Libertarians: the Chirping Sectaries

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1. *The Progeny of J. S. Mill*

ANY DISCUSSION OF the relationships between conservatives (who now, to judge by public-opinion polls, are a majority among American citizens) and libertarians (who, as tested by recent elections, remain a tiny though unproscribed minority) naturally commences with an inquiry into what these disparate groups hold in common. These two bodies of opinion share a detestation of collectivism. They set their faces against the totalist state and the heavy hand of bureaucracy. That much is obvious enough.

What else do conservatives and libertarians profess in common? The answer to that question is simple: nothing. Nor will they ever have. To talk of forming a league or coalition between these two is like advocating a union of ice and fire.

The ruinous failing of the ideologues who call themselves libertarians is their fanatic attachment to a simple solitary principle—that is, to the notion of personal freedom as the whole end of the civil social order, and indeed of human existence. The libertarians are oldfangled folk, in the sense that they live by certain abstractions of the nineteenth century. They carry to absurdity the doctrines of John Stuart Mill (before Mill's wife converted him to socialism, that is). To understand the mentality of the libertarians of 1981, it may be useful to remind ourselves of a little book published more than a hundred and twenty years ago: John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Arguments that were flimsy in 1859 (and were soundly refuted by James Fitzjames Stephen) have become farcical in 1981. So permit me to digress concerning Mill's famous essay. Some books tend to form the character of their age; others to reflect it; and Mill's *Liberty* is of the latter order.

That tract is a product of the peacefulness and optimism of Victorian England; written at the summit of what Bagehot calls the Age of Discussion, it is a voice from out the vanished past of nineteenth-century meliorism. The future, it turned out, was not to the school of Mill. As Mill himself was the last of the line of British empiricists, so his *Liberty*, with its foreboding remarks on the despotism of the masses, was more an epilogue to middle-class liberalism than a rallying-cry.

James Mill, John Stuart Mill's austere doctrinaire father (what sour folk many of these zealots for liberty turn themselves into!) subjected his son to a rigorous course of private study. By the time he was eight years old, J. S. Mill knew nearly everything that a doctor of philosophy is supposed to know nowadays; but his intellect was untouched by the higher imagination, and for that Mill groped in vain all his life long. J. S. Mill became all head and no heart, in which character he represents Jeremy Bentham; yet in truth it was Mill himself, rather than Bentham, who turned into defecated intellect.

Mill exhibited but one failing, so far as emotions go, and that not an uncommon one—being too fond of another man's wife. F. A. Hayek has discussed this association and its consequences for Mill and his followers. Mill eventually married this dismaying bluestocking, Harriet Taylor, the forerunner of today's feminist militant. He was devoted to her, and she to humanitarian abstractions. It was under her tutelage that he wrote *On Liberty*. The intellectual ancestors of today's libertarians were no very jolly crew.

"By slaying all his animal spirits," Ruth Borchard writes of Mill, "he was utterly cut off from his instincts—instinct for life, instinctive understanding of nature, of human nature in general and of his own in particular." It might be interesting to ex-

amine how these deficiencies in Mill characterized and vitiated the whole liberal movement in English and American thought; and how they affect the vestigial form of nineteenth-century liberalism that now styles itself "libertarianism." But we must pass on, remarking only that this imperfect apprehension of human nature is readily discerned in the pages of Mill's essay *On Liberty*.

That book displays a strong power of logic, and some eloquence; but there runs through it Mill's error that the tranquil English society of his own day was destined to become the universal pattern for all mankind; and it is injured, too, by Mill's curious assumption that most human beings, if only they were properly schooled, would think and act precisely like John Stuart Mill.

Now the younger Mill, in his essays on Coleridge and Bentham, had remarked truly that the cardinal error of Bentham was his supposition that the affairs of men may be reduced to a few simple formulas, to be applied universally and inflexibly—when actually the great mysterious incorporation of the human race is infinitely subtle and complex, not to be dominated by neat little abstractions. Yet into precisely this same pit Mill falls in his *Liberty*. In his introductory chapter, he declares his object to be the assertion of "one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used by physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."

