

What good is the State? - A conservative view

Libertarians and liberals show little understanding of the nation and little understanding and less enthusiasm for the state.

Hayek does perceive a major role for the state. But many liberals tend to allow it only a minimal or night-watchman role. They look upon it as some naughty child who doesn't know its place and constantly needs to be reminded of it. Or they grudgingly admit its necessity in certain limited respects but regard it with the same degree of enthusiasm with which Mrs. Thatcher might open a Christmas card from Peter Walker. The view that the state represents an invariable threat to freedom seems to me to be wrong, to represent a shallow, one-dimensional, almost monomaniacal view of politics. A strong state is a necessary precondition of individual liberty. A strong and effective state and liberty are mutually dependent and mutually sustaining. Wherever you find people enjoying freedom it is within the context of the state, or rather a particular state. Individual liberty, along with order and justice, is one of the achievements of civilised modern states. To what other source can we look for protection or redress in the event of our freedom being threatened by others? The state may not do that job very well now and perhaps it does not do it because it has taken too much upon itself, but that is not to justify the conclusion that the state should be somehow got rid of or eroded until the point where it scarcely exists. Supposing it was somehow dissolved in the way that anarcho-capitalists like Murray Rothbard or libertarians like the ghastly Ayn Rand favour, what would happen then? What would prevent the most powerful, charismatic among us from leading a faction which would tyrannise or exploit the rest? Who would prevent rival factions from settling their disputes violently, like feudal barons or rival protection gangs? There would be no

independent and impartial authority to adjudicate between them, the recognised and legitimate authority having been abolished.

Liberals take the view that man is a rational creature who acts according to enlightened self-interest and is generally capable of working out what this is. Conservatives, even the modern secular strain, know that human beings are weak, fallible creatures, both morally and intellectually, with a marked capacity for anti-social behaviour. The consequences of men's moral imperfections is that men acting on their uncontrolled impulses will act badly, however good their intentions. They need the restraint of customary and established laws and institutions. It is easier to demonstrate the truth of this proposition, which finds its best articulation from Burke, by pointing out what happens when man is stripped of social context than it is to prove it by arguing positively. Cut adrift from the traditions and customs and norms which sustain morality people do actually behave rather badly, even savagely and viciously. Witness the behaviour of the French revolutionaries who cut themselves off quite deliberately from tradition and custom and obligation. Witness the excesses of marauding armies and armies of occupation who feel themselves no longer bound by the modes of conduct which apply at home. Is it merely an accident that British football fans break even more bones and heads and do more damage when they travel to foreign cities to support their teams than they do at away matches in England? Or is it because they think that the standards and traditions of behaviour which apply at home do not apply away from home?

The point I am making is that when the individual finds himself out of his or her social context, the customary restraints, the institutionalised curbs and inhibitions no longer exist to reign in appetites and impulses and some run riot.

The consequence of man's *intellectual* limitations require that he avail himself of the bank and capital of ages when deciding political and social issues, rather than relying on his own strictly limited stocks of reason.

Man is a social creature and the state is a natural extension of man's social character. But libertarians are wont to ignore or underestimate this side of his character. Underlying all of this is an important difference between the conservative and libertarian positions. Libertarians regard the state in the same way as they regard society, as being no more and no less than the aggregation of the individuals who live in it. Its function is to protect the freedom and property of those individuals. Conservatives believe that the benefits, including liberty, order and justice, which the state confers, depend upon widespread adherence to beliefs and values which are transmitted to succeeding generations via traditions and customs, through myth and prejudice. They believe that the individual may well be hurt when these customs are eroded or overthrown. The state is not therefore just some kind of super Securitor, or security service. Its whole is more than the sum of its parts and the well-being of the whole must be considered if the parts, that is the individuals in it, are to prosper in conditions of freedom, stability and justice. The state may be seen as a civil association which provides the rules within which we live our economic and social and political lives, and which commands respect and loyalty in order to achieve this task. Without them social bonds will be weakened. In the political field consensus will break down and it will become less effective in defending freedom and maintaining justice and order.

Ordinary people have little difficulty in grasping all this, perhaps because they rely on tradition and custom to regulate their attitudes towards the state. Indeed, many ordinary people have shown themselves ready to die for particular nation states. On the whole they do not appear to resent the claims made upon them by the state in time of war or national emergency. Many of those who fought in the last war said that they were fighting for freedom. The self-same people said on other occasions that they were fighting for their country. They saw no contradiction between the two; they realised that liberty depends on the preservation of a traditional social framework.

