



Socialism, Free Markets and Christian Faith

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Eastern Europe is changing with breathtaking speed. The attempt to create a rationally planned society in which governments would have the responsibility of ensuring that the basic needs of all citizens would be met, even if this meant limiting personal freedom, has collapsed. There are shouts of joy on the political right, and anthems of praise for the free market. The air is full of the rhetoric of freedom. Meanwhile, less prominent in the news, events unfold in places like El Salvador, where the free market rules and society dissolves into chaos. 'Freedom' in large parts of the world spells only monstrous injustice for the poor. And even in our own rich society the 'cardboard city' appears and the homeless stand begging in the streets or lie in the gutters.

The centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe have failed partly because of ordinary human sin, partly because human rationality, even aided by computers, is inadequate to the task of foreseeing all the consequences of the decisions of millions of human beings, but more fundamentally because no government has the right to decide for me what my real needs are. Scientists may be able to reach a fair measure of agreement about what is needed to keep a human being alive. But human needs are not simply biological, and they can only be defined in terms of some concept of the goal of human existence. Human needs must be what are needed for the achievement of the ends for which human beings exist. A centrally planned economy has to have (whether acknowledged or not) a doctrine of 'the chief end of man'. The Marxist doctrine is false.

The 'free market' economy claims superior legitimacy on the ground that I have the right to use what I lawfully possess in accordance with my own wishes. Everyone has the right to the pursuit of happiness and the right to define for him or herself what happiness is. It is accepted that this produces inequalities, but these are not the result of any unjust acts. They are the result of chance and of the natural inequalities between people. Moral indignation about these inequalities is therefore misplaced. The free market produces far more goods and services for society as a whole, even if these are unevenly distributed. Everyone benefits, even the poorest. Interference with the free market in the name of 'justice' only weakens its capacity to produce goods and services, and these are what (in the vocabulary of the New Right) are defined as 'wealth'. The

free market is an impersonal entity governed by its own laws. Its workings are not determined by human planning but by the ancient goddesses of Nature and fortune. Claims of injustice levelled against it are simply inappropriate. Here, then, is a very ancient (and pagan) doctrine of human nature and destiny. The result, in places like El Salvador, is to produce such perceived injustice that governments lose their claim to legitimacy, and we enter the spiral of repression, violence and terror.

The argument between these two views of human nature and destiny has been carried on also in the gentler style of British politics since the war. For a whole generation we have had a broad consensus about an economy which mixed some central planning into the working of a free market. At the end of that period we did not seem to have succeeded brilliantly in the 'pursuit of happiness'. We had the 'winter of discontent' and there was talk about Britain being ungovernable. We have now had ten years of very determined action to deliver the market from state interference. We enjoy more goods and services than ever before, but we perceive vastly increased inequality and the development of an 'underclass' permanently excluded from the affluence which the rest enjoys. Here also there are the first signs of the descending spiral. When established order is perceived as unjust, the fabric of society begins to tear. One side uses the language of freedom, the other side that of justice. There is more shouting than dialogue. What is common to both sides is the language of 'rights'. Is there any rational way of conducting this debate, or must it continue to the point where it degenerates into violence? I think four affirmations are in order.

1. Freedom is the power to choose between real possibilities. An astronaut who has been cast out of the space-capsule and floats weightless in space is not coerced or limited by any exterior force, but he has no freedom. Freedom only exists where there are limits and it is the limits which create the possibility of freedom. 'Freedom is the character of one who participates in the created order by knowledge and action' (O'Donovan). Pursuing unrealities only creates the illusion of freedom. Freedom cannot be successfully pursued apart from some

belief about what the created order actually is.

2. Rights can only be claimed within a juridical framework which defines the party responsible for meeting the claim. To claim rights apart from such a framework is as useful as writing a cheque on a non-existent bank account. Specifically when it is implied that the one responsible for meeting the claim is the government, we are (in a democratic society) simply making claims against ourselves.

3. When wants and needs become the basis for rival claims of right, we have to ask about the framework within which these rival claims are made. A rational person would want only what is needed for the achievement of the ends for which human beings exist. Needs, truly understood, are based in objective reality, in 'created order'. Otherwise they are not real needs. Wants which are unrelated to needs are out of touch with reality, and the freedom to seek satisfaction of these wants leads only to bondage to illusion. But our society does not permit the inclusion in public doctrine of a doctrine about the ends for which human life exists. Beliefs about human origins are part of public doctrine, but not beliefs about human destiny. Public doctrine endorses the 'pursuit of happiness' as a proper aim for the individual, but declines to relate 'happiness' to any doctrine about the created order. It therefore provides no framework within which the rival claims of needs and wants could be adjudicated.

4. There was a time when public doctrine (as evidenced in the school curriculum) included the statement that 'the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever'. This is now permitted as private opinion but excluded from public doctrine. In the ideological battle between left and right the duty of the Church is to make plain that the argument is strictly insoluble and interminable apart from some belief, as part of public doctrine, about the end for

which the created order, and human life within it, exists. The State cannot impose such a doctrine, as the experience of Eastern Europe illustrates. But the Church can cease from treating its faith as private opinion and summon the courage to inject into the public debate the affirmation which it is commissioned to make, that the purpose for which all things exist has been made known, namely by the revelation of him whose purpose it is. The Church must state plainly that its creed is not just 'what some of us Christians believe' but is the truth by which all things will ultimately be tested. Of course this affirmation will be contested and ridiculed, but when was the Church promised that it would be otherwise? And, to put the point negatively, surely the idea that this mighty cosmos has come into existence by a series of accidents, exists for no purpose, and provides the means of satisfaction for all the million conflicting dreams of 'happiness' of its human inhabitants, is so absurd that a 'primitive' tribe in some remote island might be astounded at the credulity of those who could believe it. Yet something like this is our contemporary public doctrine. Within this framework there can be no resolution of the conflict between needs and wants. The churches may seek to be influential, successful, respected. They may seek to justify themselves in the eyes of society by good works. But the first duty of the Church in the public realm is to speak the truth.

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