

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS VS. SOCIAL RIGHTS

It seems that every day new rights are being discovered. Minorities claim a right to a job. Parents claim a right to education for their children. Blacks claim a right to preferential treatment. Feminists claim a right to free day care centers. The poor claim a right to a guaranteed annual income. The sick claim a right to free medical care. And the handicapped claim a right to barrier-free access to buildings.

In essence everyone is now claiming the right to support and aid at everyone else's expense, and increasingly, society is breaking down into conflicting special interest groups as a consequence.

There has, of course, been a backlash. Beleaguered taxpayers and property owners have begun to rebel against all of these new and very costly "share the wealth" schemes and are beginning to insist that they too have rights—to their own income and property.

Two Concepts of Rights

The conflict between groups which want more redistribution of wealth and social control of property, and those which want to keep more of their own income and have greater control over their own property illustrate the two very different, fundamentally irreconcilable and ultimately inimical concepts of rights prevalent in America today.

On the one hand there is the traditional, libertarian concept of *individual rights*, espoused by the "natural rights" theorists of the 17th Century and implemented by the patriots of the American Revolution. This doctrine holds at its root that the individual is an end in himself and that every person has a moral right to the unimpeded enjoyment of their own life, liberty and property in pursuit of their own happiness. The only obligation that one individual has toward another under this doctrine is to abstain from coercively interfering with the life, liberty and property of others. The fundamental immoral and politically intolerable act according to this theory is to use physical force or the threat of physical force to compel servitude from others, regulate commerce or confiscate wealth. According to this doctrine, a society based upon individual rights is one of self-responsible, independent and free persons, who cooperate according to their voluntary consent for their mutual advantage on terms they freely agree upon. In such a society, the role of government is small or non-existent.

A very different image of individuals and their society emerges from the doctrine of *social rights*. According to this theory, every individual has an innate duty to help others and to fail to provide such assistance upon demand constitutes an immoral act. Under this theory, the individual is not an end in

himself, but is rather a "social resource" whose ideas, labor and property may be controlled and directed for the benefit of others in society. According to the doctrine of social rights, individual rights are either non-existent or at best secondary to the rights of society, and thus may be sacrificed for the benefit of society. If individuals are reluctant or unwilling to "voluntarily" fulfill their obligations toward others, force may be used to compel them to do so. According to this doctrine, a society based upon social rights is one of interdependent, socially and economically equal, mutually supportive persons, who share their wealth, act in the spirit of community service, and who have a legally protected right to housing, education, food, jobs, etc. at public expense. In such a society, the role of government is central, ensuring that everyone contributes to the common welfare, engages in socially useful labor, helps the needy and does not spread anti-social doctrines which might be divisive and a threat to social harmony.

Ideas Have Consequences

Both individual rights and social rights theoreticians claim that their doctrines, consistently implemented, lead to societies of peace, prosperity, individual fulfillment and happiness. As a theoretical ideal, each doctrine has its appeal: The doctrine of individual rights projects a world of free, productive and self-responsible individuals. The doctrine of social rights foresees a world of well-cared for, mutually supportive and socially responsible persons. Both doctrines have had a profound effect upon world history. The doctrine of individual rights inspired the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the abolition of landed nobility throughout the world. The doctrine of social rights inspired the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution and socialist movements throughout the world. If one were to judge these doctrines merely by their claims, one would be forced to conclude that either one would lead to humane and beneficent societies. Unfortunately, the realities are very much different.

The doctrine of individual rights, when implemented in society, did largely fulfill its promise. For more than 200 years, the United States has been one of the freest, most prosperous and most humane nations upon the face of the earth. Evils prevalent in America in past centuries, notably slavery and foreign interventionism, were contradictions of the doctrine of individual rights rather than applications of it. The case is very different with the social implementation of the doctrine of social rights: socialism and communism.

Despite its rhetoric of equality, humanity and prosperity, the doctrine of social rights has led to the creation of the most brutal, repressive, and poverty-stricken societies in human history. The

most consistent representations of the doctrine of social rights in the world today are the socialist and communist nations: Soviet Russia, Communist China, Cambodia and Cuba. These are also the most repressive dictatorships in the history of the world. In all of these countries there is widespread poverty, frequent famine, slave labor camps, massive political indoctrination, repression of all dissent, a tiny, pampered political elite, travel restrictions and widespread fear of the government. It is indeed ironic that in these self-proclaimed "people's democracies", the people are almost entirely unable to express their opinions and the majority of the nation's wealth is used not for humanitarian projects but to build ever-more deadly police and military apparatuses.

