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Why I Am an Opportunist

J. W. Sullivan

June 19, 1890

In my odd hours lately I have been preparing some papers on “Opportunism.” I hope some time to publish them, but in the present series of self-dissections by spokesmen for the “ists” I can only give my views on the subject in outline.

I think the world is growing better. Nothing is more certain than that it is growing richer and that its wealth and its agencies for producing wealth are sources of enlightenment. And as mankind gains in knowledge it advances morally; it seeks, more strenuously than ever, remedies for social wrong.

The guiding principle for social readjustment, I take it, is justice — justice to begin with and justice as a final aim. The outcry of the discontented is against injustice, and something definite in the way of justice is demanded by every group calling for a reconstruction of the social system. Now, is it or is not a fact that while the names of these groups signify differences as to their social ideals, on occasions they may now move together — against injustice or toward justice? To start with, their discontent is a point of harmony and a basis for sympathy.

May it not be that if members of each group will but fraternize a little with members of the others, a subordinate principle or a prac-

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J. W. Sullivan, “Why I Am an Opportunist,” *Twentieth Century* 4 no. 25 (June 19, 1890): 3–5.

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tical step will turn up from time to time on which most or all of the groups will coincide? For example, every group that I know of desires a simplification in the forms of government. All of them together may be unable to do anything in this direction, but, for purposes of agitation and education, a joint study of the question must prove profitable to all. The reply may be made that my illustration is unhappily chosen, that the Socialists desire more government—an all-enveloping government—but on reading their programme one will see that their political (if not industrial) ideal is a democracy—one embracing most of the features of a perfect democracy. The Socialists are strong in the data of their argument for a government answerable directly to the people. They believe that if they could get behind the politicians and to the people, things would soon change radically. They believe that, in the light of successful experiment drawn from various nations, they can show the way to a pure political democracy. Would other radicals prevent them? From the least external government is it not but a step to no government—or self-government?

A rearrangement in the management of cities— this is another matter which all might discuss with profit. And perhaps amicable discussion might lead to concerted action. Or the principles developed in debating municipal improvement might educe reasons for remaining in practical unity longer. That the local monopolies in cities should be controlled by the public is a demand common to Nationalists, Single-taxers, State and Christian Socialists and others. In any city, a municipal reform party might embrace such groups, the work incidentally suggesting reasons for continued cooperation. In restoring to the people collectively the systems of gas supply and local passenger transportation, perhaps the Anarchist might take part. Capitalists no longer profiting by these monopolies, the step would reduce the robbers by one set. The politician alone in control of them, this feature of social action would be less puzzling. A mass of laborers would get better pay, and is it not true that with an improved condition would come more indepen-

dence, more intelligence, to this mass, and a higher development and a better conception of his rights, to the individual? Would not all concerned, better able to form true conceptions of liberty, be nearer actual liberty, than before?

Now, if any such common action on points of agreement is at all possible, I raise the question whether the usual classification of the groups is the only one that can be made. If by naming a man a Socialist you do not draw a line that separates him entirely from the Single-taxer, you ought to find a name which will describe both at the moment of common action. Lacking a better, we might style them Opportunists. Each is embracing an opportunity to carry society further away from the antithesis of his hopes.

If we now observe how far Opportunists from the various groups may proceed together, the true line of distinction between them emerges. This line is that which, in the view of the individualist, marks off slavery from freedom.

Today the laborer is in wage slavery. What he produces, the law does not permit him to retain. Other men live on it. He starves; for one not full grown in mind or body is starved. Every group demands a cessation of this blighting slavery.

There are degrees in slavery. The Socialism of Peru fed every one and overworked none. The Socialism of Bellamy or Gronlund, I doubt not, would bountifully feed all, thoroughly teach all. But either would take « from each according to his deeds “ to give to “ each according to his needs.” The capable would be props to the incapable; the protesting minority might be suppressed by force. But the slavery would not be attended with the horrors of that in which we live now. And to men having time to think, and able to think, change would hardly be impossible. I am far from saying that we must go through Socialism to reach liberty. I am no more than marking off degrees in the dominion of man over man, that we may note why men term Socialism, with its promise of physical comfort and ease, slavery, and that we may recognize that Social-

ism comprehends elements of political freedom as well as elements of industrial slavery.

This a fact, might not even the Anarchist, taking up with the immediate and practical steps the State Socialists propose, go far with them before meeting with the distinctive demands of Socialism— industrial militarism and actual proposals for expropriation, either of the possessors of the wealth of today or of any of the earners of the wealth in the future? The referendum is a long step toward liberty; proportional representation is a further; the executive commission is another. Putting an end to any of the lesser monopolies — those which owe their existence entirely to statutes would be in the line of beneficial abolition. Every such Socialistic step would free men from restrictions, tend to establish justice, and impart to the citizen a better idea of his rights. And, political freedom achieved and the oppressions of monopoly in its more familiar forms removed, might not the Socialist come to see that plenty as well as more liberty could then be had with free access to land? At any rate, the real problem would be stripped of confusing adjuncts.

Thus, cannot we discern a broad road which may be followed for a time by our groups of the discontented in one comradeship? If so, all thus moving together would be Opportunists.

To my mind, the Opportunist is he who seeks the relief and follows the course that is possible. He presupposes that all whom he expects to join him in any step are satisfied of its necessity. He has decided to help along this world that is growing better. He guards against displacing one injustice to substitute a greater. He would gradually weaken the classes of society profiting by injustice. He openly declares the goal at which he is finally aiming, whatever it may be. He takes up with any company which is really traveling his way, but he compromises in nothing, conceals none of his views, concedes no principle on a promise of success. He counsels no sinking of differences; all he calls for from others is a recognition of co-aims. He sifts from the various propositions of other men those which are also his own, points out their identity, and invites cooper-

ation in carrying them out. He calls on all who will to join in massing against the point of least resistance, as developed from time to time, in the ranks of the common enemy — the stand-still State as upheld by the two great political parties, “equally corrupt and equally indifferent to radical reform.” Today, all the discontented know that the laborer is a slave, and so the Opportunists among them will push the spread of literature tending to expose social wrong and to incite feeling against it; all the discontented know that the science of politics and the science of economics are both in the formative period, and so the Opportunists, patient of one another’s errors and misunderstandings in these studies, will seek to discover similarities in their various teachings; all the discontented know that much evil in society may be corrected now, and so when occasion offers Opportunists will join in ending them; all the discontented know that the conservative forces hearken to them just in proportion as they exhibit strength, and so Opportunists will aid in demonstrating the general discontent of labor, assisting alike in the dissemination of anti-conservative thought and the observance of the workers’ May day.

The Opportunist may not be able in all respects to classify himself with any cut-and-dried “ism.” I myself am not. But, sensible of the intolerable condition of labor today and seeing a point some way ahead to which many progressives have thought out their way, he asks: “Cannot we go there in a body?”