



Victims of Social Leveling

By Leonard E. Read



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VICTIMS OF SOCIAL LEVELING



EDITOR'S NOTE

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THE MARXIAN IDEAL is: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."* This standardizing process was to be accomplished by governmental action. That is, the individual's need was to be determined *for* him rather than *by* him. These "needs" were to be fulfilled through the confiscation of privately owned property, plus governmental control and distribution of future production. True, Karl Marx said he hoped for the eventual withering away of the state; but in the meantime, his "proletariat" was to assume the police powers necessary to bring about the desired leveling of society.

The "meantime" appears to be quite a stretch in Russia, where the advertised goal was to put these Marxian ideas into practice. The Russian state shows no signs of withering away; nor does compulsion, the essential ingredient of state action, seem to be on the decline. On the contrary, reliance upon the compulsory powers of govern-

*"In a higher phase of communist society . . . society can inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!" Karl Marx, *Capital and Other Writings* (Modern Library, Inc.: New York, 1932), p. 7.

ment seems to be on the increase all over the world—here in America, as elsewhere.

BEFORE MARX

SOCIAL LEVELING by compulsion was in no sense original with Marx. This form of social organization is to be found throughout recorded history. Indeed, our own Pilgrim Fathers disastrously employed it as a way of life for a brief period after setting foot on Plymouth Rock. Regardless of what any individual produced, all of it had to go into a common storehouse. The meager proceeds were then doled out in accord with the authority's idea of the need. The scheme was abandoned because the authority's power ran out when the food supply was exhausted. This was more than two centuries in advance of the Marxian expression of the formula for communism.

Persons who call themselves Marxists or Communists are not the only ones who support social leveling by compulsion. This process is implicit in nazism, fascism, Fabianism, socialism, state interventionism, the planned economy, the welfare state, and new and fair dealism. Indeed, many persons who call themselves conservatives or free enterprisers are unwitting sponsors of this process—at least, in part. All who advocate subsidies for special groups—such as price supports for farmers, below-cost

mailing privileges, wages based on violence or the threat of violence, rent control, TVA, public housing, tariffs, subsidies to plane and ship companies, and a host of other similar measures—stand as daily, living testimonies to this fact. The Marxian ideal, whether understood or not, is being advocated in numerous ways by vast numbers of adult Americans!

The fact that Marx sponsored this “ideal” does not of itself condemn its practice. Nor does the fact that social leveling by compulsion is communism sufficiently condemn it in the eyes of most people. If condemnation is in order, it should be justified on grounds more persuasive than a prejudice against a man or against the name given to his ideas. Condemnation, to be valid, must be based on the fact that persons are being impaired in their material, intellectual, and spiritual progress. It is my purpose in this essay briefly to examine these impairments.

A LESSON IN SOCIALISM

PERHAPS THE best simplified version of this thesis was made by a high school economics teacher to his class. Abbreviated, it is this:

“John, you received a grade of 95. Dick, you received a grade of 55. I am going to take 20 from you, John, and give the 20 to you, Dick. Each of you will then have 75, sufficient for passing. That will be applying the principle of ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his

needs.' Now, let's see how this would work in practice. You, John, would quit working because there would no longer be any incentive. You, Dick, wouldn't work because you would be provided something for nothing. In short, we would end up with a nonworking society. Work must be done, or we can't live. So we will require an 'authority' to try to induce work."

But this version, excellent as it is, emphasizes only two-thirds of the havoc wrought. It fails to show the impairment to the authoritarian himself.

The Marxian ideal presupposes the existence of three classifications of persons, the archetypes of which are: (1) the person with "ability"—that is, the one from whom honestly earned property is taken, (2) the person with "need"—that is, the one to whom someone else's property is given, and (3) the person in command of the instruments of compulsion—that is, the authoritarian.

If my contention is correct that all persons, in all three categories, suffer from social leveling by compulsion, then it follows that the whole caboodle of what are called "social gains" not only fail to benefit anyone but also must have a deteriorating effect on everyone. Here are the effects as I see them:

On the person with "ability"

There isn't much need to belabor what happens to the person with "ability." Almost everyone can clearly see the obvious injustice done to the person who has

the fruits of his labor taken away from him by force. The point is easy enough to comprehend when one thinks of his own property or income instead of the property or income of someone else. One both sees and feels the injustice of force used to deprive him of his own livelihood.

