

The Socialistic Movement in America ¹

(April 26, 1902)

In his masterly poem, “The Legend of the Centuries,” his genius sparkling in every line, Victor Hugo, after chronicling the crimes of the cycles, exclaimed with the passionate intensity of prophecy fulfilled: “The 19th century shall be the Century of Humanity.”

The great French poet may be quoted with eminent fitness when socialism is the theme. The whole trend of his thought was controlled by it; and its ideals swept all the vibrant chords of his poetic genius. Proudly he shared the persecution of its pioneers. As long ago as 1864, in exile, Hugo wrote:

The transformation of the crowd into the people — profound task! It is to this labor that the men called socialists have devoted themselves during the last 40 years. The author of this book, however insignificant he may be, is one of the oldest in this labor. If he claims his place among these philosophers, it is because it is a place of persecution. A certain hatred of socialism, very blind, but very general, has raged for 15 or 16 years and is still raging most bitterly among the influential classes. Let it not be forgotten that true socialism has for its end the elevation of the masses to the civic dignity, and that, therefore, its principal care is for moral and intellectual cultivation. ²

If, as I believe, the 20th century realizes the prophecy of Victor Hugo and “bursts full-blossomed on the thorny stem of Time,” as the “Century of Humanity,” it will be the culmination of the socialist agitation of the preceding century — the fruition of socialism.

In the closing years of the last century, following in the wake of the French revolution, the tendencies in Europe were unmistakably toward what has since developed into modern socialism. Of course the early stages were nebulous and vague; and the trend was not yet strongly marked or clearly revealed. But as the use of steam expanded and its application to industry became more general, with its inevitable effects upon the workers and small tradesmen, the movement was accelerated in some form or other, chiefly Utopian, until many years afterward, toward the middle of the

following century, it was crystallized by the genius of Marx, Engels, Lassalle, and others who caught the revolutionary current, clarified it, and sent it circling round the globe on its mission of freedom and fraternity.

The earliest traces of socialism in the United States had their origin in the stream of immigration that flowed from the old world to the new and bore upon its bosom the germs of discontent engendered by the effete feudalism of European countries. I shall not chronicle the many attempts, covering more than half a century, or until about 1840, to spread socialistic or semi-socialistic doctrine among the American people and thus turn the tide of development in that direction. The times were fruitful of social unrest and the many schemes and devices that were proposed, chimerical though they were, were the unerring signs and symptoms of social gestation, the forerunners of the mighty change that was laying hold of governments and institutions, destined to revolutionize them all and level the human race upward to the plans of all-embracing civilization.

Almost 80 years ago Robert Owen, dreamer, enthusiast, and humanitarian, came from England to America to make the new continent blossom with Utopian splendor. His series of experiments in communism, doomed to disappointment and failure, are an interesting study in the early years of the American movement, and although in the light of our present knowledge of industrial evolution his undertaking seems visionary and foolish, he did his share to remove the brush and dispel the fog, and the history of socialism cannot be written without his name.

Decidedly less Utopian and more rational were the manifestations in the '40s when what is called Fourierism played its interesting role in America. Many of the most intellectual men and women of the day were attracted to the movement. The most ardent enthusiasm seized the devotees and they set to work with hand and heart to convert the American states into the promised land of milk and honey. Of course the dominant strain was emotional and sympathetic; but there was nevertheless a solid substratum of scientific soundness in the undertaking, as is proved conclusively by the recorded utterance of the men who so heartily gave it support.

Brook Farm, a beautiful reminiscence, tinged with melancholy, was founded near Boston in 1841. Among the many illustrious names associated with Brook Farm, the following have peculiar interest after 60 years: George Ripley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, James Russel Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Cullen Bryant, Albert Brisbane, William Ellery Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Theodore Parker, A.

Bronson Alcott, John Thomas Codman, Henry D. Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Bancroft, Charles H. Dana, and George William Curtis.

The Brook Farm Association was ideal in conception and breathed the air of equality and brotherhood. It declared its object to be “a radical and universal reform, rather than to redress any particular wrong...” In the “parliamentary statement,” the members said that the work they had undertaken was “not a mere resolution, but a necessary step in the progress which no one can be blind enough to think has yet reached its limit.” Furthermore, said they:

We believe that humanity, trained by these long centuries of suffering and struggle, led on by so many saints and heroes and sages, is at length prepared to enter into that universal order toward which it has perpetually moved. Thus...we declare that the imperative duty of this time and this country, nay, more, that its only salvation and the salvation of civilized countries lies in the reorganization of society according to the unchanging laws of human nature and of universal harmony.

These passages evince a wonderfully clear perception for that time and would require little remodeling to fit them for a modern scientific socialist platform.

The closing paragraph is worthy to be preserved in socialist literature. It voices in lofty strains the faith of the Brook farmers in the realization of their hopes and aspirations. Here it is:

And whatever may be the result of any special efforts, we can never doubt that the object we have in view shall be finally attained; that human life shall yet be developed, not in discord and misery, but in harmony and joy, and that the perfected earth shall at last bear on her bosom a race of men worthy of the name.

