

THE
POLITICAL THEORY
OF POSSESSIVE
INDIVIDUALISM

Hobbes to Locke

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championed was at the same time a denial of individuality. Such consciousness was not to be found in men who were just beginning to grasp the great possibilities of individual freedom that lay in the advancement of capitalist society. The contradiction was there, but it was impossible for them to recognize it, let alone to resolve it. Locke was indeed at the fountain-head of English liberalism. The greatness of seventeenth-century liberalism was its assertion of the free rational individual as the criterion of the good society; its tragedy was that this very assertion was necessarily a denial of individualism to half the nation.

VI

POSSESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

1. *The Seventeenth-Century Foundations*

WE are now in a position to consider the extent to which some identifiable social assumptions are common to the main seventeenth-century political theories, and how they are relevant to the problems of later liberal-democratic society.

The assumptions which comprise possessive individualism may be summarized in the following seven propositions.

- (i) What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others.
- (ii) Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
- (iii) The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.

Proposition (iii) may appear in a theory as an independent postulate, or as a deduction from (i) and (ii) plus a concept of property as an exclusive right. Thus: since the freedom, and therefore the humanity, of the individual depend on his freedom to enter into self-interested relations with other individuals, and since his ability to enter into such relations depends on his having exclusive control of (rights in) his own person and capacities, and since proprietorship is the generalized form of such exclusive control, the individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities.

(iv) Although the individual cannot alienate the whole of his property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labour.

(v) Human society consists of a series of market relations.

This follows from the assumptions already stated. Since the individual is human only in so far as free, and free only in so far as a proprietor of himself, human society can only be a series of relations between sole proprietors, i.e. a series of market relations.

Or proposition (v) may appear in a theory not as a deduced proposition but as the primary or even the sole social assumption. This is possible because propositions (i) to (iv) are contained in it. The concept of market relations necessarily implies individual freedom as defined in (ii) and proprietorship as defined in (iii) and (iv); and the postulate that human society consists of market relations necessarily implies that an individual's humanity is a function of his freedom (proposition i).

(vi) Since freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual's freedom can rightfully be limited only by such obligations and rules as are necessary to secure the same freedom for others.

(vii) Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his person and goods, and (therefore) for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange between individuals regarded as proprietors of themselves.

These assumptions are present in one form or another in each of the theories that have been analysed. And it appears from the analysis that the strength of each theory is due to its having incorporated these assumptions, and the weakness of each to its having failed to deal with some of their implications.

The assumptions are clearest and fullest in Hobbes. His model of man, as the sum of a man's powers to get gratifications, reduces the human essence to freedom from others' wills and proprietorship of one's own capacities. His

model of society, which follows from his model of man plus the assumption that every man's powers are opposed to every other man's, we have seen to be a full possessive market model. The political society whose necessity he deduced from these models is an artificial device, calculated to provide the maximum security that could by any means be provided for the individual's exercise of his capacities.

For Hobbes the model of the self-moving, appetitive, possessive individual, and the model of society as a series of market relations between these individuals, were a sufficient source of political obligation. No traditional concepts of justice, natural law, or divine purpose were needed. Obligation of the individual to the state was deduced from the supposed facts, as set out in the materialist model of man and the market model of society. The models contained the two suppositions of fact which Hobbes thought sufficient for the deduction of right and obligation: equality of need for continued motion, and equal insecurity because of equal liability to invasion by others through the market. The system, both mechanical and moral, was self-moving and self-contained. It needed no outside mover or outside standard of right.

I have argued that it was Hobbes's possessive market assumptions which gave his political theory its extraordinary strength and consistency. I have argued also that it was one flaw in his market model that made his political theory inapplicable to the possessive market society. The flaw was his failure to see that the market society generated a degree of class cohesion which made possible a viable political authority without a self-perpetuating sovereign body.

When we turn to the theory of the Levellers we find again the main assumptions of possessive individualism, but now differently formulated, and with their implications not as fully worked out. The human essence is freedom from the wills of others, and freedom is a function of proprietorship of one's person: 'every one as he is himself, so he hath a selfe propriety, else he could not be himselfe'.¹ Political

¹ Quoted above, ch. III, p. 140.

society is a contrivance for securing individual natural rights, that is, individual freedom and proprietorship. No individual can alienate the whole of his property in his person, but anyone can alienate his property in his own labour; in doing so he gives up his natural right to a voice in elections but not his natural right to civil and religious liberties.

