

D. J. Ivison

Futilitarianism
A Libertarian Dilemma?

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Sydney Libertarians have been attacked on two grounds:

- i. Since they recognise that authoritarian activities are not going to disappear, why do libertarians continue struggling and protesting against them?
- ii. Libertarians claim to oppose policemen, priests, moralists and authoritarians of all sorts, but what are they going to **do** about it? (Where are their bombs?)

Both these criticisms have been advanced against libertarianism recently, and libertarians have found some difficulty in giving a short answer to either question — in fact, some libertarians would reject any attempt at a short answer on the grounds that it would misrepresent a complex position. Nevertheless, I shall outline the form which a short answer might take.

In order to understand how these questions come to be posed, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the social theory of Sydney libertarians. In brief, this social theory is based on a pluralist view of society, on the recognition that any society is composed of a number of ways of going on. These different social activities are never completely reconcilable; there is no lowest common denominator among the ways of going on which would give rise to some consensus of which the state (or some other institution) could be the guardian. Different social groups just do pursue different activities, and these activities often conflict. What does occur are compromises and limited agreements, concessions in return for the implementation of some parts of a policy, and these compromises, concessions and adjustments are sometimes made through the machinery of the state. However, the state is never an impartial arbiter, but a biased referee, a system of social activities which have interests of their own.

Libertarians believe that pluralism is an account of what is the case and that it is utopian to believe that there will ever be an end to the conflict of social interests. The history of society is one of social conflicts; it is unhistorical to believe that history will cease and a millennium dawn — whether the millennium be the Kingdom of God, the classless society, the national interest or any other form of the common good.

Now one form of social conflict is that between authoritarian and libertarian activities, and it is just as utopian, just as unhistorical to believe that this form of conflict will ever disappear as it is to believe that all social conflict will ever cease.

In particular, Sydney libertarians hold that conflict with authoritarianism cannot be overcome by libertarians capturing social power — through the machinery of the state, the general strike, or any social revolution — because the mere fact of being in a position of power leads to interests which are authoritarian rather than libertarian.

I have done no more than outline the general position involved and have ignored the amplifications and qualifications that a full treatment would require, but this brief account of social pluralism may suffice to indicate how the two questions come to be raised — why do libertarians continue to protest if they recognise that they will never eliminate authority, and, if libertarians are opposed to authority, why don't they take some effective action against it?

It has generally been found easier to attempt to answer the second question, usually along the lines of “set a thief to catch a thief.” If libertarians were to organise either to effect reforms within the existing social order or to overthrow it and to create a new order, they would have to become authoritarian. They only remain libertarian while they eschew moralism, while they refrain from telling people that what is good for libertarians is good for the whole world, while they remain pluralists and recognise that other social groups have interests different from those of libertarianism. The libertarian way of going on is by means of hypothetical imperatives: if you are interested in anarchism, atheism and free love, then come and listen to us; if you are interested in security, certainty and authority, then libertarianism is not your cup of tea.

The answer to the first question, I think, lies in the same direction. Just as libertarianism involves anarchism, atheism and free love, so libertarianism involves conflict with authoritarianism, just because it is libertarianism and not something else. It is a social fact that the interests of libertarians and authoritarians do conflict, and this is “why” the opposition between the two exists.

This kind of answer may appear to be dangerously close to circularity — why are libertarians libertarian? Because they are libertarian. But the apparent circularity arises only when the complexity and diversity of libertarianism are ignored. Both questions ask the same thing: why do libertarians both oppose authority and accept the fact of its continued existence? The answer can only be found in other features of libertarianism, by showing the connections between these other features and the opposition to, along with the acceptance of the continued existence of authority.

I have tried to show how the acceptance of the continued existence of authoritarianism derives from the pluralism of libertarianism, as well as from its non-moralistic way of going on. The opposition to authoritarianism, besides deriving from the “anarchism, atheism and free love” of libertarians, is connected with their social pluralism, for to expound consistently a pluralist theory of society is to reject the monist and solidarist views of the authoritarians (how can you accept their claim that what is good for the nation is good for you if the truth is that there is no national good, no interest common to all the many social activities

which exist in that geographic region?) and in rejecting these views as illusions, one may come to inquire into the motives of the authoritarians.¹

Because libertarianism is the way of life that it is, it finds itself in conflict with authoritarianism, with no hope of ever eliminating authoritarianism from the social scene.

It is from this sort of analysis that libertarians have adopted such slogans as “anarchism without ends,” “pessimistic anarchists” and “permanent protest” to describe libertarianism and libertarians.

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¹ Such an inquiry may, of course, lead one to side with the authoritarians in an attempt to win power or profit (e.g., Pareto). It is the combination of social pluralism with other views, such as anarchism and atheism, that makes for the distinctive libertarian position.

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