

The libertarian tradition No 1: Auberon Herbert

By Chris R Tame

Some recent hostile responses to the rapid growth of Libertarianism have depicted it as a febrile spin-off from the post-hippy 'Me Decade'. In fact we are the inheritors of an illustrious centuries old tradition, largely overlooked by the myopic current fashions in the history of ideas. Liberals like J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham receive plenty of attention in college courses, but the libertarian tradition as a whole is largely ignored, and misrepresented where touched upon. Mill and Bentham constitute *one* aspect - in many ways the feeblest - of liberalism. Dozens of thinkers and activists who embodied the most systematic or radical elements in Libertarianism have been consigned to the Memory Hole.

This journal honours Auberon Herbert by reviving the title of his publication *Free Life*, so it is fitting that the series begin with him. Born in 1838, Herbert developed at first as a typical member of the British ruling class. Youngest son of the third Earl of Carnarvon, he went to Eton and Oxford, and entered politics as a Conservative. After several unsuccessful Tory candidacies, he entered Parliament as a Liberal in 1872. There was a period of fluctuating, indeterminate opinions before Herbert emerged as a radical and penetrating defender of individual liberty.

From the early 1880s until his death in 1906, Herbert was probably the leading English Libertarian. He was published by major houses, and his ideas were widely discussed. He eventually lost the support of his Liberal constituency organization (and hence his seat) but remained active in anti-war agitation and in the Personal Rights and Self-Help Association, both of which he founded. As well as his own *Free Life*, Herbert wrote essays for such leading contemporary journals as *Nineteenth Century*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Contemporary Review* and *The Humanitarian*, and turned out a succession of books including *A Politician in*

Trouble About his Soul, *The Rights and Wrongs of Compulsion by the State* and *The Voluntaryist Creed*.

Although Herbert never composed a systematic exposition of his ideas, he consistently pointed the direction in which Libertarian ideology had to develop if it was successfully to combat, not only the remaining survivals of old-fashioned statism, but also the virulent new form rooted in the socialist movement. Whilst many liberals relapsed into a tired defence of the status quo, Herbert held aloft the utopian ideal of a fully "Voluntaryist" social order. His philosophy of "Voluntaryism" was an inspiring statement of the doctrine of "self-ruling, not each-other-ruling", a "system of complete liberty". It was a philosophy based on the axiom of self-ownership and the right and necessity for individuals to seek their own interest and happiness, to employ their faculties unobstructed by aggressive force. Herbert considered it absurd to deny that individuals were "self-owners", and his view on this is repeatedly stressed in his work.

Taxation

While, with some exceptions (such as the Belgian economist Gustave de Molinari and the American individualist anarchists) most libertarians of his time had accepted the right and necessity of the state to levy taxes, Herbert rejected this assumption. He recognised that the issue of compulsory taxation marked the real difference between individualist and state socialist, and that by accepting taxation the liberal conceded the state socialist's premises:

"I deny that A and B can go to C and force him to form a state, and extract from him certain payments and services in the name of such a State; and I go on to maintain that if you act in this manner, you at once justify State socialism. The only difference between the tax-compelling Individualist and the State Socialist is that whilst they both have vested ownership of C in A and B, the tax-compelling Individualist proposes to use the powers of ownership in a very limited fashion, the Socialist in a very complete fashion."

Herbert added: "I object to the ownership in any fashion". The power to levy taxes was then for Herbert the "stronghold" which must be "levelled to the ground". "There can be no true condition of rest in society, there can be no perfect friendliness amongst men who differ in opinions, as long as either you or I can use our neighbour and his resources for the furtherance of our ideas and against his own."

Anarchism

Herbert refused to accept the label of 'anarchist', largely because of a semantic decision whereby he labelled the defensive use of force (which, naturally, he accepted) as "government". His discussion of the issue of anarchism (mainly in debate with the American individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker) unfortunately never emerged from such confusion, and became bogged down in other side-issues. It has had to wait until our generation for writers like Murray Rothbard, David Friedman, Jarret Wolstein, Morris and Linda Tannehill to demonstrate how the free market can supply defensive force and rights-protecting agencies (police protection, courts etc.) in the absence of a monopoly agency of force (government).

