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Individualism Versus Socialism

By **WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN**, in Century Magazine

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THE words "individualism" and "socialism" define tendencies rather than concrete systems; for, as extreme individualism is not to be found under any form of government, so there is no example of socialism in full operation. All government being more or less socialistic, the contention, so far as this subject is concerned, is between those who regard individualism as ideal, to be approached as nearly as circumstances will permit, and those who regard a socialistic state as ideal, to be established as far and as fast as public opinion will allow.

The individualist believes that competition is not only a helpful, but a necessary, force in society, to be guarded and protected; the socialist regards competition as a hurtful force, to be entirely exterminated. It is not necessary to consider those who consciously take either side for reasons purely selfish; it is sufficient to know that on both sides there are those who with great earnestness and sincerity present their theories, convinced of their correctness and sure of the necessity for their application to human society.

As socialism is the newer doctrine, the socialist is often greeted with epithet and denunciation rather than with argument, but, as usual, it does not deter him. Martyrdom never kills a cause, as all history, political as well as religious, demonstrates.

Moral Passion Pervades Socialism.
No one can read socialistic literature without recognizing the "moral passion" that pervades it. The Ruskin club of Oakland, Cal., quotes with approval an editorial comment which asserts that the socialistic creed inspires a religious zeal and makes its followers enthusiasts in its propagation. It also quotes Professor Nitto of the University of Naples as asserting that "the morality that socialism teaches is by far superior to that of its adversaries;" and it quotes Thomas Kirkup as declaring in the Encyclopaedia Britannica that "the ethics of socialism are identical with those of Christianity."

It will be seen, therefore, that the socialists not only claim superiority in ethics, but attempt to appropriate Christ's teachings as a foundation for their creed. As the maintenance of either position would insure them ultimate victory, it is clear that the first battle between the individualist and the socialist must be in the field of ethics. No one who has faith in the triumph of the right (and who can contend with vigor without such a faith?) can doubt that that which is ethically best will finally prevail in every department of human activity.

Best Means of Development.
Assuming that the highest aim of society is the harmonious development of the human race, physically, mentally and morally, the first question to decide is whether individualism or socialism furnishes the best means of securing that harmonious development. For the purpose of this discussion, individualism will be defined as the private ownership of the means of production and distribution where competition is practically impossible, and socialism will be defined as the collective ownership through the state of all the means of production and distribution.

One advocate of socialism defines it as "common ownership of natural resources and public utilities and the common operation of all industries for the public good." It will be seen that

the definitions of socialism commonly in use include some things which cannot fairly be described as socialistic, and some of the definitions (like the last one, for instance) beg the question by assuming that the public operation of all industries will necessarily be for the general good. As the socialists agree in hostility to competition as a controlling force, and as individualists agree that competition is necessary for the well being of society, the fairest and most accurate line between the two schools can be drawn at the point where competition begins to be possible, both schools favoring public ownership where competition is impossible, but differing as to the wisdom of public ownership where competition can have free play.

Common Ground.
Much of the strength developed by socialism is due to the fact that socialists advocate certain reforms which individualists also advocate. Take, for illustration, the public ownership of waterworks. It is safe to say that a large majority of the people living in cities of any considerable size favor their public ownership—individualists



WILLIAM J. BRYAN, FROM A LATE PHOTOGRAPH

because it is practically impossible to have more than one water system in a city, and socialists on the general ground that the government should own all the means of production and distribution. The sentiment in favor of municipal lighting plants is not yet so strong, and the sentiment in favor of public telephones and public street car lines is still less pronounced, but the same general principles apply to them, and individualists, without accepting the creed of socialism, can advocate the extension of municipal ownership to these utilities.

Then, too, some of the strength of socialism is due to its condemnation of abuses which, while existing under individualism, are not at all necessary to individualism—abuses which the individualists are as anxious as the socialists to remedy. It is not only consistent with individualism, but is a necessary implication of it, that the competing parties should be placed upon substantially equal footing; for competition is not worthy of that name if one party is able arbitrarily to fix the terms of the agreement, leaving the other with no choice but to submit to the terms prescribed. Individualists, for instance, can consistently advocate usury laws which fix the rate of interest to be charged, these laws being justified on the ground that the borrower and the lender do not stand upon an equal footing. Where the money lender is left free to take advantage of the necessities of the borrower, the so called freedom of contract is really freedom to extort. Upon the same ground society can justify legislation against child labor and legislation limiting the hours of adult labor. One can believe in competition and still favor such limitations and restrictions as will make the competition real and effective. To advocate individualism it is no more necessary to excuse the abuses to which competition may lead than it is to defend the burning of a city because fire is essential to human comfort, or to praise a tempest because air is necessary to human life.

Man Needs the Spur of Competition.
In comparing individualism with socialism, it is only fair to consider individualism when made as good as hu-

man wisdom can make it and then to measure it with socialism at its best. It is a common fault of the advocate to present his system, idealized, in contrast with his opponent's system at its worst, and it must be confessed that neither individualist nor socialist has been entirely free from this fault. In dealing with any subject we must consider man as he is or as he may reasonably be expected to become under the operation of the system proposed, and it is much safer to consider him as he is than to expect a radical change in his nature. Taking man as we find him, he needs, as individualists believe, the spur of competition. Even the socialists admit the advantage of rivalry within certain limits, but they would substitute altruistic for selfish motives. Just here the individualist and the socialist find themselves in antagonism. The former believes that altruism is a spiritual quality which defies governmental definition, while the socialist believes that altruism will take the place of selfishness under an enforced collectivism.

