

TEXTBOOK OF AMERICANISM

By Ayn Rand

(This department is offered as a kind of intellectual ammunition depot. To help us clarify our own ideas, to help us understand what we are defending and how to defend it, and to enable us to identify our enemies; The Vigil presents the first of a series by Ayn Rand, distinguished American author.)

1. What Is the Basic Issue in the World Today?

The basic issue in the world today is between two principles: Individualism and Collectivism.

Individualism holds that man has unalienable rights which cannot be taken away from him by any other man, nor by any number, group or collective of other men. Therefore, each man exists by his own right and for his own sake, not for the sake of the group.

Collectivism holds that man has no rights; that his work, his body and his personality belong to the group; that the group can do with him as it pleases, in any manner it pleases, for the sake of whatever it decides to be its own welfare. Therefore, each man exists only by the permission of the group and for the sake of the group.

These two principles are the roots of two opposite social systems. The basic issue of the world today is between these two systems.

2. What Is a Social System?

A social system is a code of laws which men observe in order to live together. Such a code must have a basic principle, a starting point, or it cannot be devised. The starting point is the question: Is the power of society limited or unlimited?

Individualism answers: The power of society is limited by the unalienable, individual rights of man. Society may make only such laws as do not violate these rights.

Collectivism answers: The power of society is unlimited. Society may make any laws it wishes, and force them upon anyone in any manner it wishes.

Example: Under a system of Individualism, a million men cannot pass a law to kill one man for their own benefit. If they go ahead and kill him, they are breaking the law -- which protects his right to life -- and they are punished.

Under a system of Collectivism, a million men (or anyone claiming to represent them) can pass a law to kill one man (or any minority), whenever they think they would benefit by his death. His right to live is not recognized.

Under Individualism, it is illegal to kill the man and it is legal for him to protect himself. The law is on the side of the right. Under Collectivism, it is legal for the majority to kill a man and it is illegal for him to defend himself. The law is on the side of a number.

In the first case, the law represents a moral principle.

In the second case, the law represents the idea that there are no moral principles, and men can do anything they please, provided there's enough of them.

Under a system of Individualism, men are equal before the law at all times. Each has the same rights, whether he is alone or has a million others with him.

Under a system of Collectivism, men have to gang up on one another — and whoever has the biggest gang at the moment, holds all rights, while the loser (the individual or the minority) has none. Any man can be an absolute master or a helpless slave -- according to the size of his gang.

An example of the first system: The United States of America. (See: The Declaration of Independence.)

An example of the second system: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.

Under the Soviet system, millions of peasants or "kulaks" were exterminated by law, a law justified by the pretext that this was for the benefit of the majority, which the ruling group contended was anti-kulak. Under the Nazi system, millions of Jews were exterminated by law, a law justified by the pretext that this was for the benefit of the majority, which the ruling group contended was anti-Semitic.

The Soviet law and the Nazi law were the unavoidable and consistent result of the principle of Collectivism. When applied in practice, a principle which recognizes no morality and no individual rights, can result in nothing except brutality.

Keep this in mind when you try to decide what is the proper social system. You have to start by answering the first question. Either the power of society is limited, or it is not. It can't be both.

3. What Is the Basic Principle of America?

The basic principle of the United States of America is Individualism.

America is built on the principle that Man possesses Unalienable Rights;

-- that these rights belong to each man as an individual -- not to "men" as a group of collective;

-- that these rights are the unconditional, private, personal, individual possession of each man -- not the public, social, collective possession of a group;

-- that these rights are granted to man by the fact of his birth as a man -- not by an act of society;

-- that man holds these rights, not from the Collective nor for the Collective, but against the Collective -- as a barrier which the Collective cannot cross;

-- that these rights are man's protection against all other men;

-- that only on the basis of these rights can men have a society of freedom, justice, human dignity, and decency.

The Constitution of the United States of America is not
a document that limits the rights of man -- but a document that
limits the power of society over man.

4. What Is a Right?

A right is the sanction of independent action. A right is that which can be exercised without anyone's permission.

If you exist only because society permits you to exist -- you have no right to your own life. A permission can be revoked at any time.

If, before undertaking some action, you must obtain the permission of society -- you are not free, whether such permission is granted to you or not. Only a slave acts on permission. A permission is not a right.

Do not make the mistake, at this point, of thinking that a worker is a slave and that he holds his job by his employer's permission. He does not hold it by permission -- but by contract, that is, by a voluntary mutual agreement. A worker can quit his job. A slave cannot.

5. What Are the Inalienable Rights of Man?

The inalienable Rights of Man are: Life, Liberty and The Pursuit of Happiness.

The Right of Life means that Man cannot be deprived of his life for the benefit of another man nor of any number of other men.

The Right of Liberty means Man's right to individual action, individual choice, individual initiative and individual property. Without the right to private property no independent action is possible.

