



Economic Reform and a Liberal Culture

And Other Essays on Social and Cultural Issues

Tom Rubens

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Prefatory Note

The following group of essays is divided into three main sections. The first section deals with social, economic and cultural issues; the second with topics which are essentially philosophical; and the third with themes which are chiefly literary. Throughout, the viewpoint expressed is that of secular humanism.

Also, in the essays generally, I use mentalistic terminology to convey a number of points about attitudes and ways of thinking. However, I use such terminology only from linguistic convenience and as a *façon de parler*. My position on the mind-body problem is actually physicalistic, but, for the reason just given, I do not deploy a physicalistic vocabulary.

T.R., January 2009

Economic Reform and a Liberal Culture

Since the word 'reform' implies improvement, economic reform can be defined in broad democratic terms as changes to the economic system which benefit the majority of the population rather than a minority: which, at the very least, secure for everyone an income adequate to meet basic nutritional and health needs, and, beyond that, raise the general standard of living and ensure a more equal distribution of wealth. As part of such changes, there is reduction or complete termination of the self-interested exercise of economic power by certain individuals or groups over other individuals or groups. Economic reform is, then, essentially a process which increases material wellbeing and decreases dominative pressures of an economic kind. It aims at enlarging the dignity and integrity of every individual. (In this, it is intimately linked to political reform; the closeness of the economic and the political is fundamental and constant.)

Physical wellbeing and freedom from economic domination are such vital objectives that some people might think that they were the only really important ones. But of course they are not. Christ's dictum, "Man shall not live by bread alone" is only one of the most famous of the many statements about the importance to human beings of meeting needs additional to economic ones. That importance is, incidentally, in no way diminished by Brecht's averral, to the effect "Grub before ethics." Ethics remains pivotal even if in second place in the statement; also, one is tempted to ask how, in the first place, "grub" is to be produced and distributed without some pre-existing ethical system or at least social agreement.

The needs additional to economic ones are clearly intellectual, emotional, cultural, social. Many of these are linked to economic wellbeing, but are, emphatically, not the same as it. Very often, such wellbeing is the necessary condition for their satisfaction; and even though this is not always the case, most people would agree that extra-economic kinds of satisfaction and fulfilment are less likely to be achieved when the economic situation is precarious. So, some

degree of material security is usually a definite advantage for development in other areas of living.

Its role as an advantage needs to be emphasized because there are unfortunately cases where the advantage is not taken: where the achieving of material security and prosperity leads to little more than that. Hedonism, complacency, self-indulgence and even chronic boredom are sometimes the chief fruits of that attainment. Hence, while economic betterment makes cultural development more likely, it by no means makes it certain. Economic advance may well be accompanied by psychic stagnation, including a merely consumerist mentality. These considerations remind us of Nietzsche's concept of the 'Ultimate Man', the uncreative conformist and complacent hedonist, and typical product of a society whose goals are primarily or exclusively economic. It is not going too far to say that psychic stagnation can be, in its way, almost as inimical to cultural vitality as can political oppression.

Of all forms that cultural fecundity can take, the richest—I would argue—is a liberal culture. In such a culture, differences of outlook, viewpoint and kinds of achievement are not only tolerated but positively welcomed. Diversity and variety are not only accepted but also preferred, encouraged, protected. They are seen as indispensable ingredients without which society would lack savour and spectrum.

Also, from the specifically intellectual standpoint, the wider the range of expressed views of which the individual can avail himself, the greater the possibility of his constructing a viable position of his own on the issue in question. Such availability is crucial in science and philosophy: a point nowhere better stated than by Mill in the mid nineteenth century. Freedom to pick and choose; to accept or reject, either partly or totally; to look for compatibilities, however slender, between positions which at first seem to be irreconcilable; to critique arguments and to examine carefully what is offered as evidence; to remain in doubt, where necessary: this liberty is vital to the inquiring mind seeking independence from dogma, prejudice, unquestioned assumptions and all forms of authoritarianism.

It is accurate to say that a liberal culture has obtained in certain areas of Western society for the last 150 years or so: approximately since the time when the unprecedented advance of science became the distinctive feature of Western culture. This is not of course to say that a liberal culture consists only or mainly of science, but it is to say that the entrenchment of science reinforces and extends the spirit of

free enquiry and open-mindedness which is characteristic of a liberal culture.

At the same time, the phrase 'certain areas of Western society' must be emphasized. It is undeniable that enormous numbers of people in the West, as indeed world-wide, have in the past been barred from the chance of extensively participating in that culture. This has been due to social and economic deprivation. Limited access to formal education, long working hours, low pay and constant economic pressure have in effect locked out millions from the opportunity for in-depth engagement with ideas, intellectual and artistic movements, scientific advances, and the general life of the mind.