The strength of the Leveller theory may be variously assessed. Its powerful appeal, for those in the Leveller movement, may be ascribed to its insistence on individual freedom, both religious and secular, and to the skill with which history and Scripture were marshalled in the cause of freedom for the men below the wealthy and above the dependent poor. Its theoretical strength is attributable in large measure to its realistic recognition of the position of the individual in a market society. The Leveller writers saw that freedom in their society was a function of possession. They could therefore make a strong moral case for individual freedom by defining freedom as ownership of one's person.

The theoretical weaknesses of the Leveller position can all be referred to their failure to see the full implications of their possessive individualist assumptions, which failure may in turn be referred to the limits of their vision as members of an intermediate class. They did not see that if you make individual freedom a function of possession, you must accept the full market society. If you insist that a man is human only as sole proprietor of himself, only in so far as he is free from all but market relations, you must convert all moral values into market values. But the Levellers wrote as if there were no difference between the market morality of possessive individualism and the Christian social ethic which they also upheld. They brought in, over and above the individual right of self-preservation and self-advancement, a concept of 'humane society, cohabitation or being' as 'the earthly sovereign good of mankind', with a consequent obligation on everyone to work for 'communitive Happiness'.¹ They wavered between a view of a man's labour as a commodity

¹ Quoted above, ch. III, pp. 156-7.

and a view of it as an integral part of his personality. They asserted the right of individual appropriation of land and goods, but denied the rightness of its consequence, the greatly unequal distribution of wealth.

While the Levellers treated the class structure of seventeenth-century society more seriously than did Hobbes, and so avoided the error into which Hobbes had been led by his neglect of class cohesion, their treatment of class was also faulty. In excluding wage-earners and alms-takers from political rights they recognized one of the prevailing class divisions, and in denouncing the conspiracy of the rich against themselves (the intermediate class of small independent producers) they recognized another. Their demand for a political voice for themselves was a demand that the second dividing line should be erased. The implied assumption was that all those above the dependent poor were capable of enough cohesion to support a single elective political authority. There was no such cohesion, as events were to show. This error of the Levellers, which appears as a fault of empirical judgement, may be traced to the imprecision of their theoretical grasp of market society. They did not see that a possessive market society necessarily puts in a dependent position not only the wage-earners but also all those without a substantial (and, by the natural operation of the market, an increasing) amount of capital.

Harrington's theory stands somewhat apart from the others. Less concerned with right and obligation than with empirical uniformities of political change and stability, Harrington gave less attention to moral principles than the Levellers, and less to psychological analysis than Hobbes. While his concern for civil and religious liberties puts him in the liberal tradition, he is not as pronounced an individualist as the others. Working mainly by comparative and historical analysis he does not appear to rely on postulates about the moral or behavioural nature of the individual. Yet as we have seen,¹ he did postulate that every man seeks power over

¹ Above, ch. IV, p. 163.

others, and that power is a function of property. He recognized that these postulates were necessary for his theory of the balance. And if he said little about human nature, it was because he fully endorsed Hobbes's analysis: 'his treatises of human nature, and of liberty and necessity, are the greatest of new lights, and those which I have follow'd, and shall follow'.¹

What most clearly entitles us to describe Harrington as a possessive individualist is his assumption that seventeenth-century English society was a possessive market society. His whole case for erecting an 'equal commonwealth' in England depends, I have argued, on that assumption. He both assumed the existence and accepted the morality of bourgeois society. The behaviour of both gentry and people was brought under one general theory of possessive and accumulative motivation. The institutional balance he proposed between gentry and people would work, and the agrarian law which was to stabilize the balance would be indestructible, only because both classes accepted the market relations which Harrington assumed would henceforth permanently prevail.

He did not read market relations back into the very nature of man, as Hobbes had done. But though he did not penetrate as far as Hobbes into the nature of bourgeois man, he avoided the error into which Hobbes had been led by such a high degree of abstraction. Harrington saw the reality of class structure. He allowed for, indeed built upon, the possibility of class cohesion, as Hobbes did not. And he avoided the opposite error of the Levellers: he did not assume an improbable degree of cohesion or identity of interests between the greater and the meaner sort of freemen, but tried to arrange a balance of power between them.

