

## IV

### THE INTELLECTUAL ASCENDANCY OF COLLECTIVISM

IN the realm of ideas a change in theory is reflected in practice only after a lapse of time and, as Mr. Keynes has said, the active men of an epoch are generally applying the theories of men who are long since dead.<sup>1</sup> Thus Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, and before his death in 1790 two English Prime Ministers, Lord Shelburne and William Pitt,<sup>2</sup> had been converted to his ideas. Yet it was not until 1846 that the Corn Laws were repealed, and the free-trade system was not established until Gladstone brought in his budgets of 1853 and 1860. This great reversal of policy was the outcome of a change in European thinking which took about seventy-five years to affect the policies of governments.

In that period the liberal philosophy was in the ascendant: conservatives like Sir Robert Peel, and revolutionists as well, thought of the future in terms of increasing emancipation from prerogative and privilege. Freedom was the polestar of the human mind. When there was an evil to be dealt with, men looked instinctively for its cause in some manifestation of arbitrary power. They sought the remedy in the limitation of arbitrary power and the disestablishment of privilege. They believed in governments which were under the law, in the rights

<sup>1</sup> J. M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, p. 383. "Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."

<sup>2</sup> F. W. Hirst, *Economic Freedom*, p. 40.

of man rather than the sovereignty of kings or of majorities. They held that the improvement of the human lot was to be achieved by releasing thought, invention, enterprise, and labor from exactions and tolls, from the rule of princes, monopolists, great landlords, and established churches. Though some, conservative by interest and temperament, were opposed to drastic change, while others were in favor of radical reform, the conflict between them was whether existing privilege should be maintained or should be withdrawn.

It may be said, I believe, that between, say, 1848 and 1870 the intellectual climate of western society began to change. At some time in that period the intellectual ascendancy of the collectivist movement began. A phenomenon of this sort cannot, of course, be dated precisely, but it is fairly clear that after 1870 liberal philosophy was on the defensive in theory, and that in practice the liberals were fighting a losing rear-guard action.<sup>3</sup> England, it is true, remained faithful to free trade until the Great War of 1914, but the protectionist doctrine grew everywhere in popularity. In 1850 a liberal like Herbert Spencer believed that the next phase of social reform was an attack on the great landed monopolies; as time went on he lost confidence and finally suppressed what he had written on the subject.<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill, though he never became an authoritarian socialist, did begin, toward the close of his life, to write on the assumption that the benefits of liberal philosophy had all been achieved and that the line of further progress was in the direction of collectivism.

More than seventy-five years passed before the collectivist movement was dominant in actual affairs, but in this middle period of the nineteenth century it established itself in men's

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. V. Dicey's lectures on the relation between *Law and Public Opinion in England* during the nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Henry George's *A Perplexed Philosopher*.

thought. Both capital and labor became predominantly protectionist. The older theory that incorporation is a privilege was abandoned and the way was opened to the corporate forms of business organization by the adoption of general incorporation laws. Then, too, the conception of democracy changed. Once the popular movement had been chiefly concerned with the Bill of Rights and other limitations on the sovereign, but the rapid enfranchisement of the masses resulted in the belief that popular sovereignty must not be restrained, that the meaning of free government was the dictatorship of the majority.

Thus freedom ceased to be the polestar of the human mind. After 1870 or thereabouts men thought instinctively once more in terms of organization, authority, and collective power. To enhance their prospects businessmen looked to tariffs, to concentrated corporate control, to the suppression of competition, to large-scale business administration. To relieve the poor and lift up the downtrodden, reformers looked to an organized working class, to electoral majorities, to the capture of the sovereign power and its exploitation in their behalf. Though great corporate capitalists continued to invoke the shibboleths of liberalism when confronted by the collective demands of the workers or the hostile power of popular majorities, yet they were thoroughly imbued with the collectivist spirit through their attachment to protection and to the concentration of control. The reformers and the labor leaders also continued to talk of liberty when their attempts to organize were resisted or their plans for regulation by the state were attacked, or when their agitators were put in jail for disturbing the peace. But in their belief that popular majorities must be unrestrained, in their persistent demands for the magnification of government, in their fundamental aim to dominate and possess and perpetuate the private collectivism of the corporate system, rather than to break up monopoly and disestablish privilege, they

became the adversaries of freedom and the founders of a new authoritarian society.

