
The Parlor Socialists

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The designation “parlor” has been attached to the Socialists who are of sufficient importance in the financial and social world to attract to themselves and their movements a considerable degree of publicity. As ordinarily used in the public prints, the phrase carries with it an insinuation of diletantism or faddism or often times of downright insincerity.

But there is a deeper significance to the Parlor Socialist, a meaning vastly more profound than the daily newspaper, whose editorials and headlines are written in a hurry to catch the edition, is accustomed to go, even if the average newspaper reader, who is essentially a hasty skimmer, demanded expositions more penetrating and consistent. That is to say, for various complex reasons, more or less familiar, the attitude of the average newspaper, as such, towards current topics is apt to accord very closely with the attitude of the general public toward the same topics. The very existence of a newspaper depends upon an approximate agreement between its vies and the views of its reading or advertising patrons, or both.

I.

The general conception of Socialists in this country has been that they are a body of malcontent agitators, with a great preponderance of good-for-nothing aliens, advocating a highly-colored exceedingly fanciful and totally impractical governmental, economic, or industrial scheme. This conception only the most superficial examination can justify. It is not the purpose here however to enter upon an exposition and defense of the principles of Socialism; only insofar as it may be necessary to throw light upon the particular phenomenon indicated by the title hereof.

Socialism, as the natural and logical evolutionary successor of capitalism, attracts attention most readily where capitalism has given the greatest evidence of its ill effects and therefore of its decadence; where tyrannous industrial and commercial aristocracies have unmistakably been formed and where class lines are most sharply and indelibly defined. These beginnings are found in the commercial and industrial countries of the old world, most conspicuously in Germany, England, France, and Italy. In these countries, class lines have, to be sure, long existed but within the century there has been a change in the color of the chalk with which they were drawn. Formerly in England, merchants and others “in trade” belonged to the lower classes and were generally looked down upon by the landed and hereditary aristocracy. Now however the aristocracy has become largely industrialized while the lower classes consist almost exclusively of the proletariat, with an admixture of pseudo-bourgeois, leading ever a more precarious and dependent existence, the slaves of the wages system. The temporal power has tended to follow the possessors of wealth, transferring itself to these from the hereditary kinds and potentates,. The reference is to England because its social fabric is more familiar to American readers. The same is true of the other countries, any difference being one of degree and not of kind.

The industrial development of the United States was no less rapid in the absolute than in those countries but our country, being vast in extent, was able to absorb it, and no pressure was felt. Furthermore class lines in this country had to be formed anew rather than merely transformed as in the older countries,. But class lines were forming insidiously, even if they were not an easily discernible phenomenon. During the

greater part of a half century therefore, while Socialism in Germany was rife, while it was there a leading question exerting an appreciable influence on the government and the laws which all historians recognize, it was in this country taken practically no notice of. When considered at all, it was summarily dismissed as something peculiarly foreign, a product probably of monarchies, to disappear with the establishment of a democracy or a republic. This indeed was more than a hasty or superficial view. Even such careful analysts as Henry George and Herbert Spencer speak of Socialism as comparable to the autocracy of Russia. How they reached that conclusion is not clear although it is likely that they mistook for real Socialism the efforts of Bismarck to forestall and impede real Socialism by instituting a modicum of state socialism. They possibly noticed that state socialism was of no benefit to the proletariat and accordingly uttered their comprehensive disapprobation.

At any rate, until the last 5 years, Socialism received scant notice in this country. News items, much less editorial comment, pro or con, were rare. Magazine articles were rarer, if not entirely absent. During this time and before, there were however the beginnings which were made largely by immigrants who, being already familiar with the tenets of Socialism, had no difficulty in recognizing its applicability to all countries. Many of our cities had German or Italian Socialist organizations, where a native American Socialist could hardly be found. Even these organizations were few in number and in membership and the average editor passed them by as not worthy of serious academic consideration and as too insignificant to consider from a circulation standpoint. They touched neither his mind, his heart, nor his pocketbook.

But what, you ask, has this to do with the Parlor Socialist? From the standpoint of America, it has everything to do with him, for the phenomenon which the paragrapher lightly dubs Parlor Socialism is nothing more or less than an unmistakable sign of the Americanization of Socialism, leading the paragrapher gently but powerfully and relentlessly past the point where he can define Socialism as the unintelligible ravings of a handful of unnatural and unnaturalized bomb-throwing aliens plotting against duly constituted authority. The paragrapher finds plenty of satisfactory reasons for the socialistic product of the German

revolution or the German military system without abating one jot or tittle his own intense jingoism, but when he finds men advocating Socialism for this country, men who were born in American soil, bred in American homes, enriched by American methods, and educated at American universities, then he grows a little more serious about it, ceases for a moment his strenuous waving of the flag, ponders and possibly evolves a derisive epithet.

