The Political Economy of Freedom

Michael Oakeshott

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'The Political Economy of Freedom' first appeared in *Cambridge Journal*, Volume II, 1949. It is reprinted in Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Methuen & Co., London, 1962) and *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays* (Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1991). Reprinted here by permission of Routledge, London.

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Foreword

Our first question must be: What is the Centre for Independent Studies doing republishing a book review fifty years old? The answer is partly that it is an essay by Michael Oalteshott, the most significant British political philosopher of the century. In it, he explores the meaning of freedom through a book by an American writer he admired. Rapidly, however, we find ourselves in Oakeshott's own imaginative world.

Oakeshott was a man immensely fastidious about matching his words to his meaning, but not the sort of bore constantly saying 'It all depends what you mean by this or that.' He had endured a good deal of vacuous theorising about freedom during the Second World War, and was now suffering the dull, spiritless socialism of the Attlee government. Worse, much of the excessive regulation of that period was being presented in the name of freedom itself – freedom from want, freedom from fear, and suchlike.

His project, then, was not the abstract definitional question; 'what do we mean by freedom? Oalteshott specifically rejects this option on the ground that it merely opens the door 'upon a night of endless quibble, lit only by the stars of sophistry.' It is an exercise in eliciting the tradition within which freedom had thrived in Britain – and indeed in the Anglo-Saxon world – in previous centuries. His point is a philosophical one. Freedom is not a policy, an ideal to be pursued by governments. It is a condition which we actually enjoy, and it is far from being universal. It certainly does not arise spontaneously from human nature, but has emerged out of a long history. Most societies know nothing of it, and those European societies that do understand it have enjoyed it in different ways. But to live in terms of it is not the same as to understand, in any general way, what it actually is. To elicit the meaning of an idea, Oakeshott believed, is the business of philosophers, and they must always begin from what is actually there – from experience.

Taking our bearings from experience is one remedy for the vice of living amid the unreality of political blueprints. The collection of essays

from which 'The Political Economy of Freedom' comes is called *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* and includes several essays analysing the errors of social engineers who believe that a society is just a heap of raw material out of which can be constructed whatever they currently imagine to be a better society. Oakeshott's contemporary, Friedrich Hayek, whose *Road to Serfdom* of *1944* was no less hostile to the socialist direction of politics in that period, also criticised a similar kind of social engineering which he called by a similar name: 'constructive rationalism.' Both Oakeshott and Hayek designate this particular kind of folly as a form of 'rationalism' because it starts not from experience but from a kind of reason made up of ideals which are thought to stand above the messiness of actual life.

It is a remarkable example of the confusion of political names that in Australia today the policy of liberating economic actors from governmental control should be commonly referred to as 'economic rationalism'. When governments protect industries from foreign competition, fix prices, regulate labour markets and interfere in other such ways with producers and consumers, they are behaving in a recognisably rationalist way – and yet it is currently their critics who are called 'rationalist'. 'Economic rationalism', to put the matter brutally, is the precise opposite of the rationalism criticised by Oakeshott and Hayek. Anyone who uses this term 'rationalism' in the philosophical sense had better be ready to duck: in attacking 'rationalism' he might in Australia be misunderstood as supporting the subjection of the economy to the fashions of politicians. There is a serious risk of damage from friendly fire.

In 'The Political Economy of Freedom', however, Oalteshott begins from the life we actually live. We are free. We ? Who is he talking about? Clearly, the English, and all those who derive their political institutions from Britain. He notes that the equivalents in other languages – the Greek eleutheria, the Roman libertas, the French liberté all mean 'freedom' but spring from very different political experiences. Freedom refers, then, to a certain quality of life whose specific character is related to the civil society in which it is found. Britain, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia are different in many respects, but their enjoyment of freedom springs from the history of England and continues to be fed by it. These countries share a tradition of independence, and Oakeshott gains a certain frisson in combining the words 'tradition' (commonly a watchword of conservatives) with 'liberty' here recognised as the emblem of liberalism.

