

Sydney Libertarianism

A.J. Baker

March 1960

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| I. SOCIAL THEORY. | 3 |
| II. ANARCHISM WITHOUT ENDS. | 6 |

I. SOCIAL THEORY.

In explaining their position Sydney libertarians often refer to their interest in social theory. But this phrase, “social theory,” can suggest, not only empirical study, but also the making of certain criticisms; and at the same time, the question may be asked: How are these connected with the attitudes and sympathies libertarians have, with their support for particular social causes? Thus (1) we should expect social theory to be concerned with developing true views about the nature and interconnection of social phenomena, and the position of libertarians does depend partly on what they take to be certain facts about how society operates.

But (2) this almost always gets connected with criticism and argument, for the social theorist is led to demolish certain fallacious arguments he encounters. For example, libertarians take the important thing about religion to be the actual, earthly role of religious institutions, but they are also led to attack the theological and moral views of religious people. Or, as a different example, libertarians regard some of Marx’s work as an important contribution to the study of society, but in view of misunderstandings about Marxism and the deification of Marx by some, clarity also demands that the predominant anti-empirical, metaphysical part of Marxism be revealed and criticised.

It is easy to see why (1) comes to be accompanied by (2). In any subject matter there are forces obstructing knowledge (cf. Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin), but the obstructions are all the more powerful in the social field. There, recognition of how things are cuts too deep and injures personal hopes and illusions as well as offending influential social groups. As a result, examination of concepts and criticism of beliefs are imperative; people have little chance of becoming aware of truths about society unless at the same time they come to see through prevailing false or absurd beliefs about human conduct and social affairs.

(3) Social theorists have preferences or policies of their own. (Of course, to be a social theorist is not necessarily to be partial or one-sided in a crude sense — Lenin’s dictum “all theory is partisan,” in the crude way he meant it, illogically denies any distinction between truth and falsity. But the academic notion of complete detachment or disinterestedness wrongly treats the social theorist as a mere external spectator with no social existence and interests of his own.) In the case of libertarians, their social theory is accompanied and stimulated by the interest they have in struggling against authoritarian forces and ideas. And, as a matter of fact, those people who combine (1) and (2) above, i.e.. who are not mere uncritical collectors of “facts,” usually do take an anti-authoritarian stand. There can be exceptions; an example of particular interest to libertarians being Pareto, for he presented an account of society much of which libertarians can accept and yet had some authoritarian preferences. But this is rare. Nearly always what passes for social theory amongst supporters of various kinds of authoritarianism are ideology and false belief.

In other words, recognising how society goes on, criticising widespread but mistaken beliefs, and having the interests they have or the particular causes they support, together make up the libertarian position. (As will emerge, it is the anti-authoritarian sympathies they share with them

which give libertarians their affinity with, but their social theory which distinguishes them from, classical anarchists.)

What social beliefs do libertarians reject as uncritical? What account do they give of society? An indication may be given if I say something about two categories or concepts which appear indispensable to social theory — those which can be labeled “pluralism” and “ideology.”

(a) Social pluralism is roughly the view that society is not a single thing but a diversity of different and often competing activities and interests. A popular way of bringing this out is by exposing appeals to the “common good”, “the welfare of the people,” etc. These phrases suggest unanimity and singleness of interest, but in fact receive emphasis only when there is variety and conflict — i.e., they enable a particular group to masquerade as representative of all, and so to advance its own particular policies in a covert way. (Note that this is true not only in the case of attempted justifications of censorship, Crimes Acts, the illegalisation of abortion, and so on, it is also true of such things as an interest in good health, fresh air, etc., which, being favoured by most members of society, may appear to be more plausible examples of the common interests of society. These rarely become social or political issues; when they do, however, as with issues about national health services, compulsory T.B. tests, the eradication of smog, and so on, it is quite clear that to refer to them as “the interests of all” is to conceal genuine conflicts of interest.) Contrary to the unitary view of society — which would make past history and present day-to-day politics inexplicable — there are in society many different interests. some of which are simply irreconcilable and remain in permanent conflict.

