Human Nature Makes Socialist Ideals Impossible

Today's enthusiasts for a socialist America are unlikely to know the name of Robert Blatchford. If they did, they might think twice about their current enthusiasm.

Blatchford was an Englishman, a friend and debating partner of G. K. Chesterton. Born in 1851, he was a generation older than Chesterton, yet both were thinking and writing at a time when it was understandable to be an enthusiast for socialism. The industrial revolution was in full swing, creating great wealth and havoc. Some of that havoc depopulated the English countryside and concentrated factory workers and their families in urban slums. Blatchford thought that a strong socialist state was necessary to ease the burdens of those living in or trapped in these slums.

To combat the havoc, Blatchford founded a weekly socialist newspaper, The Clarion, in 1891. In its pages he promoted not just socialism, but atheism, feminism, and imperialism. Despite his decided views, he occasionally made room in his pages for his opponents.

One such occasion followed his 1903 publication of God and My Neighbour, a collection of his Clarion columns. The book detailed his objections to one faith – Christianity – and advocacy of another – socialism.

Blatchford invited his critics to respond, promising that he would publish three of the best essays every week for six months. A few of these pieces were written by a 30-year-old near-nobody by the name of Gilbert Keith Chesterton. The best of his contributions to this ongoing debate was titled "The Eternal Heroism of the Slums." More on it shortly.

The Clarion was a popular publication. Chesterton's challenge

received serious attention in England, and it should receive serious attention by proponents and opponents of socialism today. But we have one clear advantage over Chesterton. He was thinking and writing at a time when socialism was still nothing more than a bright and shiny new idea. We, however, are thinking and reading after decades of repeated, real-life failures of socialism.

Chesterton declared, “Mr. Blatchford’s philosophy will never be endured among sane men.” Why was this near-nobody so able to make such a confident statement? Two reasons. He knew something about the nature of man, and he knew that Blatchford’s philosophy was essentially one of materialism and determinism. Blatchford believed that two things would follow if people were provided with “better conditions of environment and heredity.” People, he believed, would be good, and society’s problems would then be solved.

Chesterton was not persuaded: “Mr. Blatchford offers nothing remotely resembling an argument to show that he knows what conditions would produce good men.” For that matter, Chesterton was also not persuaded that anyone knew the answer to that question. Surely, Blatchford could not mean that “mere conditions of physical comfort and mental culture [could] produce good men, because manifestly they do not.”

And why not? Chesterton, who had only just become a committed Christian, had detected a “strange thing running across human history.” That would be “Sin, or the Fall of Man.”

In a previous essay in The Clarion Chesterton had conceded that Christianity had “committed crimes at which the sun might sicken in heaven.” But the same could be said of every “great and useful institution” on this earth. A “much gorier” institution than Christianity, Chesterton declares, is the state or government, the very institution Blatchford trusted to fix every problem and set free those trapped in the slums.

Remember the title of Chesterton's essay, "The Eternal Heroism of the Slums"? That title was not chosen to glorify or patronize the poor. Instead, it was chosen because Chesterton and the residents of the slums knew that each person possesses a free will. Therefore, everyone, no matter where or how well they live, should behave accordingly and could behave heroically by choosing to do good despite their circumstances.

Chesterton unloads on Robert Blatchford with words that might be helpful to Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn. In associating "vice with poverty" advocates of socialist solutions have hurled the "vilest and the oldest and the dirtiest of all the stones that insolence has ever flung at the poor."

Speaking of stones, Chesterton had a response for Blatchfordians who wondered how a man "born in filth" could live a "noble life." Chesterton knew that "man has something in him which is not conquered by conditions." That something was a "liberty that has never been chained," a liberty that had "made man happy in dungeons, as it may make them happy in slums."

How did Blatchford not know that? Perhaps because Blatchford, the atheist, simply refused to believe in either sin or free will, preferring instead to believe that socialism could create a heaven on earth.

All talk of such a utopia left Chesterton smiling:

"I suppose Mr. Blatchford would say that in his utopia nobody would be in prison. What do I care if I am in prison or no, if I have to drag chains everywhere? A man in [Blatchford's] utopia may have, for all I know, free food, free meadows, his own estate, his own palace. What does it matter? He may not have his own soul."

Karl Marx, of course, presumed that chains would be thrown off in the coming workers' revolution. Both Marx and Blatchford also presumed that religion was the opiate of the masses. Once

again, Chesterton thought otherwise. After all, Chesterton believed that people who know that they have free will can do wondrous things, even heroic things, no matter the difficulty of their conditions. That is true whether those difficult conditions find us trapped in the worst of slums or consigned to the lap of luxury.

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