Suppose that I want to practice some act of charity. Millions of individuals have judgments on such matters, judgments based on intimate experiences and relationships which cannot be known by any governmental agency. But this voluntary act of charity—one of the highest expressions of brotherly love—is thwarted when my honestly acquired property is taken from me by government. What was mine has been declared not mine. Some usurper of authority over me has decreed a "social" claim upon my labor. Indeed, government now operates on the theory that it has a first lien on my income and property—even on my life itself. My freedom of choice is severely restricted. As a consequence, I am restrained from practicing the precepts of my own religion as reflected in my desire to be charitable. The state will practice charity for me! The state is to superimpose the principle of love! Love, through some quirk of reasoning, is to become a collective act of compulsion!

Then again, I may want to save that part of my income over and above my requirements for current living. Perhaps I may

even want to put it "under the mattress"! Who has any legitimate right to forbid it? Do strangers who didn't earn it have any right, in logic or in justice, to what I have honestly earned?

More than likely, however, I will not hide it under the mattress. Rather, I will invest it productively in the hope of obtaining some reward for my saving. This, beyond doubt, is one of the finest ways to become a benefactor of mankind; for this is the process of capital formation. This capital is turned into tools and factories and power—aids which help workers to produce more with their labor. This increased production can, in turn, be put to savings and family security.

No, it isn't logically possible to see other than harm done to the person with "ability" by the compulsory taking of his property.

On the person with "need"

Does any able adult person in need really benefit by living on the confiscated production of others? Does this ever improve his character or his mental and spiritual growth? Does anyone ever benefit by the removal of the responsibility for his own welfare?

The something-for-nothing idea grows out of failure to see the purpose behind the struggle for existence. The fullest possible employment of one's faculties is what makes for strength of body, of character,

of spirit, of intellect. Nonuse of faculties leads to atrophy. The story of the wild duck that joined the domestic ducks, was fed, but later couldn't fly above the barn; of the gulls that fattened up at a shrimp plant but starved when it shut down; of the cattle that became accustomed to pen feeding and died rather than forage any more; of the hand-fed squirrels that laid up no nuts for the winter but bit the hands that had fed them when they no longer held food—these and other stories of nature attest to principles of biology which are as applicable to persons who won't use reason as they are to animals which haven't the faculty of reason.

THE PURPOSE OF STRUGGLE

LIFE'S PROBLEMS—obstacles—are not without purpose. They aid the process of self-development, as well as of selection and evolution. They encourage a person to gather new strength and to hurdle the obstacles and to develop his inherent potentialities to their fullest. It isn't an accident that the vast majority of top-ranking Americans, whatever their walk of life, are men whose careers have been associated with hardship and struggle. Bounties not associated with one's own effort tend to weaken the sinews which make for a full life. Such bounties remove the necessity for production and invite a potential producer

to be a nonproducer. In short, there is an ever-present danger that they may encourage a person to become a parasite living on those who produce. Parasites are not associated with man's upgrading.

Anyone who studies the principles of organization will soon learn the elementary fact that responsibility and authority must always be equal to be effective; obviously they must go hand in hand. When the responsibility for one's own welfare is transferred from one's self to the state, it follows that the authority over one's life is transferred along with it. This fact is not an accident. Nor is it by anyone's choice. It is a consequence that cannot be otherwise.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

THE IDEA that each person has an inherent and inalienable right to life becomes meaningless when a person loses the authority for his own decisions and must act according to someone else's decisions. Unless a person holds the power of self-control, his life is not truly his own. Before a life can be valued for its own sake—and not just as a means to someone else's goal—that life must have its own power of choosing, its own quality, its own dignity. Without such a basis for love, respect, and friendship, the needy person is soon regarded as a puppet or a millstone around one's neck. Unless it is voluntary, even a mother's love in caring

for an invalid child cannot exist. Aged persons and others who have come to depend for their survival upon the state's power of confiscation become merely numbers in the confused statistics of political bureaus. Statistics and bureaus have the capacity for neither love nor charity.

