

Collectivism and Individualism

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It has occurred to me that it might be well to give a tape or series of tapes on the general subject of collectivism and individualism. This is a subject that has for many years been of great importance among social thinkers, in fact, since 1835 when the early works of Robert Owen, Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Leroux were published. The subject is of enormous ramifications and has a premiere importance at the present time in our human society. It is not only involved in certain governments of the world involving at least a third of the human population, but it is also a subject of substantial importance in the youth movements of our own country, and not only that, in certain political tendencies that have been growing in strength in our own institutions since the turn of the century and particularly from the time of the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The subject is so complex that it is difficult to know just how to introduce it. I have thought that I might give a statement of my own experience in relation to this general field of interest as a sort of introduction; but first, to clarify definition, I will read into the tape certain statements that occur on the subject of socialism in *The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* edited by Baldwin. The article in question was contributed by A. T. Hadley and the material is as follows:

- (1) [Socialism is] the disposition to rely on political activity, rather than on individual liberty, as a means of securing the people's material welfare.
- (2) Specifically applied to certain historic manifestations of this disposition—literary, administrative, or revolutionary.

Now quoting in part from what follows:

The development of the doctrines of political economy and of civil liberty had led many people to see in enlightened self-interest a panacea for social ills. Socialism was a protest against this view.

Now individualism is not a creed or a platform, but a way of looking at things; and the same thing may be said of socialism, in the first and broader sense. Under these circumstances we cannot expect to find, and do not find, a coherent statement of socialistic doctrine, generally accepted by socialists as a body. A man may easily be a socialist in some senses and an individualist in others. The individualist is the man who in a number of debatable cases believes that the good from freedom outweighs the evil. The socialist is the man who in these same cases believes that the evil outweighs the good. The difference between the two is in many cases a matter of temperament. The man who reasons more acutely than he feels is pretty certain to be an individualist; the man who feels more acutely than he reasons is likely to be a socialist. For the good of freedom is

essentially an indirect one, only to be fully understood by those who are capable of abstract reasoning, and likely to be exaggerated by those who overvalue such reasoning.

But most of the men who are inclined towards socialistic views fall into certain pretty well defined groups; and the name socialism is applied by turns to the creed and platform of each of these groups. It thus acquires in practice a number of specific senses in place of one general sense. The three main groups of socialists are the *administrative*, the *idealistic*, and the *revolutionary*.

The administrative socialist is the man who believes in extending the authority of the existing state, with such modifications as may fit it to its wider sphere of activity. He would give more rights to the officials and less freedom to the individual property-owner. He would regulate the hours and conditions of labour; would provide for factory inspection; would substitute compulsory saving in its various forms [such as] (pensions) for voluntary saving; would have state management of means of transportation and other industrial monopolies; would generally favour progressive taxation, inheritance taxes, and other measures designed to put larger proportionate burdens on the rich; and would in many cases look favourably upon strict regulation, if not actual nationalization, of landed property. The administrative socialists are sometimes divided into two sub-heads: the state socialists proper, who go into these measures as a matter of practical politics, and the professorial socialists, who adopt them as a result of disinterested study. The most advanced form of administrative as distinct from revolutionary socialism is perhaps represented by the English 'Fabian Society.'

The idealistic socialist is apt to be by temperament an artist—a man who feels so keenly the evils of the present system that he is blind to the impracticability of his proposals. He may occupy himself with devising Utopias, like Plato, or More, or Bellamy; or he may appear to stand on more solid ground, like Carlyle or George, and achieve great literary success by that combination of keen perception of present evils with inadequate analysis of the difficulties in the way of reform which appeals so strongly to the sentiment of the reader. Or he may use similar appeals as a means of strengthening the religious feeling and religious organization of the community—a thing often attempted, and sometimes successfully, by Christian socialists, both Catholic and Protestant. The sentiments thus awakened, whether aesthetic or religious, may result in the establishment of socialistic experiments like those of the disciples of Robert Owen, the Brook Farm, or the religious co-operative societies like the 'Shakers'—communistic organizations in the strictest sense of the word, yet absolutely foreign, in their purposes and methods, to the ideas of the Communist League. It is in the nature of things impossible to formulate or classify the proposals of idealistic socialism; its advocates unite only in their condemnation of the present economic organization of

human society and their belief in the automatic improvement of human nature when this weight is removed.

