LXX – Collectivism Begins In Your Neighborhood

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By Butler Shaffer

Those familiar with my writings know of my eternal hostility to collective thinking. The key to living well — materially, psychologically, and spiritually — is to recognize that we are social beings who need the cooperation of others while, at the same time, retaining our individual sense of understanding and direction. We need to maintain an energized awareness that never allows our social needs to preempt our individual judgments about the propriety of our actions.

There is nothing so destructive to decent society as the tendency to relax our psychic energies and let our thinking dissolve into mass-mindedness. Wars have long been the vehicle for transforming peaceful, principled individuals into brutish automatons whose standards of conduct become whatever collective authority defines for them. Wars are destructive enough, in terms of lives, property, and foregone opportunities. But there is a hidden cost not only to wars, but to all forms of collective behavior, that is rarely examined: the diminution of the qualities that make for a free, creative, and humane civilization.

It is to the interplay between the individual and the group that I focus my attention. Let me emphasize, again, that I am not setting the values of individualism apart from our needs for social organization. Without some form of society — if only the family – none of us would have survived to become individuals. As long as these needs reinforce one another — as they do in the marketplace, for example — there is no necessary conflict between the two. It is when the interests and purposes of a group are seen as predominant over those of the individuals who comprise it — when the group becomes an institution, in other words — that this balance is lost and conflict emerges. When our individual autonomy, uniqueness, and principles are squeezed out of us and extruded into a collective mindset, our personal and social needs are placed in opposition.

The confrontation between the individual and the collective has long been the topic of literary and philosophic examination. Socrates taking the hemlock; Galileo forced to recant his scientific discoveries; Gulliver being tied down by the Lilliputians; or John Galt forced to retreat to his Colorado gulch, are among the more vivid examples of individuals repressed by collective forces. Artists, writers, and other intellectuals are ever on the alert to warn of threats to the kinds of creative conduct in which they deal. But the virus of collectivism insinuates itself into our lives long before men and women are beheaded or sent to gulags for their politically incorrect opinions.

If our minds are to become fully collectivized, we must learn the catechisms upon which the existence of institutions depends. Having severed the consistency of purpose between individual and social needs that is implicit in all voluntary behavior, the state — largely through its school systems — has conditioned us to believe that we are the state; that political systems are but an extension of our will; that politicians and bureaucrats are our "agents," desirous not only of defending our liberties and advancing our interests, but ever mindful of their status as public servants to our will.

We eagerly embrace this doctrine as a way of silencing those inner voices that whisper to us the falsity of the proposition. We are inwardly troubled by the thought that we might be nothing more in the scheme of things than institutional chattels, to be employed as best suits our owners. We attempt to resolve such a dilemma by reciting the dogma that the institutional order exists to serve us. Many of us still pretend that politicians, judges, bureaucrats, police officers, members of the military, and other government officials, go off to work each morning with no more paramount purpose than the elimination of barriers to our sense of self-fulfillment.

Just how fallacious this notion is was made quite clear to me one morning as I was walking along a Los Angeles street. My attention was first attracted to the flashing red lights of two police cars parked in the middle of the street. As I got closer to what seemed like a major criminal arrest, I saw four burly policemen standing around a shabbily-dressed man — perhaps in his forties — who had been handcuffed by the officers. What might this man have done to arouse the attention of these state functionaries? Had he just held up a liquor store? Assaulted young women on the street? Grabbed the purse of an elderly woman? Gunned down a helpless stranger? Then my eyes caught sight of what was the apparent cause of his arrest: an old grocery cart filled with neatly folded cardboard boxes, old newspapers, bits and scraps of things, and a plastic bag filled with empty aluminum cans.

In fairness to the police officers, it might be that his arrest was for suspicion of being in possession of a stolen grocery cart, although I have witnessed other incidents in which police have restrained homeless persons sans such carts. This man's crime, to outward appearances, was to be one of the many poor people who regularly inhabit the streets of major cities. Like bag-ladies, beggars, skid-row winos, and people who sleep on park benches, this man's apparent wrongdoing consisted of being impoverished; a form of energy not useful to the institutional order. Just as he had spent his daily hours collecting refuse from the streets, parks, and trash containers, this man was being collected by the state's people-pushers with the efficient dispatch of SS officers or KGB agents rounding up the persona non grata of other regimes.

