

“Equality of Reward”:
Theodore Roosevelt and the Socialist Movement
[excerpt]
(September 5, 1908)

When the press announced recently that “the difference between the square deal and socialism” was the text of a “characteristic” speech by President Roosevelt at the unveiling of the Underhill monument at Matinecock, Long Island,¹ socialists knew what to expect and when they read the speech and beheld in fancy the Don Quixote of the White House assaulting another windmill they smiled with mingled amusement and contempt.

President Roosevelt is known as an exceedingly “characteristic” gentleman and he is never quite so “characteristic” as when dealing with socialists and the socialist movement, and the reason for this is that they, of all others, can see through him and his bourgeois “square deal” policy without the aid of cathode rays.

Capitalist President

Being a capitalist in both the economic and the ethical sense and inflated by his egotistical idealism, it is quite natural that he should oppose democratic tendencies and set his face against equal freedom as a social ideal, but he has gone farther than this, and in his “characteristic” and unbridled individualism, which brooks no opposition, has conceived a violent hatred for socialists which defies all restraints and violates all proprieties, as when he publicly denounced workingmen about to be tried for their lives as “undesirable citizens,” an astounding violation of official dignity without a precedent, and which shocked the moral sense of the entire nation. Thousands of other men were under arrest, but not noticed by the president — they were not socialists.

On every possible occasion Mr. Roosevelt vents his spleen against socialists and like the true capitalist functionary he is, warns his countrymen against their pernicious philosophy. He has the distinction of being the first president to write socialism in his message to Congress, as he also has the

distinction, such as it is, of naming his own successor and also writing socialism in his political platform.

Anthracite Commission

When President Roosevelt some years ago interposed his authority as president in the anthracite coal strike and appointed a commission which ultimately settled the strike in the interest of the coal barons, he explained to Congress in his next ensuing message that he was prompted to such action by the conviction that it was the only way to head off socialism, showing that he was faithful to his trust and that he guarded sedulously the private ownership of the anthracite mines, even though the miners and their families were verging upon starvation.

Rate Legislation

When he recommended his railroad rate legislation to Congress, in which he yielded point after point to the railroads until there was nothing left but the echo of the ignorant multitude who were applauding his supposed bravery in bearding the railroad lion in his den, the burden of his plea was “the socialists ’ll get you if you don’t watch out.”²

So socialism must come in for some credit, even among its implacable foes, for if the settlement of the anthracite strike was a great achievement and Roosevelt’s railroad policy is an inestimable boon, as they vociferously claim, it is due entirely, according to the president himself, to socialism, or, rather, the fear of socialism.

President’s Latest Outbreak

The president’s latest outbreak occurred at the commemoration of the death of an Indian fighter named Underhill, who died some two hundred years ago.³ What he had to do with socialism there was no attempt to explain, but it would have seemed grotesque, to say the least, if anyone, save Roosevelt alone, had led a furious attack on modern socialism in dedicating a monument to a dead Indian fighter, especially one of the Middle Ages.⁴

Yet in spite of all Mr. Roosevelt and his party of grafting individualists have done “to keep the avenues of occupation open” — and they have been in absolute power for years — millions of workingmen are in compulsory idleness and suffering the pangs of starvation, and when in their agony and despair they turn to Roosevelt and his individualistic regime and implore for escape from the pitiless lash of the hunger-whip; when they ask in the name of mercy what is to become of them, they are complacently told that “God knows!” and that while they voted for Roosevelt they must look to God for means of rescue from their unhappy fate.

“God Knows”

Mr. Roosevelt feels inexpressibly outraged because socialists are not satisfied with the way he and his capitalist party have kept “the avenues of occupation open,” but if instead of being the well-groomed president of the ruling parasites, pampered like a prince, he had to tramp through weary months in vain search of a job to finally find his place in the bowery midnight breadline, he could, perhaps, understand that his is not the only point of view and that the millions who are exploited and without mercy and abandoned to “God knows” what fate, are finally driven to do something for themselves; and that this is the genesis of the socialist movement and explains its phenomenal growth and why it is class conscious and revolutionary and must finally conquer, though every capitalist were a Rockefeller and every politician a Roosevelt.

Does President Roosevelt believe that the present condition of things under the capitalist rule of the Republican Party is the best that “it is humanely possible to achieve” and that industrial evolution has exhausted itself in producing capitalism? Or does he omit the working class entirely in calculating the possibilities of human achievement?

