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**In Praise
of Idleness**
and Other Essays
**Bertrand
Russell**

By the same Author

THE ANALYSIS OF MIND

Fourth Impression

INTRODUCTION TO MATHEMATICAL PHILOSOPHY

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OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

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INDUSTRIAL CIVILIZATION**

Third Impression **With Scott Nearing BOLSHEVISM AND THE WEST
BERTRAND RUSSELL
IN PRAISE OF IDLENESS
AND OTHER ESSAYS**



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PREFACE

THIS book contains essays on such aspects of social questions as tend to be ignored in the clash of politics. It emphasizes the dangers of too much organization in the realm of thought and too much strenuousness in action. It explains why I cannot agree with either Communism or Fascism, and wherein I dissent from what both have in common. It maintains that the importance of knowledge consists not only in its direct practical utility but also in the fact that it promotes a widely contemplative habit of mind; on this ground, utility is to be found in much of the knowledge that is nowadays labelled "useless." There is a discussion of the connection of architecture with various social questions, more particularly the welfare of young children and the position of women.

Passing further away from politics, the volume, after discussing the characteristics of Western civilization and the chances of the human race being vanquished by insects, concludes with a discussion of the nature of the soul. The general thesis which binds the essays together is that the world is suffering from intolerance and bigotry, and from the belief that vigorous action is admirable even when misguided ; whereas what is needed in our very complex modern society is calm consideration, with readiness to call dogmas in question and freedom of mind to do justice to the most diverse points of view.

Of the other essays in this volume, some are new, while others, which have been already published in magazines, are here reprinted by the kind permission of the editors. "In Praise of Idleness" and "The Modern Midas" appeared in Harpers Magazine, "The Ancestry of Fascism" (under a different title) appeared in The Political Quarterly in England and The Atlantic Monthly in America; "Scylla and Charybdis, or Communism and Fascism" appeared in The Modern Monthly, "Modern Homogeneity" in New York in The Outlook (now The New Outlook) ; "Education and Discipline" was published in The New Statesman and Nation. I have also to acknowledge the assistance of Peter Spence in suggesting and discussing many of the subjects.

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I

IN PRAISE OF IDLENESS¹

Like most of my generation, I was brought up on the saying : “Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.” Being a highly virtuous child, I believed all that I was told, and acquired a conscience which has kept me working hard down to the present moment. But although my conscience has controlled my actions, my opinions have undergone a revolution. I think that there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous, and that what needs to be preached in modern industrial countries is quite different from what always has been preached. Everyone knows the story of the traveller in Naples who saw twelve beggars lying in the sun (it was before the days of Mussolini), and offered a lira to the laziest of them. Eleven of them jumped up to claim it, so he gave it to the twelfth. This traveller was on the right lines. But in countries which do not enjoy Mediterranean sunshine idleness is more difficult, and a great public propaganda will be required to inaugurate it. I hope that, after

reading the following pages, the leaders of the Y.M.C.A. will start a campaign to induce good young men to do nothing. If so, I shall not have lived in vain.

Before advancing my own arguments for laziness, I must dispose of one which I cannot accept. Whenever a person who already has enough to live on proposes to engage in some everyday kind of job, such as school-teaching or typing, he or she is told that such conduct takes the bread out of other people’s mouths, and is therefore wicked. If this argument were valid, it would only be necessary for us all to be idle in order that we should all have our mouths full of bread. What people who say such things forget is that what a man earns he usually spends, and in spending he gives employment. As long as a man spends his income, he puts just as much bread into people’s mouths in spending as he takes out of other people’s mouths in earning. The real villain, from this point of view, is the man who saves. If he merely puts his savings in a stocking, like the proverbial French

peasant, it is obvious that they do not give employment. If he invests his savings, the matter is less obvious, and different cases arise.

One of the commonest things to do with savings is to lend them to some Government. In view of the fact that the bulk of the public expenditure of most civilized Governments consists in payment for past

wars or preparation for future wars, the man who lends his money to a Government is in the same position as the bad men in Shakespeare who hire murderers. The net result of the man's economical habits is to increase the armed forces of the State to which he lends his savings. Obviously it would be better if he spent the money, even if he spent it in drink or gambling.

But, I shall be told, the case is quite different when savings are invested in industrial enterprises. When such enterprises succeed, and produce something useful, this may be conceded. In these days, however, no one will deny that most enterprises fail. That means that a large amount of human labour, which might have been devoted to producing something that could be enjoyed, was expended on producing machines which, when produced, lay idle and did no good to anyone. The man who invests his savings in a concern that goes bankrupt is therefore injuring others as well as himself. If he spent his money, say, in giving parties for his friends, they (we may hope) would get pleasure, and so would all those upon whom he spent money, such as the butcher, the baker, and the bootlegger. But if he spends it (let us say) upon laying down rails for surface cars in some place where surface cars turn out to be not wanted, he has diverted a mass of labour into channels where it gives pleasure to no one. Nevertheless, when he becomes poor

through the failure of his investment he will be regarded as a victim of undeserved misfortune, whereas the gay spendthrift, who has spent his money philanthropically, will be despised as a fool and a frivolous person.

All this is only preliminary. I want to say, in all seriousness, that a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of **WORK**, and that the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work.

First of all : what is work? Work is of two kinds : first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid. The second kind is