

CREDO

Rose Wilder Lane

March 7th, 1936

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Sixteen years ago I was a Communist. My Bolshevik friends of those days are scattered; some are bourgeois, some are dead, and, by chance, I have not met the present American chiefs of the Third International. They would repudiate me even as a renegade comrade, for I was never a member of The Party. But it was an accident that I was not. I had a cold.

Jack Reed was organizing the Communist Party in America. I forget the precise locale of that historic scene, but I was there. Somewhere in the slums of New York, a dirty stairway went up from the filthy sidewalk. Haggard urchins at the doorway offered Communist publications for sale. The usual gaunt women were asking for help for someone's legal defense. "A dime, comrade? A nickel? Every penny counts now." We went up through the sluggish jostling on the stairs to the usual dingy room with the rented chairs, the slightly crooked posters, the smell of poverty and the hungry, lighted faces.

All those meetings were the same, that winter. Their illumination seemed to come, not from the grudging bulbs, but from the faces. Our police were shouting that Communists were foreigners, and it was true that most of the faces were foreign, and many of the voices. But these people had a vision that seemed to me the American dream. They had followed it to America and they were still following it—a dream of a new world of freedom, justice and equality.



They had escaped from oppression in Europe, to exist in New York's slums, to work endless hours in sweatshops and wearily study English at night. They were hungry and exhausted and exploited by their own people in this strange land, and to their dream of a better world which they did not hope to see, they gave the dimes they needed for food.

I remember the room as a small room, with, perhaps, sixty people in it. There was an almost unbearable sense of expectancy, and a sense of danger. The meeting had not begun. A few men were talking urgently, intensely, to Jack Reed. He turned from them and said to my escort, "Are you with us?"

He was eager. But the question itself was a challenge. This was a risky enterprise. Jack Reed, as every Communist knows, did not leave his own country later; he escaped from it. Federal agents, raiding police, might break in upon us at that moment. We knew this,

Emma Goldman, a Crusader for the Founding of an American Communist Party, Was Deported in 1919.

and because I shared the Communist dream I was prepared to face danger and also to submit to the rigorous party discipline. But the man beside me began a vague discussion of tactics; evaded; hesitated; finally, with a disarming smile, doubted whether he should take the risks, his safety was so valuable to the cause. Jack Reed turned on his heel, saying, “Oh, go to hell, you damn coward!”

This brief scene had shown me my unimportance; I represented no group, carried no weight in that complex of theories. I was a useless individual, just then furiously in sympathy with Jack Reed’s words and dazed by a headachy cold. I went home. The cold proved to be influenza, and before I fully recovered I was in Europe. By so narrow a margin I was not a member of the party. Nevertheless, I was at heart a Communist.

Many regard Communism, as I did, as an extension of democracy. In this view, the picture is one of progressive steps to freedom. The first step was the Reformation; that won freedom of conscience. The second was the political revolution; our American Revolution against England was part of that. This second step won for all western peoples some degree of political freedom. Liberals have continued to increase that freedom by transferring increasing political power to the people. American Liberals gained, for example, equal suffrage, popular election of nearly all public officials, initiative, referendum, recall. But now, it was maintained, we confront economic tyranny. Stating this in its simplest terms, no man is free whose very livelihood depends upon another man’s will. The final revolution, then, must capture economic control.

Capital and Labor

I now see a dominant fallacy in that picture, and I shall point it out. But let it pass for the moment. In this view there is another picture. This:

Since the progress of science and invention enables us to produce more goods than we can consume, no one should lack anything. Yet we see, on the one hand, great wealth in the hands of a few who, owning and controlling all means of production, own all the goods produced; on the other hand, we see multitudes always relatively poor, lacking goods they should enjoy.

Who owns this great wealth? The Capitalist. What creates wealth? Labor. How does the Capitalist get it? He collects a profit on all goods produced. Does the Capitalist produce anything? No, Labor produces everything. Then, if organized workers could compel capitalists to pay in wages the full value of their labor, they could buy all the goods produced? No, because the Capitalist adds and collects his profit.

From this point of view, it is clear that the profit system causes the injustice we see. We must eliminate profit system—that is to say, we must eliminate the Capitalist. We will take his current profits, distribute his accumulated wealth, and ourselves administer his former affairs. The workers who produce the goods will then enjoy all the goods, there will no longer be any economic inequality, and we shall have such general prosperity as the world has never known. When the Capitalist is gone, who will manage production? The State. And what is the State? The State is the mass of toiling workers.

It was at this point that the first doubt pierced my Communist faith. I was in Transcaucasian Russia at the time, drinking tea with cherry preserves in it and trying to hold a lump of sugar between my teeth while I did so. It's difficult. My plump Russian hostess and her placid, golden-bearded husband beamed at me, and a number of round-cheeked children stared in wonder at the American. Their house was a century old, and charming. Bright icons hung on thick walls whiter than snow; featherbeds were spread in the bed niche of the large stove, which was also whitewashed. Almost everything seemed embroidered; my host's collar and his wife's gown were works of art. There was an American sewing machine, and the samovar was a proud samovar.

The village was Communist, of course; it had always been Communist. The sole source of wealth was land, and it had never occurred to these villagers that land could be privately owned. Each family tilled an allotted acreage. When, in the course of natural events, the size of families altered so that the division of land was unsatisfactory, all the villagers assembled in town meeting and wrangled out a new division. This happened every ten years or so, depending on marriages, births and deaths.

