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Is Socialism Brigandage?

By ROBERT BLATCHFORD.

We Socialists do not propose to take anything from any man to which he has either a moral or a legal right; neither do we seek to obtain, or to retain, the property of any man for our own use. We simply propose to stop Noble Lords and Right Honourable and merely Honourable gentlemen from living in idleness and luxury upon the earnings of honest and industrious working people.

All the necessities of life come from the land. All the necessities of life are got from the land by labour. We mean to make the land the property of the People; and to place the work and instruments of production, distribution, and exchange under the control of the People. That is what we mean by Socialism.

If the people, by the exercise of constitutional means, passed an Act through Parliament making the estates of the nobles the property of the nation, with or without compensation, that would be neither brigandage nor revolution; it would be a legal, righteous, and constitutional reform.

We propose to be neither revolutionaries nor brigands, but legal, righteous, and constitutional reformers.

The Acts by which the nobility of this nation became possessed of their estates have not always been legal and constitutional, and have never been righteous, nor in their nature reforms.

The Enclosures Acts, for instance, by means of which the aristocracy took from the people seven million acres of common land in eighty years, were "legal," because a House of Lords made them law; but they seem to me to have been much more like brigandage than the methods advocated by Socialists. Because, whereas the Socialist proposes to take the land from the lords and give it to the whole nation, the lords took the land from the nation and kept it for themselves.

A few years since, a farm labourer, a friend of mine, took a few acres as an allotment from his landlord. It was poor land, and he got it at a low rent. He worked upon it, cultivated and manured it, and made it yield forty bushels of wheat to the acre. His landlord at once raised his rent, until the peasant was paying three times as much rent as the farmers about him paid for their farms.

The action of that landlord was not brigandage, but it was a very near approach to swindling. It was legal, but it was not righteous. It was a kind of thing which no honest man would do.

Yet such action is common to the noble lords who call the Socialists brigands. We understand the lease system, by means of which the landlord obtains possession of the tenant's improvements. We understand the unearned increment—which consists in the increased rent wrung by landlords from the people whose industry has made the land "valuable." We know that a great deal of the overcrowding of the rotten slum property, of the disease and misery and death in our large towns, are directly due to the greed of noble lords, who squeeze these high rents from the workers.

A few years ago I came across two very typical examples of the unjust and unmerciful extortion which is not to be called brigandage, because it has been made lawful by a House of Lords. The first of these cases was in Ireland. A number of poor peasants had rented land at nominal prices on the Galtee Mountains. The "land" was mere rock and rubble. The men set to work and "made" it. They removed the rocks and stones, they carried soil and manure on their backs up the steep hills, and after twenty years, during which some died of starvation and others of broken hearts, they "made" a few fields, on which spare crops of potatoes might be grown, and a few lean cattle fed. And when they had "made" the land the landlord raised the rent, and when they had built rude huts the landlord made them pay rent for those; and so when I saw the place the people were famished, and the produce of their labour was sold to pay the "rent" to an absentee landlord—an English Radical philanthropist.

The second case I met with in Manchester. A poor old widow rented a two-room cottage in a slum court. There was no closet in the court, and the landlord took half the widow's living room and made two closets under her bedroom. When I saw the place her living room was forty-two inches wide. When she closed her door the chimney smoked, and when she left her door open the fire went out.

The rent of that hovel was 3s. a week, and the widow, who had paid the rent for forty years, had notice to quit because she was a fortnight in arrears.

I suppose the original cost of the house would be less than £70, and the old widow had paid £300 in rent, and was to be evicted.

Brigandage! When I think how the rent and royalty, the interest and the dividends are wrung and crushed and fleeced from crowds of ignorant and poor men, and from famished, overwrought, and anxious

women and children; when I think by what mean, dirty, rapacious agents and instruments this booty is extorted; when I think how the gold so greedily grabbed by our Noble Lords is literally stained by the sweat and the tears of broken labourers, drunken rowdies, desperate women, and hungry babies; when I think how much of it comes from the sweating shop and the gin palace, and the gambling den and the brothel, I am not so much surprised at the folly and weakness of the people who pay it, as at the fact that Noble Lords are not too noble to accept it.

The money is unclean; it is blood money, the price of wrong, of suffering, of shame; no honest man would touch it. No man with the instincts of a gentleman, no man with any pride or decency, or feelings of humanity would take such money and live upon it. But our Noble Lords take it, take it greedily, and are prepared to use "all the energy and organisation they possess" to retain the power to take it. The noble, high-minded, Christian British gentlemen. No money is too foul for them to clutch; no instrument too vile for them to use to clutch it. They will not only commit robbery—a legal kind—upon the poorest, the most ignorant, and the most debased, but they are also prepared to call out their illiterate and half-drilled militia and do a little murder—of a legal kind—in defence of their iniquitous rights. The Brigands.

Well, we will endeavour to make the people acquainted with the history of the landlord's "rights," and with the nature of those "rights," and with the acts of rapacity and brutality which are perpetrated daily by our Noble Lords and their agents.