II.

Opponents of Socialism frequently say as an objection that there are different kinds of Socialists and different kinds of Socialism. Let them use the following statement as ammunition if they can. There are as many different kinds of Socialists as there are different Socialists. In using that statement however, let them take notice that it is necessarily inconsistent with the "equality of men" theory, an impossible condition which Socialists are often charged with attempting to bring about. There are also varying expressions of the details and ramifications of Socialism, but they all rest on one fundamental principle, the collective ownership and democratic administration of the social tools of production and distribution of wealth. State ownership of railroads in Germany or Russia, for instance, is therefore not considered as collectively owned, that is, not privately owned, they are certainly not democratically administered.

Socialists who are sincere (for we even recognize that such a thing is possible as an insincere or self-seeking Socialist) are striving for the same goal, their methods, powers, opportunities may and do differ. They may be classified according to any arbitrary standard — color of eyes, mental caliber, material possessions, etc. For the purposes of this paper, it is convenient to divide them, not invidiously, into two classes: the ordinary workman and the "intellectual."

Bearing in mind that no classification is absolute, it may be said in general that the former, the ordinary workman, who is a Socialist is so because his own immediate economic necessities forced him to give it attention. The struggle for existence, in its most virulent form, lies at his very door and he is ready to give ear to any propaganda that promises alleviation. His is the inductive method. That he is likely to be

relatively unintelligent goes without saying. Manifestly he has not had the advantage of a college education, often not even of common schooling. Even the skilled workman has acquired his skill at the neglect of wider intellectual pursuits. Obedient to a specialized brain, his hand performs the work assigned, but he has not been trained to think, to think widely and profoundly, to generalize, to deduce, to follow a consistent and logical abstract mental process. The unskilled workman is still more incompetent mentally. Being an unskilled workman, he often hasn't even the social advantages of the labor union. He must work long hours for small pay. His time, even if he had the inclination to study and the mental capacity to learn rapidly, will not permit him to do much more than follow the dull and tedious daily round of toiling, eating, and sleeping. His whole time, like that of a chicken, is spent in getting a living. To get out of a job is to him often a blessing in disguise, for it gives him time to think.

On the other hand, the intellectuals are Socialists deductively. They are men, not necessarily better men in the absolute, who have had the opportunity to pause for a general prospective and retrospective view, as the traveller pauses at the crest of the hill and contemplates in a large way the road he has just seen in detail as he journeyed over it, and maps out the course ahead of him; or as the traveller lost in the forest climbs a tree to widen his horizon and reestablish his bearings. They have had the advantage of the mental discipline and the introduction to knowledge afforded by the universities. They have had the advantage of access to books, and they have had, most of all, the advantage of leisure, advantages which they have used to their profit. All these advantages presuppose a certain degree of economic security. Although there are men who possess a high degree of knowledge on social and economic subjects and who are yet wage-earning proletarians, they are but the exception which proves the rule. It has been said indeed that many a wage-earner in the slums of New York or Chicago knows more about political economy and sociology than the average college professor. However that may be, the purpose is not to prove that there are not intellectuals among the proletarians, but rather to differentiate the Parlor Socialists as distinctly intellectuals, a differentiation which is obvious. Nor is it by any means contended that all intellectuals are Socialists. Let us ex-

amine the Parlor Socialist a little more closely.

He is usually a collect graduate. The average college graduate is a hopeful, ambitious lad. If he have sufficient vigor and earnestness of purpose to secure a place among the commencement day orators, he talks about big affairs and electrifies his applauding fellows with glowing idealisms. His gaze is intently fixed upon the future and in fancy he carves his career and writes his name in bold face type upon the indelible pages of history. He wants to do something. He wants to be something. He has, he thinks, fitted himself for law, journalism, business, politics, or whatnot. He is ready to take hold.

He knows the Greek and Latin and French verbs. In these languages he has read a few books which he does not remember for their literary or historic value as a whole, but merely fragmentarily as a collection of daily tasks. In the realm of history, he has been dragged through volumes about kings and dynasties and ages which, whether dry-as-dust or served like fiction, have at best but a passing interest for him as no attempt is made to apply this knowledge to his daily life and present problems. He studies political economy and sociology and possibly becomes familiar with a few detached laws like the laws of Gresham and Malthus, but he does not carry away with him a comprehensive grasp of the laws of society, a grasp that in any way will guide him in his daily life. These statements refer of course to the literary or academic institutions. The technological institutions are in a separate category, although it may be remarked in passing that no man is properly educated unless he has a working knowledge of the fundamental laws governing the society in which he lives.