Crops had been good that year; the cattle were fat, the granaries overflowed, and all the open house lofts held piles of red-gold pumpkins. Of course, there was not a poor man in the town. No Communist could have desired better proof of Communism's practical worth than the prosperous well-being of those villagers. The Bolsheviks had then been nearly four years in power, and the village taxes had not been increased, nor any more young men taken for the army than during the Czar's regime. Tiflis, the nearest city, was reviving under NEP, the Soviet's New Economic Policy of temporary retreat toward capitalism.

My host astounded me by the force with which he said he did not like the new government. He repeated that he did not like it. "No! No!"

His complaint was government interference with village affairs. He protested against the growing bureaucracy that was taking too many men from productive work. He predicted chaos and suffering from the centralizing of economic power in Moscow. Those were not his words, but that was what he meant.

"It is too big," he said. "Too big. And at the top, too small. It will not work. In Moscow there are only men, and man is not God. A man has only a man's head, and one hundred heads together do not make one great head. Only God can know Russia."

A westerner among Russians often suddenly feels that they are all slightly mad. At other times, their mysticism seems plain common sense. It is quite true that many heads do not make one great head; in fact, they make a session of Congress. What, then, I asked myself dizzily, is the State? The Communist State—does it exist? Can it exist?

I wonder now whether that ancestral home, that village, have yet been wiped from the soil of Russia to

make way for a communal farm, worked in three daily eight-hour shifts, plowed by tractors and harvested by combines, illuminated at night by great arclights. Do my host and his wife eat, perhaps, in a communal dining hall and sleep in communal barracks?

Certainly their standard of living was primitive. They had no electric lights, no plumbing. They bathed, I supposed, only once a week, in the village bathhouse, and perhaps it wasn't sanitary. How many germs were in their drinking water, nobody knew. Their windows were not screened. Their dusty roads must have been mud in rainy weather. They had no automobiles, nor even horses; only ox wagons. Possibly their standard of living has already been raised. It may be that in time every tooth in Russia will be brushed thrice daily and every child fed spinach. But if this is done for the people in former Russia, it will not be done by them, but to them, and what will do it? The State?

The Touchstone of Actuality

The picture of the economic revolution as the final step to freedom was false as soon as I asked myself that question. For, in practical fact, the State, the Government, cannot exist. They are abstract concepts, useful, perhaps, in their place, as the theory of minus numbers is useful in mathematics. In actual living experience, however, it is impossible to subtract anything from nothing; and when a purse is empty, it is empty; it cannot contain a minus ten dollars. On this same plane of actuality, no state, no government, exists. What does, in fact, exist is a man, or a few men, in power over many men.

The Reformation reduced the power of priests, so that common men were free to think as they pleased. Political revolution reduced the power of the rulers, so that common men were more free to do as they pleased. But economic revolution concentrated economic power in the hands of the rulers, so that the livelihood, the lives, of multitudes of men were once more at their rulers' disposal.

Government by Economics

When I considered facts, I could not see how it could be otherwise. The Communist village was possible because there a few men, face to face, struggled each for his own self-interest, and arrived at a reasonably satisfactory balance. Every family does that. But the government of men in hundreds of millions is another thing. Time and space prevent a personal conflict of so many wills, each in personal encounter with all the others arriving at a common decision. The government of multitudes of men must be in the hands of a few men.

Americans blamed Lenin because he did not establish a republic. But had he done so, the fact that a few men held power would not have been changed. Representative government cannot express the will of the mass of the people; the people is a fiction, like the State. You cannot get a will of the mass, even among a dozen persons who all want to go on a picnic. The only human mass with a common will is a mob, and that will is a temporary insanity. In actual fact, the population of a country is a multitude of



Lenin, Dictator of Soviet Russia, Addressing Delegates to the Congress of Soviet Presidents.

diverse human beings with an infinite variety of desires and fluctuating wills.

In a republic a majority of the population from time to time directs, checks or changes its rulers. From time to time, an action of a majority can alter the methods by which men get power, the extent of that power or the terms upon which they are allowed to keep it. But a majority does not govern; it acts as a check on its governors. Any government of multitudes of men, anywhere, at any time, must be a man or a few men in power. There is no way to escape from that fact.

A republic is not possible in the Soviet Union because the aim of its rulers is an economic aim. Economic power differs from political power. Politics is a matter of broad principles, which, once adopted, may stand unchanged indefinitely; such principles as, for example, that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed. From such principles are drawn general rules; as, no taxation without representation. Such rules are embodied in law governing action; as, Congress has the sole right to levy taxes, Congress alone may spend public money.

This most concrete application of political principles does not touch intimate details of the individual's life.

Economics, however, is concerned, not with abstract principles and general laws, but with material things; it deals with actual carloads of coal, yields of grain, output of factories. Economic power in action is subject to an infinite number of immediate unpredictable crises affecting material things; it is subject to storm, flood, earthquake; to weather and pestilence; to fashion, and plant diseases, and insects, and the wearing out of machinery. And economics enters into the minute detail of each individual's existence—into his eating, drinking, working, playing and personal habits.

The whole economic circulation system of a modern country is affected by the number of its population who wash behind the ears. This somewhat private matter affects the import or production of vegetable oils; the use of fat from farm animals; the manufacture of chemicals, perfumes, colors; the building or closing of soap factories, with attendant changes in employment in these factories and in the building trades and heavy industries, and in their demand for raw materials and for labor, and freight-car loadings, and use of fuel, with its effects on mines and oil fields. All these economic factors and many more change with changing habits of personal cleanliness. A Hollywood diet or a passion for jigsaw puzzles has prodigious results in the most unexpected, remote places. Whether the hungry child eats

bread or candy is a matter of international economic importance.

