

Letter to Upton Sinclair

Theodore Roosevelt

March 15, 1906

My Dear Mr. Sinclair:

I have your letter of the 13th instant. I have now read, if not all, yet a good deal of your book, and if you can come down here during the first week in April I shall be particularly glad to see you.

...

In the end of your book, among the various characters who preach socialism, almost all betray the pathetic belief that the individual capacity which is unable to raise itself even in the comparatively simple work of directing the individual how to earn his own livelihood, will, when it becomes the banded incapacity of all the people, succeed in doing admirably a form of government work infinitely more complex, infinitely more difficult than any which the most intelligent and highly developed people has ever yet successfully tried. Personally I think that one of the chief early effects of such attempt to put socialism of the kind there preached into practice, would be the elimination by starvation, and the diseases, moral and physical, attendant upon starvation, of that same portion of the community on whose behalf socialism would be invoked. Of course you have read Wyckoff's account of his experiences as an unskilled laborer of the lowest class. Probably you know him. He was a Princeton man wholly without the physique to do manual labor as well as the ordinary manual laborer can do it, yet in going across the continent his experience was that in every place, sooner or later, and in most places very soon indeed, a man not very strong physically and working at trades that did not need intelligence, could raise himself to a position where he had steady work and where he could save and lead a self-respecting life. There are doubtless communities where such self-raising is very hard for the time being; there are unquestionably men who are crippled by accident (as by being old and having large families dependent on them); there are many, many men who lack any intelligence or character and who therefore cannot thus raise themselves. But while I agree with you that energetic, and, as I believe, in the long run radical, action must be taken to do away with the effects of arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist, yet I am more than ever convinced that the real factor in the elevation of any man or any mass of men must be the development within his or their hearts and heads of the qualities which alone can make either the individual, the class or the nation permanently useful to themselves and to others.

But all this has nothing to do with the fact that the specific evils you point out shall, if their existence be proved, and if I have power, be eradicated.

The Strenuous Life

Theodore Roosevelt

The Hamilton Club, Chicago

April 10, 1899

In speaking to you, men of the greatest city of the West, men of the State which gave to the country Lincoln and Grant, men who preeminently and distinctly embody all that is most American in the American character, I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.

A life of slothful ease, a life of that peace which springs merely from lack either of desire or of power to strive after great things, is as little worthy of a nation as of an individual. I ask only that which every self-respecting American demands from himself and from his sons shall be demanded of the American nation as a whole. Who among you would teach your boys that ease, that peace, is to be the first consideration in their eyes — to be the ultimate goal after which they strive? You men of Chicago have made this city great, you men of Illinois have done your share, and more than your share, in making America great, because you neither preach nor practice such a doctrine. You work yourselves, and you bring up your sons to work. If you are rich and are worth your salt, you will teach your sons that though they may have leisure, it is not to be spent in idleness; for wisely used leisure merely means that those who possess it, being free from the necessity of working for their livelihood, are all the more bound to carry on some kind of non-remunerative work in science, in letters, in art, in exploration, in historical research — work of the type we most need in this country, the successful carrying out of which reflects most honor upon the nation. We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort; the man who never wrongs his neighbor, who is prompt to help a friend, but who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life. It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed. In this life we get nothing save by effort.

Who is a Progressive?

Theodore Roosevelt

Louisville, Kentucky

April 1912

In his recent speech at Philadelphia President Taft stated that he was a Progressive, and this raises the question as to what a Progressive is. More is involved than any man's say-so as to himself.

A well-meaning man may vaguely think of himself as a Progressive without having even the faintest conception of what a Progressive is. Both vision and intensity of conviction must go to the make-up of any man who is to lead the forward movement, and mildly good intentions are utterly useless as substitutes.

The essential difference, as old as civilized history, is between the men who, with fervor and broad sympathy and imagination, stand for the forward movement, the men who stand for the uplift and betterment of mankind, and who have faith in the people, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the men of narrow vision and small sympathy, who are not stirred by the wrongs of others. With these latter stand also those other men who distrust the people, and many of whom not merely distrust the people, but wish to keep them helpless so as to exploit them for their own benefit.

...

Every man who fights fearlessly and effectively against special privilege in any form is to that extent a Progressive. Every man who, directly or indirectly, upholds privilege and favors the special interests, whether he acts from evil motives or merely because he is puzzle-headed or dull of mental vision or lacking in social sympathy, or whether he simply lacks interest in the subject, is a reactionary.

Every man is to that extent a Progressive if he stands for any form of social justice, whether it securing proper protection for factory girls against dangerous machinery, for securing a proper limitation of hours of labor for women and children in industry, for securing proper living conditions for those who dwell in the thickly crowded regions of our great cities, for helping, so far as legislators can help, all the conditions of work and life for wage-workers in great centers of industry, or for helping by the action both of the National and State governments, so far as conditions will permit, the men and women who dwell in the open country to increase their efficiency both in production on their farms and in business arrangements for the marketing of their produce, and also to increase the opportunities to give the best possible expression to their social life. The man is a reactionary, whatever may be his professions and no matter how excellent his intentions, who opposes these movements, or who, if in high place, takes no interest in them and does not earnestly lead them forward.