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WHY I BELIEVE IN SOCIALISM

By SCOTT NEARING

THE WORD "SOCIALISM" is used in this article to mean the collective public ownership and administration of those parts of the economy which are of common concern to the community as a whole. In this sense the people of Connecticut own and administer the state highways and the people of the United States own and administer the post office and the national forests. Highways, post offices and forest reserves are publicly operated for public benefit.

My belief in socialism is not abstract or general. I assume that, if the people of the United States knew what was good for them, they would take over their economy late in 1949 or early in 1950 because the rapid economic changes of recent years have brought the capitalist economy of this country to a point at which the businessmen and politicians must choose between a severe depression and a disastrous war, with the overwhelming probability that, if the economy remains capitalist, the country once again will have both depression and war, as it did between 1911 and 1918 and between 1929 and 1945.

Depression and war have cursed the capitalist economies of Europe, Asia and North America during the past forty years, not because the policy-makers were cruel or wicked, but because they were too much concerned with making profit. The way to avoid further depressions and wars is to abolish profit-making or profiteering.

Money reform, trust regulation, the protection of small business concerns, the control of privately owned public utilities have been tried in the United States since the Civil War. What has been the result? Step by step the economy has passed from individual to corporate ownership. Year by year the strangle-hold of Big Business has tightened on the economy

and on the country, until a point has been reached at which a rich, powerful minority owns, controls and dominates the American scene, securing its income and exercising its authority in the name of an economic apparatus that can no longer function except on a basis of large-scale military spending.

So the people of the United States face an "either-or" similar to that which has confronted the peoples of Europe since the turn of the century. *Either* we continue under capitalism, harried by periods of increasingly severe depression, relieved temporarily by periods of wholesale war-destruction, *or* we convert the present capitalist economy into a socialist economy and then do our share in setting up a world cooperative commonwealth.

I should like to follow this general introduction to my belief in socialism by listing four reasons why the common people of the United States should be for socialism at the present time.

1. The first reason is technical. Most of the things which modern man undertakes can only be done collectively. I do not speak of personal activities such as dressing, washing and eating, or the relations with friends and neighbors, or the tinkering, repairing, gardening and building which go on in many households. Human beings have engaged in such personal, family and craft pursuits for centuries. I refer rather to those features of our lives which distinguish western man from people in other parts of the world and modern man from his great grandfathers.

Let us begin with diet. The United States has hot summers and cold winters. During the summer it is comparatively easy to have a good and varied diet as a result of local work in the garden and the kitchen. During the winter, however, it is a very different matter. California lettuce, Texas grapefruit and Georgia green beans can be enjoyed by the people of New York and New England only because of an elaborate system of rail and truck transport. The same holds true of Cuban sugar, Hawaiian pineapples, Arabian dates and other items in the diet of New Yorkers and New Englanders. Many different people in many different parts of the United States and the world provide us with our food, our clothing, our houses and their furnishings.

Take highways as another example of collective enterprise. It is only a few years since good roads were an exception in Europe and a rarity in North America. Then came the automobile and with it an impressive demonstration of the possibilities of collective purpose and collective endeavor. Automobile-owners wanted good roads. It was impossible for each one to build the road in front of his own home and thus, by individual efforts, establish a highway system. Instead, cities, towns, counties, states and the federal government joined hands, laid plans, developed engineering techniques and within forty years provided the network of first-, second- and third-class roads and bridges which are now used by motor traffic.

Turn from highways to railways, telephones and the electric grid from which we get light and power. No one individual and no small family or village group of individuals could provide any of these things. They are possible only when a comparatively large number of people substitute division of labor for individual enterprise, coordinate their efforts and turn out a product which no individual or local group could obtain as a result of personal or local effort.

IT IS UNNECESSARY to go on listing the goods and services which western man enjoys as a result of collective activity. The radio set he uses, the bicycle he rides, the car he drives, the parks in which he goes camping are products of planned, coordinated, collective action.

“But wait,” cry the advocates of individual enterprise. “All these things you are talking about—varied diet, good roads, railroads, phones, electric power, gadgets and recreation centers—are more abundant in the United States than elsewhere and the United States is the land of individual enterprise.”

