

BETTER THAN SOCIALISM.*

(For the Review.)

By JAMES F. MORTON, Jr.

While the process of evolution is incessant, in the building up of human society, as in the formation and development of species, the newly acquired ability to co-operate consciously with the law, and hence to move more directly toward the goal, has given our age an overwhelming advantage over all preceding epochs; and the growth and spread of knowledge and of the rationalizing spirit will constantly increase this advantage in the generations that lie before us. In the light of our even partial comprehension of the law of social development, we can now comprehend that every age is an age of transition, however fixed and stationary its institutions, customs and conceptions may superficially appear to be. Not for one hour has the human race stood still, since its first emergence as a definite species of animal on the earth. Nor has it ever, as a whole, and in the totality of its manifestations, gone backward. Losses on one side have been counter-balanced by gains on another. Even the apparent death of the intellect and of the spirit of advance during the Dark Ages was but a retardation of progress but no complete stoppage. Underneath the surface, irresistible forces were mustering for the attack; and in the ripeness of time they launched at clerical and feudalistic obscurantism a decisive blow. In each successive stage of the world's growth, the spirit of inevitable change was secretly at work. Whether by major or minor cataclysm, or by a multitude of small and slow steps, this or that institution has finally given way, the preparation for its overthrow was all the time going on, in the very height of its supremacy. Even so with our own age. The restlessness in the air, more noticeable than in almost any preceding epoch, indicates not merely that this is an age of transition, but that it is an age of conscious transition; and in the self-consciousness of the present age much is involved. It implies, not that we can pit our puny individual forces against the inevitable tendency of things, and hope to emerge victorious; not that we can substitute some finely devised *a priori* scheme of our own for the logical development of the individual consciousness and the social order; but that we are better fitted than the human race has been in any preceding period of its history, to comprehend the course of evolution, and by bringing ourselves into right relations with it to accelerate its normal progress, and clear away obstacles which retard its natural movement and prevent harmonious social growth. Admitting this as our legitimate task, it is in-

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cumbent on us to try by the evolutionary test all proposed plans for alteration of the social structure. It is unscientific to observe only one or two of the many factors which determine the lines of development of the individual or the race.

Socialism, adopting for its foundation principle the doctrine of economic determinism, with its accompanying tenet of the class struggle, is but half scientific. It realizes that man's activities are determined by his environment; but it fails to perceive that many factors other than economic are concerned in making up that environment and in determining the resultant line of his development. Stimuli of many kinds affect every individual; and the more complex the age, the more varied the influences surrounding all who live in it. The past and the present contribute their elements of pressure in varying directions. Common observation, in small things as in great, should long ago have proved the fallacy of referring everything to simple economic stimulus. A majority of the actions of daily life bear no relation whatever to economic interest; and many are directly opposed to it. Hereditary predispositions, religious enthusiasm, sensual appetites, heroic self-devotion, whimsical æsthetic instincts, superstitious fears, love of controlling others, personal affections, violent passions, petty envies and jealousies, scientific zeal, earnest love for humanity, and a host of other psychological characteristics and impulses join to outside pressure along many other lines than the economic, to offset the straight course of conduct which a strict regard for economic self-interest would induce. In a simpler era, the economic motive, as first in the order of time, stood out more conspicuously as the predominant factor. To-day it is still of vast importance, but so largely deflected and counterbalanced by other influences, that a philosophy devoted almost exclusively to establishing the future development of society on the supposition that the other factors in social life are practically negligible, must reach many utterly erroneous conclusions. Such is the case with Socialism. Many of its premises are undeniable; and its reasoning from them is exceedingly powerful. The only trouble is that these premises are but a half statement of the case; and that the corollaries drawn are based on the assumption that they are a complete statement.

