

Carlsbad 1819

Like another Chouannerie

The yearning for lord and manor in socialist thought

March 4, 2017 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

In 1902, an American socialist (initially a Bellamyite nationalist more specifically) by the name of William James Ghent decided to make his peace with managerialism by publishing a book.

To it he gave quite the noteworthy title: *Our Benevolent Feudalism*.

The Spectator contemporaneously comments on it (<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/31st-january-1903/41/our-benevolent-feudalism-by-w-j-ghent-macmillan-an>):

Mr. Ghent is writing about matters in the United States. If what he says of the present is true, and if he makes a correct prognostication of the future, the "Republic" on the other side of the Atlantic is on the way to being, and will soon be, an oligarchy. The Republican forms will be preserved, as they were preserved in Rome by Augustus, but the substance will have departed. He allows that the oligarchy will be benevolent, its rule being tempered by a higher moral sense and a kindlier spirit than similar Governments have had in the past, and that it will be also restrained by fear of the multitude which it will control. Indeed, to read the chapter in which Mr. Ghent sums up his visions, one might almost think, so restrained and gentle is his irony, that he looks forward to the future with contentment.

What could have motivated Ghent to loop so dramatically into such a reactionary attitude? Had he become the next Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet? Was he prepared to unleash a new reign of popery?

Well, let us quote from his work

(<https://archive.org/stream/ourbenevolentfeu00ghenuoft#page/8/mode/2up>):

The dominant tendencies will be clearly seen only by those who for the time detach themselves from their social ideals. What, then, in this republic of the United States, may Socialist, Individualist, and Conservative alike see, if only they will look with unclouded vision? In brief, an irresistible movement – now almost at its culmination toward great combinations in specific trades ; next toward coalescence of kindred industries, and thus toward the complete integration of capital. Consequent upon these changes, the group of captains and lieutenants of industry attains a daily increasing power, social, industrial, and political, and becomes the ranking order in a vast series of gradations. The State becomes stronger in its relation to the propertyless citizen, weaker in its relation to the man of capital. A growing subordination of classes, and a tremendous increase in the numbers of the lower orders, follow. Factory industry increases, and the petty industries, while still supporting a great number of workers, are in all respects relatively weaker than ever before; they suffer a progressive limitation of scope and function and a decrease of revenues. Defenceless labor, the labor of women and children increases both absolutely and relatively. Men's wages decline or remain stationary, while the value of the product and the cost of living advance by steady steps.

Though land is generally held in somewhat smaller allotments, tenantry on the small holdings, and salaried management on the large, gradually replace the old system of independent farming ; and the control of agriculture oscillates between the combinations that determine the prices of its products and the railroads that determine the rate for transportation to the markets. In a word, they who desire to live whether farmers, workmen, middlemen, teachers, or ministers must make their peace with those who have the disposition of the livings. The result is a renascent Feudalism, which, though it differs in many forms from that of the time of Edward I, is yet based upon the same status of lord, agent, and underling. It is a Feudalism somewhat graced by a sense of ethics and somewhat restrained by a fear of democracy. The new barons seek a public sanction through conspicuous giving, and they avoid a too obvious exercise of their power upon political institutions. Their beneficence, however, though large, is but rarely prodigal. It betokens, as in the case of the careful spouse of John Gilpin, a frugal mind. They demand the full terms nominated in the bond; they exact from the traffic all it will bear. Out of the tremendous revenues that flow to them some of them return a part in benefactions to the public; and these benefactions, whether or not primarily devoted to the easement of conscience, are always shrewdly disposed with an eye to the allayment of pain and the quieting of discontent. They are given to hospitals; to colleges and churches which teach reverence for the existing regime, and to libraries, wherein the enforced leisure of the unemployed may be whiled away in relative contentment.

They are never given, even by accident, to any of the movements making for the correction of what reformers term injustice. But not to look too curiously into motives, our new Feudalism is at least considerate. It is a paternal, a Benevolent Feudalism.

What a prophet, that Ghent. Though I am not convinced of its benevolence. Moreover, the feudalism appears to have transitioned into an absolutism, with the "barons" very eager to cooperate with the... well, there's no king, so the other barons, I guess. It's a republic, so perhaps a Doge? No. Every one of us is a Doge! The people are sovereign, and therefore all commoners are equally noble. At long last, we have been liberated.

One can perhaps hear echoes of Bossuet's *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture*, Book X, Article I, Proposition 11 that "Men are the true riches of a kingdom." Thus Bossuet recommends: Out with vagrants and beggars. Promote modesty, frugality and saving. Live subject to authority. Alas, with

no prince and no princely domain nor counsel, the role of human capital investor has passed down to the *noblesse de robe* and the academic scribblers who are their squires. Modesty, frugality, saving? Hah!

But, nonetheless, Ghent does describe the dynamic, if imperfectly. The “civil society” is one big manor court, and the civil registry is the court roll. Us noble commoners are all afforded the one true form of property ownership: fee simple in freehold tenure. But since we are in the benevolent social-democratic manor and under its many registries, bureaus and paperwork, perhaps it’s more like a copyhold tenure. We are all equal, so there are no rights of seignory. Instead, we all compete for seignorial privileges (uh, sorry – civil liberties) on an equal footing in the ballot box and the press. The Polish szlachta ain’t got nothing on us. Every subsidy, every step to “marriage equality” (after all, marriage is now a civil affair in the great civil society of our new manor), every social program – these are our hard-earned noble prerogatives.