Our political and business system has long been annoyed by those who choose to be unsettled and unmotivated by the material allures of corporate capitalism. Hoboes, vagrants, gypsies, people who sleep in their cars, panhandlers, and other poor, homeless

wanderers, have always been regarded as proper objects of abuse by the criminal law system. The city in which I grew up once had an ordinance — which I played a part in getting repealed — making it a misdemeanor for "ugly or deformed persons" to appear on its streets. The ordinance had been enacted at the behest of retailers desirous of ridding crippled beggars from panhandling on sidewalks outside their stores.

To be "without visible means of support" — which means to be without a substantial amount of money that can be taxed or spent in business establishments — has long seemed enough justification for locking up a man for ten to thirty days. This is not to say that all forms of poverty have been targeted for attack by the state. It is quite all right to be poor in America as long as one is willing to be institutionally poor. If poverty can be made useful to the institutional order — particularly the state — it no longer represents entropy to the system, but a form of energy available for institutional purposes.

Various institutions — such as state welfare systems, job training programs, homeless shelters, and charitable organizations — thrive by maintaining sizeable constituencies drawn from the ranks of the unemployed and impoverished. A major field of legal practice is bankruptcy law — which should tell us something about the overall nature of our corporate-state dominated economy — which allows people to have their impoverishment institutionally certified by bankruptcy courts. As long as the poor are prepared to live as part of the clientele of such agencies, they will likely be left alone. They become an indispensable part of the system for the institutionalized control of people; examples of the collective domination of individuals. Like willing slaves, men and women who consent to remain dependent on established authorities for their livelihoods will remain docile enough to pose no threat to the ruling order.

While one may remain part of the class of the institutional poor, the corporate-state alliance wars against people being independently poor. To be independently poor is to be outside the system, unattached to an institution, a walking advertisement that one may reject the established order and its values and yet survive. To be on the outside trying to get in is quite permissible, even if one never succeeds: it demonstrates a commitment to the collective order. But to be on the outside by choice; to be content living without a permanent home, a telephone or television set, an automobile, a computer and cell phone, mortgages and insurance policies, and all those other trappings of the "American way of life," is a threat to the system itself. The independently poor, who choose to wander the highways and sleep on sidewalks and in parks, are living denials of the commitments the rest of us have made to the system and take for granted.

Andrew Carnegie — a man who rose from humble beginnings — recognized the threat such persons pose to the institutional order. "One man or woman who succeeds in living comfortably by begging," he declared, "is more dangerous to society, and a greater obstacle to the progress of humanity, than a score of wordy Socialists." Recent criticisms of judicial decisions that have freed men and women involuntarily held in mental institutions reflects

this same concern. In identifying many of the homeless as people who should be institutionalized — even the verb form expresses the collectivist processes at work — such critics implicitly recognize state-practiced psychiatry for what it is: a coercive system for punishing the heretics of a consensus-defined social consciousness.

Please do not misinterpret my point. I am not suggesting that there is a sense of spiritual or intellectual awakening, or an exalted life purpose, to be found in living in a piano crate on Wilshire Boulevard. Neither am I espousing a life of alms-seeking at busy intersections. I have no desire to live that way, nor would I find pleasure in any of my children surviving in such a manner. What I am suggesting is that the collectivist mindset is the most dangerous social condition mankind faces, whether it finds expression in the form of suicide bombers, a willingness to become a cog in a government's war machinery, or simply in resigning oneself to a lifetime of control by institutional bureaucrats. State collectivism does not begin at the point of a gun, but culminates there. Its origins are to be found in our attitudes about the independence of individuals who choose, for whatever their reasons, to live outside prescribed herds. It is only in our willingness to accept the autonomy of the hobo that our own individuality will find protection.

Such were the thoughts that came to my mind as I witnessed this collector of other people's throwaways being herded into a police car for what was, presumably, but another of his numerous trips through the criminal justice system. Local retailers were no doubt relieved that such an unsightly soul was no longer around to discomfort customers as they came in to shop. Still, I felt a sense of sadness that people who have a preference for the footloose life, and who want nothing more than the opportunity to continue their wanderings from place to place, must be hunted down and jailed by a system that seems so threatened by their examples. I could only wonder at the priorities of a society that must harass those least capable of resisting the well-organized, well-armed powers of the state. Such practices hardly represent a societal commitment to the liberty and self-ownership of any of us. Nor could I help recalling the speculations of Eric Hoffer that, perhaps, those we are fond of calling the "rugged pioneers" who forged this nation, were nothing more than the tramps of earlier days; men and women who gave up what little they had in favor of treks into an uncertain, uncivilized, unstructured world.

