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Libertarian Socialism: Means and Ends

Libertarian socialism has many different meanings, but a primary meaning is found in opposition to a range of bureaucratic tendencies within a hierarchical society to seek ever increasing levels of control over work, social life, and personal relationships. For the purpose of this exposition the term 'bureaucracy' refers to a range of institutional arrangements by which a dominant stratum, the state, or the slick operators of the market, seek greater control over people's objectives, where people are treated as means or instruments whose own objectives are regarded as insignificant.

For the greater part of this century socialism has not reflected the libertarian ideal. One reason for this failure is the acceptance of the party model of political activity which, in practice, has superimposed its own objectives on to the class whose interests it claimed to represent. This bureaucratic substitution has not only alienated and demoralised many rank and file activists it has also contributed to the more general disillusionment with socialism which is prevalent in both Eastern and Western Europe today. In what follows I shall argue that any way forward for libertarian socialism must involve a total rejection to the party model of political change. I shall then attempt to resurrect certain aspects of Hegelian dialectics as a method of conceptualising political struggle in a libertarian framework, and draw attention to some inherent contradictions within the bureaucratic ideal.

The Party

Any attempt to understand the philosophy and practice of contemporary socialism and its eventual demise, must comprehend the concept of party organization. This presents no problem in the case of social democrats and labourist parties, whose organizational concepts and objectives simply reflect a desire to manage people better than their counterparts on the right. But the party in revolutionary socialist or communist thought cannot be comprehended in terms of its organizational framework alone; the party is not merely a means to an end, but both ends and means together. Built into the concept of the party are a series of philosophical assumptions and generalizations about reality, truth, the historic process, the unity between theory and practice, the relationship between leaders and led, the vanguard and the subordinate class. For the Marxist-Leninist, the party was the bearer of class-consciousness, representing both the ends of the subordinate class and the means of establishing its objectives. But from the beginning this concept of organization revealed an inherent contradiction: the party whose historic function was to serve the class as its means or instrument, in actuality perceived the class as a means or instrument for the fulfillment of its own objectives. This is a classical Hegelian reversal of the relationship between means and ends, whereby the servant as means is transformed into the essential end. There was no escape; no matter how stridently the party insisted that its interests coincided with those of the class, as servant to the aspiring class, it became its master. The rest, as we have seen in Eastern Europe, is history.

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The relative ease with which Marxist-Leninists reconstitute political problems - unemployment, poverty, racism - into party programmes often blinds one to the fact that a revolutionary party has never emerged naturally from the experiences of a subordinate class. Britain was the first industrial society and its working-classes were studied intensively by Marx and Engels. Yet even after its enfranchisement in the 1870s it took at least two decades before it thought of organizing a working class party - despite the predictions of Macaulay, Mill and Bagehot, who spoke with dread of a party that would establish the tyranny of the majority. When a party did emerge it was organized under the leadership of skilled Trades Unionists, firmly committed to Gladstonian liberalism, not revolutionary socialism.

Whenever the European working-classes embarked on a revolutionary course the institutions they created were never parties. In the post-war struggles of 1918-21, in Spain during the 1930's, in Hungary in 1956 and throughout Europe in 1968, neither strategies nor objectives revealed any natural emergence of the party. However radical and confrontational their programme, socialist parties have functioned as a cushion between the subordinate class and the interests of those who seek to manage production and social life. The discipline believed necessary for the smooth functioning of advanced industrial countries requires extensive control and managerial intervention in almost every aspect of life. A subordinate class can be brutalised into factory discipline, but for the execution of more refined tasks it must experience a sense of purposive freedom. Blind obedient automata cannot perform the creative tasks which are essential to the routine functioning of a modern working environment. The subordinate class must be educated, enfranchised, admitted into society, and encouraged to develop its own value system and objectives - even if they occasionally conflict with the interests of the dominant group. Throughout the greater part of this century, revolutionary socialist parties facilitated this transition, bringing the subordinate class into the existing framework of political discourse and curtailing its aspirations to the parameters of a reality which was accepted by the party. The Marxist-Leninist party never opposed the discipline and arbitrary imposed authority of the work place nor did it seek to exploit the inherent contradictions of bureaucratic management; instead it exalted bureaucratic management and extended discipline even further.

