

Socialism: What It Is

Benjamin Tucker

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“Do you like the word Socialism?” said a lady to me the other day; “I fear I do not; somehow I shrink when I hear it. It is associated with so much that is bad! Ought we to keep it?”

The lady who asked this question is an earnest Anarchist, a firm friend of Liberty, and — it is almost superfluous to add — highly intelligent. Her words voice the feeling of many. But after all it is only a feeling, and will not stand the test of thought.

“Yes,” I answered, “it is a glorious word, much abused, violently distorted, stupidly misunderstood, but expressing better than any other the purpose of political and economic progress, the aim of the Revolution in this century, the recognition of the great truth that Liberty and Equality, through the law of Solidarity, will cause the welfare of each to contribute to the welfare of all. So good a word cannot be spared, must not be sacrificed, shall not be stolen.”

How can it be saved? Only by lifting it out of the confusion which obscures it, so that all may see it clearly and definitely, and what it fundamentally means. Some writers make Socialism inclusive of all efforts to ameliorate social conditions. Proudhon is reputed to have said something of the kind. However that may be, the definition seems too broad. Etymologically it is not unwarrantable, but derivatively the word has a more technical and definite meaning.

To-day (pardon the paradox!) society is fundamentally anti social. The whole so-called social fabric rests on privilege and power, and is disordered and strained in every direction by the inequalities that necessarily result therefrom. The welfare of each, instead of contributing to that of all, as it naturally should and would, almost invariably detracts from that of all. Wealth is made by legal privilege a hook with which to filch from labor’s pockets. Every man who gets rich thereby makes his neighbor poor. The better off one is, the worse off the rest are. As Ruskin says, “every grain of calculated Increment to the rich is balanced by its mathematical equivalent of Decrement to the poor.” The Laborer’s Deficit is precisely equal to the Capitalist’s Efficit.

Now, Socialism wants to change all this. Socialism says that what’s one man’s meat must no longer be another’s poison; that no man shall be able to add to his riches except by labor; that in adding to his riches by labor alone no man makes another man poorer; that on the contrary every man thus adding to his riches makes every other man richer; that increase and concentration of wealth through labor tend to increase, cheapen, and vary production; that every increase of capital in the hands of the laborer tends, in the absence of legal monopoly, to put more products,

better products, cheaper products, and a greater variety of products within the reach of every man who works; and that this fact means the physical, mental, and moral perfecting of mankind, and the realization of human fraternity. Is not that glorious?

Shall a word that means all that be cast aside simply because some have tried to wed it with authority? By no means. The man who subscribes to that, whatever he may think himself, whatever he may call himself, however bitterly he may attack the thing which he mistakes for Socialism, is himself a Socialist; and the man who subscribes to its opposite and acts upon its opposite, however benevolent he may be, however pious he may be, whatever his station in society, whatever his standing in the Church, whatever his position in the State, is not a Socialist, but a Thief.

For there are at bottom but two classes, — the Socialists and the Thieves. Socialism, practically, is war upon usury in all its forms, the great Anti-Theft Movement of the nineteenth century; and Socialists are the only people to whom the preachers of morality have no right or occasion to cite the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal!” That commandment is Socialism’s flag. Only not as a commandment, but as a law of nature. Socialism does not order; it prophesies. It does not say: “Thou shalt not steal!” It says: “When all men have Liberty, thou wilt not steal.”

Why, then, does my lady questioner shrink when she hears the word *Socialism*? I will tell her. Because a large number of people, who see the evils of usury and are desirous of destroying them, foolishly imagine they can do so by authority, and accordingly are trying to abolish privilege by centring all production and activity in the State to the destruction of competition and its blessings, to the degradation of the individual, and to the putrefaction of Society.

They are well-meaning but misguided people, and their efforts are bound to prove abortive. Their influence is mischievous principally in this: that a large number of other people, who have not yet seen the evils of usury and do not know that Liberty will destroy them, but nevertheless earnestly believe in Liberty for Liberty’s sake, are led to mistake this effort to make the State the be-all and end-all of society for the whole of Socialism and the only Socialism, and, rightly horrified at it, to hold it up as such to the deserved scorn of mankind. But the very reasonable and just criticisms of the individualists of this stripe upon State Socialism, when analyzed, are found to be directed, not against the Socialism, but against the State.

So far Liberty is with them. But Liberty insists on Socialism, nevertheless, — on true Socialism, Anarchistic Socialism: the prevalence on earth of Liberty, Equality, and Solidarity. From that my lady questioner will never shrink.

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The misuse and degeneration of the term Socialism by state socialists is here deprecated and an attempt is made towards rescuing it as the condensed expression of the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Solidarity.

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