

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN
INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM
IN A DEMOCRACY

*University of Virginia
Barbour-Page Foundation*

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IN A DEMOCRACY

THREE LECTURES

BY

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PREFATORY NOTE

The lectures here printed were given orally from briefs at the University of Virginia in November, 1909. They have been written out in the summer of 1910. In writing them out some changes of order and a few additions have been made.

C. W. E.

ASTICOU, MAINE,
September, 1910.

IN INDUSTRIES AND TRADES

I

All through the nineteenth century a conflict was going on in all civilized nations between two opposite tendencies in human society, individualism and collectivism. Till about 1870 individualism had the advantage in this conflict; but near the middle of the century collectivism began to gain on individualism, and during the last third of the century collectivism won decided advantages over the opposing principle. Individualism values highly not only the rights of the single person, but also the initiative of the individual left free by society. Collectivism values highly social rights, objects to an individual initiative which does mischief when left free, holds that the interest of the many should override the interest of the individual, whenever the two interests conflict, and should con-

trol social action, and yet does not propose to extinguish the individual, but only to restrict him for the common good, including his own.

At the outset it will be well to point out that collectivism should not be confounded with socialism. Socialism dwells on the sharp and unnatural division of society into a few owners of land and machinery on the one hand, and many wage-earners on the other, on the small share of the wage-earner in the product of his industry, on the wrongfulness of private property, and on the waste and cruelty of competition. Collectivism is not concerned with any of these matters. Socialism advocates the ultimate ownership of all the means of production, including the land, by society as a whole, and as a step that way advocates immediate government ownership of public utilities. Collectivism has no general theory on that subject, and in practice is simply opportunist in regard to it. In these days there is a socialism which has no destructive or violent quality, but is in its doctrines ex-

tremely enervating to the individual man or woman. It would have society as a whole provide against all the trials and disasters of life. Are wages in any industry unreasonably low? It would have the government raise them. Is any married pair unable on account of incapacity or poverty, or unwilling on account of laziness or indifference, to bring up their children well? The government shall take charge of the children, and feed, clothe, and educate them. Are any able-bodied persons, male or female, unemployed? The state shall employ them, and shall carry on any farms, shops, factories, or mines needed to furnish the employment. Are there any sick, disabled, or old people who cannot support themselves? Society as a whole shall support them. Are any marriages unhappy, childless, or wearisome? Let the state facilitate by legislation the loosening of bonds which have become unprofitable both economically and sentimentally, and do what it can to break up family exclusiveness based on either economic or sentimental grounds. These are doctrines

which, if carried into practice, would impair the family as the unit of social organization, and would take away from the individual man or woman most of the motives which now prompt to industry, frugality, foresight, conjugal fidelity, and loving devotion to those members of the family who are either too young or too old for productive labor. The state would become a vast charitable institution, exercising a universal despotic benevolence. Compulsory labor would be the rule for the individual citizen, to whatever amount the state judged necessary to enable it to meet its enormous expenditures for the common good. The service of the state would be the universal occupation. Ambition for personal excellence or family improvement and progress would be confined to a very few morally exceptional persons. The fine arts, being dependent on individual endowment and initiative, would languish. It would be no object to acquire private property, for if the state were successfully administered everybody would be sure of bare food, clothing, and

shelter, and nobody would be able to secure luxuries or transmit savings to children.

With this Utopian scheme, so unattractive to ordinary freemen, the collectivism which is to be discussed in these lectures has nothing whatever to do. The collectivism which has developed so effectively since the middle of the nineteenth century maintains private property, the inheritance of property, the family as the unit of society, and the liberty of the individual as a fundamental right; and it relies for the progress of society on the personal virtues rightly called "homely," because they have to do with the maintenance of a home—namely, industry, frugality, prudence, domestic affection, independence, emulation, and energy.

