Woodrow Wilson’s Political Philosophy – From the President Himself…

Society as Family

His theory claims that man is born into familial government, and “all that they possessed, their lives even and the lives of those dependent upon them, were at the disposal of this absolute father-sovereign” (Wilson State 6). In the archaic form of familial government, Wilson claims, “the only individuality was the individuality of the community as a whole. Man was merged into society” (Wilson State 12).

Government as Patriarch

The father brings each individual member of his family into mutual cooperation and effectively owns the lives of each family member (Pestritto Woodrow 46). Wilson and many Progressives subscribed to the belief that the modern state, following the model of the absolute—father sovereign, must bring individuals into a collective unit working towards the same historical ends of what Hegel called the “Divine Idea”—the perfect form of government on earth (Pestritto Woodrow 15-16, 46).31

Sense of Individuality

Individualism existed only in the sense that each individual in the family, community, or nation worked for the mutual benefit of the collective. According to Progressives, it is the responsibility of the modern state to unify, or “merge” men into one collective society.

Evolution of Government

Furthermore, in The State Wilson argues, “political growth refuses to be forced; and institutions have grown with the slow growth of social relationships; have changed in response, not to new theories, but to new continuing circumstances” (Wilson State 575).32 Men cannot abstractly create government, and “must take as its guide the historical spirit of its own particular epoch” (Pestritto Woodrow 35).

What is Liberty?

The new meaning of liberty rests on the ability of the majority to use the power of government as they see fit: “political liberty is the right of those who are governed to adjust government to their own needs and interests” (4).35 Wilson and the Progressives argued that it is the responsibility of the modern state, and, more specifically, the executive of the government, to direct the public will and to embody the peoples’ democratic majoritarian spirit. The executive had to lead because a multitude of leaders would be inefficient. The president and the elites of his administration, by directing and embodying the people’s will, would move the government towards its proper historical growth and form a paternal government.