

Why I Am a Socialist

Laurence Gronlund

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I have three reasons to give, but the all-sufficient one, indeed, is my first: that I could not help myself. I do not know whether books convert many, but my experience is that they perform another very important function rather than that. Talking some years ago with the well-known French “Marxist” Jules Guesde, he told me that his own reflections had made him a Socialist long before he had seen a Socialist book; precisely thus it was with me, though I admit that my Socialism was at first of a pretty vague sort. I should say that one becomes a Socialist without any merit on his part. The function that books and addresses perform is that of serving as mirrors, in which the readers and hearers see their own thoughts reflected and thereby they first become really conscious of them. I know it is a common experience of lecturers that members of the audience at the close come up and say: “If that which you have told us is Socialism, why I am already a Socialist.”

Reflection and books alone would not, however, have made me a Socialist. The fact that I had no interest in upholding the established order is an important element, of course. But further I think my fellow-Socialists are mistaken in holding that every thoughtful man who does not find his interest in the present anarchy ought, on studying Socialism, to become converted. There are two temperaments in the world: men of an individualist order of mind, who cannot bear to have their liberty in the least infringed upon, and who insist on the right not alone of using, but of abusing what is theirs, and men of the opposite spirit, the Socialist spirit. The fact, that I by nature belong to the latter class, coupled with the other above mentioned facts, are sufficient to explain my position. I further hold that it is perfectly useless to try to convert the former class. Take for instance Henry George; he is from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet an Individualist; that means, that he, in my opinion, never will, and considering his maturity, never can, become a Socialist.

It is, however, not at all a matter of chance whether a majority at a given period in the future are to belong to either class. That the Anglo-Saxons half a century ago were to a man Individualists, I admit with George. But there is just now a natural evolution at work, I say, both in our environment and in our brains, which will lead us like little children to the goal. Observe, that does not make our efforts useless — far from it; the change can only be accomplished through us; we are absolutely needed as its co-workers. On account of this force our atmosphere, so to say, is being more and more charged with Socialism; our brains are little by little being twisted in a

Socialist direction; every young man, coming to adult age, is involuntarily having his thoughts colored with it.

Every one who will but open his eyes can see the change going on among our people from an Individualistic to a Socialistic way of thinking. Our organized wage-workers have the merit of being the pioneers in this change, not at all because they were wiser, but because they had to face the problem first of all.

That brings me to my second reason: the equally evident change in our environment. I have always believed in a moral ordering of this world and human affairs. I was logically forced to it. I could not possibly get a firm basis for a sound philosophy, could not begin to answer the question what is the meaning of this life, and why we have been born, without assuming an intelligence behind evolution whose work we have to do here. What that work is, is perfectly inexplicable without Socialism; but that throws an electric light on the subject, and this alone seems to me ought to convince our leaders of thought and intellect, such whose consciences are not drugged by selfishness.

Socialism is not merely, or chiefly, a system but a philosophy of history. It discloses to us a clear-cut plan running like a red thread through human affairs since the dawn of history. It shows us that each period of the long and weary past was a necessary, preparatory step to each succeeding stage, and that the present is but a transition period to the golden age ahead on whose threshold we stand. Such a philosophy stamps the doctrine of the struggle for existence which our "advanced" philosopher, Herbert Spencer, calls the "most universal, most controlling and comprehensive generalization" as an enthroned *lie*, as far as civilized man is concerned, and it is nothing but blindness to this view that makes Haeckel say: "Only the idealist scholar who closes his eye to the real truth can any longer tell the fable of the moral ordering of the world."

Here we have the fit answer to a blasphemous "Christian" political economist, named Devas, who has written a big volume to prove "that the conclusive answer to the Socialist objection to the accumulation of wealth in a few hands, mercantile profits, rent, and interest, is that it is God's will. I do not believe that any other can be found than this, that our mutual position is assigned to us by Providence. He from whom life comes may attach conditions to its enjoyment. Let the laborer then cease from murmuring." Now we can say in reply: If it is his will that things are as they are, then it is equally his will that *things will be what they will be*. The coming change — which Socialism proves is just as sure as tomorrow's sun — is his will.

We have an object-lesson in this evolution going on under our very eyes. Years ago Socialists prophesied that competition would necessarily lead to monopoly, and that this change would be accomplished soonest and quickest in the United States, where competition was most unfettered. And, lo, behold the *Trusts*! They prove, as nothing else could, that society cannot develop healthfully, normally, under present conditions. They are an abandonment of the principle of Individualism and a concession to Socialism. The Trust utilizes Socialism for the benefit of capitalists. But the splendid thing about it is, that at the same time it cannot help calling attention to the practicability of Socialist principles everywhere, and that in no country can they so easily be applied to business life as here. It prepares the public mind for Socialism.

My third reason is the moral awakening that now is palpably taking place among Americans, and which especially is manifest to me who, ever since I became a Socialist, ten years ago, have been on the lookout for signs. It was long since noted that our present discontent comes, not from actual deterioration in condition, but from a decided increase in unhappiness, from the fact that, though we in every respect are better off than we were fifty years ago, we are constantly growing

more conscious of our poverty. It is here I have the most convincing proof of the workings of evolution.

I think our morality a wicked, miserable thing in three respects: Our industrial relations, both the competition and wage system, are immoral; our conventional morality is the highest immorality, and our social order is positively satanic in tempting every mother's son every day of his life into evil ways.

Now mark that half a century ago hardly anybody ever harbored such an idea. Why, the working classes themselves were not aware that there was anything wrong in the wage system as such. In 1824 the English trades-unions were legalized, and immediately they inaugurated, as we know, a series of strikes, lasting for years; but all they fought for was an improved condition under the wage system; they never for a moment doubted that it was the only one under which industry could be carried on. How different it is now! There is not a single labor organization that does not look forward to the abolition of that system; and more than that: the bishops of the Episcopal church, at the close of their late Convention, issued a pastoral denouncing the principle of the wage system, to wit, that labor is considered and treated as a ware, as un-Christian and immoral.

Current morality is the highest immorality, because it differentiates one man from another, divides humanity into cliques, while morality, precisely, is the band that binds us together. It is true Pharisaism. If Jesus could walk among us in the flesh, of course, he would as fiercely denounce our self-righteous church members as ever he did the Pharisees of old. He would tell our "better citizens," who never have known what real temptation means, and hold themselves far superior to a poor fellow who is sorely tempted every day of his life, that many a prison inmate has tried to live up to an ideal and has manfully conquered temptations scores of times before he fell, and that such a man is far more moral than the Pharisee who never cared a snap for the good and the true. And it is evident that Satan has been for many years the patron of our churches; they have made it their sole business to be "witnesses for the principles of property." Henry Ward Beecher taught cornering of our food products was a legitimate business, and other ministers have been known, as often as they have a few dollars to spare, to put them into margins and stocks.

But there is evidently a quickening of the moral sense, and Socialism is the mirror which evolution holds up to our thoughtful, warm-hearted fellow-citizens. It gladdens me to see so many Christian ministers step forth and testify that the fulness of the truth is dawning upon them. Even our comfortable people will at last come to see that if they leave a child in criminal and squalid surroundings, so that it inevitably will become a thief and a murderer, *they* are responsible. *You rich are the real thieves and murderers!* But all signs and portents bear witness that Satan will be dethroned.

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