At the risk of gross undersimplification it might be said that recent events in Eastern Europe, the destruction of the socialist parties, and the emasculation of collective protection for workers, not only expresses the decline of the usefulness of the party to the bureaucratic elites on the right, but a recourse to cruder mechanisms of control based largely upon fear of unemployment and destitution. In Eastern Europe the collapse of communism in the name of democracy resulted in 'liberal' regimes which have done nothing for the majority, but have merely enabled a rich minority to expropriate collective property. But the inherent tensions within market democracy ensures that it cannot work without a strong repressive state apparatus. Market democracy has inherent contradictions. Democracy requires that any change should rest on broad-based social support. But the

privatization programme requires the exclusion of the majority of people from any decision-making in these crucial areas. This inherent tension is the same in Western Europe. Rolling back state regulation and destroying the influence of labour organizations leads to the exclusion of large numbers of people from any say in matters which directly affect their interest. The trick was in convincing large numbers of people that democracy and the market are linked. In reality the outcome appears to be that many Eastern Europeans are rejecting democracy in response to market failure and are retreating into authoritarian myths, although the possibility of moves towards a more democratic form of collectivism should not be discounted. It will be important, from the standpoint of the authorities, to retain an illusion of democratic involvement. We can therefore expect pro-market ideologists to concoct 'enterprise pacts' and various profit-sharing schemes as a means of forestalling total cynicism.

Notwithstanding media applause for the demise of communism there is the pertinent fact that capitalism, whatever its variety, is in a serious crisis; its political institutions are moribund and do not command legitimacy. Despite the triumphalism of the marketeers and the 'end of history' prophets conflict has not been eliminated. Subordinate classes are obliged to resist ever increasing attempts to manage their lives and resentment towards the incompetence of the political managers is widespread. Moreover, as intervention extends beyond the traditional work place to the professions, where scientists, teachers, lecturers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, and even vicars and priests, protest at the increasing levels of interference and the imposition of idealised industrial models of management on every profession, with their frustrating exercises in assessment and quality control - all geared to the assault on autonomy in the name of the consumer - the scope for a truly socialist and libertarian programme is widened.

The Logic of Resistance to Bureaucratic Intervention

In his interview with Flux (Issue 5, Autumn, 1992) Ken Weller of Solidarity spoke of an attitude among members of socialist parties in which subordinate classes are seen as potential clients rather than as people who are capable of articulating and achieving their own objectives. I would like to re-phrase this in terms of a more general distinction between 'seeing people either as ends or as means'. In fact the distinction between ends and means has a long history. Aristotle drew a distinction between rational men whose capacity to formulate ends equipped them for a political role in the public sphere, and slaves and women whose function was to serve as means or instruments in the private sphere. In various forms the distinction between ends and means has been drawn between humans and the natural world, masters and slaves, men and women, employers and employees, rulers and ruled. To be reduced to a means or instrument is to be robbed of autonomy and responsibility and consequently to be of no direct moral significance. If the planet is merely there for whatever purpose we desire we owe it nothing. The loss of a slave or animal is only significant insofar as its owner is adversely affected. The same can be said about attitudes to any exploited group who, at one time or another, have been deemed to be incapable of exhibiting purpose and rationality.

From the early stages of the scientific and industrial revolution appeals to purpose and intentionality were banished from scientific discourse and were no longer held to be relevant to any explanations of the natural world. The demolition of the 'Argument from Design' by Enlightenment philosophers secured the hegemony of a purely mechanistic science which reduced appeals to a Divine purposive intelligence to the level of superstition. Today appeals to a natural purposive consciousness appear only among the followers of New Age cults. Taking the denial of purpose a stage further, from the natural to the social sciences, we find the rejection of purposive action emerging in the explanations of human behaviour. From Hobbes through to Bentham and to the various strands of behavioural science there is a preponderance in favour of determinism in which the majority of people are not initiators of purposive action but are reactors to stimuli, social conditioning and various innate mechanisms. Genetic determinism and sociobiological explanations are merely additions to this mechanistic philosophy.

