

A Socialist Meets Mr. Gurdjieff

Rowland Kenney

Rowland Kenney describes life as a Socialist in England during the late 19th and early 20th Century. He was a contributor to the *New Age*, attended Ouspensky's early lectures in London and with his friend A. R. Orage first met Gurdjieff in February 1923. Kenny examines how the study of Gurdjieff's ideas altered his view of large-scale social change and led him to conclude that social progress must be the indirect result of individual efforts to achieve self-knowledge and inner growth.

As a revolutionary Socialist I am now a back number. My period of active propaganda was in the heyday of the Labour and Socialist Movement, when Robert Blatchford, George Bernard Shaw, Keir Hardie and H. M. Hyndman were in their prime. Today I am prone, as men on the shelf are apt to be, to indulge in reminiscence, and that leads me to ask myself questions. One such question is how have I come to drop almost entirely out of the Socialist Movement?

My conservative friends have a ready answer, of course. They tell me bluntly that it is because now I have more sense; that with advancing age I have seen the folly of my earlier enthusiasms and realised the need for a conservative attitude to political and social problems And they are completely, absolutely wrong. It would be nearer the mark to ascribe the change in me to fatigue after a lifetime of very hard work, or to diminished energies consequent on the natural decline of mental and physical powers with added years. Indeed, if I am driven to argue public affairs on the political level, I still find myself as far removed as ever from my Conservative friends, and as vehement as ever in my exposition of Socialist doctrine. So age and diminished energy certainly do not account for all the change. There must be added another factor, and that factor is an altered outlook on life and on human destiny, irrespective of any views I may still hold on political and kindred problems.

Now let me delve a little in my earthy past and present in brief outline the picture of one pilgrim's way—I dare not write "progress"! Strange as it may seem, I began my thinking life, before I was ten years old, as a Socialist. It was then part of my

duty to read aloud to my aged grandmother, and every Sunday I read a special article from the Manchester *Sunday Chronicle*. The article was by Robert Blatchford, who wrote beautiful, hefty, English prose under the pen-name of "Nunquam."

The Socialist Newsboy

One Sunday Blatchford criticised a new fad called Socialism that appeared to be infecting the minds of some of the working men of the industrial north. A correspondent promptly wrote to the paper to tell Blatchford that he did not know anything about it and he had better study the subject before writing any more such nonsense.

True to his nature, Blatchford had to admit that the man was right; he made a thorough study of the subject—and was converted. But Mr. Edward Hulton, the owner of the *Sunday Chronicle*, was not, and Blatchford had to find a fresh medium in which to express the new faith that now filled his being. With his closest friend, Mr. Alex M. Thompson, and a few other colleagues, he founded a new Socialist weekly paper, *The Clarion*. The first number of *The Clarion* appeared on December 12th, 1891—just before my tenth birthday, when I was already earning my own living as a newsboy—and I read it avidly.

What a newspaper was *The Clarion*! It was in no way highbrow, but the literary standard of its articles was remarkably high. Never since has there been anything in England to approach it for effective propaganda, lively wit and warm humour, a tolerant view of our common human frailties, broad human understanding, and a marvellous knack of making every reader, even a small newsboy of ten years old, feel that a *Clarion* contributor was a personal friend and that all "Clarionettes" were bound together in good fellowship, firm integrity, and in a burning desire and unswerving intention to reshape the world on just and humane lines. (And little do our present Socialist Members of Parliament admit—some of them do not even suspect—how much they owe their present positions to the work of Robert Blatchford and his devoted *Clarion* band.) So I was an out-and-out Socialist and, when I was old enough to enter into political discussion, few people with whom I came in contact were allowed to forget it.

With infinite toil I struggled out of the world of wage-earners and became a member of what we called the "salaried," and in 1910, after some experience of the publishing world, I was appointed manager of the Publications Department of the Independent Labour Party. The leading men there were Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip (later Lord) Snowden, and I was never quite at ease with them. They and their closest friends were nearly all rather narrow-minded temperance reformers and the like, ambitious and given to chapel-going and political intrigue. I preferred the broader, more human atmosphere of *The Clarion* groups, and very soon I left the I. L. P.

