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# IN DEFENSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

By ALBERT JAY NOCK

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I

PROMOTION methods and the work of book reviewers no doubt have their merits, but in order to keep from being carried quite away by them it is well to remember that a book's importance is not measurable by its age or by its popularity. The book most important to the people of any period may be an old one; again, it may be the new one which is least read by the people of that period. In fact, new or old, unless it happens to fall in with some strong current of popular emotion it is likely to be much less read than it should be. Mr. Lin Yutang's recent book, *The Importance of Living*, for example, would not have been so widely read thirty years ago as it is at present; yet its actual importance, its applicability to the conditions of individual life in society, was then precisely what it is now. Coming when it did, however, it fell in with a strong emotional urge towards finding some way of reconciling the terms of a happier life with those of a deep-rooted secularism, and it therefore got all the popularity that its excellence deserves.

Mr. Day's *Life with Father* came out in the time when we were all 'palpitating with modernity' and had hardly so much as an antiquarian interest in anything that happened in the literary world before the consulship of Mr. Harding; and hence it was appreciated as an uncommonly vivacious and attractive *jeu d'esprit* with here and there, perhaps, a trait which touched off a faintly reminiscent sense in older readers. Mr. Lind-

say's adaptation of it for the stage retains all that merit, and has the added advantage of a powerfully nostalgic popular emotion working in its behalf, which the book originally had not; and therefore his play, so I hear, is quite the success of the season on Broadway. Mr. Allen's book, *Only Yesterday*, had to a less degree the same advantage; I do not know whether anything has been made of it for the stage or cinema, but I should suppose something might be. For a similar reason I have long thought that a revival of Mrs. Mowatt's *Fashion* might be a success; I wish that the Players' Club, which has done so many distinguished revivals, would risk this one. For an analogous reason — not the same or a similar reason, but an analogous reason — I believe that a fairly free-handed American adaptation of Clairville's delightful comedy, *La Propriété c'est le Vol*, which was put on in Paris, November 28, 1848, would run to crowded houses.

So, while making every concession due to modernity, it is always worth while to keep half an eye on the past, for the old sometimes turns out to be more modern than the new. Not long ago an institution in which I have an interest salvaged an \$18,000 Gilbert Stuart out of a trash-pile in the attic; no one knew it was there. It now happens that of the innumerable books on economics and politics published in the last seven years the one which is most important at just this moment, at precisely this juncture

in our public affairs, is a reprint of one which more or less fell by the wayside fifty years ago — *Democracy vs. Socialism*, by Max Hirsch. It was written by an Australian merchant, and was published at Melbourne in 1888 by the Macmillan Company. It got a considerable circulation throughout the British Empire; but in this country, practically none. The present reprint was brought out privately last year as a textbook for students of fundamental economics; it is a well-made book, easily obtainable, and can be had at a moderate price.<sup>1</sup>

It is fair to warn the intending reader against being put off by a title which the passage of time has made repulsive. The word 'democracy' has been so flagrantly abused of late by charlatans and scoundrels that we have come to regard it as a mere parliamentary or Pickwickian term. This was not the case fifty years ago. Again, in 1888 all forms of what we now call State collectivism (and would do much better to call by the precisely descriptive term *Statism*) — all these were lumped off together in our common speech under the general name of socialism. With these two considerations in mind, the reader will have no trouble about taking the book's title in his stride and going on with the content of the book itself.

It is fair also to suggest that the reader should stop reading when he comes to the end of Hirsch's examination of collectivism, leaving the balance of the work unread, at least for the time being. The book is divided in five parts or sections. The fifth section expounds another set of socio-economic proposals, which Hirsch sets forth as an alternative to those of State collectivism. This alternative is all perfectly sound, in my judgment, and Hirsch's discussion of it is quite in place for the special student for whom the reprint was made. The general reader's immediate concern, however, is not with this or any other

set of alternative proposals, but with Hirsch's exhaustive criticism of collectivism. I take it that this generation's job is, first, to make a careful and complete assessment of the damage which State collectivism has done to civilization, and to get a clear, intelligent understanding of the ways whereby that damage came about, and must inevitably have come about. When this is done it will be time to consider how best the damage can be repaired, if at all; and then Hirsch's constructive proposals may properly be considered for what they are worth. For the present, therefore, I recommend that the reader slip a rubber band around the fifth section of the book, and give his undivided attention to the first four sections.