The main weakness of Harrington's theory, I have suggested, was due to his insufficient logical ability, which led him to contradict himself in his use of the principle of the balance. Had he sharpened his assumptions and been more careful in his deduction he could have avoided those contradictions. Thus we may say of Harrington that the theoretical

¹ *Prerogative of Popular Government, Works* (1771), p. 241.

strength of his system lay in his recognition and acceptance of possessive market relations and motivation, and its theoretical weakness in his failure to see fully or state clearly all the assumptions that were involved.

With Locke we are again in the realm of moral rights and obligation derived from the supposed nature of man and society. As with Hobbes, Locke's deduction starts with the individual and moves out to society and the state, but, again as with Hobbes, the individual with which he starts has already been created in the image of market man. Individuals are by nature equally free from the jurisdiction of others. The human essence is freedom from any relations other than those a man enters with a view to his own interest. The individual's freedom is rightly limited only by the requirements of others' freedom. The individual is proprietor of his own person, for which he owes nothing to society. He is free to alienate his capacity to labour, but not his whole person. Society is a series of relations between proprietors. Political society is a contractual device for the protection of proprietors and the orderly regulation of their relations. POLITICAL

But the assumptions of possessive individualism are not unalloyed in Locke. He refused to reduce all social relations to market relations and all morality to market morality. He would not entirely let go of traditional natural law. He used both Hobbes and Hooker to establish his political obligation. His main theoretical weaknesses might be traced to his attempt to combine these two sources of morality and obligation. The weaknesses are better traced, I have suggested, to his inability to surmount an inconsistency inherent in market society. A market society generates class differentiation in effective rights and rationality, yet requires for its justification a postulate of equal natural rights and rationality. Locke recognized the differentiation in his own society, and read it back into natural society. At the same time he maintained the postulate of equal natural rights and rationality. Most of Locke's theoretical confusions, and most of his practical appeal, can be traced to this ambiguous position.

The ambiguity was less a result of his imperfect logic than of his trying to cope with a contradiction in market society of which he was not fully aware. He did not analyse that society as clearly as Hobbes but he did take into account a problem that Hobbes had neglected, that is, the complications raised by class differentiation in an atomized market society.

It may be too much to say that it was because Locke kept these complications in mind that he did not produce clear models of man and society, and reason from them as rigorously as Hobbes. But it may be said that the effective reception of Locke's theory owes much to his having kept the complications in mind and dealt with them, however confusedly. At least his having kept them in mind enabled him to avoid Hobbes's error, and to produce a political system without a self-perpetuating sovereign.

In making the one structural alteration in Hobbes's theoretical system that was required to bring it into conformity with the needs and possibilities of a possessive market society, Locke completed an edifice that rested on Hobbes's sure foundations. Locke's other contribution, his attaching to this structure a façade of traditional natural law, was by comparison unimportant. It made the structure more attractive to the taste of his contemporaries. But when tastes changed, as they did in the eighteenth century, the façade of natural law could be removed, by Hume and Bentham, without damage to the strong and well-built utilitarian structure that lay within. Hobbes, as amended by Locke in the matter of the self-perpetuating sovereign, thus provided the main structure of English liberal theory.

The basic assumptions of possessive individualism—that man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person, and that human society is essentially a series of market relations—were deeply embedded in the seventeenth-century foundations. It was these assumptions that gave the original theory its strength, for they did correspond to the reality of seventeenth-century market society. The assumptions of possessive individualism have

been retained in modern liberal theory, to an extent not always realized. Yet they have failed as foundations of liberal-democratic theory. The trouble is not that they have been kept after they had ceased to correspond to our society. They still do correspond to our society, and so must be kept. The trouble with some liberal theory is that it does not recognize this, and tries to do without them. But the real trouble is that one change in possessive market society—a change which does not alter the validity of possessive individualist assumptions, since it is a change in an aspect of market society that was not reflected in those assumptions—has made it impossible, on two counts, to derive a valid theory of obligation from the assumptions.

The change was the emergence of working-class political articulacy. It has not altered the validity of possessive individualist assumptions for possessive market societies, because those assumptions reflect or state the atomized rather than the class nature of that society. We have seen¹ that a possessive market society is necessarily class-divided. We have also seen² that a possessive market society is a series of competitive and invasive relations between all men, regardless of class: it puts every man on his own. It is this second aspect of possessive market society that was and still is accurately reflected in the assumptions of possessive individualism. The assumptions remain indispensable, but no sufficient principle of obligation can now be derived from them. We must now consider how this has happened, and what prospects are left for liberal-democratic theory.

