

SOCIALISM IN HISTORY.

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WHEN one is asked to state shortly what Socialism means, it is not easy to give an answer. However, according to Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, M.P., in *Socialism and Society*, (who is an official exponent of the I.L.P.), it is as follows: — “The community acting through law and organised into definite forms, determining the lines of individual action, is an essential part of the Socialist idea.” Here we have what thorough Socialism denotes, and we have the clear corollary, that it can only be fully introduced by the regimentation of the people

The land owned by the community, and no private appropriation of economic rent: this might be accomplished by the land being leased out for a term of years, and the farmers kept under control of the local authorities, which is the system over most of India, the States share being farmed out; only the control is exercised by the officers of the central government. It would be possible for this control to be entrusted to communal officers, giving each community an interest in the success of the management. Now that so many agricultural operations are done by machinery this is thinkable, and the good of the community as a whole could be made of primary importance, and not merely pecuniary profit. For instance, if thought good, the conversion of farms into grass lands could be forbidden, and only such rent taken as would allow of ordinary agriculture. This would help to stem the depopulation of the countryside, and we should not have absentee landlords growing rich at the expense of the real prosperity of their country as has been the case in Ireland. But it is when we approach modern industry, and try to apply socialist ideas, especially in a country without protection and depending on a huge foreign export and import, that the social regimentation of all industrial undertakings is unthinkable: unless indeed all the trading world were equally regimented and communities dealt directly with one another. The smallest knowledge of human nature tells us that the result of any such wholesale regimentation would be intolerable oppression, and in the end the complete suppression of every kind of liberty. Thought would perish, and human energy, which is dependent on thought, would dwindle, and would only be exerted under the lash of the taskmaster.

But, say the Socialists, the present individualistic system is also intolerable. Social co-operation enables fabulous wealth to be produced, and the landholders and great capitalists appropriate an enormous proportion of it, leaving the toiling masses to live for the most part in squalid city slums on wages only just enough to breed a race to continue their labours. Day by day the gulf between the irresponsible rich, living for

the most part in luxurious hotels or well appointed villas, and the masses, becomes more and more pronounced. The professional and the shop-keeping classes exist mainly for the rich, and are part of their entourage. It is indeed only the scraps, which fall from the rich man's table, that come to the real producers. To the individualist argument, that without competition, the best that is in man will not be forthcoming, the socialist replies that the greatest benefactors of the human race did not work for profit, that altruism can be stimulated, and that the captains of the new order will be so chosen as to be free from the egoism and self-seeking of ordinary human nature. But the argument can be carried on with an infinite number of cogent reasons for and against, and so it will be most profitable to seek guidance from the past history of the world.

When the ancient world is first disclosed to us, the masses were slaves, and we know from the literature of Assyria, Egypt and Palestine, that social conditions were formed by the invasion of conquering tribes, who enslaved the previous inhabitants. The invaders formed the warrior and governing class, recruited at times from the aristocracy of the conquered, and the masses continued as hewers of wood and drawers of water. Some conquerors, as the Aryans in India, and the Hebrews in Palestine, concerned themselves immediately with agriculture, but as farmers rather than cultivators, for in India to this day, the priestly Brahmin and the warrior Rajput will not touch a plough. But often as wave of conquest succeeded wave, the conquerors, like the Turks in latter days, merely collected land tribute. How far the State or community could claim proprietary rights in the land would depend on the character of the race. The more pliant Egyptians ceded such proprietorship to their kings, under the pressure of famine, says the Bible record. But the Hebrews themselves certainly always preserved individual proprietorship. They believed that the land had been divinely given them, and divinely apportioned out to their tribes and families. It was under protest they even submitted to a king, and not all the magnificence of Solomon's reign reconciled them to the loss of liberty of each doing what was right in his own eyes. When the Assyrians conquered the Jews, it was the dominant race of the country that they carried captive to Babylon, and had they been ordinary revenue paying people, this would hardly have been necessary, for the Assyrian king would only have had to divert that revenue into his own coffers. But this fierce and intractable non-tribute paying race had to be carried away, put under the harrow of affliction and scattered and peeled. The Jew, with his Arab congener, is the champion individualist of the world; and while this trait has preserved his nationality through the ages, it has made him a restless wanderer and an outcast of the nations, for none of them can absorb him. His socialism in Russia is merely the measure of his discontent, and he could no more exist under pure socialism than could the strong characters who are now fighting the battle of Socialism on the European stage.

