

## THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF MAURICE GLASMAN'S *UNNECESSARY SUFFERING:* *MANAGING MARKET UTOPIA*

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# THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF MAURICE GLASMAN'S UNNECESSARY SUFFERING: MANAGING MARKET UTOPIA

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## Preface

This essay, presented here with only minor revisions, was originally written in 2001 as an academic review of Dr Maurice Glasman's (1996) *Unnecessary Suffering: Managing Market Utopia*. Its most important feature for Anglo-American readers is its description and analysis of that school of thought known as 'Christian Democracy', a largely continental European and Roman Catholic phenomenon little understood in the mainly Protestant, English-speaking world.

Although this issue is not specifically explored in the following, it is demonstrably true that most of the founding fathers of what has become the European Union were devout Roman Catholics; that the Vatican, the Catholic church generally, and senior lay Catholics in EU member states have been and continue to be amongst the EU's main proponents; and that throughout the EU Catholics are both more supportive of European integration than Protestants and do so for cultural rather than economic reasons. (See, for example, Nelson *et al* (2001).) This, of course, is not in itself an argument against the UK's engagement in the EU. However, it is another reason for more open and considered thought of the UK's membership of, and, no doubt, eventual dissolution in, something that is alien and ill-understood.

More specifically, looking at the European Parliament, it may also serve to illustrate the inherently highly ambiguous and often controversial membership of the British Conservative Party of the Christian Democrat-influenced European People's Party and European Democrats group of MEPs.

Those interested in the historical mirror image of this phenomenon may care to consult the earlier chapters of DeLeon's (1978) *The American as Anarchist* for a brief and clear description of the profound influence of Anglophone Protestantism on aspects of modern libertarian radicalism.

All references found below are from *Unnecessary Suffering*.

## The Quest

Glasman's starting point is the belief that there are two ways that society actively distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary suffering: establishing a justice-based common status for all, and people's treatment at work. However, whereas in the former case - i.e. political liberalism - he optimistically contends that the idea of individual rights has substantially succeeded via the establishment of durable legal institutions, in the case of the economy this is not so (pxi). Glasman sets out to remedy this defect.

*Unnecessary Suffering* is Glasman's attempt to identify and describe - if not *the* - particular concept of the 'third way', that oft-sought road that combines the best of the two allegedly dominant ideologies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: capitalism and socialism. Its purpose, however, is not to concur with much of modern politics that claims to abhor all ideology, but to describe the historical antecedents, theoretical arguments, and post-war operationalisation (or not) of something very specific: the siting of democracy within the workplace rather than the collectivist State or the individualist market (p5).

Specifically, Glasman sets out a thesis, based in particular on Roman Catholic doctrine, that, whilst accepting the institution of private property and market competition (and hence is apparently anti-socialist), nonetheless rejects unlimited managerial prerogative (which

Glasman finds in both capitalist (p20-21) and communist (p133) forms), the commodification of labour, and profit maximisation as the driving force of economic decision-making, demanding instead worker participation and workplace democracy (and hence is apparently anti-capitalist).

In a number of chapters, Glasman looks in some detail at the post-war history of (West) Germany and Poland, examining in particular the changing fortunes of Christian Democracy, communism, and the New Right, and both the external and internal pressures brought to bear on these countries. This aspect of the book is not fully explored here, but in any case much of it is an analysis of the implementation or not of the theories set out in the earlier part of the book.

## The Theoretical Core

Glasman freely draws on the work of a number of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, the first of these chronologically, and who Glasman cites as of key importance in the development of Christian Democracy in Germany, being the 19<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic bishop, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler.

One assertion of Ketteler's that goes to the heart of Glasman's view of the relation between the individual and the collective was that, in Glasman's words, "The dilemma of Christian Democracy was that the principle of private property had led to the removal of people's status as members of organisations" (p37). However, the implications of this are obvious and alarming: that one can only have true status as a member of an organisation and that individuals have little or no inherent worth.

Glasman goes on to note Ketteler's claim that contracts between an employee and an employer who holds that latter's means of subsistence are not voluntary but really a form of compulsion (p37). Aside from perhaps an Aristotelian objection to this definition of 'compulsion', there are a number of arguments against this. First, they *are* voluntary: the employee can always starve. This may well sound a shocking assertion to those schooled in modern positive-rights welfare liberalism, but the freedom of voluntary exit is ultimately the most basic freedom of all.

