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GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART VII

Questions About Economic Institutions

76. PROPERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Dear Dr. Adler,

John Locke originated the phrase about man's right to "life, liberty, and estates." But when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he changed this phrase to read "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Did Jefferson mean to convey some significant distinction when he made this change? Or is there some connection between the right to property and the right to the pursuit of happiness?

W. F. H.

Dear W. F. H.,

Your question is excellent. At first glance one sees little connection between the right to property and the right to the pursuit of happiness. Substituting one for the other, therefore, seems like a startling alteration. However, let's examine the terms and see if we can find out what Jefferson was trying to do.

The word "property" is used by Locke in two senses. First of all, he meant by it *everything* that is due men by natural right, particularly life, liberty, and estates. For Locke, "protecting property," in this general sense, describes one all-inclusive purpose of civil government.

The other meaning that Locke gives to "property" is more restricted. In this second sense it is synonymous with "estates" and means primarily ownership of land. Yet this second meaning can easily be extended to cover all forms of proprietorship in productive property and still be kept quite distinct from Locke's first meaning of the word. The right to estates or, more generally, productive property was changed by Jefferson to the right to the pursuit of happiness.

Please note that Jefferson did not proclaim man's inalienable right to *happiness*, but only the right to *its pursuit*. No government can secure the right to happiness because there is no way on earth that it can guarantee that its citizens will be happy. The most that it can do is to furnish some of the conditions under which they will be able to pursue happiness. These are the conditions which can be directly secured by the actions of government. Other factors in the pursuit of happiness are beyond the power of government to do anything directly about.

A government cannot *make* individuals virtuous, or arrange for them to have good friends or a satisfactory family life. A government may be able to see to it that no one is starved or undernourished, but it cannot make everyone temperate or prevent men from ruining their health by gluttony. Similarly, a government can provide adequate educational facilities for all, but it cannot make men take advantage of these opportunities.

In short, some of the goods needed for happiness belong to the inner or private life of an individual. Whether a man acquires them or not is up to him. With regard to these goods, government can only abet the pursuit of happiness *indirectly* through affecting the outer or public conditions of the individual's life in order to provide him with certain political and economic goods.

The political goods are those enumerated in the Preamble to the Constitution. If men live in a society which is just, which enjoys internal and external peace, and which confers the blessings of liberty upon its citizens, they are in possession of the political conditions for the pursuit of happiness. This was the case in the eighteenth century and it still is.

To lead a good life, men also need a reasonable supply of the economic goods which constitute wealth or which wealth provides—such things as the means of subsistence, the comforts and conveniences of life, medical care and health protection, educational opportunities, recreational opportunities, and ample time free from toil. The right to these economic goods is certainly part of the right to the pursuit of happiness.

In the eighteenth century, the man of substantial property possessed or had access to these goods for himself and his family. Hence if government protected his property (i.e., his estate), it secured for him the economic conditions for pursuit of happiness. This may explain what Jefferson had in mind in substituting “the pursuit of happiness” for “estates.” Certainly, the substituted phrase covers that and more: the political as well as the economic conditions needed.

77. COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP

Dear Dr. Adler,

The communist spokesmen are always referring to Karl Marx as the ultimate authority for their views. He seems to be a king or Moses to them. But I wonder just how original Marx was. Did he

originate the idea of the collective ownership of capital goods? Have any other thinkers propounded the idea of a classless society?

G. P.

Dear G. P.,

The idea of collective ownership of capital goods, by which I assume you mean factories, machinery, and the other means of production, was not at all an invention of Karl Marx, nor is this ever claimed. Collective ownership and controls were advocated as far back as Plato's *Republic* in the fifth century B.C., Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516, and Campanella's *The City of Sun* in 1623. The idea of collective ownership is associated by these writers with justice, brotherhood, the equality of men, and the good of the community as opposed to selfish interests. They believe that if the means of life and happiness were in the hands of the community, the community as a whole could profit by them.

The Marxist doctrine that social classes lead inevitably to class struggle is also clearly stated in Plato's *Republic*:

For indeed any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, and the other of the rich: these are at war with one another.

It is to avoid such warfare that Plato insists that the rulers of this ideal state must have no personal property, but live communally, sharing everything, even eating together in public mess halls. If the rulers, or guardians, obtained property, the state, according to Plato, would be faced with ruin. He writes:

But should they ever acquire homes or lands or moneys of their own, they will become housekeepers and husbandmen instead of guardians, enemies and tyrants instead of allies of the other citizens; hating and being hated, plotting and being plotted against, they will pass their whole life in much greater terror of internal than of external enemies, and the hour of ruin, both to themselves and to the rest of the State, will be at hand.

