

## Woodrow Wilson on Socialism and Democracy

1887

### INTRODUCTION

From his early years as a professor of political science, President-to-be Woodrow Wilson dismissed the American Founders' dedication to natural rights and limited government. Claiming that the country was beset with monstrous challenges unlike any other seen before in history, Wilson concluded that Americans must overcome their sentimentalism toward the past and fundamentally change their government, making it in theory as powerful as the socialists of his day speculated. In this unpublished essay written before he was 31, Wilson advocates "practical means of realizing for society the principles of socialism" by unshackling state power.

The rhetorically clever essay is significant not for its advocacy of socialism but rather for Wilson's radical belief that democracy, including American democracy, has no inherent regard for individual rights, whether natural or political, and therefore contains no principled limits on government power over individuals. For Wilson, "omnipotence of legislation is the first postulate of all just political theory." Assuming that "no line can be drawn between pri-

vate and public affairs which the State may not cross at will," he proceeds to develop a Progressive political science that takes from socialism "that all idea of a limitation of public authority by individual rights be put out of view."

For Wilson the world is in a new age, fundamentally different from anything seen before in history: "economic and social conditions of life in our century are not only superficially but radically different from those of any other time whatever," in no small part due to the rise of "corporations." We are at a new moment in history. Convinced that all political thought is controlled by the circumstances of the time in which it is developed, Wilson mistakenly calls for a constitutional revolution to meet the "radically different" conditions of his time. Yet, whatever the difference in conditions from ancient Greece to modern China, from 1787 to 1887, the American founders held that human nature does not change. Wilson does not appreciate the flexibility of America's republican government: the Constitution creates a framework for a free people to address the questions of the day.

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Wilson's revitalized democratic political science will address the issues he identifies through the new view of policy, organization, and administration he presented through his long career in the academy and in politics. Having eradicated the significance of

individual rights for democracy, he will go on in his subsequent writings to eliminate the separation of powers and unleash unlimited majority party government. Wilson, the democrat, will bring practicality to the demands of socialism.

## “Socialism and Democracy” Woodrow Wilson

*Unpublished essay*  
1887

Is it possible that in practical America we are becoming sentimentalists? To judge by much of our periodical literature, one would think so. All resolution about great affairs seems now “sicklied o’er with a pale cast of thought.” Our magazine writers smile sadly at the old-time optimism of their country; are themselves full of forebodings; expend much force and enthusiasm and strong (as well as weak) English style in disclosing social evils and economics bugbears; are moved by a fine sympathy for the unfortunate and a fine anger against those who bring wrong upon their fellows: but where amidst all these themes for the conscience is there a theme for the courage of the reader? Where are the brave plans of reform which should follow such prologues?

No man with a heart can withhold sympathy from the laborer whose strength is wasted and whose hope is thwarted in the service of the heartless and closefisted; but, then, no man with a head ought to speak that sympathy in the public prints unless he have some manly, thought-out ways of betterment to propose. One wears easily, it must be confessed, of woful-warnings; one sighs often for a little tonic of actual thinking grounded in sane, clear-sighted perception of what is possible to be done. Sentiment is not despicable—it may be elevating and noble, it may be inspiring, and in some mental fields it is self-sufficing—but when uttered concerning great social and political questions, it needs the addition of practical initiative sense to keep it sweet and to prevent its becoming insipid.

I point these remarks particularly at current discussions of socialism, and principally of ‘state socialism,’ which is almost the only form of socialism seriously discussed among us, outside the Anti-Poverty Society. Is there not a plentiful lack of nerve and purpose in what we read and hear nowadays on this momentous topic? One might be excused for taking and keeping the impression that there can be no great need for the haste in the settlement of the questions mooted in connexion with it, inasmuch as the debating of them has not yet passed beyond its rhetorical and pulpit stage. It is easy to make socialism, as theoretically developed by the greater and saner socialistic writers, intelligible not only, but even attractive, as a conception; it is easy also to render it a thing of fear to timorous minds, and to make many signs of the times bear menace of it; the only hard task is to give it validity and strength as a program in practical politics. Yet the whole interest of socialism for those whose thinking extends beyond the covers of books and the paragraphs of periodicals lies in what it will mean in practice. It is a question of practical politics, or else it is only a thesis for engaging discourse.

