In Defense of the Individual

By ALBERT JAY NOCK

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The author, Albert Jay Nock, a veteran Georgist, is one of America's most distinguished essayists, a former editor of the original Freeman, author of "Our Enemy, the State" and a number of other volumes on literary, philosophic and sociological subjects.

In 1888, few Americans took the outlook for State collectivism at all seriously. Those were "the days of innocence," an Arcadian innocence far more simple-minded than any that Mrs. Wharton portrayed. Socialism, as we then called it, was a foreign product, interesting chiefly to immigrants of the baser sort, and its importation was not likely to be disturbing. Very few were at all aware—no one, I am sure, was fully aware—of America's lush virginal susceptibility to this alien micro-organism; we domesticated it with the same thoughtless indifference which we displayed towards the potato bug and the English sparrow. Mr. Gerard's de facto "rulers of America"—our leading capitalist-enterprisers, Industrialists and financiers—even took an attitude of rather benevolent neutrality towards it, in sharp contrast to that which they took towards other social doctrines which seemed more menacing; such, for instance, as trade-unionism. State collectivism seemed to them a purely Utopian ideal; nothing could ever come of it in this country. As far as they thought of it at all, it was the figment of a disordered proletarian imagination, and nothing more; so if proletarians felt any better for blowing off steam about it in Canal Street coffeehouses, it was probably a good thing to let them do so.

They were crassly unaware that State collectivism has a philosophy; unaware that this philosophy is quite simple, very plausible, extremely attractive to a combination of human qualities which is the most dangerous of all that are in the world, and also the most common—the combination of first-rate sympathies with third-rate minds. The dreadful suffering of great masses of people, brought about by the unequal distribution of wealth, stirs a quick and noble sympathy; something must be done. Collectivism steps in with a complete economic, political and ethical program, based on a complete philosophy which is attractive, apparently sound, thoroughly acceptable and convincing to a third-rate mind. It surely should need no great perspicacity to foresee what was bound to take place under those circumstances.

It is to be hoped that the reader will not take anything in this paragraph as implying that all collectivists have third-rate minds. The curious phenomenon of a first-rate mind divided into airlight compartments is not uncommon. Thus it was quite possible, as Matthew Arnold observed, for Paraguay to be a great natural philosopher with one side of his being, and a Sandemanian with the other. Thus also, as we see, it is quite possible for Mr. Beard, for instance, to be a very great exponent of history with one side of his being, and a New Dealer with the other.

The de facto rulers of America, however, were unaware that one man armed with such a philosophy can do more damage than a bombing-squadron. This was not the worst of their hubris. They did not know that ideas must be met with ideas. You cannot stamp out an idea or shoot it out or suffocate it with press-agentry and publicity talk. They were unaware that the only way an unsound philosophy can be dealt with is by meeting it with a sound one; and they were even more naively unaware that they had a sound philosophy on their side.

Ignorant of what individualism is, ignorant of its philosophy, hence utterly unable to distinguish their best friends from their worst enemies, they held with dull dogged tenacity to the most distorted and fantastic travesty of individualism, and thereby made an uncommonly nice mess for their successors to clean up.

Curious state of things, that anyone should wonder at the progress of collectivism in America! It has turned loose on us a body of men who know their philosophy by heart, and who have it at their tongue's end; and for thirty-five years, to my knowledge, individualism has equipped no one to meet them. I venture to say that the humblest soap-boxer on Union Square today could cut rings around any ten debaters that individualism can furnish, because he knows his stuff, and the individualists not only do not know his stuff, not only do not know their own stuff, but do not even know that they have any stuff. Would Mr. Lampert or Mr. Winthrop Aldrich stand a dog's chance against Mr. Max Lerner or Mr. Granville Hicks in a debate on the philosophy of collectivism? If such a debate ever comes off, may I be there to hear it! You can buy a copy of Marx's Capital anywhere in New York for almost nothing; it is in the Modern Library, I believe at a dollar. Where (until
now that this reprint of Hirsch's book* has come out) can you buy a corresponding classic of the individualist philosophy?

Recent events in Europe, however, have made our public look a little askance at State collectivism, and wonder whether actually it is all that it is cracked up to be; so the purely social pressure, the unintelligent pressure of fashion against this form of Majestätsbeleidigung, has perhaps somewhat lightened. It does not appear, however, that these events have aroused, as they should, any active interest in knowing whether individualism has anything to say for itself by way of a philosophy, or if so, what it is. This is not so strange as it seems, as a glance at the history of collectivism's progress in America will show.

In England, State collectivism made its way step by step, against the force of continuous, searching, and extremely able criticism. Collectivism was to be brought in by the progressive legalization of one bit of its program after another, thus steadily widening the scope of State control; until finally, when enough of these legalizations had been accepted, when enough of these isolated bits had been assembled in the collectivist pattern, the transition into full collectivism would be easy and natural.

The United States also approached State collectivism step by step, but not by way of a deliberate policy. One might better say that we approached it by a disorderly series of fits and starts. No deliberate policy was needed. Certain strongly marked traits in our national character made an open road to it; and as any number of critics have observed, our form of government is fitted to slide off into collectivism more easily than any other. Essentially collectivist measures appeal strongly to our love of expediency; to our fancy for a short cut to what we want, regardless of consequences; to our soft indolent indisposition towards personal responsibility. These traits have made it second nature for us to go to the State with any difficulty.

* Max Hirsch: "Democracy vs. Socialism."