

SOCIALISM A REVERSION.

(For the Review.)

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Socialism is a comparatively new word, and it is usually regarded as signifying a new thing. Men are individuals (so we are told), and hence individualism is the natural state of the uncivilized man; but socialism is the recognition of the claims of a higher entity than the individual, namely the Community or State, and the appearance of this idea on man's horizon is the mark of a distinct advance in evolution.

This is a pretty theory, but it is contradicted by all the facts of history. As every race emerges into the historical period, we find its members altogether devoid of what we call individualism, and completely subject to the dominating idea of Clan, Tribe or State. The individual has no value; the community is everything. Japan gives, perhaps, the best contemporary example of a nation in this state of development—that is, the Japan of fifty years ago. Lafcadio Hearn, who so loved Japan that he became a naturalized citizen and married a Japanese woman, asserts that that country found itself at the time of the arrival of Commodore Perry in the same stage of evolution which the Greek cities had attained six or seven hundred years before Christ, and a study of recent Japan can acquaint us with many of the features of early European civilization. "The individual did not exist—except for punishment," says Hearn, "and from the whole of the producing classes, whether serfs or freemen, the most servile submission was ruthlessly exacted. It is difficult to believe that any intelligent man of modern times could endure such conditions and live." (Japan, An Interpretation, by Lafcadio Hearn, Macmillan & Co., p. 278.) And the author finds the same kind of government in ancient Egypt and Peru, among the early Greeks and Romans, and in the Chinese and Hindoo communities of to-day. "It means a religious communistic despotism—a supreme social tyranny suppressing personality, forbidding enterprise, and making competition a public offence." For centuries a part of the education of high born Japanese men and women was the art of committing suicide in case, with or without reason, their feudal lord should suggest it. Absolute conformity to every custom and opinion was exacted of everybody, and if by any chance a man with a mind of his own appeared (and this seems very rarely to have been the case), he was treated as an outcast. The result of this system had its beauties. "Fortunate indeed," says Hearn, "were those privileged to enter this astonishing fairyland thirty odd years ago, before the period of superficial change, and to observe the unfamiliar aspects of life; the universal urbanity, the smiling silence of crowds, the patient deliberation of toil, the absence of misery and struggle. Even yet, in those remoter districts, where alien influence has wrought but little change, the charm of the old existence lingers and amazes; and the ordinary traveller can little understand what it means. That all are polite, that nobody quarrels, that everybody smiles, that pain and sorrow remain invisible, that the new police have nothing to do, would seem to prove a morally superior humanity. But for the trained sociologist it would prove something different, and suggest something very terrible. It would prove to him that this society had been moulded under immense coercion, and that the coercion must have been exerted uninterruptedly for thousands of years. He would immediately perceive that ethics and custom had not yet become dissociated, and that the conduct of each person was regulated by the will of the rest. He would know that personality could not develop in such a social medium—that no individual superiority dare assert itself,

that no competition would be tolerated. He would understand that the outward charm of this life—its softness, its smiling silence as of dreams—signified the rule of the dead. . . . Even that Greek world, for which our scholars and poets profess such loving admiration, must have been in many ways a world of the same kind, whose daily mental existence no modern mind could share." (pp. 418-9.) And Mr. Hearn tells us of three kinds of omnipresent pressure in Japan—from a man's superiors, from his equals, and from his inferiors. "Thus, in every direction, the individual finds himself confronted by the despotism of collective opinion; it is impossible for him to act with safety except as one unit of a combination. The first kind of pressure deprives him of his moral freedom, exacting unlimited obedience to orders; the second kind of pressure denies him the right to use his best faculties in the best way for his own advantage (that is, denies him the right of free competition); the third kind of pressure compels him, in directing the actions of others, to follow tradition, to forbear innovations, to avoid making any changes, however beneficial, which do not find willing acceptance on the part of his inferiors." (p. 428.)

We have here a picture of the social condition of our own remote ancestors, conditions which still survive to a certain degree in the communities and guilds of the Middle Ages, and which are to be found to-day in the Aryan villages of India and in the mirs of Russia. The patriarchal despotism of the Russian commune presents many of the features which Hearn finds prominent in Japan. Is it a picture attractive to the modern European and American eye? It has taken us a thousand years to escape from this intense socialism and to discover and establish the value of the individual man. Revolution upon revolution has turned upon this issue. The sanctity of the individual, of his life, his person and his property has been learned only after long and painful lessons. The rights of trial by jury, of habeas corpus, of refusing to incriminate one's self, of free speech, of the ballot, mark stages in the path we have climbed. We have not reached the top yet by a great deal. We are still far from free, and monopoly and custom still oppress us with a heavy hand. But are we for that reason to stop climbing? Are we deliberately to put ourselves back under the awful despotism of an invisible idea of society, a hobgoblin which we have been so long exorcising?

And do not believe the shallow talk that individualism is nothing but egoism. You are an individual just as much as I am, and if I am egoistic in affirming my own individuality, I am altruistic in affirming yours. The altruistic basis of Christian ethics is individualistic—it is to love *your neighbor* as yourself—not the State or the Church, mind you, but the individual neighbor. The advance in humane habits of thought and practice which we have made—our hospitals and asylums—the progress of science in our universities and laboratories, have all been due to a growing respect for the individual body and the individual mind. It is socialism, properly speaking, which is neither altruistic nor egoistic, but which builds up a third imaginary Frankenstein monster which neither hears nor sees nor feels, but on whose altar the individual must be sacrificed. And we see some faint forecasts of the nature of the socialist state in the behavior of the socialist party. The dogmatism, the illiberality, the discipline, the ostracism which prevail in the socialist party press and politics are necessary results of turning away from the cause of the individual at the prompting of an atavistic and reactionary conscience. All praise to the Socialists for their condemnation of current injustice! But when they ascribe it to individualism they make a mistaken diagnosis. It is the denial of true individualism by monopoly and prejudice that lies at the root of our social ills, and the remedy lies in making the individual still more master of himself, and not in enslaving him to an organization raised to life from prehistoric tombs.

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