Centralized economic control over multitudes of human beings must, therefore, be continuous and, perhaps, superhumanly flexible, and it must be autocratic. It must be government by a swift flow of edicts, and it will be compelled to use compulsion. In the effort to succeed, it must become such minute and rigorous supervision of details of individual life as no people will accept without compulsion. It cannot be subject to the intermittent checks, reversals and removals of men in power that majorities cause in republics.

In Russia, then, our hope was realized; the economic revolution had occurred. The Communist Party had captured power with the cry, "All power to the councils!"

Russia's embryo capitalism was in reality vanquished, and the people controlled the national wealth. That is, in actual fact, a sincere and extremely able man was in power, devoted to the stupendous task of forcing multitudes of human beings into a new economic order, for what this man and his followers believed to be the ultimate material welfare of those multitudes.

And what I saw was not an extension of democracy, but the establishment of tyranny on a new, widely extended and deeper base.

The historical novelty of the Soviet Government was its motive. Other governments have existed to keep peace among their citizens, or to amass money from them, or to use them in trade and war for the renown and glory of the men governing. But the Soviet Government exists to do good to its people, whether they like it or not.

And I felt that, of all the tyrannies to which men have been subject, that tyranny would be the most ruthless and the most agonizing to bear. There is some refuge for freedom under other tyrannies, since they are less thorough and not so remorselessly armed with righteousness. But from benevolence in economic power I could see no refuge whatever.

Every report I have since heard from the Soviet Union has confirmed this opinion, and I listen only to reports from its friends, for I believe that Communists best understand what is happening there. For eighteen years the men who rule that country have toiled prodigiously to create precisely the society we dreamed of; a society in which insecurity, poverty, economic inequality, shall be impossible. To that end they have destroyed personal freedom; freedom of movement, of choice of work, freedom of self-expression in ways of life, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience.

The Rule of the Iron Hand

Given their aim, I do not see how they could have done otherwise. Producing food from the earth and the sea, making goods from assembled raw materials, and their storing, exchanging, transporting, distributing and consuming by vast multitudes of human beings, are activities so intricately inter-

related and interdependent that it is not possible efficiently to control part of them without controlling of the whole. No man can so control multitudes of men without compulsion, and that compulsion must increase.

It must increase because human beings are naturally diverse. It is the nature of men to do the same thing in different ways, to waste time and energy in altering the shape of things, to experiment, invent, improvise, make mistakes, depart from the past in an infinite variety of directions. Plants and animals repeat routine, but men who are not restrained will go into the future like explorers into a new country, and great numbers of explorers accomplish nothing and many are lost.

Economic compulsion is, therefore, constantly threatened by human willfulness; it must constantly overcome that willfulness, crush all impulses of egotism and independence, destroy variety of human desires and behavior. Centralized economic power is under a necessity, either to fail or to tend to become absolute power in every province of human life.

“It doesn’t matter what happens to individuals,” the Communists say. “Individuals don’t count. The only thing that matters is the collectivist state.”

The Soviet hope of economic equality rests now on the death of all men and women who are individuals. A new generation, they tell me, has already been so schooled and shaped that a human mass is actually being created; millions of young men and women do, in veritable fact, have the psychology of the bee swarm, the ant hill.

This does not seem so incredible to me as it once did. There may yet be a human bee swarm in Russia. It would not be unique in history; there was Sparta.

I came out of the Soviet Union no longer a Communist, because I believed in personal freedom. Like all Americans, I took for granted the individual liberty to which I had been born. It seemed as necessary as the air I breathed; it seemed the natural element in which human beings lived. The thought that I might lose it had never remotely occurred to me. And I could not conceive that multitudes of human beings would ever willingly live without it.

The Tinge of Medievalism

It happened that I spent many years in the countries of Europe and Western Asia, so that at last I learned something, not only of the words that various peoples speak, but of the real meanings of those words. Everywhere I encountered the living facts of medieval caste and of the static medieval social order. I saw them still resisting, and vitally resisting, democracy and the industrial revolution.

It was impossible for me to know France without, I thought, knowing that the French demand order, discipline, the restraint of traditional forms, and that the fierce French democracy is less a cry for individual liberty than an insistence that no class of citizens shall unduly exploit another class.

I thought I saw in Germany and in Austria scattered and leaderless sheep running this way and that, longing for the lost security of the flock and the shepherd.

Doggedly resisting, step by step, I was finally compelled to admit to my Italian friends that I had seen the spirit of Italy revive under Mussolini. And it seemed to me that this revival was based on a separation of democracy from the industrial revolution that had accompanied the rise of democracy, and that in Italy, as in Russia, an essentially medieval, planned and controlled economy was taking over the fruits of the industrial revolution without yielding to the principle of the rights of the individual.

“Why will you talk about the rights of the individual?” Italians said. “Individuals don’t matter. As individuals we have no importance. I will die, you will die, millions will live and die, but Italy will not die. Italy is important. Nothing matters but Italy.”

I began at last to question the value of this personal freedom which had seemed so inherently right. I saw how rare it is. From Brittany to Basra lay the ruins of brilliant civilizations that never glimpsed the idea that all men are born free. In sixty centuries of human history that idea did not appear. It has been a familiar idea to only a few men on earth, for little more than two centuries. Asia did not know it, Africa did not know it, Europe had never wholly accepted it, and was now rejecting it.

Sweet Land of Liberty

What is individual liberty?

When I asked myself, “Am I truly free?” of course, I saw at once that I am not. The most that can be said is that, being American, I have a relative freedom.

Americans have had more freedom of thought, of choice, and of movement than other peoples have ever had. We inherited no ideas of caste to restrict our range of desires and ambition to the class in which we were born. We had no bureaucracy to watch our every move, to search our cars and measure the gasoline in the tanks when we entered and left American cities, to make a record of friends who called at our homes and the hours at which they arrived and left.