Philosophers characteristically explain diverse phenomena by

showing them to be linked by a single principle or concept. He insists, therefore, that freedom is not to be found in any one form of liberty (preoccupation with particular liberties, such as freedom of speech, has sometimes in his view distorted our understanding) but in a 'coherence of mutually supporting liberties, each of which amplifies the whole and none of which stands alone.' And what is the underlying principle of this coherence? It is the absence 'from our society of overwhelming concentrations of power.'

One might, following this line, expect him to launch into discussion of trade unions, churches and big business, and indeed the balance of interests in civil society is discussed, but he has other fish to fry. He has become famous for exploring the idea that knowledge, and indeed the conduct of politics itself, is a 'conversation'. (Men are descended, as he jocularly remarked in another essay in Rationalism in Politics, from a race of apes who sat around talking for so long that they lost their tails.) A tradition is pre-eminently a conversation, and the absence of oveswhelming concentrations of power is here exemplified not so much by social institutions as in the relation between past, present and future. In this, he reminds us of Edmund Burke's famous image of society (in *Reflections* on the Revolution in France) as a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born. Like Burke, he recognises revolution as the clamorous uproar made by the present in the name of the future. The past is discarded and abused, often buried under a blizzard of new names and forms, yet the very revolutionaries who reject the past in this way are clearly its helpless victims. Where freedom exists, however, the voices of the past are built into politics as a stabiliser against the sway of fashion or passion. Oakeshott wrote before political theorists became preoccupied with our duties to future generations, but he belonged to a set of people who needed no instruction about keeping rivers clean, planting trees, and building houses that would not fall in on their grandchildren.

Even in a young country like Australia, whose political tradition barely dates back two centuries, the past is both around us and within us. It is that past within us, rather than the declamations of radical enthusiasts for change, which constitutes the Australian identity, as evidenced in the way Australians speak, and the names they have given to their physical environment. This real past living within us may serve to refute those simple-minded people who use the rhetoric of 'change' as a flag to be saluted or dismissed. When people talk about 'being in favour of change' – change unqualified, change as an abstraction – they

are really concerned with increasing their own power, and often that of governments. In speaking of the voice of the past in the conversation of the free, Oakeshott is formulating the instinct which has often in the past led Australian electorates to give a negative answer to invitations to augment the constitutional power of a federal government never averse to taking on new responsibilities.

Oakeshott is dismissive of affectations of originality in expounding political ideas, and the striking thing about 'The Political Economy of Freedom' is that it is a witty and lively restatement in philosophical terms of the assumptions which have guided those belonging to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of freedom whenever they have had to rise to the occasion of establishing a constitutional regime. ***The Federalist Papers*** and the deliberations of those who set up the Australian federal constitution at the end of the nineteenth century alike reveal exactly the same determination that the rule of law will prevail, and that no overmighty subject, no monopolies, no element of politics or government, not even the passions of some electoral majority should have the power to enslave.

It is time for me as introducer to stand aside and encourage the reader to taste the pleasures of Oakeshott's unique style. Let me end by pointing to one or two things such a reader will find. Startling clarifications of familiar ideas will appeal to the thoughtful. Oakeshott recognises property as power, for example, and then specifies private propesty as merely one among a variety of ways in which propesty rights may be arranged. On the closed shop he remarks: 'a "compulsory-voluntary" association is a conspiracy to abolish our right of association …'. Oakeshott's mistrust of monopolies and of power is as palpable as that of Acton, and it is a reason why one might as easily characterise him as a liberal as a conservative: but being a philosopher, he is tangential to any particular partisanship. Finally, let me quote his prediction of what would happen as governments followed collectivist and syndicalist policies:

> A collectivist government faced with numerous functional minorities each organized monopolistically with power to disrupt the whole plan of production unless its demands are met and each (when not making large demands) keeping the civil war going by means of promiscuous little hindrances to the orderly conduct of business, would be the easy victim of blackmail.

This passage, written in 1949 accurately predicts the condition of Britain in the 1970s, a condition which exploded with significant

political consequences in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher came to power. But there are few countries in the Western world, including Australia, which have not veered some way in this direction.