2. *The Twentieth-century Dilemma*

The assumptions of possessive individualism are peculiarly appropriate to a possessive market society, for they state certain essential facts that are peculiar to that society. The individual in a possessive market society *is* human in his capacity as proprietor of his own person; his humanity does

¹ Above, ch. II, pp. 55–56.

² Above, ch. II, p. 57.

depend on his freedom from any but self-interested contractual relations with others; his society does consist of a series of market relations. England, and the other modern liberal-democratic nations, are still, in the twentieth century, possessive market societies. Why, then, should not modern liberal-democratic justificatory theory, to the extent that it contains these assumptions, be satisfactory? Why should not the possessive individualist theory of the English utilitarian tradition, which is essentially the theory of Hobbes as amended by Locke in the matter of the self-perpetuating sovereign, be a satisfactory demonstration of the political obligation of the individual to the liberal state? And why should not that theory, further amended as it was in the nineteenth century by the admission that wage-earners were free men, be adequate now for the liberal-democratic state? We can best deal with these questions by collecting from our earlier analysis the conditions on which a possessive individualist theory can be an adequate theory of political obligation.

I have argued¹ that to get a valid theory of political obligation without relying on any supposed purposes of Nature or will of God (which we may call an autonomous theory of political obligation), one must be able to postulate that the individuals of whom the society is composed see themselves, or are capable of seeing themselves, as equal in some respect more fundamental than all the respects in which they are unequal. This condition was fulfilled in the original possessive market society, from its emergence as the dominant form in the seventeenth century until its zenith in the nineteenth, by the apparent inevitability of everyone's subordination to the laws of the market. So long as everyone was subject to the determination of a competitive market, and so long as this apparently equal subordination of individuals to the determination of the market was accepted as rightful, or inevitable, by virtually everybody, there was a sufficient basis for rational obligation of all men to a political

¹ Above, ch. II, p. 83.

authority which could maintain and enforce the only possible orderly human relations, namely, market relations.

I have argued also¹ that in a possessive market society a further condition is required for a valid theory of obligation of the individual to a non-self-perpetuating sovereign body (and hence for a theory of obligation to any kind of liberal state). The further condition is that there be a cohesion of self-interests, among all those who have a voice in choosing the government, sufficient to offset the centrifugal forces of a possessive market society. This condition was fulfilled, in the heyday of the market society, by the fact that a political voice was restricted to a possessing class which had sufficient cohesion to decide periodically, without anarchy, who should have the sovereign power. As long as this condition was fulfilled there was a sufficient basis for an autonomous theory of obligation of the individual to a constitutional liberal state. This second condition, like the first, was fulfilled until about the middle of the nineteenth century.

Thereafter, both conditions ceased to be met. Although possessive market relations continued to prevail in fact, their inevitability became increasingly challenged as an industrial working class developed some class consciousness and became politically articulate. Men no longer saw themselves fundamentally equal in an inevitable subjection to the determination of the market. The development of the market system, producing a class which could envisage alternatives to the system, thus destroyed the social fact (acceptance of inevitability of market relations) which had fulfilled the first prerequisite of an autonomous theory of political obligation.

The second prerequisite condition was similarly affected. Although the society continued to be class divided, and the possessing class continued to be cohesive, its cohesion ceased to fulfil the prerequisite when the possessing class had to yield its monopoly of power by admitting the rest of the society to the franchise. With the democratic franchise,

¹ Above, ch. II, pp. 94-95.

there was no longer that assurance of cohesion, among all those with a political voice, which had been provided by class interest during the time when only one class had had the franchise.

It may be argued that the continued existence of liberal-democratic states in possessive market societies, since that time, has been due to the ability of a possessing class to keep the effective political power in its hands in spite of universal suffrage. But while this may suffice to keep a liberal state going, it savours too much of deception to be an adequate basis for a moral justification of liberal democracy.

It may be argued also that the continued existence of liberal-democratic states into the twentieth century, after the cohesion of a possessing governing class had given way to the uncertain cohesion of the democratic franchise, was made possible by a sort of class cohesion on an international level. The democratic franchise came in the nineteenth century in advanced capitalist countries. By the time it came, these countries stood, in relation to the backward peoples, in somewhat the same relation as the possessing class had stood towards the non-possessing class within the advanced market societies. But while the cohesion of a possessing nation may have provided some substitute for the previous cohesion of a possessing class, this too was an inadequate basis for a moral justification of liberal democracy. In any case, with the emergence of colonial peoples to national independence, this basis is now rapidly disappearing.