The Workers' Cause

Although Herbert's wealth and social origins enabled socialist opponents to smear his philosophy as "Rich Man's Anarchism" (title of an essay by J. A. Hobson) it is clear that Herbert defended free market capitalism as the means for liberating the masses from their age-long burden of poverty. The free market was "the way of peace and co-operation"; interventionist or socialist systems were "the way of force and strife". The former resulted in division of labour, increasing productivity, high wages, innovation and progress. The latter could only mean perpetual conflict, mutual predation and poverty. Hayek's modern insights on the diffusion of knowledge, the market as the means of discovering and channelling such knowledge into the most urgent applications and the impossibility of efficient central planning, were all presciently suggested in Herbert

The Fatal Gift

For Herbert, power, the use of force, was *always* "a fatal gift", which could only

produce consequences the reverse of those its wielders professed to seek. He opposed attempts to 'better society' or 'enforce morals' by outlawing or regulating prostitution, pornography or the sale or consumption of alcohol and other drugs, not because he approved of such activities, but because such attempts did not achieve their alleged goals. His view was that "thinking and acting for others had always hindered, not helped, the real progress; that all forms of compulsion deadened the living forces in a nation that every evil violently stamped out still persisted, almost always in a worse form, when driven out of sight, and festered under the surface.

Subsequent history has amply corroborated Herbert's claims. American prohibition of alcohol created organized crime and led to increased consumption of (poor quality, high priced) alcohol. Persecution of prostitutes does not lessen the demand for their services, but simply renders them subject to exploitation by criminals and makes their customers liable to similar criminal harassment or to disease (because of the lack of any open market in information and common law redress).

The Dangers of War

In foreign policy, Herbert had a true Libertarian dedication to the cause of international peace. He was one of the chief organizers of the anti-Jingoism rallies at Hyde Park in 1878, to counteract the growing momentum towards war with Russia. He opposed British state intervention in Suez to guarantee the results of particular commercial speculations.

War had indeed proved to be the principal destroyer of lives, liberties and property, and the principal collectivizer of economics and minds throughout the twentieth century. Opposition to chauvinism and war hysteria and to the involvement of the state in overseas private business affairs must be a principal activity of Libertarians today - a logical counterpart to their struggle to restrict the state at home.

Socialism

Herbert was writing at a time when, largely due to its own errors, Liberalism was crumbling before the rise of socialism. Whilst socialists were largely successful in portraying their ideology as an heir to

liberalism, Herbert saw it as the last gasp of a reactionary phenomenon, aggressive force. He called for "One fight more. The Best and the Last" against this "mere survival of barbarism, . . . perpetuation of slavery under new names against which the reason and the moral sense of the civilized world have to be called into rebellion."

Against the "Social Organism"

In my view his most incisive contributions to the critique of socialism came in his exchange with the eminent socialist J. A. Hobson in 1898. What Herbert had to deal with was an 'argument' which has since provided the back-bone for myriad versions of collectivism, a metaphysical attack on the very reality of the individual. In the hands of countless political, sociological and psychological writers, "Even the modest luxury of a theoretical existence" has been denied the individual. Hobson glorified the "social organism", which he claimed to be somehow superior to the individuals of which it was composed. Not only was the fact of the interdependence of individuals in society (the "organic system of relations between individuals") supposed to justify a socialist state, but social wholes (like crowds) were held to consist of something that could not be accounted for in terms of individual actions.

For Herbert, such arguments were nothing more than "literary conjuring", the "tendency to put phrases in place of realities" and Hobson was (as Herbert titled his reply to him) "Lost in the Region of Phrases". Nowhere did Hobson demonstrate that all individuals were "made by society", nor prove the metaphysical existence of "society". Individuals are influenced by other individuals. When opposing the social entity to the individual, we are then "tricking ourselves with words ... simply opposing some individuals to other individuals."

There is a crude metaphorical similarity between "society" (a population group conceived as a whole) and an organism, but it is simply an analogy, and there are very real differences between the entities making up that "whole". We are indeed all dependent upon each other, and a voluntary and mutually convenient exchange of goods and services has proved to be the best way of handling our mutual interdependence.

Recognition of mutual interdependence is not enough to justify placing everyone under a system of universal compulsion as designed by Hobson and his descendants. Ironically, as Herbert observed, the socialist aim of "controlling" society had the most "unsocial" consequence since "The unity of unrestrained differentiation is a far truer unity than the unity of compulsory sameness". In reality, as those born since Herbert's time have seen demonstrated only too clearly, "social control" has meant the control of some individuals by others: "Every form of socialism only represents the dominant faction - that and nothing more." What drives socialists to such verbal gymnastics, untenable attempts to destroy even the concept of the individual? For Herbert, the answer was clear:

"It is all due to the fact that the socialist is under the unhappy destiny of having to plead for an impossible creed - a creed founded on Old World reactionary and superstitious ideas, that are only waiting half-alive to be decently buried forever by the race that has suffered so much and so long for them . . . Is there any reason, then, to wonder that men, with the literary tact and ability of Mr Hobson, smk, almost unconsciously to themselves, to cover up the dead bones of this system with metaphor and abstract conception, and to ask us to admire the something of their literary manufacture, which has as little to do with the real thing, as hothouse flowers have to do with the poor decomposing remains that lie inside the coffin on which the flowers are flung."

Free Life