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About the Author

Michael Oakeshott was born in Kent, England, in 1901. He was educated at Cambridge University and also studied in Tiibingen and Marburg during the 1920s. Apart from a period of service in the British Army during World War II, he was from 1929 to 1951 Official Fellow and Lecturer in History, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He became Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics in 1951, a position he held until his retirement in 1967. His books include *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), *Hobbes on Civil Association* (1975), *On Human Conduct* (1975), *On History and Other Essays* (1983), *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (1989) and *A Guide to the Classics, or How to Pick the Derby Winner* (1936). He died in December 1990.

The Political Economy of Freedom

Michael Oakeshott

The work of the late Professor Henry C. Simons of the University of Chicago will be well known to students of economics, and they will not need their attention called to this collection of some of his more important essays.[1] To others, however, it may be supposed that his name will be unknown. But, in spite of the fact that he is neither a brilliant nor a popular writer, he has something for the general reader; and though much of what he says has the USA for its immediate background, he has something in particular for the English reader. And I propose in this review to recommend him as a writer who should not be neglected by anyone interested in the way things are going. As an economist, Simons was concerned particularly with problems of banking, currency and monetary policy, but (like his teacher and colleague at Chicago, Professor F. H. Knight,[2] who has built up so distinguished a school of economic studies at that university) he was well aware that in every discussion of a special problem and in every proposal of economic policy there lies an often undisclosed preference for a society integrated in one way rather than another. And in order to make his preferences in this matter secure against superstition, he went to some trouble to bring them out into the open and to put them in order. They do not amount to anything so elaborate as a political philosophy, indeed he claims for them only the title of 'a political credo'; there is nothing pretentious in this attempt to hold 'economics' and 'politics' together. And it is successful mainly because it is not merely one project among others but represents the permanent habit of his mind. It is true there are a couple of essays in this volume directed expressly to the investigation of political ends and means, but the bulk of them is concerned with special economic problems and he never fails to show how his proposed solution is related to the wider context of the type of society he believes to be desirable. To those

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1 Henry C. Simons, *Economic Policy for a Free Society* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, *1948).*

2 F.H. Knight, *Ethics of Competition and Other Essays* (Harper & Bros., New York, 1935) and *Freedom and Reform* (Harper & Bros., New York, *1947).*

anxious to find out where they stand in these matters he offers not only a lucid, if fragmentary, account of his own preferences, but also a profound insight into the compatibility or incompatibility of different economic expedients with different forms of social integration.

Needless to say, Simons does not pretend to invent a political credo for himself: he is without the vanity of those who refuse to be convinced of their own honesty of purpose until they have made a desert of their consciousness before beginning to cultivate it for themselves. His pride is in belonging to a tradition. He spealts of himself as 'an old-fashioned liberal', and he allies himself with a line of predecessors which includes Adam Smith, Bentham, Mill, Sidgwiclt as well as de Tocqueville, Burckhardt and Acton. This strikes one as being a trifle uncritical; the historical nuance is missed. But it is nothing to worry about. Simons was a generous-minded man where the work of others was concerned, accepting gratefully what was offered and providing the critical subtleties for himself. If he was a liberal, at least he suffered from neither of the current afflictions of liberalism — ignorance of who its true friends are, and the nervy conscience which extends a senile and indiscriminate welcome to everyone who claims to be on the side of 'progress'. We need not, however, disturb ourselves unduly about the label he tied on to his credo. He calls himself a liberal and a democrat, but he sets no great store by the names, and is concerned to resolve the ambiguity which has now unfortunately overtalien them. It is to be expected, then, that much of what Simons has to say will seem at once familiar and unpardonably outmoded. It will seem familiar, not because it has been unduly chewed over in recent years, but because the leaders of fashion, the intellectual dandies of the Fabian Society, preserved it in their hastily composed syllabus of errors. And it will seem outmoded because of the disapproval of these eccentric arbiters. The great merit of this book, however, is the opportunity it gives to 'this sophisticated generation', which knows all the answers but is sadly lacking in education, to consider for itself what it has been told to reject as mere superstition.