This seems an attractive solitary simple principle. It sufficiently defines the convictions of twentieth-century libertarians, I believe. But the trouble with it is that solitary simple principles, however tidy, really do not describe human behavior, and certainly cannot govern it.

James Fitzjames Stephen, a forthright man of affairs and a scholar in the law, perceived with irritation that fallacy which makes Mill's *Liberty* a frail reed in troubled times; and in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, which Stephen published in 1873, he set upon Mill with a whip of scorpions. John Stuart Mill, in Stephen's eyes, was hopelessly naive:

"To me the question whether liberty is a good or a bad thing," Stephen wrote, "appears as irrational as the question whether fire is a good or a bad thing? It is both good and bad according to time, place, and circumstance, and a complete answer to the question, In what cases is liberty good and in what is it bad? would involve not merely a universal history of mankind, but a complete solution of the problems which such a history would offer. I do not believe that the state of our knowledge is such as to enable us to enunciate any 'very simple principle as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control.' We must proceed in a far more cautious way, and confine ourselves to such remarks as experience suggests about the advantages and disadvantages of compulsion and liberty respectively in particular cases."

In every principle premise of his argument, Stephen declared, Mill suffered from an inadequate understanding of human nature and history. All the great movements of humankind, Stephen said, have been achieved by force, not by free discussion; and if we leave force out of our calculations, very soon we will be subject to the intolerant wills of men who know no scruples about employing force against us. (So, one may remark, the twentieth-century libertarians would have us stand defenseless before the Soviet Russians.) It is consummate folly to tolerate every variety of opinion, on every topic, out of devotion to an abstract "liberty"; for opinion soon finds its expression in action, and the fanatics whom we tolerated will not tolerate us when they have power.

The fierce current of events, in our century, has supplied the proof for Stephen's case. Was the world improved by free discussion of the Nazis' thesis that Jews ought to be treated as less than human? Just this subject was presented to the population of one of the most advanced and most thoroughly schooled nations of the modern world; and then the crew of adventurers who had contrived to win the argument proceeded to act after the fashion with which we now are dreadfully familiar. We have come to understand, to our cost, what Burke meant by a "licentious toleration." An incessant zeal for repression is not the answer to the complex difficulties of liberty and order, either. What Stephen was saying, however, and what we recognize now, is that liberty cannot be maintained or extended by an abstract appeal to free discussion, sweet reasonableness, and solitary simple principle.

Since Mill, the libertarians have forgotten nothing and learned nothing. Mill dreaded, and they dread today, obedience to the dictates of custom. In our time, really, the real danger is that custom and prescription and tradition may be overthrown utterly among us—for has not that occurred already in most of the world?—by neoterism, the lust for novelty; and that men will be no better than the flies of a summer, oblivious to the wisdom of their ancestors, and forming every opinion merely under the pressure of the fad, the foible, the passion of the hour.

It may be objected that libertarian notions extend back beyond the time of Mill. Indeed they do; and they had been refuted before Stephen wrote, as John Adams refuted them in his exchange of letters with Thomas Jefferson and with John Taylor of Caroline. The first Whig was the devil, Samuel Johnson informs us; it might be truer to say that the devil was the original libertarian. "Lo, I am proud!" The perennial libertarian, like Satan, can bear no authority temporal or spiritual. He desires to be different, in morals as in politics. In a highly tolerant society like that of America today, such defiance of authority on principle may lead to perversity on principle, for lack of anything more startling to do; there is no great gulf fixed between libertarianism and libertinism.

Thus the typical libertarian of our day delights in eccentricity—including, often, sexual eccentricity (a point observed by that mordant psychologist Dr. Ernest van den Haag). Did not John Stuart Mill himself commend eccentricity as a defense against deadening democratic conformity? He rejoices, our representative libertarian, in strutting political eccentricity, as in strutting moral eccentricity. But, as Stephen commented on Mill, "Eccentricity is far more often a mark of weakness than a mark of strength. Weakness wishes, as a rule, to attract attention by trifing distinctions, and strength wishes to avoid it."

