

## Socialism

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A NGLO-AMERICAN socialism has reached a curious impasse. Levels of economic inequality not seen since the nineteenth century would lead one to anticipate an upsurge in socialist affiliation and activism. Yet, since the brief climax of the Bernie Sanders / Jeremy Corbyn moment, socialism has stagnated as a political force.

I believe that some light may be thrown on this puzzling state of affairs by an episode that followed Caroline Levine's plenary lecture at the 2016 North American Victorian Studies Association conference. To dramatize poetry's capacity to foster a sense of common identity and purpose, Levine invited the audience to recite lines from one of William Morris's *Chants for Socialists*:

Come, shoulder to shoulder ere earth grows older! The Cause spreads over land and sea; Now the world shaketh, and fear awaketh And joy at last for thee and me.<sup>1</sup>

During the question-and-answer period, an audience member elicited a laugh from those assembled by demanding, "Wasn't that kind of creepy?" Far from engendering a feeling of shared endeavor and collective strength, the questioner explained, he found participating in the recitation vaguely unsettling; his individuality felt jeopardized by its subsumption into a larger, group entity.

I vividly recall the response that came to my lips: "This is why we can't have nice things." Socialism—Morris's "Cause"—promises a more egalitarian and humane civilization. Victorian socialists sought to strengthen the democratic character of the state, extend self-governance into the sphere of work, and guarantee a "Minimum of Health, Education, Leisure, and Subsistence" for all citizens.<sup>2</sup> But they also drew inspiration from, and a sense of enhanced agency by, identifying with the collective—an identification facilitated by the singing of songs and recitation of poems, including Morris's own. If contemporary

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intellectuals experience even these basic rituals of solidarity as ominous impingements on selfhood, then socialism is surely dead as a political movement.

But I did not offer this sanctimonious riposte for a simple reason: Levine's interlocutor was right. The collective recitation of Morris's call to arms *had* been kind of creepy. Why?

Here, Charles Taylor's distinction between "porous" and "buffered" conceptions of the self is instructive. For most of Western history, Taylor observes, the self was assumed to be, and experienced as, permeable. Accordingly, the self could be supervened by agents (e.g., demons, spirits) and influences (e.g., curses, blessings) that originated outside of it. Due in part to this very perviousness, the porous self is inherently social in disposition. In diametric contrast, the modern, "buffered" self is conceived as autarkic, with its authentic thoughts and feelings arising from within.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, modern societies tend to equate maturity with the achievement and maintenance of rational self-possession.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, buffered selves are likely to experience affects that arise in the "interspace" between individuals—the very locus of solidarity—as potentially menacing encroachments on their autonomy; as being, that is, kind of creepy.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, Taylor's distinction between porous and buffered paradigms of the self operates both qualitatively (as a marker of the historical transition from an "enchanted" worldview to an anthropocentric one) and quantitatively. In other words, the degree to which the self is lived as porous varies—between individuals and (sub)cultures as well as among different spatiotemporal locations.

As is well known, the spike in socialist affiliation during the Victorian fin de siècle took place within an atmosphere of enormous spiritual and societal ferment. While I am not ready to follow Gareth Stedman Jones in concluding that socialism is, at bottom, a religious phenomenon, it nonetheless stands to reason that collectivist ideologies like socialism flourish in periods of "collective effervescence."<sup>6</sup> Even if we bracket overlaps between the content of particular faith traditions and socialist doctrine (such as the Christian teaching of universal brotherhood), the roiling social energies that characterize eras of enthusiasm prize open the disavowed apertures of the modern self, rendering individuals more pervious. The stances of solidarity and communal consciousness that socialism enjoins are bound to have greater intuitive appeal and resonance in such milieus.

But if collective effervescence is indeed conducive to a "thinning" of the buffering shielding modern selves—and, indirectly, to the growth of socialism—then those of us yearning for a socialist groundswell in Anglo-America are likely to be disappointed. Polling indicates that church attendance in the United States is belatedly tracing the downward trajectory that has long characterized Britain.<sup>7</sup> What spiritual energies are in circulation are concentrated, conspicuously, on the wrong side of the political spectrum. Indeed, between the cultish, conspiracy-begotten solidarity of Q-Anon and a burgeoning neofascism, collectivism now appears to be the psychic and ideological terrain of the far right.

Given these unpropitious conditions for left collectivism, perhaps it is time for socialists to make peace with the buffered self and its attendant deep subjectivity. Instead of renewing, yet again, the critique of the buffered (or bourgeois or centered) self, we might strive for its sublation (*aufgehoben*) and recuperation within a progressive political horizon.

Fortuitously, the Victorian socialist tradition offers considerable resources for pursuing such a project. Because many of its major texts were written shortly after classical liberalism's zenith, they show no inclination to criticize deep subjectivity. Think of H. G. Wells, whose Fabian socialist A Modern Utopia (1905) asserts that the "century long" debate between collectivism and individualism arose from "the confusion of a guantitative for a qualitative question," and that it is now possible to transcend the initial terms of the antagonism.<sup>8</sup> Or John Stuart Mill, whose defense of the sanctity of individual thought and feeling did not deter him from heralding the "common ownership in the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour."9 Although Oscar Wilde's socialist bona fides are dubious, he characteristically put it most provocatively. Wilde insists that socialism, by securing "the material well-being of each member of the community," would facilitate the emergence of an individualism "far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now."<sup>10</sup>

Socialism's future prospects may well hinge on its ability to come to terms with the buffered self. And, by dint of dialectical reversal, tunneling deeper into the self's recesses may ultimately divulge the communal underpinnings of individual identity. I, for one, would not find that creepy at all.

## Notes

1. William Morris, "The Voice of Toil," in *Chants for Socialists* (London: The Socialist League, 1892), 7, ll. 36–40.

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- 2. [Sidney Webb], Labour and the New Social Order: A Report on Reconstruction (London: The Labour Party, 1918), 6. This pamphlet represents (one) summa of Victorian socialist aspiration.
- 3. Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37–42.
- 4. Taylor, Secular Age, 138
- 5. Taylor, Secular Age, 35.
- 6. Gareth Stedman Jones, "Religion and the Origins of Socialism," in *Religion and the Political Imagination*, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ira Katznelson, 171–89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Emile Durkheim argued that religions originate in the "collective effervescence" of the gathered clan (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields [New York: Free Press, 1995], 228).
- Jeffery M. Jones, "How Religious Are Americans?" Gallup, Inc., December 23, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/358364/religious-americans.aspx.
- 8. H. G. Wells, A Modern Utopia (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905), 87.
- 9. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1873), 232.
- 10. Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *Fortnightly Review* 55 (February 1891), 293, 296.

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