

# Patriotism and Socialism

*By Daniel De Leon*

“There is to be a parade and mass meeting of the Socialist Labor Party tonight. The leaders are opposed to the expression of pro-Spanish sentiments, and say so. But here a difficulty comes in. Socialists are opposed to the theory of nationality and national sentiment. They do not believe that you should fight for your country, because the nation is not a unit recognized by them. A Socialist of this city feels that a Socialist of Madrid is his comrade. On the other hand, an individualist of New York is not his comrade. For patriotism is substituted allegiance to the international idea; for ties of country are substituted those of the idea of the brotherhood of man, and the red flag is substituted for the Stars and Stripes. It can be seen very readily that the real Socialist can only make a pretense of being patriotic. He cannot be a patriot without ceasing to be a Socialist.”

—*New York Sun*, April 30, 1898

The above item furnishes a timely opportunity to restate socialist philosophy, principle and sentiment, correct misunderstandings, and draw valuable historical parallels. All this can in this instance be done all the better in view of the decent and fair tone of the above criticism.

Students of history know that, during the religious wars in Europe, there was no instance when the ruling power in any country did not at some time or other charge the religious element, in the minority in such country, with lack of patriotism, if not with direct unpatriotic tendencies.

Louis XIV in France looked upon the Huguenots or Protestants as foes to the nation, as unpatriotic, or at least as people bereft of the sense of

patriotism. How did he justify the opinion? Upon the ground that “a Huguenot of France felt that a Protestant of the Netherlands was his brother; and that, on the other hand, a Catholic of France was not his brother.”

Queen Bess’ government, across the Channel, reversed the opinion. It, on the other hand, was no less positive that the Catholics of England were unpatriotic, or, to say the least, were lukewarm patriots. It, arguing similarly, grounded its principle on the opinion that “a Catholic of England felt that a Catholic of France was his brother; and that, on the other hand, a Protestant of England was not his brother.”

The Emperor Ferdinand pursued to the stake the Protestants of his dominions; religious hatred fanned the flame, but the fire was kindled by the belief that these Protestants were unpatriotic, even spies for Protestant countries, that “a Protestant of Vienna felt that a Protestant of Dresden was his brother; and that, on the other hand, a Catholic of Vienna was not his brother.”

There is hardly a government that at some time or other did not hold the Jew for being unpatriotic. In each instance, at the bottom of that opinion was the maxim that “the Jew of each country felt that the Jews in all others were his brothers; and that, on the other hand, the non-Jews, in whatever country he lived in, were not his brothers.”

Mounting still higher in history, it is well known that, not religious affection for paganism caused the apostasy of the Roman Emperor Julian, but that what steeled his arms against his Christian subjects was a sentiment, which, put into words, amounted to this: “The Christians are unpatriotic: a Christian in Constantinople feels that a Christian in southern Spain is his brother; and, on the other hand, that a non-Christian in Constantinople is not his brother.”

The idea that each time underlay this opinion in each of the above instances, and many more that could be quoted, was that the principles of the Protestant, the Catholic, the Jew, the Christian, as the case might be, excluded patriotic sentiments from his composition, inasmuch as, in each case, “for patriotism was substituted allegiance to an idea” and “for ties of country were substituted those of the idea,” etc.

\* \* \*

That issue having worked itself out, our present generation can calmly

dissect the opinions of them. So doing, it perceives the utter groundlessness of the charge that alternately imputed lack of patriotism to Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Christians. The Huguenot's love for his fair France is attested by numerous touching proofs, the English Catholic's love for the real glory of England has been demonstrated on many a battlefield, the Jew's love for the country of his birth or his choice stands today undisputed; and so on. Facts, numerous and irrefutable, overthrow the old-time maxim that "the real" Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Christian "could only make a pretense of being patriotic; he could not be a patriot without ceasing to be" a Christian, a Jew, a Catholic, or a Protestant—as the case might be.

\* \* \*

The question reverts to first principles: What is patriotism? By the light of the historic facts the answer is found all the readier.