Simons finds in its 'emphasis on liberty' the 'distinctive feature' of the tradition with which he allies himself; he believes in liberty. And this at once will raise a presumption against him. For to be a genuine libertarian in politics is to belong to a human type now sadly out of fashion. Other loves have bewitched us; and to confess to a passion for liberty – not as something worth while in certain circumstances but as the *unum necessarium* – is to admit to a disreputable naivety, excusable only where it maslts desire to rule. Liberty has become the

emblem of frivolous or of disingenuous politics. But the damage which libertarian politics have suffered from open and from hidden enemies is not irreparable; after all, their cunning is only circuitous folly and will find them out. It is self-appointed friends who have often shown themselves more dangerous. We must be clear, they say, about what we mean by 'freedom'. First, let us define it; and when we ltnow what it is, it will be time enough to seek it out, to love it and to die for it. What is a free society? And with this question (proposed abstractly) the door opens upon a night of endless quibble, lit only by the stars of sophistry. Lilte men born in prison, we are urged to dream of something we have never enjoyed (freedom from want) and to make that dream the foundation of our politics. We are instructed to distinguish between 'positive' and 'negative' freedom, between the 'old' and the 'new' freedom, between 'social', 'political', 'civil', 'economic' and 'personal' freedom; we are told that freedom is the 'recognition of necessity'; and we are taught that all that matters is 'inner freedom' and that this is to be identified with equality and with power: there is no end to the abuse we have suffered. But a generation which has stood so long on that doorstep, waiting for the dawn, that 'le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis' has begun to unnerve it, should now be ready to listen to a more homely message. And anyone who has the courage to tell it to come in and shut the door may perhaps be given a hearing. This at least is what I understand Simons to be saying to us. The freedom which he is to inquire into is neither an abstraction nor a dream. He is a libertarian, not because he begins with an abstract definition of liberty, but because he has actually enjoyed a way of living (and seen others enjoy it) which those who have enjoyed it are accustomed (on account of certain precise characteristics) to call a free way of living, and because he has found it to be good. The purpose of the inquiry is not to define a word, but to detect the secret of what we enjoy, to recognise what is hostile to it, and to discern where and how it may be enjoyed more fully. And from this inquiry will spring, not only a closer understanding of what we actually enjoy, but also a reliable criterion for judging the proposed abstract freedoms which we are urged to pursue. For a proposed freedom which manifestly could not be achieved by means of the ltind of arrangements which secure to us the freedom we now enjoy will reveal itself as an illusion. Moreover, we must refuse to be jockeyed into writing 'freedom', in deference to the susceptibilities of, say, a Russian or a Turk who has never enjoyed the experience (and who, consequently, can think only in abstractions), because any other use of the English word would be misleading and eccentric. Freedom,

in English, is a word whose political connotation springs as directly from our political experience as the connotations of eleutheria, libertas and liberté spring respectively from quite different experiences.

What, then, are the characteristics of our society in respect of which we consider ourselves to enjoy freedom and in default of which we would not be free in our sense of the word? But first, it must be observed that the freedom we enjoy is not composed of a number of independent characteristics of our society which in aggregate make up our liberty. Liberties, it is true, may be distinguished, and some may be more general or more settled and mature than others, but the freedom which the English libertarian knows and values lies in a coherence of mutually supporting liberties, each of which amplifies the whole and none of which stands alone. It springs neither from the separation of church and state, nor from the rule of law, nor from private property, nor from parliamentary government, nor from the writ of habeas corpus, nor from the independence of the judiciary, nor from any one of the thousand other devices and arrangements characteristic of our society, but from what each signifies and represents, namely, the absence from our society of overwhelming concentrations of power. This is the most general condition of our freedom, so general that all other conditions may be seen to be comprised within it. It appears, first, in a diffusion of authority between past, present and future. Our society is ruled by none of these exclusively. And we should consider a society governed wholly by its past, or its present, or its future to suffer under a despotism of superstition which forbids freedom. The politics of our society are a conversation in which past, present and future each has a voice; and though one or other of them may on occasion properly prevail, none permanently dominates, and on this account we are free. Further, with us power is dispersed among all the multitude of interests and organisations of interest which comprise our society. We do not fear or seek to suppress diversity of interest, but we consider our freedom to be imperfect so long as the dispersal of power among them is incomplete, and to be threatened if any one interest or combination of interests, even though it may be the interest of a majority, acquires extraordinary power. Similarly, the conduct of government in our society involves a sharing of power, not only between the recognised organs of government, but also between the Administration and the Opposition. In short, we consider ourselves to be free because no one in our society is allowed unlimited power – no leader, faction, party or 'class', no majority, no government, church, corporation, trade or professional association or trade union. The secret of its freedom is that

