
Social Democracy (February 1898)

The terms “social” and “democracy” are of old coinage. They have come down to us from a former generation. But they live in pristine strength and are as available now for legitimate use as when they receive the stamp of the mint and were sent forth on that mission of war or peace as fate might determine in the interest of humanity.

In the first place, I would have my readers comprehend exactly the significance of the words used as the title of a great movement in the United States and throughout the civilized world, which is progressing at a rapid pace for the reconstruction of government, the regeneration of society, and the elimination of antiquated errors productive of modern miseries so numerous as to challenge calculation, so degrading as to defy exaggeration, and so monstrous as to create widespread horror and alarm.

Need it be said that the term “social” relates to society, and in the connection used, to the entire social body, “to the public as an aggregate body;” or that the term “democracy” relates to government by the people, that is to say, self-government. Hence “social democracy” is a movement embodying the best sentiments of the times in which we live to improve social, economic, and political conditions, which, while the main idea is the emancipation of the poor from poverty and the ten thousand ills which poverty breeds, is also in the interest of every other class that goes to make up the body social and politic — the ignorant and the learned, the virtuous and the vicious, all, of every name and grade, constituting the vast and motley population — because this vast aggregation, touched anywhere by disease, involves the whole mass, and there is no hope for society while we live under a capitalistic system that exalts the few and degrades the many, makes one man fabulously rich and ten thousand despairingly poor. Such conditions are unnatural — they are violative of every conception of justice and righteousness. They create two classes — masters and slaves, monarchs and menials. They arraign “Divine Providence,” make the “Brotherhood of Man” a myth, the Declaration of Independence a sham, economic equality a vagary, and social peace an impossibility.

Under this monstrous system millions of the struggling, staggering, suffering poor have been reduced to slavery, and their homes (?) are no better than the lairs of wild beasts.

All social and political equilibrium is destroyed. The “scales of justice,” manipulated by robed rascals for pelf, have destroyed all respect for courts, until all over this fair land, from center to circumference, he whose ears are attuned to the notes of despair may hear the whispered maledictions of millions of victims whose words should be those of satisfaction and contentment.

In the midst of such conditions the Social Democracy strides to the front and offers its services to ameliorate the woes of which the poor complain.

It proposes to put an end to the rule of capital by abolishing the capitalist class, and transferring the means of production and distribution from private hands for personal gain to public ownership for the common welfare.

The profit system will thus cease to exist, and all industry will be owned and controlled by the people in their collective capacity, organized on a scientific basis, operating with the most improved machinery, and carried forward cooperatively for the promotion of the welfare of the whole people. This will mean economic equality, the basis of the only real civilization the world can ever know.

All men will enjoy the inalienable right to work and the full product of their toil. Wage slavery will cease. The towering capitalistic master and the cowering wage-menial will disappear together. Both will reappear as men, and free from the perverting, callousing, and degrading influences of the old system, they will be united as brothers, and with their faces towards the economic sunrise they will begin the march to ideal, all-embracing civilization.

This is the supreme purpose of the great national and international Social Democracy. It is composed of a progressive and intelligent membership, and is equipped for action on both political and economic lines. It comprehends the present chaotic conditions and their cause, and proposes to move forward, direct as a rifle ball, upon the works of the enemy. Its weapon is the ballot. It will not turn backward, nor move aside the breadth of a hair. It will not fuse nor compromise. Its numbers will steadily increase, for it is composed of a class-conscious membership who can not be bribed, nor intimidated, nor stampeded.

The battle royal is now on. It is between capitalism and socialism; there is no middle ground and there can be no compromise. The issue is the collective instead of the individual ownership of the earth, and the freedom instead of the slavery of mankind.

In June [1898] the first national convention of the Social Democracy will be held. Every state in the union will be represented. The work of the organization will then be prosecuted with all the ardor of crusaders. The Colonization Department, organized under an efficient commission, to enter upon the work of colonizing the unemployed and establishing a system of cooperative industry, is one of the strong features of the organization, and gives promise not only of practical and beneficent results in the near future, but of being a powerful factor in promoting the general movement and hastening its triumph.

What a noble and ennobling spirit animates the Social Democracy!

It would strike the fetters from the millions of victims of wage-slavery. It would enthrone manhood.

It would inaugurate independence where now crouching, crawling, slaving dependence exists.

