

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIALISM

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Preface.

Socialism consists of a synthesis of beliefs, aspirations, and ideas of reform which appeals profoundly to the mind. Governments fear it, legislators manipulate it, nations behold in it the dawn of happier destinies.

This book is devoted to the study of Socialism. In it will be found the application of those principles already set forth in my two last works — *The Psychology of Peoples* and *The Psychology of the Crowd*. Passing rapidly over the details of the doctrines in question, and retaining their essentials alone, I shall examine the causes which have given birth to Socialism, and those which favour or retard its propagation. I shall show the conflict of those ancient ideas, fixed by heredity, on which societies are still reposed, with the new ideas, born of the new conditions which have been created by the evolution of modern science and industry. Without contesting the lawfulness of the tendencies of the greater number to ameliorate their condition, I shall inquire whether it is possible for institutions to have a real influence in this amelioration, or whether our destinies are not decided by necessities entirely independent of the institutions which our wills may create.

Socialism has not wanted apologists to write its history, economists to discuss its dogmas, and apostles to propagate its faith. Hitherto psychologists have disdained to study it, perceiving in it only one of those elusive and indefinite subjects, like theology and politics, which can lead only to such impassioned and futile discussions as are hateful to the scientific mind. It would seem, however, that nothing but an intent psychology can exhibit the genesis of the new doctrines, or explain the influence exerted by them over the vulgar mind as well as over a certain number of cultivated understandings. We must dive to the deepest roots of the events whose evolution we are considering if we would attain a comprehension of the blossom.

No apostle has ever doubted of the future of his faith, and the Socialists are persuaded of the approaching triumph of theirs. Such a victory implies of necessity the destruction of the present society, and its reconstruction on other bases. To the disciples of the new dogmas nothing appears more simple. It is

evident that a society may be disorganised by violence, just as a building, laboriously constructed, may be destroyed in an hour by fire. But does our modern knowledge of the evolution of things allow us to admit that man is able to re-fashion, according to his liking, a society that has so been destroyed? So soon as we penetrate a little into the mechanism of civilisations we quickly discover that a society, with its institutions, its beliefs, and its arts, represents a tissue of ideas, sentiments, customs, and modes of thought determined by heredity, the cohesion of which constitutes its strength. No society is firmly held together unless this moral heritage is solidly established, and established not in codes but in the natures of men; the one declines when the other crumbles, and when this moral heritage is finally disintegrated the society is doomed to disappear.

Such a conception has never influenced the writers and the peoples of the Latin States. Persuaded as they are that the necessities of nature will efface themselves before their ideal of levelment, regularity, and justice, they believe it sufficient to imagine enlightened constitutions, and laws founded on reason, in order to re-fashion the world. They are still possessed by the illusions of the heroic epoch of the Revolution, when philosophers and legislators held it certain that a society was an artificial thing, which benevolent dictators could rebuild in entirety.

Such theories do not appear tenable to-day. We must not, however, disdain them, for they constitute the motives of action of a destructive influence which is greatly to be feared, because very considerable. The power of creation waits upon time and place; it is beyond the immediate reach of our desires; but the destructive faculty is always at hand. The destruction of a society may be very rapid, but its reconstruction is always very slow. Sometimes man requires centuries of effort to rebuild, painfully, that which he destroyed in a day.

If we would comprehend the profound influence of modern Socialism we need only to examine its doctrines. When we come to investigate the causes of its success we find that this success is altogether alien to the theories proposed, and the negations imposed by these doctrines. Like religions (and Socialism is tending more and more to put on the guise of a religion) it propagates itself in any manner rather than by reason. Feeble in the extreme when it attempts to reason, and to support itself by economic arguments, it becomes on the contrary extremely powerful when it remains in the region of dreams,

affirmations, and chimerical promises, and if it were never to issue thence it would become even more redoubtable.

Thanks to its promises of regeneration, thanks to the hope it flashes before all the disinherited of life, Socialism is becoming a belief of a religious character rather than a doctrine. Now the great power of beliefs, when they tend to assume this religious form, of whose mechanism I have elsewhere treated, lies in the fact that their propagation is independent of the proportion of truth or error that they may contain, for as soon as a belief has gained a lodging in the minds of men its absurdity no longer appears; reason cannot reach it, and only time can impair it. The most profound thinkers of humanity — Leibnitz, Descartes, Newton — have bowed themselves without a murmur before religious doctrines whose weaknesses reason would quickly have discovered, had they been able to submit them to the ordeal of criticism. What has once entered the region of sentiment can no longer be touched by discussion. Religions, acting as they do only on the sentiments, cannot be destroyed by arguments, and it is for this reason that their power over the mind has always been so absolute.

