

A Prophetic Warning: Orestes Augustus Brownson on the Rise of Socialism

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*H*umanitarian democrats of Orestes Brownson's day and their socialist heirs today correctly affirmed the social nature of man, a solidarity grounded in humanity's created nature, but wrongly emphasized man's social nature at the expense of each person's uniqueness and freedom, which is likewise a gift from God. Brownson saw no end to the socialists' agenda in social and economic life, including the abolition of the natural right to private property. The socialists would crush individual diversity and sacrifice individual freedom on the altar of an imagined state of future equality—a pure abstraction. By so doing, they would impose a dull, drab, ugly, and tyrannical uniformity on the progressively powerless men and women who are subject to their rule.

Introduction: Socialism Resurgent

“We will replace the frigidity of rugged individualism
with the warmth of collectivism.”

—Zohran Mamdani, Mayor of New York City, January 1, 2026¹

“Democracy and socialism have but one thing in common—equality. But note well the difference. Democracy aims at equality in liberty; socialism desires equality in constraint and in servitude.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville, September 12, 1848²

Socialism is on the march. Democratic Socialist candidate Zohran Mamdani won election as Mayor of New York while promising to freeze rents, expand public housing, provide “free” bus rides, and make the equivalent of Soviet grocery stores great again.

In September 2025, the Gallup Poll reported that 39 percent of Americans are favorable to socialism.³ Polling by the Democratic Socialists of America Fund found that 53 percent of Democrats support politicians “described as similar to” Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, and a stunning “74 percent of likely Democratic voters” said that “democratic socialism” best reflects their political viewpoint.⁴ On November 21, 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution condemning socialism by a margin of 285 to 98, and all 98 negative votes were House Democrats.⁵ A generation ago, all of this would have been unthinkable.

Though socialism is often defined technically as the public ownership of the means of production and distribution, it is likely that the mass of today’s self-identified American “socialists” view it in terms of specific policy proposals, such as much higher taxes on the wealthy, “free” health care, expanded social services, or some vague ideal of communal sharing.

This is a radical break from the blue-collar, middle-class tradition of Democratic Party politics championed by the likes of Presidents Bill Clinton, Harry S. Truman, and John F. Kennedy or the late House Speaker Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill, but it is not entirely new. Many American “socialist” communities flourished in the 1830s.⁶ The late Lewis Feuer of the University of California observed that “socialist sentiment” was more prevalent in America during the late 1830s than at any other time in American history.⁷

“No American...Comes Near Him”

One champion of that early socialist cause was none other than Orestes Augustus Brownson (1803–1876), a precocious child of the rocky back country of Vermont who grew up to become one of the most controversial, intriguing, and prominent figures in American intellectual life.⁸ As Professor Philip Gura of the University of North Carolina notes, Brownson “was imposing, over six feet tall and broad shouldered, his black hair brushed straight back without a part.... A powerful speaker, to some he was abrasive; to others, uncouth; and to some, who feared his social radicalism, downright intimidating.”⁹

In 1853, recounting the many prominent acquaintances made on his visit to the United States, Sir John Acton, the great British historian, declared,

“Intellectually no American I have met comes near him.”¹⁰ The late Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., of Harvard University judged Brownson to be one of America’s best prose stylists, brilliant and logically rigorous, and said that in his mastery of philosophy, he had “no equal” in the America of his time.¹¹ “One thing on which Mr. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and I agree,” wrote the late Russell Kirk, “is the importance of Brownson.”¹²

In matters of religion, Brownson was a deeply contemplative but provocative wayfarer. An ardent seeker of religious truth, he became a Presbyterian, a Universalist, a Unitarian, an Atheist, and finally a Roman Catholic. Raised by strict New England Congregationalist foster parents, he was given little formal education. Like Abraham Lincoln, he was self-taught and became a master of English prose while teaching himself Latin, French, German, and Italian. He immersed himself in modern European philosophy, theology, literature, and politics while writing on American social, intellectual, and political trends, leaving behind a massive body of work that fills 20 large volumes.¹³

The Social Gospel. Committed to enlisting religion as a means to improve the lot of the working poor, during the 1830s, young Pastor Brownson expounded a revolutionary “Social Gospel” message and channeled his energies into radical reform movements. He declared Jesus to be “The Prophet of the Workingman.” Then a disciple of the early 19th century French radical Henri de Saint Simon, he identified himself as a socialist. “With the Saint Simonians,” he wrote, “everything is progress, everything changes to man’s conception as he advances.”¹⁴ Humanity was on a path upward and onward to ever higher stages of civilization, Brownson argued, and the new and true religion, shorn of priestcraft and unholy hierarchies, was the “religion of humanity.”¹⁵

Human inequalities on a global scale were morally intolerable and traceable to the primary inequality: the inequality of wealth. The deepening social division rooted in this inequality was between the idle rich and the “real producers” of wealth, the poorer and more numerous working classes.¹⁶ Brownson also worked closely with Robert Dale Owen, son of Britain’s famed Utopian Socialist, and his sidekick, the irrepressible feminist Fanny Wright, who insisted that organized religion was an obstacle to radical social reform. He also joined the Workingman’s Party of New York, the world’s first labor party.