The denial of ends is one of the modes of withholding any recognition of moral status and dignity. Factory hands are but means to the factory owners ends; slaves are mere instruments to provide pleasure for the slave-owner, women mere commodities for the enjoyment of men. All of this is familiar. The ideal of bureaucratic control is a situation where those who are perceived as mere means not only accept this role but identify with the objectives of those who use them. The slaves rejoice in the military victories of the slave-owners, the women freely identify with the stereotypes of bondage depicted for them by the manipulators of the pornography industry. The bureaucratic ideal is a well-managed society wherein subordinate members have no ends of their own. Thus news bulletins present the prospect of over 3 million unemployed as a headache for John Major, the destruction of mining communities as an embarrassment for Michael Heseltine, but the cancellation of the aspirations of these millions of people is robbed of significance - unless, perhaps, as many on the political left would have it, they can produce a revolutionary leadership that would leave its mark on history.

Towards the end of his Science of Logic Hegel addresses the problem of ends and means in his examination of a battery of related distinctions drawn between teleology and mechanism, purpose and causality, finality and efficiency, free-will and determinism. Rejecting the mechanist and determinist view that purpose has no scientific significance Hegel develops an analysis of labour in which the role of purposive freedom is essential. He questions the division between ends and means, offering a perspective on history whereby the means represent a permanent potential to impose their ends in any power relationship. In the Science of Logic he depicted the social tension between ends and means in the discourse appropriate to syllogistic logic, although his syllogisms bear no relation to formal logic as it is usually understood. The Hegelian syllogism has three terms: a middle term [means, instrument] which mediates the two extremes; an end [skilled worker] and an object [raw material]. In Hegel's analysis of labour the means [a tool or plough] is employed by an end [a skilled worker] against the object [the natural world], whose resistance is overcome by a

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combination of the practical knowledge and desire of the skilled worker. Hegel's point is simple to grasp. The teleology-mechanism, free-will-determinism, dichotomies can be transcended by locating conscious human purpose within the causal network. The relationship between human needs and the instruments of labour is dialectical: the labour process is rooted in human needs and desires, and in turn science and technology rest upon a social base which in turn generates the search for further causal relationships. In work one penetrates deeper into the causal processes of the natural world, overcoming its resistance, setting the forces of nature to work against themselves in the interests of human desire. The building of a house, he notes, requires the purposive manipulation of fire and wind to make it fire-proof and wind-proof. In purposive production nature is set against itself to fulfill the ends of human desire. There are both epistemological and political lessons to be derived from Hegel's account of labour; the limits of knowledge and freedom are not transcendently drawn, but are the functions of the purposes human agents set for themselves. Whilst human labour can never go beyond the limits of causality new desires stimulated by advances in the awareness of what is possible lead to the discovery of hitherto concealed causal relationships. In turn the advancement of practical skills provides the basis for new desires and freedom from natural necessity, and so the process continues. Desire for a good harvest engenders practical farming skills the development of which - combine harvesters and fertilizers - give rise to a new set of needs and further problems to overcome, such as the expectations of better diets, elimination of starvation, and the problem of coping with the environmental problems created by technology. All of these require still further developments in practical skills, such as engineering and factory production of agricultural equipment and environmental sciences. In Hegel's eyes the fusion of finality and causality is the key to the growth of knowledge and freedom from causal determination.

The social dynamic of the labour process is dramatized in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit where freedom for the slave is not solely freedom from the master but also freedom from what was considered the natural limit of freedom - the hardness of the physical world. Here, however, the syllogism takes a different form. The slave, or skilled worker, has become a means for the masters's ends. The syllogism now consists of an end [a master], a middle term [slave] and the objects of the natural world. Using the skills acquired in purposive production the slave works to fulfill an alien end. Herein lies the contradiction: whilst purpose is essential to production the displacement of purpose is in conflict with the potential for the enhancement of knowledge and freedom. On the one hand the slave must increase knowledge and practical skills in order to dominate the natural world whilst on the other hand social powerlessness denies significance to the slave's objectives. This is the contradiction inherent in social relationships within an authoritarian ethos. The skilled worker, though treated as a means or instrument, is at the same time a conscious purposive agent. At one and the same time the logic of authoritarian production requires that the worker is both ends and means simultaneously; doing one's job, acquiring practical skills, whilst being required to submit as a thing with no other purpose than the satisfaction of her bosses.