Amen to that. Passing from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, by 1929 we encounter a writer very unlike Mill exposing the absurdities of affected eccentricity and of doctrinaire libertarianism: G. K. Chesterton. Gabriel Gale, the intuitive hero of Chesterton's collection of stories entitled *The Poet and the Lunatics*, speaks up for centricity: "Genius oughtn't to be eccentric! It ought to be the core of the cosmos, not on the revolving edges. People seem to think it a compliment to accuse one of being an outsider, and to talk about the eccentricities of genius. What would they think if I said I only wish to God I had the centricities of genius?"

No one ever has accused libertarians of being afflicted with the centricities of genius: for the dream of an absolute private freedom is one of those visions which issue from between the gates of ivory; and the dreadful speed with which society moves today flings the libertarians outward through centrifugal force, even to the outer darkness, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. The final emancipation from religion, convention, custom, and order is annihilation—"whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms."

In *The Poet and the Lunatics*, Chesterton offers us a parable of such licentious freedom: a story called "The Yellow Bird."

To an English country house comes Professor Ivanhov, a Russian scholar who has published *The Psychology of Liberty*. He is a zealot for emancipation, expansion, the elimination of limits. He begins by liberating a canary from its cage—to be torn to pieces in the forest. He proceeds to liberate the goldfish by smashing their bowl. He ends by blowing up himself and the beautiful old house where he has been a guest.

"What exactly is liberty?" inquires a spectator of this series of events—Gabriel Gale, Chesterton's mouthpiece. "First and foremost, surely, it is the power of a thing to be itself. In some ways the yellow bird was free in the cage. It was free to be alone. It was free to sing. In the forest its feathers would be torn to pieces and its voice choked for ever. Then I began to think that being oneself, which is liberty, is itself limitation. We are limited by our brains and bodies; and if we break out, we cease to be ourselves, and, perhaps, to be anything."

The Russian psychologist could not endure the necessary conditions of human existence; he must eliminate all limits; he could not endure the "round prison" of the overarching sky. But his alternative was annihilation for himself and his lodging; and he took that alternative. He ceased to be anything but fractured atoms. That is the ultimate freedom of the devoted libertarian. If, *per imposible*, American society should accept the leadership of libertarian ideologues—why, this Republic might end in fractured atoms, with a Russian touch to the business.

2. *Why This Breed Must Not Be Indulged*

NOTWITHSTANDING, there is something to be said for the disintegrated Professor Ivanhov—relatively speaking. With reference to some recent remarks of mine addressed to the Heritage Foundation, there writes to me Mr. Marion Montgomery, the Georgia novelist and critic: "The libertarians give me the willies. I much prefer the Russian anarchists, who at least have a deeply disturbed moral sensibility (that Dostoevsky makes good use of), to the libertarian anarchist. There is a decadent fervor amongst some of the latter which makes them an unwelcome cross for conservatism to bear."

Just so. The representative libertarian of this decade is humorless, intolerant, self-righteous, badly schooled, and dull. At least the oldfangled Russian anarchist was bold, lively, and knew which sex he belonged to.

But surely, surely I must be misrepresenting the breed? Don't I know self-proclaimed libertarians who are kindly old gentlemen, God-fearing, patriotic, chaste, well endowed with the goods of fortune? Yes, I do know such. They are the people who through misapprehension put up the cash for the fantastics. Such gentlemen call themselves "libertarians" merely because they believe in personal freedom, and do not understand to what extravagances they lend their names by subsidizing doctrinaire "libertarian" causes and publications. If a person describes himself as "libertarian" because he believes in an enduring moral order, the Constitution of the United States, free enterprise, and old American ways of life—why, actually he is a conservative with imperfect understanding of the general terms of politics.

It is not such well-intentioned but mislabeled men whom I am holding up to obloquy here. Rather, I am exposing the pretensions of the narrow doctrinaires who have imprisoned themselves within a "libertarian" ideology as confining and as unreal as Marxism—if less persuasive than that fell delusion.