The present age is one of those periods of transition in which the old beliefs have lost their empire, while those which must replace the old are not yet established. Hitherto man has been unable to live without divinities. They fall often from their throne, but that throne has never remained empty; new phantoms are rising always from the dust of the dead gods.

Science, which has wrestled with the gods, has never been able to dispute their prodigious empire. No civilisation has ever yet succeeded in establishing and extending itself without them. The most flourishing civilisations have always been propped up by religious dogmas which, from the rational point of view, possessed not an atom of logic, not a spice of truth, nor even of simple good sense. Reason and logic have never been the true guides of nations. The irrational has always been one of the most powerful motives of action known to humanity.

It is not by the faint light of reason that the world has been transformed. While religions, founded on chimeras, have marked their indelible imprint on all the elements of civilisations, and continue to retain the immense majority of men under their laws, the systems of philosophy built on reason have played only an insignificant part in the life of nations, and have had none but an

ephemeral existence. They indeed offer the crowd nothing but arguments, while the human soul demands nothing but hopes.

These hopes are those that religions have always given, and they have given also an ideal capable of seducing and stirring the mind. It is under their magic wand that the most powerful empires have been created, and the marvels of literature and art, which form the common treasure of civilisation, have risen out of chaos.

Socialism, whose dream is to substitute itself for the ancient faiths, proposes but a very low ideal, and to establish it appeals but to sentiments lower still. What, in effect, does it promise, more than merely our daily bread, and that at the price of hard labour? With what lever does it seek to raise the soul? With the sentiments of envy and hatred which it creates in the hearts of multitudes? To the crowd, no longer satisfied with political and civic equality, it proposes equality of condition, without dreaming that social inequalities are born of those natural inequalities that man has always been powerless to change.

It would seem that beliefs founded on so feeble an ideal, on sentiments so little elevated, could have but few chances of propagating themselves. However, they do propagate themselves, for man possesses the marvellous faculty of transforming things to the liking of his desires, of regarding them only through that magical prism of the thoughts and sentiments which shows us the world as we wish it to be. Each, at the bidding of his dreams, his ambitions, his hopes, perceives in Socialism what the founders of the new faith never dreamed of putting into it. In Socialism the priest perceives the universal extension of charity, and dreams of charity while he forgets the altar. The slave, bowed in his painful labour, catches a confused glimpse of the shining paradise where he, in his turn, will be loaded with good things. The enormous legion of the discontented — and who is not of it to-day? — hopes, through the triumph of Socialism, for the amelioration of its destiny. It is the sum of all these dreams, all these discontents, all these hopes, that endows the new faith with its incontestable power.

In order that the Socialism of the present day might assume so quickly that religious form which constitutes the secret of its power, it was necessary that it should appear at one of those rare moments of history when the old religions lose their might (men being weary of their gods), and exist only on sufferance, while awaiting the new faith that is to succeed them. Socialism, coming as it

came, at the precise instant when the power of the old divinities had considerably waned, is naturally tending to possess itself of their place. There is nothing to show that it will not succeed in taking it. There is everything to show that it will not succeed in keeping it long.

Book I: The Socialistic Theories and Their Disciples:

Chapter 1: The Various Aspects of Socialism.

1. The Factors of Social Evolution.

Civilisations have always had, as their basis, a certain small number of directing or controlling ideas. When these ideas, after gradually waning, have entirely lost their force, the civilisations which rest on them are doomed to change.

We are to-day in the midst of one of those phases of transition so rare in the history of the world. In the course of the ages it has not been given to many philosophers to live at the precise moment at which a new idea shapes itself, and to be able to study, as we can study to-day, the successive degrees of its crystallisation.

In the present condition of things the evolution of societies subject to factors of three orders: political, economic, and psychological. These have existed in every period, but the respective importance of each has varied with the age of the nation.

The political factors comprise the laws and institutions. Theorists of every kind, and above all the modern Socialists, generally accord to these a very great importance. They are persuaded that the happiness of a people depends on its institutions, and that to change these is at the same stroke to change its destinies. Some thinkers hold, on the contrary, that institutions exercise but a very feeble influence; that the destiny of a nation is decreed by its character; that is to say, by the soul of the race. This would explain why peoples possessing similar institutions, and living in identical environments, occupy very different places in the scale of civilisation.