The merit of Hirsch's work is that it presents the complete case against every known form and shade of State collectivism, from Marxism and Fascism down to the New Deal, leaving not a shred of respectability, or even of plausibility, to the claims of any of them. Out of the mouths of the collectivists themselves it shows that the State does not and cannot administer a collectivist economy without bringing on consequences so calamitous as to end in a complete rebarbarization of society. It is the simplest, fairest, most orderly, and intellectually the most respectable presentation of this charge that I have ever seen; and it is unanswerable.

But why is this book more important to us now than it was fifty years ago? Intrinsically, of course, it is not; but like Mr. Lin's book and Mr. Lindsay's play, it now would appear to have a force of emotion behind it; an emotion made up of disappointment, exasperation, perplexity and fear; an emotion excited by the facts of personal experience and personal observation — facts from which there is no escape or appeal. Fifty years ago, no such force was in play. In 1888, one approached Hirsch's treatise before the event, and could suspend judgment. One could say that it

all might be true, and if so, it would be interesting; but there was nothing immediate about it, nothing pressing; it answered to nothing in our experience, nor to anything we seemed likely ever to experience. Now one approaches it after the event, under most distressing circumstances which leave no chance of doubt that it is true throughout. I myself remember, sometime back in the 'nineties, reading Hirsch's forecast of the inevitable future of family life and the inevitable status of women under a régime of State collectivism. It seemed so wildly improbable that I was inclined to laugh at it and say it was absurdly farfetched — nothing of the sort could happen in any civilized country. Yet I have lived to see it happen in what was then the most highly civilized country of Europe, and also in some less highly civilized in which State collectivism has run to the end of its appointed course.

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 microorganism; 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 hebetude. 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 naïvely unaware

<sup>2</sup> 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 airtight compartments is not uncommon. Thus it was quite possible, as Matthew Arnold observed, for Faraday 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 (of sorts) with the other. — AUTHOR

<sup>1</sup> Obtainable from the Schalkenbach Foundation, 39 East 29th St., New York City. — AUTHOR

that they had a sound philosophy on their side. Their general notion of philosophy seems to have been that it is a thing of no force or use, a mere accomplishment, good enough for loafers to while away their time with — probably all right for such inconsiderable persons as professors, essayists, literary men — but of no practical value. If they had a case to present to the public, the practical thing was to disregard its philosophy, or its lack of philosophy, and hire a good lively public-relations counsel to 'put it across.' 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. The few intelligent radicals of the period kept telling the American capitalist-enterpriser that they were the best friends he had. They told him frankly that if he accepted their leadership in the impending scrimmage between the Haves and Have-nots he would surely lose his collar and necktie; but they also warned him that if he did not accept it State collectivism would win the day and take his shirt and trousers. All they got in return was considerable obloquy and a good all-round snubbing — well, now that their warning has been pretty faithfully made good, this would seem to be the season of repentance. I do not know whether the capitalist-enterpriser of today is wiser than his predecessor; but if not, his case is one for which there is no help.

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. Lamont 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? How many of us know even that such classics exist? Since the death of the *Arena* and the lamentable eclipse of the *North American Review* and the *Forum*, what publication would print articles applying the philosophical principles of individualism to this or that current aspect of public affairs? I know of none. Until lately, in fact, as the *New Yorker* remarked the other day, it has been distinctly unfashionable to say or write anything unfriendly to collectivism. I quite believe that a year ago the *Atlantic* would have felt it rather a strain on old friendship to print anything even so little tendentious as this recommendation of Hirsch's treatise.