As the stateliest edifice that rears its proud front to the admiring gaze of man has its foundation in dirt; as the sweetest scented flower has its roots in dung; as the noblest figure of the human race has its source in foulness; so likewise even the inspiring feeling of patriotism has its origin in sordidness. The sordid source of patriotism is the sordid physical needs of primitive man. Man originally feels constrained by his material needs to look upon all others as hostile, therefore as inferior, to such an extent as to attach supreme importance, consequently, supreme superiority to his own house, his own clan, his own settlement. The nearer he is to the oyster stage, the stronger is this sentiment. When language has become sufficiently developed with him, he calls that feeling "patriotism." But, as the edifice, the flower, the individual human being, so does the race develop; the further it develops, the further it is removed from its lowly, foul source; the nearer it reaches the blossoming point, all the more are its original and contracted views expanded. The sordid, material interests that gave birth to its patriotism are by degrees affected by and become interwoven with nobler sentiments and aims. A stage is finally reached when "patriotism" stands transmuted—so transmuted that the superficial observer wholly forgets its source, its necessary and continued connection therewith, and falls into the dangerous and visionary idea that its roots are in the sky, instead of deep down in the earth, where, in fact, they are to be found.

Patriotism properly understood, despite the low down condition in which

capitalism keeps the masses, is today affected by that broader, nobler view of the race that is made possible by increased material well-being, or the possibility thereof. The moral scope of the race has proceeded upon the lines of a wider extension of fraternity. It thus proceeded upon lines that overthrew the original principle of exclusiveness. Material conditions dictated the change; and it has been consistent with its original principle. Originally, material conditions rendered imperative an extreme egotism; as time passed, the love of self, of self-preservation, found an increased security, an increased material welfare in an extended fraternity. From that point to this the transition was rapid. Patriotism ceased to be equivalent with barbarism, it rose, sublimated, to the height of the broadest humanity and a passion, no longer to crush but to inspire; a passion to lead in the noblest thoughts, the noblest endeavors; an emulation in wisdom and virtue; a desire that one's own country should be ornamented and garlanded, not with the spoils of other countries, but with the great feats of its own people. Patriotism, in the proper sense, means a passion to improve one's own domicile in the only way such is possible today—by elevating all others. The most patriotic nation is that that is fired by that desire; the best patriot is he who is moved by that passion.

\* \* \*

Socialism is that idea that alone can raise patriotism to its completest development. We see the plight capitalism throws the country into. Its material needs require the sufferings of other nations, gloats over their defeats, needs their scalps, and, as a matter of course, *the human race being one*, the capitalism of no nation can inflict sorrow on another without inflicting it on its own. Capitalist patriotism is, accordingly, a contradiction in terms. Modern civilization repudiates it.

\* \* \*

It is this fact, the fact that socialism stands for a material basis that overthrows and is superior to that of capitalism, and that, accordingly, raises its patriotism as far above that of capitalism as the patriotism of capitalism is above the patriotism of the Choctaw aborigines—it is due to this fact that the present capitalist governments of the world, and together with our own capitalist class, hold towards the Socialist of today the same opinion that Louis XIV held towards the Huguenot, that Queen Bess held toward the

Catholic, that Julian held toward the Christian, and that all held toward the Jew.

\* \* \*

With advancing civilization, the language of the *Sun* on patriotism and socialism will be looked upon in the same light as the language of the above-named narrow-minded tyrants. Events will surely happen that will demonstrate that the Socialist is no visionary. That he recognizes the material foundation needed for all noble thought. That, without losing sight of his noble aims, he will be as brave in the defense of his country against invaders as any; in fact, infinitely braver—because he has a greater ideal at stake than those of his fellow citizens, whose mental and moral horizon are bounded by the limitations of capitalist thought and feeling.

*The People*, Vol. VIII, No. 6. May 8, 1898

**Please report errors to**

**Socialist Labor Party of America  
P.O. Box 218,  
Mountain View, CA 94042-0218  
USA**

**fax: 408-280-6964**

**[www.slp.org](http://www.slp.org) — [socialists@slp.org](mailto:socialists@slp.org)**