After a short bout with skepticism, his religious enthusiasm was revitalized in 1836, and he emerged in Boston as an independent preacher, and founded his own congregation, calling it the “Church of the Future.” As a prominent Boston lecturer, he also became intimately involved with the New England Transcendentalists, the famed literary circle that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, Theodore

Parker, George Ripley, and Henry David Thoreau. Brownson was an erratic participant in their experiment in community living at Brook Farm and, according to Professor Perry Miller of Harvard University, was the “most radical” member of this impressive group.¹⁷

“Marxist Before Marx.” The financial panic of 1837 hit Brownson’s working-class congregation particularly hard. Poverty, misery, and starvation were multiplying ills, and it seemed to him pointless to depend upon the good graces and prayerful hopes provided by religion.

Brownson’s economic analysis led him to conclude that the wage system, its special character shaped by the increasingly monopolistic structure of much of the economy, was the root evil of modern industrialism. In 1840, amid a national presidential campaign, he published his most provocative essay, “The Laboring Classes,” in the July 1840 issue of *The Boston Quarterly Review*. There, he again insisted that the capitalists’ economic advancement was rooted in exploitation of the work of the laboring classes.

We stand and look at these hard-working men and women hurrying in all directions, and ask ourselves, where go the proceeds of their labors? [To t]he man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves.... [O]ne fact is certain; no man born poor has ever by his wages, as a simple operative, risen to the class of the wealthy. Rich he may have become, but it has not been by his own manual labor. He has in some way contrived to tax for his benefit the labor of others.¹⁸

For Brownson, like Marx and Engels writing after him, society was divided between the “oppressors and the oppressed.” And like them, he saw the intensity of the class struggle between labor and the business classes increasing with the accelerating advance of industrial capitalism. Thus:

The old war between the King and the Barons is well-nigh ended, and so is that between the Barons and the Merchants and Manufacturers, —landed capital and commercial capital. The businessman has become the peer of my Lord. And now commences the new struggle between the operative and his employer, between wealth and labor. Every day does this struggle extend further and wax stronger and fiercer; what or when the end will be God only knows.¹⁹

The solution: radical reform. “[O]ur business,” declared Brownson, “is to emancipate the *proletaires*, as the past has emancipated the slaves. This is our work. There must be no class of our fellow men doomed to toil through life as mere workmen at wages.”²⁰ Schemes of universal education and the

power of religion, he insisted, are of little to no use in alleviating the conditions of the lower classes. By then, Brownson himself, though a Protestant preacher, had become fiercely anti-clerical. A triumph of Christianity, even “pure” Christianity, even if it were to occur, would not resolve the concrete crises facing the working classes.²¹

It was past time to enlist the strong arm of the state, Brownson declared, and impose specific remedies. These included:

- **Destruction of the banking system.** “Uncompromising hostility to the whole banking system should therefore be the motto of every working man and of every friend of Humanity. The system must be destroyed. On this point, there must be no misgiving, no subterfuge, no palliation.”
- **Abolition of inheritance.** “A man shall have all he honestly acquires, so long as he himself belongs to the world in which he acquires it. But his power over his property must cease with his life, and his property must then become the property of the state, to be disposed of by some equitable law for the use of the generation which takes his place.”
- **Abolition of all monopolies.** “Following the [destruction] of the Banks, must come that of all monopolies and of all privilege. There are many of these.”²²

Brownson further declared that powerful and malevolent economic interests—the banks, the big business organizations, and international financiers—would oppose all these reforms and that a violent clash would therefore be inevitable. Unlike Marx, Brownson did not personally advocate the abolition of private property or a violent revolution to overthrow the existing economic order, but like Marx, he did predict that the increasing immiseration of the poorer and more numerous classes of society would result in a violent revolt. In fact, the consequences of the prevailing economic order would end in a gigantic international class war. “Change,” he predicted, “will be effected only by the strong arm of physical force. It will come, if it ever comes at all, only at the conclusion of a war, the likes of which the world as yet has never witnessed, and from which, however inevitable it may seem to the eye of philosophy, the heart of Humanity recoils with horror.”²³

An ardent Democrat, Brownson campaigned vigorously for President Martin Van Buren in the 1840 election, but his publication of “The Laboring Classes,” his hot-blooded assault on modern industrial capitalism,

badly damaged not only him but also Van Buren and the Democrats in the general election. His attacks were not confined to the Eastern Banking establishment; he also condemned the alleged collusion between British and American financiers and saw free trade itself not as a path to peaceful cooperation, but as a form of economic competition that would aggravate international rivalries and instigate war.

The essay solidified Brownson's reputation in 1840 as a hard man of the Left. Its key elements—exploitation of labor, condemnation of “wage slavery,” abolition of inheritance, class struggle, and violent revolutionary conflict—uncannily anticipated so much of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, which was published eight years later, that the late Harvard Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., defined Brownson as a “Marxist before Marx.”²⁴

Brownson was intellectually brilliant but politically naïve. He honestly believed his fire-and-brimstone essay would help his fellow Democrats in the 1840 elections. But they quickly repudiated it, and the conservative Whigs gleefully reproduced it for mass distribution. It embarrassed President Van Buren, but John C. Calhoun of South Carolina lauded his work as a well-deserved excoriation of the evils of Northern industrialism. Brownson's friend Ralph Waldo Emerson similarly loved the essay and praised Brownson for his bravado and “sturdy” style.

