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What Is Behind the Label?

A Plea for Clearness

Sylvia Pankhurst

November 3, 1923

Men and women call themselves Socialists, Communists, Anarchists, Individualists, thinking they thus explain their views to themselves and others. Yet question them, but a little; you will discover how few of them have any clear conception of what they mean by their labels. Thus it is that many fail to recognise a brother of their faith, unless he bear a label, discourse he never so fully and clearly upon his beliefs and ideals.

When we are considering the as yet intangible things of the future, the life of our hopes beyond our present experiences, precise thinking is difficult; prolonged research and meditation are necessary to arrive at any clearness of aim. Therefore behind the labels we find abundant confusion. The advocate of such an extreme form of State interference with the liberty of the individual as compulsory birth-control is found to label himself Individualist. Zealous upholders of Capitalism also label themselves Individualists, though Capitalism could not be maintained an hour without the power of the State forces, which protect private property, and prevent those who have not enough to satisfy their needs from despoiling those who have something to spare.

Self-styled Anarchists are found who have not thought out a single fundamental of a society without law, and who support variously nationalisation of the land, the single tax, and other State organised panaceas, Trade Unions with their centralised mechanism and oppressive officialdom, and petty trading and production for profit, which, like the larger Capitalism, necessitates law and its forces to protect the property-holder from being dispossessed.

So-called Socialists are found whose idea of Socialism consists in various reforms of the Capitalist system: Parliamentary legislation to secure such things as more liberal charity towards the poor or closer supervision over them, higher taxation or taxation on a new basis, municipal trading, State Capitalism, State subsidies and other encouragements to great Capitalism, or, on the other hand, war on great Capitalism, and State encouragement of small Capitalism, and other confused and conflicting expedients.

Self-styled Communists are found whose aims differ little if any from those of the most confused and vague of the reformists.

'What is Socialism, what is Communism, what is Anarchy?' ask a multitude of would-be converts, weary of the cruelty and waste of Capitalism and eagerly desiring an alternative. For answer they receive only confused denunciations of existing things; no hopeful vision of the new life which the labelled ones are supposed to advocate is vouchsafed them. They turn away empty and discouraged.

Programmes become cramping and conservative influences if men and women worship them as holy writ, and refuse their thoughts permission to go on before an accepted formula. Yet without discovering for ourselves what our aims really are, without defining them so that they may be understood by others, how shall we work for them, how shall we sow the seed that shall create a movement to achieve them?

Our aim is Communism. Communism is not an affair of party. It is a theory of life and social organisation. It is a life in which property is held in common; in which the community produces, by conscious aim, sufficient to supply the needs of all its members; in

which there is no trading, money, wages, or any direct reward for services rendered.

The Individualist emphasises his dislike for coercion by the collectivity, his desire that the individual shall be free. We also dislike coercion and desire freedom; we aim at the abolition of Parliamentary rule; but we emphasise the interdependence of the members of the community; we emphasise the need that the common storehouse and the common service shall provide an insurance against want for every individual.

We aim at the common storehouse, not the individual hoard. We desire that the common storehouse shall bulge with plenty, and whilst the common storehouse is plenished we insist that none shall want.

We would free men and women from the stultifying need of making their own individual production pay; the peasant toiling uncounted hours with inadequate tools, the fear of incapacity and want always dogging his thoughts; the little business man counting his losses and profit with anxious mind; the wage-slave selling his labour cheaply and without security; the artist debarred from the effort to improve his skill and quest for his ideals by the insistence of the economic spur.

We aim at the common service; we desire that all should serve the community, that no longer should there be divers classes of persons; the hewers of wood and the drawers of water; the intellectuals, the leisured classes, who are merely parasites. The Individualist cries: 'Freedom.' We answer: 'Thou shalt not exploit.' 'Thou shalt not be a parasite.'

Yet we would have nothing of dictatorship: we believe that a public opinion can be treated which will produce a general willingness to serve the community. The exception to that general willingness will become, we believe, altogether a rarity; we would not have the occasional oddity who will not join the general effort disciplined by law; the disapprobation, even the pity of his fellows will insure his rarity.

The thought: 'I will not produce because I can secure a better living as a non-producer,' whether it be the thought of an employer, or of an unemployed worker, is a typical product of Capitalism. A society in which that thought predominates is inevitably one of poverty and exploitation. The thought: 'I will not produce if I can avoid it' falls like a blight upon society to-day. It is the inevitable product of the capitalist system.

Let us produce in abundance; let us secure plenty for all; let us find pleasure in producing; these thoughts must pervade the community if it is to be able to provide, in lavish measure, plenty for all-in material comfort, in art, in learning, in leisure. At such a community we aim. We emphasise the need for the Workshop Councils.

The Individualist fears that even the autonomous Workshop Councils may lead to the circumscribing of personal liberty. We however desire the Workshop Councils in order to insure personal liberty.

In the Communist Society at which we aim all will share the productive work of the community and all will take a part in organising that work.

How can it be done?

In these days of great populations and varied needs and desires people are not willing to return to the stage at which every individual or family made its own house, clothing, tools, utensils, and cultivated its own patch of soil and provided all its own tools. A return to productive work, a discarding of artificial and useless toil, we desire and expect to see, but work in which many workers co-operate we expect and desire to retain.

The building of engines and ships and all sorts of machinery, the construction of cables, weaving and spinning by machinery, and numberless other things are dependent on the co-ordinated work of large numbers of people. It is probable that developments in the use of electricity and other present and future inventions, will tend to render less economically necessary than used to be the

case, both the vast workshop and the vast city. Moreover the influence of profit-making being eliminated, the unhealthy and congenial massing together of people will be checked. Nevertheless for at least a very long time, the large scale production wrought by many inter-related workers, will remain a necessary condition of maintaining both plenty and leisure for all.

If large numbers of people are working together and if the varied needs of large populations are to be supplied, the work will come either to be directed from above or from below. Unless each individual in the work shop is an independent co-operator, taking a conscious share in the organisation of the collective work, then all the workers in the shop must be under the direction of a manager; and that manager must either be appointed by those whom he directs or by some outside authority.

The same principle applies throughout the entire field of production, distribution, and transport; unless the workshops co-ordinate themselves, unless they themselves arrange their relationship with their sources of supply and the recipients of their products, then that co-ordination must be affected by an outside authority with power to enforce its authority.

In order to promote the liberty and initiative of the individual, as well as for the welfare of the collectivity, therefore, we emphasise the need for the autonomous workshop councils, co-ordinated along the lines of production, distribution and transport.