The Right to the Pursuit of Happiness means man's right to live for himself, to choose what constitutes his own private, personal, individual happiness and to work for its achievement, so long as he respects the same right in others. It means that Man cannot be forced to devote his life to the happiness of another man nor of any number of other men. It means that the collective cannot decide what is to be the purpose of man's existence nor prescribe his choice of happiness.

6. How Do We Recognize One Another's Rights?

Since Man has inalienable individual rights, this means that the same rights are held, individually, by every man, by all men, at all times. Therefore, the rights of one man cannot and must not violate the rights of another.

For instance: a man has the right to live, but he has no right to take the life of another. He has the right to be free, but no right to enslave another. He has the right to choose his own happiness, but no right to decide that his happiness lies in the misery (or murder or robbery or enslavement) of another. The very right upon which he acts defines the same right of another man, and serves as a guide to tell him what he may or may not do.

Do not make the mistake of the ignorant who think that an individualist is a man who says: "I'll do as I please at everybody else's expense." An individualist is a man who recognizes the inalienable individual rights of man -- his own and those of others.

An individualist is a man who says: "I will not run anyone's life -- nor let anyone run mine. I will not rule nor be ruled. I will not be a master nor a slave. I will not sacrifice myself to anyone -- nor sacrifice anyone to myself."

A collectivist is a man who says: "Let's get together, boys -- and then anything goes!"

7. How Do We Determine That a Right Has Been Violated?

A right cannot be violated except by physical force. One man cannot deprive another of his life, nor enslave him, nor forbid him to pursue his happiness, except by using force against him. Whenever a man is made to act without his own free, personal, individual, voluntary consent -- his right has been violated.

Therefore, we can draw a clear-cut division between the rights of one man and those of another. It is an objective division -- not subject to differences of opinion, nor to majority decision, nor to the arbitrary decree of society. NO MAN HAS THE RIGHT TO INITIATE THE USE OF PHYSICAL FORCE AGAINST ANOTHER MAN.

The practical rule of conduct in a free society, a society of Individualism, is simple and clear-cut; you cannot expect or demand any action from another man, except through his free, voluntary consent.

Do not be misled on this point by an old collectivist trick which goes like this: There is no absolute freedom anyway, since you are not free to murder; society limits your freedom when it does not permit you to kill; therefore, society holds the right to limit your freedom in any manner it sees fit; therefore, drop the delusion of freedom -- freedom is whatever society decides it is.

It is not society, nor any social right, that forbids you to kill -- but the inalienable individual right of another man to live. This is not a "compromise" between two rights -- but a line

of division that preserves both rights untouched. The division is not derived from an edict of society -- but from your own inalienable individual right. The definition of this limit is not set arbitrarily by society -- but is implicit in the definition of your own right.

Within the sphere of your own rights, your freedom is absolute.

8. What Is the Proper Function of Government?

The proper function of government is to protect the individual rights of man; this means ~~to~~ to protect man against brute force.

In a proper social system, men do not use force against one another; force may be used only in self-defense, that is, in defense of a right violated by force. Men delegate to the government the power to use force in retaliation -- and only in retaliation.

The proper kind of government does not initiate the use of force. It uses force only to answer those who have initiated its use. For example: when the government arrests a criminal, it is not the government that violates a right; it is the criminal who has violated a right and by doing so has placed himself outside the principle of rights, where men can have no recourse against him except through force.

Now it is important to remember that all actions defined as criminal in a free society are actions involving force -- and only such actions are answered by force.

Do not be misled by sloppy expressions such as "A murderer commits a crime against society." It is not society that a murderer murders, but an individual man. It is not a social right that he breaks, but an individual right. He is not punished for

hurting a collective -- he has not hurt a whole collective -- he has hurt one man. If a criminal robs ten men -- it is still not "society" that he has robbed, but ten individuals. There are no "crimes against society" -- all crimes are committed against specific men, against individuals. And it is precisely the duty of a proper social system and of a proper government to protect an individual against criminal attack -- against force.

When, however, a government becomes an initiator of force -- the injustice and moral corruption involved are truly unspeakable.

For example: When a Collectivist government orders a man to work and attaches him to a job, under penalty of death or imprisonment, ~~##~~ it is the government that initiates the use of force. The man has done no violence to anyone -- but the government uses violence against him. There is no possible justification for such a procedure in theory. And there is no possible result in practice -- except the blood and the terror which you can observe in any Collectivist country.

The moral perversion involved is this: If men had no government and no social system of any kind, they might have to exist through sheer force and fight one another in any disagreement; in such a state, one man would have a fair chance against one other man; but he would have no chance against ten others. It is not against an individual that a man needs protection -- but against a group. Still, in such a state of anarchy, while any majority gang

would have its way, a minority could fight them by any means available. And the gang could not make its rule last.

Collectivism goes a step below savage anarchy: it takes away from man even the chance to fight back. It makes violence legal -- and resistance to it illegal. It gives the sanction of law to the organized brute force of a majority (or of anyone who claims to represent it) -- and turns the minority into a helpless, disarmed object of extermination. If you can think of a more vicious perversion of justice, ~~##~~ name it.

