

# The Commoner.

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## DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM

Papers like the Chicago Chronicle, the Nashville American, the St. Paul Globe, and others which, like these papers, are owned and run in the interests of some corporation, are constantly accusing the democratic party at present organized of being socialistic. The platforms of 1896 and 1900 have been criticised as socialistic, and those who adhere to those platforms when not described by these papers as populists, have by these papers been classed as socialists. The fact is that the socialist movement is receiving its greatest support from the greedy trusts and corporations, and from those who yield willing and unthinking obedience to the large corporations. The socialist may be defined as one who believes in the ownership and operation by the government of all the means of production and distribution. Sometimes the thing advocated is called the co-operative commonwealth. The ultimate purpose of the socialists is to so enlarge the sphere of the government as to eliminate competition, and provide for the joint production and distribution of all the products of labor through the instrumentalities of the state. It is a common error to obscure the line between the individualist and the socialist. One test is whether the person believes that competition is a helpful or a destructive force. It is also a common error to confuse the arguments in favor of municipal ownership with the arguments that favor real socialism.

If the term socialist was broad enough to include all co-operative effort in which the government engages, then the government would today be socialistic to a considerable degree. But there is a well defined line between government ownership when competition is impossible, and government ownership for the express purpose of destroying competition. Take the case of a city water plant. The argument in favor of the municipal ownership of such a plant is not that all competition between water companies is necessarily bad, but that competition is practically impossible. A city could not afford to allow its streets to be torn up for the putting in and repair of a half dozen different water systems. And if it were willing to submit to the inconvenience, the cost of a number of systems would be a heavy tax upon the consumers, for each system would have to make a dividend upon all of its plant, including the mains that parallel other systems of mains.

Where there is private ownership of a water plant, it has been customary to secure a franchise reserving the right to impose conditions, but the tendency of a private monopoly to increase its profits both by an increase in its rates and by a cheapening of the service usually manifests itself, and the effort to correct abuses and to control franchise holding companies has resulted in most of the municipal corruption, of which there is such an abundant evidence throughout the country. There has been great growth in public sentiment in the direction of municipal ownership, and in most of the large cities the question has been so thoroughly investigated that on a popular vote a proposition in favor of a municipal water plant, a municipal gas plant, or a municipal electric plant would in all probability carry.

Following close behind the water and the lighting comes the street car service, and the same arguments that apply to water and lighting apply with almost as much force to the street car system. The streets are limited in width and it is impossible to have a number of car lines with separate tracks. The public recognizes the advantage of having a unified street car system run from some central point into various directions, with a single fare and transfers, but when this system is in the hands of a private corporation it soon exhibits all of the evils of any other private monopoly, and the tendency to have the government take charge of the street car systems is an inevitable one.

If central heating plants grow in favor, as they seem likely to, the same principle will apply,

and the city will finally be constrained to take hold of it for the same reason that the city is taking hold of water and lighting, and to a less degree, of the street car lines. In doing this the city is no more guilty of embarking upon what can be properly called socialism than is the national government when it operates the postal service. At first the government established an office at which people could call for their mail, then a system of carriers was established in the cities, and the mail was taken to the door, it being found more economical for one person to deliver mail to a large number than for the people thus accommodated to go to the office for their mail. Now the same system has been applied to the country, and there is a great deal of saving of time to the farmers.

If we are to shun as socialistic every co-operative effort of the government, we must abandon our public schools, for they are distinctly co-operative. Instead of leaving education to private schools, the people of the country acting together, establish the school house and employ the teacher.

In paving streets the city indulges in co-operative effort, and in providing police protection the city engages in a co-operative work. Instead of imposing upon each person the necessity of protecting himself or of hiring a watchman, the people of the town acting through their city organization, employ their police force, as they also do their fire department.

All government is co-operative in the sense that it is an economical method employed by the people to do for themselves by joint action what it would be more expensive for each one to do for himself.

During the last few years the federal government has been conducting a series of experiments in agriculture. It tests the soil of different sections, transfers seeds and plants from one latitude to another or from one point to another in the same latitude for the purpose of ascertaining what can be cultivated to advantage. In doing this it is acting for all the people, and is doing that which could only be done at much greater expense by individual effort.