Here is the key to the logical structure of the master-servant dialectic in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit. After a struggle which stops short of death the master uses the slave as a means for his own ends. Just as the plough mediates between the farmer and the harvest, so the master slides the slave between himself and the things he desires. He desires food without having to work for it. So he desires slavery and the means also become the object of his desire. The cotton plantation owners go to war for the defence of slavery. But the master becomes degraded and trapped in his enjoyment, whilst the slave learns how to dominate the natural world and, in turn how to dominate the master through the weakness of his desires. Thus it is ultimately through his attachment to things that the master loses his freedom. On this point Hegel reveals greater foresight than many Marxists, for desire for the universality of things need not lead to freedom, but to even greater enslavement. Slavery to the means of production may exist in the midst of undreamt of riches.

What can we learn from Hegel's treatment of teleology? It provides a set of categories for the understanding of social dynamics within oppressive power relationships, which not only apply to factory production but to the manipulation of leisure as well as personal relationships. Hegel's emphasis on freedom and purposive production provides a philosophical grounding for future libertarian theory which, so frequently in recent years, has been eclipsed by various exponents of anti-theoretical activism, individualism and hedonism.

Underpinning much of post-Enlightenment thought are rigid dichotomies between freedom and necessity, theory and practice, purpose and mechanism. The location of conscious human purpose within natural mechanisms reveals how inappropriate these dichotomies are to the understanding of social change. Nevertheless, traces of mechanistic thought were incorporated into Marxism and the theories of the revolutionary left. Whilst Marx emphasized the importance of class conflict in the transformation of social life, his classes were portrayed in mechanistic terms. The proletariat was presented as the exploited producing class which, according to the logic of the productive forces, would overturn the existing power structure. But Marx never gave any serious thought to the class struggle within the sphere of production. Seeing the worker as a passive object exploited for labour power, Marx never considered the worker's interest in imposing his or her ends on the productive process. The worker was seen as a passive means whose output and surplus value could be objectively determined. As such class conflict was depicted as a struggle to reduce profits and increase wages. But as Hegel would have noticed the history of class struggle is more than wages and profits disputes; it is the history of resistance to the management of production within the workplace. The employer does not buy an hour of passive labour as the Marxist model suggests; he buys an hours output which will vary according to the worker's resistance. In this important sense, workers are not passive automata but people with a definite say in the determination of the exchange value of labour power. In short: Marx's theory of pauperism was too mechanistic in that it failed to consider the dialectical unity which Hegel observed between nature's necessity and purposive freedom. To be sure, Marx's

theory of pauperism is concerned with relative, not absolute, pauperism, but even so, the action of social classes is neglected. Whilst factory production seeks to reduce the worker to a thing, it can never really succeed without becoming dysfunctional. Purposive production and human freedom cannot be completely eradicated from the sphere of production. The struggle for worker's autonomy is not for an additional luxury over and above the requirement for adequate wages; it is a necessary feature of purposive production. Autonomous action - where people who are regarded as means struggle to impose their ends - is a feature in every place of employment. It involves the many informal methods of resisting production - strikes, works to rule, malingering, creative loitering, ridiculing tear-arses, pretending to be stupid, absenteeism and sabotage. But not all autonomous action is directed at resistance to production. Control over one's work can be demonstrated in confrontations with employers where workers actually increase both the quantity and quality of production. This might include work-ins, occupations, and doing the job better when the foreman is absent. There is 'good-work' sabotage, usually in service industries, where disgruntled workers give the customers 'fair measure' in defiance of a company policy to cut standards. In fact 'good work' sabotage - sabotaging the employer's sabotage - which is widespread, offers libertarian socialists an opportunity to publicise and encourage autonomous actions which have the added benefit of enlisting the support of the consumer.[1]