The revolutionary socialist feels the evils suggested by the idealist, but does not share his sanguine hopes. He agrees, in general, that the practical reforms suggested by the administrative socialist are desirable, but he thinks that such reforms, if carried out by the officials of governments as they now exist, would only substitute one form of tyranny for another. He overestimates the power of the machinery of government, and believes that if this machinery can really be brought into the hands of the masses all will go well. This idea, well expressed by Rousseau, is the central article in the revolutionary socialist's creed. He is a social democrat—democrat first and socialist afterwards. He is occupied at once with attacking the power of capital (which he thinks Marx has proved to be wholly unnecessary) and the power of governmental aristocracy. For this end he is ready to adopt either constitutional or extra-constitutional means; to join hands with the Fabian or with the Nihilist, as may suit his purpose; to take part with equal readiness in the trades union congress, the parliamentary debate, or the appeal to force. His economic proposals as embodied in the manifestoes of the Communist League or the International have a superficial resemblance to those of the administrative socialists. But fundamentally they are based upon a different idea—the idea that capital is not a power whose abuses are to be checked, but a usurper which consists of nothing but abuses. Considering all value to be based on labour, he regards capital as being in its origin property withheld from the labourer, and in its continuance a means of withholding further property every year. Constitutional law, as at present administered, he thinks to be nothing better than a means of using the organized forces or society to perpetuate this species of robbery.

It should be said in justice to the great body of revolutionary socialists that these extreme positions have been in a measure forced upon them by the continental governments, whose policy of repression has made it impossible for the moderate socialists among the labouring classes to have a fair chance either outside of Parliament or within it.¹

It was in the year 1909, while a student at Stanford University and had my first contact with the Theosophical movement that I came under the influence of arguments which belonged to the idealistic type of socialist. These arguments came both from members of the academic community and from the Theosophical students. These arguments seemed to me impressive, for they presented socialism as the expression of the morality of Christ, preeminently with respect to that particular dictum which says that thou art thy brother's keeper. Now, the force of this argument seemed to me strong and despite the fact that by temperament I was naturally an individualist, and indeed, thought

¹ James Mark Baldwin, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 541-543.

more acutely than I felt, as was noted in the article just quoted, despite that fact I felt I had to identify myself, even against my inclination, with the socialist movement and called myself, thereafter for some years, a socialist. I even maintained this position up to the time of the First World War when drafted into the army in 1917 I witnessed the overthrow of the Kerensky government by the forces lined up under Lenin and Trotsky. Now remember, it was not the decadent rule of the czars of Russia that were overthrown by Lenin and Trotsky, but the liberal Kerensky government which had not had a time to establish itself effectively. The Kerensky forces had overthrown the czarist regime; this should not be forgotten. But at any rate, in 1917 I heard of this overthrow and was at the time sympathetic; for, like so many young people, I was very callow in my thinking on these subjects. I had not then known of the distinction, of the very great distinction, between idealistic socialism and revolutionary socialism.

My sympathy continued for a short time until reports came that made me pause and question. Travelers into Russia brought back reports that were not like I would have expected if the principles of idealistic socialism, essentially the principles of the Christ which were nonviolent in nature, were those that were being exemplified. So, I gradually became in attitude a question mark and decided to withhold judgment for a period of ten years. And so in 1927, I examined what had happened based upon reports, some of business men, some of citizens of Russia themselves who reported on what was going on, and I came to the conclusion that here we had something that was totally different from the meaning of Christian socialism and was more obnoxious actually than anything we'd known before; that it was indeed something more vastly cruel than was ever true even of the decadent czaristic government.

