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A Libertarian Is the Only Real Egalitarian

BY DEIRDRE NANSEN MCCLOSKEY

A libertarian—which means a true “liberal” in the original sense of the word—wants a society with no human-made, involuntary ups and downs, no masters and slaves. That’s all there is to it.

But what about equality?

One reply is that the libertarian admires the varied gifts of humans: some have athletic prowess, some have wisdom in religion, and some have insight into commercially tested betterments, such as a new app or a new hip replacement. The libertarian therefore wants people to exchange their gifts for mutual advantage and mutual enlightenment. It amounts to free trade and free speech among free adults. Lovely.

You know it works in rock music and friendship and the English language. Let’s have equal liberty of *permission* to venture, says the libertarian. Let’s not have governmental intervention in rock music, friendship, language . . . or the economy. Equality of permission. No masters with a clipboard or a regulation and the threat of a fine or impris-

onment to back them up.

The libertarian doesn’t think that the usual ideas about equality—equality of income or equality of opportunity—make a lot of sense. Instead, the libertarian wants that liberty of *permission*.

The scientific fact is that equality of permission works, and it pretty quickly creates greater equality of incomes and opportunities. What the libertarian’s hero Adam Smith called

in that revolutionary year 1776 “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty” lets anyone venture equally as an adult. Economic history shows that the new liberty of permission, which gradually widened during the two centuries after 1776, did in fact lead to other equalities—much better consumption and better parenting. The vastly more prosperous people alive now—30 times more

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Gov. CHRIS SUNUNU of New Hampshire addresses a Cato seminar in Naples, Florida, in February, where he discussed the policies that have made New Hampshire the top-ranked state in the 2021 edition of Cato’s *Freedom in the 50 States*.

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prosperous, it turned out—end up reasonably equal in that they at least have the essentials of life, such as food and a roof over their heads and the like. Maybe they are not all equal in their ownership of jewelry and fast cars, but they are much more equal to the rich in the basics than in olden days. And the liberal equality of permission implied a spreading reluctance to beat children and neglect their educations, on the understanding that children, too, are equal persons whose custody is a trusteeship rather than a piece of property.

If we try to get the other nonpermission equalities directly, we don't get them at all. Robbing Peter to pay Paul turns out to make us all poorer by driving Peter out of business, corrupting Paul, and giving Helen, the bureaucrat who runs the redistribution, such powers that she is tempted to misuse them in very nasty fashion. And equality of opportunity, which sounds nice, is impossible to achieve if you take it literally. You had better parents than Bobby, say. Should we forbid your parents from being better, or should we intervene to coerce Bobby's parents to be better—or at least better in the opinion of Helen the bureaucrat? Say one person is smarter than another and speaks Spanish as well as English. So to make them equal at the starting line, should we drive nails into that first person's head until they are as stupid as the second person, and they forget Spanish?

You see the problem. The metaphor of an exactly equal starting line for a foot race is not the sensible, practical, doable, fair proposal. The sensible proposal is to let people race as they will. That way you get more runners, and immense innovation in the economy. It's a fact of history after 1776.

In the 1700s, this notion of letting people do what they want so long as they didn't hurt others looked completely crazy. *Everyone* had a master and the master told you what to do. Eat your spinach. Stand still for a beating

“ Do your own thing, without force or fraud against others. ”

with a knout. No, Jews can't go to law school. No, blacks can't get a house loan after serving in World War II. The new libertarians/liberals like Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), and Adam Smith (1723–1790) denied that a white owner should be the black slave's master, or that a husband should be the wife's master, or that the officials from the king or the Congress should be masters over us all. Each adult is to be their own master.

As Adam Smith put it, a person should be “left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way.” Do your own thing, without force or fraud against others. You help others by doing carpentry or moviemaking or doctoring for pay.

You again get the point: no artificial, involuntary masters are to order you about. Every adult should be free and should have equal dignity. Everyone is to be treated as having equal permission to try out things. New religions. New machines. New relations between men and women. That's true liberalism. And you can see that it is strongly egalitarian, more egalitarian in fact than the impossible or unwise equalities that our good friends on the left propose.

TREATING ADULTS AS ADULTS

A six-year-old child of course needs a parent to make decisions. If the child decides to eat only potato chips, her mother needs to step in and make her eat her spinach. But as an adult, you are liberated to eat potato chips or spinach as you please. Good. True

liberalism could therefore be called “adulthood,” in just the sense we all declared angrily to our parents at some point, a little bit before actually becoming adults: “You're not my boss!”

