

AN EXAMINATION OF SOCIALISM

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SOCIALISM is a political theory according to which people would be happier and better if the means of production—that is, the land of a country and its buildings, ships, machines, rails, &c.—belonged to the Government instead of belonging, as they now mainly do, to private citizens and private corporations.

That is the only exclusive meaning of Socialism. All the other wobbly ideas that have been tacked on to it by its enemies or its friends—that it is “atheistic,” or that it involves sexual “immorality,” that it is “progressive,” that it is “Christian”—have nothing to do with the one proposition which alone distinguishes it from all other policies.

A Socialist State need be neither more democratic nor less democratic than the present state of affairs. A State in which all the means of production were owned by the Government might be under a despot or under an aristocracy, or it might be managed as a democracy. However it was managed it would be

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a Socialistic State if the means of production were owned and controlled by Government.

Socialism does not in its essence imply that nobody should own anything. There is no reason why a man in a Socialist State should not own a great quantity of things for his own private enjoyment. The only thing that would be denied to private ownership would be something commonly used or usable as a means of production; something which, when one part of the community owns it and the other part does not, permits the owning part to live upon the labour of the non-owning part. A man in a Socialistic State would be allowed to own ornaments and purely personal possessions such as pictures and furniture, watches, and even productive machines should they be used for his own enjoyment alone; but he would not be allowed a share, large or small, in a factory, or a shop, or a railroad, or a commercial steamship, or a piece of land (to be used for profit), except that share which he might be said to own as a member of the community whose Government owned and controlled all these things.

Again, a State could be Socialistic and yet have very different degrees of enjoyment among its citizens. The Government might reward men according to merit, distributing very unequally the wealth produced by labour applied to the capital and land it owned. The Government might give large amounts of the good things to a few people whom it thought deserved them, and very little to the mass of mankind whom it might think so wicked as not to deserve them. It might make an unequal distribution by giving high rewards to the talented, the good organizers and the

good managers, in order to secure efficiency of production, and very little to the general mass of labourers. It might act purely by caprice, giving large amounts to its favourites and small amounts to the rest of the community. It might (as many confusedly think that it *must*) distribute to each according to his need; it might make a rigidly equal distribution to each family in the community according to the age and number of its members. Whatever form the distribution took, whether there were great differences between the amounts distributed or exact equality in them, whether the distribution were determined by competition in talent or by caprice, or by the sense of human equality, the State would still be a Socialistic State if the means of production were owned and controlled by the Government.

This is the main point to seize; for it is in this, and in this alone, that Socialism differs from other political theories.

It is certain that, whatever may have happened in other parts of the world, our ancestors here in Western Europe never had anything of the kind. There was plenty of co-operative production in the Middle Ages; there was plenty of common land (as there still is) side by side with land privately owned. There existed for a short time a legal fiction, which still theoretically survives, that the land of the country ultimately belonged to the Crown; but in practice no Socialistic State can be discovered in the past history of men of our own blood. Many have thought to discover it, and guessed it to be present in certain ill-understood and very obscure primitive customs, but the evidence in favour of this kind of guesswork was never strong

enough to convince a close critic of evidence, and, as research proceeds, gets weaker every day.

The proposal, then, which is the Socialist proposal, to convert all private property in the means of production—that is, in the factories, machines, land, houses, &c.—into Government property is a novel proposal. It is a proposal to do something quite new and as yet untried by men of our descent with our inherited traditions and instincts and ways of looking at things. Why has so revolutionary a proposal been made, and what arguments can be brought forward in its favour?

This revolutionary proposal has been made because the present state of society is in itself a novel one, suffering from evils new in the history of our country, and, for that matter, of the world; and the arguments in favour of it—the arguments, that is, by which it is attempted to prove that England would be a better and a happier country under Socialism, are many and strong. As things now are in England, a small proportion of the inhabitants of the country possess by far the greater part of the means of production. It is very difficult to obtain exact figures, and all general statements made in this connection must be received with caution. But I think the following general statement is not very wide of the mark, though, of course, it does not pretend to be rigidly accurate. I think one may say that less than two hundred families at the very most control one-quarter of our means of production. Another quarter is in the hands of perhaps two thousand families at the most. And the remaining half (unless we are to include properties so small that they hardly count as capital) cannot at the utmost be made to include as much as a