Ruskin's statement that "government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life; anarchy and competition eternally and in all things the laws of death," is often quoted by socialists, but, as generalizations are apt to be, it is more comprehensive than clear. There is a marked distinction between voluntary co-operation upon terms mutually satisfactory and compulsory co-operation upon terms agreeable to a majority. Many of the attempts to establish voluntary co-operation have failed because of disagreement as to the distribution of the common fund. For income, and those which succeeded best have usually been the result of

competition? At present official favors are not distributed strictly according to merit either in republics or in monarchies. Is it certain that socialism would insure a fairer division of rewards? If the government operates all the factories, all the farms and all the stores, there must be superintendents as well as workmen; there must be different kinds of employment, some more pleasant, some less pleasant. Is it likely that any set of men can distribute the work or fix the compensation to the satisfaction of all or even to the satisfaction of a majority of the people? When the government employs comparatively few of the people it must make the terms and conditions inviting enough to draw the persons needed from private employment, and if those employed in the public service become dissatisfied they can return to outside occupations. But what will be the result if there is no private employment? What outlet will there be for discontent if the government owns and operates all the means of production and distribution?

Individualism Has Been Tested.
Under individualism a man's reward is determined in the open market, and where competition is free he can hope to sell his services for what they are worth. Will his chance for reward be as good when he must do the work prescribed for him on the terms fixed by those who are in control of the government?

As there is no example of such a socialistic state as is now advocated, all reasoning upon the subject must be confined to the theory, and theory needs to be corrected by experience. As in mathematics no one can calculate the direction of the resultant without a knowledge of all the forces that act upon the moving body, so in estimating the effect of a proposed system one must take into consideration all the influences that operate upon the human mind and heart, and who is wise enough to predict with certainty the result of any system before it has been thoroughly tried? Individualism has been tested by centuries of experience. Under it there have been progress and development. That it has not been free from evil is not a sufficient condemnation. The same rain that furnishes the necessary moisture for the growing crop sometimes floods the land and destroys the harvest; the same sun that coaxes the tiny shoot from Mother Earth sometimes scorches the blade and blasts the maturing stalk. The good things given us by our heavenly Father often, if not always, have an admixture of evil, to the lessening of which the intelligence of man must be constantly directed. Just now there are signs of an ethical awakening which is likely to result in reforming some of the evils which have sprung from individualism, but which can be corrected without any impairment of the principle.

Altruism Necessary.

The individualist, while contending that the largest and broadest development of the individual, and hence of the entire population, is best secured by full and free competition, made fair by law, believes in a spiritual force which acts beyond the sphere of the state. After the government has secured to the individual, through competition, a reward proportionate to his effort, religion admonishes him of his stewardship and of his obligation to use his greater strength, his larger ability and his richer reward in the spirit of brotherhood. Under individualism we have seen a constant increase in altruism. The fact that the individual can select the objects of his benevolence and devote his means to the causes that appeal to him has given an added stimulus to his endeavors. Would this stimulus be as great under socialism?

Probably the nearest approach that we have to the socialistic state today is to be found in the civil service. If the civil service develops more usefulness and more altruistic devotion to the general welfare than private employment does, the fact is yet to be discovered. This is not offered as a criticism of civil service in so far as civil service may require examinations to ascertain fitness for office, but it is simply a reference to a well known fact—viz. that a life position in the government service, which separates one from the lot of the average producer of wealth, has given no extraordinary stimulus to higher development.

It is not necessary to excuse or to defend a competition carried to a point where it creates a submerged fifth, or even a submerged tenth, to recognize the beneficial effect of struggle and discipline upon the men and women who have earned the highest places in industry, society and government.

A Friendly Rivalry.

There should be no unfriendliness between the honest individualist and the honest socialist; both seek that which they believe to be best for society. The socialist, by pointing out the abuses of individualism, will assist in their correction. At present private monopoly is putting upon individualism an undeserved odium, and it behooves the individualist to address himself energetically to this problem in order that the advantages of competition may be restored to industry. And the duty of immediate action is made more imperative by the fact that the socialist is inclined to support the monopoly, in the belief that it will be easier to induce the government to take over an industry after it has passed into the hands of a few men. The trust magnates and the socialists unite in declaring monopoly to be an economic development, the former hoping to retain the fruits of monopoly in private hands, the latter expecting the ultimate appropriation of the benefits of monopoly by the government. The individualist, on the contrary, contends

that the consolidation of industries ceases to be an economic advantage when competition is eliminated, and he believes further that no economic advantage which could come from the monopolization of all the industries in the hands of the government could compensate for the stifling of individual initiative and independence. And the individualists who thus believe stand for a morality and for a system of ethics which they are willing to measure against the ethics and morality of socialism.

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