

Back in 1883, Karl Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue, got himself banged up in prison for making a speech in favour of socialism. Not one to waste time, he spent his days in jail putting the finishing touches to his most famous essay, The Right to Be Lazy.

In what is now recognised as a classic, and prescient, work of socialist thought, he praised leisure, advocated a three-hour working day and called for stiff penalties for anyone found working longer hours.

"Far better were it to scatter pestilence and to poison the springs than to erect a capitalist factory in the midst of a rural population. Introduce factory work, and farewell joy, health and liberty; farewell to all that makes life beautiful and worth living."

The Right to be Lazy



by Paul Lafargue

Biographical note

BORN in Cuba in 1842, Paul Lafargue was an important figure in French socialism. He started out as an anarchist, then embraced Marxism – quite literally, marrying Karl Marx’s daughter, Laura. He went on to be a major figure in the French Workers’ Party.

Karl didn’t seem to like him much, accusing him and his party of “revolutionary phrase-mongering” and of denying the value of reformist struggle, also saying “If he is a Marxist, then I am clearly not”. Karl wrote to his mate Friedrich Engels that “Lafargue has the blemish customarily found in the negro tribe” (Paul was of mixed French, Jewish, African and indigenous Caribbean ancestry). Engels likewise sneered at him “Being in his quality as a nigger, a degree nearer to the rest of the animal kingdom than the rest of us...”.

Given that kind of shit, it is perhaps not surprising that it’s mostly been anarchists who have kept his memory alive, but it’s also a tad ironic, as he spent much of his political life attacking anarchist groups. Anarchist affection for him is chiefly due to his 1883 essay, *The Right to Be Lazy*, a call for the workers of the world to stop working so much and indulge in the joy of leisure.

Paul wrote this text on the virtues of laziness while in prison for giving a socialist speech. While the eight-hour day was still a dream, and the slogan ‘the right to work’ was spreading like a bad cold, he demanded a three-hour working day and even condemned the proletariat for its “passion for work”.

He was imprisoned several times, during one such sojourn becoming the first socialist elected to the French parliament. In the end, Paul and Laura killed themselves in a joint suicide pact. Like almost everyone else, they are buried in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

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[11] Karl Marx, *Capital*.

[12] “The Proportion in which the population of the country is employed as domestics in the service of the wealthy class indicates its progress in national wealth and civilisation.” (R.M. Martin, *Ireland Before and After the Union*, 1818). Gambetta, who has denied that there was a social question ever since he ceased to be the poverty-stricken lawyer of the Café Procope, undoubtedly alluded to this ever-increasing domestic class when he announced the advent of new social strata.

[13] Two examples: The English government to satisfy the peasants of India, who in spite of the periodical famines desolating their country insist on cultivating poppies instead of rice or wheat, has been obliged to undertake bloody wars in order to impose upon the Chinese Government the free entry of Indian opium. The savages of Polynesia. in spite of the mortality [14] Paul Leroy-Beaulieu. *La Question Ouvrière au XIXe Siècle*, 1872.

[15] Louis Reybaud. *Le Coton, Son Régime, Ses Problèmes*, 1863.

[16] Gallifet was the general who was directly responsible for the massacre of thousands of French workingmen at the closing days of the Paris Commune.

[17] ‘They simulate the Curii but live like Bacchanals’ (the Curii were a family of ancient Rome considered virtuous), Juvenal.

[18] Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, Book II, Chapter XXXIV. Translation of Urquhart and Motteux.

[19] Paul de Cassagnac, like his father, Orsnier, was prominent as a conservative politician, journalist and dualist.

[20] Herodotus. Book II.

[21] Biot. *De L’abolition de L’esclavage Ancien en Occident*, 1840.

[22] Livy, Book I.

[23] Plato’s *Republic*, Book V.

[24] Cicero’s *De Officiis*, I, 42.

[25] Three capitalists: a banker, an industrialist and the owner of the world’s first department store.

[26] ‘Dirty professions’.