

The Ebb and Flow of Democratic Debate

By FRANCIS NELSON

I

ONE OF THE MOST CURIOUS phenomena observed in the party politics of this generation is that which has brought about the new use of old labels. Those of us who are old enough to remember the straightforward political struggles of more than forty years ago find ourselves living in a strange world. On the one hand, we see millions of individuals in the different countries on the various continents busily placing familiar labels upon new concoctions. On the other hand, we see the old, established parties adopting programs that are supposed to be ameliorative but which would have shocked our grandfathers. It might be said that there are only two old labels that have not been put to misuse: Toryism and Whigism. But even Toryism has not quite escaped, for now it is frequently applied to the capitalist class, whereas a hundred years ago it was applied exclusively to the landlords.

It becomes more and more difficult every day for an old campaigner to know where he stands in the political arena. In the days of Gladstone and Disraeli, Lincoln and Cleveland, no sign posts were necessary to indicate directions. Later than that, even, the elector could find his way about and somehow know whom and what he was voting for. Today, if the names of the candidates were suppressed and only the party platforms presented to him he would scarcely be able to choose the place where he would put his mark upon the ballot paper. For all parties vie with one another as to the attractiveness of the bribe that will draw the voter to the poll. The dole has become the bait used by all parties, with the result that an honest candidate sincerely desirous of urging

the people to reaffirm and re-establish their rights would have no chance whatever in competition with the patriarchalists.

Small wonder, then, that the average voter does not really know what he is or what he really wants. A state of confusion has been reached from which there seems no escape. When Socialists protest that they are democrats and seek liberty, free speech, and the restoration of rights, something has happened to the definitions which were clearly understandable fifty years ago. At political meetings here and in Great Britain about the time this century began, volleys of questions would come from an audience demanding an explanation from a speaker who got his ideas mixed. But that was back in the days when there was debate. And perhaps the reason men are not clear about the meaning of the terms they use is that they are not challenged.

Forty years ago, in this writer's experience, lecturers and candidates were submitted to long questioning on the difference between Socialism and Communism. When, in 1907, Victor Grayson was elected to Parliament as a declared Socialist, in a three-cornered election, he was unable to define the terms "Socialist" and "Communist." However, he was elected as a minority member. Two years afterwards he was at the bottom of the poll. During the period when Grayson was in Parliament the most fierce debate raged on the platforms of the constituencies from one end of Great Britain to the other. The issue was: "Individualism versus Socialism." The State Socialists, however, held aloof, for as some of them admitted, they were not interested in mere political Socialism. If there was ever a time in the history of the hustings when economic terms were clarified and made plain to the average elector, it was during the land campaign, which terminated with the two general elections that took place in 1910.

Several Americans who visited the mother country during those years, men and women who had the opportunity to

attend political meetings, said that they were a revelation to them and they wished that such a campaign could be held in their country where there was little debate and no questions. There were few, then, who attempted to put old labels on new bottles. A candidate or lecturer who would be so naïve as to speak of Socialism as a system "which ensures representative government, personal liberty, free speech and an untrammelled press"¹ would have been laughed at.

Today, in this country, it is not unusual to find Socialists protesting that they are liberals, and as Socialists demanding a restoration of rights. It seems a very long time since Sidney Webb wrote:

... The first step must be to rid our minds of the idea that there are any such things in social matters as abstract rights.²

II

THE CHARGE THAT was often made against the political Socialist was that he was illiterate so far as a knowledge of his subject was concerned. During the campaign in Great Britain many preachers of that gospel admitted that they learned more about Socialism at Liberal meetings than they could from their own speakers. It was a shock to several of them when Laurence Gronlund was quoted as follows:

It [the conception of the State as an organism], together with the modern doctrine of evolution as applied to all organisms, deals a mortal blow to the theory of "man's natural rights." ... Philosophical socialists repudiate that theory of "natural rights."³

Further on, Gronlund says:

... As against the State, the organised Society, even Labor does not give us a particle of title to what our hands and brain produce.⁴

It would be a simple task for a young man to take works

¹ Abraham Cahan, in his Introduction to "Socialism, Fascism, Communism," New York, 1934, p. 9.

