

THE FALLACY OF 'LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM'

Perry de Havilland

Ox`y`mo`ron

n. 1. (Rhet.) A figure in which an epithet of a contrary signification is added to a word; e.g., cruel kindness; laborious idleness.

Webster's 1913 Dictionary

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I recently discovered a reference to an essay written by Labour MP Peter Hain in 2000 about 'libertarian socialism' on the Chartist website called 'Rediscovering our libertarian roots.'¹

The whole notion of this alleged form of libertarianism is something I have commented on before, but I have probably never seen a more clearly written explanation of the true thinking that underpins 'libertarian socialism' than this article by Hain.

It is very important to understand what Hain's essay is and is not. It is not a philosophical paper making logical links between socialism and libertarianism. What it is is a tactical paper very much along the lines of the one I wrote called 'Giving libertarianism a left hook',² only with the opposite objective.

Rather than critiquing Hain's article, I will just quote what I think are the most illustrative sections:

The key elements of libertarian socialism - decentralisation, democracy, popular sovereignty, and a refusal to accept that collectivism means subjugating individual liberty. [...]

Discredited by its association with statism, socialism's rehabilitation can only be achieved through a recovery of its libertarian roots, applying these to the modern age through Labour's Third Way. [...]

Underlying libertarian socialism is a different and distinct notion of politics which rests on the belief that it is only through interaction with others in political activity and civic action that individuals will fully realise their humanity. Democracy should therefore extend not simply to government but throughout society: in industry, in the neighbourhood or in any arrangement by which people organise their lives. [...]

However, power can only be spread downwards in an equitable manner if there is a national framework where opportunities, resources, wealth and income are distributed fairly, where democratic rights are constitutionally entrenched, and where there is equal sexual and racial opportunity. This is where socialism becomes the essential counterpart to libertarianism which could otherwise [be seen as] - and indeed sometimes

is - right wing. It means nationally established minimum levels of public provision, such as for housing, public transport, social services, day-care facilities, home helps and so on. The extent to which these are 'topped up' and different priorities set between them, is then a matter for local decision. [...]

Most individuals need active government to intervene and curb market excess and distortions of market power. For choice and individual aspiration to be real for the many, and not simply for the privileged few, people must have the power to choose.

Nevertheless the old left nostrum that markets equal capitalism and the absence of markets equals socialism, is utterly simplistic. As Aneurin Bevan argued, the extent to which markets are regulated or subjected to strategic intervention by government is not a matter of theoretical dogma, but a practical matter to be judged on its merit. That is why a Third Way Labour government is not passive, but highly active, working in partnership with business and investing in the skills and modern infrastructure which market forces and the private sector do not provide. [...]

There are so many problems and manifest contradictions that leap off the page it is difficult to know where to start. The core of what makes this so wrong lies as usual at the meta-contextual level. The problem is one of the distorting lens of the writer's world view, based as they clearly are on utterly utilitarian principles. Hain says libertarian socialists are characterised by a "refusal to accept that collectivism means subjugating individual liberty", whereupon he follows with an article which lists the many ways in which his socialist system would in fact do precisely that.

The core of Hain's view is that *politics*, which is a euphemism for 'the control of the collective means of violence backed coercion', is the essential core around which 'society' exists and interacts. Thus when he says society must be 'completely democratic', he means society must be completely political. Yet the argument that it is only by this that *individual* liberty can be realised falls at the first fence by virtue of the fact you cannot opt out of a *political* society and particularly a democratic political society: if my

neighbour gets to vote on all aspects of “any arrangement by which people organise their lives”, then clearly *my* individual wish regarding what I may do with *my* own life is by no means my choice unless that choice is quite literally a popular one.

Secondly, if democratic rights are to be ‘constitutionally enshrined’ and the society *completely* democratic in all its aspects and therefore *completely* political, then how can the *individual* rights of people be insulated from the democratic political process which may seek to abridge them? You can either have complete democracy enshrined or, as the American founding fathers tried with limited success, you can have individual rights enshrined and placed *outside* the reach of democratic politics, but you cannot logically have both.

The notion that a completely *politicised* democratic ‘society’ of the kind advocated by Hain could by its very nature allow any *personal* liberty whatsoever in a meaningful sense is manifestly absurd. If you cannot opt out of something you have not previously agreed to, in what manner are you free? If society is totally political, then you may have ‘permissions’ to do this or that, won by the give and take of democratic political processes but you do not have super-political inalienable *rights* at all. Politics can in theory make you ‘free from starving’ perhaps (in practice of course it tends to do the opposite), but what about being free to try or not try, some course of action? When every aspect of life is subject to the views of a plurality of other people, there is no liberty to just *try* anything at all on your own initiative. What Hain is arguing for is by his own words collectivism.

It seems to me that one thing all forms of collectivism share is that individual choice is *always* subordinate to The Group, be it the fascist *volke* or a local soviet or an anarcho-syndicalist people’s council or whatever other fiction of ‘society’ the state decides to use. So talk of individual rights within the context of a collectivist ‘society’ is either incoherence or if not is nothing more than a tactical ploy to conflate a violence based system of total governance with its antithesis in a manner well understood. As I wrote in a recent article, unlike a collectivist kibbutz, which is a voluntary collectivist commune, you cannot just walk out of the door of a collectivist ‘society’ and start setting up private arrangements with other willing people if the majority do not want you to do that: they will in fact deputise the use of violence to prevent it.

