

The Drift of Our Times: Lecture to the
Fox River Chautauqua, Appleton, Wisconsin¹

[Excerpt]

(July 7, 1907)

When called upon to respond to such a generous and touching reception as that which you tendered to me a year ago and repeat on this occasion, words, no matter how fitly chosen and how feelingly expressed, seem but cold, formal, and meaningless. I am deeply sensible of your kind consideration, the more so because I am aware that most of you differ with me upon some of the great questions of the day. My appreciation, though not expressed in words, is no less genuine and shall find its expression in deeper devotion and consecration of the cause of our common humanity.

The speaker said that when the present system evolved from the feudalism of past centuries, competition was a constructive force; now it is a destructive force. When each man labored with his own tools, he commanded the output, sale, and the reward of his work, but with the coming of machinery, the control of the product passed into the owner of the machine. Then each man could compete fairly with every other man; now the large manufacturer crushes the small one, the present system forces capitalists to get their labor as cheaply as possible — women if they be cheaper than men, children if their wrecked lives can but produce cheaper than women — an competition has become a destructive force.

Underlying society are great forces constantly in operation and these are making for a new social order based upon cooperative industry. There is a hue and cry against concentration of capital, but it is in vain. This concentration in our modern industrial life can no more be effectually checked than can the law of gravitation be suspended. Concentration and combination, based upon cooperation, are the new forces born of our industrial development which are transforming capitalist society into a socialist commonwealth.

The spirit of the present system is selfish, that of the survival of the fittest, only except in few cases, the fittest do not survive. John D.

Rockefeller is not the fittest. I bear no malice towards Rockefeller and I am sure no man envies him. Individual capitalists such as Mr. Rockefeller are the mere product of the prevailing system. Mr. Bryan is quoted as saying that Mr. Rockefeller ought to be put in the penitentiary. I don't agree with him. If this is true of Mr. Rockefeller, it is true of every other capitalist, large or small, in the country. The reason so many small capitalists hate Rockefeller is not because of a difference of principle or purpose between them, but simply because of a difference of capacity. Rockefeller has succeeded and they have failed at precisely the same game. They are all Rockefellers in principle and desire, and only differ as to size and capacity.

I would not imprison Rockefeller or punish him in any manner; I would simply abolish the system that produces him. Senator LaFollette, Mr. Bryan, and a number of other political reformers propose to curb the greed of corporate capital and reform existing abuses in our politics and industrial life. They propose, for example, that the national government should regulate our railroads. They are wasting their time and energy in a vain and hopeless cause. the fact is that the railroads and allied corporate interests are the government. In the existing system it is not the government that regulates the railroads, but it is the railroads that regulate the government.

Politics is simply the reflex of economics. The economic master is always and everywhere, has always been in every age and always will be, the political ruler. In other words, the owners of things are the rulers of men. This seems strange, but it is nevertheless a fact of history and of economic science.

To verify this fact it is only necessary to occupy a seat, as I did for two weeks, in the United States Senate and the House of Representatives and there see the agents and attorneys of all the varied corporate interests do the political bidding of their masters.

The railroads, for illustration, control one million votes because they have that number of men who depend upon them for themselves and their families. The results that flow from this state of economic dependence of the great masses of people express themselves daily in municipal, state, and national political corruption and administration. This state of affairs never can be remedied so long as the sources and means of life upon which the great masses of the people depend are the private property of the few and are operated upon the basis that millions of dollars in their hands are of more consequence than the property happiness of the people.

These facts in combination ensure the coming of socialism. It is inevitable. The concentration will go on until the masses are propertyless and they will then make common cause against the few surviving economic monarchs, sweep them from power, take possession of the government, and make themselves, the collective people, the masters of industry, the sovereigns of the nation.

This will mean industrial democracy, a real republic, the triumph of the people, and will express itself in a higher and nobler civilization than mankind has ever known.

Under this system each one is forever pitted against each other one. I want a system in which we can live side by side like brothers. I want an era of love, when the standard of greatness will be service to others; when we will not have to spend all of life to earn bread, but will have time for the moral and intellectual life. When art, literature, and music will be for all the people, to brighten all lives and make for a better civilization. I am converging all my energy to bring about the abolishment of the system which makes this impossible and to bring the system which will give unto all men and women to walk erect and free in the full majesty of their glorious manhood and womanhood.

The people are not ready for the change. They are never ready for a change. It has been thus with man's first upward step, from a brute to a savage, from a savage to a barbarian, from barbarian to serf, from serf to wage-earner, and thus it is with his march into the full orb'd day of true civilization and perfect freedom which will come with the change.

For myself, I am glad the change is coming. I stand here a socialist, even if I stand alone. You can retard or hasten the change, but you can not prevent it, no more than you can prevent the rivers from finding their way to the sea. Capitalization can no more be stifled under the present system than the law of gravitation can be overcome. It is only a question of time when a few will control all. Then the people will see, then all will join, we will form the great socialistic party, sweep into power, and reorganize society on a social basis. The Rockefellers will have appropriated all. We will lawfully expropriate the appropriators.

Socialism is not anarchy. They are direct opposites. The one would abolish all government, the other perfect government. Under socialism we would have a real democracy, a real republic, the first in the world; all would have equal opportunities, all would work for all. Socialism does not mean equal pay to all. Under socialism Rockefeller, with his great brain,

his marvelous executive ability, would give is service to the people and would be loved and amply rewarded. He would not have his millions, but would be the happier for it.

All I ask is that you be true to yourselves, that you have the moral courage to think and act for yourselves and accept the consequences. This is what we need today. The drift of our times is towards socialism. When the few have all, you will come to see that this is true, if not before.

I am not a pessimist. I realize that in the long last, right will prevail.

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¹ This is an excerpt of one of five Chautauqua lectures delivered in the summer of 1907. All were booked months in advance, prior to Debs joining the staff of the Appeal to Reason, and he took a short leave to fulfill these speaking contracts. This speech in full was of two hours' duration and was delivered under a big-top tent to a crowd estimated between 1,000 and 2,000 people.