In its analysis of social development, Socialism divides society into sharply defined classes, and history into sharply defined epochs. In its view, we are now living under what is termed the capitalist system, in which there is an inevitable struggle between two classes, the capitalist class and the working class (all other persons being either identified in interest with one of these classes or treated as negligible quantities); and this struggle can terminate only by the absolute surrender of one class or the other. The logical and practically inevitable outcome is held to be the overthrow of capitalism by the working class through its physical and numerical superiority, the absorption of capitalist industries by the grouped workmen, and the ultimate establishment of a system of collective production and distribution of all wealth. This is frequently presented to us as a plain mathematical demonstration; and our

Socialist friends marvel at the hardness of our hearts or the thickness of our heads, when we decline to be fully convinced. Yet the evidence, when closely examined, is anything but conclusive. That capitalism is necessarily and in its very essence an evil thing and a term of reproach, is assumed, rather than proved. That the capitalist mode of production and distribution is the single outstanding fact of modern life, is by no means adequately shown. That the inevitable tendency of modern industrialism is the wiping out of all classes except the capitalist class and the proletariat, is in no wise established. That the interests of the capitalist and the working class are in all things diametrically opposed, is an error out of which many other errors grow. That future progress must come solely through a class struggle, and the ultimate triumph of the now disinherited class, is an unwarranted contention. And finally that the collective production and distribution of wealth is the only possible solution of the economic and social problem, is far from a necessary conclusion, even were all the foregoing assertions amply maintainable.

After all, what is the matter with the present social order? In the first place, the life of to-day cannot be isolated from the past, as a novel and unrelated phenomenon. There is no hard and fast line of demarcation between it and the conditions immediately preceding it. Nor is it in itself a fixed and stationary system, but a process undergoing constant change. If we forget these facts, we shall fall into fallacy after fallacy.

A close examination of what we will consent to term the capitalist mode of production reveals two outstanding facts, one of them to be assigned to the credit, the other to the debit side of the account. It is a system, if we must use the expression, of tremendous initiative. Under its stimulus, the most gigantic operations have become so commonplace as to appear no longer startling. New and vaster enterprises are continually being evolved, to meet the infinitely varied demands of a complex age. On the other hand, a mere glance reveals an egregiously disproportioned series of rewards for the different forms of productive service, and a grossly inequitable distribution of wealth. The problem is to conserve the advantages of capitalism, while overcoming its present attendant evils. The sudden or even gradual introduction of collectivism would, in its theoretically perfected state, wipe out all inequalities of distribution, provided it did not miss its aim by the cumbersomeness of its methods. As to this, we have no facts to guide us. The ability of collectivism to stand the strain is matter of pure speculation. If successful, it would indeed eliminate the present excessive rewards of the organizers of industrial activity, and would abolish poverty as understood to-day. If unsuccessful, however, it would throw our civilization into a state of chaos or despotism, from which it would take centuries to recover. The risk is tremendous, in departing from the normal course of social evolution, to place the entire body of production and distribution at the mercy of the possible efficacy of an *a priori* hypothesis. Common reason would demand that so complete an overturn of our entire method of relationships be reached, if at all, only through a long series of preparatory steps, and finally adopted only in case it

becomes the inevitable consequence of the gradual readjustments found necessary in the struggle to secure greater justice. To pronounce in its favor so far in advance, and to close the mind to all possibility that a different outcome may emerge from the many variations which lie between us and an ideally perfect state of society, is to occupy a most unscientific position.