Individualism has a strong natural hold on the American democracy. In the first place, the early settlers on American soil were in the main Protestants, inheritors of the deep-seated individualism of the Protestant Reformation. In the next place, the first American colonies on the Atlantic shore of the great territory now

called the United States brought with them from the Old World only the slightest traces of the feudal system—the earliest successful colony, that of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, none at all. The early settlers were individualistic in their make-up and temperament, as all pioneers are apt to be, and their occupations were of the independent, individualistic sort. They were farmers, fishermen, tradespeople, and mechanics; and these are occupations which lend themselves to independence of character and to the acquisition of private property. The eighteenth century, through its public events and through its commonest private experiences, was very favorable in this country to the development of individualistic theory and practice. The population was sparse, and there were no large towns or cities, and no factories. The teachings of Franklin, Jefferson, and Thomas Paine were intensely individualistic. Jefferson's fundamental doctrine was the political and economic value of individual liberty—the pursuit of happiness was the right of every human

being, and in that pursuit he had a right to be let alone, provided he did not interfere with other peoples' pursuit of happiness. The town meeting, manhood suffrage, and representative government all emphasized the potency of the individual and the sanctity of his rights. So when an American municipality declares to-day by its habitual action that no resident is to go cold or hungry, and that every child is to receive free of cost an elementary education—which indeed has been the traditional practice of the New England town for centuries—it is not putting into practice any theory of nineteenth-century socialism. It is helping unfortunate or degraded individuals and educating children on the principles of collectivism, without intending even the least interference with private property, family duty, or the self-respecting independence of the individual tax-paying citizen.

The rise and growing power of collectivism in the American democracy is due to the same influences which have acted on the European nations, and especially on the English. These influences have been the development of the

factory system, the creation of corporations with limited liability, the rise of numerous scientific and artistic professions, the exploitation of the natural resources of new countries or regions by capitalists coming from older countries or regions, and the creation of unprecedented inequalities as to comfort and wealth, not as privileges of birth, but as results, first, of the general liberty and the prevailing social mobility, and secondly, of the transmission of education and property. From all these influences taken together there have appeared in every democratic society in the world, and especially in the American democracy, industrial and social classes or layers, and strong collective action in every class.

The concentration of population which has taken place within two generations in the United States, east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio and the Potomac, has made necessary the free use of collective forces for the protection and service of the concentrated population; and many individualistic rights and habits have been impaired or modified in

view of imperative collective needs. The concentration of population has forced government to assume many new functions, to increase public expenditures, and therefore taxes, and to interfere frequently with individual rights formerly considered very precious. In short, government has been centralized, and its forces have been more freely used and more widely applied in proportion to the concentration of population. Since governmental administration covers many new subjects and costs much more than it used to, it must appropriate a larger proportion than formerly of the products of the national industries, do everything in its power to prevent the waste or misuse of natural resources, and regulate both private and corporate activities in the interest of the whole community. In this process collectivism has made many gains, and individualism many losses.

These lectures will deal with the struggle between individualism and collectivism under

three heads, first, in industries and trades, secondly, in education, and thirdly, in government.

Following the introduction of mechanical power and the consequent organization of the factory system, trades-unions came into existence in England early in the nineteenth century. The operatives were for the most part ignorant, uneducated people, who had been transferred within a generation from out-of-door employments to indoor work in crowded, unventilated rooms, where they engaged in monotonous labor for very long hours, but could only acquire a limited amount of skill. The factory taught punctuality, order, and diligence; but it did not try to make the work either wholesome or interesting. The system tended to mass the wretched population of operatives in the congested districts of large towns, a process which increased their misery. The trades-unions exerted a collective force, each for its own trade, to resist the intolerable physical and moral conditions under which the great

manufacturing industries were conducted. They instituted a collective demand for higher wages, shorter hours, and more humane conditions of daily labor, and maintained that demand with extreme violence and much self-sacrifice. As time went on and the unions covered all the principal trades, their successful exertions were of great service, not only to the operative class in large factories, but to the little skilled laboring class in general, and therefore to English society as a whole.

The trades-unions came comparatively late to the United States, the individualistic quality of the original population being a strong obstacle to their progress in this country. They were a foreign importation, and are still manned chiefly by persons of alien birth, or by American-born children of aliens. The immense development of the factory system in the United States, however, necessitated the creation of trades-unions on American soil, and once started here they developed their peculiar collective action with ingenuity and energy.

All well-organized unions inculcate submission to the majority rule, obedience to officers elected for short terms, and supreme loyalty to the union in all cases of conflict of loyalties. These are collective doctrines, taught for the purpose of securing common action on the part of large bodies of men who believe themselves to have a common interest as a class, or group, or set, to promote which they are willing to forego a large part of their liberty as individuals.