Many ancient and modern authors prior to Marx, such as Aristotle, Plutarch, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Gibbon, to mention only a few, speak of class conflict as the inevitable consequence of the division of the state into rich and poor.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there are isolated thinkers who propose the collectivization of factories, machinery, and other means of production as a solution. But it is not until the end of the eighteenth century that the movement for collectivization begins to snowball. There are two reasons for this: the French Revolution and the manifest evils of the factory system and the new industrialism. Gracchus Babeuf and other left-wing leaders of the French Revolution demand communism, economic equality, and the abolition of private property. Claude Henry Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier also advocate a collectivist economy, and so does the Englishman Robert Owen, an amazingly successful manufacturer and philanthropist who turned communist. All this was decades before Marx and Engels hammered out their theories.

Engels once said that most of the leading ideas of socialism are to be found in the great “utopian” socialists—Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen. As for Marx, the two discoveries for which he claims originality are “the materialist conception of history and the secret of capitalist production by means of surplus value.” However, Engels shows that Owen anticipates the Marxist theory that workers are exploited under a system of private ownership of the means of production.

Even the materialist theory of history—the theory that economic factors govern history—has many forerunners. Yet it must be said that it is Marx’s development of the theory that first put it on the map. It was what Marx did with ideas which earlier writers had advanced that made the difference.

Marx adopted the theory of the class struggle, the labor theory of value, and other basic supports of his own system from the British economist David Ricardo, but draws very different conclusions from them. Ricardo’s *Principles of Economics and Taxation* (1817), to which Marx owed so much, is a most vigorous analysis and defense of capitalism. Marx’s *Capital*, fifty years later, is an extended exposition of capitalism, which concludes with the prediction that it must inevitably collapse and be superseded by a system of collective ownership and management.

Most important ideas, the philosopher A. N. Whitehead once said, are anticipated by men who do not work out their implications or see their full significance. Marx’s achievement was to weld borrowed ideas with his own and to propose a revolutionary program which, however wrong in principle and practice, still continues to convulse the world.

78. WHAT ABOUT COMMUNISM?

Dear Dr. Adler,

The Russian leaders make what seem to us wild claims about the perfection of communist society and its inevitable triumph over capitalism. They often refer to the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as affording them the “scientific” and certain basis for these claims. Why did Marx and Engels think that communism was the best system and that it would inevitably win out? Does the Soviet experience confirm or deny their teachings?

H. T. B.

Dear H. T. B.,

Marx and Engels maintain that all history is the history of class conflict. The dominant class invariably employs the machinery of political power to secure its interests and to hold sway over the other classes. In this view, the state is nothing more than an instrument of oppression. Only when the state is done away with and a truly classless society is realized, will humanity enter on an era of freedom and of cooperative living. Then human history as the history of class conflict will come to an end.

The progressive, historical steps toward the realization of the final phase of communism are presented as inevitable. Each step is looked upon as an advance over what preceded it. That is why Marx and Engels hail the advent of capitalism and industrialization as a definite step forward. The overthrow of the aristocrats and the feudal landlords and the rise to power of the commercial middle class, the bourgeoisie, is a necessary prelude to the next stage in the development.

Marx and Engels regard the bourgeois state as a temporary, transitional phase. In it the mass of workers, the proletariat, are alienated from the products of their own labor because productive property is owned by private individuals. The essence of their projected communist revolution is to take this productive property out of private hands and put it under the control of the state.

This aim is stated quite openly in *The Communist Manifesto*. But it remains for Lenin, in a book entitled *The State and Revolution*, to clarify the measures to be taken to achieve the communist revolution.

First of all, Lenin advocates what he calls “the progressive peaceful inroads of socialism.” These amount to a series of legislative measures designed to weaken property rights and make the bourgeois state vulnerable. But to overthrow the existing order once and for all a violent revolution is necessary. It is not the bourgeois state that is supposed to wither away.

Following this revolution is the projected dictatorship of the proletariat. In this stage, the lower stage of communism, productive property is to be concentrated in the hands of the state, which is to administer economic life according to the rule: From each according to his ability, to each according to his work or contribution. It is this state, the proletariat state, that is supposed eventually to wither away, leading to the higher stage of communism—the truly classless society.

The only clue that Lenin gives us as to when this is supposed to occur is the following:

The state will be able to wither away completely when society has realized this rule: “From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs”; i.e., when people have become accustomed to observe the fundamental rules of social life, and their labor is so productive, that they voluntarily work *according to their ability*.