Egypt then had state-ownership of the land, and we know from the Babylonian records of 2,500 years B.C., that this was the prevailing custom in the ancient civilisation. Certainly, it was so in India, where the socialist land system preceded the invasion of the Mahomedans, who, under the Mogul emperors, only elaborated it, no doubt on the model of that existing in the old Babylonian empire. The writer served in India for over 20 years as a Revenue Officer and Magistrate, during all of which time he was moving amongst the people, settling their land and domestic quarrels, and intimately mixed up with their lives; and he would like to describe how socialistic all their system is.

In most parts of India, and till the Permanent Settlement in Lower Bengal also, the State's share of the produce of the land was leased out for long or short periods, either to individuals who were often great feudatories, or to village communities. There was an hereditary right to the settlement conceded to old landholders at fixed rates, and most of the cultivators or tenure holders had similar hereditary rights. For the farmers, as for the cultivators, there were no competitive rates. The rent, till recently, was usually paid in kind, or even if in cash, the farmer was substantially interested in the out-turn, for arrears were chronic and their realisations of course depended on the out-turn. So also as a matter of fact was the State concerned; and self-interest prompted it to protect its tenants and subtenants. This led it, when necessary, to remit revenue, and even to make agricultural loans. Rural finance was conducted through the farmers and village bankers, who advanced corn to the peasants, to be repaid after the harvest at 25 to 50 per cent interest. This ownership of the land by the State, which merely delegated its rights, had far-reaching effects. If the rural economy of a village could be improved, the State and all its agents benefitted. These were the capitalists, and it was at least their interest, not only that life and property should be secure, but that timely assistance should be given to the up-keep of irrigation channels, reservoirs, and embankments against floods. The chain of executive authority was simple — a governor over a province, great feudatories and farmers (or quasi-proprietors) over smaller tracts. Success in paying the revenue was practically the only qualification for such posts. But the checks on the executive were automatic. In the long run at least, righteousness and due protection of the cultivator paid all round. The farmer for his own interest, not to mention to gain a good name, dug tanks, made embankments, cut irrigation channels, and so improved the chances of his own income being increased and of his own possession being continued.

It will be seen, then, that the competition of our modern European system was practically absent from the above arrangement. Of course a grasping and needy ruler might pit one farmer against another, and introduce the competitive element; but the agricultural world was too conservative to allow such changes. Anyhow, when it was

done, it was the abuse of the system, and was against custom, which in the East is akin to religion.

The village economy as regards professional services and industries was (and still is) very simple. The priest, the barber, the astrologer, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the accountant, the policeman, the potter, the shoemaker, each either had so much service land, or was entitled to fixed dues. Where there are weavers separate from the family, the prices would be fixed in measures of grain. Again, under Hindu law and custom, every family is joint, with the father or eldest brother, as manager. This too works against competition and the development of energy.

Thus it will be seen that India, at least so far as it is Hindu, is under a complete socialist system, the community coming first and the interest of the individual being of secondary importance. All is fixed order and method, and each individual has his assigned place. Religion through caste stereotypes the system. But there is something in a socialistic régime that cannot be described: that is the atmosphere of restriction, each person being limited to his special department of life, and his thought being thus strictly circumscribed. I have known common coolies return from a British West Indian colony, and one felt this unmistakeable stamp was gone~they had acquired individuality. The same result would be noticeable amongst coolies and clerks working alongside of English employees on the railway. They had gained a larger and freer outlook on life, and they approached life's problems with a greater readiness of device. One would not so often get the reply to a proposed change, "this is not the custom." Such are the unseen forces in human character, of a socialistic or individualistic environment.

Here it may be asked, how about the famed industries of India, — its silks, its carved ivories, its brasswork, its spices, its dyes, — how were they produced? Well, at all times and under the most socialistic system, at the top there must be individuality, which is fostered and sustained out of the revenue collected by the ruler and his deputies. Merchants, too, have always existed, and must always exist, who by trade and exchange, make the revenue paid in the provinces available to the ruler for his soldiers and servants, and to support the skilled artisans who supply his luxuries. As there always have been cities, there have always been industries carried on outside of the prevalent socialism.