It is obvious that in order to secure this vigorous collective action in industrial contests each member of a union must reconcile himself to heavy losses of individual liberty, and must always be ready to make serious sacrifices for what he regards as the good or interest of his fellows. Each workman must strike, for example, on vote of the majority of his union to do so, in spite of the fact that to cease to earn wages may involve heavy loss and suffering to himself and his family. No union man can utilize any unusual skill or capacity he may possess to secure his own ad-

vancement. He cannot be eager or zealous at work, either in his employer's interest or in his own. He cannot be sure of bringing up his sons to his own trade. He cannot secure a rise of wages except through the union. He finds that the union rules make it very difficult for him to pass from the journeyman class to the employer class; but, worst of all, he is deprived of the individualistic motive for personal improvement from day to day and year to year. He sees that rapid workers and pace-setters are outlawed. He sees that his union makes apprenticeship unnecessarily long in order to keep down the number of journeymen; that it stops the employment of old men who are not worth the union wage; that it causes younger men who are dull or slow, and therefore not worth the union wage, to be employed only irregularly, at moments of unusual activity in their trades; and that it causes women to be practically excluded from many trades because they are not worth the union wage for men; and yet he submits to the majority which makes and enforces such

rules. He not only modifies or opinions, but also sacrifices pre an individual to the collective class. Surely these losses of in to secure collective efficiency grave indeed. Taken in con operation of the union rules if put of the individual workm are sure to diminish very much in a few gen- erations the individual initiative and produc- tiveness of large masses of the population, namely, those that work under the factory system, or in other large bodies which are capable of being unionized.

The trades-unions have made it their chief object in recent years to secure higher and higher wages and shorter and shorter hours, and to this end they have sought to secure a monopoly each of its own kind of labor. This effort to secure monopoly has been approxi- mately successful in a few trades, and partially successful in many, and this labor monopoly has threatened so seriously the industries of the country, that another kind of collective

*Worker Collectives
lead to Employer
Collectives*

Unions provide many poor attributes + does corporate... they affect each others' monopoly of power.

which also interferes greatly with in- liberty, became indispensable. The ions of employers came into vigorous e, in order to combine all employers ren line of business in energetic resist- , the monopolies of labor organized by unions. Many of the employers were ations.

orporation with limited liability is the greatest business invention of the nineteenth century; because it concentrates in a few hands the managing and directing powers, masses capital, and has extraordinary facilities for increasing the amount of capital invested in a given industry. Through their shares and bonds, quite new forms of property, successful corporations are great dif- fusers of property among the frugal people of the country, securing to well-established in- dustries a portion of the annual savings of the people, and yet putting these savings into such a form that their owners can at any moment bring them back into their own hands by selling the bonds or stocks in which they have

been invested. The stocks and bonds of well-managed corporations afford excellent illustrations of collectivism strengthening democracy and resisting socialism by devising safe but mobile forms of property. Many successful corporations in finance, transportation, or manufacturing demonstrate the possibility of developing an effective collectivism which will not destroy, though it may qualify, individualism.

Trusts being combinations of existing corporations, firms, or powerful persons, are larger units of collective action which hope to secure the economic advantages of a vast, unified organization, and also a control of prices. Like trades-unions, they generally aim at a monopoly, but seldom attain to it. Whenever they do attain to it, they incur the hatred of the democracy. Trades-unions, corporations, and trusts alike tend to suppress competition, and therefore to stop industrial progress—for competition is not only the life of trade, but the source of continuous improvement, since it supplies an urgent motive

for improvement. Any industry from which competition was successfully excluded would inevitably become a stagnant or unprogressive industry; and any population which succeeded in securing itself from competition—as, for example, by an effective tariff wall—would become within a few generations a retrograde population. Fortunately, the means of entirely excluding competition have not yet been discovered, though diligently sought. The collective action of corporations and trusts can be made very effective without approaching the destruction of competition; but the highest efficiency of trades-unions toward the accomplishment of their class objects cannot be secured unless they respectively control nearly all the labor in their several trades. Hence, the urgency of the unions for the "closed shop," or at least for the shop in which union men have a strong preference. The agents of the unions in collective bargaining have a great advantage if they can say to the employers, "You shall have *no* workmen except on the following