The contemporary world is so thoroughly imbued with the collectivist spirit that at first it seems quixotic to challenge it. Yet the prospects of reversing the mercantilist policies of European states can hardly have seemed bright when Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*; now we know that the zenith of those policies had been passed. The Ancien Régime was doomed, though Europe still had to pass through the wars and revolutions which marked its end. So it may well be to-day that the beginning of the end is at hand, that we are living at the climax of the collectivist movement, its promises already dust and ashes in men's mouths, its real consequences no longer matters of theoretical debate but of bitter and bloody experience. For in the generation before the Great War, when it became the fashion to believe that all reasonable and enlightened men must be collectivists, no one had ever lived in a society regimented by an omnipotent state according to an official plan. But from 1914 to 1919 the western peoples had a taste of it under war conditions, and since then they have had the opportunity to observe the Russian, German, and Italian experiments. The easy confidence of the pre-war generation has now been shaken by grave doubts as to whether the collectivist principle is consistent with peace and prosperity or with the moral and intellectual dignity of civilized men.

A reaction, definite and profound as that which in the late eighteenth century set in against the Ancien Régime, which in the nineteenth set in against the crudities of *laissez-faire*, has, I believe, already begun. But the popular and influential leaders of contemporary thought are in a quandary. Their settled convictions compel them to believe that a new and better order is being created in one or the other of the collectivist states; their instincts and their observations tell them

that the coming of this new society is attended by many of the symptoms of a relapse into barbarism. They do not like dictatorships, the concentration camps, the censorship, the forced labor, the firing squads, or the executioners in their swallow-tail coats. But in the modes of their thinking, the intellectuals who expound what now passes for "liberalism," "progressivism," or "radicalism" are almost all collectivists in their conception of the economy, authoritarians in their conception of the state, totalitarians in their conception of society.

Mr. Stuart Chase, for example, is a man of liberal instincts and democratic sympathies, but he tells us that in order to achieve abundance for all we must have "centralization of government; the overhead planning and control of economic activity. . . . The United States and Canada will fall into one regional frame; similarly most of Europe. Economically supreme over these frames must sit an industrial general staff with dictatorial powers covering the smooth technical [*sic*] operation of all the major sources of raw material and supply. Political democracy can remain *if it confines itself to all but economic matters . . .*" (italics mine).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, though Mr. Chase is the enthusiastic sponsor of dictatorship on a continental scale, he would yet like to preserve the essentials of personal self-determination. The problem for him, as for all the collectivists of his school, is to reconcile the theory of a dictated economy with an instinctive revulsion against the behavior of active dictators. By some the reconciliation is achieved rather easily. They explain away the barbarism of the dictatorship they happen to admire while denouncing it manfully in all others. Thus sympathizers with the communist effort are profoundly moved by the German persecutions and the Italian deportations. But they have

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Chase, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-13. Cf. also George Soule, *op. cit.*, pp. 214-15.

an abiding faith that the Russian persecutions and deportations have been exaggerated and misunderstood. Mr. Soule, for instance, holding up the Soviets as an example, says with what is apparently an untroubled conscience that the land and capital of Russia are administered by the Communist Party so "that all these things shall be used for the benefit of the whole population (except of those whom the Socialist State regards as enemies or useless persons, like statesmen, priests, private traders and private employers)." Others, who sympathize with the fascist effort, are certain that its brutalities are an unfortunate necessity in order to forestall the greater brutalities of a communist regime. By such casuistry as this men accommodate their faith in the collectivist principle to their recollection of what constitutes a civilized society.

Apologists for both communism and fascism, then, are compelled to believe that the absolutism which they see at work in these promised lands is transitory;<sup>6</sup> that it is either an accidental blemish or only a temporary necessity. They are, I believe, greatly mistaken. A collectivist society can exist only under an absolute state, a truth which Mr. Chase seems dimly to have appreciated when he said that "political democracy can remain if it confines itself to all but economic matters." In view of the fact, for example, that schools, universities, churches, newspapers, books, even athletic sports, require money,

<sup>6</sup> Cf., e.g., Engels's letter to Bebel (1875): "As the State is only a transitional institution which we are obliged to use in the revolutionary struggle, in order to crush our enemies by force, it is pure nonsense to speak of a free people's State. During the period that the proletariat *needs* the State, it needs it, not in the interests of freedom, but in the interests of crushing its antagonists, and when it becomes possible really to speak of freedom, the State as such will cease to exist." (Quoted in Lenin's *State and Revolution*, pp. 170-71. Vanguard Press, 1926.) Lenin gives a similar definition: "Dictatorship is an authority relying directly upon force, and not bound by any laws. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is an authority maintained by means of force over and against the bourgeoisie, and not bound by any laws." *The Proletarian Revolution*, p. 15. Communist Party publication, London.

marketing, and have to have economic support, the realm of freedom and democracy which Mr. Chase leaves is about equal to nothing at all. That is why the absolutism that we see in Russia, Germany, and Italy is not transitory, but the essential principle of a full-blown collectivist order.