Why are these doctrinaire libertarians, with a few exceptions, such very odd people—the sort who give hearty folk like Marion Montgomery the willies? Why do genuine conservatives feel an aversion to close association with them? (Incidentally, now and again one reads of two camps of alleged conservatives: "traditionalist conservatives and libertarian conservatives." This is as if a newspaperman were to classify Christians as "Protestant Christians and Muslim Christians." A libertarian conservative is as rare a bird as a Jewish Nazi.)

Why is an alliance between conservatives and libertarians inconceivable? Why, indeed, would such articles of confederation undo whatever gains conservatives have made in this United States?

Because genuine libertarians are mad—metaphysically mad. Lunacy repels, and political lunacy especially. I do not mean that they are dangerous; they are repellent merely, like certain unfortunate inmates of "mental homes." They do not endanger our country and our civilization, because they are few, and seem likely to become fewer. (I refer here, of course, to our home-grown American libertarians, and not to those political sects, among them the Red Brigades of Italy, which have carried libertarian notions to grander and bolder lengths.) There exists no peril that American national policy, foreign or domestic, will be in the least affected by libertarian arguments; the good old causes of Bimetallism, Single Tax, or Prohibition enjoy a better prospect of success in the closing decades of this century than do the programs of Libertarianism. But one does not choose as a partner even a harmless political lunatic.

I mean that the libertarians make up what T. S. Eliot called a "chirping sect," an ideological clique forever splitting into sects still smaller and odder, but rarely conjugating. Such petty political sectaries Edmund Burke pictured as "the insects of the hour," as noisy as they are ineffectual against the conservative power of the browsing cattle in an English pasture. If one has chirping sectaries for friends, one doesn't need any enemies.

What do I mean when I say that today's American libertarians are metaphysically mad, and so repellent? Why, the dogmas of libertarianism have been refuted so often, both dialectically and by the hard knocks of experience, that it would be dull work to rehearse here the whole tale of folly. Space wanting, I set down below merely a few of the more conspicuous insufficiencies of libertarianism as a credible moral and political mode of belief. It is such differences from the conservatives' understanding of the human condition that make inconceivable any coalition of conservatives and libertarians.

1. The great line of division in modern politics—as Eric Voegelin reminds us—is not between totalitarians on the one hand and liberals (or libertarians) on the other; rather, it lies between all those who believe in some sort of transcendent moral order, on one side, and on the other side all those who take this ephemeral existence of ours for the be-all and end-all—to be devoted chiefly to producing and consuming. In this discrimination between the sheep and the goats, the libertarians must be classified with the goats—that is, as utilitarians admitting no transcendent sanctions for conduct. In effect, they are converts to Marx's dialectical materialism; so conservatives draw back from them on the first principle of all.

2. In any society, order is the first need of all. Liberty and justice may be established only after order is tolerably secure. But the libertarians give primacy to an abstract liberty. Conservatives, knowing that "liberty inheres in some sensible object," are aware that true freedom can be found only within the framework of a social order, such as the constitutional order of these United States. In exalting an absolute and indefinable "liberty" at the expense of order, the libertarians imperil the very freedoms they praise.

3. What binds society together? The libertarians reply that the cement of society (so far as they will endure any binding at all) is self-interest, closely joined to the nexus of cash payment. But the conservatives declare that society is a community of souls, joining the dead, the living, and those yet unborn; and that it coheres through what Aristotle called friendship and Christians call love of neighbor.

4. Libertarians (like anarchists and Marxists) generally believe that human nature is good, though damaged by certain social institutions. Conservatives, on the contrary, hold that "in Adam's fall we sinned all": human nature, though compounded of both good and evil, is irremediably flawed; so the perfection of society is impossible, all human beings be-

ing imperfect. Thus the libertarian pursues his illusory way to Utopia, and the conservative knows that for the path to Avernus.

5. The libertarian takes the state for the great oppressor. But the conservative finds that the state is ordained of God. In Burke's phrases, "He who gave us our nature to be perfected by our virtue, willed also the necessary means of its perfection. —He willed therefore the state—He willed its connexion with the source and original archtype of all perfection." Without the state, man's condition is poor, nasty, brutish, and short—as Augustine argued, many centuries before Hobbes. The libertarians confound the state with government. But government—as Burke continued—"is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*." Among the more important of those human wants is "a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individual, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can be done only *by a power out of themselves*; and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue." In short, a primary function of government is restraint; and that is anathema to libertarians, though an article of faith to conservatives.