The titled robbers of Great Britain have always done their robberies in a legal manner. We propose to enforce their cessation in a legal manner. Moral right or economic reason the landlord and the capitalist have none to lean on. Only by law is their property theirs, only by law are their privileges upheld. And laws which were made by the State can by the State be altered. We Socialists are lawful men. We respect the law, and mean to use it. We are not mere brigands. We are the new police; our duty is to "arrest the rogues and dastards"; our motto is:

The Law giveth, and the Law taketh away;
Blest be the name of the Law.

Those who do not wish you to be Socialists have given you very false notions about Socialism, in the hope of setting you against it.

The men who have tried to smash your unions, who have written against you, and spoken against you, and acted against you in all the great strikes and lock-outs, are the same men who speak and write against Socialism.

They say that Socialists want to get up a revolution, to turn the country upside down by force, to seize all property, and to divide it equally amongst the whole people.

But to-day there are very few Socialists who believe in brute force, or who think a revolution possible or desirable.

I have always been dead against the idea of revolution, for many reasons. I do not think a revolution is possible in Britain. Firstly, because the people have too much sense; secondly, because the people are by nature patient and kindly; thirdly, because the people are too free to make force needless.

Revolution by force of arms is not desirable nor feasible; but there is another kind of revolution from which we hope great things. This is a revolution of thought. Let us once get the people, or a big majority of the people, to understand Socialism, to believe in Socialism, and to work for Socialism, and the real revolution is accomplished.

As to seizing the wealth of the country and sharing it out amongst the people. First, we do not propose to seize anything. We do propose to get some things—the land, for instance—and to make them the property of the whole nation; but we mean that to be done by Act of Parliament, and by purchase. Second, we have no idea of "sharing out" the land, nor the railways, nor the money, nor any other kind of wealth or property, equally amongst the people. To share these things out—if they could be shared, which they could not be—would be to make them private property, whereas we want them to be public property, the property of the British nation.

"Make all men equal in possessions," cry the non-Socialists, "and in a very short time there would be rich and poor, as before."

It is quite true that, did we divide all wealth equally to-morrow, there would in a short time be many penniless, and a few in a way of getting rich; but it is only true if we suppose that after the sharing we allowed private ownership of land and the old system of trade and competition to go on as before. Change those things: do away with the bad system which leads to poverty and to wealth, and we should have no more rich and poor.

WHAT SOCIALISTS WANT.

GREAT BRITAIN is ruled by the wealthy in the interests of the wealthy. We propose that it should be ruled by the people in the interests of the people; for class rule brings conflict of interest, which brings hatred, while community of interest breeds fellowship, and fellowship is life.

All the means of existence in Great Britain are owned by individuals. We submit that things which are needful to make a nation and to maintain a nation should be owned by the nation.

The nation owns the Navy, the Government factories, the public buildings, the public lands, the arsenals, the forts, and the barracks. We suggest that the nation should own all the ships, all the railways, all the factories, all the buildings, all the land, and all the requisites of national life and defence.

The nation manages the Post Office, the Telegraphs, and, through the local Councils, it manages many of its gasworks, waterworks, and tramways. We contend that the nation should manage all its business and all its work.

The nation directs the people's morals through a State Church, which once a week teaches the wickedness of grinding the faces of widows and orphans. We claim that the nation should establish social conditions which will make oppression and injustice impossible all the week round.

Do not accept accounts of our aims from persons interested in the maintenance of existing evils, but take your definition of Socialism from standard encyclopædias and dictionaries. Thus:

The "Popular Encyclopædia" describes Socialism as "the abolition of that individual action on which modern societies depend, and the substitution of a regulated system of co-operative action."

"Worcester's Dictionary" defines Socialism as "the science of reconstructing society on an entirely new basis, by substituting the principles of association for that of competition in every branch of human industry."

The "Century Dictionary" includes in Socialism "any system of social organisation which would abolish entirely, or in great part, the individual effort and competition on which modern society rests, and substitute co-operation, would introduce a more perfect and equal distribution of the products of labour, and would make land and capital, as the instruments of production, the joint possession of the members of the community."

The "Encyclopædia Britannica" says that "to identify Socialism with a violent and lawless revolutionary spirit . . . is to confound the essence of the movement with an accidental feature more or less common to all great innovations. . . . It should be said that the ethics of Socialism are closely akin to the ethics of Christianity, if not identical with them."

The plain truth is that Socialists desire:

Not to "share out" wealth, but to prevent plunder of the common wealth.

Not to create strife, but to set up co-operation.

Not to feed the shirker at the cost of the worker, but to order that "he who will not work shall not eat," whether he be tramp or duke.

Not to despoil anyone, but to provide decent Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Education for all.

If you are interested in these aims, and would like fuller details, send to the Clarion Press, 44, Worship Street, London, E.C., for: "What Socialism is and is not," by R. Blatchford (1d., by post 1½d.); "Competition," by R. Blatchford (1d., by post 1½d.); "The Only Way to Democracy," by A. M. Thompson (1d., by post 1½d.); "Mind Your Own Business," by R. B. Suthers (6d., post free 7½d.)

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