If capitalism can do no better in the way of providing “equal opportunity for each man to show the stuff that is in him” than it has already done, it has proved a stupendous failure, for not only have millions no opportunity at all, but other millions are slain in their babyhood, while still other millions are denied proper sustenance from their infancy, cheated out of their growth, robbed of their vitality, and exploited of all the means that enable the human being to rise above the deadline of defeat, despair, and degradation.

Armies of Idle

The commissioner of labor of the state of New York reported recently that 35 percent of the organized workers of that state, as shown by the reports of their unions, were out of employment. President Yoakum,⁵ of the Rock Island system, has made the statement within a few days that 400,000 railroad employees — 25 percent of the entire number employed on the railroads of the United States — were idle since the “panic” set in last October.

It is estimated that almost if not quite 6 million, or 20 percent of all wage workers in the country, are out of work. This number may or may not be approximately correct and there is no way to verify it, for the United States government, although it squanders millions of dollars in supporting information and statistical bureaus of all descriptions so as to retain an army of ward-heeling politicians in office, very discreetly refrains from furnishing any statistics upon the vital question of the unemployed. It is worthy of note in this connection that Mr. Taft’s voluminous letter of acceptance contains no hint that there is a grand arm of men and women begging for work in the United States, with no hope in finding it.

The census bureau has recently issued a report which shows that in certain industries the weekly earnings of children is \$1.84, of women \$2.26, and of men \$5.23. These figures will be found under the head of “the earnings of wage earners” and are secured from “123,703 establishments throughout the country, some 63 percent of all manufacturing concerns having employees.”

Is It Worthwhile?

Does Mr. Roosevelt maintain that these hapless victims of industrial servitude have “equal opportunity for each man to show the stuff that is in him?” Is it worthwhile to argue with him that these children are having all the “stuff” ground out of them for the benefit of the capitalist class and that there is nothing left of them when they are grown except the empty shell, if they survive at all?

What has Mr. Roosevelt to say of a system based upon such brutal exploitation in which even babes, millions of them, are fed alive to Mammon? Is it because socialists protest that this brutality and crime is an

impeachment of capitalism and a rebuke to civilization that Roosevelt so furiously denounces them? And is it because they propose a reorganization of society upon a basis of cooperative labor freely performed by free men, thus putting an end to Big Stick rule, and its countless iniquities, that he has branded socialists as “undesirable citizens?”

If Mr. Roosevelt, instead of spending his time in spectacular self-exploitation, will look about him he will see enough of all that is corrupt and menacing to society, for which his administration is responsible, without going out of his way to denounce the socialists.

It was not a socialist who, as governor of New York, signed the bill which made possible the gigantic railroad robbery known as the “Alton deal;” it was not a socialist who was elected president by the hugest political corruption fund, put up by the trusts and corporations, in the history of American politics; it was not a socialist president who invited one he afterward denounced as a thieving magnate to come around to the White House in the dark of the moon to help him write his message.

Not the socialists are they who maintain lobbies to debauch legislation, who steal franchises, rob the people, subvert the public will, and conspire in every conceivable manner to rob honest labor and keep the common people in subjection.

Reward of Toil

Mr. Roosevelt talks glibly about “reward” as if the idle capitalist class honestly earned its colossal private fortunes. Not satisfied with insulting socialists by imputing to them certain theories they do not hold, he resorts to downright mendacity when he says:

There can be no grosser example of privilege than that set before us as an ideal by certain socialistic writers — the ideal that every man shall put into the common fund what he can, which would mean what he chose; and should take out what he wanted.

There is not a word of truth in this charge. It is pure fabrication, and is inspired by cold-blooded malice. Who are the “socialistic writers” engaged in exploiting this ideal? Mr. Roosevelt cannot name a single one who is recognized as an authority on socialism. The Socialist Party in the United States has recently adopted a platform and a program in which its

principles, policies, and purposes are clearly set forth. Let this authoritative statement of the party as to its attitude and intent be examined and it will be found that there is not the slightest justification for the president's deliberate misrepresentation.

If President Roosevelt deems it necessary to resort to such undignified, to say nothing of indecent, methods of combating the socialist movement and obstructing its rapid progress he must be hard pressed and his intelligent readers among non-socialists who may be temporarily deceived will not be slow to rebuke his presumption upon their credulity when they learn the truth.