Marx did, however, recognize that under certain conditions factory production generated contradictions. The more the worker creates machines, said Marx in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, the more he is dominated and dehumanized by them. Such was the alienation which had its genesis in the division of labour in nineteenth-century factory production. But Marx saw this as a philosophical problem about which little could be done. If production were to continue in a communist society, a degree of alienation would remain. The realm of freedom, as Marx says in Capital, would be established outside of production. But what Marx saw as a philosophical contradiction is a literal one in a most profound sense. In the interests of greater production, in both the capitalist and former communist countries, there is a tendency to reduce the worker to the status of an artifact. But at the very same time she is required to participate as a free and conscious human being, learning how to overcome the obstacles thrown up by the natural world, learning how to meet the resistance of the machine. Thus the logic of production in an unequal society generates an inescapable contradiction whereby the labourer is both excluded and included in the productive process. In simple terms, it is a contradiction between doing what one is told and doing one's job. If workers respond as automata - which they should do according to the logic of production - the whole system can ground to a halt; for if people are passive objects they cannot produce. Yet if they seek to control their own movements, initiate their own decisions, they pose a threat to the distribution of power within the system.

Throughout this article I have focused primarily on factory production. But the analysis of the contradiction between purpose and passivity applies to any system of social relationships involving unequal access to power. [2] Despite all the machinery

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of coercion no prison can function without the free consent and cooperation of the inmates who, at the same time, must be depersonalized and reduced to the status of objects. In schools, universities, banks, offices, hospitals, armies, and churches, there are conflicts arising out of the incompatible requirements for autonomy and bureaucratic intervention. Libertarian socialists might well address these issues, giving prominence to struggles where subordinate groups, which might well include a vast number of over-managed professionals such as scientists, teachers and health-care workers, attempt to establish their autonomous ends. Newsletters and Bulletins should never report struggles as seen through the eyes of any potential elite but address the objectives of the participants. But this raises a problem which dominated many meetings and conferences of the libertarian left during the 'sixties and 'seventies: what kind of autonomous actions should we support? I recall many heated arguments which turned on whether or not a commitment to autonomy was incompatible with a condemnation of the autonomous actions of racists, fascists or sexists. Demands would then be made for a socialist content to autonomous or self-managed movements. The problem was that once the socialist blue-prints were produced, which emphasised ends at the expense of the autonomous means, the standpoint would then revert to one of vanguardism or elitism.

In fact this was never a serious problem. Political judgements can be made with reference to vast experiences of conflict throughout history. A few questions about the origins, structure, and ideology of any political movement should provide enough information with regard to its significance for libertarian socialists. Do we really need access to the blue-prints of revolutionary socialism to decide whether or not to support the Union of Democratic Miners, or defend members of Militant who face expulsion from the Labour Party? The search for some kind of standard of socialist consciousness is a hangover from the party model, where the party functioned as a revolutionary school-teacher assessing the consciousness of the masses, awarding conditional support for this or that struggle insofar as it came up to standard.

Despite the so-called death of revolutionary socialism there is a war going on in which suffering and poverty is being inflicted on many people whilst intelligent people, who can see through the lies and nonsense of our political leaders, remain inactive through despair and disillusionment. In this situation libertarian socialists must have a serious re-appraisal of their priorities. The traditional socialist standpoint of Leninists and Fabians, which sought first the conquest of the state and the 'commanding heights of the economy, should be first on the list for reassessment. This is not to say that libertarian socialists should withdraw interest in these areas, but that the many diverse struggles which are taking place all around us should not be assessed with reference to strategies for the attainment of statist objectives. Emphasis should be primarily upon conflicts where people's autonomy is directly threatened. Too many people are bullied by employers, banks, bureaucrats and street thugs. It is amazing that some anarchists still see the criminal lumpenproletariat as a meaningful avenue for social improvement. But insofar as libertarian socialists pursue autonomy as an end in itself then freedom from muggers and housebreakers is

also a priority. Why should the respectable right claim all the virtues associated with the protection of law and order?

There is no simple formula for the way forward. In a climate where interference from the authorities is on the increase, and democratic gains are under assault, where collective struggle has almost been forgotten, where people live in fear of unemployment and the unemployed are harassed by the state, bailiffs and loan sharks, the prospects look bleak. But according to some of the arguments presented here, the game isn't over.

