

Sidney Webb, *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, 1889

Owing mainly to the efforts of Comte, Darwin, and Herbert Spencer, we can no longer think of the ideal society as an unchanging State. The social ideal from being static has become dynamic. The necessity of the constant growth and development of the social organism has become axiomatic [obvious]. No philosopher now looks for anything but the gradual evolution of the new order from the old, without breach of continuity or abrupt change of the entire social tissue at any point during the process. The new becomes itself old, often before it is consciously recognized as new. ...

The main stream which has borne European society towards Socialism during the past 100 years is the irresistible progress of Democracy. ... There is every day a wider consensus that the inevitable outcome of Democracy is the control by the people themselves, not only of their own political organization, but, through that, also of the main instructions of wealth production; the gradual substitution of organized cooperation for the anarchy of the competitive struggle. ... The economic side of the democratic ideal is, in fact, Socialism itself. ...

[A] society is something more than an aggregate of so many individual units – that it possesses existence distinguishable from those of any of its components. ... Without the continuance and sound health of the social organism, no man can now live or thrive; and its persistence is accordingly his paramount end. ...

If we desire to hand on to the afterworld our direct influence, and not merely the memory of our excellence, we must take even more care to improve the social organism of which we form part, than to perfect our own individual developments. Or rather, the perfect and fitting development of each individual is not necessarily the utmost and highest cultivation of his own personality, but the filling, in the best possible way, of his humble function in the great social machine. ...

[C]omplete individual liberty, with unrestrained private ownership of the instruments of wealth production, is irreconcilable with the common [good]. The free struggle for existence among ourselves menaces our survival as a healthy and permanent social organism. Evolution, Professor Huxley declares, is the substitution of consciously regulated coordination among the units of each organism, for blind anarchic competition. ...

It was inevitable that Democracy should learn this lesson. With the masses painfully conscious of the failure of Individualism to create a decent social life for four-fifths of the people, it might have been foreseen that Individualism could not survive their advent to political power. If private property in land and capital necessarily keeps the many workers permanently poor (through no fault of their own), private property in land and capital will inevitably go the way of the feudalism which it superceded.