Auguste Comte had read his de Maistre. He loved *Du pape*, in particular. So much that he included it as one of the books in his Positivist Library (<https://archive.org/stream/positivistlibra00harrgoog#page/n16/mode/2up>), the list for readers seeking to move past the metaphysical stage of pre-enlightened darkness and usher in the Religion of Humanity. Comte had flipped the reactionary invective against pride, egoism, on the weakness of individual reason and need for faith, and used these into the service of positivism and meliorism. So too do our modern socialists speak of community and man’s alienation only to unleash on him the cold, calculating Weberian bureaucracies at best or at worst, the Red Terror.

Saint-Simon – the one who most of all severed modern man from his place in an ordered hierarchy of a realm, and instead reduced his essence to “worker” versus “idler,” creating the socialist fetishization of the working class and many a proletarian nationalist party or union worker ever fearful of whether the next labor market perturbation will reduce his nominal wages by 0.05% or not. He had also read his de Maistre. So much did Saint-Simon want a spiritual revival that he did not wait to proclaim a New Christianity:

Yes, I believe Christianity to be a divine institution, and I am persuaded that God grants special protection to those who devote their efforts to causing all human institutions to be submitted to the fundamental principle of this sublime doctrine. I am convinced that I myself am performing a divine mission when I remind the Peoples and the Kings of the true spirit of Christianity. And, fully confident of the special and divine protection that is being given to my efforts, I therefore feel hardy enough to make representations concerning their conduct to the Kings of Europe, who have formed a coalition, and have given this union the sacred name of Holy Alliance; I now address myself directly to them, and dare to say;

Princes,

What is the nature, what is the character, in the eyes of God and of Christians, of the power that you exercise?

What are the bases of the system of social organization that you are working to establish? What measures have you taken to ameliorate the moral and physical existence of the poor classes?

You call yourselves Christians, yet you continue to base your power upon physical force, so that you are still only the successors of Caesar, and you forget that true Christians propose, as the final outcome of their efforts, to annihilate completely the power of the sword, the power of Caesar, which, by its very nature is provisional.

Listen to the voice of God, which speaks to you through my lips; become good Christians once again, and stop looking upon armies, noblemen, heretical clergies and perverse judges as your principal sources of sustenance. United under the banner of Christianity, you will be able to accomplish all the duties that this banner imposes upon the powerful; remember that it commands them to employ all their forces in advancing as rapidly as possible the social well-being of the poor!

The prince, unable to withstand the tide of revolution, evidently relented – and its consequences are in wide view to all of us today. Liberal Christianities and Social Gospels, all of these are visible from Saint-Simonianism.

But not only those. Here are also the traces of the Catholic corporatism of Baron Karl von Vogelsang (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Freiherr_von_Vogelsang), whose Christian Social Party of Austria would leave an impression on a certain populist by the name of Karl Lueger, who in turn would inspire a well-known young aspiring art student.

Also of a certain Catholic thinker by the name of Marc Sangnier, who heeded the call of the *Rerum novarum* by founding Le Sillon (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Sillon) – a group contemporary with Action Francaise, but on the other end: democratic, republican (ever more militantly so with its years) and on the verge of going so far as to question the episcopal polity for a priesthood of all believers. Yet no doubt following a Catholic skepticism of modernity.

But these are ideas. What about material actions? What about actually living on the manor?

Etienne Cabet, founder of the Icarian movement of utopian communes, helped out with that. A description of one of his experiments (<https://archive.org/stream/icariachapterinh00shaw#page/116/mode/2up>):

In dress the Icarians are necessarily very plain, though entirely free from the affectation of peculiarities. At Nauvoo, when the colony numbered some hundreds, there was more reason for adopting uniformity of garb than in the small community of today where there is no temptation to extravagance or to rivalry in dress. A dark blue calico is the fabric most commonly worn by the women on week-days. The men wear the plain, substantial clothes of western farmers.

[...]

The amusements of the community are not of a very gay and hilarious character, and are not so prominent a feature of the social life as they would be, were the young members more numerous. (Although we have generally referred to this branch as the "old party," it was not exclusively composed of old people; on the other hand the party of the young people contained several aged persons.) The younger members have some musical taste, and there is a cabinet organ in the hall. The library, now containing about a thousand volumes — an equal number having been kept at the other village, — consists chiefly of standard French works of literature, philosophy, history, science, and miscellany, most of them saved from the wreck of the Nauvoo library. A number of French and American periodicals are taken, and their perusal is the favorite recreation. Sunday is kept as a holiday, and sometimes the little community gathers in the assembly hall for music, select reading, a dance, or an amateur play; while on other Sundays a quiet picnic is enjoyed under the trees on the Nodaway. The standard of morality is high, and the ethical sense of the community, trained by their unselfish mode of life, is superior; but, though permitting any form of belief among their members, they are not religious. Being materialists and positivists, philosophically, they exalt their communistic doctrines into a so-called religion of humanity.

