

William Graham Sumner
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REPLY TO A SOCIALIST¹

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“ALWAYS dig out the major premise!” said an experienced teacher of logic and rhetoric. The major premise of Mr. Sinclair is that everybody ought to be happy, and that, if anybody is not so, those who stand near him are under obligations to make him so. He nowhere expresses this. The major premise is always most fallacious when it is suppressed. The statement of the woes of the garment workers is made on the assumption that it carries upon its face some significance. He deduces from the facts two inferences for which he appeals to common consent: (1) that such a state of things ought not to be allowed to continue forever, and (2) that somehow, somewhere, another “system” must be found. The latter inference is one which the socialists always affirm, and they seem to be satisfied that it has some value, both in philosophy and in practical effort. They criticize the “system,” by which they mean the social world as it is. They do not perceive that the world of human society is what has resulted from thousands of years of life. It is not a system any more than a man sixty years old is a system. It is a product. To talk of making another system is like talking of making a man of sixty into something else than what his life has made him. As for the inference that some other industrial system must be found, it is as idle as anything which words can express. It leads

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to nothing and has no significance. The industrial system has changed often and it will change again. Nobody invented former forms. No one can invent others. It will change according to conditions and interests, just as the guilds and manors changed into modern phases. It is frightful to know of the poverty which some people endure. It is also frightful to know of disease, of physical defects, of accidents which cripple the body and wreck life, and of other ills by which human life is encompassed. Such facts appeal to human sympathy, and call for such help and amelioration as human effort can give. It is senseless to enumerate such facts, simply in order to create a state of mind in the hearer, and then to try to make him assent that "the system ought to be changed." All the hospitals, asylums, almshouses, and other eleemosynary institutions prove that the world is not made right. They prove the existence of people who have not "equal chances" with others. The inmates can not be happy. Generally the institutions also prove the very limited extent to which, with the best intentions and greatest efforts, the more fortunate can do anything to help the matter — that is, to "change the system."

The notion that everybody ought to be happy, and equally happy with all the rest, is the fine flower of the philosophy which has been winning popularity for two hundred years. All the petty demands of natural rights, liberty, equality, etc., are only stepping-stones toward this philosophy, which is really what is wanted. All through human history some have had good fortune and some ill fortune. For some the ills of life have taken all the joy and strength out of existence, while the fortunate have always been there to show how glorious life might be and to furnish dreams of bliss to tantalize those who

have failed and suffered. So men have constructed in philosophy theories of universal felicity. They tell us that every one has a natural right to be happy, to be comfortable, to have health, to succeed, to have knowledge, family, political power, and all the rest of the things which anybody can have. They put it all into the major premise. Then they say that we all ought to be equal. That proposition abolishes luck. In making propositions we can imply that all ought to have equally good luck, but, inasmuch as there is no way in which we can turn bad luck into good, or misfortune into good fortune, what the proposition means is that if we can not all have good luck no one shall have it. The unlucky will pull down the lucky. That is all that equality ever can mean. The worst becomes the standard. When we talk of "changing the system," we ought to understand that that means abolishing luck and all the ills of life. We might as well talk of abolishing storms, excessive heat and cold, tornadoes, pestilences, diseases, and other ills. Poverty belongs to the struggle for existence, and we are all born into that struggle. The human race began in utter destitution. It had no physical or metaphysical endowment whatever. The existing "system" is the outcome of the efforts of men for thousands of years to work together, so as to win in the struggle for existence. Probably socialists do not perceive what it means for any man now to turn about and pass his high judgment on the achievements of the human race in the way of civilization, and to propose to change it, by resolution, in about "six years." The result of the long effort has been that we all, in a measure, live above the grade of savages, and that some reach comfort and luxury and mental and moral welfare. Efforts to change the system have

not been wanting. They have all led back to savagery. Mr. Sinclair thinks that the French Revolution issued out in liberty. The French Revolution is open to very many different interpretations and constructions; but, on the whole, it left essential interests just about where it found them. A million men lost their lives to get Louis de Bourbon off the throne and Napoleon Bonaparte on it, and by the spoils of Europe to make rich nobles of his generals. That is the most definite and indisputable result of the Revolution. Mr. Sinclair also repeats the familiar warning or threat that those who are not competent to win adequate success in the struggle for existence will "rise." They are going to "shoot," unless we let him and his associates redistribute property. It seems that it would be worth while for them to consider that, by their own hypothesis, those-who-have will possess advantages in "shooting": (1) they will have the guns; (2) they will have the talent on their side because they can pay for it; (3) they can hire an army out of the ranks of their adversaries.