If only one socialist country were guilty of these evils, one could dismiss it as an aberration, but when such evils are all but universal one begins to strongly suspect that these evils are not coincidental but rather inherent consequences of the fundamental ethical premises upon which these systems are based—which is precisely what I am going to argue.

Social Rights and the Obliteration of Liberty

Advocates of social rights justify their sacrifice of individual liberty in the name of achieving prosperity and "social justice". In fact they achieve neither because the doctrine of social rights is logically inconsistent, ethically abhorrent, economically naive and politically insidious.

By asserting the right of "society" to control property while denying individuals such a right, the doctrine of social rights commits what psychologist Nathaniel Branden has termed "the fallacy of the stolen concept"—using a term while denying the concepts on which it logically and genetically depends. Society is nothing more than a term for a group of individuals and has no existence apart from the existence of those individuals. All attributes and capabilities of "society" are therefore logically and genetically dependent upon the attributes and capabilities of the individuals who make up society. Thus if individuals do not have the capacity of ownership then neither can that collection of individuals called society have such a capacity. To deny the right of individuals to own property is to deny the logical basis for all ownership. In practice, social ownership does not lead to popular control of property but rather to control of property by a social elite which proclaims itself "the voice of the people" and then exterminates anyone who challenges their authority.

The doctrine of social rights also conveniently neglects to define precisely who constitutes society and how conflicts are to be resolved when different social groups demand the right to control the same property. In fact, with rare exceptions, there is

no such thing as a single "social or public" interest which is served by all policies and actions. There are rather a host of different "publics" and interest groups with differing interests and ends: Farmers want higher prices; consumers want lower prices. Defense contractors want more armaments; the rich want more limousines; the poor want better housing, Government workers want more bureaucracy; everyone else wants less. When everyone is supposed to own everything there is no logical way to solve such conflicts; the different groups just fight it out in the political arena or in the streets. Only when the right of each individual to decide how to use his own property is recognized can such differences be peacefully and rationally settled. Thus the doctrine of social rights inherently leads to conflict over "social allocation" of scarce resources, conflicts which can never exist if individual rights are recognized.

Ethically the doctrine of social rights requires the obliteration of liberty. When every individual can be properly sacrificed for what the powerful claim is "the social good", there can be no such thing as the right to liberty, property or life itself. If the individual may be properly subordinated to the ends of "society" (whatever that means), every individual ends up being a slave to the state.

The doctrine of social rights also fails to produce prosperity for a very simple reason: Regardless of what socialist and altruist theorists say *should* motivate people, the fact is that people are most highly motivated by what they perceive to be their own benefit. Stalin tried to substitute "labor hero medals" for monetary rewards to boost production. The result was the near collapse of the Soviet economy, quickly followed by a program of wage differentials greater than in the capitalist west. Most people plain will not work hard or efficiently when the fruits of their labor are confiscated from them and redistributed to the needy.

Finally the doctrine of social rights is politically insidious: It proclaims the common good of all men as a standard of value, but never defines just what that good consists of. This means that whatever group comes to power can define the good in any way it desires. In Soviet Russia it means most productivity going to build up a military apparatus. In Communist China it means breaking up families and regulating every waking moment of people's lives. In Cambodia it means herding everyone out of cities, including the sick and the old, and forcing them to work from sun-up to sundown farming with primitive agricultural implements.

The Mixed Economy and Social Rights

Great Britain, Socialist Sweden, the United States and other mixed economy welfare states have fortunately not yet sunk to the level of brutality and poverty of China or Cambodia, but that is precisely the direction in which we are headed.

The signs of the coming collectivist state are all about us: Economic regulation is piled on top of economic regulation. Taxes skyrocket and productivity plummets. Moral crusades are launched to "protect people from themselves" by prohibiting drugs and drink and cigarettes and rock concerts. The benefits of working for the government become greater and greater while the rewards of productivity become less and less. Conflicting special interest groups fight ever-more ferociously for their "fair share" of "social wealth".

In the final analysis, social sacrifice means social victims and social beneficiaries; social justice means individual injustice; and social rights means individual slavery.

It is true that the doctrine of individual rights does not *guarantee* universal justice, universal economic success, or universal respect. But neither does the doctrine of social rights guarantee these things and in fact, it makes their attainment impossible.

Individual rights and political liberty are not a *sufficient* condition for freedom and prosperity, but they are a *necessary* condition for them. The free, prosperous and humane society has not, cannot and will not be attained by following the doctrine of social rights, however ethereal its rhetoric. Ideas often have consequences very different from their proclaimed ones. Only the doctrine of individual rights which begins with respect for the individual can achieve the end of humanity and prosperity.

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As libertarians we say to the world: Wake up and cut the cord. There is a world of infinite pleasure, variety and adventure open to the person with the courage to be free.

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