

# The THREAT *to the* INDIVIDUAL

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The perennial problem of political states is to find a right and just balance between the claims of the individual and the claims of society. The great conflict of our times between free enterprise and socialism is just one facet of this larger problem.

To those of the Western tradition, complete individualism, which means anarchy, makes no more sense than complete socialism, which means totalitarianism. The individual cannot express himself except through the society to which he belongs; in countless ways he is dependent for his welfare on the actions of his fellow men. On the other hand, the strength of a society is in the end determined by the intellectual and moral stature of the units of which it is comprised. No matter how nobly designed and efficiently planned, the edifice will totter and crumble unless its member parts are made of sturdy material.

The difference between the sensible supporters of free enterprise and the sensible supporters of socialism, even though profound, is no more than a difference in emphasis. The doctrine of free enterprise, while not denying the claims of society or the advantages of social organization, stresses the fundamental importance of the individual man and woman. The doctrines of socialism, on the other hand, place society first and reject the claims of the individual where they conflict, or appear in the socialist view to conflict, with the interests of the larger entity.

## Individualism and Socialism.

In the 19th century, the doctrines of individualism, under the inspiration of philosophers such as Adam Smith, Bentham and Mill,\* held supreme sway, and

the interests of the majority were often ruthlessly trampled upon in the more or less unbridled pursuit of self-interest. The central principle of this theory lay in the idea that the individual in looking after his own affairs to his own best advantage would at the same time, and all unconsciously, further the well-being of the community at large. In practice it did not work out quite like this, and the abuses of individualism sometimes ran riot with unhappy consequences for the mass of the people.

The socialistic tendencies of the 20th century represent a reaction, and a not unnatural reaction, from the uncurbed individualism of the 19th century. And today, the idea of the community, the state, the social conscience, the public good, has succeeded the idea of the individual as the predominant political economic and social conception of our times. Instead of assuming, as the leading 19th century thinkers did, that what is good for the individual must be good for society, we now too readily assume that what is good, or what appears to be good, for society must be good for the individual. We tend to think in aggregates, and mostly in very large aggregates, rather than in units, and in our enthusiasm for schemes of large-scale social improvement we forget sometimes to consider the effect of these schemes on individual personality and character.

## Too Much Planning!

If the fault of the 19th century was that there was too little social organization, too little economic planning, too much stress on the individual, the danger of our times—and it has now become a grave and imminent danger—is that there will be too much organisation, too much planning, too little regard for men and women as individuals. The reaction

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\*James Mill, father of John Stuart Mill.

from 19th century individualism, which, up to a point, was a necessary and wholesome corrective tendency, now threatens to over-reach itself. If the era of self-regarding and selfish individualism is to be succeeded by the era of the domination of the mass, expressing itself through the omnipotent and omnipresent state, then our last condition may be no better, may even be worse, than our first. *Those with a passion for organising their fellow humans, even if their objective is the highly laudable one of advancing human welfare, would do well to reflect that over-organisation can be equally as bad and destructive as under-organisation. A society, like a business, can be brought to bankruptcy through the former just as surely as through the latter.*

There are warnings and danger signals on every hand for those who have their eyes open.

### The Mass Mentality.

In every field of life, and not merely and perhaps not most vividly in that of economics, the mass is tending to absorb and suffocate individual personality. Mass opinions, mass tastes, mass desires, mass beliefs are in process of submerging individual opinions, individual tastes, individual desires, individual beliefs. The individual is fighting for his life in seas that threaten to engulf him, and to some his struggles appear to be growing weaker. Perhaps what we have got most to fear are not the concrete instances of the advance of socialism, in terms of nationalised industries or of the superimposition of another government control, but the growth of the mass mentality, the mass mind and character, what some would call the socialist temperament. In some ways people seem more willing to be organised, to submit more easily to the discipline of the inevitable ration book or queue, more ready to let

others form their opinions for them, than ten or twenty years ago. And this development is the more to be feared because it is a not unnatural one; it represents what is, after all, the easy way.