Secondly, in practice, people do manage to find alternative employment after having reached the seeming bottom. In any case, it is a matter of empirical fact that the immiseration hypothesis was and is wrong and that this picture of the destitute individual prostrate before 'the boss' is a marginal and decreasing one and certainly not an image on which to base and operationalise any social theory.

Thirdly, the fate of the dismissed or otherwise unemployed worker under economic liberalism seems better than the same individual who for some reason is excommunicated from his organisation or guild when, as is quite clear from Glasman's overall thesis, the guild - ultimately through its relationship with, and use of, State coercion - really can make sure that he never works again. In the Ketteler/Glasman thesis, then, there seems little real place for the individual as an autonomous economic agent.

Ketteler also claimed that society was by then so complex that welfare needs could not be met by charity alone (p37). However, it can be strongly argued that the reason that the whole raft of possible non-State welfare provision available through commercial, not-for-profit, or charitable organisations can no longer cope, certainly now

at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is because of their ‘crowding out’ by the State from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards with the latter’s power to fund through coercively expropriated taxation.

For Ketteler, the role of unions and artisans’ organisations was a positive one and to quote Glasman was “to ensure high quality craftsmanship, honesty in relation to other workers and the preservation of values within the economy” (p38). Some of this is no doubt often true, but when we examine, say, the medical profession, by maintaining unnecessarily high standards it limits supply thus raising prices and denying *appropriate* medical treatment in particular to the poor who cannot afford to pay twice for it (i.e. once through taxation and then again to the commercial medic). In any case, the supplier is here apparently sovereign. Also, in practice, it can be interpreted to mean that individual workers are not allowed *if they wish* to negotiate their own terms except via the union or similar organisation.

Ketteler also believed that the State should take steps to rectify the fact that “the market violated the capacity of the person to live an autonomous life” (p38). This is an odd assertion. If one is not ‘dependent’ upon the market – a polite fiction, of course, since it is not the impersonal market one is dependent upon but other real, people – then one must be either dependent upon others simply giving one money, surely a condition even less conducive to an autonomous life, or, excluding those acts traditionally considered criminal, dependent upon others being coerced into giving it by and via the State, no less unconducive to an autonomous life one would have thought, and certainly rather less moral.

Another key influence on Glasman is Karl Polanyi, and especially his book *The Great Transformation*. For Glasman, Polanyi’s two key propositions were that individuals are “... constitutively dependent upon a physical environment and other people for the satisfaction of needs” (p5), and that “the economy requires social institutions which disseminate skills, distribute knowledge and preserve the status of human beings and nature as something other than commodities” (p5-6). From this follows what Polanyi calls the ‘three commodity fictions’: labour, land, and money. These are not commodities at all since they are not produced for sale. Labour, for example, is “inseparable from the body and the life of a person and cannot, therefore, be stored up or reinvested.” Land is not a commodity since it is a “gift of geography and history” (p6).

However, it would be a serious blow to Glasman’s thesis if Polanyi’s commodity fictions were themselves fictitious: and I would argue that they are, and indeed self-evidentially so. First, one might argue that a commodity is anything upon which a subjective value can be put. Then Polanyi makes the attributive mistake of confusing labour with the person: when we sell our labour we do not sell *ourselves*. Next, if we wish to live as anything than the most primitive hunter-gatherers, *productive* land needs to be wrested from nature and by a ‘Lockean’ mixing in with it of our labour – to use a well-known concept – becomes property and hence a commodity.

Regarding the third of these, money, Glasman also discusses further on in his book subsequent Christian Democrat demands for the ‘constraint’ of capital (p35). Polanyi, the Christian Democrats, and Glasman all seem to suffer from a straightforward misunderstanding of the nature of money in all its forms. Money is a good like any other, subject to subjective evaluation and the laws of supply and demand. To ‘constrain capital’ is nothing less than to constrain the most important form of non-constituted – i.e. not of the person’s body - private property of all, that which facilitates the voluntary transfer of goods and services, and hence an autonomous private sphere of activity, and therefore ultimately advanced liberal civilisation itself.

Anticipating his later discussion of Hayek, he sets out Polanyi’s argument that atomism - i.e. in practice market capitalism, I assume - and nationalism are linked in their mutual contempt for the range of intermediary institutions and traditions such as unions, churches, guilds, etc. which serve to sustain society (p7). However, whilst there is real truth in this in the latter case, and Glasman’s theoretical rejection of

the leviathan State does him credit, in the former case we begin to see Polanyi’s, and hence Glasman’s, primary error in their misunderstanding of the market, again seen more clearly when he turns to Hayek.