Since that time I have gone into the subject much more comprehensively, and at the present time after sixty years of reading and observation, of penetrating into the general problem of government, of social relationship, and of economics, have arrived at a position that is well-thought-out. I know where I stand and why I stand there. Now, I wish not so much with the expectation of convincing others, as rather with the intention of rendering my present position clear, to present what I know of this subject. The reason for this is that individuals that I've met recently assume a position on my part which is contrary to fact. I even started a book on the general problem of government, but it became so complex that I was unable to finish it.² But let me say, I know where I stand today; I know why I stand there. And, let no one imagine that mere callow argument or emotional appeal will change that position. It is well thought out and seasoned. I've observed what has happened in Russia over a period of 53 years. I have watched what has happened in the other countries. My position is definite and clear-cut and is for definite reasons.

On the subject before us, the profoundest contributions have not been made by the men that I have named so far, nor by Karl Marx or Lenin or Bernard Shaw, but instead, by Sri Aurobindo and Dr. Carl G. Jung. The statement of Sri Aurobindo is a chapter in a book, of which I do not now remember the title, on the subject of collectivism and the

² This may be a reference to "On the Significance of Liberalism," which Wolff references in *The Vertical Thought Movement* as "a volume I plan to publish in the near future," and from which he includes a long quotation.

individualism, or perhaps more truly collectivity and the individual.³ Aurobindo pointed out in that article, that these are both valid parts of the whole, that they are two polar principles—the individual and the collectivity. He also pointed out that in the history of humanity there has been a more or less rhythmical swing toward the emphasis at one time of the collectivity principle and of the individual principle at others. He has said, however, that the movements have gone to greater extremes in the direction of the collectivity than it ever has in the direction of individuality or individuation, that both have, however, a valid place in the whole. But, this point is of premier importance, it is only through the individual that the divine speaks, not through the collectivity. That which is spoken by the divine through the individual may be for the good of the collectivity but it is not brought forth out of the collectivity. I prefer to use the term *transcendental modulus*, thus occupying a position that's neutral between the conceptions of a supreme being and a supreme principle. But in any case, whether a principle or a being, knowledge can come from this source and it comes out through the individual, however much its objective may be the service of the collectivity.

Jesus Christ was a good example as in his own person he was a supremely strong individual—a man who could define a religious point of view which was his own; and that takes the strongest manifestation of individual strength. He defined a position that was heretical with respect to the milieu in which he stood. But the message was to the collectivity; and that message was to be brother to brother in all relations, to serve the good of all, to be concerned about the good of thy neighbor. Now, here we have an example of the twofold principles—the strong individual and its relation to the collectivity. Without the strong individual, society, the collectivity, would be lost. The road to the divine source, or the transcendental modulus, would be closed; both are needed. Therefore, when I take a position that emphasizes the individual, I am not therefore rejecting the good of the collectivity, but emphasizing what is necessary in order that the good of that collectivity can be attained.

Now, this contrast is given here in terms of that between the collectivity and individuality. It is most common to make the contrast between socialism and capitalism. This is superficial; it does not get at the essence of the problem. The contrasting principles are the individual and the collectivity. And on the side of the individual we have these dual emphases: the individual and freedom; on the side of the collectivity, the principles of the collectivity and regimentation.