it is composed of a multitude of organisations in the constitution of the best of which is reproduced that diffusion of power which is characteristic of the whole.

Moreover, we are not unaware that the balance of such a society is always precarious. 'The history of institutions,' says Acton, 'is often a history of deception and illusions.' Arrangements which in their beginnings promoted a dispersion of power often, in the course of time, themselves become over-mighty or even absolute while still claiming the recognition and loyalty which belonged to them in respect of their first character. To further liberty we need to be clear-sighted enough to recognise such a change, and energetic enough to set on foot the remedy while the evil is still small. And what more than anything else contributes to this clear-sightedness is relief from the distraction of a rigid doctrine which fixes upon an institution a falsely permanent character, and then (when the illusion is at last recognised) calls for a revolution. The best institutions, of course, are those whose constitution is both firm and self-critical, enjoying their character as the repository of a beneficial fragment of power but refusing the inevitable invitation to absolutism. And though these are few, it is perhaps permissible to number among them the hitherto existing parties of English politics.

It might be thought (by those who have not enjoyed the experience of living in such a society, and who can therefore think of it only in the abstract) that a society of this sort could be saved from disintegration only by the existence at its head of some overwhelming power capable of holding all other powers in check. But that is not our experience. Strength we think to be a virtue in government, but we do not find our defence against disintegration either in arbitrary or in very great power. Indeed, we are inclined to see in both these the symptoms of an already advanced decay. For overwhelming power would be required only by a government which had against it a combination so extensive of the powers vested in such a variety of different individuals and interests as to convict the government of a self-interest so gross as to disqualify it for the exercise of its proper function. Normally, to perform its office (which is to prevent coercion) our government requires to wield only a power greater than that which is concentrated in any one other centre of power on any particular occasion. Consequently it is difficult to excite in us the belief that a government not possessed of overwhelming power is on that account a weak government. And we consider that our freedom depends as much upon the moderation of the power exercised by government as upon the proper

and courageous use of that power when necessity arises.

But further, our experience has disclosed to us a method of government remarkably economical in the use of power and consequently peculiarly fitted to preserve freedom: it is called the rule of law. If the activity of our government were the continuous or sporadic interruption of the life and arrangements of our society with arbitrary corrective measures, we should consider ourselves no longer free, even though the measures were directed against concentrations of power universally recognised to be dangerous. For not only would government of this kind require extraordinary power (each of its acts being an ad hoc intervention), but also, in spite of this concentration of governmental power, the society would be without that known and settled protective structure which is so important a condition of freedom. But government by rule of law (that is, by means of the enforcement by prescribed methods of settled rules binding alike on governors and governed), while losing nothing in strength, is itself the emblem of that diffusion of power which it exists to promote, and is therefore peculiarly appropriate to a free society. It is the method of government most economical in the use of power; it involves a partnership between past and present and between governors and governed which leaves no room for arbitrariness; it encourages a tradition of resistance to the growth of dangerous concentrations of power which is far more effective than any promiscuous onslaught however crushing; it controls effectively, but without breaking the grand affirmative flow of things; and it gives a practical definition of the kind of limited but necessary service a society may expect from its government, restraining us from vain and dangerous expectations. Particular laws, we know, may fail to protect the freedom enjoyed in our society, and may even be destructive of some of our freedom; but we know also that the rule of law is the greatest single condition of our freedom, removing from us that great fear which has overshadowed so many communities, the fear of the power of our own government.