We are not obliged, as Continental Europeans are, to carry at all times a police card, renewed at intervals, bearing our pictures, properly stamped, and stating our names, ages, addresses, parentage, religion and occupation. American workers are not classified; they do not carry police time cards on which employers record each day they work; their places of amusement are not subject to raids of policemen inspecting those cards and acting on the assumption that any workingman is a thief whose card shows he had not worked recently. In America, commercial decrees a hundred years old do not hamper every clerk and customer, as they do in France, so that an extra half hour is consumed in every department-store purchase. There is no universal military service in America, to take something from

each young man's life.

An American may look at the whole world around him and take what he wants from it, if he can. Only criminal law and his own character, abilities and luck restrain him.

But anyone whose freedom has been, as mine has always been and today most urgently is, freedom to earn a living, if possible, knows that that independence is another name for slavery without security. This is a slavery in which one is one's own master, bearing a double burden of toil and of responsibility. The American pioneers phrased this clearly and bluntly. They said, "Root, hog, or die."

There can be no third alternative for the shoat let out of the pen, to go where he pleases and do what he likes. Individual liberty is individual responsibility. Whoever makes decisions is responsible for results. When common men were slaves and serfs, they obeyed and they were fed. Free men paid for their freedom by leaving that security.

The question is whether personal freedom is worth the terrible effort, the never-lifted burden and the risks of self-reliance.

For each of us the answer is a personal one. But the final answer cannot be personal, for individual liberty cannot long exist, except among multitudes of individuals who choose it and are willing to pay for it. Multitudes of human beings will not do this unless their freedom is worth more than it costs, not only in value to their own souls but also in terms of the general welfare and the future of their country.

The test of the worth of personal freedom, then, can only be practical results in a country whose institutions and ways of life and of thought have grown from individualism. The only such country is the United States of America.

Here, on a new continent, people with no common tradition founded this republic on the rights of the individual. This country was the only country in the western world whose territory was settled and whose culture is still dominated by those northwestern European races from whom the idea of universal individual liberty came into the world's history.

The Pioneer Spirit

When one thinks of it, that's an odd fact. Why did half this continent become American? Spaniards were in Missouri before Raleigh sailed from England. French settlements were old in Illinois, French mines in Missouri were shipping lead down the Mississippi, French trading posts were solidly built in Arkansas, half a century before farmers fired on the British at Lexington.

Why did Americans, spreading westward, not find a populated country, a vigorous colony to protest in France against the sale of Louisiana?

I think it significant that Americans were the only settlers who built their houses far apart, each on his own land. America is the only country I have seen where farmers do not live today in close, safe village groups. It is the only country I know where each person does not feel an essential solidarity with a social group. The first Americans came from such groups in Europe, but they came because they were individuals rebelling against groups. Each in his own way built his own house at a distance from others in the American wilderness. This is individualism.

There was no plan that America should cover half this continent. The thought of New York and Washington lagged far behind that surge. It was the released energies of individuals that poured westward at a speed never imagined, sweeping away settlements of more cohesive peoples and reaching the Pacific in the time that Jefferson thought it would take to settle west of the Alleghanies.

I have no illusions about the pioneers. My own people for eight generations were American pioneers, and when, as a child, I remembered too proudly an ancestry older than Plymouth, my mother would remind me of a great-great-uncle, jailed for stealing a cow.

The pioneers were by no means the best of Europe; in general they were trouble makers of the lower classes, and Europe was glad to be rid of them. They brought no great amount of intelligence or culture. Their principal desire was to do as they pleased, and they were no idealists. When they could not pay their debts, they left the town between two days. When their manners, their personal habits or their loud opinions offended the gently bred, they remarked, "It's a free country, ain't it?" A frequent phrase of theirs was, "Free and independent." They also said, "I'll try anything once," and "Sure, I'll take a chance!"

They were riotous speculators; they gambled in land, in furs, in lumber and canals and settlements. They were town-lot salesmen for towns that didn't exist. They were ignorant peasants, prospectors, self-educated teachers and lawyers, printers, lumberjacks, horse thieves and cattle rustlers, workers and grafters. Each was out to get what he could for himself, and devil take the hindmost. At every touch of adversity they fell apart, each on his own; there was human pity and kindness, but not a trace of community spirit. They were individualists. And they did stand the gaff.

This was the human stuff of America. It was not the stuff one would have chosen to make a nation or an admirable national character. And Americans today are the most reckless and lawless of peoples. We are also the most imaginative, the most temperamental, the most infinitely varied people. We are the kindest people on earth; kind every day to one another, and sympathetically responsive to every rumor of distress. Only Americans ever made millions of small personal sacrifices in order to pour wealth over the world, relieving suffering in such distant places as Armenia and Japan. Everywhere, in shops, streets, factories, elevators, on highways and on farms, Americans are the most friendly and courteous people. There is more laughter and more song in America than anywhere else. Such are some of the human values that grew from individualism while individualism was creating America.

The American Phenomenon

Look at this phenomenon: The United States of America. For one hundred and fifty years, Europe colonizes this continent. Then Spain holds the Gulf and Florida, Mexico, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Russia is in the north. France controls the waterways of the Mississippi valley, the fur trade and the Missouri mines. Along the Atlantic coast, between wilderness and sea, are scattered little English colonies.

Not all the English colonies rebel against England. Those that do have not much heart for the fight. The war drags along, a little wilderness war fought with valor by a few rebels and neglected by England, whose vital interests are elsewhere. An excursion of French gunboats helps decide the issue. Peace is signed, and thirteen colonies without a common interest do not know whether to unite or to be separate nations.