(b) Libertarians emphasise what is one of Marx’s most defensible concepts, that of ideology. Of course, everyone uses the word “ideology” today: Russian and American politicians and all the newspapers, and in relation to Marx’s original meaning they all use it wrongly — i.e., they use it to refer to any set of ideas which is taken to support a political interest. Now there were ambiguities in what Marx himself said, and Lenin and the other Russian Communists were mainly responsible for the wrong use current to-day, but what I have in mind is Marx’s use of the word “ideology” to describe theories or beliefs which are unconscious expressions of something else or camouflage the promotion of special interests. Compare Marx’s own best example: that in 1848 the bourgeoisie spoke of Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, but what they really meant were Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery. (Note the ironic truth which results when we translate into Marx’s use references by Khrushchev to “our Communist ideology” or by Eisenhower to “our Christian ideology”.) It is convenient, though not essential, to bring out the nature of ideologies by referring to Marx. Pareto, for instance, drew attention to the same type of thing in a different, more ramified way by emphasising the fact that throughout history there have been myths, superstitions, religious views, moral theories, and so on, which taken at their face value are empty of content and, indeed, meaningless, and yet have had immense influence in history. For that matter, if we make even a cursory study of moral justifications, it is easy to detect the presence of ideological processes. Almost every group speaks in the name of the good, right, justice, natural law, progress, happiness, and so on, but it is usually transparent that these are unconscious covers for the promotion of certain policies or interests at the expense of others. (The reference to unconscious covers is to be stressed. Using ideology is quite different from being a cynical or unscrupulous Machiavellian — when people say they are furthering the good, etc., they usually sincerely believe what they say.) It is as if individuals and groups have a blockage, they cannot face up to the unpleasant fact that there are conflicts and differences of interest in society. Hence

arises the tendency they have, to use ideology to disguise from themselves and others what their policies really are.

To sum up: An ideology is a belief (or set of beliefs) which (i) masquerades as a true belief and is taken by its believers simply to be a true belief, (ii) in fact, taken literally, is neither true nor false, but instead is absurd or meaningless, (iii) has the actual social role of covertly assisting special interests. Such beliefs or theories, libertarians point out, are not expendable extras which are occasionally let loose on society; on the contrary, they are exceedingly prevalent and influential: it is a rare social or political controversy which is not marked by liberal use of ideological concepts and beliefs. From this arises the importance libertarians attach to criticising ideologies and bringing out their real social roles.

II. ANARCHISM WITHOUT ENDS.

Given this type of social theory, Sydney libertarians point out that although they share the anti-authoritarian interests of classical anarchists they cannot help but be critical of utopian anarchism — i.e., of the kind of anarchism which fixes its sights on the future and contends that the main thing is to work for the achievement of the future “free society.” Such a view is open to criticism (a) because it involves a false social theory and (b) because its emphasis on the future obscures what has always been the most important feature of anarchist and libertarian activity, being anarchist or libertarian here and now.

Thus the problem for the utopian anarchist is to explain how the passage from an unfree to a free society is going to take place. But the solution offered (e.g., by Kropotkin) greatly over-emphasises the part that can be played by co-operation and rational persuasion. The ideas and practices which prevail in existing society, it is claimed; are so obviously vicious and illogical that they cannot persist. With the spread of education and the growth of a saner attitude to political and social questions we must expect the gradual triumph of the rational and freedom-loving outlook.

The trouble with this belief is that it assumes education and persuasion occur in a social vacuum, when in fact they occur under definite social conditions, and we can by no means alter these conditions at will. It is likewise assumed that the rational decisions of men have an immense influence on the course of events, when the social facts go against this assumption. Thus, take the operation of social institutions like the State, Churches, the army, universities, and so on. These don't arise because (or just because) certain people get together and decide to create them nor do they continue to exist because certain people have decided to prolong their existence. Institutions are usually there, going on in certain specifiable ways, irrespective of what rational decisions individuals make or fail to make. Anarchists have always been the first to point this out in regard to the State -e.g., that those like the Bolsheviks, who think they capture or control the State are, in fact, captured or controlled by the State; hence the continuity of the State machine and its manner of working from Tsarist to Soviet times. But the same is true of other institutions. Imagine a revolutionary minded bank manager trying to reform the activities of a bank. It is obvious that banking activities have ways of going on, which set severe limits to what individuals can do -e.g., if the manager started giving unlimited overdrafts the bank would collapse; and there is also a second kind of limit: the training, outlook, etc., usually required for a man to become a bank manager. So, the general conclusion we have to draw is this: far from the ideas and decisions of men controlling social activities and institutions, it is much more the other way round. Parts of State apparatus such as the army and public service are not just instruments of the politicians, let alone of “the people”; like newspaper organisations, trade union secretariats, and so on, they have a “life” of their own, and largely shape the outlook of the men who work in them.

All this conflicts with the hopeful belief of the utopian anarchist that by education and rational persuasion men can be led to decide on the formation of a free society. (In this respect, Syndical-

ists and the I.W.W. — “a new society within the shell of the old” — had a more defensible, though still utopian, position.)