I answer: “You have been reading a newspaper dominated by Big Business advertising and listening to a radio owned by the Big Business crowd. Stop reading and listening long enough to use your thinking apparatus. The United States today is one of the best available examples of the effectiveness of technical collective enterprise. The Big Business boys, who still hold property titles to railroads, factories and the like and who made \$20 billions in corporate profits in 1948, have simply packaged

this collective endeavor in an individual-enterprise wrapper, advertised it and sold it to the American people as a product of individual enterprise.”

Technically speaking, United States experience with collective enterprise provides argument number one why the American people should be for socialism in 1949.

2. The second reason why I believe in socialism is political. William Demarest Lloyd phrased it pithily many years ago in the title of his book, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*. Either the people take over the wealth of Big Business and use the economic power which is implicit in wealth ownership, or else Big Business will abolish the commonwealth and utilize its authority to enslave and exploit the people.

Here we face a sharp contradiction. The collective production apparatus of the United States is privately owned. The American people work together to turn out goods and services, which are then distributed in part to those workers who participated in the collective endeavor and in part, in the form of profit, to property-owners who may have had little or no connection with the productive process. Consequently, there has developed in the United States a group of people which works collectively for its living and another group which owns individually for its living. The interests of these two groups are in conflict and this conflict is one of the chief disruptive forces in the western world.

This conflict will continue so long as the interests of the commonwealth are threatened by the adventures of private enterprise in search of wealth and power. Since it is impossible to abolish collective production techniques, the only practicable way to end this conflict is to collectivize or socialize the distribution of income.

U.S. PROPERTY OWNERS are well aware of this dilemma. Through their ownership of press, radio and movies, they are doing their level best to divert attention from it by shouting “Stop thief!” and pointing abroad. At first their “thief” was Kaiser William and the German militarists. Then it was Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. Now their red herring is Joseph Stalin and the Communists. Meanwhile United States property-owners have been loading themselves with booty.

Unless they can hold political power, American big-business men cannot hope to retain possession of their vast property holdings and their fantastically large profits derived from collective production techniques. So they denounce "communism" (collectivism) of ownership and income distribution, while they enjoy the benefits of collective production.

Many times in history, the owners of land and various forms of capital have allied themselves with the armed forces and the agencies for shaping public opinion, secured control of the state apparatus and set up a self-perpetuating minority government. The United States is now passing through this experience. Woodrow Wilson, the historian, was aware of this when he wrote in his *New Freedom* (1913), "An invisible empire has been set up above the forms of democracy." The invisible empire, wrote Mr. Wilson, is operated by the vested interests.

During the past forty years we have watched this historical drama unfold in Japan, Italy, Germany. We often describe it as "fascism"—the concentration in the hands of a profit-seeking oligarchy of economic, political and social authority over the making of public policy. Some of us believe that this tendency of a trustified economy to take control of political and social policy-making is inherent in the competitive struggle for profit and for this reason we insist that the "invisible empire" of profit-seekers which today dominates the United States can be liquidated only by the social ownership and operation of the social productive apparatus—mines, factories, railroads and means of mass merchandizing.

3. The third reason why I believe in socialism is sociological. A community, like any structure, is built along certain lines and operates in accordance with certain principles. Among the principles underlying community life there are two opposites—competition and cooperation. Competition is acting against. Cooperation is acting with.

Competition stimulates people and stirs them up. Its least anti-social forms are contests between sportsmen, gardeners and animal-breeders. Its most anti-social form is a contest between rival power-seekers who employ armies, navies and air

forces to promote their interests and cripple or destroy their rivals.

Certainly competition has its uses and advantages. It arouses interest and offers incentive to thought and action. But, like any other social force, it can reach a level of intensity at which it negates its own objectives. Between 1870 and 1910 the business interests of Britain and Germany engaged in a competitive struggle for world markets. In 1914 this competition entered a military phase which lasted more than four years. The results were described by a British editor in these lines:

*"Oh, customers," the merchants said,
"We've had our little fun.
Shall we begin to trade again?"
But answer came there none.
And this was hardly strange because
They'd killed them every one.*

Competition, carried to its logical conclusion, will wipe out all the competitors. It must therefore be limited in its application, in much the same sense that men limit fire. A fire, turned loose, will destroy a city; confined in a furnace, it will provide heat and power.