### "To Keep Out the Cold."

It is easy for a man to be one of the crowd; it is not easy, and it often needs a great deal of courage, to be different, to be true to oneself and to one's own innermost beliefs. *And it is man in the mass rather than man as an individual person that is in the ascendancy today. The spirit of the pioneer, the spirit that is prepared to attempt the impossible, to flout the world's opinion, to tempt fate, is on the decline, and we are huddling together to keep out the cold.* The doctrine of socialism, which is the doctrine of the mass, discourages the former process and encourages the latter, because it levels in more than an economic sense. It not only reduces the fastest runners to the pace of the field; it tends to produce uniform ways of life and thought, and anyone who doesn't conform to majority opinion, to the dull, brutish, standard pattern, is looked upon almost as an outcast. Socialism, in its extreme manifestations, leads not merely to a uniform diet, but to a uniform mentality and morality and way of life.

It is this tendency toward uniformity, standardisation, the mass-production of identical minds, that is such a disturbing feature of the present times. For the great achievements of man, no matter in what field we may choose—economics, industry, literature, scholarship, the arts—have their genesis in individual minds working in solitude apart from and uninfluenced by the crowd. The glory of life lies in its variety, in the encouragement of the different aptitudes and tastes and desires of millions of *individuals*, individuals because they all, in ways great

and small, differ from one another. *But you can't expect to submit man to the discipline of the mass, to the discipline of a too tight and all-embracing organisation, and at the same time retain his glory and preserve his divine individuality.*

### "The Uncommon Man."

It would be idle to deny that today the individual is suspect. Let him get out of step with his particular social group, let him break away from the accepted standards of his trade union or his business association or his local political body, let him try to blaze a new trail of his own devising, and he will quickly be brought to heel. He needs only to be "different" and he becomes an object not merely of doubt, but often of abuse and scorn.

This trend was becoming apparent in the politics of the decades between the wars. The men in demand were the "safe men," those whom the majority understood, or thought it understood. The great individualists, men such as David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, men of a strong independence of mind and judgment, who refused to march with the crowd if they thought it was moving in the wrong direction, were scorned and rejected to the political wilderness. The disappearance of the great man, the dominating figure, and the rise of the masses and mediocrity are merely two aspects of the same process. We elevate the "common man" into a god and we automatically dethrone the "uncommon man" from the positions of leadership and influence. If we set all our standards by those of the ordinary man in the street, no matter how decent and how admirable he may be, we at the same time reject the highest standards by which to measure and appraise human conduct.

### The Committee Atmosphere.

Socialism is based on the organising principle; it carries the principles and methods appropriate to the technical sphere and the handling of inanimate materials and things into the handling of human beings. Social organisation and planning cannot be effective unless based on a rigid discipline. The individual must be bound by regulations; he must carry out his part strictly according to the rules. He cannot be permitted to deviate one degree from the adopted plan otherwise he imperils the plan and the effectiveness of the work of all the others engaged in carrying it out. Large-scale planning has a superficial attractiveness. It appeals to our sense of tidiness and orderliness, and on the face of it appears to be efficient. *But carried beyond a certain point the mass organisation fails to deliver the goods. It becomes, in fact, disastrously inefficient. The very multiplicity of rules and restrictions stultify initiative, deaden the mind, and cramp the individual. The "man with ideas" is not only not wanted; he becomes a damned nuisance.*

The great works of men's minds from which our civilisation has sprung were not created in this atmosphere. This is fast becoming an age of committees and discussion groups. But, however desirable it is to allow the majority opinion to make itself felt and to give scope for the expression of the views of the ordinary man, we should not overlook the fact that the great conceptions which have shaped our way of life were not the product of committees. Nor is the committee mentality conducive to the creation and acceptance of such ideas. If the exceptional theme has to run the gauntlet of the group judgment it is a million to one against its adoption. For the committee does not like the unusual, the idea out of step with commonly accepted notions.

Because it does not care to take responsibility for something that stands a good chance of going astray, it prefers to play safe.

### The Voice of Wisdom.

It is, of course, of supreme importance to give the ordinary man a say in the shaping of events. This is of the very essence of democracy. But we must be careful to prevent the voice of the majority from drowning the voice of the individual. Aided by the modern popular press and radio there is today a babel of tongues, a deafening clamour and noise; there are more people than ever before telling other people what they should do: *But where among it all can be discerned the unmistakable and irresistible voice of leadership and inspiration? Has the world ever been more confused, more self-distrustful, more in doubt about the paths it should choose to follow? The mass speaks, but not often with the voice of wisdom.* There are more people than ever before writing and speaking, there are more avenues of expression by which their ideas can be conveyed to the multitude, but there is a singular shortage of noble themes, a singular absence of divine inspiration. There is a vast noise, but no great harmonies. Instead of true individual thought and opinion, we have a parrot-like repetition of ready-made creeds, of well-worn dogmas and platitudes, of potted ideas, lacking freshness, originality and inspiration.