At this point, what would seem likely to be the future of this continent? Does it seem probable that these colonies, quarreling with one another, divided by religion, social structure and economic interests, will prevail against the great powers already in possession of this soil? Does it not appear that, if they are to survive, they must be united under a most powerful government?

Precisely the opposite occurred. The men who met in Philadelphia to form a government believed that all men are born free. They founded this government on a new principle: All power to the individual.

How can such a principle be embodied in government? There is no escape from the fact that any government must be a man, or a few men, in power over the multitude of men. How is it possible to transfer the power of the ruler to each man in this multitude? It is not possible.

This was not a problem merely of allowing common men some voice in the councils of their rulers, some power to stop their rulers in the act of using authority to the injury of common men. The intent was actually to give the governing power to each common man equally. So that in effect, the political result would be the same as in the Communist village, where each man has equal power and struggles for his own self-interest until a satisfactory balance is arrived at. The governing power of this new republic was actually to reside in the multitudes. Common men were to govern themselves. But how is it possible to embody this intent in the mechanisms of government, since any government of multitudes of men must be a man or a few men in power over the many? It is not possible.

The problem was solved by destroying power itself, so far as this could possibly be done. Power was diminished to an irreducible minimum. Governing power was broken into three fragments, so that never could any man possess whole power. The function of government was cut into three parts, each checked in action by the other two. And over these three parts was set a written statement of political principles, to be the strongest check on them all, an impersonal restraint upon the fallible human beings who must be allowed to use these fragments of authority over the multitudes of individuals.

The Casual Birth of a Nation

Not without reason, Europeans cried out that this government was anarchy let loose in the world. Not without reason, older governments refused to recognize it. Nearer to anarchy than this, no government can come and be a government. Never before had multitudes of men been set free to do as they pleased.

And the first Congress, with unscrupulous chicanery, robbed the Revolutionary common soldiers of their meager pay and put it in the pockets of congressmen and New York bankers.

What future could be predicted for such a lack of government, in such a situation?

In less than a hundred years, France and Russia had vanished from this continent. Spain had yielded Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California. England had been pushed back on the north. The whole vast extent of this country had been covered by one nation, a tumultuous multitude of men under the weakest form of government in the world. How did this happen?

The characteristic of American history is that everything appears to happen by accident. Nothing seems planned or intended. Other nations adopt policies and pursue them; their history is formed by the clash of these policies with other planned policies elsewhere. But America moves by a kind of indirection. Always in American history the unintended, the apparently irrational, happens.

Consider a question as vital as slavery. Everywhere else in the western world, human slavery was abolished by deliberate, well-considered legislation or by decree. Whenever the question was submitted to Americans, an overwhelming majority voted against abolishing slavery. Then Lincoln was elected on a platform promising free land and a railroad to the Pacific. An old quarrel about division of power between state and Federal governments blazed at last into a war that had been narrowly averted for a half a century, and, as a war measure, slavery was abolished.

Chaos That Works

No one intended to drive the Indians from the Middle West. Again and again, in good faith, Indian tribes were established forever as permanent buffer states. That was a rational policy. Again and again, Federal soldiers evicted white settlers from lands secured by treaty to the Indians. But there was no control over individualism, and the Indians vanished.



Yesterday. Cottonwood Falls, Kansas (Around 1909-1910) as the Main Street of Town Appeared Before the Gasoline Age

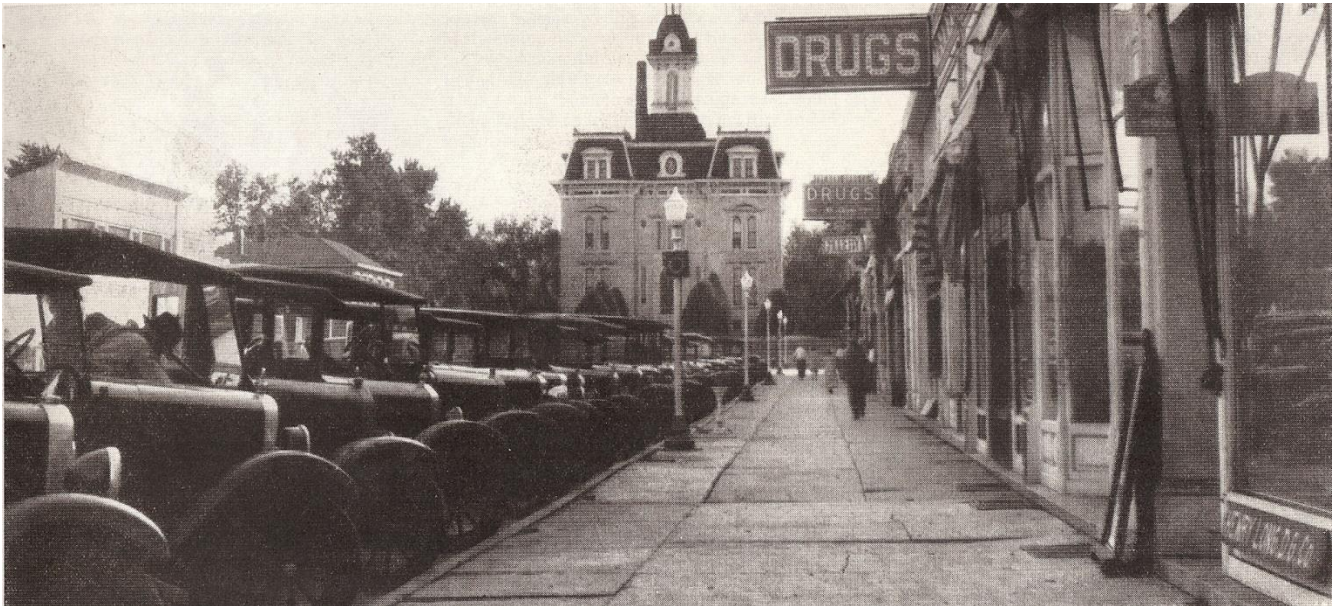
California was torn from Mexico, almost as a personal adventure, at a time when no one dreamed there was gold in those foothills and thoughtful men knew the soil was worthless because America already had far more land than Americans could use, and for centuries to come California's population could not be large enough to be a market for farm products.