To-day the economic factors have an immense importance. Very feeble at a period when the nations lived in isolation, when the diverse industries hardly varied from century to century, these factors have ended by acquiring a pre-eminent influence. Scientific and industrial discoveries have transformed all our conditions of existence. A simple chemical reaction, discovered in a laboratory, ruins one country and enriches another. The culture of a cereal in

the heart of Asia compels whole provinces of Europe to renounce agriculture. The developments of machinery revolutionise the life of a large proportion of the civilised nations.

The factors of the psychological order, such as race, beliefs, and opinions, have also a considerable importance. Till quite lately their influence was preponderant, but to-day the economic factors are tending to prevail.

It is especially in these changes of relation between the directing factors to which they are subject that the societies of to-day differ from those of the past. Dominated of old above all by faiths, they have since become more and more obedient to economic necessities.

The psychological factors are nevertheless far from having lost their influence. The degree in which man escapes the tyranny of economic factors depends on his mental constitution; that is to say, on his race; and this is why we see certain nations subject these economic factors to their needs, while others allow themselves to become more and more enslaved by them, and seek to react on them only by laws of protection, which are incapable of defending them against the formidable necessities which rule them.

Such are the principal motive forces of social evolution. Their action is simultaneous, but often contradictory. To ignore them, or to misconceive them, does not hinder their action. The laws of nature operate with the blind punctuality of clockwork, and he that offends them is broken by their march.

2. The Various Aspects of Socialism.

This brief presentment already allows us to foresee that Socialism offers to the view different facets, which we must examine in succession. We must investigate Socialism as a political conception, as an economic conception, as a philosophic conception, and as a belief. We must also consider the inevitable conflict between these various concepts and the social realities; that is, between the yet abstract idea and the inexorable laws of nature which the cunning of man cannot change.

The economic side of Socialism is that which best lends itself to analysis. We find ourselves in the presence of very clearly defined problem.. How is wealth to be produced and divided? What are the respective of labour, capital, and intelligence? What is the influence of economic facts, and to what extent can

they be adapted to the requirements of social evolution?

If we consider Socialism as a belief, if we inquire into the moral impression which it produces, the conviction and the devotion which it inspires, the point of view is very different, and the aspect of the problem is entirely changed. We now no longer have to occupy ourselves with the theoretic value of Socialism as a doctrine, nor with the economic impossibilities with which it may clash. We have only to consider the new faith in its genesis, its moral progress, and its possible psychological consequences. Then only does the fatuity of discussion with its defenders become apparent. If the economists marvel that demonstrations based on impeccable evidence have absolutely no influence over those who hear and understand them, we have only to refer them to the history of all dogmas, and to the study of the psychology of crowds. We have not triumphed over a doctrine when we have shown its chimerical nature. We do not attack dreams with argument; nothing but recurring experience can show that they are dreams.

In order to comprehend the present force of Socialism it must be considered above all as a belief, and we then discover it to be founded on a very secure psychologic basis. It matters very little to its immediate success that it may be contrary to social and economic necessities. The history of all beliefs, and especially of religious beliefs, sufficiently proves that their success has most often been entirely independent of the proportion of truth that they might contain.

Having considered Socialism as a belief we must examine it as a philosophic conception. This new facet is the one its adepts have most neglected, and yet the very one they might the best defend. They consider the realisation of their doctrines as the necessary consequence of economic evolution, whereas it is precisely this evolution that forms the most real obstacle. From the point of view of pure philosophy — that is to say, putting psychologic and economic necessities aside many of their theories are highly defensible.

What in effect is Socialism, speaking philosophically or, at least, what is its best-known form, Collectivism? Simply a reaction of the collective being against the encroachments of the individual being. Now if we put aside the interests of intelligence, and the possibly immense utility of husbanding these interests for the progress of civilisation, it is undeniable that collectivity — if only by that law of the greater number which has become the great credo of

modern democracies — may be considered as invented to subject to itself the individual sprung from its loins, and who would be nothing without it. For centuries, that is to say during the succession of the ages which have preceded our own, collectivity has always been all-powerful, at least among the Latin peoples. The individual outside it was nothing. Perhaps the French Revolution, the culmination of all the doctrines of the eighteenth-century writers, represents the first serious attempt at reaction of Individualism, but in enfranchising the individual (at least theoretically), it has also isolated him. In isolating him from his caste, from his family, from the social or religious groups of which he was a unit, it has left him delivered over to himself, and has thus transformed society into a mass of individuals, without cohesion and without ties.