For in so far as men embrace the belief that the coercive power of the state shall plan, shape, and direct their economy, they commit themselves to the suppression of the contrariness arising from the diversity of human interests and purposes. They cannot escape it. If a society is to be planned, its population must conform to the plan; if it is to have an official purpose, there must be no private purposes that conflict with it. That this is the inexorable logic of the principle can be learned best by looking at what actual collectivists say and do when they are in power rather than by consulting the writings of sheltered revolutionists like Mr. Chase and Mr. Soule or, better still, Karl Marx, working in the British Museum. It is easy to make the best of both worlds while living safely in a regime of liberty; to let oneself become enchanted by the notion that the promises of the Providential State can be reconciled with the blessings of freedom.

But when we come to the actual collectivists, a different note is sounded. The fascist conception of life, says Mussolini, "accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the state." Does communism accept the individual on any other terms? Does it recognize any right — to labor, to possess property, to think, to believe and to speak — which does not coincide with the interests of the state? It cannot. The ultimate ideal, the practical goal, the inescapable procedure of any full-blown collectivism, was announced by Mussolini, who has been all kinds of collectivist in his time, when he said, "All in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State."

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. A political providence is necessarily a jealous god — how jealous will depend upon how far the state is impelled to go in directing the social order. Of course, the average humane collectivist<sup>†</sup> does not wish to go all the way to the totalitarian state. He does not wish to go too fast or too violently to the point at which he would like to stop. That does not alter the fact that he has embraced a principle of social organization which has no other remedy for evil except to intensify overhead government by officials. For, unless the moderate collectivist believes that a little more official supremacy will end all important evils, how can he say when he proposes to stop? If he is right in thinking that the state can, by what Mr. Chase calls “the overhead planning and control of economic activity,” remedy the disorders of mankind, then surely it would be cruel and benighted not to take full control and end all social evils. Though no doubt most collectivists in western countries hope to stop a long way this side of absolutism, there is nothing in the collectivist principle which marks any stopping place short of the totalitarian state. Their tastes and scruples are the sole checks on their principles, which in themselves are absolutist.

And, worse than this, the application of those principles is cumulative in its effect. As long ago as 1884<sup>\*</sup> Herbert Spencer pointed out that “every additional state-interference strengthens the tacit assumption that it is the duty of the state to deal with all evils and secure all benefits” and at the same time there is a continually “increasing need for administrative compulsion and restraints, which results from the unforeseen evils and shortcomings of preceding compulsions and restraints.”

Spencer predicted that this tendency must lead to the trans-

<sup>†</sup> Who reads Mr. Mumford, Mr. Chase, Mr. Soule, for example.

<sup>\*</sup> *The Man versus the State*, p. 33.

formation of industrial and quasi-popular regimes into "militant communities" organized for "a state of constant war" under a "revival of despotism."<sup>9</sup> There may have been some doubt about that judgment in 1884. But now the course that Spencer predicted is unfolding itself before our eyes. Fifty years have passed since he wrote. During those fifty years there has been no stopping place in the progress of mankind toward ever-greater regimentation in ever-contracting societies. There has been no point in the expansion of tariffs, bounties, bureaucracies, inspectors, censors, police, and armies, no point in the contraction of markets, the disintegration of states, the disunion of ethnic groups — no point at which the collectivists have been able to say: "Thus far and no farther."

How can they say so? The application of their principles creates such disorder that they are never without warrant for redoubling the dose. Without abandoning their central doctrine, how can they refuse to invoke the state as savior when there is obviously so much evil that should be remedied? They have no other principle they can invoke. Like the secret of some ancient art, they have lost the principles of freedom.<sup>10</sup>

They must not complain, then, if men look at Russia, Italy, and Germany to see where the cult of the state is leading them. There, in deeds visible to all, the idea is incarnate.

<sup>9</sup> *The Coming Slavery.*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bk. III.