Aroused by private, selfish propaganda and inspired by democratic ideals, Americans rushed to war to free Cubans from imperial tyranny, and found that they were fighting the Filipinos to keep them from freeing themselves. Thus America became an empire and a world power. Such instances are multiplied by hundreds, by thousands. Everywhere you look at American history you see them. There is no plan, no intention, no fixed policy anywhere; this is anarchy, this is chaos. It is individualism. In less than a century, it created America.

For seven years I have been looking at America. I had spent more than thirty years in my own country, before, and I had traveled over it everywhere and lived in many of its states, but I had never seen it. Americans should look at America. Look at this vast, infinitely various, completely unstandardized, subtle, complex, passionate, strong, weak, beautiful, inorganic and intensely vital land. How could we be so bemused by books and by the desire of our own minds to make a pattern, as to apply to America the ideology of Europe?

With some rough approximation to fact, Europeans can think in terms of Labor, Capital, System, and the State. One can speak of Labor in Paris, where the working class is rigidly distinct from other classes; in England, where their very speech sets them apart; in Venice, where only the son of a gondolier may

become a gondolier.



Today (1936). Instead of Muddy Buggies and Farm Wagons, a Long Shining Rank of Motorcars.

“Capitalist” is a word of some meaning in those countries, where, within a social framework only slightly shaken, men with money have won those upper levels held yesterday by the aristocrat. There is a profit system, where business has replaced the feudal system. The state is a shorthand symbol for many facts, where dictators control a regimented social and economic order by means of a bureaucracy.

In America a man works, but he is not Labor. A hundred million men, working, are not Labor. They are a hundred million individuals with a hundred million backgrounds, characters, tastes, ambitions and degrees of ability. Each of them, amid the uncertainties, catastrophes and opportunities of an inorganic society, creates his own life and finds his own status as best he can.

The Scattering of Ownership

An American raised wheat, but he was not the Wheatgrower. In every state of this Union, men of every race and circumstance and mind, by every possible variety of method and with many varying needs and many ends in views, raise wheat. All of them are not the Wheatgrower. Men raise cotton, men grow oranges, men plant soybeans; they are not Agriculture.

The Capitalist cannot be found; he does not exist. Men of many different minds and for many purposes, or by accident or luck, create huge business and financial organizations, and fight to draw profits from them. But here everything is fluid, changing and uncertain; nothing is static and secure. Here is no solidly established class, holding lower classes steady like cows to be milked. To capture control over these American multitudes is not possible, because no control exists to be captured. As long as our form of government stands, there can be no such control. Every business or financial undertaking must serve these unpredictable multitudes and swiftly change to serve their changing desires, tomorrow and

tomorrow and tomorrow, or rivals will rise from the multitudes and destroy it.

Ownership must constantly be fought for and defended, and in this very struggle ownership has melted away; it has become so scattered and diffused through the multitudes that no one can say where it begins or ends, and the ultimate destination of profits from industry, if there be one, cannot be discovered. Economic interests intermingle, the debtor is also the creditor, the producer is the consumer, the insurance company raises wheat, the farmer is selling short on the Board of Trade.

The Boundaries of Wealth

A few thousand men in this struggle and confusion apparently possess enormous sums of money. But look for this money and it is not there, it is not solid actuality; it is not the tangible property of a rentier class, or the Junker's hold on vast stretches of earth. It is dynamic power pouring through business and industry, and like the power that drives a machine, if it is stopped it vanishes. These vast fortunes exist only as dynamic power, and this power, too, must serve the desires of the multitudes. American wealth is innumerable streams of power, fed by small sources and great ones, flowing through the mechanisms that produce the vast quantities of goods consumed by the multitudes, and the men who are called the owners can hardly be said even to control the wealth that stands recorded as theirs, for its very existence depends upon satisfying chaotic wants and pleasing unpredictable tastes. Fortunes that were making good hairpins vanished when American women cut their hair.

Some thousands of men in America direct fragments of economic power as best they can, and these men draw out of the streams of this dynamic power as much tangible wealth as they and their families can consume. Many of them draw out vast sums, beyond any man's power to consume, and use these sums to build hospitals, libraries, museums, or for unique and inestimable service to music, science, public health. Many of them spend stupidly and wastefully as much as can possibly be spent in the most luxurious and decadent manners of living, and this spectacle is infuriating.

All these men who, in their various ways and for various purposes, struggle to direct American industry are expensive, in that they draw large sums of actual money from the streams of productive power and pour these sums back into the streams again by spending them for their own individual purposes—often purely selfish purposes. But a bureaucracy is expensive too. The bureaucracy that is necessary to controlling in detail, and according to a plan devised by men possessing centralized economic power, all the processes of business, industry, finance and agriculture, is stupendously expensive.