I drifted into journalism, and my next specialist part as a Socialist, apart from branch propaganda, was played in 1912 as editor of the *Daily Herald*, during its first

year of existence. We were extremists, strongly critical of official Labour—which loathed us and all our works, a fact which I can still contemplate without either embarrassment or remorse. But to give even the barest outline of the birth and early days of the *Daily Herald*—was it not Lord Northcliffe who called it the “Miracle of Fleet Street”?—would lead me far beyond the scope of this article. Here I am only concerned to mention that I gave myself whole-heartedly to the development of the paper, with an editorial policy of the most extreme type. In due course I left the *Daily Herald*; then came the First World War and the overturn of our old world.

Psycho-analysis and Psycho-synthesis

Soon after the war ended I found myself, as the result of an air-crash, a physical and nervous wreck. Insomnia, unceasing pain, the loss of my old fire and vigour, the preposterous and almost fatal treatment I received at the hands of successive physicians and surgeons, mitigated by the excellent nursing I got in understaffed hospitals, and the apparent hopelessness of my position nearly drove me frantic. Fortunately, I had the sense enough to see that my physical crash could not be entirely responsible for my condition, I must also consider the psychological aspect of the case.

For some years I had been a contributor to the *New Age*, a weekly journal edited by the late Mr. A. R. Orage, one of the most brilliant editors of his day, who was interested in every new idea that appeared to have in it anything vital or constructive. At that time he was devoting considerable space to putting the new and then disturbing ideas of Freud and Jung before the British public—most papers were, of course, denouncing them as blasphemous and obscene.

So I turned to the works of the psycho-analysts and had endless talks with my colleagues who were also studying, and in some cases practising, the new methods of psycho-therapy.

Although in later years I modified many of my extravagant views about the therapeutic possibilities of psycho-analysis, I profited greatly by it. I got a clearer conception of the hidden and complex motives that decide so much of human conduct and activity. But analysis was not enough, and soon I was casting around for some new line of thought. *Psycho-synthesis* was what I demanded of my friends, and they had nothing to offer me. Then, just when all ways to further progress in my work of self-creation seemed closed, a new and entirely unexpected one opened.

The Harmonious Development Of Man

Towards the end of 1921, Orage sent me a message asking me to call at his flat in Chancery Lane on my way home that evening, as the late Mr. P. D. Ouspensky had arrived from Constantinople. I had only the vaguest recollections of the name of Ouspensky, as a man who had contributed occasional articles to the *New Age*—I believe on foreign affairs—and I wondered what could be awaiting me.

When we did get down to the substance of our talk, and Ouspensky opened his mind to us, I experienced mixed but powerful feelings of bewilderment and exhilaration. He informed us that for some years he had been studying the teachings of a man to whom he had been introduced in Moscow, a Mr. Georgy Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, who, he had completely satisfied himself, had knowledge and powers beyond those of ordinary men. Gurdjieff had built up a method of study and practice concerned with what he termed "The Harmonious Development of Man," and it was his intention to open an Institute in Western Europe where he could give practical instruction to those interested in his ideas.

I was soon convinced that our psycho-synthesist had arrived, but the message he brought was concerned with esoteric matters which, though they had occasionally roused my curiosity, had seemed to my workaday mind to be too fantastic for everyday use, and I had never seriously studied them.

Socialism and political, economic, and social questions had almost entirely dominated my thoughts and activities. Orage, on the other hand, had managed to steep himself in the study of all these things. Indeed, he had lectured and written on Theosophy and various Eastern religions and cults, while at the same time keeping abreast of modern developments in the world of politics, literature and art.

At the beginning of our conversation Orage spoke of Theosophy – apparently he and Ouspensky had discussed this subject in the past. Then he and I discussed various aspects of psycho-analysis, but Ouspensky brusquely brushed these things aside, and very soon Orage and I were listening spellbound to his particular line of thought.