A temporary substitute for the old cohesion has sometimes been provided in our century by war. But, apart from the fact that the cost of this cohesion is a weakening of liberal institutions, few would rest a moral justification of liberal democracy on a premiss of continual war. In any case, the technical conditions of war are now such that war on a scale sufficient to bring the required cohesion within one warring nation would destroy the nation. Thus none of the factors which together may be said to have operated to keep liberal-democratic states going in possessive market societies, after

the disappearance of the old basis of cohesion, has provided or can provide a satisfactory justifying theory.

The dilemma of modern liberal-democratic theory is now apparent: it must continue to use the assumptions of possessive individualism, at a time when the structure of market society no longer provides the necessary conditions for deducing a valid theory of political obligation from those assumptions. Liberal theory must continue to use the assumptions of possessive individualism because they are factually accurate for our possessive market societies. Their factual accuracy has already been noticed, but the point will bear repetition. The individual in market society *is* human as proprietor of his own person. However much he may wish it to be otherwise, his humanity does depend on his freedom from any but self-interested contractual relations with others. His society does consist of a series of market relations. Because the assumptions are factually accurate, they cannot be dropped from a justificatory theory. But the maturing of market society has cancelled that cohesion, among all those with a political voice, which is a prerequisite for the deduction of obligation to a liberal state from possessive individualist assumptions. No way out of the dilemma is to be found by rejecting those assumptions while not rejecting market society, as so many theorists from John Stuart Mill to our own time have done on the ground that the assumptions are morally offensive. If they are now morally offensive they are none the less still factually accurate for our possessive market societies. The dilemma remains. Either we reject possessive individualist assumptions, in which case our theory is unrealistic, or we retain them, in which case we cannot get a valid theory of obligation. It follows that we cannot now expect a valid theory of obligation to a liberal-democratic state in a possessive market society.

The question whether the actual relations of a possessive market society can be abandoned or transcended, without abandoning liberal political institutions, bristles with difficulties. In the measure that market society could be aban-

done, the problem of cohesion would be resolved, for the problem was defined as the need for a degree of cohesion which would counteract the centrifugal force of market relations. But there would still be the problem of finding a substitute for that recognition of a fundamental equality which had originally been provided by the supposed inevitable subordination of everyone to the market. Could any conceivable new concept of fundamental equality, which would be consistent with the maintenance of liberal institutions and values, possibly get the wide acknowledgement without which, as I have argued, no autonomous theory of political obligation can be valid?

We may take some comfort from the fact that the two problems, of cohesion and of equality, do not now have to be solved in that order. The question whether the actual possessive market relations of a given liberal-democratic state can be abandoned or transcended has now become of secondary importance. For a further change in the social facts has supervened. The very factor, namely, technical change in the methods of war, that has made war an impossible source of internal cohesion, has created a new equality of insecurity among individuals, not merely within one nation but everywhere. The destruction of every individual is now a more real and present possibility than Hobbes could have imagined.

From this, the possibility of a new rational political obligation arises. We cannot hope to get a valid theory of obligation of the individual to a single national state alone. But if we postulate no more than the degree of rational understanding which it has always been necessary to postulate for any moral theory of political obligation, an acceptable theory of obligation of the individual to a wider political authority should now be possible. Given that degree of rationality, the self-interested individual, whatever his possessions, and whatever his attachment to a possessive market society, can see that the relations of the market society must yield to the overriding requirement that, in Overton's words, which now

acquire a new significance, 'humane society, cohabitation or being, . . . above all earthly things must be maintained'.¹

The new equality of insecurity has thus changed the terms of our problem. Twentieth-century technology has, so to speak, brought Hobbes and the Levellers together. The problems raised by possessive individualism have shrunk: they can perhaps now be brought to manageable proportions, but only if they are clearly identified and accurately related to the actual changes in the social facts. Those changes have driven us again to a Hobbesian insecurity, at a new level. The question now is whether, in the new setting, Hobbes can again be amended, this time more clearly than he was by Locke.

¹ Quoted above, ch. III, p. 156.