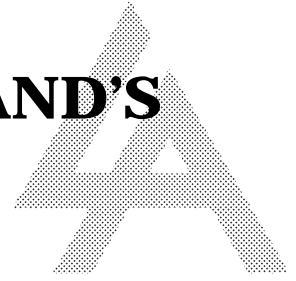


THE PRINCIPLED SOCIETY VERSUS THE PRINCIPLED INDIVIDUAL: A CRITIQUE OF DAVID MARQUAND'S *THE UNPRINCIPLED SOCIETY*

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Attacks on freedom can come from many directions, but I was surprised recently to find a new threat coming from as apparently innocuous a source as the Liberal Democratic Party. *The Unprincipled Society* by David Marquand (Cape, London, 1988) is described by its author as an attempt to identify the social and intellectual factors which have been responsible for the decline of the British economy since the late nineteenth century. Marquand's diagnosis, however, is so hopelessly mistaken that the solution which he prescribes would not only fail to solve our economic problems but would also put the survival of our free society in jeopardy. The purpose of this essay is to explain why.

PUBLIC INTERVENTION IMPLIES A PUBLIC PURPOSE

According to Marquand, the basic cause of all our economic problems is the great strength of individualist values in British society. His argument is that, although free market policies may have been adequate for the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, they are not suitable for a modern high-tech economy, which requires intervention by a "developmental state". However, a developmental state cannot work effectively without administrative discretion; in other words, it cannot be governed by rules, but must have the power to do whatever it chooses, so that it can be flexible enough to adopt the right policy at the right moment. This discretionary power, in turn, requires a concept of the state as "more than the sum of the citizens" (p. 154), otherwise the politicians who intervene in the economy cannot know what they are doing and cannot command the public support which they need for their policies to succeed. In Marquand's own words:

Public intervention implies a public purpose: otherwise, those who do the intervening cannot know what they are trying to achieve. But in a political culture shaped by the assumption that society is made up of separate, atomistic individuals, pursuing only their own private purposes, the notion of a public purpose which is more than the sum of private purposes is apt to seem dan-

gerous, or meaningless, or both. The result is an intellectual and moral vacuum at the heart of the political economy. (pp. 10-11)

This, in his view, is the fundamental reason for our country's problems. Ever since the Civil War of 1642-1651 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Britain has differed from the nations of Continental Europe in that its political system has been dominated by a philosophy of individualism, according to which the rights of the individual come before the power of the state and the rule of law must always prevail over arbitrary power. To quote Marquand again:

More thoroughly than any other country in Europe, British culture was permeated with the individualism which her intellectuals codified and justified, and to which the astounding growth of her economy gave the sanction of success. (pp. 7-8)

Because Britain has never had a tradition of arbitrary power exercised at the government's own discretion, state intervention in the economy has never worked.

It would be superfluous for me to repeat what so many libertarian economists have said already by explaining why a market economy is fundamentally more efficient than a command economy. I will content myself with observing that, if the individualist values of classical liberalism have really been responsible for Britain's economic decline during the twentieth century, then it is very difficult to explain the economic success of the U.S.A., where those same values are, if anything, ever stronger. Marquand, however, does not merely blame individualism for Britain's economic problems; he goes on to argue that if individualist principles were followed consistently they would actually destroy society, and the only reason why this has not happened in Britain is that other values have existed alongside individualism. He reaches this conclusion partly by making false deductions from libertarian premises and partly by misrepresenting what libertarians really believe. To understand why he is wrong and why his views are dangerous to our freedom, a careful analysis of his arguments is necessary.

FALSE CLAIMS ABOUT LIBERTARIANISM

Marquand's definition of what he calls "the tradition of reductionist individualism" is as follows:

A society is made up of separate, sovereign, atomistic individuals. The obligations which these individuals owe to their society derive ultimately from the fact that it can be shown that it is to their advantage to belong to it. They follow their own purposes, which they choose for themselves. These purposes may be altruistic as well as egoistic, but in either case, they are individual, not social; and even altruistic purposes are pursued in

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the same fashion as egoistic ones. There is no reason to believe that altruism is more natural to man than egoism; probably, it is less. Firms, or colleges, or research institutes, may have common purposes, but whole societies do not. The notion that politics is, or should be, a process through which a political community agrees its common purposes is therefore nonsensical. The community, in Jeremy Bentham's cutting phrase, is a 'fictitious body'. Politics is about reconciling conflicts between individually chosen purposes. It has no business with the choice of purposes. Indeed, in some versions of this tradition, the notion that politics might have something to do with the choice of purposes is at least incipiently tyrannical. Freedom means my freedom to choose my own good for myself, and to pursue it in my own way, provided only that I leave others free to choose and pursue their good in their own way. To allow others to take part in the process through which I choose my good would be to allow them to trespass on psychic space which belongs to me - space which it is my right to keep inviolate. (p. 214)

This is a fair and accurate description, except in one respect. From a libertarian point of view, individuals do not owe obligations to society, but to other individuals. These are derived from the fact that all individuals have equal rights, and society in the form of the state is simply a device for ensuring that those rights are respected. Marquand also, however, makes two blatantly false allegations about libertarianism: that libertarians believe people cannot learn, and that they believe people cannot share a common purpose or a common good.