Such a bureaucracy is costly not only in ever-mounting pay rolls but in human energy. For it must take great and ever-increasing numbers of men from productive activity and set them to dreary work amid coils of red tape and masses of papers recording what other men have done or may be permitted to do. Also, bureaucracies are stupid and sluggish impediments to the whole range of human activities, as anyone knows who has struggled to move under their clogging weight in Europe. Bureaucracies slow down, impede and postpone the realization of the multitude's desires because they are not compelled, as in this American chaos business and industry were compelled, to serve those desires or perish.

This American chaos of released human energies has been going on for little more than a century, less than half of this country's past. In that time it had created America and made America the richest country in the world. Where has this wealth come from?

Americans have been exploiting the natural resources of half a continent. And this exploitation is continuing now and should resume its accelerating rate of speed, for our untouched natural wealth is enormous. But natural resources alone do not explain our relatively greater wealth, for while Americans have been exploiting America, Europeans have been exploiting Asia, Africa, South America, the West Indies, the East Indies and the South Seas.

No such riches poured into American hands as Mexico gave Spain. There are mines in Burma, China and Australia as well as in Nevada. California's gold did not outweigh South Africa's diamonds. There are coal and iron in Britain and in the Saar, inexhaustible oil in Persia, Mosul, Azerbaijan and Venezuela. The great forests of the world were not in America. No soil on earth is as productive as Egypt and the Sudan. Coffee, rubber, sugar, rum, spices and copra and tin paid dividends. India returned some profit, and Indo-China was not a loss to France, nor the East Indies to the Netherlands. I find it difficult to see that Americans exploited more natural resources than Europeans did.

Land Plus Labor

Free land will not explain our wealth. Wealth comes not from land, but from labor on the land, and subject populations toil, perhaps, even more industriously than free men. Incidentally, there was little free land in America. Speculators got most of good land and held it for good prices. The Homestead Act was passed in 1862, when only the supposedly uninhabitable Great American Desert remained, and twenty-eight years later the last of the Great American Desert was settled. Two decades after that, I, myself helped to sell the virgin land of California for prices ranging to \$600 an acre.

Perhaps America is the richest country because it is one country with no trade barriers drawn across it. Perhaps it is the richest country because Americans welcomed and exploited the industrial revolution as no other people did, and perhaps they were able to do this because they were not hampered by frontiers, class distinctions or the weight of bureaucracy. The fact that America is the richest country is not alone so important; England is rich, and so are France and the Netherlands. It is more important that America is the country of the richest population in the world.

Unrestrained selfishness should logically build up vast wealth of a few and submerge the multitudes into deeper poverty. The rich should grow richer and the poor, poorer. There is less disparity, now, today, between the richest American and the common American in enjoyment of wealth than there was between Jefferson at Monticello and the Far Western settler in Kentucky.

A Share the Wealth Experiment

It appears that individualism tends to a leveling of wealth, a destroying of economic inequality. This brief experiment in individualism, certainly, has not only created great wealth and an unimaginable multiplication of wealth in forms of goods and services, but it has also distributed wealth to an unprecedented and elsewhere unparalleled degree. We express this by saying that America has the highest standard of living in the world.

This, too, seems to have happened by accident. Certainly it was not planned; no one intended it. Each of us has been out to get all he could, “upon the good old plan that he shall get who has the power and he shall keep who can.”

Only once have any large number of Americans wanted to distribute wealth, and they did not intend to raise the standard of living. The standard of living had already risen too high and come down too sickeningly. They wanted to return to the prosperity of the 80's.

This happened forty years ago. I remember it well. Hard times had ended, it seemed forever, an age of tremendous expansion in business, invention and wealth. Within the memory of my parents, who were not old, living conditions had been utterly transformed. The kerosene lamp had replaced candles; the spinning wheel was gone, the loom was used now only for making rag carpets. Machine-made cloth, machine-made shoes, factory-made brooms and soap had revolutionized housekeeping. Wire nails, wire fence, riding plows, mowing machines and binders, eight-horse-powered threshers, had made farming easy—easier, in fact, than it is today in Europe. Railroads ran from coast to coast, postal service was fast and cheap, the telegraph had gone almost everywhere. Business boomed. On Fifth Avenue rose the gas-lit palaces of millionaires. In the Middle West women wore silks on Sundays; men smoked good cigars and drove fast teams. Then suddenly, crash! The panic.

Some blamed the tariff, more blamed the railroads. In 1860, a majority at the polls had demanded subsidies for railroads. In 1890 and thereafter, railroads were bitterly hated because they were subsidized. Everyone was in debt, of course. There had been no time since the founding of this republic when Americans were not deeply in debt. Mortgages were foreclosed, banks failed, factories shut down. Charitable ladies opened soup kitchens in the cities. Farmers, after creditors took the cows, could live on potatoes and turnips until the mortgage took the farm.

A population shaken from the soil moved along the roads in covered wagons pulled by hungry horses. Organized bands of unemployed swarmed from the cities, shouting, “We have the bone and sinew! We demand our rights as working men!” City police and militia had driven them out. They terrorized smaller cities and towns. From the Rockies to the Mississippi they captured trains, crowded the cars, and cheered the unemployed train crews that took them full speed eastward. Traffic was demoralized. East of the Mississippi, dispatchers cleared all trains off their divisions, Coxey's Army of the unemployed marched on foot to Washington.

It is all in the files of old newspapers, for those who do not remember those days. I was riding in a covered wagon and listening by the campfires, and I remember them.

Meanwhile most families went on living undramatically, as they always do everywhere, through depression, inflation, revolution and war. No one starved. Someone in America will always divide food with the desperately hungry. It may be that American kindness has grown from each American's own sense of insecurity.