sixteenth of the whole community. The rest consist of families working for a wage, and unlikely, save in exceptional individual instances, to be anything other than wage-earners, either now or in the future. Side by side with this concentration of ownership in few hands you have a highly competitive system of production under which security of employment is at its minimum. Thus a great and an increasing proportion of the population—so it is maintained—has no share in the permanent wealth of the country, and can only enjoy what it does on condition of continual labour for others who own that permanent wealth ; while the workers, though not perhaps becoming actually poorer, are becoming relatively poorer compared with the owning classes, and with all this they are less and less secure of permanent employment as trade competition extends over a wider and wider area of the world's surface. A good crop of some product on the other side of the globe may suddenly throw out of employment any number of men employed here in the production of a similar article. The cessation of demand for something produced by us, but consumed by people whom we have never seen, in India or in China, may suddenly destroy the livelihood of a whole group of artisans in England. Every progress even, every new invention, tends to bring into the experience of some group of labouring men a period of insecurity at the best, and at the worst of acute distress. Meanwhile there is a constant tendency for property to amalgamate still further, there is a constant tendency for the big business to swallow up the small one, and it is the main Socialist argument that if we leave things as they are we shall end in a state of society where quite a

small number of exceedingly rich men will control the destinies of all the rest of their fellows. It will, moreover (they say), be a state of society in which competition for employment will always maintain the average earnings of the labouring class at an exceedingly low level, and the power of enjoyment of the mass of the community will be miserably small compared with the power of enjoyment of the few owners who control it.

It is to avoid a consummation of this kind that Socialists propose the fundamental transformation of our social system, towards which transformation they are working with such enthusiasm and conviction.

Now let us look at another aspect of the matter, and consider certain consequences that would follow upon Socialism were it ever brought into being.

In the first place, no man in a Socialistic State would be what we now call *free*. This is a proposition very hotly denied by many Socialists, because they believe it to be an unfair and a misleading one ; but no clear thinker can deny it, and by far the best arguments used in this connection by the clearest thinkers upon the Socialistic side are to the effect that, though the citizen in a Socialist State would not be "free" in the sense in which an old independent owner of land and capital used to be, he would be much *freer* than the mass of the population is to-day. Before returning to that, however, it is well to repeat the first and fundamental objection to the Socialist solution of our modern difficulties. No man under a Socialist State would be what *we* call *free*. He could not exercise his will as to where he should go, what he should consume, what he should do with his time, to what activities he should direct his energies.

There is a rather muddle-headed habit, but a common one, present not only in Socialist discussion but in most other political discussion, which may be briefly described as trying to have your cake and eat it too. Men like to believe that some ideal of theirs would have all the advantages inherent to itself, and also the advantages in contradiction with its very nature. All men love individual freedom—even such a remnant of it as the modern artizan may claim is very dear, and the threat of losing it is a serious one. It is, therefore, not surprising that those who see in Socialism the only remedy for the appalling evils which we suffer to-day try to reconcile that remedy with individual freedom. But consider for a moment how impossible such a reconciliation is. A man in a factory under a master may, if he choose, leave that factory and look for work elsewhere. If he prefer, for the sake of security, to remain in that one employment, he is in many things at the disposal of his master's will during the hours of his labour. He cannot go to the manager or to the master and say: "I don't like this job; I feel inclined for that other one. Be good enough to give it me." At least he can go and say it, and perhaps in certain cases if he shows large aptitude for the new job and is able to convince his master of it, or if he finds a special favour extended to him, that liberty of choice will be conceded; but it is obvious that it could not be universal. You could not have every employee in Mr. Jones's mill saying exactly what he would do and for how long he would do it, or choosing his job according to his private inclination. So far liberty is already largely restricted by the industrial system, and the rich man is far freer than the poor one. But now go a step further. Work

is done, and the man goes out into the street. He thinks he will have a glass of beer ; but all the public-houses in the neighbourhood are owned by Mr. Jones just as much as the mill is, and Mr. Jones will or will not let him drink, according as he sees fit. He goes home, and, finding something not suitable to him in his present house, he decides to move into another which has caught his fancy, and which is more convenient to him for some reason. He finds, to his astonishment, that not only is Mr. Jones the owner of his present house, but of the other house too ; and can deny him the faculty of exchanging his old residence for the new one. He thinks he will use part of his wages to get a pair of boots ; but he can only get boots of the sort provided by Mr. Jones, and Mr. Jones can allow him to have a new pair, or not, just as he thinks fit. He will go to a music-hall. He finds that Mr. Jones owns that, too, and decides on his entertainment. Wherever he turns, all the things he desires to get, all the places in which he desires to move and to have his being, belong to the same man as owned the mill where his working hours were spent, and wherever he goes, no matter how far afield, this omnipotent being is everywhere the owner and controller, not, indeed, of his person, but of the food by which his person remains alive, and of the shelter by which he remains alive, and of every recreation or necessity relative to his being.

Now Mr. Jones is, under Socialist conditions, the Government ; and to the loss of freedom which every man feels during those hours which he gives as a wage-earner to the capitalist who employs him must be added, under a Socialist system, a similar loss of freedom in all

the other hours of his life. There is no way out of that truth.