"INTERESTS ARE IMPERVIOUS TO ARGUMENT"

The first of these allegations comes in a passage where Marquand claims that, for libertarians:

The polity is and can only be an arena for the pursuit of interests ... [which are] ... the products of prior individual preference .. [and therefore are] ... not subject to change by argument or debate. (p. 67)

He later adds that:

If they are consistent, neo-liberals must believe that [the world] is ruled by interests; and if the rest of their theories are right, interests are given, impervious to political argument or debate. (p. 80)

He goes on to say that this libertarian attitude is inconsistent with the latest discoveries in psychology:

Scientific advances have begun to undermine the reductionist model of man which underpins the prevailing view of politics. Man, it appears from modern social cognitive psychology, is above all an infinitely complex learning animal. (p. 217)

Marquand does not cite any libertarian writers as evidence for his astonishing claim, and to the best of my knowledge none of them have ever said anything of the sort. Members of the Libertarian Alliance who put so much time and effort into writing and publishing pamphlets and organising conferences will be especially surprised to be told that they believe people cannot learn. Incidentally, it is also worth noting in passing that it is not strictly true to say that the world is ruled by interests. To be fair to politicians, many of them go into politics for sincerely idealistic reasons. However, many of them do not, and it is not safe to assume that

the sincere idealists will always come out on top, which is why the power of the state has to be limited.

To return to my main theme, however, Marquand argues that, if libertarians believe that people cannot learn to pursue their interests in a different way, then they cannot dismantle socialism and restore a free market economy without violating their own principles. People have voted for socialism and big government because they believe it is in their interests, and this process cannot be reversed without changing popular expectations and demands. If people cannot learn, then the only way of restoring a free society is by state coercion. In Marquand's own words:

The revival of a market order depends upon the revival of the old market values; only after they have revived will the reign of market freedom dawn. But, on neo-liberal assumptions, argument and persuasion alone cannot revive them. (p. 82)

In reality, campaigning for libertarianism consists largely of convincing people that they cannot promote their own interests by using the power of the state to pick each other's pockets, but only by creating wealth. If they try to pick each other's pockets, then in the short run it will only benefit some people at the expense of others, and in the long run it will not benefit anyone, because sooner or later the victims will either run out of money or decide to stop being victims and become pickpockets themselves. The real problem with our present society is that there are too many people whose opportunities for creating wealth are limited because they have no capital and no productive assets other than their own labour power. In the long run the key to the triumph of libertarianism is to find ways of turning as many as possible of these workers into capitalists. Anyone who doubts that this is possible should read *Sharing the Success* by Peter Thompson (Collins, London, 1990), which gives a full account of the outstanding achievements of the National Freight Consortium since its privatisation in 1982.

NATURAL LAW

Marquand's second misrepresentation of libertarian beliefs is his claim that, according to libertarianism, people cannot share a common purpose or a common good. As it happens, his comments on this point are somewhat ambiguous. In the definition of libertarianism quoted above, he says that libertarians believe that:

Firms, or colleges, or research institutes, may have common purposes, but whole societies do not. (p. 214)

However, he later says that libertarians believe that:

The notion of a common good is a sentimental fantasy, and the notion of politics as a process of deciding what should count as the common good, either absurd or potentially tyrannical. (p. 219)

Shortly afterwards, he makes the same point again:

For neo-liberals, [community and a common purpose] are impossible under any circumstances. (p. 224)

He remarks that this supposed libertarian belief is in conflict with the classical view held by Aristotle, that one person's pursuit of his own good is not necessarily incompatible with other people's pursuit of their good.

Since David Marquand is the Professor of Politics and Contemporary History at Salford University, it is surprising that

he is not aware of the continuous line of tradition, based on the concept of natural rights, which connects Aristotle with John Locke and the earliest classical liberals. It is true that his attacks on libertarianism are aimed mainly at the utilitarian side of the libertarian tradition, but a man of his academic standing should know that the influence of natural rights theory on libertarian ideas has been equally important. If he had even got as far as reading the entries on "Natural Law" and "Human Rights" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* he would have realised this. In fact, very few libertarians, if any, have ever denied that people can have a common purpose or share a common good. However, to understand exactly why Marquand is wrong, it is necessary to look more closely at what it means to have a purpose.