Up from Radicalism. This notorious essay also marked the decisive turning point in Brownson's intellectual life and professional fortunes. The Democrats' electoral defeat in 1840 profoundly demoralized Brownson and left him disillusioned with partisan politics and the overblown promises of popular democracy. He reconsidered the big questions of philosophy, theology, and politics. Over the next four years, Brownson slowly drifted toward conservatism, both in politics and in religion. It turned out to be a momentous intellectual transition and led him to become, as Russell Kirk reminds us, a leading figure in the pantheon of American conservatism and a formidable apologist for Roman Catholicism.²⁵

Brownson the newly minted conservative was no less combative or controversial than Brownson the radical. Throughout the 1850s, he continued writing and debating philosophical and religious issues of the day, alienating his former Boston colleagues on matters of religion as well as politics. While immersing himself in philosophy, both ancient and modern, he emerged as a formidable apologist for the Catholic faith, but he also concentrated increasingly on politics and the deepening national crisis over slavery and its extension into the territories. Brownson was adamantly opposed to slavery but insisted that it could be safely abolished only through constitutional means. Piecemeal attempts to resolve the issue, however, failed, and in 1861,

those simmering sectional tensions exploded into one of the most horrific civil wars of modern times.

The Civil War and the Rise of Humanitarian Democracy

The Civil War was the product of a complex set of interrelated causes, but, as General Ulysses S. Grant insisted, the main cause was slavery and its fundamental incompatibility with the American idea of human equality and personal liberty.²⁶ Beyond the sectional disputes over Westward expansion, debates over free trade and tariffs, and constitutional conflicts over the rights of the states and authority of the general government, there were simmering and deepening cultural and ideological divisions. These divisions were mortal threats to the Federal Constitution and preoccupied Brownson throughout much of the 1860s and early 1870s.

Though he had lost a once exuberant faith in popular wisdom, Brownson nonetheless remained a staunch constitutional democrat and never abandoned the core democratic principles of popular sovereignty, political equality, and majority rule. For Brownson, the problem was how American democracy was to be understood and constitutionally applied. This was the central focus of *The American Republic*, his masterwork of political theory published in 1865.²⁷ Written during the Civil War—the “nation’s struggle for life”—*The American Republic* emphasized how the country had come apart ideologically and culturally and how sectionally rooted differences manifested themselves in competing “tendencies” or sharply different interpretations of the meaning of American democracy.

Personalist Democracy. Brownson acknowledged that John Locke’s liberal political theory, especially the theory of social contract, was America’s “political tradition.” However, while embracing the concept of natural law and natural rights, Brownson nonetheless faulted Locke for his account of the origins of political authority and obligation.²⁸ That liberal tradition found varied expression in America, most notably in the North and the South. The aristocratic culture of the South, for example, nurtured a fierce sense of individualism and thus its common political expression, which Brownson termed “personalist democracy.” Each free man was a master unto himself in this Southern culture, and rightful government existed only with personal and political consent. Freedom, for the personalist democrats, was identified for all practical purposes with power.

Because Lockean liberalism took on a local color in the nation’s different regions, so did constitutional theory. In the South, the prevailing constitutional interpretation of federalism was a clear, stark social contract theory.

Just as society and the state were the product of individual consent, the federal government was a product of consensual contract, an agreement among the sovereign states. The Federal Union itself, the American Republic, as John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and his congressional allies so strongly argued, was a contract among free, equal, and independent sovereigns. Therefore, the states that had previously consented to join the Union could logically and legally withdraw the consent that they had freely given. After all, they were independent sovereign states, supreme unto themselves.

With the fall of the Confederacy, the “personalist democracy” of the South was decisively and practically defeated, never more to regain its former strength in the higher councils of the American Republic. They were truly *Gone with the Wind*.

Humanitarian Democracy. With the Northern victory, Brownson saw the emergence of a new, robust ideological threat rooted in the abolitionist movement: “Humanitarian Democracy.” “The humanitarians,” he wrote, “are more dangerous in principle than the egoists, for they have the appearance of building on a broader and deeper foundation, of being more Christian, more philosophic, more generous and philanthropic; but Satan is never more successful than under the guise of an angel of light.”²⁹

The men and women of abolitionist New England were the leading champions of the emerging humanitarian democracy. Brownson knew them, grew up with and lived among them all his life, and often shared their sentiments. The New England Yankees were his people, so he was intimately familiar with their views, both social and religious. Just as the slaveholding South was the cultural incubator of fierce individualism, especially among the planter class and their adherence to egoistical or “personalist” interpretations of democracy, the religious and cultural life of Brownson’s native New England, the Puritan home base, nurtured the growth and ideological intensity of humanitarian democracy.

Those imbued with the old Puritan spirit might have lost their sense of supernatural mission, but they had lost none of their religious fervor in the hurried task of improving the moral and social life of their fellow citizens. In one of his most powerful Civil War essays, “Liberalism and Progress” (1864), Brownson elaborated on his fellow New Englanders’ reformist zeal:

[The Puritan] is philanthropic but makes his philanthropy his excuse for meddling with everybody’s business as if it were his own, and under the pretense of promoting religion and morality, he wars against every generous and natural instinct and aggravates the very evils he seeks to cure. He has his use in the community; but a whole nation composed of such as he would be short lived

and resemble the community of the lost rather than that of the blest. The Puritan is a reformer by nature, but he never understands the true law of progress and never has the patience to wait till the reform he wishes for can be practically effected. He is too impatient for the end ever to wait for the slow operations of the means, and he defeats his own purpose by his inconsiderate haste. He needs the slower, the more deliberative, and the more patient and enduring man of the South to serve as his counterpoise.³⁰

Because man is both an individual being and a social being, the tendencies toward individualism and socialism are rooted in the very composition of human nature. Man is not only an individual, with intellect and free will, but also a social animal who lives and can only live in society. Men do not live outside of society, and society obviously does not exist outside of individual men. The radical individualist tends to assert the mental and moral supremacy of the individual above all else; the humanitarian democrat tends to assert the essential unity of the human race and exalts the rule and rights of society over individual interests and freedom. Both tendencies, taken to extremes, are inherently destructive of good order and, in the American context, threats to the Federal Constitution.

