
How I Became a Socialist

by Frederic F. Heath

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When James G. Blaine was defeated for the Presidency of these United States in the year 1884, there was at least one sincere mourner in the land. I lacked a year of being able to vote for him, it is true, but I had tramped several miles in rubber boots that were cruelly heavy, and held aloft an ill-smelling torch, in my devotion to his cause. So the day after election I was footsore as well as head-sore when the despatches gave the Republicans such harrowing doubts as to the result. It looked as if the "plumed knight" had been unhorsed, but we hoped against hope, and appeased our wrath as best we could. I appeased mine by happening upon a big bundle of campaign dodgers in an upper room of the Republican headquarters, in Milwaukee, a dodger sent on from the East and unsuitable for such a German-American city because of its attack on Carl Schurz; but up went the window and out went the flying leaves, nevertheless. Pedestrians picked them up and read them, and when the country chairman, Henry C. Payne, came out from an inner room and saw what I had done, he went the Slang Dictionary several points better, and doubtless meant every word he said. You will observe that at that time I had not discovered that an old party campaign ends abruptly on election day.

And I little suspected at that time that I was a Republican because my father was, or that letters from a much revered uncle, a chief of division in the Treasury Department of Washington, had anything to do

with it. I supposed I was a Republican because that political faith represented my philosophy of life. That party had given black slavery its quietus, and I had imbibed strong anti-slavery ideas from my maternal grandsire, whose tall, spare frame actually shook at the mere thought of a "copperhead." And then, did not the Republican Party stand for "protection" to American labor? And was I not an apprentice and "protected" to the extent of my \$2 a week salary! Most certainly I was. Such arguments as I used to have!

Two weeks later I was eking out a beggarly weekly income in Chicago at my trade (drawing on wood) and not lucky enough to get steady employment. I boarded with a relative, who maintained a brownstone front on Jackson Boulevard, so that while poorer than my pride would allow me to admit, I nevertheless lived in an aristocratic atmosphere. I will never forget with what feelings of concern we heard one evening the sound of a nearby explosion. It was the detonation of the Haymarket bomb! The days that followed were full of excitement, which the newspapers, with an eye to business, did their best to keep alive. Then the trial came on and I gloried in the travesty of justice that



followed, and looked as leniently on the packing of the jury that was to avenge "law and order," as I had on the tattoo marks on the epidermis of Blaine's political career. My benchmates were divided in sentiment, but I had heard enough and read enough to know, deep down in my inner consciousness, that the Haymarket tragedy was not part of a conscious plan to enforce restitution to the plundered myriads of toil, but rather the culmination of a series of clashes between an assortment of social rebels speaking in a foreign tongue, and a notoriety-loving police cabal, egged on by the capitalist press for both mercenary and class reasons. This was a conviction that I smothered for the time. But the Haymarket bomb had its message for me, nevertheless. I forced my attention to conditions I had previously, as a dutiful Republican, had refused to see.

Yet in spite of the influence of surroundings, I believe I was always a democrat. I always had a hatred of caste, and of artificial superiorities. As a member of the workaday army I was painfully conscious of the vulgarity and unwholesomeness of the whole fabric of toil and of toil's *dramatis personae*. In time I grew into the stoutest kind of a rebel. I evolved a philosophy of my own. I became impatient that the lower classes did not partake of the culture and the refinements that minister to a satisfactory life, and came in time to blame conditions and not the workers for it. I grew to be reflective. I remember that I noted the fact that the first ambition of the negro who drifted North was to make a good appearance and dress well, even though this latter was often carried to the lengths of caricature. I saw that there was in the breasts of all persons, white or black, the desire for self-betterment, no matter how little the possibility of attaining to their ideal.

I was puzzling my brain with such groping thoughts as this, when Bellamy's *Looking Backward* flashed forth upon the American people. I capitulated to it at once, and a few years later was the author of a series of reports of the sessions of a mythical Bellamy club, in a Chicago illustrated newspaper, of which I myself was editor, articles which afford me amusing reading today, you may believe. By this time I had come to think myself a Socialist, yet kept on religiously voting for "protection" of American industry.