² "Socialism in England," London, 1890, p. 79.

³ "The Co-operative Commonwealth," pp. 82-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

on Socialism which were written over a generation ago and prove conclusively that the Socialists and Communists who enter the political arenas today do not know what they are talking about. Indeed, it would save thousands of our young people useless expenditure of energy if they would sit down and read the "Communist Manifesto" instead of wasting their time listening to "hot gospelers" who do not know their creed. Either Marx and Engels, Sidney Webb, and Laurence Gronlund (to mention only a few of many writers on Socialism) thought that they knew what they were writing about or the men who misinterpret their "gospel" are deliberately deceiving their audiences.

Let us take an excerpt from the "Communist Manifesto," which was quoted perhaps more than any other during the land campaign in Great Britain, and ask ourselves if the writers, Marx and Engels, knew just what was to be gathered from it:

To be a capitalist, is to have not only a purely personal, but a social status in production. Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the united action of all members of society, can it be set in motion.

Capital is therefore not a personal, it is a social power.

When, therefore, capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society, personal property is not thereby transformed into social property. It is only the social character of the property that is changed. It loses its class-character.⁶

At question time when this quotation was put to a Socialist speaker, with the demand to explain it, the audience laughed heartily at his confusion and bewilderment. During three years there was not a single occasion on which a Socialist orator was able to say what it really meant. The reason was that at least fifty per cent of his audience would be made up of factory workers, many of whom were in small co-operative mills run by themselves, and that, besides, there would be

⁶ Published in Chicago by Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1888, p. 32.

present the proprietors and managers of large mills who had also been working men. Indeed, a plumber, a gas-fitter, or a small carpenter could demonstrate easily that his bag of tools (capital) had no "social power" and that capital was not "a collective product."

But who has riddled the sheer statements of the "Manifesto" more severely than the Socialists themselves? Either there is a precise definition for the term Socialism or it means nothing. It can be anything, as it has become in the confusion that has ensued since debate and question have been absent from our platforms.

III

THE MOST COMPLETE ANALYSIS of Socialism was made by Professor Robert Flint when he was at Edinburgh University. In his book, "Socialism," he says:

It [Socialism] denies to the individual any rights independent of Society; and assigns to Society authority to do whatever it deems for its own good with the persons, faculties, and possessions of individuals.⁶

If any student be curious about the difficulties encountered by Socialists in putting their principles and concepts into practice, or even presenting them to the electors of a country, he could do no better than study in their own literature the results of what has happened in Russia since 1917. It needs no old-fashioned individualist to expatiate upon this theme. The Socialists have told everything. When Lincoln Steffens was in Moscow, he learned from Lenin that the greatest difficulty confronting the latter was the practical application of the distributive proposals of the doctrine and the question of how to deal with the farm problem. Of course, a plan of distribution of products for the equal benefit of all, which State Socialists consider the very pivot of their systems, is sufficient to bring to grief any attempt made by the doctri-

⁶ P. 373.

naire, no matter whether he be a God-given leader of men or the wisest politician that ever promulgated a scheme.

The result of the Russian experiment seems to be attractive to those visitors who stand in Moscow and cannot see beyond the ends of their noses. The ruse which Potemkin practiced upon Catherine II is still in vogue in Russia. The visitors have been shown only what the authorities wished them to see, and many of the "intelligentsia" have been hoodwinked by the glowing descriptions uttered by the Dean of Canterbury and other well-intentioned but very simple souls. It is amazing how some trusting individuals can be taken in. Suppose, for example, that a visitor to our shores arrived in Chicago and desired to see what had been done for the Negroes. Would the Mayor, or his deputy, take him to view the hovels of the west side, where the unsanitary conditions are a menace to the whole community? Or would the observer be shown the model housing project of the Rosenwald Foundation, on Grand Boulevard?