We should realize that the end pre-exists in the means. An evil means inevitably leads to an evil result. Related to the thesis under discussion, evil, not good, must come to persons who attempt to benefit from the confiscated property of other persons.

DOUBLE STANDARD OF MORALITY

ACTUALLY, WE are dealing here with a problem arising from a double standard of morality. Comparatively few persons will take private property without the owner's consent. We think of that as stealing and frown upon the practice. Yet we will gang up into a political group and take billions of dollars' worth of property without consent. Many citizens think of that as "doing good," and they encourage the practice.

But doing politically what we frown upon doing individually does not in any sense deny the immorality of the act. It merely makes the act legal. Actually, the only thing changed by legalizing the taking of property without consent is to gain social absolution for the theft. We keep ourselves from being tossed into jail. But to

anyone who does not believe in the authoritarianism of a majority any more than of a Stalin—to anyone who believes in the right to life and the right to honestly acquired property—no moral absolution is gained by legalization. Taking the honest fruits of someone else's labor without his consent is evil.

SHORTSIGHTED VIEW

THOSE WHO think only materialistically will argue that the stealing of a loaf of bread is a loss to the person from whom it is taken but a gain to the thief, if the thief "gets away with it." This is a shortsighted view. The person from whom the loaf of bread is taken loses only a loaf of bread. But the one who takes the loaf without the owner's consent loses the respect of all mankind—loses the only claim he had to freedom: his integrity! Man's meaning, his chance of realizing those potentialities peculiarly his—civilization, evolution, the trend to Godliness—all are founded on integrity. Without integrity, all else is lost.

Unless one believes in authoritarianism, unless one believes that man should rule over men, unless one believes that some men should cast other men in their little images, it isn't possible to see other than harm done to the person with "need" by the compulsory taking of someone else's property.

On the person using compulsion

Of the three classifications of persons involved in social leveling by compulsion, the authoritarian—the one who administers the compulsion—has been too little diagnosed. It isn't difficult to understand the discouragement and the destruction that come to the person from whom honest gains are confiscated. It is hardly less difficult to understand the eroding of the moral fiber of those who become the "beneficiaries" of confiscated property. But what about the "humanitarian with the guillotine"? The well-meaning social reformer who uses the police force as his means of persuasion? The dictator who grabs power illegally or the leader who strives for "a mandate from the people"?

The person who attempts by force to direct or rearrange the *creative* activities of others is in a very real sense a slave-master. And here is the crux of it: A slave-master becomes a slave himself when he enslaves others. If another person is pinning me on my back, he is as permanently fastened on top of me as I am under him. True, he can, by force, keep me from being creative; but in so doing, his own energies must be diverted from creative actions to destructive actions. One who only destroys is himself destroyed. This is the same as saying that he who practices only evil is himself evil. Man's usefulness to himself, to other men, to God's creative purpose is to be

achieved only by personal upgrading. To be truly helpful, one must rise to the point where he has something to offer to others.

Materialistically, the valuable person is the one who has money or tools to use or to lend, or potatoes or skills to sell. Intellectually, the valuable person is the one who has knowledge and understanding which are available to others in search of knowledge and understanding. Spiritually, the valuable person is the one who, by reason of a love of righteousness, discovers some of the divine principles of the universe and becomes able to impart to others that which he has perceived—by deed as well as by word.

SELF-CULTIVATION

ALL ASPECTS of upgrading are creative in character. Necessarily they first demand an attention to self—that is, self-cultivation. Nothing creative is induced by compulsion. With the possible exception of a low form of imitation, compulsion has only the power to restrain, repress, suppress, destroy. By the use of sufficient force, I can keep you from acting creatively; but no amount of force can compel you to think, to invent, to discover, to attune yourself to the Infinite, the source of all knowledge and understanding. Compulsion is antagonistic to creativeness.

The point here under discussion is this:

I cannot indulge in my own upgrading at the same time I am inhibiting someone else's creative action. Therefore, to the extent that one's life is spent in using force to direct others, to that extent is one's life destroyed, its purpose frustrated.

In a reference to political authority, Lord Acton stated: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This warning is not to be taken lightly. One does not have to look far for the evidence nor to think deeply for the reason.

