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LIBERTY MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

by

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In a recent column* Murray Rothbard asserts that the quest for political "liberty" should be exclusive of other ethical considerations. He strongly suggests that to venture beyond this ideological Rubicon in advocacy of positive alternatives is to renew political coercion and to foster utopian fantasies. He sarcastically attacks Milton Mueller for his "tangled lucubrations"**, attempting insights on a future libertarian society. Dr. Rothbard holds these attempts in such contempt that he does not even bother to quote Mueller for us or give us the specific source of his remarks. Obviously, the good professor is beyond concern that we might want to judge for ourselves. It seems he feels that the mere assertion "liberty is enough" should be enough for us.

I emphasize this point because I suspect that Dr. Rothbard and others who share his view dare not examine the problem in any greater depth. To do so, after all, would implicitly undercut this position. Because to seriously argue the desirability of limiting a political ideology to barebones "liberty" is itself to require an ethical rationale. To argue such, means to resurrect the critical significance of ethical theory to: (a) Natural Rights theory and (b) a specific set of activities in dismantling coercive institutions. In order to do that, one must be prepared to elaborate the positive desirability of the ethical theory as a whole. Or else how is one to know what is "liberty" and for what it is good? Although liberty is philosophically sufficient as a condition of individual sovereignty, it empirically, i.e., ideologically presupposes the question of how liberty taken to its ultimate extreme fosters good in actual life.

Dr. Rothbard weaves his editorial remarks around a set of large blind spots in his "strategic vision"***. One of these is very obvious in his stated belief that a stateless society "would look pretty much like the present one". This is indeed a strangely myopic conclusion for a scholar who has studied so many facets of the "crippling incubus of the State." And yet it becomes an absolutely necessary intellectual rationalization in support of his ethical agnosticism and political pragmatism.**** **Once examined, we are left with the**

*"Is Liberty Enough?" Reason, Dec. 79, p. 58.

**Apparently Dr. Rothbard finds something unwholesome in lucubrating, i.e., the act of hard study and writing in a scholarly manner.

***A phrase he has employed not infrequently in his political writings.

****See my letter published in the June 1979 issue of Frontlines (page 7) and my open letter to Rothbard in the Versus State Newsletter in the November-December issue.

bewildering oxymoronic conclusion of a stateless society remaining "pretty much like" a society suffering the "crippling effects" of the State, or in a phrase, "anarchy as usual".

Only two centuries ago, the invention of a constitutional republic, and with it the partial securing of individual rights, permitted the rise of a material well-being beyond the wildest dreams of the American revolutionists. In our epoch the process of change is exponentially more rapid and infinitely more profound in its implications. The very idea of a stateless society is the greatest social change ever contemplated by humankind. The ramifications of the idea of absolute personal sovereignty are not only politically and economically momentous but psychologically awesome.

Indeed, there is truth in Dr. Rothbard's *reductio ad absurdum* that a free society will not result in "human nature transformed in some magical way". He is correct in the view that there is no political route to positive human change (aside from the abolition of the State). But even the achievement of "liberty" to the extent of merely abolishing the State will require and enable an authentic liberalization of attitudes on a mass scale. Just that will make it next to impossible to maintain many authoritarian ideas and habits commonly accepted today. The mentalities of millions of persons will change profoundly in adaptation to a new condition of life.

People and conditions won't be the same. Drastic changes at all levels of human interaction will occur. Contrary to Dr. Rothbard's belief it will not be business as usual. The abolition of the State here or somewhere else, will touch off a series of cataclysmic upheavals affecting every sector of life and ultimately the entire globe. Every successive advance will suffer violent counterreactions. This is the nature of a non-traditionalist, secularizing society in the process of radical change. Achieving uncompromised personal sovereignty will blast apart all existing social relations. Contrary to Rothbard's view, there will be no happy back-to-business-as-usual after abolition. There will be no utopia - Rothbardian or otherwise - only new opportunities for our struggle to permit justice as well as liberty.

Just as there is no need not fall prey to the lure of utopian fantasy (as did Fourier, Trotsky, et. al.) in conceiving the positive potential of a libertarian society; neither does the strong projection of a fully developed ethical culture need imply authoritarian means. What is wrong, for example, for libertarian intellectuals to recognize that mysticism (and, thus, most religion) requires faith over reason, thus, tends to increase the individual susceptibility to political authoritarianism? Indeed we should be clear in our stand that, although we are opposed to the convenient religious doctrine which upholds the secular authority of the State, we recognize and respect absolutely the rights of the individual to adopt any form of personal insanity - Christian, Islamic, Judaic, etc.* If atheism or agnosticism are more conducive to the evolution of a rational and non-authoritarian society then why should we not advance these conditions as desired ends for our movement?

*"Insanity" here is not employed metaphorically. There are ample grounds to regard most if not all "mystical experience" as a part of mass psychotic behavior.

