

# A Free Condition of Society

Freedom Press (London)

December, 1889

*[From a Speech delivered by James Blackwell at the Central Democratic Club, November 6, 1889.]*

It is a very common error on the part of a large section of the public to confound Socialism with a particular method proposed for its realization. With these people any trifling Act of Parliament which proposes to protect the worker against the rapacity of the Capitalist or the Landlord is termed Socialistic, and a condition of society in which the State—meaning Parliament and the Government—will control and direct industry in the interest of the workers, is looked upon by them as the goal of Socialist ambition.

Socialists themselves, however, know very well that Socialism is something quite apart from any particular plan of action; that it is an end to which the Vote, Parliamentary Action and the Conquest of the State are only the means of one section of the Socialist party—the Social Democrats. And the Social Democrats themselves will quite readily admit that it is not this machinery of which they are enamored. They are Democrats, believers in Parliament and Government only because they imagine it will enable them to secure Socialism.

What then is Socialism? The Emancipation of Man from Economic Servitude is my definition, and I think it is one which will readily be accepted by Anarchists, members of the Socialist League, Social Democrats, or any others who call themselves Socialists.

Now in order to bring about this emancipation of man from economic servitude, working class Socialists agree in saying that the whole people must undertake the management of their own affairs, and in this sense all are Democrats. But as to how this is to be done—the people are to manage their own affairs—there arises a difference of opinion, and Socialists divide themselves into two widely distinct schools of thought—the Anarchist and the Social Democrat.

Social Democrats assert that the only method by which the people can manage their own affairs is by electing rulers or administrators, whilst Anarchists claim that if the people hand over the management of their business to rulers or administrators they most decidedly do not manage it themselves and in fact remain under the same political system of society as exists to-day, a political system which is antagonistic to the true spirit of Socialism, and will be found to be impossible in practice when the emancipation of man from economic servitude is accomplished.

Anarchists believe that by allowing free scope to all individuals to manage their own affairs, to make free contracts between one another, dissolvable at will and to develop their own initiative,

the highest possible condition of society will be realized. Every individual will act as he thinks best and will have to put up with the consequences of his actions.

I will assume that we are all agreed upon Socialism. We disbelieve in Rent, Profit and Interest. We believe in the worker getting what he produces and we disbelieve in Monopoly in Land, Machinery and Credit. Anarchists also disbelieve in taxes—a trifle of some 90 millions of pounds a year. which the workers have to pay.

But how will you get on without Government you say? Let us see.

In association on the Anarchist principle we propose that individuals should associate as their sympathies and interests direct.

For example. Some thousands of people form an industrial community. Of their own free will associations and individuals following certain callings have come to live in a certain town. It is found necessary that the roads and streets of that town, together with its sanitary arrangements, should be looked after very well. It is decided that certain individuals who offer to do this work shall do it, and it is done just in the same way as to-day gas is provided by gas companies and water by water companies, and where the interests of the sanitary or paving association is likely to conflict with the gas or water association, as for instance in the laying of pipes and mains, it is left to those associations to arrange matters. For indeed it is not the business of any other person in the town except those immediately concerned; so long that is as the different associations do their work satisfactorily, so long as the town is well paved, the sanitary arrangements are properly looked after and the gas and water supply is all right. As to how these associations are to be recompensed for their labor, it may be that they will receive payment something after the style in which gas and water companies are paid to-day, or if absolute communism prevails, that they will receive their necessaries from other associations. Note that the distinction between the Paving and Sanitary Association and the present local body or vestry is that the former is similar to a present day company formed to do certain work, but that all the members of the company or association are equal partners. "The tools belong to the toilers, the product to the producers," is the Anarchist motto. The vestry lives on taxation, the association lives on payment for work done, which is not exactly the same thing. If a man did not want the part of the street he lives in paved little is gained by forcing him, but it must be obvious that such cases would be as exceptional as to-day it is exceptional to see a well-to-do man habitually walking the streets without a hat on his head or boots on his feet. No one is compelled to do either of these things but probably not one who can afford the expense omits them.

The present form of the organization of industry, the machinery of manufacture and distribution, is admirably adapted to meet the wants of men. Indeed I hold that as it is true that mechanical machinery which to-day is a curse will to-morrow be a blessing to the workers, it is equally true that the system of organization which prevails under capitalism will when perfected under Socialism be the best possible for the general welfare. To make this quite clear let us once more remember that Socialism is the emancipation of man from economic servitude.

Go into a large factory and you will see a number of workmen who are at any rate slaves while they are within the factory walls. The masters' orders are obeyed without a murmur. Equality is undreamed of. There is a slave-owner and his slaves; there is a king and his subjects. That is Capitalism. Remove the master. Make every workman an equal partner in the factory, thus establishing equality and abolishing exploitation and you have Socialism.

Now this transformation can be effected and I believe will be effected without changing the industrial organization as far as its base is concerned, although of course it will be greatly modified.

The general recognition that the exploitation of man by man is unjust will force on the struggle between the exploiters and the exploited until economic oppression is no more.

Let us suppose we have reached this point in the Social Revolution and that every one admits that exploitation is unjust and against the interests of the community. Two great movements will be taking place. The movement on to the land and the risings in the factories.

The land will certainly absorb a vast number if not the whole of the present army of unemployed, who will find that they can at any rate get a good living for themselves by tickling the soil with a hoe, and very many people who to-day are driven against their wills to the large town, and cities will then prefer the rural life, even if does not offer in some respects such great advantages as the life of the city.