Enthusiastic for grand schemes of social reform, seeking moral rejuvenation and “uplift,” the “humanitarian democrat” was marked, Brownson said, by a “tendency to exaggerate the social element, to overlook the territorial basis of the state, and to disregard the rights of individuals.”³¹ In short, humanitarian democracy had become the new engine of American collectivism, the exaltation of society over the person, the all-powerful group over the powerless individual. For Brownson, humanitarian democracy, as distinguished from the constitutional or territorial democracy of the nation, was synonymous with “social despotism” or socialism.

The true rationale for materialistic socialist politics is oddly metaphysical. The humanitarian democrat is obsessed with a “pleasing abstraction”: the solidarity of the human race bound together by the sacred principle of equality in some *future* social condition in which mutual love and charity will abound and all marks of personal distinction or differences, the very source of toxic social divisions, are suppressed or even, if possible, erased altogether.

This obsession with the abstraction of an egalitarian future would fuel a never-ending “progressive” campaign to secure that imaginary condition. Humanitarians, Brownson predicted, would not be satisfied with the abolition of slavery or even the stellar achievement of racial equality. Their relentless campaign of social reform would move on to agitation for sexual

equality. From there, they would launch their campaign for economic equality and ultimately abolition of the right to private property—the Holy Grail of the socialist project. In this new dispensation, a thorough levelling of social and economic life, the rights of individuals would no longer matter. Thus, “[t]he humanitarian is carried away by a vague generality, and loses men in humanity, and sacrifices the rights of men in a vain endeavor to secure the rights of man, as your Calvinist or his brother Jansenist sacrifices the rights of nature in order to secure the freedom of grace.”³²

Brownson insisted that over time, the premise of any political theory would be pushed to its logical conclusion. If inequality equals injustice, then all inequalities must be eliminated in the name of justice. It is not only social and economic or racial inequalities, but also individual differences and distinctions generally that divide one from another and undermine human solidarity. Therefore, even natural inequalities, distinctions, or differences rooted in the natural order, the products of Creation itself, are legitimate targets for social intervention, secular moralizing, and coercion by the state.

Following the logic of these premises, therefore, the socialist project must end in unlimited power and unprecedented repression. Indeed, Brownson anticipated the woke intolerance of modern political correctness:

Individuals are, and as long as there are individuals will be, unequal: some are handsomer and some are uglier; some wiser or sillier, more or less gifted, stronger or weaker, taller or shorter, stouter or thinner than others, and therefore some have natural advantages which others have not. There is inequality, therefore, injustice, which can be remedied only by the abolition of all individualities, and the reduction of all individuals to the race, or humanity, or man in general. [The humanitarian] can find no limit to his agitation this side of vague generality, which is no reality, but a pure nullity, for he respects no territorial circumscriptions, and must regard creation itself as a blunder. This is not fancy, for he has gone very nearly as far as it is here shown, if logical, he must go.³³

No Limits. If Creation itself is a “blunder,” then there is no limit to the socialist project of levelling human life.³⁴ Today, not surprisingly, we thus see the ideologically driven minimization or eradication of sexual differences in the transgender ideology that emerged from academia and is now present even among medical professionals. Today’s “progressives,” immune to common sense and even biological reality, feverishly campaign for biological men to participate in women’s sports and carry their toxic message of sexual meaninglessness everywhere from bathrooms to ballparks.³⁵

Such a project, we now know, entails profound personal, moral, and intellectual costs. Language is corrupted and curtailed. Women are no longer women, but “birthing” persons or “pregnant people.” Speech codes and compulsory speech are enforced by social or employer sanctions against those who are charged with failing to use the politically correct pronouns or “misgendering” those newly classified victims. Even thought must be policed. Today, in the United Kingdom—the home of William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Jonathan Swift—British citizens are arrested and jailed for “offensive” communications, even satire, on the internet.³⁶

Since free speech is a product of free thought—a gift of Creation—punishment for “thought crimes” is logically appropriate in a secularized state that repudiates the inherent value of such a gift or even Creation itself. What Brownson feared in the 19th century with the threat of an absolutist socialist superstate was anticipated in all its hideous terror by George Orwell in the 20th century.³⁷

The High Price of Socialism

In its practical application, as noted, the ideology of humanitarian democracy becomes “social despotism” or “socialism.” In Brownson’s assessment, socialism is not simply political control of the means of production and distribution, though it most assuredly includes a command-and-control economic reorganization of society along those lines. Rather, socialism as a matter of principle is the exaltation of society over and above the individuals who necessarily comprise it, the subordination of the individual to the group, and the triumph of the claims of the collective over any competing rights or interests of individuals.

While man is both an individual and a social creature by nature, as Aristotle and Aquinas taught, socialism represents a radical imbalance of that natural order, a radical reset of the relationship between the individual and society. Society would be overwhelmingly dominant, and its power, through the state, would be untrammelled. Of course, it is and would be utterly incompatible with the *republican* principle of limited government, which in a republican constitutional order continually strives to strike a prudential balance between the *res privata* and the *res publica*, the private affairs of the individual and the public affairs of society.

