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EDITORIAL

## BONING THE FISH.

By DANIEL DE LEON

**T**HE fish of the Lincoln, Neb., *Independent* that in two successive articles has been “landed” and then “fried,” is now ready to be “boned.”

The issue has been the source of value. Throughout, the *Independent* sought to escape the, to capitalism, damaging facts that “labor is the producer of all wealth, and that value, exchange value, depends upon the amount of labor crystallized in a commodity and socially necessary for its reproduction.” The *Independent’s* objection was necessary to boost its false theories on money. The discussion started there. Persistently misquoting THE PEOPLE, the *Independent* always seeks to create confusion by falsely imputing to THE PEOPLE the chaotic utterance that “labor is the sole producer of all wealth values.” This false quotation need not be re-refuted. What now remains of importance is to take the bone out of the fish. And that’s easily done.

In the previous articles, especially the last, “Frying the Fish,” the fact was demonstrated that only the amount of labor, socially necessary to reproduce a commodity, determined its exchange value. The effect of the demonstration is visible in the way the *Independent* now seeks to escape. It says:

“What is ‘the socially necessary cost’ of reproducing a painting by one of the old masters?... Is it possible that these things have no exchange value?”

This evasion should not have been tried. It was sufficiently forestalled and barred out by the article “Frying the Fish,” where the point was clearly enough made that only such articles come into social-economic consideration as are commodities, and that only such are commodities that are produced industrially. The evasion being made we shall now lift the bone out of the fish between the knife

and fork of Ricardo. He says:

“Things, once they are recognized as useful in themselves, draw their exchange-value from two sources: from their scarcity and from the quantity of labor necessary to acquire them. There are some things the value of which depends only on their scarcity. No amount of labor being capable of increasing their quantity, their value cannot fall through their too great abundance. Such are rare statues, pictures, etc. This value depends solely on the faculties, the tastes and the caprice of those desirous of possessing such objects. . . . THESE, HOWEVER, FORM BUT A VERY SMALL PART OF THE COMMODITIES WHICH ARE CONSTANTLY EXCHANGED. The greater number of desirable objects being the fruit of industry, they can be multiplied, not only in one country, but in many, to an extent to which it is almost impossible to fix any limits, every time that one is willing to employ the industry necessary to create them. . . .

“WHEN, THEN, WE SPEAK OF COMMODITIES, OF THEIR EXCHANGE-VALUE, AND OF THE PRINCIPLES WHICH REGULATE THEIR RELATIVE PRICE, WE HAVE IN VIEW ONLY THOSE COMMODITIES THE QUANTITY OF WHICH CAN BE INCREASED BY THE INDUSTRY OF MAN, THE PRODUCTION OF WHICH IS ENCOURAGED BY COMPETITION, AND IS NOT PREVENTED BY ANY OBSTACLE.”

This reasoning being founded upon common sense is sound economics. The serious man disregards trifles. Arsenic is poison, yet many food substances contain it. They are not rejected as poison, because the arsenic they contain is so small as not to affect the bulk. The staunchest ship makes bilge-water, yet none but triflers would hold up the bilge-water, and with that as a “proof” deny the water-excluding qualities of such craft. And so with “paintings by great masters,” etc. However numerous all such things may be of themselves, they are infinitesimal in the volume of articles that find their way in the market. They establish no rule. They are negligible quantities in the establishment of the economic law.

So general and well established is the principle by which the condition of such exceptional matters is disregarded that the principle has been raised to a maxim of logic and jurisprudence. The bone of the *Independent's* fish may now be picked up with that maxim and thrown into the garbage barrel. The maxim is: “De minimus non curat lex”—the law does not bother about trifles.

It is pleasing to realize that trifling is the last refuge of all capitalist minds. 'Tis

only on trifles they can hang a theory to militate against the Socialist principle that points to capitalism as a plunderer of labor, and that at the same time points to the Socialist Republic as the solution of the social problem.

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