So far about the beginning of Eastern civilisation. But before discussing the origin of Western civilization, we must distinguish between Rome in the East and Rome in the West. In the East of course Rome had had Greece as its precursor; but the Grecian empire had been of an ephemeral nature, as it was bound to be, for the Greek genius had no turn for government. Its very virtues handicapped it. Beauty, art, science, philosophy, enjoyment of life, with an all round outlook, were the spheres the Greek

excelled in. But he had no love of imposing law and order, and no great desire to exploit nature, in spite of his love of science. The city with its dependent territory exhausted his patriotism, and here too he was turbulent and changeable. So it was impossible that he could govern and retain an empire. His character too was wanting in seriousness and tenacity of purpose; and in religion he readily fell into superstitions. The Romans, then, found in Asia Minor and Syria, a number of opulent and luxury loving cities, loosely bound together by weak governments. The cohesive elements in the countries at large were the old land settlements of the Assyrian and Persian periods. Each city had its adjacent dependent territory with private owners, and a great bulk of the land belonged to Temples; but as a whole it was state-owned. All civilised Asia had long been under such a system, and in spite of the many Greek-colonised cities, we must remember that the old rural population still surrounded them. Roman ideas in these countries never penetrated beneath the surface, and the proconsuls and deputies merely governed. The Greek character was never strong enough to resist the socialistic tendency of the East. They could trade and barter and philosophise; but they could not infuse into the social body, the individualism and strength it required. The Greek medized, and the Roman grascized, and as Sir William Ramsay tells us in his *Cities of St. Paul*, it was the Jewish element in the Greek cities of Asia Minor that supplied much of the energy and stability.

Now the strong individuality of the Jews is surely demonstrated by their possession in ancient times of a non-socialist land tenure, when all the rest of the world apparently had possession on a communal basis. This possession has been disputed, notably by Mr. James Neil in "Land Tenure in Ancient Times," read before a meeting of the Victoria Institute; but his arguments are rather fanciful, and the fact that Palestine now conforms to the general Asiatic custom, is surely explained by centuries of subjugation, and the loss of its chief inhabitants.

The above arguments are put forward to explain why, in studying the Roman social organism, we must confine ourselves strictly to the Western Empire — to Italy, Spain, Gaul, Britain, Illyria, which all grew up under the Roman polity from a state of barbarism into one of highly developed civilization: and as the predominating element in the East was socialistic, that in the West was individualistic. And it all seems to have sprung from the Roman idea of property and of personal character. The quarrels about the status of the politicians and plebeians, the gradual extension of the franchise, and the adoption of republican systems of government, show a national cast of character with reverence for individuality, that was entirely absent from the history of Asia. This part of Roman history reads like a chapter of that of England, with patricians and plebeians in place of barons and commons. There was the same strong individualism, and the same strong desire to possess and manage property apart from State interference. As Rome conquered great tracts of country by defeating and

subduing the half nomad tribes, the Roman national instinct proceeded to settle the lands as private property. Each country or province became a model of Latium or Campania, with the *municipium* as the administrative centre, and Roman citizens provincials, freedmen, and slaves. Over land and slaves there was full ownership — *dominium*, and the State only came in with its claim to allegiance and payment of the taxes. There was a regular army to keep the peace and support the law, and the individual could do what he liked with his own. It was not as in the East, where the State was always interfering in land affairs, and where, under the Greek régime there was State education. Sir William Ramsay describes the Greek system as a “minutely ordered and articulated government,” and therefore in Greek civilisation, in spite of its culture of the individual, we find the definition of socialism fulfilled, “the community organised into definite forms, determining the lines of individual action.” In fact the Greek, in spite of his freedom of thought, had little freedom of action, for he lived in a socialistic environment.

But the canker at the root of the Roman system was its exaggeration of individualism, and of the rights of private property. This made Pliny declare that “the lust of avarice had so totally seized upon mankind that their wealth seemed rather to possess them, than they to possess their wealth.” Dollinger, the historian, in the same strain, says, “avarice and rapacity early showed themselves features of the Roman character. War was not conducted for honour and glory, but as a main source of gain.” Then every one knows how Seneca, while declaiming on the beauty of poverty and simplicity, was practising usury on the most gigantic scale in far off Britain. In fact the Roman commonwealth is described as “a vast institute for the securing of private property.” The laws gave unlimited dominion over property, and there was no sense of responsibility. This power of the individual was pandered to by slavery, and it was no wonder that the whole moral nature deteriorated.

The reaction was to come in Christianity, which was nurtured amongst the poor and the slaves; and common misery developed sympathy and the social virtues. The empire was starved on Individualism; the Christians brought in Socialism and gave the community new life. On this social spirit was built up the strength of the Church. Paganism got weaker and weaker on its hard, distracted, and corrupted individualism: and the centralised power of the Bishops enabled Constantine to proclaim Christianity as the State religion. From that time forward socialist principles certainly increased, and the irresponsibility of property decreased, till in feudalism it disappeared, and property acquired a new basis. The State acquired the right of universal proprietor, the old Roman *dominium* lapsed and the person with a soul to be saved became of more consideration than the thing to be possessed. The beggar was glorified and almsgiving exceeded all other virtues. The industries that revived in guilds flourished without competition, and competition in agricultural rents was unknown. Service rather than