"If the service is equal, let the reward be equal," proceeds the president as if he were saying something that anyone, let alone socialists, had ever disputed. It is precisely because the reward is not equal for equal service rendered that socialists are opposed to capitalism. The figures above quoted prove conclusively that they who do the actual work in the present system, the work that is useful, are treated as menials and starved into inanity and premature graves. Millions of these victims, though dumb, and resigned, cry to heaven against the cruel injustice of the present system which dooms them to bitter poverty and finally to death by slow torture.

Panic and Paralysis

In contemplating the present situation and its countless horrors confronting one upon every hand under President Roosevelt's administration I recall the "panic" of 1893, which the Republican platform adopted in 1896 charged upon the incompetency, dishonesty, and unfitness of the Democratic Party. If the Democratic Party was responsible for the "panic" of 1893, and there is no doubt about it, then the Republican Party is responsible for the "panic" of 1908. There is absolutely no escape. It was when the Republican Party came into power and increased the tariff to its highest levels and adopted the gold standard that the promise was made and the assurance given that prosperity would henceforth be perpetual in the United States. The "full dinner pail" campaign of 1904 is still remembered.

In 1900 the Republican slogan was "Let well enough alone;" in 1904, "Stand pat." But in spite of it all "prosperity" has suddenly vanished; there is a larger number of idle workers in the country than ever before in all its history. The Republican Party is and has been in absolute control and what

is its answer? "God knows!" — and that is why the president froths at the mouth in denunciation of the socialists and exhibits his impotent rage because they propose to put an end to this outworn and rotten system and reorganize society upon a rational basis and in harmony with the forces underlying it and determining the course of its development.

Rule of Beak and Claw

Mr. Roosevelt, like every other self-sufficient individualist, believes in the supremacy of beak and claw, of fang and hoof. The very thought of a time coming when these will rule no more is abhorrent to him and arouses him to furious denunciation. This is as far as Mr. Roosevelt has risen in the scale of civilization and that is why he is the beau ideal of the ignorant masses under the domination of capitalism.

It would be horrible, according to Mr. Roosevelt, if a time ever came when a giant could not have the whole feast and the dwarf only the crumbs. The giant's strength is to be forever rewarded and the dwarf's weakness to be everlastingly punished. The president would set a beautiful example at his own table if he made practical application there of the ideals (?) he expresses in his violent diatribe against socialism.

What would Mr. Roosevelt say if men today proceeded to make distribution of rewards upon the basis of physical strength and muscular equipment? Would he not be the first to say they ought to be shot and order out the soldiers for that purpose? What better moral justification can he plead for the distribution of rewards on the basis of superior mental capacity? The time will come when the human being will rise somewhat higher than the beast in this regard, but it will never be under the sway of capitalism which Mr. Roosevelt is so eager to buttress against the assaults of socialism that he is driven to the most flagrant misrepresentation.

Let it not be inferred that I am now assuming to define the attitude of the Socialist Party in respect to the rewards of labor or the distribution of wealth. The Socialist platform is clear enough upon this point and there is no excuse for misunderstanding. Each worker is to receive his socially due share of the product, the entire product, and when the time comes the workers themselves will establish a basis of reward and remuneration to suit themselves. To presume to say what that basis will be, or rather what it will not be, and then condemn it is nothing less than vulgar impertinence, quite characteristic of the present occupant of the White House.

Equality of Reward

When Mr. Roosevelt charges socialism with demanding “equality of reward” he is as wide of the mark as he is of every other vital proposition he discusses in his memorial tirade. There is absolutely nothing in the Socialist platform or its program that warrants the assumption that it stands for “equality of reward.” Personally there are socialists who take that position and it is eminently to their credit, seeing that they are men of exceptional capacity and who, in the grab-all game, could, if they would, rake in the spoils, but who are too decent to do it. This, of course, Mr. Roosevelt is wholly incapable of understanding.

But with all this, socialism, as a movement has nothing to do and will have nothing to do until it comes into power and as the people themselves will then rule in the purest and completest democracy yet evolved it is entirely probable, Mr. Roosevelt to the contrary notwithstanding, that they will distribute the wealth equitably among those who produce it.

Clipping the Claws of Individualism

But blindly and venomously as Mr. Roosevelt is opposed to socialism he is yet driven to the extremity of making some concession to it. He would not have done this a year or two ago, but he is compelled to do it now, and in a year or two more he will be compelled to make still further concessions, galling as it may be to him. In his closing paragraph he says: “In the interest of true individualism, the collective and common power of the community must be exercised to control and regulate for the common good this business use of vast wealth,” etc.