In all this declamation we hear a great deal about votes and political power, "ballots or bullets." Of course this is another outcome of the political and social philosophy of the last two centuries. Mr. Sinclair says that "Democracy is an attitude of soul. It has its basis in the spiritual nature of man, from which it follows that all men are equal, or that, if they are not, they must become so." Then Democracy is a metaphysical religion or mythology. The age is not friendly to metaphysics or mythology, but it falls under the dominion of these old tyrants in its political philosophy. If anybody wants to put his soul in an attitude, he ought to do it. The "system" allows that liberty,

and it is far safer than shooting. It is also permitted to believe that, if men are not equal, they will become so. If we wait a while they will all die, and then they will all be equal, although they certainly will not be so before that.

There are plenty of customs and institutions among us which produce evil results. They need reform; and propositions to that end are reasonable and useful. A few years ago we heard of persons who wanted to abolish poverty. They had no plan or scheme by which to do it; in the meantime, however, people were working day by day to overcome poverty as well as they could, each for himself. The talk about abolishing poverty by some resolution or construction has died out. The "industrial system" is just the organized effort which we are all making to overcome poverty. We do not want to change the system unless we can be convinced that we can make a shift which will accomplish that purpose better. Then, be it observed, the system will be changed without waiting for any philosophers to propose it. It is being changed every day, just as quickly as any detail in it can be altered so as to defeat poverty better. This is a world in which the rule is, "Root, hog, or die," and it is also a world in which "the longest pole knocks down the most persimmons." It is the popular experience which has formulated these sayings. How can we make them untrue? They contain immense tragedies. Those who believe that the problems of human pain and ill are waiting for a speculative solution in philosophy or ethics can dream of changing the system; but to everybody else it must seem worse than a waste of time to wrangle about such a thing. It is not a proposition; it does not furnish either a thesis to be tested or a project to be considered.

I am by no means arguing that "everything is for the best in the best of worlds," even in that part of it where the Stars and Stripes still float. I am, on the contrary, one of those who think that there is a great deal to be dissatisfied about. I may be asked what I think would be a remedy for the distress of the garment workers. I answer candidly that I do not know — that is why I have come forward with no proposition. My business now is to show how empty and false Mr. Sinclair's proposition is, and how harmful it would be to heed it. He only adds to our trouble and burden by putting forward erroneous ideas and helping to encourage bad thinking. The plan to rise and shoot has no promise of welfare in it for anybody.

Neither is there any practical sense or tangible project behind the suggestion to redistribute property. Some years ago I heard a socialist orator say¹ that he could get along with any audience except "these measly, mean-spirited workingmen, who have saved a few hundred dollars and built a cottage, with a savings bank mortgage, of which they rent the second story and live in the first. They," said he, "will get up and go out, a benchful at a time, when I begin to talk about rent." If he had been open to instruction from facts, he might have learned much from the conduct of those measly workingmen. They will fight far more ferociously for their cottages than the millionaires for their palaces. A redistribution of property means universal war. The final collapse of the French Revolution was due to the proposition to redistribute property. Property is the opposite of poverty; it is our bulwark against want and distress, but also against disease and

¹ This was one of Professor Sumner's pet anecdotes, and I risk its repetition here and elsewhere in the volume. — THE EDITOR.

all other ills, which, if it can not prevent them, it still holds at a distance. If we weaken the security of property or deprive people of it, we plunge into distress those who now are above it.

Property is the condition of civilization. It is just as essential to the state, to religion, and to education as it is to food and clothing. In the form of capital it is essential to industry, but if capital were not property it would not do its work in industry. If we negative or destroy property we arrest the whole life of civilized society and put men back on the level of beasts. The family depends on property; the two institutions have been correlative throughout the history of civilization. Property is the first interest of man in time and in importance. We can conceive of no time when property was not, and we can conceive of no social growth in which property was not the prime condition. The property interest is also the one which moves all men, including the socialists, more quickly and deeply than any other. Property is that feature of the existing "industrial system" which would most stubbornly resist change if it was threatened in its essential character and meaning. There is a disposition now to apologize for property, even while resisting attack upon it. This is wrong. Property ought to be defended on account of its reality and importance, and on account of its rank among the interests of men.

What the socialists complain of is that we have not yet got the work of civilization all done and that what has been done does not produce ideal results. The task is a big one — it may even be believed that it is infinite, because what we accomplish often only opens new vistas of trouble. At present we are working on with all the wisdom we have been able to win, and we hope

to gain more. If the socialists could help by reasonable and practical suggestions, their aid would be welcome. When they propose to redistribute property, or to change the industrial system, they only disturb the work and introduce confusion and destruction. When they talk about rising and shooting, as if such acts would not be unreasonable or beyond possibility, they put themselves at the limit of the law, and may, before they know it, become favorers of crime.