rent was exacted, status and not contract ruled society, and the hardness of Roman materialism did not dominate all the relations of life. For good or ill, however, this state of things was to disappear. In England, especially, the spirit of commercialism and racial individualism steadily destroyed the socialist element. The wool trade disturbed rural relations, feudalism weakened, and the conditions of land tenure altered, and were put on a more material basis. But of course the whole extent of this change did not take place, till the new industrial system had increased population and brought competition into full swing. Then gradually all the social responsibility implied in land ownership was discarded, the iron rule of competition and of land law was adopted, and the cruel individualism of the Roman Empire has returned with the same views of property and the same results. Unblushingly, the community has been exploited for the enrichment of the landlord and capitalist class. Free trade eased off the position for a time. But the need of great concentration of population for the new industrialism has enabled a crushing tax to be imposed, and a practical monopoly of light and air to be established. And yet no one individually has been responsible. Given certain principles — the Roman idea of property — the *jus privatum*, and the inevitable consequences follow.

The Socialist urges there is only one alternative to this harsh individualism, which must work out into cruel injustice, and that is pure Socialism. Society, he says, is an evolutionary system. Mr. Macdonald's argument is, that competition and individualism have created huge productive forces — that is their function, but that there naturally follows Socialism to secure justice in distribution; and Socialism implies payment for services rendered to the community, and no other payments under it will be allowed. He, of course, denies that with the elimination of competition, individualism and all that it implies will disappear. He tells us, and I think truly, that now “things dominate man with results spelt out in moral, social, and physical deterioration,” and that competition unrestrained means “the unregulated clash of individual interests, and the haphazard expenditure of individual effort.”

This contention of Mr. Macdonald, that society is an organism, which but for arrested development must always inevitably work out into Socialism, is what constitutes the dangerous element of socialist propaganda. While the principle that Individualism and Socialism are twin forces, co-operating to create and sustain society, and all that is necessary is their due co-ordination, is accepted, we have only to consider which of the two forces should be stimulated and which should be checked. For instance, most people would admit that there is an excess of individualism among the English and the Americans, at least, and that there is an excess of socialism in India and the East generally. But the I.L.P., through their apostle tells us, that Socialism is an absolute good for us anyhow, as evolution has taken us through the preliminary stage, and immediate tracks should be made for it, not, of course, by a violent revolution, but by

gradual, though sure, measures. This view concentrates enthusiasm, by narrowing the outlook, and placing the new Jerusalem on a very near horizon. But we would urge that the above sketch of the history of the chief civilisations does not support Mr. Macdonald's contentions. Civilisations have found their grave, both in acute individualism and in acute socialism. One well known Socialist speaker and writer denies, that Socialism under the spirit of Christianity would be liable to the fatal decay of thought and energy. as seen among the Hindus But surely we saw in the dark and middle ages such decay and atrophy, in spite of a great deal of Socialism. The profession of Christianity did not then save society. Then again, as regards Roman civilisation, there seems to have been no evolutionary tendency towards Socialism during the long centuries of its existence. Property, property, was the prevailing note everywhere and always. That a demoralised proletariat mass was produced in the cities, supported and amused at the public expense, does not disprove this. These were not Socialists. not the product of a regimented population, which Socialism means, but the demoralised units of an unhealthy Individualism. They were no more Socialists than the London proletariat of today, which is also so dependent for support on public charity. The Roman law is intimately known to us through the Institutions of Justinian, and it has less suggestion of Socialism than our own with its provision for the poor. He then, would be a bold arguer, who would assert that there was any evolution towards Socialism in the Roman system. On the contrary, it may be said to have perished, because it rigorously excluded any such tendency.

But just as Roman civilisation perished from over individualism, the Indian and Chinese ones are decayed and effete from excess of Socialism, which hardly squares with Mr. Macdonald's theory. We see, too, that all progress has been absent from these systems since the dawn of history, and certainly the officers who maintain the order and method in them have not shown the altruistic traits, which we are told are so readily forthcoming when the competition and the "unregulated clash of individual interests" are excluded, for what struck me most, when I first went to India, was the general callousness of the strong and powerful in their dealings with the weak. Yet the common will of the community had been sole master, as it must be under a socialistic system, "determining," as it would, "the lines of individual action." The Hindu common will, too, had approved infant marriages, self-immolation of widows, divisions into rigid castes, infanticide, and many other social enormities, and under Socialism there was no hope of a change. Hence. though the common will of a modern community might prescribe a fairly excellent code of laws and customs, yet their immutability would be a fatal objection. Therefore, the complete supremacy of the community over the individual, which is the inevitable result, and meaning of pure Socialism, cannot be made the goal. As well might the individualist make anarchy his goal.