Having said this, we must not shrink from ideologically delineating the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical roots of authoritarian culture. For example, how do we explain political "liberty" in the context of a theocratic tyranny such as that in Iran? If "libertarianism" as Dr. Rothbard asserts "cannot satisfy many people's hunger for an all-embracing creed" then something else will continue to do so. That is the psychopolitical reality of our times -- to evade it is to be non-objective, non-rational and to lose by default.

These questions go far beyond the restriction imposed by Dr. Rothbard's 'correct line' libertarianism which artificially limits itself to "politics". What Rothbard's approach fails to provide is a basic explanation and elaboration of the psycho-ethical problems involved in transitioning to a stateless society. If the problem we face in abolition of the State were merely one of demonstrating economic efficiencies then we could accept Rothbard's approach. The widespread acceptance of the superior efficiency of the market economy, however, has long ceased to be the major bone of contention. In our country, at least, the majority of persons intuitively acknowledge the superiority of "free enterprise" over government intervention. On this basis, were it the only essential point of resistance, we should have won long ago!

No, it is not the question of political economy which makes most victims of the State balk at the idea of a stateless society. Rather, it is the implicit need for a new ethical identity. People intuitively grasp that a free society is capitalist which in turn means morally unfettered egoism. Contrary to the simplistic economist assumptions of Dr. Rothbard, however, the psychological transition from accepting an altruist world view to an egoist personality is a far more difficult problem for many than a mere intellectual switchover. It entails reconstructing the personality from one dependent on vicariously achieved emotional gratification to one capable of an intrinsic emotional fulfillment resulting from an autonomous process of conscious ethical calculation. This requirement is not merely psychological but psycho-social as well -- compelling the individual to consider an eventual re-arrangement of all his relations -- many of which may not hold up to the mutual demands of rational egoist standards. This is psychologically more awesome for most persons than even the idea of dismantling the State.

People are aware of these problems -- perhaps not intellectually -- or in the terms I have employed, but they feel the threats and uncertainties with a great acuteness. They are (quite correctly) suspicious of easy one-shot solutions such as dismantling the State. Those layers of the population who are at all susceptible to even considering our views want to know how and for what (and for whom) things are going to work. A very special minority of dynamic activists want a developed model of the positive aspects of our moral identity. Their interest is not in liberty per se but the positive ethical reasons which necessitate the achievement of liberty. Unless there is a morally deep intrinsic satisfaction achievable in the libertarian ideology, we can never compete with the authoritarian systems which provide the means of intrinsic moral self-exaltation. This is the powerful motivational essence of revolutionary Communism, of fundamentalist Christianity and of Shi'ite Islam.

The problem, thus, is not merely a matter of whether to play chess or poker, or attend Fellini over Bergman films as Dr. Rothbard would suggest but

one which goes to the core of human identity. The question is how an atheist, rational-egoist anarchist can think and feel completely valid in living and dying (if necessary) for an ideal. That is the essential question, not only for the psychological integrity of our future culture, but for the ideology of our anti-statist movement now. As long as we don't understand that, our antagonists will always have the edge.

Motivation is both a positive as well as negative process. It is not merely the "negative" desire to escape tyranny but the positive attraction towards understandably realizable improvements which have meaning to both the materialistically concerned masses and to the ethically progressive revolutionist personality. Contrary to the assumptions of many libertarians including Dr. Rothbard, most people at this stage really don't want to escape tyranny. This is not merely for the commonly assumed extrinsic material considerations, e.g., job security, medical care, retirement benefits, etc. It also proceeds from the intrinsic protection afforded the ego from the challenges of personal competition by a statist order. Libertarians often forget that totalitarian societies afford a comforting sense of immunity from accountability and objective standards for anyone who has gained even the slightest status. This ego-protecting cocoon forms the motivational basis for the conservative resistance to libertarian change we observe in the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe.* Indeed, the fear of repression also reinforces the acceptance of tyranny but the overall passivity of the population comes more or less of a basic satisfaction with conditions as they are, i.e., the "business as usual" mentality. The present thrust of the libertarian movement is almost entirely limited to the "negative" focus of tearing down institutions which now provide a bulwark of security for the millions who feel uneasy about the uncertainties of change and competition. And yet it is precisely to this inherently conservative bourgeois class which the Libertarian Party aims its electoral appeal. This exclusive approach not only shows little promise of gaining the support of the natural client classes of the State but its petty egoist appeal offends precisely those persons most necessary in fighting the State.

Much of the moral fervor which motivates left activists and fuels their ultimately reactive "revolutions" comes of a basically valid resentment at the mass victimization of the powerless. They regard the emphasis on reduced taxation, deregulation and other economist political measures as merely a cynical ploy to continue the exploited subservience of the powerless while further reducing any available institutional means for restitutive redistribution. To these ethically sensitized personalities, however misguided they may be, libertarian advocacy of absolute natural rights rings hollow in the lack of positive concerns.