In actual practice, when a Collectivist society violates the rights of a minority (or of one single man), the result is that the majority loses its rights as well, and finds itself delivered into the total power of a small group that rules through sheer brute force.

If you want to understand and keep clearly in mind the difference between the use of force as retaliation (as it is used by the government of an Individualist society) and the use of force as primary policy (as it is used by the government of a Collectivist society), here is the simplest example of it: it is the same difference as that between a murderer and a man who kills in self-defense. The proper kind of government acts on the principle of man's self-defense. A Collectivist government acts like a murderer.

9. Can There Be A "Mixed" Social System?

There can be no social system which is a mixture of Individualism and Collectivism. Either individual rights are recognized in a society, or they are not recognized. They cannot be half-recognized.

What frequently happens, however, is that a society based on Individualism does not have the courage, integrity and intelligence to observe its own principle consistently in every practical application. Through ignorance, cowardice or mental sloppiness, such a society passes laws and accepts regulations which contradict its basic principle and violate the rights of man. To the extent of such violations, society perpetrates injustices, evils and abuses. If the breaches are not corrected, society collapses into the chaos of Collectivism.

When you see a society that recognizes man's rights in some of its laws, but not in others -- do not hail it as a "mixed" system and do not conclude that a compromise between basic principles, opposed in theory, can be made to work in practice. Such a society is not working -- it is merely disintegrating. Disintegration takes time. Nothing falls to pieces immediately -- neither a human body nor a human society.

10. Can A Society Exist Without A Moral Principle?

A great many people today hold the childish notion that society can do anything it pleases; that principles are unnecessary, rights are only an illusion, and expediency is the practical guide to action.

It is true that society can abandon moral principles and turn itself into a herd running amuck to destruction. Just as it is true that a man can cut his own throat any time he chooses. But a man cannot do this if he wishes to survive. And society cannot abandon moral principles if it expects to exist.

Society is a large number of men who live together in the same country, and who deal with one another. Unless there is a defined, objective moral code, which men understand and observe, they have no way of dealing with one another -- since none can know what to expect from his neighbor. The man who recognizes no morality is the criminal; you can do nothing when dealing with a criminal/ except try to crack his skull before he cracks yours; you have no other language, no terms of behavior mutually accepted. To speak of a society without moral principles is to advocate that men live together like criminals.

We are still observing, by tradition, so many moral precepts, that we take them for granted and do not realize how many actions of our daily lives are made possible only by moral

principles. Why is it safe for you to go into a crowded department store, make a purchase and come out again? The crowd around you needs goods, too; the crowd could easily overpower the few salesgirls, ransack the store and grab your packages and pocketbook as well. Why don't they do it? There is nothing to stop them and nothing to protect you -- except the moral principle of your individual right of life and property.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that crowds are restrained merely by fear of policemen. There could not be enough policemen in the world if men believed that it is proper and practical to loot. And if men believed this, why shouldn't the policemen believe it, too? Who, then, would be the policemen?

Besides, in a collectivist society the policemen's duty is not to protect your rights, but to violate them.

It would certainly be expedient for the crowd to loot the department store -- if we accept the expediency of the moment as a sound and proper rule of action. But how many department stores, how many factories, farms or homes would we have, and for how long, under this rule of expediency?

If we discard morality and substitute for it the collectivist doctrine of unlimited majority rule, if we accept the idea that a majority may do anything it pleases, and that anything done by a majority is right because it's done by a majority (this being the only standard of right and wrong) -- how are men to apply this

in practice to their actual lives? Who is the majority? In relation to each particular man, all other men are potential members of that majority which may destroy him at its pleasure at any moment. Then each man and all men become enemies; each has to fear and suspect all; each must try to rob and murder first, before he is robbed and murdered.

If you think that this is just abstract theory, take a look at Europe for a practical demonstration. In Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, private citizens did the foulest work of the G. P. U. and the Gestapo, spying on one another, delivering their own relatives and friends to the secret police and the torture chambers. This was the result in practice of collectivism in theory. This was the concrete application of that empty, vicious collectivist slogan which seems so high-sounding to the unthinking: "The public good comes above any individual rights."

Without individual rights, no public good is possible.

Collectivism, which places the group above the individual and tells men to sacrifice their rights for the sake of their brothers, results in a state where men have no choice but to dread, hate and destroy their brothers.

Peace, security, prosperity, co-operation and good will among men, all those things considered socially desirable, are possible only under a system of Individualism, where each man is safe in the exercise of his individual rights and in the knowledge

that society is there to protect his rights, not to destroy them. Then each man knows what he may or may not do to his neighbors, and what his neighbors (one or a million of them) may or may not do to him. Then he is free to deal with them as a friend and an equal.

Without a moral code no proper human society is possible.

Without the recognition of individual rights no moral code is possible.

(To be continued)