Socialism and personal liberty

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SOCIALISM
AND PERSONAL LIBERTY
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BY

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"If ye learn to walk in the perfect law of liberty, ye shall do well."

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NOTE

Readers of My Second Country will find that the opinion that I expressed in that book about the dictatorship of the proletariat as a method of transition from capitalist to Socialist Society is modified here. The reasons for that modification, arising from the experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, are explained in the chapter on the subject.

I would warn the reader that the descriptions of various Socialist systems given in the present book are necessarily very summary and incomplete and need to be supplemented. It is not my purpose to give a complete exposition of Socialist theory, nor would that be possible within the limits of a small volume. All that I have been able or have tried to do is to touch on the various theories merely in their relation to the particular question of personal liberty.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.

THE CONDITIONS OF PERSONAL LIBERTY . . . 9

CHAPTER II.

THE NECESSITY OF ECONOMIC FREEDOM . . . 18

CHAPTER III.

DEMOCRATISM . . . . . . . . . 35

CHAPTER IV.

SPURIOUS SOCIALISMS . . . . . . . . 47

CHAPTER V.

MARXIST SOCIALISM . . . . . . . . 61

CHAPTER VI.

DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT . . . . 72

CHAPTER VII.

REVOLUTIONARY SYNDICALISM . . . . . 101

CHAPTER VIII.

LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM . . . . . . 122
SOzialism
and Personal Liberty

Chapter I.

The Conditions of Personal Liberty.

One of the greatest obstacles to the progress of Socialist ideas is the fear that Socialism would destroy personal liberty. The objection is not met by pointing out that for the large majority of mankind personal liberty does not really exist in present economic conditions. That is true; but the fact that it is true is one of the strongest reasons for altering the conditions. Socialism is not presented in a very attractive guise by the argument that it would be no worse than the present social system. A prisoner would, no doubt, be gratified by the news that he was about to be transferred to a more comfortable prison where the food was better and more abundant, but he would not be aroused to the same enthusiasm as if he were told that he was about to be set free. The enthusiasm for Socialism now felt by a minority of the workers will spread to the large majority only when they are convinced that Socialism is really a path to freedom. "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," but they want to be sure that they will not merely exchange their chains for others of a different pattern.
Too many Socialists even gladly admit that Socialism and personal liberty are incompatible. Nothing has done more to damp enthusiasm for the Russian revolution than the discovery that personal liberty has been suppressed in Russia. It is possible, of course, to point out that existing conditions in Russia are not necessary consequences of a social revolution; that Russia was of all European countries the least suited to a Socialist experiment; and that the great difficulties arising from its backward state of economic development and the ignorance and barbarism of the majority of its population have been increased by foreign interference. But our “pure” Communist friends will have no such excuses. They hold up the present Russian system as the only possible Socialist system and the ideal for every other country to aim at. A prominent member of the Communist Party of Great Britain wrote to me in 1920 that he quite agreed with a remark of mine that “the servile State was no imaginary danger,” but for his part he would welcome it. I have, however, usually found that the apostles of “iron discipline” tacitly assume that it will be exercised by themselves and imposed on others.

This strange hatred of liberty for its own sake ignores reality. For, as Henri Barbusse has said, “the human reality is the individual” and an attempt to base a social order on the ignoring of that fact would be Utopian, for it would run counter to a fundamental tendency of human nature. “Every collective organisation of men must come