Of the many species of liberty which compose the freedom we enjoy, each amplifying and making more secure the whole, we have long recognised the importance of two: the freedom of association, and the freedom enjoyed in the right to own private property. A third species of liberty is often set beside these two: freedom of speech. Beyond question this is a great and elementary form of freedom; it may even be regarded as the key-stone of the arch of our liberty. But a key-stone is not itself the arch, and the current exaggeration of the importance of this form of liberty is in danger of concealing from us the

loss of other liberties no less important. The major part of mankind has nothing to say; the lives of most men do not revolve round a felt necessity to speak. And it may be supposed that this extraordinary emphasis upon freedom of speech is the work of the small vocal section of our society and, in part, represents a legitimate self-interest. Nor is it an interest incapable of abuse; when it is extended to the indiscriminate right to take and publish photographs, to picket and enter private houses and cajole or blackmail defenceless people to display their emptiness in foolish utterances, and to publish innuendos in respect of those who refuse to speak, it begins to reveal itself as a menace to freedom. For most men, to be deprived of the right of voluntary association or of private property would be a far greater and more deeply felt loss of liberty than to be deprived of the right to spealr freely. And it is important that this should be said just now in England because, under the influence of misguided journalists and cunning tyrants, we are too ready to believe that so long as our freedom to spealr is not impaired we have lost nothing of importance – which is not so. However secure may be a man's right to spealr his thoughts, he may find what is to him a much more important freedom curtailed when his house is sold over his head by a public authority, or when he is deprived of the enjoyment of his leasehold because his landlord has sold out to a development company, or when his membership of a trade union is compulsory and debars him from an employment he would otherwise talie.

The freedom of association enjoyed in our society has created a vast multitude of associationsso that the integration of our society may be said to be largely by means of voluntary associations; and on this account we consider our freedom extended and made more secure. They represent a diffusion of power appropriate to our notion of freedom. The right of voluntary association means the right to take the initiative in forming new associations, and the right to join or not to join or to quit associations already in existence: the right of voluntary association is also a right of voluntary dissociation. And it means also the duty of not forming or joining any association designed to deprive, or in effect depriving, others of the exercise of any of their rights, particularly that of voluntary association. This duty is not to be thought of as a limitation of the right; the right, like all rights, is without any limits except those provided by the system of rights to which it belongs and those inherent in its own character: this duty is merely the negative definition of the right. And when we consider the full nature of the right, it is clear that its exercise can be hostile to what we know as our

freedom only when it leads to that which in fact denies its own character – a 'compulsory-voluntary' association. A 'compulsory-voluntasy' association is a conspiracy to abolish our right of association; it is a concentration of power actually or potentially destructive of what we call freedom.

It will be agreed that, from one point of view, property is a form of power, and an institution of property is a particular way of organising the exercise of this form of power in a society. From this point of view distinctions between different kinds of property scarcely appear; certainly all categorical distinctions are absent. Personal and real property, chattels, property in a man's own physical and mental capacities and property in the so-called means of production, are all, in different degrees, forms of power, and incidentally spring from the same sources, investment, inheritance and luck. In every society an institution of property is unavoidable. The ideally simplest kind of institution is that in which all proprietary right is vested in one person who thereby becomes despot and monopolist, his subjects being slaves. But, besides being the least complex, this institution is, to our way of thinking, the most hostile to freedom. We have, perhaps, been less successful, from the point of view of freedom, in our institution of property than in some of our other arrangements, but there is no doubt about the general character of the institution of property most friendly to freedom: it will be one which allows the widest distribution, and which discourages most effectively great and dangerous concentrations of this power. Nor is there any doubt about what this entails. It entails a right of private property – that is, an institution of property which allows to every adult member of the society an equal right to enjoy the ownership of his personal capacities and of anything else obtained by the methods of acquisition recognised in the society. This right, like every other right, is self-limiting: for example, it proscribes slavery, not arbitrarily, but because the right to own another man could never be a right enjoyed equally by every member of society. But in so far as a society imposes external limits, arbitrarily excluding certain things from private ownership, only a modified right of private property may be said to prevail, which provides for less than the maximum diffusion of the power that springs from ownership. For what may not be owned by any individual must nevertheless be owned, and it will be owned, directly or indirectly, by the government, adding to governmental power and constituting a potential threat to freedom. Now, it may happen that a society determines to withdraw from the possibility of private ownership certain things not inherently

