

**Wilde, Oscar. *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. Edited by Linda Dowling. London: Penguin Books, 2001.**

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Irish writer of witty society-bashing comedies, short stories, and articles. Wilde was not awarded an Oxford scholarship, despite his prize-winning poetry. He lectured in England and the United States to support himself. Wilde's fancy for homosexual prostitutes burst on the public scene in a defamation lawsuit Wilde brought against the Marquess of Queensberry, whose son Wilde loved. Wilde lost that litigation, was imprisoned for two years upon conviction for gross indecency with men. Upon Wilde's release (1897), he fled to Paris, where he died alone. Wilde published *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* in 1891.

*The Soul of Man Under Socialism*

Were socialism to reign, one might finally escape the impositions of others. Most people ruin themselves by their altruistic urges. Their emotions run rampant at the sight of suffering; thoughts never catch up. Social altruism helps sustain social blight. The supposed remedy is part of the illness. Do-gooders do the most harm. One must, rather, step back, analyze, and then reconstruct society so that poverty is impossible. Private property is the ultimate culprit. Every man should share in society's prosperity, cooperate instead of compete, and let society grow healthy. Then individualism will blossom. People will choose to do what they are moved to do. They will self-realize. And so, they will get out of everyone else's hair, being busy doing their own constructive tasks. Property, being an error, is also a nuisance. It demands time and attention. It should be abolished.

Some poor people are grateful for charity. They are the worst. The best poor rankle and spit and rebel. You see, disobedience drives innovation. All good things spring from disobedience. It is acquiescence that is the problem. People tolerate their horrible lives; consider America's slaves. People must choose their activities, for that effort to be worthwhile. People must choose their associations freely; that is where man is best. Much of socialism is polluted with ideas of coercion.

How might individualism blossom without private property? Private property confuses man with his things. It teaches that one is what one has, not what one is. Property sets man to endless work, and establishes habits in man that deny his individuality. Property makes man insecure, since his position can be eroded by factors outside himself. Most merely exist. A man without property really lives. That is rare.

Perfect men are known for peace, not rebellion. Such will be, when they exist, simple, contented, knowing without disputations, wise, measuring all things by a non-material yardstick, giving, involved without meddling, and childlike. Such a person will be future-oriented, self-purposed, and inspired by those who encourage one's uniqueness. The new world's dictum will be "Be Yourself." This is the dictum of Jesus. Jesus really encouraged men to develop their own personalities. Do not let private property deter you. Get rid of it. With much in the socialist program Jesus concurs. Private property abolition, deconstruction of family life: with these Jesus would have been comfortable. For the highest call is to be oneself. Imitation in morals or life is plainly wrong. Men are not of one, or even several, types. Each is unique.

The State must stop governing. Government is a failed idea. Under democracy the many ride roughshod over the few. Authority of any sort is intrinsically degrading. Where governments are cruel and heavy-handed, the goodness of rebellion arises, promoting individuality. But where governments are kind and well-intentioned, nothing good comes. The people become petting animals, satisfied to be what others tell them. The masses never become themselves. When there is no authority, there can be no punishment. What sickens, in reading history, is not crimes of the few, but the punishments good people inflict. Crimes are occasional, punishments perpetual. Punishment induces crime. Reduce punishment to reduce crime. If there were no punishments, all crime would be treated as is disease. The root of crime is starvation. Without property, and with provision to all, crime will disappear. Even jealousy will evaporate.

The State should make needful things. Individuals should make beautiful things. Manual labor degrades those who perform it. All such should, to the extent possible, be relegated to

machines. Sophisticated leisure is the goal of humankind. In art, man reaches individualism. When man creates for himself, without reference to what others desire, he becomes an artist. The public, however, being ill-parented, wishes to make art serve their purposes. They want the artist to tell them comfortable lies and reach conclusions that they, never having thought a moment in their lives, have already concluded. The public fears novelty.

Wilde considers the structure of censorship in England. Poetry gets little, since the masses do not read it. Novels suffer great control, with the result that England produces wretched novels. The classics are turned to ugly effect. All new products suffer by comparison; the public makes classics into authorities. So, the public finds new works incomprehensible or plainly immoral. Occasionally, they call a work morbid or unhealthy or exotic, without really knowing the meanings of the words. All these aspersions dribbling off the public tongue emerge from their inability to imagine a world without authority. That is, the world of the artist.

Wilde prefers violence to opinion. The rack ennobled its victims. The press has replaced the rack. The public has domesticated it, and made the press its omnipresent lapdog. The press reports everything to its insatiable public, except what needs knowing. Some upright journalists resist; most do not.

The public corrupts art by seeking to control it. Some theaters have resisted, and the public has learned receptivity. But most succumb. Art dominates its audience. The spectator receives, and best receives when he can set aside all his prejudices and let the artist speak. New art sets its own standards; it has never before existed. As with plays, so with novels. The novelist takes no account of public preference or sentiment. Those who do are hacks. Wilde sings the praises of George Meredith as a novelist. In decorative arts, the craftsmen decided to do away with the boring, and so furnishings improved. The public resisted, but had no alternative.

The form of government suited to artists is anarchy, that is, no government at all. The people and the monarch are all the same: bad. Princes coerce bodies, popes coerce souls, and the people seek to coerce both body and soul. The people are the worst. Their tyranny is that of the broken-hearted clown. The people are tragic, piteous, and brutal in their authoritarian rampages.

Critics claim Wilde's scheme is impractical. Of course it is; that is its value. What seems practical is shopworn and trite. Practicality is a description of what is usual, of the ruts we wish to bump ourselves out of. Wilde objects to these conditions that give rise to perceptions of impracticality. Change culture. People will adapt. It is change, not constancy, that is the rudiment of human nature.

Individualism emerges from within man. It is not imposed from without like "duty" or medieval "self-sacrifice." Individualism does not call people to be good. They are good if left to develop on their own paths. So, the herd humans distort words. Being self-consciously oneself is called affectation. Conforming is called thinking, when the opposite is true. Selfishness is thought to be living freely. Sympathy is truncated at sharing pains. Life is broad. Live as you will. Let others do the same. Be yourself. Sympathize with good, as well as ill. Rejoice in friend's successes. The Renaissance banished the medieval Christ of suffering. We see now that the nihilist is the true Christian. He welcomes pain; it is him.

Individualism does not welcome pain. It banishes pain. People blossom, becoming fully themselves. Pleasure rules nature. One tests choices by reference to pleasure. When none are slaves, individualism will dominate. And socialism will have accomplished its goal.