It is true that this situation, certainly in Britain, has been changing, especially over the last forty to fifty years. But it has not done so at a uniform rate,¹ and not to the extent that further economic reform is not needed, both for its own sake and for the cultural advantages it brings.

There is no reason why efforts at economic reform should not go hand in hand with those to preserve, enhance and amplify a liberal culture. What should be aimed at is a combination of general economic wellbeing and maximal latitude intellectually and culturally. It perhaps goes without saying that a liberal culture is not in any sense a 'class' culture; by its very nature, it transcends class outlooks. Hence, those seeking economic reform on the basis of a specific 'class' position are not committed to a liberal culture. Their perspective is exclusionary, unaware of the possibilities a liberal culture possesses. This inadequacy is chiefly due to failing to see people *fully as individuals* — that is, to give close consideration to the quality of their individual minds and sensibilities. Such omission² is clearly a hazard entailed by an over-collectivist outlook of any kind.

Given these observations, the project for economic reform should endeavour to liberate people as individuals. Though these people have in large numbers been socially and economically deprived, they are not for this reason to be rigidly defined in class terms; since

[1] See, for example, current (2008) figures which show that social and economic mobility in Britain is now at its lowest for 40 years.

[2] Also, this omission accounts for a large amount of the inverted snobbery which is sometimes found among those with a rigidly 'working class' viewpoint. Such rigidity debars most of what is, in fact, the West's great cultural heritage, in literature and the other arts, and in philosophy. Generally on the problems surrounding 'class' concepts and outlooks, more will be said in the next two essays.

it is only as individuals that they can reap the manifold and complex cultural benefits of economic emancipation. Also, it is only as individuals that they can form meaningful estimates of their own performances, as contributors to or commentators on, that complex and indeed challenging culture to which they have gained access.

The word 'challenging' is used advisedly. The massive intellectual demands of a liberal and completely open culture are implied in Popper's telling phrase, "the strain of civilization," and in Malraux's concept of "the imaginary museum" of accumulated knowledge and achievement whose vastness must be encompassed, as a matter of intellectual obligation, by the modern mind.

It should be added that the complexity of a liberal culture, even in the context where capitalism is the dominant economic system, is of such magnitude that extreme care is required in relating it to economics. That care is not shown by those who characterise the whole culture as one whose ruling ideas are those of the economically dominant capitalist elite. By contrast, if it is argued, more modestly, that hegemonic capitalism is *only part* of the liberal culture (and such an argument can viably be made, given the history of the origins of capitalism in the West), then it obviously can be said that this part is driven by ideas which are economically dominant. But, if so, it will have to be added that this part is by far the intellectually simplest component of the culture. At the same time, there is a completely alternative argument which can be made: that hegemonic capitalism is actually *not part* of the liberal culture at all, but only co-exists with it. The general implication of all these points is that the culture would lose little or nothing in intellectual complexity even if the economic system ceased to be capitalistic.

The Protest Perspective and Meritocracy

Even if the social groups which are now economically dominant in Western society—those representing the interests of big business and big finance—were to have their industrial, commercial and financial power removed, major problems would still remain. Firstly, there would be the continuing possibility of new groups emerging, with the aim of becoming dominant.¹ Secondly, regarding the people without this aim—who are, in fact, the vast majority—there would be a different kind of problem: the persistence of mass-averageness (intellectual, cultural, moral) and an accompanying mass-conformism.

The latter problem, like that of economically dominant groups, has always existed. Its perennial nature can be seen from the following references to major writers and thinkers across the last four centuries: In the seventeenth century, Shakespeare, in a mildly disparaging manner, depicted the attitude of “the indifferent children of the earth ... Happy in that we are not over-happy”.^a In the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer described the majority as ‘Fabrikwaaren der Natur’ (Nature’s manufactured articles). Also in this century, Mill wrote:

The general average of mankind are not only moderate in intellect but also moderate in inclinations: they have no tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to anything unusual, and they consequently do not understand those who have ...^b

In the twentieth century, Santayana echoed Schopenhauer’s view,^c while Eliot spoke of the morally middling character of most people.^d More writers could be referred to, but this selection is substantially representative.