There remains, moreover, the immense question of initiative and of adequate stimulus for intensified individual enterprise; and it is not in any way demonstrated that collectivism, even at its best, can furnish anything of the sort. It is fashionable among Socialist debaters to brush aside this criticism, and to point to the isolated instances of heroism and martyrdom in the world's history, as evidence that the highest efforts are not dependent on any expectation of material reward. The answer is measurably applicable; and being so, it cancels the very basis of the Socialist philosophy, which is, that the economic motive is the determining factor in guiding individual and social activity. Yet it is not a complete reply. The love of humanity or the ambitious thirst for glory have their part to play in inducing self-sacrifice or moments of heroic action. Yet even in these instances the choice is that of the individual. The soldier fights as but one of the military organization; and as such he is but little more than a machine. The army in its ordinary activities is collectivistic; and as such it tends to discourage individual initiative. For its special purpose, the disadvantages of collectivism are far less than would be found in the organization of industry; but they are frequently all too apparent. The notable acts of heroism are performed by the few who stand out from the mass in a moment of individual decisiveness, and act well up to the sudden emergency that confronts them. Likewise, the great general is he who at the critical moment cuts through the red tape of army system, and forms his sudden plan, which is executed before a council of war could so much as hear of it. These, however, are the rare geniuses; and the general tendency of militarism is to keep all at a dead level. For the purposes of industrial organization, infinitely more than for military aims, the personal equation is of vital significance. The huge schemes of our great superintendents of industry require a daring of which the collectivist majority could never become capable. Even in the great transportation systems and the other vast natural monopolies, which self-protection may ultimately force into the control of municipalities, States or the federal government, private administration commonly exhibits greater efficiency. The only trouble is that these great enterprises become the means of oppression; and that their originators reap much more than a fair reward for their services to the community. If there is a way short of collectivism, by which this may be stopped, it is the part of good judgment to seek it.

It may be laid down as an incontestable fact that no device can prevent exploitation altogether, so long as human beings are imperfect. An absolutely perfect state of society would require absolutely perfect human beings. What we have to deal with is the partly developed human material, capable of being modified to an indefinite degree by the conditions of environment. That

human beings are unequal to one another in every particular, is beyond all cavil. Our problem is to take advantage of this natural inequality of capacity, so that the ablest shall be stimulated to put forth their full strength for social uses, and the weaker shall in their lesser field of activities be free from injustice and oppression. We must correlate fair play to the individual with fair play to society as a whole; and to do this, we must take account of facts. It is not true that capitalists are all monsters, or workmen all angels, nor that capitalism is necessarily a term of reproach. The real capitalists, as apart from the mere bloodsucking monopolists, are men of extraordinary ability; and the only question is how their efficiency may be best utilized so that society may benefit by it in the maximum degree.

The Single Tax philosophy presents the one complete solution of the problem, not because it is a clever scheme of taxation, nor because it is a blow against the possessors of great wealth. It succeeds, because it meets all the conditions requisite. Between capitalism, with initiative and exploitation, and Socialism, with neither initiative nor exploitation, there can be but one middle ground—initiative without exploitation, the conservation of the strong constructive elements in our present mode of industrial activity, and the elimination of the power of a few to reap the lion's share of the advantages growing out of our intensive modes of production, and thereby to destroy the opportunities and liberties of the many. There is but one conceivable way of reaching this end; and that is by preserving individual initiative, and destroying special privilege. It is not competition that is a curse, but monopoly. The Single Tax philosophy is applicable not to millennial but to actual conditions. It demands no superhuman idealism, and removes no needful incentive. It offers no Paradise to the idler, and affords not the faintest encouragement to shiftlessness. It removes impediments to natural activities, rather than creating an artificial nexus of activities, in accordance with an *a priori* design. It represents the simple extension of principles already brought into existence in the normal course of social and economic development, and carries these principles only to the end logically involved in their very nature. It neither penalizes ability, nor leaves the weak and less able without hope or opportunity. It renders to the individual the full fruit of his toil, and to the community the wealth of which it is the true creator. It is not a substitute for justice, but justice itself. What changes in human nature and in methods of production future ages may bring forth, no person living may predict. Our work is with the materials of the living present. If we attend to our business of abolishing special privilege and doing justice now, we are preparing in the surest manner for any conceivably superior form of social organization which may become the inheritance of the future.

"THE English are a strange people," said a cynical Frenchman. "They hang one admiral to encourage others." They also urge people to make good use of land, and then fine them so much every year for having done it. That, too, is strange.—FREDERICK VERINDER.