A purpose, by definition, must be deliberately chosen, which implies a mind, and only individuals have minds, not societies or other collective bodies. Individuals can have a common purpose if they all choose the same thing, but there is always the chance that they may not. It is possible, therefore, for private organisations in which membership is voluntary to have a common purpose, because any individuals who disagree with the chosen purpose can always leave. Society, however, includes everyone by definition, and you cannot opt out of it. This is why the only common purpose that a whole society can have is to create and maintain a framework of law which serves to deal with any conflicts between the purposes chosen by its members, either as individuals or in voluntary association.

THE INDIVIDUALISM OF ALL CHOICES

Marquand goes on to claim that libertarians believe individuals always choose their purposes in complete isolation from each other, and that in reality this is not true. In his own words:

We do not choose our purposes in solitary ratiocination on some mountain peak, and then descend to fight for them against our fellows, who have chosen them in similar solitude. We choose them through a constant, never-ending process of communication with the other members of our society. (p. 217)

Once again, no libertarian as far as I know has ever denied that people discuss their purposes with each other. However, the point which Marquand fails to appreciate is that, when you have finished talking to your friends and neighbours and all the other members of society and listening to their advice about what you should do, you still have to make up your mind for yourself. Even if you merely choose to let other people choose for you, you still have to make that one single choice yourself.

UNDERSTANDING CANNOT BE FORCED

One of the main themes of *The Unprincipled Society*, which is closely related to Marquand's false accusations against libertarianism, is that the only answer to Britain's problems is to develop a concept of politics as mutual education. To quote Marquand:

Reductionist individualism can encompass only two ways of living together in society, and therefore only two conceptions of politics and political man and only two modes of social change. One is the command mode, and the other the exchange mode. Change may be commanded from the top down, or it may result from free exchanges of one kind or another. People

change either because they are told to, or because it is worth their while (or made worth their while) to. (pp. 228-229)

He argues that there is also a third mode, which he calls the "preceptoral mode", in which politics involves the greatest possible amount of public debate and participation, and is seen as:

A process of mutual education, in which the members of a community listen to and learn from each other, and in doing so redefine their interests. (pp. 67-68)

From a libertarian point of view, the problem with Marquand's concept of politics as mutual education does not lie in the mutual education but in the politics. Most libertarians would agree that mutual education is very important, and it certainly can occur as a side-effect of politics, but politics is not the only way, or even the best way, of achieving it. This is another point which requires careful analysis to show exactly why Marquand's views are mistaken.

Learning can take place in two ways: by conditioning, or by conscious understanding, which involves active use of the mind. Conditioning can take place by force, but it is a primitive method of learning which is only of limited use in human life. Conscious understanding, which is by far the most important means of human learning, cannot be forced but must be voluntary. It is true that people can learn by participating in politics, but politics is primarily about power. At the end of all the discussion and debate, there has to be a vote, and in a vote there is always the chance that you will be forced to do what the majority want. If learning is a voluntary process, then different people may come to different conclusions from the same debate, but if politics enters into it, then only the majority will be allowed to act on what they have learned. The only answer to the problem is to cut back the role of the state in society and take politics out of as many areas of human life as possible, so that individuals - including both the majority and the minority - are free not only to learn from each other but also to put their new knowledge into practice.

UNDERESTIMATING HUMAN GENEROSITY

Apart from his misrepresentation of libertarianism, Marquand draws the conclusion that individualism threatens the survival of society by making false assumptions about what people will do in a state of freedom. He starts by stating that:

Even the cleverest egoists cannot serve as the building blocks of a society. If men are driven by self-interest, then they are driven by self-interest; and, despite heroic efforts to prove that it can do more than this, all that self-interest can tell me is that it is to my advantage for other people to behave well. (p. 215)

This is a fair comment, and all libertarians recognise that it is vitally important for individuals to respect the equal rights of other individuals. However, he then goes on to say that:

The position is not very different if the egoists are capable of spasms of altruism. For there is an important sense in which a spasm of altruism is merely a special case of egoism. It is still freely chosen by the atomistic individual; and what the individual can freely choose he can freely unchoose. (pp. 215-216)

He adds that:

A society built on self-interest would be built on a chasm. One built on egoism tempered by altruism ... would be built on a fault line which might, at any moment, collapse into an earthquake. (p. 216)

Socialists like Marquand always underestimate human generosity and compassion when they assume that people will not help each other unless the state forces them to do so. It is ironical that in September 1987, only a year before *The Unprincipled Society* was published, the Charities Aid Foundation published a report which showed that the amount of money being given to charities in Britain had reached its highest level ever - after eight years of Thatcherism, which, as socialists never tire of telling us, has turned Britain into a selfish and uncaring society. The fact is that when people are left free from state coercion, the altruism of which they are capable amounts to far more than mere spasms, and there is no reason to expect them to choose to stop helping each other.