Of the many difficulties with this theory, let me call attention to two outstanding ones.

The first concerns the dictatorship of the proletariat. Actually the “proletariat state” is just another name for “state capitalism.” Productive power is not destroyed by the communist revolution. Instead, productive property is merely shifted from the hands of some owners into the hands of some others, namely the bureaucrats who run the state. What guarantee is there that these bureaucrats will relinquish their power when the time comes for the state to wither away? Milovan Djilas points out in his recent book, *The New Class*, that communism’s entrenched bureaucrats form a new and dominant class in society, and are just as jealous of their position and prerogatives as any other dominant class has ever been.

Secondly, communist theory is utopian in the extreme. Its assertion that man is perfectible on this earth puts it into basic conflict with Christianity, which denies that the Kingdom of God can be achieved in time. It posits a future condition of mankind which will be a panacea for all of man’s social ills. It pretends to be able to remake man by altering his environment. It supposes that human

beings are nothing but plastic material that can be shaped and molded like any other material. This, we know, is not the case.

79. “CREEPING SOCIALISM”

Dear Dr. Adler,

I have heard the term “creeping socialism” thrown around quite a bit in the past few years. As far as I can see, it is an invidious label applied by people who oppose the social and economic reforms instituted in this country since 1933. I suppose the “creeping” refers to the gradual development of these reforms. But what does the “socialism” refer to? I fail to see what is socialistic about such things as social security and the regulation of industry and labor. Aren’t these all improvements within the capitalistic system? What rational meaning, if any, does this term “creeping socialism” have?

P. G.

Dear P. G.,

During the present century, and especially in the last thirty years, the western democracies have adopted an ambitious program of social and economic legislation. We now take for granted such things as unemployment insurance, old age pensions, minimum wage laws, and the various government commissions regulating economic affairs. These new measures have had a transforming effect on our economy—an effect which is welcomed by some and opposed by others.

Many proponents of the new measures claim that they have reformed and even saved the capitalistic system. The new policies, they say, have eliminated the injustices and inhumanities that prevailed in the capitalism of the nineteenth century. Welfare measures have also made capitalism workable by assuring sufficient purchasing power to buy its products, and by adding economic controls to prevent catastrophic depressions.

Opponents claim that these new policies are leading us down the road to socialism by gradual and almost unnoticed steps—hence the name “creeping socialism.” What we have now, they say, is a “mixed economy”—part capitalist and part socialist. They fear that the ultimate result of this will be a completely socialist economy, with the state owning and operating all means of production.

Moderate, democratic socialists have long advocated such a gradual program of economic welfare and controls as the way to achieve socialism without violent revolution. In Great Britain, this was the policy of the Fabian Socialists and of the Labor Party. In the United States, the New Deal program of Franklin D. Roosevelt legislated a whole series of welfare measures, which according to the socialist leader Norman Thomas, had been proposed in the Socialist Party Platform of 1932.

Until very recently, those socialists who advocated the gradualist approach thought of “creeping socialism” as eventually creeping all the way to a completely socialist economy, which involves the abolition of private property in the means of production. But in the last year or so, most of the socialist parties in western Europe have abandoned the idea of state ownership of capital as essential to the socialist goal. They have, in effect, accepted the mixed economy which is now operative in the western democracies as a working approximation of their socialist ideals, though they advocate still further economic reforms to bring us closer to the welfare state of their dreams.

On the other hand, many spokesmen for capitalism have also accepted the welfare state. The British Conservative government has approved and extended the welfare measures originated by Liberal and Labor governments. In the United States, the Republican administration has accepted and administered many of the measures put through by the Democratic party between 1932 and 1952. Thus, history appears to have made strange bedfellows, with the socialists accepting the private ownership of capital together with the profits thereof, and the capitalists accepting the welfare measures that constitute substantial inroads on those profits.

We are left with two critical questions: (1) Can the “creeping socialism” of the last thirty years be prevented from creeping the whole way to complete socialism of the Soviet variety, which would destroy democracy and freedom? Some defenders of the mixed economy think that it can, but there are those who greatly fear that the mixed economy will inevitably degenerate into communism.

(2) Can a truly democratic capitalism supplant the mixed economy with its socialist tendencies? I think that this can be done if we restore the rights of property and diffuse the private ownership of capital as widely as possible. We can achieve economic justice and welfare for all, while still preserving our democratic liberties, if all the citizens own enough capital to give them economic power and

independence. This is the view advocated by Louis Kelso and myself in our book *The Capitalist Manifesto*.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Andre Wilson

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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