Even mere discourses, one would think, would be attracted to treat of the practical means of realizing for society the principles of socialism, for much the most interesting and striking features of it emerge only when its actual applications to concrete affairs are examined. These actual applications of it are the part of it which

is much the most worth talking about—even for those whose only object is to talk effectively.

Roundly described, socialism is a proposition that every community, by means of whatever forms of organization may be most effective for the purpose, see to it for itself that each one of its members finds the employment for which he is best suited and is rewarded according to his diligence and merit, all proper surroundings of moral influence being secured to him by the public authority. ‘State socialism’ is willing to act through state authority as it is at present organized. It proposes that all idea of a limitation of public authority by individual rights be put out of view, and that the State consider itself bound to stop only at what is unwise or futile in its universal superintendence alike of individual and of public interests. The thesis of the state socialist is, that no line can be drawn between private and public affairs which the State may not cross at will; that omnipotence of legislation is the first postulate of all just political theory.

Applied in a democratic state, such doctrine sounds radical, but not revolutionary. It is only an acceptance of the extremest logical conclusions deducible from democratic principles long ago received as respectable. For it is very clear that, in fundamental theory, socialism and democracy are almost, if not quite, one and the same. They both rest at bottom upon the absolute right of the community to determine its own destiny and that of its members. Men as communities are supreme over men as individuals. Limits of wisdom and convenience to the public control there may be: limits of principle there are, upon strict analysis, none.

It is of capital importance to note this substantial correspondence of fundamental conception as between socialism and democracy: a whole system of practical politics may be erected upon it without further foundation. The germinal conceptions of democracy are as free from all thought of a limitation of the public authority as are the corresponding conceptions of socialism; the individual rights which the democ-

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ocracy of our own century has actually observed, were suggested to it by a political Philosophy radically individualistic, but not necessarily democratic. Democracy is bound by no principle of its own nature to say itself nay as to the exercise of any power. Here, then, lies the point. The difference between democracy and socialism is not an essential difference, but only a practical difference—is a difference of organization and policy, not a difference of primary motive. Democracy has not undertaken the tasks which socialists clamour to have undertaken; but it refrains from them, not for lack of adequate principles or suitable motives, but for lack of adequate organization and suitable hardihood: because it cannot see its way clear to accomplishing them with credit. Moreover it may be said that democrats of today hold off from such undertakings because they are of today, and not of the days, which history very well remembers, when government had the temerity to try everything. The best thought of modern time having recognized a difference between social and political questions, democratic government, like all other governments, seeks to confine itself to those political concerns which have, in the eyes of the judicious, approved themselves appropriate to the sphere and capacity of public authority.

The socialist does not disregard the obvious lessons of history concerning overwrought government: at least he thinks he does not. He denies that he is urging the resumption of tasks which have been repeatedly shown to be impossible. He points to the incontrovertible fact that the economic and social conditions of life in our century are not only superficially but radically different from those of any other time whatever. Many affairs of life which were once easily to be handled by

individuals have now become so entangled amongst the complexities of international trade relations, so confused by the multiplicity of news-voices, or so hoisted into the winds of speculation that only powerful combinations of wealth and influence can compass them. Corporations grow on every hand, and on every hand not only swallow and overawe individuals but also compete with governments. The contest is no longer between government and individuals; it is now between government and dangerous combinations and individuals. Here is a monstrously changed aspect of the social world. In face of such circumstances, must not government lay aside all timid scruple and boldly

make itself an agency for social reform as well as for political control?

‘Yes,’ says the democrat, ‘perhaps it must. You know it is my principle, no less than yours, that every man shall have an equal chance with every other man: if I saw my way to it as a practical politician, I should be willing to go farther and superintend every man’s use of his chance. But the means? The question with me is not whether the community has power to act as it may please in these matters, but how it can act with practical advantage—a question of policy.’

A question of policy primarily, but also a question of organization, that is to say of *administration*.