There was one criticism that Socialism made as to the capitalist system that I was in a position to un-

derstand. That was the utterly reckless and planless way in which capitalism ruled in the industrial field. I had at different periods of my life been a printer, a wood engraver, and an artist for wood engravers. I had practically given my time to my employers as an apprentice for the sake of learning trades that were later rendered practically useless by the development of industry. The Mergenthaler linotype knocked the typesetter out, and process engraving knocked out the wood engraver and the artist on wood as well. And later on, when I drifted from newspaper work into the occupation of a staff artist on the Milwaukee *Sentinel* and had made portrait drawing my specialty, along came the coarse-screen halftone process and again took my employment away from me and tossed my skill to the winds. And it was not hard to see that the same sort of fate was overtaking other workers and forcing them to readjust themselves, as best they could, in the work-army.

But to resume: To my view a Socialist is not a Socialist until he has actually taken his place in the ranks. So I have not yet told how I became a Socialist. My introduction to the actual Socialist movement was due to three influences. First, there was the paper that J.A. Wayland used to print at Greensburg, Indiana, long before the Ruskin colony even was dreamed of. Then there were stray copies of Socialist Labor Party literature that came my way. And, finally, I struck up an acquaintance with Victor L. Berger, who had given up teaching to edit the local German Socialist daily in my native city, Milwaukee, where I was now again located, he having succeeded Paul Grottkau. I fell in with Comrade Berger at the time of the big Milwaukee street railway strike, in which he was rendering President Mahon all the assistance possible. I viewed the strike from the standpoint of a Socialist, and scandalized my aristocratic Prospect Avenue neighbors by being a most persistent patron of the buses that ran in opposition to the cars. The Milwaukee Socialist movement at that time was a large one, wholly outside the SLP (which was regarded as too narrow and stagnating), and was composed of German-Americans. The word got abroad among them that a Yankee had turned Socialist, and they began to see the beginning of the end! The great desire among the German Socialists in the country at that time was to have Socialism become native to the soil; for they saw that there could be no progress oth-

erwise. To have the ice broken locally, therefore, by means of a real descendant of Pilgrim New England, was no everyday matter — so I learned later. I attended a meeting of their club without understanding a word that was said, and was urged to work toward the establishment of an English-speaking branch, some of them agreeing to join. At this time, like the typical convert, the intensity of my Socialism was unbounded. I was terribly academic. I had the SLP habit, strongly developed. Ordinary words were too tame; phrases were my “long suite,” and I remember now, when we were about to form the English-speaking branch at last, it was my suggestion that the fact of having read Marx’s *Capital* should be the badge of eligibility to membership! Luckily this proposition was not agreed to, and so the club grew in membership and influence — and Marx escaped again being made a fetish. Meantime Berger and I had become brother confessors. He had a fund of general information and a farseeing judgment that I made big draughts upon. It helped to reduce the intensity of my fanaticism, and gave me a much clearer outlook. Some of our plans of those days have since been realized beyond our expectations.

The years that have followed have mellowed my conception of Socialism, luckily. The Socialism presented by the Socialist Labor Party soon grew to be repugnant to me. I could not square it with my love of democracy. I came to realize that a Cooperative Com-

monwealth secured through a cataclysm was a wild dream indeed, and not at all in accordance with the teachings of history. And I felt also that if Socialism was to be a condition of society in which autocratic or bureaucratic rule was to exist I should in all probability be in rebellion against it. I wanted my Socialism to be democratically administered; I wanted the whole people to rule, and hence when we were able to launch the new national party in 1897 (the so-called Debs Party), I was proud that the name chosen was the Social Democracy of America, and have always regretted that exigencies developed later that seemed to require a change, although in my own and in some other States the old name is still retained, under the rights granted by state autonomy.

And so I have told not only how I became a Socialist, but also how I came to be a Social Democrat. Socialism in America today is virile and all-conquering just because it has ceased to be cataclysmic, and therefore utopian. It is a proposition that is simply unanswerable, and loses nothing by being stated in simple language. We live in a most favored time. I thank my stars that it has been given to me to live just at this particular stage in the world’s history, when there is such a wonderful cause to be won. I can think of nothing more inspiring, unless it be Social Democracy realized.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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