

Why I am a Guildsman

Bertrand Russell

Russell's statement was published in 1919 in The Guildsman: a Journal of Social and Industrial Freedom, edited by G.D.H.Cole.

I have been led to Guild Socialism by the consideration of what seemed to me the good and bad elements in the existing system and in older proposals for reconstruction: it seemed to me that Guild Socialism combined the good elements and avoided those that were bad more successfully than any of its rivals.

The greatest evil of the existing system is, to my mind, the concentration of economic power, the arguments against which are exactly the same as those against the concentration of political power, being, in fact, the familiar arguments in favour of democracy. So long as economic power remains in the hands of a few, democracy is a sham. The evils of poverty and exploitation are glaring, and are, so far as can be seen, incurable without some form of collective ownership. The capitalist system plays a great part in the causation of wars, while through its control of education and the Press it keeps large sections of opinion under the influence of ignorance and misinformation. These are among the evils which a new system must seem able to cure if it is to command our support. Some of these evils might be cured by any form of Socialism; but there are others which State Socialism would almost certainly not cure.

Power, securely held and long possessed, has nearly always a very bad effect on character, and makes the holders of power incapable of giving effect to the wishes of the democracy. The resulting evils are by no means least in a strong bureaucracy, such as State Socialism would establish. If the holders of executive power are to be amenable to the popular will, they must be in very direct touch with those whom their

decisions affect, they must be easily removable, and they must be under the necessity of publicly defending the measures they adopt. If the present money-making incentive of the capitalist is removed, there must be found some other form of self-interest, presumably that of success in the public esteem, to prevent those who control industry from succumbing to technical conservatism and a Chinese adherence to tradition. I believe this to be possible under Guild Socialism, but highly improbable under State Socialism. I believe also that the distribution of different kinds of power in the hands of different authorities will secure some of those advantages which eighteenth-century political philosophers sought in the theory of checks and balances.

A powerful argument in favour of autonomous guilds in industry may be derived from the theory of democracy. Democracy is not realized by conferring power on the majority of any casual group of human beings; it is realized only when the group fulfils certain conditions in relation to the function concerned. This is recognized in the case of nationality: no sane person contends that British dominion in Ireland is in accordance with democratic principle, although it is carried out in accordance with the will of Parliament. It is recognized even more effectually as regards religious bodies: the power of Parliament to decide the dogmas of the Church of England has become obsolete. The general principle is: any group, whether geographical or not, which has strongly-marked interests that do not greatly affect people outside the group, should be self-governing in regard to such interests. The principle of nationality is one instance of this; self-government in industry is another.

The vastness of modern States and the helplessness of individuals in the grip of enormous organizations has an effect in diminishing responsible and vigorous initiative. Great organizations are an inevitable effect of industrialism; and industrialism will remain under any possible system, it is the strongest thing in the modern social world. But constructiveness and the creative spirit are essential to a healthy life in all who are naturally energetic. Unless men are to become apathetic and disillusioned, unless society is to become stereotyped and unprogressive, it must be possible for the more active-minded members of the community to feel that they are capable, by their actions, of effecting some improvement in the matters that interest them. At present, in industry, constructiveness finds no outlet except in the few great capitalists. It is difficult to believe that any system short of self-government could remedy this evil. The Syndicalists deserve credit for having first sought a cure, but their proposals are open to the objections that may be urged against anarchism, and also to the objection that no adequate provision is made for those political questions that are not

primarily industrial. Peace and war, education, sanitation, and so on, are essentially geographical questions, and demand a geographical public authority. For this reason, the co-existence of the geographical State and the industrial Guild Congress seems to me to effect the necessary compromise between State Socialism and Syndicalism.

To sum up: the present system of private capitalism is to be condemned on account of its cruelty, rapacity and oppression, its tendency to promote wars, its hostility to enlightenment, and its extreme restriction of personal initiative. State Socialism is to be feared because, though it might cure poverty and secure economic justice, it would probably soon become rigid and Byzantine, even more hostile to initiative than the present system, and probably as favourable to misinformation as even the capitalist Press. Anarchism, which aims at avoiding these evils, would place no obstacles in the way of brigandage, and would probably soon end in a military tyranny. If the dangers of anarchism are to be avoided, and the evils of the existing system are to be remedied, Guild Socialism seems to me the plan which involves least of the evils to be feared under State Socialism. I believe that it is capable, not only of putting an end to poverty and economic injustice, but of securing the greatest sum of liberty and initiative that is possible to human nature at its present stage of development.