Yet voluntary, temporary parents or bosses are indeed necessary to get some good things done such as raising children to responsible adulthood or getting a hamburger made and sold. When you're paid to cook or sell or bus tables at McDonald's, you follow whatever lawful order the boss issues. That's the deal. You might tolerate a little jerky behavior from the boss if it's not too bad. But if you really don't like how you're treated, or the wage that you are being paid, you can quit and go find another boss who will pay you adequately and who is not such a jerk. Or you quit and start your own business and, as a boss, you pay others to do carpentry or movie-making or doctoring.

That happens tens of thousands of times a day. The good result of all this *voluntary* bossing and paying and leaving and entering is that hamburgers get served to people at reasonable prices. Carpentry and movies and doctoring are all available, too, as they are not in economies run on principles of non-permission and involuntary service. We say to the soldier in uniform at the airport, “Thank you for your service.” We should say it to you and your boss at McDonald's too. The obvious and simple system of natural liberty of permission is the most altruistic one, everyone busily doing services for others.

So a boss under liberalism is not a master in the old, nasty, slavish, involuntary sense, the sense that every human society adopted before liberalism. Richard Rumbold was hanged at Edinburgh in 1685 for being a fierce liberal and plotting against the tyrannical king. Under British law he was permitted to make a statement from the scaffold before the executioner yanked the trap door open. “I am sure,” he said, “there was no man born marked of God above another, for none comes

into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any booted and spurred to ride him.” To “no man” we can now add “no woman, no teenage child, no black, no colonial person, no sexual minority,” and on and on.

Liberalism is different from every other political philosophy in just this way. A non-liberal socialist society, for example, elevates the central planners to positions of coercive bossiness over others. An old aristocratic society, likewise, elevates the dukes and barons. A coercively theocratic society (unlike, for example, a voluntarily conservative society of religion, such as you can see among the Mormons or the Amish) elevates the priests or ayatollahs. But a liberal society doesn’t elevate anyone at all, unless for temporary purposes of winning the football game or getting hamburgers made and sold, and only when that someone has shown that he or she deserves to be the quarterback or the boss—for the time being, or as long as enough people consent.

THE ALLURE OF COMMAND AND CONTROL

In view of all this, why do young people keep saying, “Let’s try socialism”? They talk as though 1917 in Russia and the horrors after 1945 of a third of the world’s population being ruled by hideous socialist tyrants never happened. I do wish they wouldn’t.

But here’s why. We are used to little families in which Mom and Dad ensure that hamburgers and educations and medical care are made and distributed among the children fairly. In other words, a family is a little socialist economy. Usually a good one. It sounds strange to say so, but consider: the socialist motto is supposed to be “from each person according to their ability, to each person according to their need.” Sweet. And in a family, that’s how things go. A good family, in the style of the *Little House on the Prairie*, is fair, equal, and as centrally planned as Russia was under communism. No wonder, in other words,

“ The Great Enrichment flattened out the inequalities of safety and comfort. ”

that people coming to political consciousness around age 16 or 20 reach for socialism. Their little socialist families were all right. Why not try it in the society as a whole?

But big societies can’t be organized like a sweet family. That’s a sad truth, like rain when you don’t want it. But there you are. Yes, a society can and should help out poor people and the disadvantaged, the way a father helps his little children. One of the five religious duties of a Muslim is to offer charity, and the same is true in Christianity and Hinduism, as well as for simple justice in any human society. It’s depressingly easy for a ruler in a boss society, like a tribe’s chief or a town’s mayor, to divert the nice charity collected by taxes to their own family. Most governments in the world—on the actual evidence as against wishful thinking—are more like the mafia than *Little House on the Prairie*. Think of Russia or Saudi Arabia.

It would be wonderful if a big economy could be organized like a sweet family. Your mother didn’t make you go out at age six to earn money to pay for lunch, thank God. Markets should not be applied everywhere. But you can see that expecting farmers to provide beef for the hamburger at McDonald’s without payment, simply out of the goodness of their hearts, as though in a sweet family, isn’t going to work. Nor will you show up at McDonald’s to cook the hamburgers or bus the tables for free. And if McDonald’s starts offering hamburgers for free, the lines will be miles long.

And, of course, the business will promptly close for good.

