But it will be known, without any doubt, by a name far greater, and that is, for the revolution of the relations between capital and labor. We have in England one paper, *Justice*, devoted to Socialism, hardly read by you. On the continent there are numbers of journals entirely devoted to the Socialistic movement. In France, at the voting for the municipal elections at Paris in 1881, there were only 17,895 Socialist votes; three years later there were 38,729—that is to say, that in three years some 17,000 odd had grown to 38,000 odd. Take, again, the numbers at Berlin. In 1871 there were 1,135 votes for the Socialist party; in 1874 16,549; three years later 17,000; and three years later 33,629; and in 1881, only one year between, 56,712.

Do you intend to ignore a movement like that? You cannot ignore it. A movement that can spread so rapidly on the Continent cannot be ignored. It is an international question, it is a question of nations and of the progress of all nations.

You will ask: "Will you not have a frightful struggle, and will it not end in bloodshed?" Possibly. I do not know. "Is it not setting class against class?" Yes; and Socialists mean to devote their lives to setting class against class. We preach class warfare. We hope it may not be a warfare of bullets and of steel; but if it is class warfare even this alas! is possible. It is a warfare of the labor class against the capitalist class. In the past there has been no such battle without bloodshed. I only hope that this freedom of the labor class, that has certainly to come, may be brought about by reason and argument. But it will have to be brought about. Shelley and Marx did not think it would be brought about without a tremendous struggle. Neither they nor we are blind to the possibilities that are before us. Marx tells us again and again: "Work on, you men. Get yourselves represented in Parliament; get hold of the means of Government where you can, and increase your power, until you are sufficiently strong to say: 'Now we will see right done.' And then the fighting will come. But it will come from those who hold your right from you." Such a cry will go up in time. I want your voice and mine to help to swell that great cry. It is growing in volume and intensity from all of the labor classes throughout the world: "Our Rights! Our Rights! Our Rights!"