For the moment, let me recall your attention to the discussion of the administrative form of socialism as given in the Baldwin dictionary. There it said:

The administrative socialist is the man who believes in extending the authority of the existing state, with such modifications as may fit it to its wider sphere of activity. He would give more rights to the officials and less freedom to the individual property-owner. He would regulate the hours and conditions of labour; would provide for factory inspection; would substitute

³ The chapter and book that Wolff did not remember is “The Inadequacy of the State Idea” from *The Ideal of Human Unity*, found in vol. 15 of the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centennial Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 278-284.

compulsory saving in its various forms (pensions) for voluntary saving; would have state management of means of transportation and other industrial monopolies; would generally favour progressive taxation, inheritance taxes, and other measures designed to put larger proportionate burdens on the rich; and would in many cases look favourably upon strict regulation, if not actual nationalization, of landed property.⁴

As I go back in memory to the turn of the century and take a cross section of our life as we knew it then, contrasting it with what it is at this time, it appears that this country has already slid down the road of socialistic regimentation very far indeed. Back in those days, we scarcely knew that the federal government existed. It was more or less like an abstraction existing somewhere way off in Washington. Our only living contact with it was in connection with the post office. Today, in every move that one takes, he finds the federal government interfering with him. Any business move must first be considered in the light of the effect of income taxes upon the move. One is regimented in point after point. Many things that in those days we could do as a fully free act, without permit, without a license, are impossible today without these instruments of authorization. Well, the question arises, for one who has known those earlier days, and knows life as it is now, which is better? My answer would be complex; in some respects this life is better, but in almost every respect, it is better only because of technological advance. What one could do with a horse and buggy was very limited indeed; but today one can take his automobile and virtually command travel over the whole continent—something utterly impossible in the horse and buggy age. One can know news almost within hours after the event because of our news communications. One can know reproductions of the world's best music in his isolated home. One can keep records of travels in the availability of privately used cinema. These are improvements in our way of life, but notice that nearly all of them come from the development of technology. As we move, we're not nearly so free today as we were then. For example, take travel on the road; as we move in this age upon the road, we virtually must possess a legal education to not make an error; the smallest kind of slip can make one a violator of the law. That was not so in those older days. I don't know whether there even was a code governing travel at that time. If two persons met traveling in opposite directions, it was an act of courtesy to turn out of the road to one side and for the other to turn out on the other side; and so they passed. You were not concerned by the presence of a possible officer of the law; we moved more on a basis of courtesy rather than on the basis of a police enforced law. We could choose to move upon our own property without the intervention of authorities that supplied licenses if you conformed with their wishes otherwise you were forbidden to act even on your own property. It was not so in those old days; there was greater freedom.

Now, I'm not blind to the fact that the very fact in change in the mass of population forces a certain degree of regimentation; that when the population was only 60 million life could be freer than when the population is more than 200 million people in the same area. But this development involves more than that; it's a change of point of view. It's a change from the position that the true function of government is the exercise of the police power and the defense of the country, but otherwise to leave the action of

⁴ Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, 542.

the peoples to a basis of self-determination as far as possible. This is a position that emerged from the truly liberal, authentically liberal, political thinkers. I mean men such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer. This was the inheritance of our country in our political thought. The basic premise in this line of thought was that political government was, at best, a necessary evil—something with which we could not now dispense but which in the ideal state would no longer exist—a position quite contrary to the political philosophy of Aristotle. And that I conceive to be the essential philosophic position back of the American government. The development, therefore, in terms of administrative socialism in this country is equivalent to a repudiation of our fundamental political philosophy; and I would say that is a sign of very real degeneration. I remember reading an article by Mr. Lansing, who had been the secretary of state during the administration of Woodrow Wilson, in which he pointed out that in this country there had been a decay of self-reliance; and that is very evident indeed.

No, in the political sense, I would much prefer living in this country as it was at the turn of the century. I believe very strongly in the political philosophy of John Locke and repudiate most emphatically the political philosophy of Aristotle. I consider the position of John Locke as truly liberal; whereas, the so-called modern liberal, is one who has reverted to the older Aristotelian position, namely, a position of increasing political authority over the life of man viewing it as a positive good.

I shall have more to say about the implications of the increase of political power relative to other forms of power at a later time in this talk. I wish merely now to point out how, how far this country has deteriorated toward a repudiation of its most precious inheritance.