Such a work cannot have very lasting results. Only the strong can support isolation, and rely only on themselves; the weak are unable to do so. To isolation, and the absence of support they prefer servitude; even painful servitude. The castes and corporations destroyed by the Revolution formed, of old, the fabric which served to support the individual in life; and it is evident that they corresponded to a psychologic necessity, since they are reviving on every hand under various names to-day, and notably under that of trades-unions. These associations permit the individual to reduce his efforts to a minimum, while Individualism obliges him to increase his efforts to the maximum. Isolated, the proletariat is nothing, and can do nothing; incorporated he becomes a redoubtable force. If incorporation is unable to give him capacity and intelligence it does at least give him strength, and forbids him nothing but a liberty with which he would not know what to do.

From the philosophic point of view, then, Socialism is certainly a reaction of the collectivity against the individual: a return to the past. Individualism and Collectivism are, in their general essentials, two opposing forces, which tend, if not to annihilate, at least to paralyse one another. In this struggle between the generally conflicting interests of the individual and those of the aggregate lies the true philosophic problem of Socialism. The individual who is sufficiently strong to count only on his own intelligence and initiative, and is therefore highly capable of making headway, finds himself face to face with the masses, feeble in initiative and intelligence, but to whom their number gives might, the only upholder of right. The interests of the two opposing

parties are conflicting. The problem is to discover whether they can maintain without destroying themselves, at the price of reciprocal concessions. Hitherto religion has succeeded in persuading the individual to sacrifice his personal interests to those of his fellows only to replace individual egoism by the collective egoism. But the old religions are in sight of death, and those that must replace them are yet unborn. In investigating the evolution of the social solidarity we have to consider how far conciliation between the two contradictory principles is allowed by economic necessities. As M. Léon Bourgeois justly remarked in one of his speeches: "We can attempt nothing against the laws of nature; that goes without saying; but we must incessantly study them and avail ourselves of them so as to diminish the chances of inequality and injustice between man and man."

To complete our examination of the various aspects of Socialism we must consider its variations in respect of race. If those principles are true that I have set forth in a previous work on the profound transformations undergone by all the elements of civilisation — institutions, religions, arts, beliefs, etc. — In passing from one people to another, we can already prophesy that, under the often similar words which serve to denote the conceptions formed by the various nations of the proper rôle of the State, we shall find very different realities. We shall see that this is so.

Among vigorous and energetic races which have arrived at the culminating point of their development we observe a considerable extension of what is confided to personal initiative, and a progressive reduction of all that is left to the State to perform; and this is true of republics equally with monarchies. We find a precisely opposite part given to the State by those peoples among whom the individual has arrived at such a degree of mental exhaustion as no longer permits him to rely on his own forces. For such peoples, whatever may be the names of their institutions, the Government is always a power absorbing everything, manufacturing everything, and controlling the least details of the citizen's life. Socialism is only the extension of this concept. It would be a dictatorship; impersonal, but absolute.

We see now the complexity of the problems we must encounter, but we see also how they resolve themselves into simpler forms when their data are separately investigated.

Chapter 2: The Origin of Socialism and the Causes of its Present Development

1. The Antiquity of Socialism.

Socialism has not made its first appearance in the world to-day. To use an expression dear to ancient historians, we may say that its origins are lost in the night of time; for its prime cause is the inequality of conditions, and this inequality was the law of the ancient world, as it is that of the modern. Unless some all-powerful deity takes it upon himself to re-fashion the nature of man, this inequality is undoubtedly destined to subsist until the final sterilisation of our planet. It would seem that the struggle between rich and poor must be eternal.

Without harking back to primitive Communism, a form of inferior development from which all societies have sprung, we may say that antiquity has experimented with all the forms of Socialism that are proposed to us to-day. Greece, notably, put them all into practice, and ended by dying her dangerous experiments. The Collectivist doctrines were exposed long ago in the *Republic* of Plato. Aristotle contests them, and as M. Guirand remarks, reviewing their writings in his book on *Landed Property among the Greeks*: "All the contemporary doctrines are represented here, from Christian Socialism to the most advanced Collectivism."