excluded by the right of private property itself, and there may be good reason for taking this course. But it should be observed that whatever benefits may flow from such an arrangement, the increase of liberty as we understand it is not among them. The institution of property most favourable to liberty is, unquestionably, a right to private property least qualified by arbitrary limits and exclusions, for it is by this means only that the maximum diffusion of the power that springs from ownership may be achieved. This is not mere abstract speculation; it is the experience of our society, in which the greatest threats to freedom have come from the acquisition of extraordinary proprietary rights by the government, by great business and industrial corporations and by trade unions, all of which are to be regarded as arbitrary limitations of the right of private property. An institution of property based upon private property is not, of course, either simple or primitive; it is the most complex of all institutions of property and it can be maintained only by constant vigilance, occasional reform and the refusal to tinker. And it is instructive to observe how closely many of the private property rights which we all regard as inseparable from freedom are bound up with other private property rights which it is now the custom erroneously to consider hostile to freedom. That a man is not free unless he enjoys a proprietary right over his personal capacities and his labour is believed by everyone who uses freedom in the English sense. And yet no such right exists unless there are many potential employers of his labour. The freedom which separates a man from slavery is nothing but a freedom to choose and to move among autonomous, independent organisations, firms, purchasers of labour, and this implies private property in resources other than personal capacity. Wherever a means of production falls under the control of a single power, slavery in some measure follows.

With property we have already begun to consider the economic organisation of society. An institution of property is, in part, a device for organising the productive and distributive activity of the society. For the libertarian of our tradition the main question will be how to regulate the enterprise of making a living in such a way that it does not destroy the freedom he prizes. He will, of course, recognise in our institution of private property a means of organising this enterprise wholly friendly to liberty. All monopolies, or near monopolies, he knows as impediments to that liberty, and the greatest single institution which stands between us and monopoly is private property. Concerning monopolies he will have no illusions; he will not consider them optimistically, hoping that they will not abuse their power. He will

know that no individual, no group, association or union can be entrusted with much power, and that it is mere foolishness to complain when absolute power is abused. It exists to be abused. And consequently he will put his faith only in arrangements which discourage its existence. In other words, he will recognise that the only way of organising the enterprise of getting a living so that it does not curtail the freedom he loves is by the establishment and maintenance of effective competition. He will know that effective competition is not something that springs up of its own accord, that both it and any alternative to it are creatures of law; but since he has observed the creation (often inadvertently) by law of monopolies and other impediments to freedom, he will not think it beyond the capacity of his society to build upon its already substantial tradition of creating and maintaining effective competition by law. But he will recognise that any confusion between the task of making competition effective and the task (to be performed by effective competition itself) of organising the enterprise of getting a living and satisfying wants will at once be fatal to liberty as he knows it. For to replace by political control the integration of activity which competition (the market) provides is at once to create a monopoly and to destroy the diffusion of power inseparable from freedom. No doubt the libertarian, in this matter, will have to listen to the complaint that he has neglected to consider the efficiency with which his economic system produces the goods; how shall we reconcile the conflicting claims of freedom and efficiency? But he will have his answer ready. The only efficiency to be considered is the most economical way of supplying the things men desire to purchase. The formal circumstances in which this may be at its maximum is where enterprise is effectively competitive, for here the entrepreneur is merely the intermediary between consumers of goods and sellers of services. And below this ideal arrangement, the relevant comparison is not between the level of efficiency attainable in an improved (but not perfected) competitive economy and the efficiency of a perfectly planned economy, but between an improved competitive economy and the sort of planned economy (with all its wastefulness, frustration and corruption) which is the only practical alternative. Everything, in short, that is inimical to freedom – monopoly, near monopoly and all great concentrations of power—at the same time impedes the only efficiency worth considering.