A good society is most certainly a free society but it is an ordered, just, cohesive

and peaceful society. Yet liberals believe pre-eminently in freedom and attribute almost every social ill from vandalism to race hatred to a lack of freedom, sometimes to a lack of economic freedom. William Roepke, one of the intellectual fathers of the West German economic miracle and himself a classical liberal, is reported as telling an amusing story about the monomania entailed by extreme economic liberalism. Roepke remembered Mises saying that if only the principles of free trade could have been followed from the beginning, World War II might never have happened. I don't recall Roepke's exact reply to this, but he was, in effect, struck dumb. And he remarked to me that it was incredible that anyone with a fair knowledge of German or of European history could reduce the German question - the darkest and most sombre question of the age, with myriad roots reaching back hundreds of years - to a mere set of economic arrangements. For Roepke, this kind of economic determinism, though employed in the defence of the free market, is just as fallacious as the Marxian version of economic determinism.

Every conceivable social ill is attributed to a lack of freedom; little account is taken of circumstance or particular conditions. The universal panacea therefore is more freedom, and the unthinking corollary of this is often less state. This may well be a cure to particular problems. But it is not the universal panacea that libertarians suppose it to be. An extension of individual liberty will not solve problems in Northern Ireland or Brixton.

Freedom (or more freedom) in the abstract, idealised way beloved by the modern liberal, all round! Freedom for the Saudis, the Pygmies, the Zulus. The Shah of Persia extended individual liberties in his country and was always being pressed by liberals to go further. The result of that and of rapidly rising incomes was the collapse of traditional bonds which held that country together. Are we still confident that more liberty was an unmixed blessing for the Iranians? Would either the Saudis or the oil-consuming nations of the West benefit if we pressed the Saudi leaders to grant their peoples a much greater degree of liberty? This seems highly questionable. Unlike libertarians, conserv-

atives believe that liberty flourishes in a particular kind of context. They tend to work for elimination of concerted evils rather than the realisation of abstract goals. Conservatives, who know that politics is about the correct application of power according to circumstances, deal with the here and now.

Liberal and libertarian ideologues do not like complexity. They like single, dominant ideas and themes. They get very frustrated when complexity or circumstance gets in their way. Curiously, circumstance and complexity stubbornly hang around. Ideologues nevertheless maintain their faith in simplicity. Bentham denounced complexity as the nursery of fraud and extolled simplicity: 'O rare simplicity Handmaid of beauty, wisdom, virtue - of everything that is excellent.' That sounds to me very like the modern libertarian.

Just in case you think that these lessons have no point in socialist or socially fragmented Britain, consider the way in which libertarian ideologues speak and behave. They dismiss their critics as fools or cretins or crooks. They describe people as 'sound' or 'unsound'. They employ the vocabulary of Right-wing Stalinists. They attribute foul motives. Read their tracts and pamphlets - many are full of the most extreme vituperation. How will such utterances contribute to the enlargement of freedom? I suggest that it will lead to a heightening of political squabbles and tensions and result in greater intolerance, which in the end will lead to the denial of liberty.

Those liberals who believe in some kind of state, albeit of extremely modest proportions, can normally tell you exactly what the state should and should not do, that is to say they set out its function in fine Utopian style. But Popper, the great man who popularised the phrase 'the Open Society' and indeed, Hayek, specifically warn against social blueprints of that kind and they warn of the very great dangers entailed in attempting to apply such blueprints.

Both liberals and conservatives (though not all libertarians) can agree that it is the job of the state to prevent its citizens from being coerced. In Britain today the principal

agency for coercion and victimisation are the trade unions. The trade unions are literally outside the law. They can force the individual to behave in a way in which he would not wish to behave by threats and they can bankrupt companies in pursuit of industrial or political objectives; even if the company in question is not directly involved in the dispute at hand. Additionally, they are, according to Hayek, the major cause of our economic decline through their effect on the structure of relative prices and the resultant waste of resources. If that situation is to be redressed it can only be done by the State, the State in all its authority. The job can't be accomplished by a night-watchman state or a minimal state or by a state which has been disparaged by the intellectual community. It can only be achieved by a state which commands respect, allegiance and affection. Liberals balk at such notions. But then, if they conceded they must take tough action on that, they might have to admit that there were other occasions on which more than a night-watchman or minimal state was needed. The night-watchman state cannot turn itself into an authoritative state in a jiffy and then switch back into being night-watchman again.

The state is not the invariable enemy of liberty and the legitimate exercise of state authority is in my view the necessary concomitant of liberty not its opponent. Burke wrote of the Utopians of his own age: "In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista you see nothing but the gallows". It may seem paradoxical to you to say that in their opposition to the state the libertarians and the extreme liberals present a glimmering of the same danger. But that is what I believe.

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