For Brownson, then, socialism, which exalts the social over the individual nature of man, is an ideological distortion of human reality.³⁸ But one must not overlook the fact that its perennial appeal is deeply rooted in our very real social nature. That is why its perennial appeal is dangerous and deadly:

Veiling itself under Christian forms, attempting to distinguish between Christianity and the Church, claiming for itself the authority and the immense popularity of the Gospel, denouncing Christianity in the name of Christianity, discarding the Bible in the name of the Bible, and defying God in the name of God, Socialism conceals from the indiscriminating multitude its true character, and, appealing to the dominant sentiment of the age and to some of our strongest natural inclinations and passions, it asserts itself with terrific power, and rolls on its career of devastation and death with a force that human beings, in themselves, are impotent to resist. Men are assimilated to it by all the power of their own nature, and by all their reverence for religion. Their very faith and charity are perverted, and their noblest sympathies and their sublimest hopes are made subservient to their basest passions and their most groveling propensities. Here is the secret strength of Socialism, and here is the principal source of its danger.³⁹

Among the “basest passions” Brownson identified are envy and class hatred: “It is unjust that one should have what another wants, or even more than another. What right have you to ride in your coach or astride your spirited barb while I am forced to trudge on foot?”⁴⁰ As Russell Kirk noted, Brownson “seems to have been the first writer of note to denounce Marxism as a heresy from Christianity—a concept recently affirmed by Christopher Dawson, Arnold Toynbee, Martin D’Arcy and Reinhold Niebuhr.”⁴¹

Not only is the person to be subordinated to society, but society will determine what is good for that person and secure that good: “[T]he essence of Socialism is in this very assumption that our good lies in the natural order and is unattainable by individual effort.”⁴² Individual effort, let alone the “rugged individualism” derided by Mayor Mamdani, is no path to personal or social progress. Moreover, man’s supernatural destiny, if it exists, is ignored, and there is no room for a delusional relationship to a nonexistent or irrelevant God. In short, socialism reduces the realization of the good life of all individuals to a system of radically secular and repressive collectivism—a future state of material as well as spiritual poverty.⁴³

Constitutional Costs. The Union victory in the Civil War had dramatically strengthened the general government, most notably through an expansion of executive power. The humanitarians, champions of the “socialistic democracy,” falsely saw the Northern victory as their victory rather than simply as a valiant triumph to preserve the nation’s territorial integrity and precious constitutional order.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the humanitarians rightly saw the dramatic expansion of executive power as a fitting instrument of their agenda, which had little respect for the traditional authority of the

states or constitutional limits. Worse, warned Brownson, congressional acquiescence in and popular approval of this executive expansion was the chief danger to American liberty.⁴⁵ Among other things, following the abolition of slavery, he proposed a just national reconstruction in the spirit of Lincoln: charity for all and malice toward none. Eventually, the defeated states of the South would, and should be, restored as states with the full rights of states in the federal union. Meanwhile, he insisted, Congress had a solemn duty to reassert its rightful authority and curb the enthusiasms of ambitious future Presidents, even great and good Presidents such as Abraham Lincoln.

Humanitarian democrats, originating in the ranks of fervent abolitionists, were the chief champions of this trend toward national consolidation and centralization of power. They were cavalierly indifferent to local custom or prescription—the American Republic’s *unwritten* constitution—and disposed to undermine or destroy federalism, the Founders’ careful delineation of the powers of the general government and the particular governments of the several states. As neatly summarized by Brownson:

The most marked political tendency of the American people has been, since 1825, to interpret their government as a pure and simple democracy, and to shift it from a territorial to a purely popular basis, or from the people as the state, inseparably united to the national territory or domain, to the people as simply population, either as individuals or as the race. Their tendency has unconsciously, therefore, been to change their constitution from a republican to a despotic, or from a civilized to a barbaric constitution.⁴⁶

The democracy of the humanitarians was thus a “mass democracy,” and in threatening to override state and territorial distinctions, holding that American sovereignty is vested in the American people as an undifferentiated mass, their triumph would logically result in centralizing power, eliminating or weakening the federalist character of the American Republic as embodied in such institutions as the Senate or the Electoral College. That outcome is also part of the agenda being pursued by today’s radicals.

Political scientists Peter Augustine Lawler and Richard Reinsch point out that Brownson’s prescient warnings about the direction of humanitarian democracy during the Civil War anticipated the rise of 20th century Progressivism:

While the rising humanitarians of Brownson’s day wanted to emancipate people from the circumscriptions of territory, property, local law, and the

requirements of republican citizenship, the progressive movement joined many of these ideas to a coherent body of political thought that directly contradicted the historical and philosophical basis of the Constitution. Progressivism emphasized a consolidationist federal power that must, of necessity, supplant the individual and civil society, and to a large measure the states, if social justice were to be achieved. The competition in markets and in politics, particularly at the state and federal congressional levels of government, was to be suppressed in service of a higher commitment to national progress.⁴⁷

The Secular State: Barreling Toward Absolutism

Humanitarian democracy is socialism in political practice, and its adherents would eventually erect a superstate, a powerful and intrusive regime of busybodies preoccupied with identifying and punishing various social “sins” and ready to root out all distinctions and differences and make wayward men “good” according to the latest secular fashions.⁴⁸

But if the state becomes the absolute master, Brownson declares, “[e]very man, as a man, is an absolute slave.”⁴⁹

[Such a state] may do by us and ours as it pleases. If it takes it into its head to make a new and arbitrary division of property, however unjust it may seem, we shall not only be impotent to resist, but we shall not even have the right of the wretched to complain. Conscience will be no shield. The authority of the absolute sovereign extends to spiritual matters as well as to temporal.⁵⁰

Brownson thus emphasized that the tendency toward centralized power would threaten the role of the Church. In fact, the future state would usurp the role of the Church as a teacher of morals, defining right and wrong in the private lives of individuals and imposing its punishments for officially defined “sin.”⁵¹