By implication at least, most colleges teach the conservative gospel of things-as-they-are, with respect to politics and economics. At any rate, they do not intimate that a substitute for capitalism is possible or advisable. They do not even recognize capitalism categorically, and Socialism is a matter to be treated in 1 page out of 400 in the average economics textbook. It is clear, therefore, that while Parlor Socialists are college graduates, the colleges are no directly responsible.

Referring again to the average college graduate, it may be said that he leaves college firm in the determination to "make money," which he frequently confounds with "making a living." And often times he

has an additional mental twist to the effect that some ways of making money are more honorable than other. If he is a rich man's son, he goes to college because it is the proper thing to have an unimpeachable certificate of education and, neglecting those sons of rich men who do not make even a pretense of being useful members of society, the majority after graduation proceed in the ways recognized as "proper." If a lawyer, he waits for his client and takes orders whether to stand upon the law or circumvent it; if a minister, he preaches established doctrine; if in mercantile business, he racks his braid to keep up the selling price and down the cost price; if a doctor, he humors his patients and gives them what they think they ought to have rather than to lose them; if a journalist, he seeks to discover what the people want him to say and says it; if in public utilities, he contrives to buy legislative bodies and secure franchises as cheaply as possible; if a politician, he joins the more likely of the two dominant political parties and seeks office in the old vote-buying, boss-ridden methods. All these things are eminently proper according to the standards of the day and according to the interests of the class to which he belongs.

He sets about accumulating his automobiles and yachts and town and country houses with as much zeal and energy, yes with as much self-justification, as the proletarian does about getting and holding a job which will yield him hardly sufficient to keep body and soul together. It is the gospel of cutthroat competition. His only limit is "what the traffic will bear." Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. It is the recognized gospel and hence eminently proper. The man who sets about to carve his career in any of these fashions stands little chance of being successfully assailed, for the average critic and molder of public opinion is struck from the same die.

III.

But the Parlor Socialists are different. Their view of life is somewhat more broad. Their methods deviate from the standards called proper. To be called a Parlor Socialist one must of course have large and increasing material possessions. But such a one, although going through the motions of properly taking care of these interests, does not make it his whole business or look upon it as the chief desideratum of life. He wants

enough, but he does not want too much and, unlike many of our present-day commercial barons, he conceives that it is possible for an individual to have too much wealth. He pauses to examine the general manner of money-making and weigh it in ethical scales, asking the question as to why he, young and inexperienced, should possess so much without effort while thousands whom he sees about him possess but little or nothing with the maximum of effort. He is led into investigating the sources of wealth and soon comes to the obvious conclusion that wealth is produced by labor and that therefore he is living on the labor of others.

Although he may love ease and comfort, nay although he may be excessively sybaritic, he pauses to witness the despair and wretchedness of those about him and wonders whether it is not possible for all to live in ease and comfort. Although he may love ease and comfort, he does not consider it the part of true luxury to have a half dozen automobiles, to have several different domestic establishments in various parts of the country, to languish at the club or join in the social whirl of gaiety and conventional amusement. On the contrary, he reaches the conclusion that true luxury is impossible so long as a large majority of his fellow beings live in squalor and destitution. He is like the good, old-fashioned housewife who would disdain to sit in a sumptuous parlor so long as the rest of the house was unkempt. He is a little bit different from the rest of his class. He lives more deeply and thoughtfully than those who are in the conventional rut. He learns more of real life in a year than the goggled speeder can learn in a decade at the automobile lever. But he is not yet a Socialist, except in embryo. He is only a questioner. He has merely become conscious that he is the beneficiary or, if he is particularly harassed by his excessive material possessions, the victim of widespread inequalities.

If he is a man of parts, dauntless, persevering, he will not stop until he gets to the bottom of the question. He examines first this explanation, then another; now this remedy, now that one. Beginning with the general prejudicial contempt for Socialists and Socialism, he finally recognizes that the social disease he is fighting is systemic and organic and that Socialism and Socialists offer the only systematic remedy.

