
Why Teach Freedom?

A student writes: "I have read the pamphlets you sent me, also most of the books you recommended. I am more convinced than ever that the planned economy is a dangerous delusion and that man's greatest good can be achieved only through freedom. But I am troubled by the reaction of my professor when I try to talk to him along these lines. He is an honest thinker: I am sure of that. Also, I am sure that he has read more about the free economy than I have. Why is it that he rejects the premises I present to him and refuses to accept the facts? Can you explain this to me?"

I can't, not unless I call upon an hypothesis that is hardly provable. For many years I have struggled with the problem the student has put to me: Why are some people libertarians, why are others of equal learning and background socialists? It isn't a matter of education. Once I attended the closing session of a course given by the noted laissez-faire economist Ludwig von Mises, and listened to the reactions of his students. It was a gabfest. Some gave distinct evidence of rejecting all they had learned from him in fifteen previous lectures, even what they

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had presumably read in his books. Others were enthusiastic exponents of his thesis. Why?

The bureaucratic socialist, of course, must be excluded from this speculation. In his case, socialism is a job, not necessarily a conviction. I knew a thoroughgoing libertarian who entered the bureaucratic service out of economic necessity; within six months he sang the collectivist tune.

In the same class with the bureaucrat is the professor whose job depends on his going along with the head of the department, or whose income is in part derived as a "consultant" on government projects. I have known one or two such who, in private conversation, had some strong reservations on the collectivism they taught in class. These, like the bureaucrats, are "boughten" socialists; their cases can be easily explained.

But how do you account for the socialistic attitude of those whose economic status ought to incline them to the opposite point of view? I know a very successful stockbroker who makes out a strong case for government manipulation of the economy; to him it is dogma, even though his comfortable living is derived from the free marketplace. The story of a book is a case in point. In *God and Man at Yale*, William F. Buckley, Jr., pointed out that the textbooks used in the freshman course in economics decried the free economy and extolled planning; the alumni bought his book, but also increased their contributions to Yale. I have found audiences heavily sprinkled with "upper-bracket" men quite cool to the proposition that the income tax amendment ought to be repealed on the ground that it violates the right of property, while audiences consisting mainly of wage earners and small businessmen ask to be organized for action. Not that all rich men are socialists, nor all poor men are libertarians, but that you cannot account for their attitudes along economic lines.

Neither education, background, nor income can explain either the socialist or the libertarian. Whenever you try any of these criteria you are faced with cases that refute your premise; you find that both types come from penthouses and slums, that they include Ph.D.'s and illiterates. You are driven to the conclusion that if there is a causative principle it must be found somewhere in the makeup of the person rather than in environmental influences. Psychology does not help, for it too seeks explanations for mental attitudes in conditioning and shies away from the realm of inherent traits or temperament. So, the best you can do is to describe the socialist—or the libertarian—as you have known him, and to leave the “why” of him alone; it is beyond understanding.

The characteristic that invariably identifies socialists is an urgency to improve other people. It is a passion that blinds them to the fact of immutable individuality and leads to faith in the therapy of force. It is utterly irrational; so much so that they find it necessary to cover up the impulse with an inordinate display of logic. When you examine their arguments you find them based on axioms which support their inherent drive. In short, they are so constituted that they cannot let other people alone.

Perhaps it is an inner need that impels the socialist to his ideology, for I have never met an advocate of government intervention who did not admit, inadvertently, his own capacity for commissariat functions. He always has a plan, to which others must submit, and his certainty that the plan will produce the contemplated results does not permit him to brook criticism. Always he is the fanatic. If you disagree with him it is not because you are in error; it is because you are sinful. You are not an ignoramus; you are a “class-conscious capitalist,” or a

“reactionary,” or at least an “antisocial.” Why is it that name-calling is stock argument with all socialists?

That this inclination toward social improvement through force is an innate, not an acquired, characteristic is proven by the attitude of many ex-socialists. I know a writer of repute who, though he has rid himself intellectually of all Marxism, of which he once was an articulate advocate, still insists that large fortunes ought to be regulated. Compulsion is in his inwards. Former communists find it difficult to accept fully the faith of the libertarian in social improvement through individual improvement; some kind of political regulation need not lead to the Moscow excesses. It is not true that “once a socialist always a socialist”; but intellectual conversion does not automatically rule out the possibility of an atavism.

If, then, the socialistic attitude—and, by implication, that of the libertarian—stems from an ingredient of personality, why put so much stress on education? The libertarian is particularly concerned over the spread of socialistic doctrine in the schools and in the public press, and is most anxious to bring his own philosophy into opposition. On the face of it, this concern seems unwarranted, for an innate tendency toward freedom will not be changed by words into an acceptance of slavery.

Basically, this is true. But a character trait, like a seed, germinates best under proper cultivation, and the inclination toward freedom is strengthened by intellectual conviction; as in the case of the student who wrote me. There are many who, like this young man, are instinctively repelled by government intervention but who crave intellectual support for their inclination. It is to them that the proponent of libertarianism must address himself; the socialist is beyond redemption. That is to say, the libertarian teaches not to “make” libertarians, but to find them.

Likewise, the socialist teacher does not make converts; he merely confirms the socialistic inclination of his willing students. And there the intellectual battle between the two schools of thought might rest.

But socialism is not an intellectual pursuit, it is primarily a drive for political power; and if its proponents succeed in enthroning themselves, the case for libertarian thought will be most difficult. Hence, the reason for seeking out the natural libertarians through education is to prevent, by constant and intelligent reiteration of its tenets, the suppression of the philosophy of freedom and the driving of its advocates underground.