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

<sup>3</sup>Another great classic of individualism, Spencer's essays on *The Man versus the State*, has been issued recently. It contains a brilliant introduction by Mr. Nock, by the Caxton Printers, Inc., Caldwell, Idaho.

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. When the British collectivist went in against critics such as Bagehot, Spencer, Hirsch, Huxley, he got full change for his money. His policy of progress 'step by step' was therefore deliberate. 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. This policy was a sound one, as we are now in a position to perceive. We see that State collectivism is now as fully dominant in England as it is under the systems which frankly call themselves totalitarian, and that its dictates are enforced by the same means that those systems employ. In a letter to Grant Allen in 1898, Herbert Spencer wrote: 'I said just as you say, that we are in course of rebarbarization, and that there is no prospect but that of military despotisms, which we are rapidly approaching.' That prospect is now the present fact; and the character of the fact is not in the least altered or affected by British State collectivism's choosing to operate under the *nom de guerre* of 'democracy.'

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 which would take time or be bothersome to settle for ourselves. Some people are out of work — let the State make jobs for them. Some are hungry — let the State feed them. Some monopolies are oppressive — let the State break them up. There is a shortage of houses — let the State build more. Some have too much money — let the State take it away from them and redistribute it. Such measures which, as I say, it is second nature for us to approve are purely collectivist; and we have put so many of them into effect — without in the least realizing what it was that we were doing — that the transition to full State collectivism is now the simplest of simple matters. One interesting effect of our national habit is that those to whom the thought of collectivism was utterly odious were the ones who did most to make a collectivist régime possible. They were the great financiers, enterprisers and industrialists of former years. They worked tooth and nail to make the State assume power to do things for them, to give them privileges of various kinds; tariffs, land grants, concessions, exemptions, franchises, and suchlike — naïvely unaware that whenever you give the State power to do things for you, you give it equivalent power to do things to you. Their successors are becoming aware of this, with a vengeance.

The most disquieting result of this long process of 'conditioning,' however, is a sort of by-product, also unconsciously arrived at. Like the English

people, we have been gradually, ignorantly and painlessly — even agreeably — conditioned to the successive steps leading towards State collectivism, to each one as we came to it, so that we have easily adjusted ourselves to their aggregate, finding it neither unnatural nor shocking. But that is not the most disturbing outcome of the process. We are conditioned also to an unconscious acceptance of State collectivism's root-principle, which is that the citizen has no rights which the State is bound to respect. Collectivism's whole philosophical system is built on the doctrine that there is no such thing as the natural and unalienable rights which the Declaration of Independence postulates. The State gives us all the rights we have, and it may modify or nullify them at its pleasure. Undermine this doctrine, and the entire structure of collectivist philosophy collapses.

It would be hard to find an American today who does not tacitly accept this doctrine, and hence the absence of curiosity about the principles of individualism is not to be wondered at. The American simply does not suspect that there is anything for him to be curious about. If the State orders him to fall down and worship a molten image, or to drown his girl-children at birth, he may disobey, he may rebel, but he will not instinctively base his disobedience on the broad ground of the State's ethical incompetence to issue any such order. When he resents a collectivist bureaucrat's prescriptions of what he shall eat, drink, or wear, he does not know that his resentment has a sound philosophy behind it; how can he know it, when the whole force of his conditioning has been towards reducing him to a state of unquestioning ignorance? The régime of prohibition was most instructive on this point; it brought on a tremendous irruption of loose talk about 'personal liberty,' with never a hint of a sound philosophical principle involved. We also remember that the fulminations

of the egregious Liberty League gave never a hint of a fundamental anti-Statist principle. It is here, it is in this complete conditioning to an acceptance of collectivism's doctrine of State-created rights, that our society's real danger lies at this present juncture.