Notes

[1] See, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, **Sabotage**, IWW, Cleveland, April, 1915; reprinted by Carl Sleinger, 1978.

[2] The significance of Hegelian dialectics for feminism has been noted. See Susan Easton, 'Functionalism and Feminism in Hegel's Political Thought', Radical Philosophy, Summer, 1985, pp.2-8.

Blocked quotes

1. 'None of us desire or is able to dispute the will of the party. The party in the last analysis is always right, because the party is the single historical instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its basic problems'. Leon Trotsky, cited by Tony Cliff in 'Trotsky on Substitutionism', in Party and Class, London: Pluto, ND.

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'It is a decisive, though little noticed, fact in the development of European revolutions that the slogan of Councils (Soviets, Rate, etc.) was never raised by the parties and movements which took an active part in organizing them, but always sprung from spontaneous rebellions...' Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, pp.216.

3. 'Unquestioning submission to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of labour processes that are based on large scale machine industry'. (Lenin, 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government', Selected Works, vol.VII, p.342.

4. 'In tools or in the cultivated fertilized field I possess a possibility, content, as something general. For this reason tools, the means, are to be preferred to the end or purpose of desire, which is more individual; the tools comprehend all the individualities.

But a tool does not yet have activity in itself. I must still work with it. I have interposed cunning between myself and the external objects, so as to spare myself and to shield my determinacy and let it wear itself out. The Ego remains the soul of the syllogism, in reference to it, to activity. However, I only spare myself in terms of quantity, since I still get blisters. Making myself into a thing is still unavoidable; the activity of the impulse is not yet in the thing. It is important also to make the tool generate its own activity, to make it self-activating. This should be achieved [a] by contriving it so that

its line, its thread, its double edge or whatever, is used to reverse its direction, to turn it in upon itself. Its passivity must be turned into activity, into a cohesive movement. [b] In general nature's own activity, the elasticity of a watch-spring, water, wind, etc. are employed to do things that they would not have done if left to themselves, so that their blind action is made purposive, the opposite of itself: the rational behaviour of nature, laws, in its external existence. Nothing happens to nature itself; the individual purposes of natural existence become universal. Here natural impulse departs entirely from labour. It allows nature to act on itself, simply looks on and controls it with a light touch: cunning.' G.W.F. Hegel, Jena Lectures 1805.

5. 'The building of a house is, in the first instance, a subjective aim and design. We have, as means, the several substances required for the work - iron, wood, stones. The elements are made use of in working up this material: fire to melt the iron, wind to blow the fire, water to set the wheels in motion, in order to cut the wood etc. The result is that the wind, which has helped to build the house, is shut out by the house; so also are the violence of rains and floods, and the destructive powers of fire, so far as the house is made fire-proof. The stones and beams obey the law of gravity - press downward - and so high walls are carried up. Thus the elements are made use of in accordance with their nature, and yet to cooperate for a product, by which their operation is limited. Thus the passions of men are gratified; they develop themselves and their aims in accordance with their natural tendencies, and build up the edifice of human society; thus fortifying a position for right and order against themselves.' Hegel, The Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree, Dover: New York, 1956, p.27

6. 'Hegel was the first to state correctly the relation between freedom and necessity. To him freedom is the appreciation of necessity. "Necessity is blind only in so far as it is not understood". Freedom does not consist in the dream of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends'. F. Engels, Anti-Duhring, Progress, Moscow, 1962, p.157.

7. 'Adherence to the rules, originally conceived as a means, becomes transformed into an end-in-itself; there occurs the familiar process of displacement of goals whereby an instrumental value becomes a terminal value. Discipline, readily interpreted as conformance with regulations, whatever the situation, is seen as a measure designed for specific purposes but becomes an immediate value in the life organization of the bureaucrat. This emphasis, resulting from the displacement of the original goals, develops into rigidities and an inability to adjust readily...the very elements which conduce towards efficiency in general produce inefficiency in specific areas'. R. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, revised ed., Glencoe, Illinois Free Press, 1957, pp. 199-200.