Marquand makes exactly the same mistake - underestimating what people can do without the state - when he argues that it is impossible for people to live outside a society, and that they would destroy both society and themselves if they tried to do so. He explains that:

We live in society because we are social creatures, genetically programmed for sociability. (p. 217)

This, he suggests, makes it necessary for the state to force people to live in a society for their own good. It is surely more logical to assume that, if the advantages of social life are so great, then people will see them for themselves and act accordingly, without waiting for the state to give them instructions.

COLLECTIVISM IN ALL ITS UGLINESS

Probably the most sinister passage in the whole book comes in a section where Marquand is discussing the redistribution of wealth by the state. He argues that anyone who believes in redistribution must be prepared to answer the question "Why should I make sacrifices for others?", and goes on to say that the only possible answer can be:

Because it is your duty; because you are part of a community, which existed before you were born, which will endure after your death, which helped to make you what you are and to the other members of which you have obligations; because you are a member of the human race, and no man is an island unto himself. (p. 226)

He adds that:

Only the notion of community or fraternity can make it a duty - as opposed to a compassionate whim - to help one's fellows. (p. 226)

Here we see collectivism revealed in all its ugliness. We are all familiar with the kind of socialists who claim to believe in a "compassionate society" and then go on to express a misguided belief that you can force people to love their neighbours by Act of Parliament. To Marquand, however, mere compassion is not enough. He is not content with a society of free men and women who help each other of their own free will, because they care about each other; he wants nothing less than a society based on the principle that everyone is the slave of everyone else - which in practice, of

course, means that everyone is the slave of the state. His argument, in fact, is dangerously similar to the arguments that have been used by all the worst dictatorships of the twentieth century to justify their atrocities. Once you accept the idea that individuals have no right to exist for their own sake, and that their only purpose in life is to serve the interests of some collective body, such as the proletariat or the Aryan race, then you are on the slippery slope which leads to Auschwitz and the Gulag. Perhaps the fairest comment to make at this point is that Marquand does not realise the full implications of what he is saying.

THE THREAT OF A UNITED STATES OF EUROPE

If David Marquand was just a spokesman for one of Britain's smaller political parties, then it might not be so important to analyse and refute his views in such great detail. However, he is also one of Britain's leading advocates of a United States of Europe, and as such he is part of a political movement which is growing rapidly in power and influence. In a way, he has performed a valuable service by reminding us that Britain is special because individualist values are unusually strong in our culture. In the light of his comments, it is interesting to consider the real reasons for the virulent hatred of patriotism which is displayed by certain socialists, especially those who are also supporters of European federalism. At first glance there seem to be no logical reason for their venom, since loving your country does not mean hating other people's countries or having any aggressive intentions towards them, and is entirely compatible with a spirit of peace and friendship towards all other democratic nations. It is likely that their attitude is partly due to the collectivist desire to create a totally uniform world where no variety or diversity is tolerated. However, I would suggest that there is also another motive involved. When socialist intellectuals sneer at patriotism and say that people who love their country are "jingoists" or "chauvinists", the target of their attacks is nearly always either Britain or America - in other words, precisely the countries where the individualist tradition is strongest.

The libertarian case against a United States of Europe is quite plain and straightforward; it would mean more bureaucracy and red tape, more wasting of taxpayers' money, and a very dangerous centralisation of power. Federalists, in fact, are people who still think that big government is the answer to all our problems, and have not yet realised that it is part of the problem. The patriotic case against federalism is equally strong to those of us who are still proud to be British and want to put Britain back in the first division of the world league where it belongs instead of surrendering our independence to a foreign power. *The Unprincipled Society* should make it clear that, where Britain is concerned, libertarianism and patriotism go hand in hand, and should serve as a warning of what may be in store for us if the Euromaniacs ever succeed in turning their dreams into reality. If the tradition of individual rights is less deeply rooted in some European countries than in Britain, then it makes no sense at all for us to put our heritage at risk by giving up our independence - especially if some of our leading federalists want a United States of Europe precisely because they think it would be a good way of burying British individualism under Continental statism. If we do not want our freedom to be trampled under foot by a vast bureaucratic dinosaur, then we should waste no time in stopping the Delorsosaurus dead in its tracks.