

LXXXVII – Collectivist Utopias

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By Butler Shaffer

My Property class had spent a good deal of time exploring how the inviolability of property boundaries is the only way to maintain both a free and peaceful society; and how the violence, discord, and other forms of social conflict in our world are all consequences of the failure to respect one another's claims of ownership. "Property," I suggested to my students, is not a social invention or an ideological preference, but the most basic fact of existence, applicable to all forms of life. The only question is, at least in a human setting, whether property is to be owned and controlled by individuals, or by state collectives.

One of my students asked the inevitable question: "isn't a self-owning, self-directed life utopian?" "What do you mean by utopian?", I responded. "An ideal system that can't work in the real world," he replied. "If it can't work in reality," I inquired, "how can it be ideal?"

I went on to explain how every living thing must occupy space and must consume some portion of its environment – all to the exclusion of every other person or thing in the world – in order to survive. While we benefit greatly from cooperating with, sharing, and loving others, all of life comes down to an individualistic experience. We are born, live, and die as individuals; only the individual transports the species from one generation to the next.

It is collectivism that is the unrealistic expression of utopian belief systems. In its worst form — the state — collectivism is the institutionalized exertion of violence to compel living beings to behave contrary to their natural self-interest inclinations. So strong are the motivations for individual preferences that the state must resort to attacks upon the very nature of life to satisfy the ambitions of those who see others as nothing more than resources to be exploited for such ends.

The state — whatever its particular forms — always expresses itself as a collective form of property ownership. All political systems are socialistic, in that they are premised upon the subservience of individual interests to collective authority. Communism, fascism, lesser forms of state socialism, and welfarism, are all premised upon the state's usurpation of privately-owned property. Whether one chooses to be aligned with the political "Left," "Right," or "Middle," comes down to nothing more than a preference for a particular franchise of state socialism.

It is, of course, the central purpose of government school systems to indoctrinate young minds in the dogma of statism; an effort whose success can be measured by the sense of shock expressed by most adults at the proposition that individual and social life could be lived in any way other than in obedience to political authority. It was years of consistent

inculcation in the statist model — whose catechisms are repeated in the media, universities, and social gatherings — that led my student to imagine a self-owning, self-directed life as "utopian."

A corollary of statist theology is the belief that the absence of governmental authority is synonymous with "anarchy," and that such a condition equates with disorder. And yet, our lives are free, orderly, and peaceful only to the degree that we live anarchistically, without using force, violence, threats, or the infliction of death to accomplish our purposes. It is only when property boundaries are respected and considered inviolable, that peace and order prevail. When my students ask if such arrangements prevail any place, I remind them that their daily lives are conducted in such a manner. "Do you threaten your friends, fellow students, coworkers, or neighbors with violence in order to get what you want?," I ask. Our relationships with other people are expressions of the anarchist assumption that men and women live harmoniously with one another, and without presuming to govern others through violent means.

The statist, of course, will not hear of such matters. To the historical record of two hundred million deaths, economic catastrophes, concentration camps, and rampant police states produced by governments in the twentieth century alone, they present the nostrum of "limited government" as an antidote to political oppression. Intelligent men and women ought to have figured out, long before 9/11, that constitutionalism and other myths about limiting the exercise of political power have been proven utter failures. We can begin with the complete collapse of a Congress that grovels at the feet of a hapless president who is the incarnation of the establishment interests for whose purposes the political system operates. We can also read decades of Supreme Court cases in which the powers granted to the federal government have been given very expansive definitions, while liberties reserved to individuals have been given very narrow interpretations.

None of this should have surprised cogent minds. From the outset, the United States Constitution represented, in the words of Lord Macaulay, "all sail and no anchor." What else, other than expansive state power, ought to have been expected from a document whose preamble speaks of such purposes as "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, [and] promote the general Welfare?" When, to such purposes, are added such powers as the "Power To lay and collect Taxes, . . . to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare," as well as the power "To make all laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the united States," one should have wondered where lay the "limited" nature of the state! Conservatives continue to bleat the need to "get back to the Constitution." The reality is that the state never deviated from this instrument. It is exercising the virtually unrestrained powers that were spelled out for it!

One cannot grant to another the power to exercise a monopoly on the use of force — which

is the standard definition of a sovereign state — and expect that power to be limited by anything other than the appetites of the rulers and/or the willingness of the ruled to be coerced. A belief in "limited government" is as naïve as believing that one can place a large bowl of candy in front of a group of young children, direct them to take only "reasonable" amounts, and expect the contents of the bowl to be only minimally reduced by day's end.

The state rules its citizenry through the mobilization of their fears, not simply of punishment by political authorities, but of other persons or conditions in life. From at least the time of FDR to the present, the state has feasted on a popular desire — which the state, itself, has generated — for collective security. All that has ever been required has been a willingness of people to huddle in fear, expecting the state to protect them from the exercise of personal responsibility and control over their own lives. To accomplish such ends, the individual need only give up the self-ownership that was long ago ceded to a collectivist ideology.

Managers of the collectivist utopia are never without fear-objects with which to petrify people. The bogeyman is a quite fungible and chameleon-like character, capable of becoming what those in charge want it to be. Today, most Americans dutifully recite the mantra of "terrorism" with as much enthusiasm as their World War I-era grandparents condemned "the Hun." In doing so, they ignore the central fact that all political systems are grounded in terror (i.e., by the state's threats of force or even death for non-compliance).

But, as the Soviet Union's ruling class recently discovered, the future of massive states may be called into question simply by virtue of size alone. The brontosaurus-like American nation-state appears to be on the verge of collapse, providing the opportunity for life processes to break out of their collective bondage. Fear, terror, militarism, and the escalating restraints on human action, are taking their toll on the civilization itself. As the Italian historian, Benedetto Croce, observed of an earlier period in Europe, "it is impossible to found on fear a quiet and trustful tenor of life."

Fear has its limitations as a motivator of human behavior. As a response to an immediate threat to one's well-being, fear can mobilize the necessary energy for one's survival. But as a permanent way of life — which the Bush administration warns Americans is their future under his sociopathic thinking — fear is enervating to both the body and spirit of people. There comes a breaking point at which the bogeyman no longer frightens.

The political security blanket that most Americans are accustomed to pulling over their heads in times of state-induced fears, has become worn and tattered. Those who reach for it increasingly find themselves grasping at handfuls of lint. Soon, men and women will find themselves face-to-face with the harsh realities of life that can only be effectively dealt with by the spontaneous, autonomous, and anarchistic forces with which they now conduct their daily lives; even as they continue to mouth the collectivist utopian catechisms that both deny and destroy the best of what it means to be human.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