In the factories the workers who have got rid of the masters and have become in a sense factory owners will first of all think about reducing their hours of toil and they will absorb all those who to-day follow useless occupations or are unemployed into their communal partnership—the benefit of all concerned.

Then instead of the firms, factories and shops of to-day you will have free associations of workers on the land and in the factories and distributing agencies, and the form of organization prevailing to-day will be modified considerably. The farming associations will be large or small according to the nature of the soil or the kind of farming employed. The same thing will be seen in the factory organization. A capitalist to-day in his greed will mix up several businesses and by the combination will make money, but under Socialism this would not be found to answer and the workers of the different departments would probably form themselves into different associations. Or a capitalist association may have to-day a number of branch establishments which enables it to reap profit. But under Socialism each one of those branches could very well be as independent as the small shops are to-day. For instance, in the bread business there are several large monopolies in London, companies having 30, 40, or more branch shops, which are supplied from a central bakery. Now under Socialism it is likely that each one of these branches would be worked by a separate independent group, as would be also the central manufactory, and the groups would arrange their exchanges of bread independently. Thus the group would not be compelled to go to a particular central bread manufactory but could choose which one it preferred. The present cooperative distributing societies give one an idea of the modification of distributive organization which is likely to take place. when society becomes one huge cooperative organization, based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. There is the Wholesale Society, which buys large quantities of goods and has buyers in foreign ports, and there are the small retail bodies which buy from the Wholesale Society, but these small societies can buy elsewhere if they like. They buy from the Wholesale Society because they think it best to do so.

Then, again, the reason for the vast number of shops which fill up the streets to-day would disappear with Socialism. Perhaps 4 out of 5 or even 9 out of 10 of these small rival depots would be closed. The managers would have no longer any reason for rivalry and being anxious to dispense with all but necessary work, would find out what shops were really necessary and what were not, with the result that the unnecessary ones would be closed up, the shop assistants now employed either helping to reduce the work in the necessary shops, or going on to the land or into the factories as inclination might determine.

There are a good many firms to-day whose business of middlemen is necessary and in a modified form they would doubtless continue to exist, but there are others and by far the larger number who are quite unnecessary and simply prey upon industry: those would undoubtedly

be suppressed. In a word the tendency would be to suppress the unnecessary and to maintain the necessary units of organization which at present exist, and the feeling of solidarity among the whole people which Socialism cannot fail to create would make every worker anxious to do useful work and only useful work.

The Post Office and Railways would be managed on similar lines to other industries. The group in Holborn would attend to their business and the group in Whitechapel would attend to their business and the necessary arrangement between them would be made by some general rules agreed to at a congress of those concerned, by the election of a committee of management or by some sort of clearing-house arrangement such as obtains to-day.

Imagine our railways as they would be if the shareholders were suppressed and the boards of management consisted of workers. One of the results would be to still further decentralize. There are many lines to-day belonging to various companies which could better manage their interests independently than in conjunction with others. And the clearing-house which to-day regulates matters between the different railway companies would then perform the same services for the different lines and their controlling associations of railway men.

Another feature of the present organization of industry to which I wish to draw attention is that of the Chambers of Commerce—These are practically congresses of merchants and manufacturers which meet locally and occasionally nationally to discuss the interests of their members. No one is obliged by force to carry out the decisions they come to, but the best thing to be done under certain circumstances having been ascertained, it is done naturally as a matter of course. Such congresses I think will be a quite common method of arranging matters and determining projects under Socialism, although of course they will then consist of the workers themselves instead of as now of their rulers.

”The mine for the miners” is the Anarchist ideal. Let us look for a moment at the coal industry as we can imagine it to be under Anarchism. The great thing is that the consumer should have the coal at the lowest possible cost or expenditure of labor. And this question would settle itself by the mines supplying the districts nearest to them, other things being equal, by the establishment of coal depots in direct connection with the mine and by the elimination of the intermediary dealers. To-day it is often said that the poorest people pay the highest prices. That is absolutely true. The householder who can have in a ton of coals at a time saves in labor of moving and profit to small middlemen several shillings over his poorer neighbor who has a hundredweight or a half hundredweight at a time. Socialism would benefit us by carrying this principle of eliminating the middleman as far as possible.

Above all the Anarchist has faith in experiment. Let the individual initiative have full play and the general result to society will be gain. Failures there will be of course, but they will be failures leading to success. In the domain of Science almost all great discoveries have been preceded by failures. So in industrial organization failure will doubtless often result from experiments which will eventually lead to increased good for all.

Do not fall into the error of thinking these ideas of organization are only held by those who call themselves Anarchists. These are only the advance guard behind whom are a vast army of people who yet but dimly understand Socialism, but see more clearly the evils of government control. Listen, for instance, to the words of a French writer recently quoted in one of our monthly magazines:

”When I try to picture to myself the coming organization of society, as far as our shortness of sight will allow us to foretell the future, it appears to me in the guise of a multitude of associations

of every size and description—associations in which the workers will possess the entire product of their work, because they will also be the owners of their instruments of production—which will suppress all middlemen, since they will exchange all products directly among themselves—which will not cramp individuality, because individual initiative will remain the hidden spring setting each of them in motion, but which, on the contrary, will, by their solidarity, protect the individual against the chances and changes of life.”

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Freedom Press (London)  
A Free Condition of Society  
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Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 3, No. 37, online source RevoltLib.com,  
retrieved on April 12, 2020.

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