Precisely! It will not do to admit, even for the sake of “individualism,” that the trust pirates shall have absolute sway. Mr. Roosevelt is too adroit a politician to take such a position. He must in some manner placate the people who are being eaten up and so he invokes the “collective power” to curb the individual will.

But when he curbs individualism it is no longer individualism and such curbing means the application of another and an entirely different principle to personal rights and social relations.

It is only quite recently that Mr. Roosevelt and others like him have begun to talk about “curbing individualism” and about exercise of the

collective power for the collective good. It is distinctively a socialistic principle that Mr. Roosevelt would apply and a socialistic power that he would invoke to protect society against the ravages and barbarities of the very individualism of which he has been and is yet such a strenuous advocate.

Periodical Tirades

As the industrial and social development proceed Mr. Roosevelt's complications will increase and his entanglements multiply. He has lost none of his vindictiveness for those who disagree with him and especially for socialists, who know him, but he is at last compelled to turn to the "collective power" to extricate him from the meshes of the brutal individualism of decadent capitalism.

The answer of socialists to Mr. Roosevelt is that his periodical tirades are the most convincing proof of the progress of their movement. Each attack of the president is another certificate of approval and another voice of encouragement.

Socialists are not visionaries nor are they dupes and blind followers. They are students and investigators and they understand from a scientific interpretation of history the laws underlying society and the trend of its development. They not only hope for socialism and believe in it, but they know it is coming. With them it is not a matter of speculation, but a certainty.

Capitalism is hurrying to its doom. The capitalists cannot save it. They cannot even manage it, nor prevent it from breaking down and exposing its corruption and decay; its impotence and other symptoms of advancing dissolution.

"Collective Power"

The "collective power" to which Mr. Roosevelt himself must at last turn will have to be invoked more and more to prop up collapsing capitalism, but this can at best prolong it, for it is as certainly doomed, having fulfilled its mission, as the feudalism which preceded it and from which it sprang.

Yes, capitalism and its merciless votaries and mercenary menials has about run its course and every sane mortal on earth ought to join in

heartfelt gratitude. In a hundred years hence its history will be an extension of the period of barbarism and its ideals, if such they may be called, reflected in the slavery and suffering, the sorrow and despair, the blood and fears of its countless victims, sparing neither babyhood nor old age, will be regarded with unspeakable abhorrence by civilized human beings.

Lewis H. Morgan foreshadows in his *Ancient Society* the coming civilization:

Since the advent of civilization the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding, and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power.... The time will come ... when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property, and define the relations of the state to the property it protects as well as the obligations and the limits of the rights of its owners. The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relations.... Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence, and knowledge are steadily tending.⁶

This is socialism and it is going to triumph in the United States of America, and all the world.

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¹ President Theodore Roosevelt traveled to Matinecock, Long Island, New York on July 11, 1908 to deliver a speech at the dedication of a monument to Captain John Underhill (1597-1672), a leader of the militia of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

² Allusion to the refrain "An' the Gobble-uns'll git you ef you don't watch out!" from the poem "Little Orphant Annie" (1885) by James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916).

³ Underhill achieved his fame leading the Massachusetts Bay Colony's militia alongside their Native American allies, the Mohegan people, against the Pequot people in the eleven-month Pequot War of 1636-37. About 700 Pequots were killed or captured and enslaved in the conflict and the tribe's hegemony in the region was smashed, paving the way for European colonization.

⁴ Roosevelt used the occasion of the Underhill monument dedication to hold up the Underhill family as a model of rugged individualism and to slam "certain socialistic writers" who had put forward "the ideal that every man shall put into the common fund what he can, which would mean what he chose, and could take out whatever he wanted..." Thus, said Roosevelt, "the man who is vicious, foolish, a drag on the whole community...should take out what is not his, what he has not earned; that he shall rob his neighbor of what that neighbor has earned. This particular socialistic ideal would be to enthrone privilege in one

of its grossest, crudest, most dishonest, most harmful, and most unjust forms.” (See: “President on Reward,” *Washington Post*, whole no. 11,721 (July 12, 1908), p. 2.)

⁵ Benjamin Franklin Yoakum (1859-1929) was a railroad executive that as chairman of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad attempted to build a massive unified system running from the Midwest to Mexico. Briefly the largest system under unified individual control, the so-called Yoakum Line came to grief in the early 1910s due to financial problems, with his partner the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway filing for bankruptcy in 1913.

⁶ Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society, or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. [1877] Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., n.d. [1907], pp. 561-562.