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Armies that Overlap

Benjamin Tucker

8 March 1890

Of late the “Twentieth Century” has been doing a good deal in the way of definition. Now, definition is very particular business, and it seems to me that it is not always performed with due care in the “Twentieth Century” office.

Take this, for instance: A Socialist is “one who believes that each industry should be coordinated for the mutual benefit of all concerned under a government by physical force.”

It is true that writers of reputation have given definitions of Socialism not differing in any essential from the foregoing,— among others, General Walker. But it has been elaborately proven in these columns that General Walker is utterly at sea when he talks about either Socialism or Anarchism. As a matter of fact this definition is fundamentally faulty, and correctly defines only State Socialism.

An analogous definition in another sphere would be this: Religion is belief in the Messiahship of Jesus. Supposing this to be a correct definition of the Christian religion, none the less it is manifestly incorrect as a definition of religion itself. The fact that Christianity has overshadowed all other forms of religion in this part of the world gives it no right to a monopoly of the religious idea. Similarly, the fact that State Socialism during the

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last decade or two has overshadowed other forms of Socialism gives it no right to a monopoly of the Socialistic idea.

Socialism, as such, implies neither liberty nor authority. The word itself implies nothing more than harmonious relationship. In fact, it is so broad a term that it is difficult of definition. I certainly lay claim to no special authority or competence in the matter. I simply maintain that, the word Socialism having been applied for years, by common usage and consent, as a generic term, to various schools of thought and opinion, those who try to define it are bound to seek the common element of all these schools and make it stand for that, and have no business to make it represent the specific nature of any one of them. The “Twentieth Century” definition will not stand this test at all.

Perhaps here is one that satisfies it: Socialism is the belief that progress is mainly to be effected by acting upon man through his environment rather than through man upon his environment.

I fancy that this will be criticised as too general, and I am inclined to accept the criticism. It manifestly includes all who have any title to be called Socialists, but possibly it does not exclude all who have no such title.

Let us narrow it a little: Socialism is the belief that the next important step in progress is a change in man’s environment of an economic character that shall include the abolition of every privilege whereby the holder of wealth acquires an anti-social power to compel tribute.

I doubt not that this definition can be much improved, and suggestions looking to that end will be interesting; but it is at least an attempt to cover all the forms of protest against the existing usurious economic system. I have always considered myself a member of the great body of Socialists, and I object to being read out of it or defined out of it by General Walker, Mr. Pentecost, or anybody else, simply because I am not a follower of Karl Marx.

Take now another “Twentieth Century” definition,— that of Anarchism. I have not the number of the paper in which it was given, and cannot quote it exactly. But it certainly made belief in cooperation an essential of Anarchism. This is as erroneous as the definition of Socialism. Cooperation is no more an essential of Anarchism than force is of Socialism. The fact that the majority of Anarchists believe in cooperation is not what makes them Anarchists, just as the fact that the majority of Socialists believe in force is not what makes them Socialists. Socialism is neither for nor against liberty; Anarchism is for liberty, and neither for nor against anything else. Anarchy is the mother of cooperation,— yes, just as liberty is the mother of order; but, as a matter of definition, liberty is not order nor is Anarchism cooperation.

I define Anarchism as the belief in the greatest amount of liberty compatible with equality of liberty; or, in other words, as the belief in every liberty except the liberty to invade.

It will be observed that, according to the “Twentieth Century” definitions, Socialism excludes Anarchists, while, according to Liberty’s definitions, a Socialist may or may not be an Anarchist, and an Anarchist may or may not be a Socialist. Relaxing scientific exactness, it may be said, briefly and broadly, that Socialism is a battle with usury and that Anarchism is a battle with authority. The two armies — Socialism and Anarchism — are neither coextensive nor exclusive; but they overlap. The right wing of one is the left wing of the other. The virtue and superiority of the Anarchistic Socialist — or Socialistic Anarchist, as he may prefer to call himself — lies in the fact that he fights in the wing that is common to both. Of course there is a sense in which every Anarchist may be said to be a Socialist virtually, inasmuch as usury rests on authority and to destroy the latter is to destroy the former. But it scarcely seems proper to give the name Socialist to one who is such unconsciously, neither desiring, intending, nor knowing it.