This may seem to be a digression, but it is necessary to point out these considerations to the student because so many false reports have been circulated about the Russian experiment. For nearly thirty years every imaginable shift has been tried and, yet, Socialism, as it was conceived by Marx and Engels, is as far from realization as it ever was.

Does any student of this problem know where any principle of political democracy has been put into force under the Soviets? Has any one yet found a Russian worker who can boast of his "rights"? Is there anything liberal in social affairs? Do they enjoy an unfettered press? Where is the free platform upon which questions of the State are debated without restriction? Surely there must be something wrong if all these fine expressions of freedom have no purpose in the only great experiment of which we have knowledge.

The use to which the Socialists, in recent years, here and

in Great Britain, have put the Bolshevik plan bears all the marks of a deliberate deception. Those in the political arena speak of it as if it were something for the British and the American people to imitate. Now let a Socialist of the old school answer those of the new. Karl Kautsky, in an essay, "Marxism and Bolshevism—Democracy and Dictatorship," says:

... In Soviet Russia it is not capitalistically trained leaders but economic leaders who came from the ranks of Social-Democracy that are similarly ruining the economic administration of their state, which they call Socialist merely because instead of private ownership of the means of production they have established government ownership of these means. But they have at the same time transformed the State into the property of the ruling dictators and instead of democratically socializing production they have autocratically militarized it. As a result we have the same dreadful conditions existing in both cases: the same degradation and slavery, although for different reasons and in different form.⁷

Kautsky closes this article with the following hope:

With the disappearance of the Bolshevist dictatorship there will begin a period of speedy unification and coordination of all the independent organizations of the proletarian *democracy*, who will resume their march to victory.

Not the collapse of the dictatorship in Russia but its further continuance in power constitutes the gravest menace and causes the greatest damage to the *liberation* struggle of the modern working class.⁸ (Italics mine.)

These sentences are sufficient to indicate that Kautsky himself was utterly befogged about the Socialism which was to replace political democracy. Proletarian democracy has been in force in Great Britain and in this country for many years, and, still, although the worker goes to the poll and marks his ballot, he is a wage slave and has not utilized the advantages of his citizenship even to force his legislators to restore his rights.

Perhaps the student of this problem might find enlighten-

⁷ Published in "Socialism, Fascism, Communism," p. 192.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

ment in Eduard Bernstein's "Evolutionary Socialism."⁹ In this the author strips the Marxian gospel naked. He simply tears to tatters the materialistic interpretation of history. As for the theory of surplus value, he exposes it to the most damning criticism. Indeed, there is scarcely anything left to Marx and Engels after his searching analysis of their pet theories and his scathing denunciation of them. Unhappily, there are no more Bernsteins, and there has not appeared upon the scene a man of his caliber to force the Socialists of our day to study for themselves the ideas laid down in "Das Kapital" and the "Communist Manifesto."

It may be wondered what a Bernstein (if he were here) would think of the Socialists who enter the political circuses of Great Britain and the United States and masquerade as Democrats and Liberals. Would he not laugh on hearing them talk about "rights" and "liberty"? And what would he think about the proletarian sheep that follow the advice of the unschooled mentors?

IV

MUCH HAS BEEN MADE of the sweeping victory achieved by the workers in the recent general election in Great Britain. Many of our weeklies have hailed it as a Socialist triumph, and some of our conservative publicists have condemned it as such. It is nothing of the kind. Although the term "Socialism" has covered the party platform and the majority of the candidates elected have stood as Socialists, the program calls for nothing more than schemes for nationalizing the Bank of England, some industries, and certain services. So far, the electors (as political democrats) remain as free to vote the government out, when the opportunity presents itself, as they were when they defeated Churchill a few months ago.