Caesar, not Christ, would become the moral teacher of men and women in the new dispensation. The state as Church would assume unto itself the task of punishing personal “sin” because personal sin would now be a political matter. The modern “progressive” state would—as it in fact did—enact laws that, for example, wrongly prohibit the personal sale or use of alcohol: “The state cannot punish the simple vice of drunkenness; it can punish drunkenness only when it interferes with the rights of others or disturbs the public peace.”⁵²

Too many commentators on Brownson’s political theory, noting his disillusion with the promises of popular democracy in the aftermath of the 1840

presidential election, tend to overlook his genuinely democratic convictions and libertarian predispositions, which were deeply rooted in the axiomatic *republican* distinction between private and public life. Brownson feared that an increasingly materialistic and secularistic age would be profoundly dangerous to personal and political liberty. As New Mexico State University Professor Gregory Butler has observed, “Orestes Brownson’s postconversion writings clearly demonstrate his conviction that the modern world, once it is dominated by a secularized socialist ideology, is condemned to a period of unmitigated tyranny.”⁵³ Brownson warned, for example, of the marriage of modern secularism and state power, believing that the post-Christian order would inevitably become a repressive post-liberal order. Shorn of religious restraint, such a secularized state, ignoring or denying the laws of God, would become absolute. Recognizing nothing above itself, the state would become a law unto itself, citing whatever it deemed expedient to justify its actions and therefore both amoral and lawless.⁵⁴

If an increasingly faithless society followed its irreligious premises to their secular conclusion, there would be an inevitable progression from “political atheism” to “political absolutism.” God-given natural rights, including rights of conscience and personal property, would be ignored, unrecognized, or flatly denied.⁵⁵ Instead, citizens would be left with only government permission slips, which the rulers of the superstate could either give or take away from them. Absolutism—what is often called “statism,” the triumph of untrammelled civil power—would spell not only the end of all liberty, but also the death of all genuine authority. Men and women, ruled by ruthless ideologies, would henceforth be at the mercy of raw power.

Brownson’s prophetic 19th century fears were fully realized in the 20th century. Modern totalitarian ideologies—Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism—are united in their worldview that God, for all practical purposes, is either dead or irrelevant. These modern ideologies have also been united in a secular faith that the progress of humanity would depend on the power of a revolutionary class or managerial elite to replace the outdated moral law of a nonexistent God with the will of an omnipotent atheistic superstate that, severed from any moral authority higher than itself, would become the final arbiter of love and life, of good and evil. That explains, in part, the ferocious anti-religious repression practiced by totalitarian regimes.

But it gets even worse. To paraphrase the great G.K. Chesterton, when men no longer believe in God, they can and will believe in anything. Paradoxically, the substitution of the state or its rulers for God would be manifest in grotesque public rituals or pronouncements reminiscent of religious veneration.

Such was the case of blasphemous poems honoring Josef Stalin in Soviet Russia during the 1930s, combined with bizarre Communist pseudo-religious rites and practices.⁵⁶ Similarly, some high-ranking followers of Adolph Hitler in National Socialist Germany portrayed “The Fuhrer” as nothing less than Germany’s divinely ordained Messiah. In 1937, Robert Ley, head of the National Socialist Labor Front, declared: “We believe on this earth *solely* in Adolph Hitler. We believe that National Socialism is the *sole* faith and salvation of our people. We believe that God has sent us Adolph Hitler.”⁵⁷

Not surprisingly, as Chesterton might have imagined, these statist claims are sometimes laughably idiotic, such as the recent Chinese Communist Party *diktat* that the reincarnation of Tibet’s Dalai Lama must take place only within Beijing’s jurisdiction.⁵⁸ Even the afterlife is not beyond the totalitarian claims of China’s atheistic regime. It is not enough to dismiss such claims as silly; one must never underestimate the sinful lust for domination, what St. Augustine termed the *Libido dominandi*. Armed with advanced information technology and dedicated to surveillance, censorship, and social control, the totalitarian superstate remains a looming Orwellian nightmare.

Conclusion

Orestes Brownson issued a sober warning to posterity. The rights of the individual and the rights of society must be properly balanced in a sound constitutional order—a primary task of statesmanship. While humanitarian democrats of Brownson’s day and their socialist heirs today were and are certainly right to affirm the social nature of man, a solidarity grounded in humanity’s created nature, they are utterly wrong to emphasize the social nature of man at the expense of the uniqueness and freedom that, equally with man’s social nature, are likewise gifts from God.

Based on the apparent lack of any limitations in their pursuit of equality, Brownson saw no end to the socialists’ agenda in social and economic life, including the abolition of the natural right to private property. They would crush individual diversity and sacrifice individual freedom on the altar of an imagined state of future equality—a pure abstraction. By so doing, they would impose a dull, drab, ugly, and tyrannical uniformity on the progressively powerless men and women subject to their rule.

