

## Individual Liberty in Five Models of Social Organization

What constitutes individual liberty and how is individual liberty secured and maintained in society? Some answers to these questions are found in the views propounded in the five models studied here, views that run the gamut from Edmund Burke's proposition that the dignity and importance of the individual is only a reflection of the dignity and importance of the state, to its seeming opposite in J. S. Mill's assertion that, "The worth of a state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it" (140), and to the idea inherent in anarchism that the freedom of noble men must ultimately be replaced by the nobility of free men (Woodcock 34). In this essay I will explore the views of individual liberty in each of the five models - Burkean Conservatism, Democracy, Liberalism, Socialism and Anarchism - and show how they attempt to answer the questions posited above. I will also attempt to show how basic rights are defined and how individual freedom can be reconciled with the needs of society.

### Burkean Conservatism:

In our post-modern age that rejects all absolutes, Burke's assertion that any purely abstract metaphysical idea has no real meaning sounds a jarring note. Just as Burke asks in his classic defense of conservative values, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, what liberty means to a madman who "has escaped from the protecting restraint ... of his cell," so might we today ask what it means to a homeless person with no social support. For Burke freedom was not found in "metaphysical abstraction" but in the solid institutions of his day, the monarchy, established religion, and tradition.

In Burke's view, the preservation of the monarchy and the institutions that accompany it - the aristocracy, parliament and the whole system of inherited privilege - guarantee the protection of the individual. Burke does not have much faith in the morality or judgment of individuals and feels that without the imposed framework of the monarchy, the resulting government would be more open to corruption for personal ends. Burke holds great stock in experience and history, and to him, only a hereditary crown can perpetuate liberties and indeed preserve them as hereditary rights.

The hereditary right is not exclusive to kings but extends to the average citizen as well. For Burke, freedom is not a "vague, speculative right," but a recorded right of Englishmen specifically, a patrimony from one's forefathers going back all the way to the Magna Carta. It is not to be confused with equality, a principle Burke considers a fiction that "inspires false ideas and vain expectations into men." Rights for Burke are concrete realities not abstract givens, and are in relation to one's contributions. "Natural rights" have no meaning to him; the real rights of an individual are civil rights and have to do with practical things such as the right to earn a living, to inherit property, to have a fair share in society's benefits, and to nourishing and educating one's children. Restraints as well as liberties are rights, since Burke feels men want and need a "restraint upon their actions" to control their will and thus have a right to expect a "control and power out of themselves" (151). As part of an organic whole, of a family in the form of community, church and state, the individual's liberties are secure only in as far as the whole is secure.

## Democracy:

Burke is of course responding to the ideas of Thomas Paine and of the philosophers and political theorists before him such as John Locke, Montesquieu and Voltaire. Where Burke finds democracy “the most shameless thing in the world” (191) and places the foundation of rights in established society, in one of the great classics on democracy, *Rights of Man*, Paine argues that men have natural rights by the mere fact of their existence, that these rights go back to man’s origins and that all men are born equal and with equal natural rights. Natural rights include intellectual rights, including the right to religious belief, and the right to act for one’s comfort and happiness in so far as it is not injurious to the natural rights of others.

Paine argues that there are some rights that an individual has no power to execute for himself, such as those pertaining to his protection and security, and so he enters into society to have these rights better secured. He defines these as civil rights, those rights that are in “the common stock of society” and which gain force “by the accumulation of many...every man is a proprietor in society and draws on the capital as a matter of right” (69).

Civil rights translate into civil power and, unlike the Burkean model, government is not imposed on society but arises out of it. Individuals enter into a compact with each other to produce a government. This requires that they first draw up a constitution on the authority of which all future governments will rest. The liberty of the individual resides in the laws set down in this constitution.

While Paine recognizes that government is necessary, he feels that it suffices to have minimal control over society. He argues that mutual dependence and reciprocal interest, such as that found in trade and commerce, have greater influence than laws. Men naturally associate for their common security and on this the safety and prosperity of the individual as well as of the whole depends. It depends too on the “perfect civilization” Paine envisions, something Burke has no illusions about.

## Liberalism

While Thomas Paine sets out the abstract concepts of individual liberty as developed by the French philosophers of the eighteenth century, in *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill delves into the nitty-gritty of defining more specifically what these liberties are and attempts to untangle the contradictions they present when applied to the needs of society. He first defines the “appropriate region of human liberty,” which falls into three categories: liberty of conscience, including freedom of thought, feeling, and opinion, and freedom to express and publish opinions; liberty of tastes and pursuits; and freedom to unite for whatever purpose not harmful to others (16). These human liberties combined promote the development of individuality, “the stuff of heroes” that is developed only through the perception and judgment that are exercised in making free choices, and which Mill considers a dimension of well-being to both the individual and society. Individuality “strengthens the tie that binds every individual to the race, by making the race...better worth belonging to” (76). It also presents a bulwark against the one thing Mill finds potentially more harmful than political oppression – the “tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling,” and with it “the despotism of custom” (85).