It is a delusion to think, as many on the political Left do, that whoever is not a member of the economically dominant group is, actually or potentially, someone with a significant contribution to make in the intellectual, cultural and moral spheres. Some on the Left even speak as if it follows with logical necessity that being a member of

[1] See in particular the writings of Pareto and Popper on this problem.

the non-dominant group must mean possessing the capacity for such contribution.²

To argue that the non-dominant majority lacks significant capacities *qua* majority is *not*, of course, to argue the converse: that the dominant minority do possess them, *qua* minority. This is because the qualities in question are rare among human beings in general, whatever their social and economic status. It is, then, not a matter of identifying such attributes with social groups or large collectives of any kind. Even if one were to agree with the extreme Left-wing view that these qualities are totally absent from the dominant minority (in accordance with the argument that their absence is the very reason for the dominance of that minority in the first place), then one would still be forced to acknowledge that their presence in the majority is sparse, to be found only among a few exceptional individuals. Hence, one must speak of a minority of individuals who cannot be defined in sociological group terms: a minority scattered across the human species, consisting of people who think more extensively, respond more widely and deeply, and originate more things, than the majority do.

To insist on this point is not, as some on the Left might retort, to endorse, implicitly or explicitly, the existing socio-economic *status quo*. To aver the rarity of momentous capacity is simply to assert that it will remain rare *whatever* the socio-economic system. This assertion is perfectly compatible with an argument for completely changing the current system if the latter chiefly serves the economic interests of elites: changing it, then, to one without the economic hegemony of elites. The argument is grounded in the view that control of this kind leads to, among its many damaging consequences, an undermining of the intellectual, moral and cultural spheres, especially with regard to freedom of expression and publication. However, accompanying the argument will be, again, emphasis on the exceptional nature of major ability, at all social levels.

To this line of reasoning there are two obvious logical extensions. One is that, in a system not controlled by self-interested groups, those who are prominent politically and socially will either possess outstanding capacity themselves, or will place a high value on those who do possess it. The second is commitment to establishing true equality of opportunity: chiefly educational and cultural, but also economic in so far as this equality does not allow the emergence of

[2] To what extent this way of thinking derives from mid-nineteenth century Marxism is a question worth considering.

economically hegemonic groups. Overall equality of life-chances will of course maximise the development of all existing human potential, but especially that of exceptional capacity, with all the rich variety this engenders.

Inequality of opportunity is one of the most glaring forms of social injustice, and all intelligent protest against the latter has foregrounded the issue of this inequality. It is in fact only equalled in importance by the issue of inequality in civil, legal and human rights: ones with which it is closely inter-twined.

Once equality of opportunity has been established, it is, clearly, to be distinguished from equality of outcome. Protest and rebellion are fully justified when they seek the former, but not when they seek the latter. To try to impose uniformity of performance—or, at any rate, to draw a line above which performance is not to rise—is unjust and illiberal in the extreme.

Hence all efforts at social reform and, where necessary, revolution, should be founded on an open-ended perspective and a commitment to an open society. That this has unfortunately not been the case with many of the social upheavals and revolutions throughout history, is a fact to be continually borne in mind. In so many cases, especially in the twentieth century, rebellions against a closed system have led to new kinds of social closure and authoritarianism—sometimes ones even harsher than those they replaced. The danger of such an outcome is on-going, attaching even to the most well-intentioned radicalism when the latter's social perspective is under-informed. An open society means a richly textured social and cultural fabric, an intricate and manifold cultural heritage, plus a full awareness of these facts and an actual welcoming of them.

Such complexity is intimately connected with exceptional ability. Without recognition of the latter, there is a simple, level and horizontal perspective, not the vertical and gradational one which acknowledges complexity by distinguishing between the average and the above-average, the ordinary and extraordinary.

Awareness of finer distinctions is vital in all current and future efforts to achieve social justice and create a better world; that is, in all protest movements against the globe's rich and powerful and their self-serving policies. This awareness is pivotal because, without it, the protest perspective runs the risk of narrowing into one solely concerned with the satisfying of elementary human needs. If this narrowing were to occur, the perspective would neglect the equally

important sphere of human liberties and individuality, where finer distinctions operate.

Among these finer distinctions are the following: Thinking in highly specific terms, as distinct from chiefly collective ones, about the individual; considering what the individual does with the opportunity and wherewithal that has been provided for self-development; recognising the need that pronounced individuality has for distinctive achievement; hoping that the latter is attained, and appraising the individual with reference to this attainment; prizing such attainment as part of a general value placed on social and cultural complexity and diversity.