Whilst accepting both the State and the market, Polanyi claims that “a substantive economy ... requires a society based upon non-market institutions which plays a role in the provision of needs, the distribution of knowledge and the allocation of status” (p17). (A cynic might say that this emphasis on status is to protect those that have ‘paid their dues’ from free-market parvenus.) As a result, rather like Ketteler, he goes on to say that “Unmediated dependency on either the State for welfare or the market for wages leads logically to an unmediated dependency on the State as the protector of community” (8). This is certainly true in the case of the State, but again, unfortunately for Polanyi, there really are only two ways of getting money: through theft, fraud, or coercion, whether ‘privately and illegitimately’ through crime or ‘publicly and legitimately’ through State-expropriated taxation; or voluntaristically through wages, interest and rent received, inheritance, gift, or charity. To a true liberal, only the latter voluntary transfers are morally acceptable. Any other distinction or attempt to create a fictitious ‘third way’ in title transfer is illusory.

Glasman examines – and surprisingly, perhaps, for those expecting a thoroughgoing assault on the New Right, not entirely unfavourably – some of the work of Friedrich Hayek, and indeed this is possibly the most important section of *Unnecessary Suffering* (p24-27). He notes Hayek’s critique – e.g. in *The Fatal Conceit* - of constructivist rationalism his support for a spontaneous order, and thus his opposition to socialism on the grounds of its adherence to “hyper-rationalism in its administration and atavistic communitarianism in those matters concerning ethics and moral argument” (p25). Glasman shares Hayek’s views about the role of tradition in the preservation of knowledge and his critique of the centrally planned state. However, whilst he agrees with Hayek’s identification of an intermediary between instinct and reason, he says that Hayek failed to understand that the same was true of the economy, i.e. that there is an intermediary between the market and the collectivist State, these being represented by institutions such as “vocational organisations, public libraries, universities, artisan institutions and municipal government” (p26).

*This is the core of Glasman’s theoretical argument*, but I suggest that Glasman has fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the market: that rather than being the discrete entity that he assumes, it is but one species of a much larger type of social interaction characterised by voluntaristic relationships. In other words, that there *are* only two forms of societal relationships: coercive and voluntary, with the market being the directly wealth-creating *element* of the latter. Also, for all his acknowledgement of Hayekian criticisms of the limits of statism, it cannot but be noticed that many of the intermediary institutions that he so favours rely on the coercive half of societal relationships – i.e. the State – for either their funding and/or their special protection.

Glasman’s theory, then, is both flawed in its misunderstanding of the societal location of the market and also its conception of many of his favoured intermediary institutions which turn out to be deeply statist albeit of a second-hand, parasitic, and dishonest nature. His announcement of Hayek’s epistemological failure to account for the “institutional means through which substantive practices of practical knowledge have been protected from the rationality of the market as well as the rationalism of the state” (p27) is anyway doubtful given the inherently subjective nature of the market, but more importantly suffers from his failure to acknowledge that such practical knowledge – that is knowledge of subjective value to either the worker, entrepreneur, consumer, or hobbyist – can be and is protected and transmitted via the various elements – market and non-market - of the voluntary aspect of social relationships.

### The New Right

Towards the end of the book, Glasman discusses the rise of the New Right in the 1970s and 1980s (p98-120). He offers an interesting view into the nature of ‘crisis’, a period during which the existing

arrangements come to be perceived as unstable, and either collapse due to this instability or survive thus proving there was no crisis in the first place. Crises thus resolve themselves either way: there can be no permanent crisis (p98). However, there seems to be at least a third option missing from Glasman's analysis: that crises can be detected and changes made towards a (sufficiently) new system before the old system actually collapses. Therefore, one analysis might argue that Britain *was* in crisis during the 1970s but did not actually collapse due to the Conservative Party's victory in 1979 and the implementation of the necessary "Thatcherite" policies.

He claims that the major crisis during this period was that the Keynesian paradigm - *qua* system of historical interpretation rather than moral philosophy - was discredited by its failure to any more accurately predict and explain events (p111-113). This caused a breakdown in trust for the paradigm and the answer to 'what is to be done?' could no longer be given since the 'logically and conceptually prior' consideration of 'what's going on?' was no longer held to be reliably answered. The New Right, however, in a process which Glasman likens to a Kuhnian paradigm shift (p99), appeared to offer a new and better explanation.