Obviously, there is a curious paradox here. For while the ordinary person has apparently a far greater voice than ever before in the conduct of affairs, what he utters is not often his own ideas, not often the product of his own independent thinking and of his own private judgment; rather it is the commonly accepted ideas and dogmas of the group in whose name he speaks. *He is often a slave to some narrow creed to which he has given*

*an unthinking acceptance. It is not the voice of the individual we hear, but the voice of the mass by which he is dominated.* One of the great dangers of our times is that men tend to think that loyalty to a group or party relieves them of the necessity of thinking for themselves. This applies as much to the trade unionist, to whom solidarity of thought and action is the highest good, as to those who acclaim private enterprise in all its manifestations, blindly and uncritically.

The world is deluged and confused with the propagation of half-digested ideas, murky generalisations, with the dogmas of pressure groups accepted often unquestionably and slavishly by their adherents. The members of these pressure groups, and most of us today belong to such groups, turn away unthinkingly from any truth that is not to their liking and that does not conform to their own hard-and-fast preconceptions.

### The Independent Thinker.

The pure, independent thinker is becoming a rarer and rarer phenomenon; and yet in the complex hotly-partisan world of our day he was never more necessary. The world was seldom in greater need of the guidance and intellectual leadership and inspiration of lofty impartial minds. The University scholar is not satisfied to remain within the four walls of learning and search for ultimate truth; he, like all of us, feels the urge to be one of the crowd and he comes forth to participate in the partisan hurly-burly. He feels he must take sides, and once he has, his teaching, consciously or unconsciously, becomes coloured with the political views, which he has over-hastily adopted. This tendency is greatly to be regretted, for in a world of pressure groups and ideological conflicts, the University at least should strive, more than ever, to be an oasis of individualism and of independent thought and judgment.

*It was never more necessary than it is today that there should exist on great public questions some final impartial arbiter of wisdom and truth, some final court to which the public can appeal. But where is it to be found?*

### "Less Than a Thing of Naught."

It would be wrong to ascribe these modern tendencies exclusively to the influence of socialistic ways of thought. But what cannot be gainsaid is that socialism by its very nature gives an impetus to mass thinking, mass ways of life, mass standards, against which we need to be on our guard, and against which we need to set up counter forces. This is the conclusion of a great scholar, Alexander Gray, of Edinburgh, in a massive work in which he surveys the historical background and present content of modern socialist thought.\*

"But, even if it be recognised that for all manner of reasons the tide is still flowing, and is likely to continue for some time to flow, so strongly in the direction of a more ubiquitous State and a less significant individual, it may just for that reason be all the more necessary to emphasise the other side in order that a proper balance may be maintained. It is of the essence of democracy that there should be someone to point out the dangers inherent in the views of the prevailing majority, and to draw attention to the pitfalls along the path by which we are being led. Quite apart from the economics and the politics of the matter—which, perhaps in the light of eternity are the least

important parts of life—we are today too much lost in the crowd; we are too much mass-produced. The race of eccentrics, the salt of the world, has perished from the earth. Where is there today a Saint-Simon or a Fourier? Who would listen to them if they were to arise and speak? The great need of the present day is for a prophet of liberalism: not because liberalism any more than any other tenable political creed, is an exclusive repository of wisdom and truth, but precisely because liberalism, insofar as it stands for the pre-eminent worth of the individual, is an essential ingredient in any balanced view of things, and because liberalism at the present moment is dangerously in eclipse. For the strength of liberalism or individualism, or whatever it may be called, is that all great things are conceived in solitude—however they may be executed—by men who have relied on themselves, and not on their fellows or the State. There may be a divinely inspired man; there may even be a heaven-sent statesman; but there was never a divinely inspired State. In the great moments of life, man is necessarily, and perhaps lamentably, alone. For every life is a pilgrimage, and every true pilgrimage ends in solitude. As John Bunyan shrewdly observed, a man may have company when he sets out for heaven, and yet go thither alone. The danger involved in the drift or urge in the direction of an ever more actively controlling and intervening State, is that at the end of that path—however it may be disguised—lies totalitarianism, with the individual even less than the Guild Socialist's manure, even less than a thing of naught."

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\*"The Socialist Tradition," by Alexander Gray.