It would give to every toiler a home in his own right, make it light and bright and joyous; a fit place for mothers to expand in all the loveliness of womanhood, where children may be reared and lisp in song and praise their thankfulness for blessings to which millions of them are now strangers.

In seeking to accomplish the work in which the Social Democracy is now engaged, there is no departure from the severest demands of common sense. The Social Democracy is as free from vagary, as far from the impracticable, as the science of mathematics.

It uses words and terms which are signs of emancipating ideas —lifting, building ideas. It sees in Social Democracy the certainty of man owing himself, of receiving and enjoying all he earns, giving no part of it to an exploiter who poses as his benefactor. It sees cooperative workingmen in control of their own factories, their own machinery and tools, regulating their own hours of labor and conditions of employment, working for themselves and their loved ones, owning their homes, and knowing no master excepting the law which, as a “rule of action,” liberates instead of crushes and dwarfs their energies.

Contrast this program with what is transpiring around us today, and men of thought must be satisfied that there is a demand growing every day more imperative for the Social Democracy.

The unseemly wranglings in Congress over civil service, indicative of inordinate greed for spoils, mantles the face of the nation with a blush of shame, emphasizing the fact that political baseness and corruption have reached fathomless depths, and demonstrating that under the rule of capitalism the political waters, foul beyond conception, are breeding stench more numerous than Coleridge found at Cologne, and that the minds of Republican politicians, the avowed champions of "protection of labor" and "civil service reform," are as contaminating as the exudations of a pestilence.

While the Social Democracy is putting forth its energies to solve problems of interest to the toiling masses, the operations of the Dingley tariff are multiplying and strengthening the trusts of the country,ⁱ and these are tightening their grasp upon the throats of the people and commanding obedience by extortion. While there is neither war nor pestilence, failures, bankruptcy, insanity, suicide, murder, larceny, and prostitution increase at a rate to threaten the country with wreck and ruin; and while this appalling program is being carried out, national banker and Secretary of the Treasury Gage is formulating a currency plan that will deliver the people to the tender mercies of four thousand or more national banks,ⁱⁱ whose rapacity is equal to as many man-eating tigers in the jungles of Bengal.

What prospect is there that things can be improved under this system? None whatever, and the more prudent men contemplate the outlook, the more satisfied they become that the lines mapped out by the Social Democracy are the ones to be followed if the hopes of the poor are not finally to go down in black despair.

But I do not doubt the triumph of the Social Democracy.

It is founded on established economic principles. It is philanthropic without one departure from axiomatic truth, and it is growing because the more it is investigated, the more it is found to embody those principles of life and growth and expansion which meet the approval of thoughtful men.

That the capitalist class, their politicians and parsons, their press and judiciary, oppose it with all their power is a sign of the times full of promise. Labor will not be "fooled all the time." There must come a time when labor will arouse from its lethargy, when workingmen will no longer submit to being sheared like so many sheep, nor tagged and branded like so

many cattle, when, grasping in the fullness of its emancipating power, the Social Democracy movement, they will rush to its standard and bear it to victory.

The Social Democracy is moving onward and upward. It is gathering momentum each day. It is in the interest of humanity, and never, in all the ages, has humanity awakened a profounder interest than now; so marked, so deep, so vivid are the lines of impression that it would be treason to truth to doubt ultimate results.

I am not only filled with hope, but with confidence, and this confidence grows in strength as from the East and the West, from the North and the South, advanced thinkers, students of affairs, men and women of action, great and good, with “thoughts that breathe and words that burn,”ⁱⁱⁱ flock to our standard with words of cheer.

When the first campaign of the Social Democracy has been fought, the United States will marvel at the progress of the movement, and the millions of Social Democrats throughout the world will join in generous applause.

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ⁱ The Dingley Act of 1897, initiated under the new administration of Republican William McKinley, was the highest tariff in American history. It placed heavy new taxes on hides and raw wool and dramatically increased existing tax rates on imported sugar, woolen goods, linen, silk, and other products.

ⁱⁱ Lyman J. Gage (1836-1927), named Secretary of the Treasury by President William McKinley, was instrumental in winning passage of the Gold Standard Act of 1900, which placed the United States on a monometallic gold-based monetary system.

ⁱⁱⁱ Definition of poetry by Thomas Gray (1716-1771).