The logical flaws in the ‘collectivist society replacing collectivist state’ notion are so obvious that they have been pointed out a great many times by a great many people, but I will add my voice to the throng anyway. Hain, like Marx before him, clearly sees libertarian socialism as working towards the ‘withering away of the state’ as a true collectivist ‘society’ comes to replace it. But to maintain such a condition of total political governance will require the use of force to prevent *any* consensual but not democratically sanctioned acts between willing individuals. To maintain this suppression of spontaneous several relationships, a collectivist socialist ‘society’ must be organised and structured in certain ways that make it indistinguishable from a collectivist socialist state.

So if for a collectivist ‘society’ to function there must be a high degree of politically imposed non-spontaneous behaviour from its ‘citizens’ (such as preventing a person selling their own labour for less than the political community will allow them to), and those mandates must be backed with the threat of violence (i.e. law) if they are not to be ignored, then what we have a political State by any reasonable definition of the word ‘State’, much as Rousseau would have defined one. In fact, *socialism* must be the most ironic use of language in the history of human linguistics: it is the advocacy of the complete replacement of *social* interaction with *political* interaction, the very negation of civil society itself.

Now of course all societies have laws, be it polycentric law or state imposed law. Even the most libertarian society plausibly imaginable will have force backed prohibitions against the unjustified use of violence, which is to say (in very crude and simplified terms) libertarian law deals with ‘that which you may not do without consent of the person to or with whom you are doing it’. You may not cause me harm with dioxin from your factory because I have not given you leave to put your chemicals in my lungs. This law is based on the principle that the individual’s rights to his body (and property) are his own.

However the collectivist places the protection of the political collective as more important than the individual and thus collective law is whatever the political collective says it is. If the political collective says ‘a factory may not put dioxin in Fred’s lungs because we want a more environmentally safe place to live for all of us’, then that is the law because the political collective has said so, not because Fred has the right to control the contents of his own lungs.

But if they say ‘a factory may indeed put dioxin in Fred’s lungs because we want a better economy and more stuff for the rest of us’ then that too is the voice of the collective. And Fred? If he does not like it, well, it is “only through interaction with others in political activity and civic action that individuals will fully realise their humanity”. And if Fred finds himself in the minority? Well, as the society is ‘totally democratic’, we will have none of this nonsense of independent and politically neutral courts stepping in to support the objective and several rights of Fred *against* the collective, as if that could happen in our libertarian socialist paradise, we would no longer have our totally democratic society.

So as Hain says it is only through trying to control the means of collective coercion, the means to use force to make people do things, that Fred can ‘fully realise his humanity’, how is this ‘libertarian socialism’ going to protect the individual called Fred’s rights? What if the majority in Hain’s total democracy don’t like Fred? And who will define these ‘individual’ rights? The political collective, of course. Forget constitutions which constrain democracy because those are anti-democratic (which is rather the point). Forget consensual several relationships because everything is democratic, meaning no politically unpopular relationships will be allowed. Forget custom and culture as a means to moderate interactions because that is not political. If Fred is not popular, Fred is just out of luck.

Fascist collectivists try to prevent mixed race sex, socialist collectivists try to prevent ‘undemocratic’ private trade, but the principle of collectivism is always the same. If an individual does something he wants to do in a collectivist ‘society’, it is because the political collective *allows* him to do it, not because it is his right to do as he pleases with those who are willing participants.

Clearly this democratic ‘society’ of Hain’s is willing to use force to prevent free trade between willing individuals unless they happen to be acting in a manner which is politically favoured. Much as most states currently use force to try and prevent free trade in drugs between willing individuals, the same will be done to any relationship the political collective dislikes. Put another way, this democratic society is in fact a state which will be organised to enforce the political will of the plurality on an epic scale, given that this would be a *totally* political society. Any time some tried to opt out, they will quickly discover just how ‘withered away’ the state is under ‘socialist libertarianism’.

Of course just as modern states may be more repressive or less repressive (running on a continuum from, say, Switzerland to North Korea), some implementations of so-called ‘socialist libertarianism’ may be more or less savage in their interpretation of an unfettered total political democracy at a given point in time. An individual who shares the views, aspirations, and prejudices of the majority may well think that life seems equitable and good. After all, if he is allowed to do the things he wishes to do, why complain? But as the democracy advocated by Hain is total, what if he wants to do that which not popular?

I have long thought that supporters of collectivism (be it of the socialist, nationalist or conservative kind) who are homosexuals or who are people with others lifestyles that will *never* be popular (in the literal sense of the word) are extremely unwise indeed to advocate anything that does not reserve rights to individuals *before* collectives. Socialism is by Hain’s own words seen as “...where socialism becomes the essential counterpart to libertarianism which could otherwise [be seen as] - and indeed sometimes is - right wing”. Of course by ‘right wing’ Hain means individualist. Libertarianism puts the rights of the individual as the first of all virtues. Libertarian socialism is individualist collectivism. Libertarian socialism is an oxymoron.

So what is Hain’s total political ‘society’ in reality? It is locally organised totalitarianism with Big Brother based in the local town hall rather than in Whitehall.

Notes

1. Peter Hain (July/August 2000) ‘Rediscovering our libertarian roots’, at the Chartist website, URL (consulted 26th May 2003): www.chartist.org.uk/articles/britpol/july_hain.html.
2. Perry de Havilland (2nd November 2001) ‘Giving libertarianism a ‘left hook’’, at Samizdata.net, URL (consulted 26th May 2003): www.samizdata.net/blog/archives/001563.html.

This essay was first posted to the Samizdata.net weblog (www.samizdata.net/blog/archives/003542.html) as ‘Libertarian socialism?’ on the 25th May 2003.