

UNEQUAL PROGRESS

Although himself a dedicated follower of Auguste Comte's ideas, Professor Edward Spencer Beesly, a historian, was a friend of Karl Marx's in the heydays of the International Workingmen's Association. His radical views on a number of issues made him a regular guest speaker at many trade union and socialist functions and he readily allowed his name and personality to be used in the agitation leading up to the electoral reform of 1867. Here are excerpts from "A Lecture Delivered to a Meeting of Trade Unionists, May 7, 1868".

<p>05- There is no question about the material progress of the non-workman class. There are many thousands of houses in London infinitely more commodious and luxurious than the palaces of the Plantagenet kings.¹ But there is very great question whether the workmen generally have made any real progress in comfort. Some of them have, no doubt. The skilled artisan² in London gets enough to eat. He is perhaps no better lodged than his forefathers, but he dresses better, and he has greater opportunities of enjoying himself and moving about to better himself. But among the agricultural labourers what state of things do we find? In many parts of England they are positively worse off than they were a hundred years ago. In the Eastern Counties, where agriculture is carried on by the newest lights of science the horrible gang-system³ has come into existence within the present century. Nor is such misery confined to agricultural labourers. It has been proved in official reports that the workmen in such extensive trades as shoe-making, silk-weaving, and stocking-weaving, are on an average worse fed than the Lancashire operatives were during the cotton famine.⁴</p> <p>10- 15- 20- 25-</p> <p>Now, wretchedness of this terrible kind does not exist even among barbarous nations and savage tribes. The child of the North American Indian, or the Caffre, or the Esquimaux, does not begin to work in a mill or in an agricultural gang almost as soon as it can walk. It gets better food than the English child, and leads a healthier and more enjoyable life. The West Indian negro has been treated as an irreclaimable savage because he will not toil like an English labourer, and the reason assigned is that he has plenty to eat and drink without working hard for it. I fancy most English labourers wish they could say the same. Really, if progress and civilisation mean nothing but an increase in wealth, irrespective of its distribution, Rousseau had much reason</p> <p>30- 35- 40-</p>	<p>45- to prefer the state of nature. It is childish to remind the poor man that his ancestor under the Plantagenet kings had no chimney to his hut, no glass in his windows, no paper on his walls, no cheap calico, no parliamentary trains⁵, no penny newspapers. He was no worse off in these respects than the Plantagenet king himself, who was equally without chimneys, glass windows, calico, railways, and penny newspapers. There are parts of the world now where the labourer is still in that condition. But he gets sound and healthy sleep out of the straw spread on the floor of his windowless hut, which is more than three or four families huddled together in a single room in St. Giles's⁶ can do, though they may have a glazed window and a chimney. A poor Englishman might be ashamed to walk about in a good stout sheep-skin; but he is often clad in garments much less warm and durable. What sort of progress is this, in which the larger part of the community remains as miserable, if not more miserable, than in a state of barbarism? If progress is necessarily so one-sided, it were better — I say it deliberately — it were better it ceased. It were better that all were poor together than that this frightful contrast should exist to shake men's faith in the eternal principles of justice.</p> <p>50- 55- 60- 65- 70-</p> <p>Happily, we are not shut up to so discouraging a conclusion. If we look at the whole history of our race in Western Europe, instead of studying one short chapter of it alone, we shall soon see what its progress has been. The labouring class have steadily advanced in dignity and influence. [...] Now we have come to a time when the workmen are almost everywhere standing on their rights, and resisting what they deem unfair or oppressive. They have learnt the secret of combination. With freedom and dignity has come confidence — confidence in each other. They have grasped the idea that the main object of government and industrial organisation should be <i>their</i> comfort and happiness. [...]</p> <p>75- 80- 85-</p>
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Pp. 153-155 in BEESLY, Edward, Spencer, "The Social Future of the Working Class", pp. 150-174 in FROW, E. & KATANKA, M. (eds.), *1868 Year of the Unions — A Documentary Survey*, London: M. Katanka Books Ltd, 1968, 184 p.

1. Plantagenet: the English reigning dynasty, 1154-1485.

2. Artisan = *ouvrier qualifié*.

3. A system whereby a farmer, instead of employing labourers permanently, employs a company (or "gang") of labourers by contracting with a "gang-master" for a particular task to be completed within a specified period of time. This American practice was being tentatively introduced in England at the time.

4. The cotton famine: when the scarcity of raw cotton due to the American Civil War generated mass unemployment in the cotton districts of Britain.

5. Trains going from London to the rest of the country and back at reduced rates over the week-end, so as to allow MPs to return to their constituencies, and used for (comparatively) cheap excursions by others.

6. A district in London.