If a marriage is to take place, the nearest justice of the peace is resorted to, and the knot is tied in a simple and legal manner. The school-house, which stands midway between the two villages and is patronized by both, belongs in the regular district school system of the county, and school-director and teacher are chosen in the usual manner. As there are only two or three families besides Icarians resident in the school-district, an Icarian is always elected director, and the teacher is appointed with particular reference to the character of the school. For several years an intelligent French lady, well educated in Cincinnati, and formerly an Icarian, has presided in the school-room. Until quite recently Icaria maintained its own schools, wherein Icarian doctrines, manners, and morals received much attention; but the depleted membership of the communities has of late years made the present arrangement expedient.

From the first the Icarians have been good American citizens, taking a quiet but intelligent part in public affairs, and showing high respect for our institutions and forms of government. Cabet and all his comrades took out naturalization papers in 1848, and showed ardent sympathy with abolitionist and free-soil doctrines. They voted the Fremont presidential ticket in 1856, and Marchand is rather proud of having voted for every Republican President. All his fellow-members in the New Icarian Community remain Republicans. The other community has for several years thrown its political influence with the "Greenback" party on the ground that it represents dissatisfaction with the present state of society. If the colony had remained in Texas, its thorough-going ideas of liberty must have involved it in trouble with its neighbors, and the war would have endangered its existence. A number of its members saw military service in the Union Army.

Good citizens, those Icarians. They certainly timed their ascension into republicanism and apple pie quite appropriately: in 1848.

We had even more radical proposals, too. Where Icarians respected the sexual division of labor to one degree or another, Fourier with his abominable phalansteries (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phalanst%C3%A8re>) was less eager about it.

Thus the danger of socialism. It is, contrary to what a capitalist cliché often claims, very much in line with human nature. It is a longing for order, community and routine. Of a regime of status and vocation, as opposed to a tumultuous regime of contract and bargaining. And so, many ambitious status-seeking youths rush to the NGOs and the academic posts fancying themselves the bearers of a *noblesse oblige* with their schemes for expanding the civil service – the one and anointed disbursing officer of charity. The most natural of desires are perverted to follow the most ruinous of ends.

This entry was posted in [Feudalism](#), [Historical insights](#), [Political economy](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

6 thoughts on “The yearning for lord and manor in socialist thought”

1. Michael Rothblatt says:

[March 4, 2017 at 9:57 pm](#)

Are you familiar with The Political Context of Sociology by Leon Bramson? In the book Bramson shows how socialism is the outgrowth of Reaction and Traditionalist Conservatism.

Do you think there can be no order, community and routine under capitalism? In his book Why Not Capitalism? Jason Brennan made good argument for communitarian capitalism.

Ludwig von Mises outlined many omnipresent inclinations toward socialism: resentment of personal responsibility, resentment of frustrated ambition, resentment of the intellectuals, resentment of white collar workers, resentment of the rich kids, etc. In short, regime of status and vocation is highly attractive because it enables one to feel good about oneself even when one is a miserable failure.

BTW great to see a such a breath of fresh air in Reactosphere! Given what I've read so far, it seems to me that you're probably the closest of all the people out there to my own thinking on the matters (with the possible exception in the area of economics perhaps).

Reply

o [Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur](#) says:

[March 4, 2017 at 10:36 pm](#)

I have not read Bramson, but the thesis that socialism has aristocratic origins is quite old. In fact, Mises himself subscribed to it. Being a member of the lower gentry, he likely saw it first hand.

My take on capitalism is more complex. I find most anti-capitalist argumentation to be quite flawed and frequently based on dubious egalitarian assumptions even when the speaker is of the right. William Graham Sumner is a good corrective. On the other hand, I do believe that a partial restoration of status-based institutions is necessary. Modern venture capital is an example of a patronage relationship. The company stores and truck systems of old were practically an industrial manorialism.

Reply.

- o Michael Rothblatt says:

March 5, 2017 at 11:43 am

Yes, for example, in his youth Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn was a socialist of the right, though he later wrote that he was thoroughly ashamed of his immature presumptions.

Aren't the company stores and truck systems universally considered bad and exploitative though? Before the WWII (after the war, we got Communism thanks to the Western betrayal) there was an interesting practice in my country owing to cultural peculiarities. Namely, employers would act paternalistically toward employees — employers would provide free board for employees, and if necessary also free room. Employees would also often get products of the enterprise for free, or cheaper than the market rate depending on what the product in question is. For Christmas employees would get fattened hogs, and other gifts. Rich industrialists would often act as patrons, building churches, schools, etc. I think this is a natural development under certain conditions. Without WWI, Catholic and Orthodox parts of the world would've probably developed in that direction — laissez-faire honed by noblesse oblige.

Reply.

2. Pingback: Gobineau, the Royalist | Carlsbad 1819

3. Pingback: Bonald and the socialists: some unsettled debts | Carlsbad 1819

4. Pingback: Conservatism, the social question and the idea of a socialist monarchy | Carlsbad 1819

Website Built with WordPress.com.