
The Social Spirit.

by Eugene V. Debs

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We need to grow out of the selfish, sordid, brutal spirit of individualism which still lurks even in Socialists and is responsible for the strife and contention which prevail where there should be concord and good will. The social spirit and the social conscience must be developed and govern our social relations before we shall have any social revolution.

If there are any among whom the social spirit should find its highest expression and who should be bound fast in its comradely embrace and give to the world the example of its elevating and humanizing influence, it is the Socialists. They of all others have come to realized the hardening and brutalizing effect of capitalist individualism in the awful struggle for existence and it is to them a cause of unceasing rejoicing that they live at a time in the world's historic development when the very conditions which resulted from this age-long struggle forbid its continuance and proclaim its approaching termination.

The rule of individualism which has governed society since the days of primitive communism has effectually restrained the moral and spiritual development of the race. It has brought out the baser side of men's nature and set them against each other as if the plan of creation had designed them to be mortal enemies.

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Typical capitalists are barren of the social spirit. The very nature of the catch-as-catch-can encounter in which they are engaged makes them wary and suspicious, if not downright hateful of each other, and the latent good that is in them dies for the want of incentive to express itself.



The other day I saw two such capitalists shake hands. It was pitiable. Their hearts had no part in the purely perfunctory ceremony. They happened to meet and could not avoid each other. And so they mechanically touched each other's reluctant hands, standing at right angles to each other for a moment — not face to face — and then passing on without either looking the other in the eyes.

This cold and heartless ceremony typified the relation begotten of capitalist individualism in which men's interests are competitive and antagonistic and in which each instinctively looks out for himself and is on alert to take every possible advantage of his fellow man.

The result of this system is inevitably a race of Ishmaelites.

How differently two Socialist comrades shake hands! Their hearts are in their palms and the joy of greeting is in their eyes. They have the social spirit. Their interests are mutual and their aspirations kindred. If one happens to be strong and the other weak, the stronger shares the weakness and the weaker shares the strength of his comrade. The base thought of taking a mean advantage, one of the other, does not darken their minds or harden their hearts. They are joined together in the humanizing bonds of fellowship. They multiply each other and they rejoice in their comradely kinship. The best there is in each, and not the worst, as in the contact of individualism, is appealed to and brought forth for the benefit of both.

What an elevating, enlarging, and satisfying relation!

And this is the “dead level” of mediocrity and servitude to which we are to sink when this relation becomes universal among men as it will in the International Socialist Republic.

So at least we are told by those who in the present system have acquired the instincts and impulses of animals of prey in the development of their imagined superiority by draining the veins and wrecking the lives of their vanquished competitors, but we are not impressed by the virtues of the shining system of which they stand as the shining examples.

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Through all the ages past men, civilized men, so-called, have been at each other's throats in the struggle for existence, and the spirit of individualism this struggle has begotten, the spirit of hard, sordid, brutal selfishness, has filled this world with unutterable anguish and woe.

But at last the end of the reign of anarchistic individualism is in sight. The social forces at work are undermining and destroying it and soon its knell will be sounded to the infinite joy of an emancipated world.

The largest possible expression of the social spirit should be fostered and encouraged in the Socialist movement. In spite of the hindrances which beset us in our present environments and relations, we may yet cultivate this spirit assiduously to our increasing mutual good and to the good of our great movement.

In our propaganda, in the discussion of our tactical and other differences, and in all our other activities, the larger faith that true comradeship inspires should prevail between us. We need to be more patient, more kindly, more tolerant, more sympathetic, helpful, and encouraging to one another, and less suspicious, less envious, and less contentious, if we are to educate and impress the people by our example and by the results of our teachings upon ourselves, win them to our movement, and realize our dream of universal freedom and social righteousness.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Sketch of Gene Debs by Art Young, from The Liberator, 1918.

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