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Endnotes

1. News release, "Mayor Zohran Mamdani Inaugural Address," New York City, Office of the Mayor, January 1, 2026, <https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2026/01/mayor-zohran-mamdani-inaugural-address> (accessed March 5, 2026).
2. "Tocqueville on Socialism," trans. Ronald Hamowy, *New Individualist Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1961), p. 21, https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/2136/NewIndividualistReview_1360_Bk.pdf (accessed March 5, 2026).
3. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Image of Capitalism Slips to 54 Percent in U.S.," Gallup News, September 8, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/694835/image-capitalism-slips.aspx> (accessed March 5, 2026).
4. Holly Otterbein, "Poll: Capitalism Is Out...and Socialism Is In," *Politico*, September 15, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/15/is-socialism-going-mainstream-a-new-poll-suggests-it-might-be-00564167> (accessed March 5, 2026).
5. George Caldwell, "127 Democrats Refuse to Vote to Condemn 'Horrors of Socialism,'" *The Daily Signal*, November 21, 2025, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2025/11/21/127-democrats-refuse-to-vote-to-condemn-horrors-of-socialism/> (accessed March 5, 2026). "Two Democrats voted 'present' and 27 did not vote." *Ibid.*
6. A historian of the socialist movement, Edmund Wilson, says that these early American socialists were preoccupied with devising "imaginary systems" for communal living that included Brook Farm in Massachusetts, which attracted Orestes Brownson among other New England luminaries, and that "it was the United States, with its new social optimism and its enormous unoccupied spaces, which was to become the great nursery for these experiments." Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1953), p. 101, https://dn710908.ca.archive.org/0/items/WilsonToTheFinlandStation/Wilson%20-%20To%20the%20Finland%20Station_text.pdf (accessed March 5, 2026).
7. Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals: A Set of Post-Ideological Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 183, <https://dn721801.ca.archive.org/0/items/marxintellectualsfeuer/marxintellectualsfeuer.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2026).
8. Lord Acton, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Henry David Thoreau, Senator John C. Calhoun, Senator Charles Sumner were just a few of Brownson's many correspondents, and he published in the nation's leading journals, including the *Boston Quarterly Review* and *The Democratic Review*. Brownson addressed most of the issues of his day—ranging from the role of religion and religious liberty to mass immigration and assimilation to the baneful influence of corporate power on American politics—in his own *Brownson's Quarterly Review*. "*Brownson's Quarterly Review* began in 1844. A second series began in 1847, and a third in 1853. A 'New York series' (the fourth) began in 1856, a 'third New York series' began in 1860, and a 'national series' began in 1864. Publication was suspended later that year, but then resumed with a 'last series' in 1873. *Brownson's Quarterly Review* ceased publication for good in 1875, and Brownson died the following year." Online Books Page, <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=brownsonsqrev> (accessed March 5, 2026). All volumes of *Brownson's Quarterly Review* are available in pdf form online from the Hathi Trust, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000061068> (accessed March 5, 2026).
9. Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), p. 74.
10. Lord Acton, letter to German theologian Ignaz Dollinger, cited in Roland Hill, *Lord Acton* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 66.
11. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim's Progress* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1939), p. 288, <https://dn720501.ca.archive.org/0/items/orestesabrownson010813mbp/orestesabrownson010813mbp.pdf> (accessed March 6, 2026).
12. Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993), p. 52.
13. See *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, ed. Henry F. Brownson (New York: AMS Press, 1966). Cited hereafter as *Works*.
14. Orestes A. Brownson, "Memoir of Saint Simone" (1834), in *Seeking the Truth: An Orestes Brownson Anthology*, ed. Richard M. Reinsch II (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), p. 83. Cited hereafter as *Seeking the Truth*.
15. *Ibid.*
16. "I allude to that marked distinction which exists all over the world and which is every day becoming more glaring in our own country, between the working men and the idlers, between those who produce and are poor and those who produce not and are rich; between those who perform all the productive labor and those who are crafty enough, enterprising enough, to obtain all its fruits." Orestes Brownson, "An Address Delivered at Dedham, on the Fifty Eighth Anniversary of American Independence, July 4, 1834," in *Seeking the Truth*, p. 89.
17. Perry Miller, *The New England Transcendentalists* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), p. 339.
18. Orestes Augustus Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," in *Seeking the Truth*, p. 171.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
21. "Could we convert all men to Christianity in both theory and practice, as held by the most enlightened sect of Christians among us, the evils of the social state would remain untouched." *Ibid.*, p. 175.
22. *Ibid.*