6. The libertarian thinks that this world is chiefly a stage for the swaggering ego; the conservative finds himself instead a pilgrim in a realm of mystery and wonder, where duty, discipline, and sacrifice are required—and where the reward is that love which passeth all understanding. The conservative regards the libertarian as impious, in the sense of the old Roman *pietas*: that is, the libertarian does not venerate ancient beliefs and customs, or the natural world, or his country, or the immortal spark in his fellow men. The cosmos of the libertarian is an arid loveless realm, a "round prison." "I am, and none else beside me," says the libertarian. "We are made for cooperation, like the hands, like the feet," replies the conservative, in the phrases of Marcus Aurelius.

Why multiply these profound differences? Those I have expressed already will suffice to demonstrate the utter incompatibility of the two positions. If one were to content himself simply with contrasting the beliefs of conservatives and libertarians as to the nature of liberty, still we could arrive at no compromise. There is the liberty of the wolf, John Adams wrote to John Taylor; and there is the liberty of civilized man. The conservative will not tolerate ravening liberty; with Dostoevski, he knows that those who commence with absolute liberty will end with absolute tyranny. He maintains, rather, what Burke called "chartered rights," developed slowly and painfully in the civil social order, sanctioned by prescription.

Yet even if libertarian and conservative can affirm nothing in common, may they not agree upon a negative? May they not take common ground against the pretensions of the modern state to omnicompetence? Certainly both bodies of opinion find that modern governments, even in such constitutional orders as the United States, seem afflicted by the *libido dominandi*. The primary function of government, the conservatives say, is to keep the peace: by repelling foreign enemies, by maintaining the bed of justice domestically. When government goes much beyond this end, it falls into difficulty, not being contrived for the management of the whole of life. Thus far, indeed libertarian and conservative hold something in common. But the libertarians, rashly hurrying to an opposite extreme, would deprive government of effective power to undertake the common defense or to restrain the passionate and the unjust. With the libertarians in mind, conservatives repeat Burke's aphorism: "Men of intemperate mind never can be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

So in the nature of things conservatives and libertarians can conclude no friendly pact. Conservatives have no intention of compromising with socialists; but even

such an alliance, ridiculous though it would be, is more nearly conceivable than the coalition of conservatives and libertarians. The socialists at least declare the existence of some sort of moral order; the libertarians are quite bottomless.

Necessarily the differences of principle described above extend to practical questions of the hour. It was recently a plank in the platform of the Libertarian Party that expectant mothers should enjoy a right to abortion on demand; while to the reflecting conservative, the slaughter of innocents is the most despicable of evils. What amicable practical arrangement might be attained between two views so diametrically opposed?

Doubtless the libertarians, long accustomed to skulking in the Cave of Adullam, soon will be calling Mr. Reagan a socialist. Adversity sometimes makes strange bedfellows, but the present success of conservatives disinclines them to lie down, lamblike, with the libertarian hyenas. In considerable part, the victory of Mr. Reagan and his friends is the renewal of America's old moral order, linked with the Christian concept of society. The victors are not about to consummate a dialectical union with a faction that denies the very premises of this country's civil social order.

It is of high importance, indeed, that American conservatives dissociate themselves altogether from the little sour remnant called libertarians. In a time requiring long views and self-denial, alliance with a faction founded upon doctrinaire selfishness would be absurd—and practically damaging. It is not merely that cooperation with a tiny chirping sect would be valueless politically; more, such an association would tend to discredit the conservatives, giving aid and comfort to the collectivist adversaries of ordered freedom. When heaven and earth have passed away, perhaps the conservative mind and the libertarian mind may be joined in synthesis—but not until then. Meanwhile, I venture to predict, the more intelligent and conscientious persons within the libertarian remnant will tend to settle for politics as the art of the possible, so shifting into the conservative camp. At the Last Judgment, libertarianism may find itself reduced to a minority of one, and its name will be not Legion, but Rothbard.