Ouspensky made no claims on his own behalf. All he knew he had learned from Gurdjieff. He insisted that we must not regard him as having arrived at any advanced stage; our business was to work on ourselves and see what we could do towards a change in our own level of being. But for me it was impossible, even after only one conversation, to doubt that here was a man with a level of being immeasurably above my own.

Orage himself soon realised that he also had found his master; and if the pupil, Ouspensky, could so impress us, what must the master, Gurdjieff, be like? For me Gurdjieff's teachings, as outlined by Ouspensky, opened up new lines of thought and feeling, new mental and spiritual horizons. They were a revelation. Their impact was terrific, almost terrifying, and, although, later, during many years I had no direct contact with either Ouspensky or Gurdjieff, they never ceased to occupy my thoughts and colour my life.

Our first task was to organise a group for the regular study of Gurdjieff's ideas. Some members of the early group persisted in their studies and work on themselves; others fell away for various reasons. But one thing I feel certain about: no one who has gained even an elementary grasp of Gurdjieff's ideas and sincerely tried to apply them can ever entirely lose them or fail to be permanently influenced by them. They are a "seed" of "being" which, I believe, only the death of the "Ground," the person, can kill.

What these ideas are I shall perhaps attempt to explain in brief outline, in future. Now I must confine myself to pointing out what bearing they have had on my attitude as a Socialist.

Determinism—with a Difference

In the first place, religion, as presented to us in my childhood, was repellent to me. I had no use for an omnipotent God who could permit all the evils and cruelties of the world to exist. I was a Determinist. From my early years I saw our three-dimensional world in time as one of cause and effect. I found no place in it for free will.

I was not so foolish that I could not see how illogical was my position. While asserting that we were mere pawns on the chess-board of the universe, I was asking my hearers to revolutionise the political and economic system under which we lived. Why argue about what we ought to do when we were the helpless victims of inexorable mechanical laws? But I went on arguing. Something in me insisted that Determinism was not the whole story; but I ignored these promptings.

Now so far as our world in space and time is concerned, Mr. Gurdjieff is a Determinist—but with a difference. There is an invisible world as well as a visible world. We are children of eternity as well as of time. And contact with eternity can be established here in space, now in time. But, he says, it cannot be established mechanically, or through any change in outward circumstances. It must be done by a change of the inner being of the individual through "*conscious effort and intentional suffering.*"

Actually we are machines, but wonderful machines; for we have in us latent powers which, properly developed and used, can transform us into free beings. We can cease to be the slaves of mechanical forces, but this can only be achieved by hard work of a special kind. In his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man Mr. Gurdjieff has devised and perfected the necessary methods, which are being studied and practised by an increasing number of people in many parts of the world.

Very well, then: I believe that no amount of effort by men in their present state of mechanicalness and inner conflict can bring order into the chaos of the world about us.

The first step to be taken to save the world is for men and women to save themselves. And to save themselves means to re-create themselves. Man's business is to become Man. At present man is a jumble of contradictory tendencies, impulses, desires, and beliefs. Worse, he is unaware of how terrible is the situation in which he is placed. He must first become acquainted with himself as he really is before he can even come so far as to desire to change. Given the knowledge, the desire, the opportunity, and the determination, change is possible. Now he is no one thing. He must become ONE. And this means that he must become a conscious being, with a permanent self and a permanent aim.

Until a sufficient number of people have achieved that, humanity will continue to pursue its cyclic course of recurrent rises and falls. Progress in an apparently upward direction will be followed by downward trends and ultimate catastrophe, as has so often happened in the history of the world. Indeed, this must inevitably happen in processes limited to the world of time and space—the mechanical sequence of birth, maturity, decay, and death. But man is blessed in that he has the possibility of release from this wheel of causality; he can become free.

So here am I, still a Socialist in the sense that I believe a society organised for service would be a better society than one of grab and greed; and an individualist of a type not recognised by any school of political thought. As a Socialist I am a back number, living in silence and seclusion. As an individualist I am making my puny efforts to create a self. I am striving to assimilate the teachings of Mr. Gurdjieff, to work according to his methods of self-creation.

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