23. Ibid.
24. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Orestes Brownson: An American Marxist Before Marx," *Sewanee Review*, XLVII, No. 3 (July-September 1939), p. 319.
25. See Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 2001, Seventh Revised Edition), pp. 245-250.
26. "The cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery." Hon. Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: J.J. Little and Co., 1885), Vol. II, p. 542.
27. This famous book has gone through many editions; the most recent, with an excellent introduction by the late Professor Peter Lawler, is that produced by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute: *Orestes Augustus Brownson, The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies and Destiny* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003). The book is also included in *Works*, Vol XVIII, pp. 1-222. See also Robert E. Moffit, PhD, "Freedom and Federalism: Orestes Brownson's Case for the Federal Constitution," Heritage Foundation *First Principles* No. 51, February 25, 2015, https://static.heritage.org/2015/pdf/FP-51.pdf?_gl=1*1dn2on5*_gcl__au*MjA2OTc2Mjc4Mi4xNzYxNjYxOTMw*_ga*MzI2MjI1MzQyLjE3NjE2NjE5MzA.*_ga_WI4BT6YQ87*czE3NjYwNzExMDkkbzE4JGcwJHQxNzY2MDcxMTA5JGo2MCRsMCRoMA.
28. Brownson denied, for example, that political authority was the product of social contract in a "state of nature" and held, with Aristotle and Aquinas, that political authority was natural to man as a social and political animal and no such state of nature either did or ever could exist; in short, it was nothing more than a metaphysical abstraction. Political theory, he argued, must be based on the real, not the unreal, and the factual, not the imaginary. On his critique of the social contract theory, see Brownson, "The American Republic," in *Works*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 27-40.
29. Ibid., p. 184.
30. Brownson, "Liberalism and Progress" (1864), in Kirk, *Orestes Brownson: Selected Political Essays*, p. 167.
31. Ibid., p. 181.
32. Brownson, "The American Republic," in *Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 185.
33. Ibid., p. 186.
34. In this assessment, Brownson anticipated Pope Leo XIII's condemnation of socialism in his encyclical *Quod Apostolici Muneris* (1878). In speaking of the socialists of that time, Leo wrote: "They leave nothing untouched or whole which by both human and divine laws has been wisely decreed for the health and beauty of life." Cited in *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XIII*, ed. Etienne Gilson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 189.
35. See Jay W. Richards, "What Is Gender Ideology?" Heritage Foundation *Commentary*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/what-gender-ideology>; see also Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018).
36. Based on British data, about 30 people a day, or 12,000 annually, are arrested and jailed for speech violations. See Chadwick Moore, "UK Free Speech Crackdown Sees Up to 30 People a Day Arrested for Petty Offenses Such as Retweets and Cartoons," *New York Post*, August 19, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/08/19/world-news/uk-free-speech-struggle-30-arrests-a-day-censorship/> (accessed March 6, 2026).
37. In Orwell's imagined dystopian future, the "Thought Police" were relentless. "Thoughtcrime was not a thing that could be concealed forever. You might dodge successfully for a while, even for years, but sooner or later they were bound to get you." George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Plume-Harcourt Brace, 1983), pp. 16-17.
38. "Now, social despotism or state absolutism is not based on truth or reality. Society has certain rights over individuals, for she is a medium of their communion with God, or through which they derive life from God, the primal source of all life; but she is not the only medium of man's life." Brownson, "The American Republic," in *Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 46.
39. Brownson, "Socialism and the Church" (1852), in *Works*, Vol. X, p. 92.
40. Brownson, "The American Republic," in *Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 185.
41. See *Orestes Brownson: Selected Political Essays*, ed. Russell Kirk (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 1990), p. 9.
42. Ibid.
43. In 1873, Brownson anticipated the Communist project that Karl Marx initiated and correctly saw the inevitability of a collective misery. "But communism, which demands equality in material goods, is not only an impossibility, but an absurdity. Equality of wealth is equivalent to equality of poverty.... Communism, if it could be carried out, would not, then, as the communists dream, secure all the advantages of wealth, but would result in the reduction of all to the most abject poverty—the very thing which they are ready to commit any crime or sacrilege in order to escape." Orestes Brownson, "The Democratic Principle," in *Brownson: Selected Political Essays*, pp. 212-213.
44. "The socialistic democracy claims the victory which has been really won by the territorial democracy, as if it had been socialism, not patriotism, that fired the hearts and nerved the arms of the brave men led by McClellan, Grant, and Sherman." Brownson, "The American Republic," in *Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 184.
45. "There is a growing disposition on the part of Congress to throw as much of the business of government as possible into the hands of the Executive." Ibid., pp. 189-190.

46. Ibid., p. 177.
47. Peter Augustine Lawler and Richard Reinsch, *A Constitution in Full: Recovering the Unwritten Foundation of American Liberty* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), p. 95.
48. Orestes Brownson, "Liberalism and Socialism," in *Works*, Vol. X, p. 542.
49. Brownson, "Democracy," in *Works*, Vol. X, p. 4.
50. Ibid., p. 5.
51. In fact, any such secular claim to moral teaching is false. "The office of the state is not to teach morals, or to interpret the moral law, but to execute it; not to define right, but to protect and vindicate it. To teach morals, to define what is or is not right, is not within the competency of the civil power. That belongs to the spiritual or moral power, distinct from the civil power, and moving in another orbit." Brownson, "Liberalism and Socialism," in *Works*, Vol. X, p. 542.
52. Long before Prohibition was enshrined in the Constitution under the Eighteenth Amendment, the State of Maine had enacted such a law, and Brownson strongly objected to it: "A man has a natural right to drink wine, beer, cider, gin, rum, brandy or whiskey, if he chooses, and can honestly procure it. He has a right to use intoxicating drinks so long as he does not abuse them." Ibid.
53. Gregory Butler, *In Search of the American Spirit: The Political Thought of Orestes Brownson* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. 133.
54. Writing in 1854, Brownson warned, "The great practical errors of our time are, that religion has nothing to do with politics, or that men in their political actions are entirely independent of the spiritual order; and that the state is the supreme judge for itself of what is best for the temporal welfare of its subjects, and, in seeking it, may go with or against the spiritual power, as it judges proper." Orestes Brownson, "Temporal Power of the Popes," in *Works*, Vol. XI, p. 128.
55. "These rights—the rights of conscience and the rights of property with all their necessary implications—are limitations of the rights of society, and the individual has the right to plead them against the state. Society does not confer them, and it cannot take them away, for they are at least as sacred and as fundamental as her own." Brownson, "The American Republic," in *Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 46.
56. "They began by substituting new festivals, new processions, and new symbols for the Orthodox festivals, processions and rites and symbols of divine service. They started by discovering 'Red' substitutes for the Church ceremonies of baptism, marriage and burial, for these were...the religious rites which seemed most closely bound up with the life of the masses." Rene Fueleop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 193.
57. Cited in Peter Viereck, *Meta-Politics: The Roots of the Nazi Mind* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 289. Emphasis in original.
58. David Stillwell, "Tyrants Need Buffers: China Is Not a Monolith. That's an Opportunity for the West," *Washington Examiner*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/issue/july-23-2025/> (accessed March 6, 2026).