These doctrines were many times put into practice. All the political revolutions in Greece were at the same time social revolutions, or revolutions with the object of changing the inequalities of conditions by despoiling the rich and oppressing the aristocracy. They often succeeded, but their triumph was -always ephemeral. The final result was the Hellenic decadence, and the loss of national independence. The Socialists of those days agreed no better than the Socialists of these, or, at least, agreed only to destroy: until Rome put an end to their perpetual dissensions by reducing Greece to servitude.

The Romans themselves did not escape from the attempts of the Socialists. They suffered the experimental agrarian Socialism of the Gracchi, which limited the territorial property of each citizen, distributed the surplus among the poor, and obliged the State to nourish necessitous citizens. Thence resulted the struggles which gave rise to Marius, Sylla, the civil wars, and finally to the ruin of the Republic and the domination of the Emperors.

The Jews also were familiar with the demands of the Socialists. The

imprecations of their prophets, the true anarchists of their times, were above all imprecations against riches. Jesus, the most illustrious of them, asserted the right of the poor before everything. His maledictions and menaces are addressed only to the rich; the Kingdom of God is reserved for the poor alone. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

During the first two or three centuries of our era the Christian religion was the Socialism of the poor, the disinherited, and the discontented; and, like modern Socialism, it was in perpetual conflict with the established institutions. Nevertheless, Christian Socialism ended by triumphing; it was the first time that the Socialistic ideas obtained a lasting success.

But although it possessed one immense advantage that of promising happiness only for a future life, and therefore of certainty that it could never see its promises disproved — Christian Socialism could maintain itself only by renouncing its principles after victory. It was obliged to lean on the rich and powerful, and so to become the defender of the fortune and property it had formerly cursed. Like all triumphant revolutionaries, it became conservative in its turn, and the social ideal of Catholic Rome was not very far removed from that of Imperial Rome. Once more had the poor to content themselves with resignation, labour, and obedience; with a prospect of heaven if they were quiet, and a threat of hell and the devil if they harassed their masters. What a marvellous story is this of this two thousand years' dream! When our descendants, freed from the heritages that oppress our thoughts, are able to consider it from a purely philosophical point of view, they will never tire of admiring the formidable might of this gigantic Minerva by which our civilisations are still propped up. How thin do the most brilliant systems of philosophy show before the genesis and growth of this belief, so puerile from a rational point of view, and yet so powerful! Its enduring empire shows us well to what extent it is the unreal that governs the world, and not the real. The founders of religion have created nothing but hopes; yet they are their works that have lasted the longest. What Socialist outlook can ever equal the paradises of Jesus and Mahomet? How miserable in comparison are the perspectives of earthly happiness that the apostle of Socialism promises us to-day!

They seem very ancient, all these historical events which take us back to the

Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews; but in reality they are always young, for always they betray the laws of human nature, — that human nature that as yet the course of ages has not changed. Humanity has aged much since then, but she always pursues the same dreams and suffers the same experiences without learning anything from them. Let any one read the declarations, full of hope and enthusiasm, issued by our Socialists of fifty years ago, at the moment of the revolution of 1848, of which they were the most valiant partisans. The new age was born, and, thanks to them, the face of the world was about to be changed. Thanks to them, their country sank into a despotism; and, a few years later, into a formidable war and invasion. Scarcely half a century has passed since this phase of Socialism, and already forgetful of this latest lesson we are preparing ourselves to repeat the same round.

2. The Causes of the Present Development of Socialism.

To-day, then, we are merely repeating once more the complaint that our fathers have uttered so often, and if our cry is louder, it is because the progress of civilisation has rendered our sensibility keener. Our conditions of existence are far better than of old; yet we are less and less satisfied. Despoiled of beliefs, and having no perspective other than that of austere duty and dismal solidarity, disquieted by the upheavals and instability caused by the transformations of industry, seeing all social institutions crumble one by one, seeing family and property menaced with extinction, the modern man attaches himself eagerly to the present, the only reality he can seize. Interested only in himself, he wishes at all costs to rejoice in the present hour, of whose brevity he is so sensible. In default of his lost illusions he must enjoy well-being, and consequently riches. Wealth is all the more necessary to him in that the progress of industry and the sciences have created a host of luxuries which were formerly unknown, but have to-day become necessities. The thirst for riches becomes more and more general, while at the same time the number of those amongst whom wealth is to be divided increases.

The needs of the modern man, therefore, have become very great, and have increased far more rapidly than the means of satisfying them. Statisticians prove that comfort and convenience have never been! so highly developed as to-day, but they show also that requirements have never been so imperious. Now the equality of the two terms in an equation only subsists when these two

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