This man did not appear to be pushing drugs, but only an old grocery cart, and judging by the neatly ordered collection he had amassed, he had doubtless done much to make the streets of Los Angeles a cleaner place. Like the hoboes who, years ago, used to trade their labor for food at my uncle's farm, this man had eschewed panhandling in favor of supporting his meager wants by work, albeit work not high on college grads' hierarchies of status jobs. His was the work of the scavenger, the lowly recycler of the entropy that we define as "trash," a role one finds throughout all of nature. But offsetting the meager material rewards of his efforts was the fact that he apparently enjoyed what hoboes, gypsies, and other vagabonds of human history always enjoyed: the opportunity to wander

freely without a commitment to the formal acquisition and consumption system of our institutionalized world. It was this freedom that was being shackled by the brutes who had been hired to pursue, through the streets of our cities, those whose wanderings outside institutional confines might cause the rest of us to ponder alternatives to our own commitments.

Many of those who live in this fashion support themselves through the sale of merchandise or services on city streets, parks, and sidewalks. In many cities, men and women have been run off such facilities, or even arrested, for selling trinkets, food, clothing, souvenirs, or artwork, to the public. The defense of such police behavior has been, among other arguments, that such government owned property "belongs to everyone," and that private persons ought not use it for monetary gain. But herein lies the fallacy of collectivism, for if each of us "owns" the city streets or parks, how can any of these alleged "owners" be denied their use? The argument is further contradicted by the fact that established businesses routinely use city streets and sidewalks for the delivery of their wares.

At a time of high unemployment, homelessness, and minimum-wage restrictions that prevent many inner-city young people from earning a living other than through the sale of illegal drugs, one wonders at the wisdom of placing legal barriers in the way of men and women desirous of engaging in even such informal businesses as operating pushcarts, braiding hair, or selling toys or T-shirts. While we continue to mouth slogans about our wondrous "free enterprise" system, as well as the liberty to live our lives as we choose, we ignore the numerous restrictions that foreclose many low-income people from entering the marketplace as entrepreneurs, thus reinforcing their ties to government welfare systems.

The collectivization of our society has all but enervated any meaning of "free enterprise" premised upon an individual's liberty to enter the marketplace. It is a confusion that has led most people to find no distinction between the business system (as a corporate entity) and the free market (as a legally unrestrained process). In our modern, corporate-state world, it seems that one is "free" to enter a trade or business only if the established political and corporate interests are first paid off: government agencies sell permits and licenses, exact other fees, and collect taxes along the way; landlords must be paid rent for business space; in many lines of work, one must procure a license — issued by a state-enforced association of one's would-be competitors — before lawfully entering a trade or profession; and banks and other lending institutions must get their cut. In order to assure compliance with local zoning, building, and business codes, licensed construction, plumbing, and electrical contractors must build or remodel the facilities; insurance companies must be paid expensive premiums for all the insurance and performance bonds these other institutional interests will insist upon to protect their positions; while accountants and lawyers must be paid to assure that all of these formalities have been followed. Against such an array of

political and economic interests, is it surprising that local governments seek to restrain those who have the audacity to try to enter the world of business without making these legally mandated payoffs?

There was a time when entry into the marketplace was not so severely restricted. My grandfather was one of the founders of a still-existing town in Nebraska. He built and operated a hotel and opera house in this town with, I suspect, virtually none of the governmental restraints that would attend someone trying to do the same thing in this town today. Modern requirements for conducting business have less to do with the demands of a free market, than with restrictions imposed upon the market by the corporate-state forces that have come to define the business sector.

Even in my youth, I recall a daily parade of vendors — from bakeries, cleaners, dairies, ice and coal companies; to farmers with their fruits, vegetables, and eggs; encyclopedia, brush, and vacuum cleaner salesmen; photographers and peddlers of various notions — going through neighborhoods selling their products or services. Even garbage collection was a competitive business, rather than a state-run monopoly. Our streets were alive with men and women buying and selling, and haggling over prices and the quality of goods.

I had the sense that, had I wanted to enter this exciting marketplace, I could do so without having to get anyone else's permission, except, perhaps, that of my parents. Indeed, I did enter this market when I was nine years old, obtaining a newspaper delivery route through this same neighborhood, and even managing to mow lawns and shovel snow from sidewalks. At the same time, some of my friends were going door-to-door selling magazines, seeds, or other products. We were able to learn something of the realities of the marketplace by operating our own lemonade stands or collecting scrap metal for resale, while other kids produced a neighborhood newspaper, and a circus on a vacant lot. Such freedom provided us the opportunity to experience a sense of both productive and existential independence. While these earlier practices were subject to some amount of governmental regulation, there was also more of an attitude evinced then, than now, that the marketplace was not the private preserve of institutional interests, but was open to any individual who wished to participate.