Probably you have noted the profound change that comes over men when they are given power over others. When acting as responsible, self-controlled beings—when attending to their own affairs—they were admirable both in their thinking and in their behavior. Then comes power through some office of governmental control. In due course—usually soon—they begin to think like authoritarians; they talk like authoritarians; they act like authoritarians; for, indeed, they are authoritarians. It is as if a chemical change had taken place.

INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCE

POWER OR AUTHORITY over the creative activities of others—that is, a responsibility for the behavior of others—is an assignment with an inevitable consequence. Thus overburdened, a wielder of power eventually comes to be intolerant, quick-tempered,

irrational, disrespectful, and unrespected. How could he be expected to function as a strictly self-responsible person under such an assumed burden?

Further, when in possession of political power over others, it is almost impossible for a fallible human being not to mistake this power for infallibility. The obeisance paid to a person in authority, the drooling of the weak-willed who like to be led, the lies told by those who seek the favors he has the power to dispense—all only aid and abet the degrading process. It is not easy to reject something flattering said about one's self, regardless of its source. Indeed, the authoritarian loses his capacity to discriminate among sources. The authoritarian mentality must be directed to directing others. Therefore, it cannot simultaneously attend to the art of discrimination—a purely personal, introspective accomplishment of the intellect. This is why it is often said of the authoritarians: "They surround themselves with 'yes men.'" The authoritarian cannot abide dissenters. The authoritarian must act authoritatively. His job—running the lives of others—makes it impossible for him to run his own life. Thus the authoritarian process spells inferiority for the very life that claims superiority.

A clue as to what happens to the person who accepts dictatorship in any of its many forms can be obtained by reflecting on daily experience. For example, observe two

persons rationally discussing some subject of common interest. Each offers the other his most intelligent ideas on the subject. Their friendship, their mutual confidence, the privacy of the occasion—all combine to elicit from each the best that he has to offer. The exchange of intellectual energy is mutually beneficial, and the awareness of this fact encourages thinking and understanding.

AN INSTANT CHANGE

NOW, FORCE these same two individuals on a stage before a multitude, or suddenly place a microphone between them and announce that 50 million people are listening in. Instantly, their mental processes will change. Thoughtfulness and the desire to understand will practically cease. No longer will they function as receiving sets, drawing on the expansible capacities of their own and each other's intellects. They will change into sending sets—if they aren't so horrified by the situation that they can't even transmit. At best, however, their actions will be outward. And what they say will be frustrated by such nonintellectual influences as how they sound to their public, the impression they are making on others, and the competition between them for applause.

In short, they will become different persons, for the simple reason that the proc-

esses which go to make up their behaviors will have changed. The person who changes from a process of self-improvement to the compulsory "improvement" of others, experiences changes in his mental processes as profound as the above. The authoritarian act is always an outward act directed at other persons.

The directing of, or the meddling in, the creative activities of others—the dictator role—is so compellingly corrupting that no person should ever accept the role. If he has made the error of acceptance, abdication for his own mental and spiritual health would seem advisable. The likelihood of eventual corruption is so great, perhaps inevitable, that no man need really concern himself about the weakness of others in this respect. It is sufficient that he recognize: "Even I could not escape the corrupting influences of this role."

ALL ARE HARMED

THE THREE classifications discussed above are merely archetypes. In America, at least, it is almost impossible to find a person who is purely representative of any one of the three types. By reason of the universal scope of social leveling by compulsion, and by reason of our general participation in power politics, most of us are more or less combinations of all three types. For these reasons, no one of us is entirely one or the

other. And for the same reasons, no one of us is completely immune.

In summary, all of us are, to some extent, in this thing together. And all of us are degraded to the extent that social leveling by compulsion is practiced, whether we are primarily the ones with "ability," the ones with "need," or the ones who act as do-gooders or levelers.

The only way, then, that we can avoid personal degradation is to avoid social leveling by compulsion. Not a single person is truly benefited. Instead, all are harmed.

A positive suggestion? Let government confine itself to defending the life, liberty, and property of each of us equally. Leave all *creative* action to men acting freely, all *creative* energy flowing unrestrained and uninhibited. Only the release of energy can produce abundance, be it material, intellectual, or spiritual. Given abundance and unrestrained freedom to act creatively, there will be as much good done by each for others as can be done.