When it comes to societal authority, while Mill, like Paine, expresses a more optimistic view of the capacity of men to make moral judgments than Burke, he recognizes that some controls are necessary. While he makes strong arguments against interference by the public in purely personal conduct, he feels that everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit and that members of society are bound to observe a certain line of conduct toward the rest that includes not injuring the interests of others, bearing a fair share of labors in defending the society; and submitting to the jurisdiction of society when his conduct affects society badly.

In discussing the means of securing these liberties, Mill eschews a large bureaucracy and envisions a central organ with limited powers as the ideal balance between public and private. This will be a kind of clearing house of information and knowledge the actual powers of which will be limited to compelling local officers to obey laws laid down for guidance (139). Rules will be laid down by a legislature but it will be these local officers responsible to their constituencies who will enforce them. Like Paine, Mill believes that men will naturally lean towards a sensible and fair organization of their affairs, the less authoritarian control the better.

## Socialism

Socialism continues the historical trend of more government to less government to a government of persons replaced by the “administration of things.” In Socialism the individual finds his liberties in his position of equality with all other members of a society where the division of classes has been swept away by the development of the modern productive forces. These productive forces are appropriated by a state that represents all of society. In this state, a person’s struggle for individual existence disappears and he enjoys a life fully sufficient materially. Freed from mere animal conditions, he can develop his mental and physical faculties. As stated in Marx and Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto*, originally published on the eve of the 1848 European revolutions, once man is “master of his own form of social organization,” he is free.

In his essay of 1891, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Oscar Wilde argued that with a leveling out of society and an end to both poverty and the extravagance of the upper classes, all are relieved of the chains of, on the one extreme, pauperism and, on the other, altruism. They are also relieved of the need to submit to a “tyranny of fashion” and other manifestations of oppressive conformity to social norms. On a personal level, the abolition of marriage, as proposed by the early Socialist Utopians Fourier and Owen, allows for a purer flowering of love between man and woman, and provides women emancipation from their restricted role in society. Moreover, with the entire society freed from the anarchy of the capitalist system of production, the individual can relax in the security of a stable state where production is regulated upon a definite plan.

It is the role of the state now not to govern but to organize labor and the productive forces according to the needs of the community and of each individual. The social appropriation of productive forces provides both for the maintenance and extension of production and the subsistence and enjoyment of the individuals in society. It is in the very negation of his individual sovereignty and his submission to that of the state, of which he is a part, that the individual finds his freedom.

Though they represent two extremes, there are echoes of Burke's arguments here that the individual is only as secure and free as the state, and in the rejection by both Burke and the (Marxist) socialists of an abstract metaphysical foundation for social organization.

## Anarchism

Where a socialist finds individual liberty in a highly organized structure of modern industrial society, as George Woodcock explains in his essential introduction to anarchist thought, *Anarchism*, an anarchist rejects all authority and seeks a replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of non-governmental co-operation between free individuals. All dogma and rigid systems are to be avoided or destroyed; the sovereignty of the person, not the people, is key.

Though there are several strains of anarchism, some common assumptions can be made: anarchists hold a naturalistic view of society and believe that man is capable of living in freedom and harmony; and that societal relations are regulated by mutual agreements and by social custom and habit, not by law or authority. In this, anarchists look to the past for models of society organized around cooperation and not competition, where individuals live less complicated lives closer to nature.

The dissolution of government and authority carries a decentralization of responsibility and the state is to be replaced with a federalism allowing maximum freedom for the individual. With their simple needs met and toil reduced, men are free to enjoy and develop the real luxuries of life that lay not in material gain but in art, science and the cultivation of their minds and sensibilities.

Woodcock ends his preliminary discussion of anarchism by pointing out the "full circle" history has taken from aristocracy through democratic liberalism and socialist models to anarchy. The one commonality all models seem to have, with the exception perhaps of socialism, is the one that may prevail ultimately in future experiments in social organization; that is the emphasis on personal responsibility as a requirement for freedom however it is defined. As Burke put it in a letter to Lord Charlemont in August of 1789, "Men must have a certain fund of moderation to qualify them for Freedom else it becomes noxious to themselves and a perfect nuisance to every body else." As existing models evolve and new ones emerge, may responsibility save us from the noxious.

## Works Cited

- Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien. London: Penguin, 1986.
- Engels, Friedrich and Karl Marx. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Ed. Currin V. Shields. Upper Saddle River: Prentice, 1997.
- Paine, Thomas. *Rights of Man*. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Marxists Internet Archive. 16 August, 2008. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/index.htm>
- Woodcock, George. *Anarchism*. Broadview, 2004.