There were other secondary social benefits to free, neighborhood commerce, including providing employment opportunities for a number of handicapped persons: students at a nearby school for the blind manufactured brooms and doormats, and sold them door-to-door (one of these students gave me a book in Braille, which introduced me to an alternative form of my own language); a crippled man sharpened knives and scissors and sold assorted household odds and ends. The relatively low costs of entry into such trades gave people additional employment options and provided opportunities to learn new skills, both of which fostered a greater sense of independence. Today, such people would likely either be part of the clientele of state welfare bureaucracies — reduced to the demeaning state of institutionalized dependence — or would be standing at major street corners with

Styrofoam cups and plaintive signs that begged for your pity and money.

The unrestricted freedom of entry into various trades was not only consistent with ideas of self-ownership — a concept foreign to men and women of collectivist persuasion — but also served to keep control over economic decision-making decentralized in the hands of individuals, rather than centralized in institutions. Because the transactions between sellers and neighborhood residents were of an arms-length, personalized nature, such practices reinforced the authority that men and women held over their own lives.

All of this contributed to yet another social benefit: the reinforcement of a sense of community and neighborliness, as residents visited with one another beside a fruit and vegetable truck, or exchanged jokes with a milkman who was always willing to share chunks of ice with children on a hot summer day. Such behavior reflects the point made earlier, namely, that the marketplace is an expression of both our social and economic needs. So much of our daily lives was conducted out on the streets that I managed to know our neighbors far more intimately than I have since experienced living in other cities. I suspect that what turned the vibrant neighborhoods of a generation ago into the more sluggish bedroom communities of today, was not just the advent of air conditioning and television, but the decline of the sense of the neighborhood as a social system, one in which we lived and played, not merely ate and slept. Furthermore, because of its voluntary and decentralized nature, we rarely experienced conflict between individual and neighborhood interests.

Collectivism was not born in congressional chambers or Ivy League classrooms, but in our willingness to abandon our streets and neighborhoods to institutional interests. But why did we do so? From whence arose our trust in collective forces and fear of ourselves as individual decision-makers? Is it because we believe that autonomous individuals and voluntary groups could ever match the wholesale slaughter practiced by governments, a carnage that produced some two hundred million corpses in the 20th century alone? Do we share with religious leaders the fear that self-directed and spiritually-inquisitive individuals are likely to introduce more social discord than the medieval "holy wars" that are now enjoying a return engagement in the Middle East? Do we attach ourselves to major corporate systems because we expect the economic energies of people to disappear, for enterprise to suddenly cease, or for marketplace business cycles to become worse than under corporate-state induced and managed depressions, unemployment, and inflation?

Do we continue to hand over our children and tax dollars to government schools because we believe that alternative, voluntary systems of learning might exceed the government school record for state-certified ignorance and institutionalized illiteracy? Do we really expect the costs of alternative systems of health care to come close to matching the obscene costs of state-certified and defined medicine? In a world in which so many scientists have become state-subsidized sorcerers — helping to produce such atrocities as

state-run eugenics programs; systems for the political control of populations; and the arsenals of atomic, biological, and chemical weapons of mass slaughter — do we really expect technology in the hands of free men and women to be a threat to the human species?

It is time that we "take back the streets," not in the political or other violent meaning in which that phrase is often used, but by ending the conflict between our individual and social purposes that has been generated by a divisive, collective mindset. The "city" and "community" are not synonymous terms, neither are the words "precinct" and "neighborhood." The marrow of our lives is being sucked from us by our continuing acceptance of collectivist beliefs. We need to regain the sense of community that we lost when we allowed political systems to help generate and mobilize fears about our neighbors.

Collectivist ideas have largely been advanced by intellectuals, many of whom preoccupy themselves with creating restraints on the activities of others, while insisting that their own realms of free expression be shielded from state coercion. They take great comfort in the limited definition of liberty attributed to Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." There may be some justice in expanding the scope of this phrase to include an unrestrained freedom of action as well as ideas, an effort that would pull the rug from beneath all collectivist systems. Let us, in other words, extend these sentiments to all men and women as they peacefully pursue whatever is of interest to them or provides meaning to their lives: "I disapprove of what you do, but I will defend to the death your right to do it."

The Best of Butler Shaffer