At this point, another and entirely different qual-

ity is requisite. The recognition of the fact is one thing. To make public that recognition is quite another, requiring a kind of nerve or heroism of which story books are wont to prate, a heroism more traditional than historical, more desired than possessed. He has found that society is divided into two classes, one small one preying on the large one. He has found that he belongs to the preying class, which is as jealous of its prey as the dog of its meager bone. To announce his conviction involves the possible dis severance of the social ties of a lifetime and even of the family ties. He must place himself in opposition to the views of his entire class and attract to himself the heedless bark of every feist that turns a stilted phrase or wields a dogmatic pen. Having become conscious of the existence of classes, he is opposed to class lines and becomes a traitor, so-called, to his own class. He believes that society should be a homogeneous, harmonious whole, instead of two opposing forces deployed in battle array upon the industrial arena. So believing and having the courage of his convictions, he joins hands with those of the other class who are likewise class-conscious and protestant.

IV.

We have been taught to sing of "Hands Across the Sea." This is hands across the social chasm in an attempt to heal the breach made by the unsocial ravages of capitalism. A slight recapitulation will clarify the figure. The proletariat, the exploited wage slave, becomes conscious of the chasm, makes his examination, and espouses Socialism. This after a time attracts the attention of now and then a truth-seeking member of the other class. He looks and "lo, it is good" and they join hands, marking the advent of the intellectuals into the movement.

The introduction of the Parlor Socialist into the American movement therefore is truly and deeply significant. It is a critical moment calling for more serious consideration and discussion than contemptuous or derisive innuendo in the form of fantastic epithet can satisfy. Nor can it be satisfied in the way of which the following is a fair example: "Millionaire Socialist So-and-so To Live in a Hut," says a newspaper headline. The statement not being true, we may assume an ulterior motive besides the mere desire to give the news. We may assume that the headliner be-

lieves that Socialists should live in huts and he is anxious to disseminate Socialist So-and-so's apparent sanction of that belief. To tell him in general that Socialists, far from desiring to live in huts, however better they may be than some tenements, believe that with an equitable distribution of wealth no man would need to live in a hut, makes no impression upon him. To tell him specifically that his story is untrue elicits the charge that Socialist So-and-so therefore is not sincere. If Socialist So-and-so is not going to live in a hut, wear rags, and dine with the Barmecides, he is not a true and faithful Socialist, the newspaper headliner's conception being so vague that he confuses the desire to relieve the destitution of the proletariat with the desire to share his destitution and privations. He believes that Socialist So-and-so should sell all he has and give it to the poor. In vain does the Socialist protest that such a proceeding is utterly futile, that charity is but a poor substitute for justice, that to give to the poor reduces them to the state of mental dependence, lowers their wages, and offers another source of gain to some capitalist leech. And so the newspaper headliner merely corrects himself in some subsequent issue by the derisive declaration that Socialist So-and-so has decided that he will forego hut-living and other asceticisms.

Or perhaps the newspaper headliner is merely reasoning by analogy, always a most dangerous logical process. Perhaps, consciously or otherwise, he draws an analogy from the two dominant parties, formed of leaders and followers, parlor officeholders and kitchen voters, leaders who promise nothing but buncombe and give nothing but excuses, sympathetic plutocrats who give just enough "to the cause" to get the required votes and protect their vested interests, their followers riding in carriages on election day to walk the rest of the year. Perhaps he cannot conceive how a party can be organized on any other basis, how a man with money could have any other reason for dabbling in active politics at all, much less in a form of politics where all are on equality and the leader is but a follower.

V.

The story of the man who was arrested for keeping a vicious dog is a familiar one. He defended him-

self on three grounds: in the first place, his dog was not vicious; in the second place, he always kept his dog muzzled; and in the third place, he didn't have any dog in the first place. Our case is similar. The Parlor Socialist as a class after all does not exist. A Socialist is one who believes that the wage system is slavery; that competition is wasteful; that special statutory privilege of any kind is unsocial and immoral. He believes he has found a definite, simple remedy in the collective ownership of the social tools of production and distribution of wealth. He denies governmental favors to others and asks them not for himself. The Parlor Socialist advocates these things to his own material disadvantage, thus refusing sustenance to the popular gospel that a plethora of material wealth is the *summum bonum*. But he does not advocate them to his own economic insecurity for, of the economic security he seeks to obtain for all, he will himself partake.

Parlor Socialism as a characterization is ephemeral. It will disappear when the Socialist movement is thoroughly Americanized, that is, when the Parlor Socialists are sufficiently numerous to cease to invite individual comment and when, through the lapse of time, they have given unmistakable evidence that they are not merely victims of a passing fad or fancy.

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