

# **THE NEXT STEP IN DEMOCRACY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649377800

The next step in democracy by R. W. Sellars

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**R. W. SELLARS**

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# The Next Step in Democracy

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New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1916

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# THE NEXT STEP IN DEMOCRACY

## CHAPTER I

### THE SPIRIT OF MODERN SOCIALISM

LARGE movements bearing on many aspects of life are hard to define. There are at least two reasons for this. In the first place, they imply a criticism of the old standards of justice and the good and therefore cannot be defined by means of them. In the second place, they consist in large measure of tendencies which are only partly conscious of their end and which are impressive because of the prophecy they contain rather than for what they explicitly champion. So long as a definition is thought of as an expression of definite relations between fixed and essentially changeless terms, no significant definition can be given of a new movement. The true definition is a product of a slow and creative growth; it is the expression in conceptual elements of an intuition which is made possible only by the final settling down of social forces into something approaching an equilibrium. The intellectual formulation comes after the relative maturity of a social movement rather than before.

At certain periods everyone feels that something new is abroad. There is no longer that quiet satisfaction with the customary methods of doing things that characterizes the epoch of accepted order. Those who are sensitive to signs of change know that society is preparing to take a step forward; they feel that the old watchwords no longer

have the same authority and that men are consciously and unconsciously reaching out to new ideas and purposes and adjusting themselves to new methods. It is as though society had accomplished certain things with fairly appropriate institutions and habits, had enjoyed the benefit for a time and was then reaching out for something finer and more adequate. Without clear knowledge of the reason why, discontent and restlessness grow apace and men look with critical eyes upon arrangements which but now were regarded with complacency.

It is not difficult to find something analogous to this in the life of the individual. How often a person strives for some goal which seems to him, for the time, the thing which will satisfy all his desires. He thinks of himself as attaining this haven and settling down with a sigh of satisfaction to its enjoyment. But soon after his success, new desires spring up, urging him on to new enterprises—a new horizon opens up before him and what he has accomplished appears little by the side of what is possible. His new situation has brought with it added knowledge and new opportunities so the old *wanderlust* returns and drives him onward. Now the history of society is very similar to this; forces making for change appear and break up the status which seemed so enduring.

We may say, then, that periods of transition follow periods of relative balance and stability. During these eras of change, while the direction to be taken is not yet clearly marked, the air is full of suggestions. Discussions are rife and all kinds of ideas gain currency. The conservatives, who are averse to change either because they have little imagination and naturally respect customs and habits or because they are the beneficiaries of the still dominant order,—and both motives may be unconsciously



combined—decry innovations and praise the harmony and beauty and practicality of the actual social structure. In doing so, they are always partially right. They are in a position to see those aspects of society which are valuable and significant—for the old is never without its justifications. But we must balance against this the fact that the conservative has an influence far beyond what is rightfully his because of the values he defends, for his social position gives him a leverage upon public opinion in excess of his numbers and he has, moreover, back of him the essential conservatism of organized society, its fear of the unknown and untried. Over against the conservatives are the liberals who welcome certain limited changes and are less antagonistic to far-reaching schemes of reform; while in the vanguard are the more radical members of society who are fertile in ideas of a revolutionary type. It is by means of the interplay of these groups, reënforced by the changing pressure of political and industrial conditions, that the direction of progress and its speed are determined. Gradually society gains consciousness of new desires and new possibilities. The result is the growth of social movements which champion these desires and try to put them into action.

Now socialism is just such an initiatory movement and it is far easier to come under its influence and to feel that it stands for something vital than to analyze it and give it an adequate definition. The correct reason for this difficulty of definition is, I believe, that which I offered above; it challenges the current, limited notions of justice and of the social good and consists of tendencies which have not yet secured complete formulation. Like all things which are big and vital, it is full of possibilities and has not come to complete self-expression. It is a move-

ment rather than a position, as much a means of discovery and of social growth as a program. To demand too complete a program is to require socialism to anticipate what cannot be anticipated—those changes in industry, politics, social temper and social relations to which institutions must adapt themselves. The mistake made by many of the fathers of modern socialism has lain here, in the attempt to forecast the future in too definite a way. The result has been the production of orthodoxies quite comparable to those of the Churches and nearly as harmful in their consequences. I mean that there was the tendency to construct a social philosophy good for all time founded on the rendering explicit what was already supposedly implicit. Reflective thought was the microscope to be used by the great thinker in his effort to discern the forces already at work. Once these could be discerned, the future course of society could be predicted. We are more modest to-day because we realize that newness is a character of all phases of life and that we cannot look with assurance very far ahead. The unforeseen intervenes to disturb the most careful calculations. This situation does not mean that there are not certain perennial ideals like justice and liberty which are effective in human life, but that their concrete expression is conditioned by factors which are not entirely predictable.

I presume that every young man of to-day who has the capacity to be attracted by the thought of a juster and humaner world than that visible around us has been drawn in some measure towards socialism. And such youths are surely many, for generous enthusiasms find hospitable soil in fresh minds not swayed by too anxious thought of self-interest, minds which for the time being are willing to undertake the quest of the Holy Grail. Let that man

take shame to himself who has never been fired by the dream of better things into alliances and actions which seemed to his older and soberer self foolish and unwise! What would the world be were it entirely controlled by the tired pessimism of middle-age? But enthusiasm, valuable as it is in furnishing energy and in giving instinctive backing to the things which are worth while, must be supplemented by reflection if it is to use this energy economically and to the proper issues. Society is very complex and its re-organization cannot be left a matter of good intention and of enthusiasm not completely purged of sentimentality. Noble ideals must be given a realistic foundation and justified before the bar of sober reason or they will be viewed askance by the matter-of-fact people who have society's fortune in charge. But if reason and enthusiasm combine they will in the long run carry everything before them—and the run will not be so very long either in this day and generation. Socialism, if it is to conquer, must be a philosophy as well as a religion; it must be capable not only of attracting but also of convincing. It must appeal to sober second thought.

When we ask what socialism is, we are met by many and varied answers. Sometimes the term, socialistic, is used as an adjective to qualify measures which break with past principles and methods, especially those of the so-called *laissez faire*. Business men, accustomed to have their own way in the use of what they call their own and to conduct affairs as it seems right to them, are inclined to call all social control of a novel sort socialistic. Thus legislation which has for its aim the betterment of the conditions of labor in regard to hours, surroundings or instruments is usually called socialistic by employers of the old school. So far as this deepened control does bear witness to the