## II

Nevertheless we may take it, I think, that in spite of this intensive conditioning a fair number of our countrymen are sincerely puzzled. They see that nowhere has collectivism worked out at all to their satisfaction; and they are unable to see the faintest prospect that it will or can work out any more satisfactorily anywhere than it is now doing. They vaguely suspect that there is something wrong about it, but, conditioned as they are, they do not suspect that there is anything wrong with the *idea*, the basic philosophy of collectivism, but only with its administration. Hence their notion of reform does not and cannot reach beyond proposals for various superficial administrative changes, usually of personnel. Neo-Marxian collectivism might work well in Russia if you got rid of Stalin and his cohorts. Nazi collectivism might work well in Germany if you threw out Hitler and his banditti. 'Democratic' collectivism might be just the thing for England if you swept away the Tory jobholders. New Deal collectivism might work first-rate in this country under a Republican régime.

Yet, unless I am quite in error, there is an undercurrent, however slight, of uneasiness and apprehension lest all this will not actually get the world very far; a suspicion that it comes, and can come, to no more than so much hopeful and nugatory tinkering with a perpetual-motion machine. One of our vigorous young publicists has proposed that we should 'take communism away from the communists,' but one feels that it would be quite unlikely to work any better if we did. Another says that what is

needed is the finding of 'a moral equivalent to communism'; to which a judicious critic replied sharply that there is no moral equivalent to being half-witted. The reply was just and by no means inurbane; still, one must remember that from a people who for fifty years have been intensively conditioned into an *ad hoc* half-wittedness, no more might be expected; Mr. Huxley's *Brave New World* may well be seriously reread at this moment. The point is that those who are in honest doubt and perplexity, feeling that something must be radically wrong with State collectivism, do not know what is wrong or why, for they have hitherto had access to nothing that will tell them.

They now have that access. Hirsch's treatise attacks collectivism's fundamental doctrine of State-created rights, and destroys it. It examines collectivism's economic conceptions, its industrial proposals, its ethical conceptions, its distributive proposals, its political conceptions, its pretensions to a scientific character, and wrecks them all. It then exhibits the practical outcome of collectivism, showing what the conditions of a society living under a collectivist régime must inevitably be. This last has the force of absolutely accurate prophecy. We can see now that just this is what the greater part of European society has come to, what English society has come to, and what our society is coming to as fast as eight years of headlong acceleration can drive it.

In opposition to collectivism's philosophy, Hirsch exhibits the philosophy of individualism, based on the doctrine of natural rights. As a result of the conditioning process, this philosophy is so little known to us that individualism is quite commonly supposed to be the same thing as anarchism; so a word about it is in place. Not long ago, for example, a book reviewer ranged Herbert Spencer among the anarchists, and his

editor let him do it! Many editing, one may say — very many editing! Quite so, but beyond this the incident is worth remarking as exhibit of a formidable depth of ignorance on the writer's part, and *a fortiori* on the part of the public. This reviewer is a university professor, he has a position of responsibility, and I am told he has pretensions to character. Well, then, if such a person is so ignorant, and his editor so ignorant, what must the general state of ignorance be?

Individualism would indeed confine government to a very limited sphere of action; but so far is it from anarchism that within that sphere it would have governmental action greatly extended and elaborated. In a word, individualism holds that government should maintain the national defenses; it should secure its citizens from trespasses against person or property; enforce the obligations of contract; and make justice costless and easily accessible. Beyond this it should not go; but within this sphere it should be enabled and required to do a vastly bigger and better job than it is now doing. Individualism contemplates an organization of society on the basis of purely voluntary coöperation; and it holds — what we now know and see to be true — that if State-enforced coöperation be once admitted, in whatever form, on whatever pretext, and to however slight a degree, the way to collectivism is laid open.

Things being as they are, those who are looking askance at the world's public affairs, and at our own in particular, may be interested to see what these two rival philosophies are, and to compare their merits and demerits. As time goes on, there may be a revival of the larger literature of individualism; I think it is highly probable; but whether so or not, Hirsch's treatise will give an inquiring reader all he needs to clear and steady his mind at the moment, and for that alone I recommend it.

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