As yet, there has been no attempt to use the war measure

⁹ Published in London, 1909.

introduced by Attlee, in May, 1940, which approximated a Socialist attempt to take over persons, their faculties, and their possessions. This war measure, the Defence of the Realm Act, is the very instrument which earnest, honest Socialists would use if they meant business. But the Attlee-Laski party knows that the British people had quite enough restriction during the war and that they seek relief from it under the government they have elected. It may be presumed, therefore, that these Socialists will go no farther than nationalizing this and that and make no attempts to set up a Socialist State, either of the Soviet pattern or of any other prescribed by Marx and Engels. It will prove to be the biggest deception that has ever been practiced upon the British people. For if the great hope is that the present government can lift the burden of poverty off the backs of the workers, it is doomed to failure. Indeed, so much is said already. Political freedom, even under a system of nationalization, will not solve the economic difficulties of the laboring class. For the proprietor of every industry nationalized is to receive compensation, and no one can pay it but the same workers who paid it to their employers and landlords before.

V

THE USE OF WORDS upon the political platform has become largely an abuse. When an English audience, gathered to hear a candidate speak on reform, will permit him to employ the old watchword of the English agitators in order to cloak his intentions, a great change has taken place. The English people in their long struggle have fought over and over again for the reaffirmation and re-establishment of rights as laid down in the Constitution; alas, they have fallen upon sad days. They have either forgotten their history or they are not made of the stuff of their fathers. They do not know that basically they stand in just the same position as they did

before the Reform of 1832, when political amelioration was to be the means of bringing about economic emancipation. The great period of enlightenment that men dreamed of in the middle of the last century, when the advocates of universal education imagined ignorance would be dispelled and knowledge would overcome all economic and political evils, has failed signally to help the workers. Indeed, when education was difficult to seek one hundred and fifty years ago, the common folk of England had far greater political sense than they reveal today.

The Radical movement in England, to go no farther back than the days of Wilkes, Cartwright, Jebb, Priestley, and Francis Place, was one that achieved great things. And what was there in the problems that harassed them that is not perplexing us today, after all our lavish expenditure on education? All the basic evils are present, and the same forces are arrayed against change. The motive of mankind has not been altered one iota by science and invention. Man is still a land animal, and he is just as dependent on the source of all things for his food, fuel, clothing, and shelter as he was in the days of Pitt and Fox. New cures for old sores catch the many, but the salves and poultices of nationalization do not touch the seat of the trouble.

It is strange that the uneducated man of Wilkes' day not only realized what was wrong with him but the cause of his malady. He knew then that he had been shackled by landlordism, both by force and by legislative enclosure. He was aware that he had lost his freedom when the commons were taken from him and when he was driven—a landless man—into the congested labor markets of the town.

There is no excuse, however, for the man of today, for he has had the political power to undo the wrong and has lost his opportunity. He has shackled himself. He has made himself a slave of the State, and if he thinks it preferable to

work for the bureaucracy than to work for an individual employer, then it is his affair. He has made his choice, and he will have to endure the problems of his own creation.

One hope there is: a revival of the agitations of the Radicals or, indeed, of the campaign which swept Great Britain in 1910. This depends not upon the success of schemes of nationalization but upon a spiritual awakening of the people, which is an English characteristic. Strange as it may seem to us at this stage, a wave of deeper religious consciousness may come again, as it did in the days of Wesley, and bring in its train a desire to re-examine the economic and political problems heaped so heavily upon the producers. We know what these spiritual revivals have done for communities in the past, and there is no reason why one should not come again and sweep all before it.

But there is little hope of such a miracle arising in the Church. A man—a Priestley, a Wesley, or a Roberts (the great Welsh revivalist)—is wanted to rouse the people to a sense of their own responsibility. Maybe the British people are waiting for their souls to be touched so that they may be inspired, as they have been in the past, to work out their own salvation. Nothing but a spiritual revolution can save us from the shackles of the State.

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