To this criticism the Socialist has an answer. The answer is as follows: "I admit that the ownership of all the means of production by the Government would be a bad thing, if it were used despotically, as such ownership is now used by individual owners. But I would never tolerate a Socialist ideal unless that ideal included democratic management."

Note at this point that the two ideas of Government ownership and democracy have no connection. We have all of us met Socialists who were not in the least democratic, and it is perfectly easy to be a Socialist and a most rabid anti-democrat, especially if you are keener on people being made to do whatever you think is good for them than you are upon their being free to choose between good and evil. Still, it must be admitted that the desire for Socialism, springing as it nearly always does in hearts powerfully affected by the misery of the people, is usually associated with a democratic ideal of government; and most Socialists will say to you: "The man will not be free as regards the Government, but since he will, as a citizen, be the master of the Government, he will be really just as free as the most independent owner is to-day, and much more free than the ordinary wage-earner is to-day. He will be able to make or unmake the regulations which shall control his life."

The critic of Socialism at once replies that this will not be the case. A man voting as one of many thousands or millions is quite a different thing from a man enjoying elastic and immediate personal control every moment over his own actions. No one would be so

insane as to say that the actions of a modern Government, on however democratic a base, are invariably consonant with the will of the great majority of its citizens. Most people would say that usually the actions of the Government were out of touch with the will of the great majority of the people. This, they would say, was true even of the very limited sphere of Government to-day, and of the very slow and imperfect action which it can take in quite a few matters. Those who believe this to be true even of Government as it is cannot believe that Socialism, no matter how democratic the political system with which it was combined, would give freedom of action even to the majority of citizens.

The critic of Socialism asks a further question : What about the minority ? Either you must have a constitution where nothing can be done without an overwhelming majority, in which case you would be perpetually coming to a deadlock, or else you must work by ordinary majorities, in which case you would be perpetually creating hearty and intolerable discontent in large minorities opposed to you. Further, this system of majority voting, even if it worked, could only apply to the very large decisions of life. In all the innumerable minor details that make up our circumstances we should necessarily be in the hands of officials. I am not saying that would be a bad thing, or that it would be worse than the state of affairs that exists now for most of our citizens. I am only pointing out that this is an absolutely inevitable result of Socialism, and a result that cannot be avoided save by a process of confusion of thought : by trying to believe that a thing can both be and not be at the same time. Nor has

any one ever been able to show how so clear and obvious a resultant of the Socialist system could possibly be avoided.

The next criticism offered to Socialism is of a more subtle and profound kind, but is none the less very real. As Socialism would destroy what we call freedom, so it would destroy what we call the satisfaction of the desire for property. Now here two very important arguments used by Socialists against their opponents must be immediately noted.

First, they say, under present conditions the vast mass of our fellow-citizens cannot satisfy that human desire for property in so far as it exists; their whole efforts are directed—and God knows under what an anxious strain of body and mind!—to satisfy the bare necessities of human appetite—the necessary food, and clothing, and house room. They would, under a Socialistic State, if it were democratically managed, own, not indeed any of the means of production, but far, far more of the enjoyable permanent possessions of life than they do to-day. This is perfectly true, and all that the critic of Socialism can set against it is a repetition of the undoubted truth just stated—namely, that under a Socialist State the desire for property which can now in theory be satisfied by all, and is in practice satisfied by some, would not be satisfied by any if private property in land and the means of production were abolished.

But even to this the Socialist has a second and a very strong reply. He can say: "The desire for property does not exist very strongly in the case of land and of machinery. The desire to have these things is only a desire to be what is called 'rich'—that is, to be able to

exchange the product of land and capital so owned against daily enjoyments. The desire is not for the things themselves, for the land itself, or for the machinery itself ; and those things which a man really does desire to own, the things which are part of his permanent possessions, and with which he is constantly in contact, and out of which he obtains a permanent enjoyment because he is their owner, those things—his books, his furniture, his ornaments, his pictures, perhaps even a little plot of land (if he promises to produce nothing for sale with it)—he could possess under the Socialist State ; and then everybody would have such personal possessions, whereas now very few do.”

There is but one reply to this very powerful contention, which is that, as a fact, men do desire to own land and the means of production, and to own them absolutely, not only in order that they may be what is called “rich”—that is, that they may command passing enjoyments—but for the pleasure and consequences of owning the things themselves, and that for the following reasons :

First, that you cannot distinguish between the desire of ownership in a thing according to whether that thing is productive or not. It is true the interest which a man takes in a share of a business is not the same as the interest he takes in a particular instrument which he himself handles and uses. Still, it is a personal interest, and not a mere crude sense of superior opportunity for enjoyment. This is particularly the case with regard to land, which arouses the most powerful sentiment of affection and interest in the possessor, quite independently of whether it is cultivated for profit or

not, and quite independently of the amount in which it is owned.