Neglect of the above considerations might, under certain circumstances, be conscious and deliberate rather than unconscious, indicating an outright hostility to individualism, and for all sorts of reasons linked with the roles of political and social leadership: not least, a dislike of variety and complexity. The need for the protest perspective to be as panoramic as possible, so as to avoid the imposition of uniformity and standardisation, cannot be over-emphasised. In a society without injustice, individuals, in the words of Santayana, "would be born equal, but they would grow unequal, and the only equality subsisting would be equality of opportunity."^e

In extension of the above points, let's consider the following argument of Raymond Williams (advanced, incidentally, fifty years ago):

the idea of not a community but an equality of culture—a uniform culture evenly spread—is essentially the product of the primitivism (often expressed as mediaevalism) which was so important a response to the harsh complexities of the new industrial society. Such an idea ignores the *necessary* complexity of any community which employs developed industrial and scientific techniques; and the longing for identity of situation and feeling, which exerts so powerful an emotional appeal in such writers as [William] Morris, is merely a form of regressive longing for a simpler, non-industrial society. In any form of society towards which we are likely to move, it now seems clear that there must be, not a simple equality (in the sense of identity) of culture; but rather a very complex system of specialised developments—the whole of which will form the whole culture, but which will not be available, or conscious as a whole, to any individual or group living within it.^f

What Williams calls the "necessary complexity" of occupational and cultural pursuits would, as previously said, remain a reality, in an open society, even with the removal of economically dominant groups. Society would go on being multi-faceted, requiring not only

many different *kinds* of ability, but also many different *degrees* of ability within these kinds. Thus, even if economic differences (or at least large-scale ones) were to disappear with the departure of group hegemony, differentiation of another type – the capacity type – would continue. This would apply to economic and industrial activity as much as to any other kind, and would be especially pertinent to the economic management of a system designed to meet, adequately and reliably, the material needs of everyone. Across the board, capacity would be an indispensable consideration.

The perspective would be, then, pervasively and inescapably meritocratic. Indeed, it would be more meritocratic than in any previous form of society, since a social structure without the dominance of self-interested groups enjoying special privileges would be one with complete equality of opportunity: therefore one with more space than had ever previously existed for the unhampered display of ability.

Total meritocracy would be precisely the thing to create the enormous cultural complexity which, to paraphrase Williams, no one individual or group could entirely encompass. In so far as meritocracy is justified, there would exist no viable grounds for complaining at that complexity. Nor would there be any justification for the “regressive longing” for some (supposedly) simpler cultural context: a longing which, it must be said, is unfortunately still to be found among some on the Left.

The diversity which meritocracy engenders is at variance with all rigid types of group or ‘class’ concept. The latter always tend toward oversimplification, and are usually flawed generalisations. Once the individual is viewed as a potential source of initiative and creativity which links him / her with other individuals (whatever their social location) who are capable of similar accomplishments, then rigid group definitions inevitably weaken. To a large extent, this is true even in societies *with* dominant groups (such as present-day Western societies), and would be totally true in a society without them.

End Notes

- [a] *Hamlet*, II 2, ll. 226–7.
- [b] *On Liberty* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Bks. Edition, 1986 (1859)), p. 79.
- [c] *Reason in Society* (New York: Dover Publications Inc. edition, 1980 (1905)), p. 101.
- [d] *The Rock*, VIII.
- [e] *Reason in Society*, p. 129.
- [f] *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (Penguin Bks. Edition, 1963 (1958)), pp. 233–4.

The Relevance of Spengler Today

This essay will focus on Oswald Spengler's most famous work, *The Decline of the West*,¹ published between 1918 and 1922. But first I must specify that I reject the central component of Spengler's argument in this book: that is, the concept of historical necessity, determinism or destiny. According to this concept, the historical process is something which, while operating *through* the actions of human beings, is *not driven by* those actions, and is not dependent for its direction on them. The latter are therefore instrumental to it; it directs human action, not human action it; it is the end to which actions are the means or stepping stones. Thus something called historical necessity is the formative force: something which is more than the mere sequence of human actions, more even than what is disclosed by a point-by-point analysis of the causes and effects of particular actions; something with a shape and structure of its own, informing all the actions which transpire within its framework, and not reducible to them.

The concept of historical determinism, otherwise known as historicism, takes two main forms. One is that the directional impetus is linear, moving in a continuous line. The other is that it is cyclical—with processes in one period being either identical with or equivalent to processes in another period, so that one period either repeats or echoes another. Spengler's position is this cyclical one: specifically the 'equivalence' one. He sees history as unfolding through the life cycles of particular cultures; these, though different from each other, share a common rhythm of development, efflorescence and subsequent decline: a pattern of rise followed by inevitable fall. According to Spengler, Western culture is now in its stage of inescapable decline.² As said, I reject historicism in all its forms. This includes the cyclical form.

[1] I will in fact be quoting from an abridged version of this text: *The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler* (hereafter, D.W.O.S.).

[2] This argument, incidentally, made the book enormously appealing to a number of thinkers in the period immediately following World War I, when the repercussions of that conflict were still being keenly felt.