There has been considerable discussion in regard to the purchase of the telegraph lines by the government. Some years ago under President Harrison the postmaster general recommended the operation of the telegraph lines in connection with the postal system, and this can be defended by the same arguments that are employed to defend the carrying of the mails by the government.

A considerable number of people favor the ownership and operation of the railroads by the government. They argue that competition is only possible to a limited extent even where there is no consolidation of lines, for the reason that most of the towns have but one railroad, and the people adjacent to such towns are, by their very location, compelled to patronize that one road. The position of the people so situated would be tolerable if the government would prevent, as it might, the watering of stock, extortionate rates and discriminations. But instead of the government controlling the railroad corporations in the interest of the people, the corporations have too often controlled the government in the interest of the railroad stockholders and managers. The consolidation of the great lines of railroads has lessened the competition and at the same time increased the influence of the corporations over the government authorities, and these consolidations have brought many to a point where they look upon government ownership as the only relief.

Whether the government will embark upon the ownership and operation of railroads will depend not so much upon what is said about the theoretical advantage of co-operation, as upon the necessities that may arise.

The democratic party during the campaigns of 1896 and 1900 was an earnest advocate not of the government ownership of railroads, but of the strict regulation of the roads in the interest of

the public.

Papers like those above mentioned, which have been active in opposing railroad regulation, are much more responsible than the democratic party for any growth that has taken place in the sentiment in favor of the government ownership of railroads, just as the financiers who defeat legislation intended to increase the security of banks are responsible for growth of the sentiment in favor of government savings banks.

The question, however, which is doing most to make socialists is the trust question. There is no economic reason why all woolen goods should be manufactured by one firm, and all cotton goods by another, and all iron goods by another, and all sugar by another, and all crackers by another. There is no reason why all the meat should be packed by one firm, and all the whisky made by another, and all the tobacco supplied by another. The trusts are organized not because of any economic necessity, but for the purpose of destroying competition and of putting the consumer at the mercy of the producer.

The democratic party attacks the principle involved, and declares that a private monopoly is indefensible and intolerable. It favors legislation that will lay the axe at the root of the tree, and by making a private monopoly impossible, restore industrial independence, and by a revival of competition give protection to the consumer, and stimulus to the producer.

The papers which defend the trust as an economic development are the best friends of socialism. If they can make the people believe that all competition is harmful, that the trust is a natural growth and "has come to stay"—if they can make the people believe that a better article can be furnished for a less price when one producer supplies it all, and if they can further convince the public that there are no moral or sociological objections to the trust, they will have wonderfully aided the socialists, because the socialist then taking for granted what he is not able to prove—namely, the advantage of the trust—can insist that the advantage must accrue to the whole people and not to a few individuals.

In the campaign of 1896 the leading anarchists of the country supported the republican party, although the republican papers were in the habit of speaking of Chicago platform democrats as anarchists. Why did the anarchists support the republican party? Because the anarchists believed that the democratic party, by applying remedial legislation, would relieve conditions and lessen discontent, while they believed that the republican party would aggravate conditions and increase discontent.

In 1900 the ultra socialists were more friendly to the republican party than to the democratic party, and they are today. Why? Because they believe that the republican party is friendly to the trusts, and that the trust, when firmly established, will be so intolerable as to make the people welcome government monopoly as a relief from private monopoly. For the same reason the ultra socialists sympathize with the reorganizers, who are as friendly to the trusts as the republicans are, if not more so.

Whether papers like the Chronicle, the Globe and the American denounce democrats as socialists with intention to deceive, or because they are ignorant of the tendency of their own arguments, or because they have perfect confidence in the power of organized wealth to control the people under any and all circumstances, may be a matter of conjecture, but that they are helping the socialists there can be no doubt.

In advocating individualism the democratic party can consistently favor legislation putting competitors upon an approximately equal footing. Legislation limiting the rate of interest is legislation of this kind. Such legislation does not deny the right of contract, but it recognizes that in most cases the borrower and the lender are not upon an equal footing—they recognize that but for legislative protection the borrower may become the servant of the lender. So with legislation