St. Paul heard from the early Christian community he had set up in Thessaloniki that many people were not doing their jobs. They believed that the Second Coming of Christ and the end of history were about to happen any day, so you can understand their lack of interest in doing the dishes or baking the bread. St. Paul was annoyed and wrote to them pointing out indignantly that when he was with them he did his share of the work and declaring that “one who does not work, should not eat.” That’s how a large society in which free riding is possible has to work, if anyone is to eat. Put your shoulder to the wheel, and we’re all better off. Food and housing and education do not fall on people free from the sky. They have to be made by work. The pseudofairness in the old communist East Germany from 1949–1990 resulted in half the amount of work productivity of West Germany. The bitter joke in Eastern Europe under Russian-imposed socialism was, “They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work.”

CAPITALIST FAIRNESS

Yet isn’t capitalism unfair? Doesn’t it have a tendency to make the rich richer and poor poorer?

No. In actual fact, the liberalism that spread after Douglass and Wollstonecraft and Smith was explosively good for the poor. The poor have been the main beneficiaries of the Great Enrichment since 1800. The rich got richer, true. But meanwhile, the poor went from having little to eat to now having adequate—even excessive—food, from living in hovels to living in apartments with central heating and hot running water, from being almost entirely illiterate to being able to read instruction manuals and a billion websites, and from dying of cholera to having penicillin. In 1960 even a billionaire couldn’t buy a smartphone or a drug to fend off his clinical depression. Now poor people can have both. In other

words, the Great Enrichment flattened out the inequality of safety and comfort. The poor, who were your ancestors and mine, got vastly richer. They are not, as Jesus claimed in a society of actual zero sum, always with us.

But shouldn't we now equalize incomes? No. Coerced equality of outcome, making the pay of a gifted surgeon or musician or entrepreneur the same as that of an unskilled worker, merely yields less for all of us. If inequalities in pay don't encourage people to become surgeons or rock musicians or the next Sam Walton (founder of Walmart, from one little store in Bentonville, Arkansas), we don't get those services. Without the signal a market gives—"For Lord's sake, make more of this stuff that rose so much in price!"—we would remain as poor as people were in 1800.

Want to see unfair? Go back to the divine

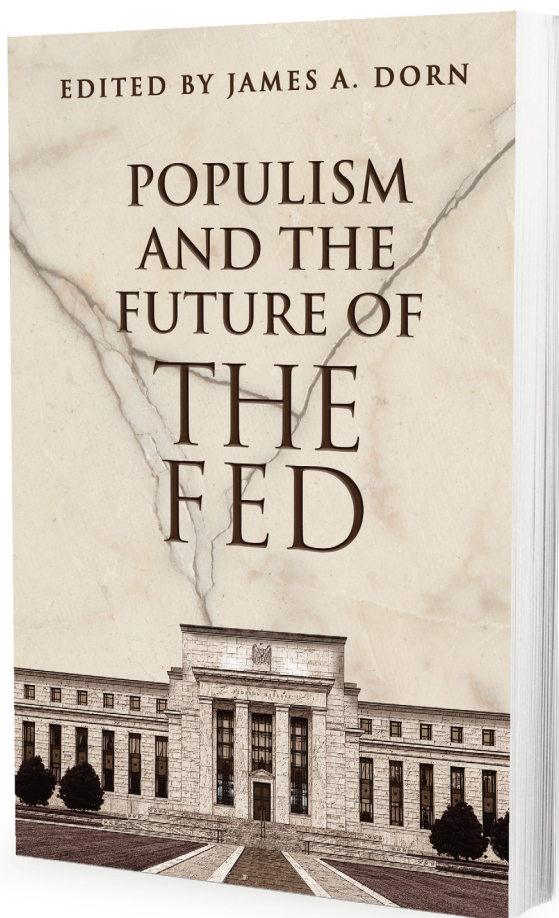
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right of kings, before liberalism. And if you seek the poor who are always with us in the modern world—although their absolute number is falling almost every year—look to the wretchedly poor in the wretchedly governed countries, such as Zimbabwe. Liberal markets slowly expanding in permissions after 1776 inspired people to try new things, causing worldwide income to rise from \$2 a day per person in 1800 at present-day prices to, on average, \$45 a day now. That's equality

of real comfort.

In the Slavic lands there is a traditional story about Jesus and St. Peter wandering in disguise at a poor peasant village, where they asked for an evening meal and a place to sleep. After many rejections, a generous couple helps them. The next morning Jesus reveals himself, and says to the husband, "For your charity I will grant you anything you wish." The husband and wife consult with each other in whispers, and then the husband comes back to Jesus and says, "My neighbor has a she-goat that gives him milk every day..." Jesus anticipates, interjecting, "And you want me to give you a goat, too?" "No. We want you to kill the neighbor's goat."

Envy and its accompanying talk about inequality is not a good basis for social policy. That's if we want everybody to have goats. ■



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