This was written in January 1844, and the whole document bears evidence of the robust development of socialist thought.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “And truly, I honor the generous ideas of the socialists, the magnificence of their theories, and the enthusiasm with which they have been urged.”

Albert Brisbane, Parke Goodwin, and Horace Greeley, the latter the most unique and in many respects the most clear-sighted and practical,

were commanding figures in that day. All of them had the revolutionary blood tingling in their veins, all perceived more or less clearly the drift of the period — the inevitable tendency toward collectivism and industrial freedom.

In the meantime Marx and his coadjutors were clearing the murky atmosphere of the old world. They were exploring for the foundation of things and discovered it in “the materialistic conception of history,” the working basis of socialist activity throughout the world. From this time forward the movement had a scientific foundation, the scattered and contentious factions were gradually united and harmonized, and socialism became a distinct and recognized factor in the political and industrial destiny of mankind.

Taking inspiration from European pioneers, and reinforced by the socialists who crossed the water and at once began the proselyting inseparable from their philosophy, the Americans took heart; they prosecuted their labors with renewed zeal, they scattered the seed near and far and their doctrines struck root in American soil.

Albert Brisbane was one of the heroic figures in inspiring and directing the American movement. He was a pronounced socialist and as early as 1840 set forth his views in a volume entitled *Social Destiny of Man; or, Association and Reorganization of Industry*. In this work he made a strong plea for cooperative industry and “an equitable distribution of profits to each individual.”

Without wishing to disparage any of the men of that period by invidious comparison, the prodigious personality, the charming simplicity, coupled with the keen insight and intense earnestness of Horace Greeley commands special admiration. The importance of Greeley’s influence in the early history of socialism in America, when hate and persecution were aroused by the very term, has never yet been recognized, and the writer takes this occasion to pay to “our later Franklin’s” memory the humble tribute of gratitude and love.

Parton, the biographer of Greeley, said:

The subject of all Greeley’s oratory is one alone; it is ever the same; the object of his public life is single. It is the *emancipation of labor*, its emancipation from ignorance, vice, servitude, insecurity, poverty. This is his chosen, *only* theme, whether he speaks from the platform or writes for the *Tribune*.

Horace Greeley was in the true sense a labor leader. He was the first president of Typographical Union No. 6, of New York City, and took advanced ground on every question that affected the interests of the working class. Greeley was above all radical and progressive, that is to say, revolutionary, and the labor leaders of today could with credit to themselves and benefit to their followers study his works and follow his example.

The upheaval in Europe in 1848 drove many of the active socialists into exile; and the general tide that set in toward the Western hemisphere bore many of these restless spirits to our shores; and no sooner landed they began to sow the seed of socialism and to prosecute the propaganda they had been compelled to abandon on the other side. The German socialists who came over were the very men needed here at that period. They were trained and disciplined in the "old guard;" they had the bearing and fearlessness of veterans and they knew no such word as discouragement or failure. Among these agitators William Weitling³ bore a conspicuous part in preparing the way for organization and action along political lines.

From this time the propaganda became more active and also clearer and more definite. The movement was gradually evolving from the haze of communism that clung to it through all its early years and was beginning to take form as a political organization with the one object of conquering the powers of government as a means of emancipating the working class from wage bondage. Labor unions, turner bunds,⁴ and singing societies were organized all through the '50s, all tending in the same direction and though not all pronounced, having practically the same end in view. these were the headwaters of the American stream flowing toward a common center and once united, cutting through all resistance, sweeping on and on in its course, gathering volume, increasing in momentum, defying dams and leaping over impediments until at last it pours its majestic flood into the shoreless ocean of international socialism, bearing upon its heaving bosom the emancipated human race.

Viewed today from any intelligent standpoint, the capitalist not excepted, the outlook for socialism is luminous with incomparable hope, certain of realization. It is the light upon the horizon of human destiny and it has no limitations but the walls of the universe.

What party strife or factional turmoil may yet ensue, I neither know nor care; I only know we have the conquering movement; that day by day, nourished by the misery, the hopes, and aspirations of the working class,

its area of activity becomes wider, it grows in strength, increases in moral and intellectual grasp, and when the final hour strikes, the socialist movement, the greatest in all history — great enough to hold the race — will crown the struggle of the centuries with victory and proclaim freedom to all mankind.

Let us all unite to hasten the day of deliverance — to usher in the era of peace and plenty, of light and joy.

Slavery will then be but a horrible memory — a black shadow upon the history of the past. The industrial dungeon will have become the temple of science. The badge of labor will be the insignia of nobility, and civilization will mantle the earth with a garment of glory.

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¹ This article was adapted and expanded to pamphlet length in 1904 and republished by Debs through his Standard Publishing Company as *The American Movement*. See below, this volume. This earlier version was written prior to the debut of Morris Hillquit's *History of Socialism in the United States*. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903), the greatly revised pamphlet version after its publication.

² From *William Shakespeare* (1864), by Victor Hugo (1802-1885).

³ Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871), an émigré to the United States after the failure of the revolutions of 1848, was one of the earliest exponents of socialism in the United States. He launched a monthly journal, *Die Republik der Arbeiter* [The Republic of the Worker], in 1850.

⁴ Local German-American gymnastic clubs that also served a the function of social and political societies.