To take concrete case: consider the type of sexually free society Wilhelm Reich advocated. In existing society we have what Reich called the “authoritarian sexual morality,” i.e., the denial of adolescent sexuality, emphasis on compulsive monogamy, and so on, which means that the great mass of the people, even jealousy or other disturbances to their sexualities. But, in contrast with this, when they are married, are subject to guilt feelings, possessive, Reich argued, it is biologically perfectly possible for people to have non-authoritarian, orgasmically much more satisfactory, sexual relationships. Well, then, suppose we want to bring about a society in which this kind of sexual freedom prevails. It is highly utopian to think that people could be rationally educated into this, even if many of them would gain from doing so. For sexual freedom to occur on a large scale, two things would have to be achieved: first, a negative requirement, the power of religious and other moralistic forces in society would have to be destroyed; and, secondly, on the positive side, new social conditions would have to arise or be brought about in which it would be possible for straightforward and non-guilt ridden sexual relationships to become widespread. But a policy of rational argument and good wishes would not achieve these results. Thus, to bring about the second, not only would there need to be such obvious conditions as the availability of contraception and abortion, there would also have to be the absence of neurosis and guilt feelings in the people themselves. But these guilt feelings — or, as Reich says, the incapacity of people for orgasmic satisfaction — are mainly derived from childhood training and from the guilts and prohibitions instilled by the existing educational system. But how do we, the would-be revolutionaries, change the existing educational system? By educating the existing educators? But in that case we should need to be already running the educational system! In other words, it is one thing to know how the prevailing sexual ideology affects the sexual life of most people and a quite different thing to bring about a significant disappearance of that ideology.

For reasons of this kind, then, Sydney libertarians are wary of talking about reforming society or about future freedom. Instead they use such phrases as “anarchism without ends,” “pessimistic anarchism,” “permanent protest”. “Anarchism without ends” indicates that there are anarchist-like activities such as criticising the views of authoritarians, resisting the pressure towards servility and conformity, having unauthoritarian sexual relationships, which can be carried on for their own sake, here and now, without any reference to supposed future ends. Similarly, the label, “pessimistic anarchism,” indicates that you can expect authoritarian forces in any society whatever, that freedom is something you always have to struggle for, and is not something which can be guaranteed in some future society. (“Pessimistic anarchism” also hits off the fact that libertarians have many of the sympathies and interests of the classical anarchists, but have views about the nature of society more akin to those of the “pessimistic sociologists,” Pareto, Mosca and Michels.) Then there is the slogan, “permanent protest,” which has been borrowed from Max Nomad, who also refers to “permanent revolution” and “perpetual opposition.” (Compare, e.g., his books, *Rebels and Renegades* and *Apostles of Revolution*.) The libertarian use of the phrase, “permanent protest,” has some differences from Nomad’s use, for he has more in mind mass revolutionary movements and argues that the underdog is born to be betrayed by all of his would be emancipators, but that the only thing for the underdog to do is to go on protesting. (Compare Albert Camus in *The Rebel*: “The historic mission of the proletariat is to be betrayed;” and his distinction between (constant) rebellion which he supports and (final) revolution which he opposes because it merely introduces a new form of tyranny.) But while Nomad refers particularly

to protest against the social structure as a whole (the overall distribution of power and privilege), libertarians in speaking of “permanent protest” wish rather to stress the carrying on of particular libertarian activities within existing society (i.e., in a country like Australia which has social conditions rather different from those, e.g., in Bulgaria, Spain or Cuba).

What are examples of these activities? A very obvious one is the work of criticism carried on by the Libertarian Society. There are various false theories, metaphysical views, overt and concealed moral and political assumptions that have wide influence in society; the role of the critic is to expose these as illusions or ideologies, and this is a permanent job which has to be carried on from generation to generation. Politicians, priests and policemen don't change just because their justifications of themselves are shown to be illogical or absurd. Similarly, other libertarian activities are carried on here and now and not with an eye to some future state of affairs when they will cease to exist. The utopian picture of a future free society would not even be intelligible to us if we were not already acquainted with examples of unauthoritarian activities in our present society. Contrary to the utopian, the libertarian looks not to some future society in which authoritarianism will have been got rid of and freedom supposedly brought into existence for the first time. Instead, he takes it to be a matter of keeping alive what already exists, of keeping up protest, keeping on struggling to emancipate himself from myths and illusions, and of keeping going his own positive activities. You don't have to reform or overthrow the State before you can carry on libertarian activities. You don't have to wait hopefully for the destruction of religion; you can, here and now, with your children and your friends, resist the pressure from Christian forces. You don't have to try to make the world safe for sexual freedom of the Reichian kind, but you can here and now fight against guilts and ideology and, at least to some extent, live a straightforward, uncompulsive sexual life. In other words, free or unauthoritarian activities are not future rewards, but are activities carried on by anarchist or libertarian-minded groups, here and now, in spite of authoritarian forces.

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



A.J. Baker
Sydney Libertarianism
March 1960

www.takver.com

(Based on a paper given to the London Anarchist Group in March 1960)

en.anarchistlibraries.net