Then again, Socialism unalloyed is essentially rest. History says that has been its quality, and reason says that it is necessarily so. For there are only two forces, that act in the social organism — the individual and the common will. The action of the individual will alone is unthinkable and unknown; but the practical suppression of the individual will, and the complete supremacy of the common will, is known both in ancient and modern times. To aim at pure Socialism, therefore, and achieve it, would bring moral and mental stagnation. Too many nations have, unfortunately, achieved this end. So reformers, as all good Liberals should be, while ready to go a long way with Socialists, cannot have the same goal.

By the above arguments we wish only to oppose the thesis of the Socialists, that pure Socialism would mean the millennium, but not their assertion, that excessive Individualism has brought about a terrible state of things. Christianity itself contains the highest Socialism, and the highest Individualism, and if we were all Christs, it would be like the Trinity in Unity, and the Unity in Trinity. But in the world as it is, we must be opportunists. If the bonds which uphold the principle of private property are irksome and injurious to the body politic, they must be loosened; if, as in Eastern countries, they are relaxed, they must be tightened. Surely, in many ways in England, the excessive rights accorded to private property might be curtailed. Only admit the principle of responsibility as regards all property, and a new mode of treatment immediately comes into force. For instance, for the insignificant pleasures of sport, the proprietor seeks to exclude the masses from wandering over a barren moor; that a labouring class shall not interfere with his sentiment, building sites are most unduly restricted; for some inscrutable reason the propertied classes oppose the registration of all ownership of lands and houses, thus rendering their sale and transfer difficult and expensive, and the enforcement of the duties of ownership impossible. Land and other property are allowed to be tied up by trusts and entails, and often the trouble and expense thereby caused are a social and public nuisance. Let every legal restriction that now hampers property be put on its trial, and be presumed noxious till the contrary be proved, the only interest allowable in land being simple and absolute ownership.

Let us pay no more regard to the extremists on one side than on the other. Socialism, or the exercise of the power of the community, is good, and even necessary, and all the more necessary now that Individualism has been pushed so far. But let Socialists clearly understand that they cannot eat their cake and keep it. Every measure of Socialism means, *pro tanto*, the restriction of individual liberty. That need not mean as under the present Poor Law, that those who have recourse to it, shall be stripped of all self-respect; but as he who volunteers to serve in the Army, or Navy, or Civil Service, has to live within well-defined restrictions, and is, in return, guaranteed the means of livelihood, so must they who cannot support themselves in the freer life

of Individualism. The only direct means of dealing with the chronic unemployed, and the demoralised masses, would seem to be to have State colonies on the pattern of the Church and Salvation Armies. There would not need to be anything dishonourable in entering such colonies ; in fact, many persons of high ideal might think their moral atmosphere wholesomer than that of the ill-regulated, jostling, and often cheating, outer world. But such colonies could not be successful unless (what Socialism means) the individual within them was liable to coercion. For instance, a man is starving because he cannot get employment, and elects to enter a colony. He must no more be allowed to leave, except after a reasonable time, than he could leave the Army or Navy. So also parents, who have children and cannot or will not, support them, should be compelled to enter a colony. Their action in having a family, which they cannot properly bring up, being considered a constructive election to enter a socialist state. If it be asked, how such State colonies would be managed, the answer must be that experience must decide. Of course, every young person in them could not be allowed to rush into marriage; but neither are young soldiers and sailors; and, as a matter of social law, neither are the young members of our upper classes. If they do, they suffer for it. So would those in State colonies. To those who would scout all idea of touching such pitch as Socialism, I would point to the demands of great masses of Englishmen to have the whole State socialised, and, unfortunately, they can show up some very dark spots in the present individualistic system. Private property has a bad reputation, and the moral basis of it is being undermined. The writer was much struck a short time back by seeing in the newspapers that of three men charged with conspiring to pick pockets, one had been convicted 26 times, one 18 times, and one many times. The fact is, conscience is making a coward of society. Dishonest itself, it is afraid to punish dishonesty in others. Something must be done, and if that something is not in the direction of curtailing the so-called rights of property, of enforcing the duty of responsibility, and of easing off the position of the unemployed, we may drift into revolutionary waters, and the ship of State may be hardly kept from foundering. Let the moderate men assert themselves, and, by timely reform of the laws of property in the direction of Socialism, ward off such revolutionary measures as are now being preached by the apostles of pure Socialism.