Looking at it from the inside to some degree, one might question Glasman's apparent view that the New Right came out of nowhere in the 1970s (p115). There had always been a classical liberal 'underground opposition' to the post-war settlement, but it had been ignored by the establishment and often actively suppressed - as it still is - by the universities and much of the intelligencia. Equally, however, Glasman is, for some at least, over-optimistic about the collapse in support for the post-war settlement (p119): it is difficult to recall it being true either at the time or, providing one allows for rhetorical and tactical changes, now.

### A Miscellany of Interest

Glasman highlights some interesting and illuminating aspects of post-war and post-Cold War history. It is certainly an eye-opener to learn of the massive foreign debt accumulated in the 1970s by the supposedly communist Poland and owed to Western governments and banks (p89).

Staying with Poland, Glasman describes at some length the ideological roots of free union Solidarity and plausibly describes them as a mixture of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and the Roman Catholic socio-economic thought that forms the core of *Unnecessary Suffering* (86-97). If so, it shows that the democratic Left in this country during the 1980s were, after all, more correct in saying that it was *their* model that Solidarity was pursuing, not the contemporary Thatcherite/Reaganite one. Some of us must stand corrected.

Glasman is given to making dubious - and sometimes distasteful - historical comparisons. To take just one example amongst many, discussing the inter-war years, he writes that "Each country, whether it was New Deal America or the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or welfarist Britain, responded to the threat that market economies posed to the existence of society by releasing labour, land and money from the subordination to the price system alone." (p15). To talk within a 'liberal' thesis about labour - i.e. human beings - being in any sense 'released' by Stalin or Hitler, other than millions of them being 'released' from the burden of breathing, is unnerving.

### Dr Glasman's Internal Struggle

Throughout the book, one is aware of the tension within Glasman's thinking, and implicitly within Christian Democracy. On the one hand he frequently rejects socialism and the centralised State, and indeed specifically says that his intermediary institutions facilitate life in a *capitalist* economy (p78).

On the other hand, he is also critical of capitalism in terms that would make any socialist feel proud. For example, he argues against a straw man version of 'market utopianism' by describing a society in which self-interest is the only acceptable form of rationality (9). It certainly

calls into question Glasman's familiarity with the world of 'actually existing commerce' and the way that many of those engaged in business in fact spend a surprisingly large amount of their time *not* acting as economic profit-maximisers.

He also openly calls for a "society [which] could democratically organise the satisfaction of needs" (p142), but 'happiness', for example, is not an objectively verifiable 'need' and Glasman is, no doubt unconsciously, promoting despotic austerity. He also seems predisposed towards a rationalist interpretation of history, particularly when discussing the New Right (and especially paradoxically when considering his support for some of Hayek's thinking), as though the key actors consciously envisaged all real-world political events and their outcomes.

If a crude judgement about Glasman's ideological homeland is to be made, it is that he is a liberal-minded man of the Left who recognises that socialism is no longer an intellectually respectable cause. Instead, he has cast around for something which seems to offer the political liberalism that he seeks, whilst still allowing him an emotionally pleasing denunciation of 'capital'.

(I should note here at the last that I know the immensely likeable Maurice Glasman personally. He once told me that, because of his support for the anti-socialist elements of Christian Democracy and (in part) thinkers such as Hayek, some of his students regard him as being definitely 'of the Right'.)

### The Wrong Tools for the Job

However, this 'psycho-political' analysis is likely to do him a disservice, for if nothing else it is to try to interpret and make some sense of Christian Democracy using inappropriate and inadequate conceptual tools. Yet this same error is very widely made in Britain when analysing the EU, particularly by its opponents. Critics from the 'Left' regard the EU as a 'capitalist club', and can point to elements such as the free movement of goods and capital and the acceptance of material inequality to justify their belief. Critics from the 'Right' liken it to the old Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, and can point to elements such as the Common Fisheries and Agricultural Policies and worker participation in management decisions to justify their belief.

However, they are both wrong. The crucial point is that, as noted in the Preface above, the EU is substantially founded on and driven by a Christian Democrat ideology of the sort described by Dr Glasman. Something that is not merely philosophically mistaken, but fundamentally alien to the liberal, Protestant, Anglophone political tradition.

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