Secondly, this general desire to own is connected with certain human consequences which have nothing to do with whether the thing owned is capable of exploiting the labour of others or not. Of one of these human consequences, economic freedom, mention has been made above. Another well worth noting, and closely attached to it, is the preservation of personal honour. Where few own, the mass who do not own at all are under a perpetual necessity to abase themselves in a number of little details. That is why industrial societies fight so badly compared with societies of peasant proprietors. The mass of the population gets trained to the sacrifice of honour; it gets used to being ordered about by the capitalist, and partially loses its manhood. If there were but one capitalist, the State, this evil would certainly be exaggerated. Men might be better fed, better clothed, and materially much happier; they might be brighter in spirits, better companions, and healthier men all round, but they would necessarily have lost all power of expression for the sentiment known as personal honour; they would have one absolute master, all forms of personal seclusion from whom would be impossible. This, when it is stated in the midst of modern evils, appears a very small point; but those who have passed by compulsion from a higher to a lower standard of personal honour can testify how vital a point is that honour in the scheme of human happiness.

It must, however, finally be asked of the man who criticizes the Socialist proposal: "If you will not accept this positive and clear remedy for the in-

tolerable conditions of modern industrial society, what alternative have you ? ”

It is as though a man suffering from a bad limb were to hesitate to have it amputated, and the surgeon were to say to him : “If you will not let me cut it off, what other course do you propose to pursue in order to be cured ? ”

This question is a strong and insistent one ; it is the root question of the whole affair, and it requires reply ; for any one who pretends that the present condition of society in England is tolerable, or has even the least chance of enduring, is of a mental calibre worthy rather of what is called “practical politics ” than of serious and vital discussion. Let us see, then, what the answer is which the serious opponents of Socialism (not the politicians, for they do not count) make to its demand.

What they say is, that if you could make a society in which the greater part of citizens owned capital and land in small quantities, that society would be happy and secure. They say (as every one must) that such a subdivision is quite possible with regard to land ; but they also believe it to be possible with regard to shares in industrial concerns. When they are told that a high division of this sort would necessarily and soon drift again into a congested state of ownership, with a few great capitalists on the one hand and a wretched proletariat upon the other, they answer that, as a matter of fact, in the past, when property was thus well divided, it did not drift into that condition, but that the highly divided state of property was kept secure for centuries by public opinion translating itself into laws and customs, by a method of

guilds, of mutual societies, by an almost religious feeling of the obligation not to transgress certain limits of competition, &c. When they are told that a State in which property was highly divided would involve more personal responsibility and personal anxiety than would the Socialist State, they freely admit this, but they add that such responsibilities and anxieties are natural to freedom in any shape and are the price one must pay for it.

Consider carefully this alternative theory. It is valuable because—First, it is the only possible alternative ; secondly, because it is one which has hardly entered into the consciousness of English people.

So few English people have ever owned anything during the last few generations that the idea of highly divided capital is not present as a social experience. It is hardly an historic memory. Nevertheless, it remains with English people, just as much as with any other Europeans, an instinctive ideal. And I repeat, between that ideal of highly divided capital and Socialist collectivism there is no possible third ideal ; we must go one way or the other. Every reform, every little tinkering and futile Bill which people maunder through in the House of Commons necessarily tends one way or the other.

The whole contention of the future in Europe lies between these two theories. On the one hand you have the Socialist theory, the one remedy and the only remedy seriously discussed in the industrial societies which have ultimately grown out of the religious schism of the sixteenth century—that is, the industrial societies of North Germany, of the Northern United States, and especially of England and the lowlands of Scotland.

On the other hand, you have the Catholic societies whose ultimate appetite is for a state of highly divided property, working in a complex and probably, at last, in a co-operative manner. That is certainly the way the Irish nation is going. The Irish people—unlike the aliens of the North—have steadily refused to turn themselves into a proletariat, whether in the modern industrial phase or in preparation for the final Socialistic phase. The Irish are determined to own. The same solution appeals to the great mass of the French people (with the exception of certain plague spots such as the mining and spinning districts of the North), and the interest of all our debates in the near future in Western or European society will lie, I think, in the victory of one or other of these two ideals—the Socialist ideal, in which the diseased industrial world will attempt to heal itself upon lines consonant with its existing nature; the ideal of widely-diffused ownership, in which the healthier and older world, which has survived outside the modern industrial system, proposes to build up its new life, until it can see its way to basing an intensive production upon highly divided individual property.

Which of the two systems will win no one can say. The Socialists, of course, do the most prophesying: but then they have grown out of that Biblical enthusiasm in religion and philosophy to which prophecy is native. But prophecy has always been worthless in human affairs, save where it regarded transcendental things.