In considering this, we should take careful note of the fact that not one of the Soviet dissidents -- even those living safely in exile -- advocates laissez-faire capitalism. The total lack of movement towards Natural Rights or anything approaching a libertarian system exists in spite of their intimate

*It is also observable here among our own "civil servant" class and parabureaucratic corporate management. Incidentally, it is also a condition found among most "higher education" professionals.

experience with a most brutal tyranny. Instead of liberty and reason they have without exception reluctantly retreated to either democratic socialism or authoritarian religionism or both. Indeed, they certainly have shown not the slightest interest in our negative focus on "liberty".*

What this means logically is that the motivational key lies not exclusively in the extrinsic efficiency arguments dwelling on political-economic liberty but in an appeal to a maximal ethical identity. The strategically crucial segment of popular support in any radical movement (and ours is indeed inherently radical) must come from those persons who yearn most for a self-identity of the highest abstract order. For this class of persons, liberty may not be enough. It is often, in fact, of minor consequence. The men and women who form the hardcore of the various revolutionary organizations avidly accept a military discipline as strict as found in the most rigidly authoritarian countries. Their lives are totally dedicated to the achievement of their ideals on a world-historical scale. They often have no significant desire for petty liberties or materially extrinsic rewards. Indeed, these persons can be dangerous to liberty -- especially when they man the other side. But the point is that they exist and more significantly for judging the efficacy of our ideological method -- they have moved the world in their direction. This has been so not so much a result of the intellectual virtuosity of their ideologies but rather due to the ethical intensity of their motivation. More specifically, revolutionary Communism has functioned as a motivational conduit for secular idealist personalities who might otherwise be energizing the anti-statist movement. This class of world-shakers is indeed a fearsome group but their abilities can be employed for good or evil. The choice is partially up to us.

Whatever the misgivings on this, libertarians must objectively deal with the psycho-political conditions of our movement. One of these may well be that those most motivated to fight most effectively for the ideal of liberty may have little use for it personally. This is not so much of a paradox when one fully considers that ultimate satisfaction in life is moral integration. Liberty, in this context, is merely freedom from external impositions on the expression and effectuation of moral integration. It is thus, the abstract ideal of liberty as a historical phenomenon which will attract those willing to give their all for the struggle and not merely the attraction of momentarily experiencing liberty. The latter is what motivates most of the present movement which, as a result, is weak and ineffectual. It expresses itself in endless books and articles which drone on beating the dead horses of taxation, inflation, regulation, etc. The libertarian movement has been repeating itself for years -- so much so that through a process of levelling its appeal to the lowest possible common denominator -- all difficult questions have been laid aside. As a result, many problems have never been brought to the fore. Established writers such as Dr. Rothbard have petulantly attacked any deviation from the proscribed limits of proper libertarian discourse.

*An excellent summary of these attitudes and their ethical rationales can be found in From Under the Rubble, edited by A. Solzhenitsyn.

REPORT ON THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE AMERICAN
ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT HELD IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON ON DECEMBER 30, 1979

Abolitionists from different parts of the country met to resolve the problems facing a nascent movement to end the State. Not surprisingly, there was important representation from newly-won converts working high in the L.P.'s hierarchy. Their names cannot be divulged for fear of their suffering reprisals from the now ideologically bankrupt and repressively authoritarian party apparatus. In any case, we now have a de facto abolitionist caucus within the L.P.

The Steering Committee was unanimous in its desire for a full abolitionist stance and generally agreed that the L.P. would not achieve this purpose in its present condition or in any reasonable future projection of its capacities. Interestingly enough, L.P. activists were the ones most convinced of the basic structural inefficacy of the Party.

Extremely fruitful discussions were held on the motivational failures of existing rational egoist philosophy. The present libertarian ideology fails to enable the necessary intrinsic emotional gratification which should come of experiencing the abstract good in achieving an objective, ethically-directed identity. The failure of libertarian philosophy to provide intrinsic satisfaction from being good for its own sake was determined as the crucial inferiority of existing secularist anti-statism in its struggle with revolutionary collectivists and theocrats. The inability of rational egoists to derive intrinsic satisfaction from ideological work without the promise of extrinsic rewards and other petty-egoist rationales vastly reduces the strength and moral impact of our movement. Thus, it was resolved that the formulation of this problem and its resolution in the recent work of Comrade Richard Slomon should occupy the committee's full capacities. Each member of the committee promised specific help in expediting the publication of Comrade Slomon's completed opus.

No date was set for a national plenary session of the AAM but discussion of the Namibian C.D.P. leader, Ben Pillay's call for an International Abolitionist Party was seen as necessitating continued correspondence and instruction. Comrade Pillay is presently investigating the legal questions of an above-ground abolitionism in his country. The Steering Committee chose not to engage a study of legal questions affecting the AAM at this time.