William Jennings Bryan. His Ideas Profoundly Affected the Political and Economic Philosophies of His Time

The Trust-Busting Era

But starvation is not the worst of poverty among an individualistic people. Poverty, with us, is not the chronic state of certain classes, to be borne as animals bear cold, so that it is a physical thing. Normal Americans feel an individual responsibility to think, to act, to achieve; poverty from which we can find no immediate escape is an agony of mind and spirit. After three years of that agony, most Americans knew what they wanted. They wanted to smash the trusts.

The trusts were the grandparents of our present huge corporations. We saw them as combinations in restraint of trade. A few men actually owned and controlled them, for they were new and the melting away of ownership had hardly begun. It seemed clear that the trusts caused our misery, for everyone had been prosperous while the trusts were forming, and now that the trusts were solidly there, everyone was poor.

“Bust the Trusts!” we shouted. Our champion against them was the silver-tongued orator, William Jennings Bryan; his weapon was free coinage of silver at a ratio to gold of 16-to-1.

We wanted to destroy the trusts and distribute their wealth, and it was quite true that currency inflation would have distributed wealth and destroyed it.

That was the fiercest political battle in the history of this republic. Rich men had actual power then, and, naturally they defended their money. They fought for it openly and furiously, and by the narrowest margin they saved it. They defeated Bryan. The multitudes of Americans had made their one effort to distribute wealth, and had failed.

Yet wealth has so increasingly been created and distributed that today, harassed as we are by personal anxieties and seriously alarmed by the public debt, few Americans would refuse help from public funds to any family as destitute of proper food, clothing, shelter, medical care and financial safety as the majority of American families were then.

Today America, and only America, offers every child free schooling to the gates of college. Only America has a free public-library system, with an extension service to villages and farms. Only America has free radio programs and unlicensed, untaxed radios. Common men elsewhere would hardly expect to own a radio. Except the British Empire, only America has an uncensored press.

The telegraph, the electric light, the silk stocking, lipstick and rouge, fresh vegetables and fruits in winter, the icebox, and the milk bottle, the gas range, ready-made clothes, the sanitary mattress, the seamless sheet, wallpaper, the toothbrush, the leather shoe, moving pictures, ice cream, and a thousand other things to which Americans are so accustomed that we do not see them, all testify to such a distribution of wealth in this individualistic country as no other people have dreamed of enjoying.

The Closing Gap

Twenty-five years ago, the automobile was a rich man's prerogative; it still is, everywhere but here. In America, the anarchy of individualism had so distributed automobiles that California is overwhelmed by scores of thousands of penniless families arriving in them, and hunger marchers do not march but travel in trucks. And these people should have automobiles; that is my point. They should have them, and individualism has somehow, without plan or any such definite purpose, seen to it that they do have them.

Twenty-five years ago a majority of Americans bathed in the washtub on Saturday nights and lighted their way to bed with a kerosene lamp; today our intellectuals point indignantly to an America that has left more than 2,000,000 farm houses without modern bathrooms or electric lights. Something, they say, must be done about this.

There must be more than 2,000,000 American families that still use the washtub and the kerosene lamp. They should have plumbing and electricity. They should have automatic central heat, electric refrigeration, air conditioning, and every other form of material wealth that may be imagined and created to serve them in the future. There is still far too much economic inequality; the gap between the rich and poor has not been sufficiently narrowed. Something certainly should be done to distribute wealth, to raise the general standard of living, to improve living conditions for the poor and to give everyone a more abundant life. But that is precisely what this anarchy of individualism has been doing,

increasingly doing for more than a century. After looking at this unique American experiment, I think it can stand on its record.

We look too much at charts and figures. We should look at America. My farmhouse is near a village of 800 people, in a submarginal farming community technically known as rural slums in the Ozarks. Not sixty persons in this town would appear in statistics above the "line of subsistence." Yet this village has electric lights, a water and a sewer system, a paved main street. It offers a free high-school education to every child and brings the country children to it in free buses. With not twenty exceptions, the houses are pretty houses, well cared for, with lawns and flowers, plumbing, iceboxes, telephones, radios. Nearly every family has an automobile. The washerwomen use electric washing machines. Most of the men wear overalls, except when they dress up, but you'll find no more charming or more smartly worn clothes than the women's inexpensive dresses. They all wore silk stockings.

This village is no exception. Drive along the highways and you see them every few miles. The greater part of most of them is below the statistical line of subsistence.

There is nothing new in planned and controlled economy. Human beings have lived under various forms of it for 6000 years. The new thing is in the anarchy of individualism, which has been operating freely only in this country for less than a century and a half.

I look at it now, and ask myself whether individualism has enough social vitality to survive in a world turning back to the essentially medieval, static forms. Can individualism, which by its very nature has no organization and no leader, stand against the attack of an organized, disciplined and controlled group?

The spirit of individualism is still here. Not half the reported unemployed have ever appeared on the reported relief rolls; somewhere those millions who have not been helped are still fighting through this depression on their own. Millions of farmers are still lords on their own land; they are not receiving checks from the public funds to which they contribute their taxes. Millions of men and women have quietly been paying debts from which they asked no release, and somehow being cheerful in the daytime and finding God knows what strength in themselves during the black nights. Americans are still paying the price of individual liberty, which is individual responsibility and insecurity.

These unnoticed Americans are defending the principle on which this republic was founded, the principle which created this country and has, in fact, brought the greatest good to the greatest number. By such personal courage and endurance, the American principle has been successfully defended for more than a century. But during that century, the western world was turning toward democracy. The test of strength comes now, when half of Europe has turned back from democracy to the old stability in which the multitudes, having no authority, have no responsibility, but leave both the power and the burden to a few men in control.