The limits within which competition may operate are set by the need in any community for continuous cooperation. This need is present in a tribe of herdsmen or a farming village. It grows increasingly insistent in larger communities practicing an extensive division of labor. Concretely, an athletic meet between the students of rival schools cannot be permitted to reach a point at which the school buildings are wrecked and the boys and girls are shot or gassed. "Let's win" must be subject to the more general idea, "Live and help live."

Individualistic (private-enterprise) society exalted competition all through the nineteenth century. During the past forty years it has reaped a frightful harvest of destruction and murder on the highest competitive level, which is war. Sociologically, there is no escape from this situation short of a sharp reversal of policy which will put cooperation in the forefront of social thought and action, and subordinate competition to the requirements of effective cooperation. Socialism proposes

precisely this substitution of cooperation for competition as the dominant theme of social policy-making.

4. I favor socialism for a fourth reason, which is related to the purposes of human life. Perhaps this reason may be described as ethical.

Why are human beings on this earth? What must they do in order to fulfil their destiny? For the purpose of this discussion, let us assume that the chief end of man's life on earth is to develop his faculties, to live, as far as possible, according to the pattern of his destiny and to do everything he can to provide an equal chance for his fellows to live rewardingly.

Such a life-perspective, applied to present-day development of the arts and sciences, leads to an obvious working formula:

A—Feeding, clothing and housing the physical body is incomparably less important than the struggle to express, unfold, create.

B—Let the community provide the necessities and decencies of life—food, clothing, shelter, education, health services—in the same way that it now supplies highways, street lights, libraries and parks—open for the use of all on the basis of need.

C—Let each individual do his daily chore of necessary labor in order to replace the goods and services which he consumes and to provide support for the old, the sick and the immature. Meanwhile, let him concentrate his major energies on his major task of expression, unfoldment, improvement, creation.

Such a formula would shift the emphasis of human life from the acquisitive to the creative. It would likewise subordinate the competitive struggle for wealth and power, which is now eating out the heart of the western world, to a cooperative effort to live and help live.

Periodically in human history, men have faced decisions which involved a thoroughgoing change in their ways of life. The decisions to abandon cannibalism and to abolish chattel slavery were of this basic nature. The decision to forego the exploitation of man by man is equally significant and this underlies the change-over from capitalism to socialism.

PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY in the United States is based on the private ownership of land, mines, factories and the like and on the right of the private owner to live in parasitic idleness upon the rent, interest and dividends provided by the labor of his non-owning fellow humans. Such a system is unethical, unjust—and unworkable, as the depressions and wars of the past forty years clearly indicate.

If western man survives, it will be on a basis of cooperation, with “each for all and all for each.” The community must own, plan and administer those common enterprises which, under present collective techniques, provide the necessities and decencies of life for the entire community. Goods and services socially produced must be equitably rationed while scarce and offered freely when abundant, in accordance with the foundation principle of a workable social order, “To each according to his need.”

Men and women brought up under the “mine for me” formula of private enterprise will have some difficulty in adjusting to the “ours for us” formula of socialism. Those who have been living parasitically on the labor of others will have particular difficulty in making the change-over. Despite such obstacles, I believe that the time has come for humanity to take its next great forward step—from individual to collective enterprise, from capitalism to socialism.

Peoples in various parts of the world are deliberately taking this next step in social evolution. The people of North America are taking the step technically and opposing it politically. It will be a happy day for humanity when the die-hard reactionaries of North America, who are leading the drive against socialism, are brushed aside by an aroused and indignant public which has come to its senses in time to adopt socialism, in preference to the waste and wickedness of depression, military spending and war devastation.—*Reprinted from “Monthly Review,” June 1949 (66 Barrow Street, New York)*

Write for other leaflets by Scott Nearing and for a list of his recent books and pamphlets