This outline of the political faith of a libertarian in the English tradition will be thought to lack something important unless there is added to it at least a suggestion of the end or purpose which informs

such a society. It belongs, however, to some other tradition to think of this purpose as the achievement of a premeditated utopia, as an abstract ideal (such as happiness or prosperity), or as a preordained and inevitable end. The purpose of this society (if indeed it may be said to have one) is not something put upon it from the outside, nor can it be stated in abstract terms without gross abridgment. We are not concerned with a society which sprang up yesterday, but with one which possesses already a defined character and traditions of activity. And in these circumstances social achievement is to perceive the next step dictated or suggested by the character of the society in contact with changing conditions and to take it in such a manner that the society is not disrupted and that the prerogatives of future generations are not grossly impaired. In place of a preconceived purpose, then, such a society will find its guide in a principle of *continuity* (which is a diffusion of power between past, present and future) and in a principle of *consensus* (which is a diffusion of power between the different legitimate interests of the present). We call ourselves free because our pursuit of current desires does not deprive us of a sympathy for what went before; like the wise man, we remain reconciled with our past. In the obstinate refusal to budge, in the pure pragmatism of a plebiscitary democracy, in the abridgment of tradition which consists in merely doing what was done 'last time', and in the preference for the short-cut in place of the long way round that educates at every step, we recognise, alike, the marks of slavery. We consider ourselves free because, taking a view neither short nor long, we are unwilling to sacrifice either the present to a remote and incalculable future, or the immediate and foreseeable future to a transitory present. And we find freedom once more in a preference for slow, small changes which have behind them a voluntary consensus of opinion, in our ability to resist disintegration without suppressing opposition, and in our perception that it is more important for a society to move together than for it to move either fast or far. We do not pretend that our decisions are infallible; indeed, since there is no external or absolute test of perfection, infallibility has no meaning. We find what we need in a principle of change and a principle of identity, and we are suspicious of those who offer us more; those who call upon us to make great sacrifices and those who want to impose upon us an heroic character.

Now, though none of these characteristics is fully present in our society at this time, none is wholly absent. We have experienced enough of it over a sufficiently long period of time to know what it

means, and from that experience has sprung our notion of freedom. We call ourselves free because our arrangements approximate to this general condition. And the enterprise of the libertarian in politics will be to cultivate what has already been sown, and to avoid the fruitless pursuit of proposed freedoms which could not be secured by the only known method of achieving freedom. Policy will not be the imagination of some new sort of society, or the transformation of an existing society so as to make it correspond with an abstract ideal; it will be the perception of what needs doing now in order to realise more fully the intimations of our existing society. The right conduct of policy, then, involves a profound knowledge of the character of the society, which is to be cultivated, a clear perception of its present condition, and the precise formulation of a programme of legislative reform.

The present condition of our society is exceedingly complex; but, from the point of view of the libertarian, three main elements may be distinguished, There is, first, a widespread and deplorable ignorance of the nature of the libertarian tradition itself, a confusion of mind in respect of the kind of society we have inherited and the nature of its strength and weakness. With eyes focused upon distant horizons and minds clouded with foreign clap-trap, the impatient and sophisticated generation now in the saddle has dissolved its partnership with its past and is careful of everything except its liberty. Secondly, owing to the negligence of past generations, there is an accumulated mass of maladjustment, of undispersed concentrations of power, which the libertarian will wish to correct because it threatens liberty, and which others also may wish to correct for less cogent reasons. Thirdly, there is the contemporary mess, sprung from the attempts of men ignorant of the nature of their society to correct its maladjustments by means of expedients which, because they are not inspired by a love of liberty, are a threat to freedom both in failure and in success.

The two great, mutually exclusive, contemporary opponents of libertarian society as we know it are collectivism and syndicalism. Both recommend the integration of society by means of the erection and maintenance of monopolies; neither finds any virtue in the diffusion of power. But they must be considered mutually exclusive opponents of a free society because the monopoly favoured by syndicalism would make both a collective and a society of free men impossible.

Collectivism in the modern world has several synonyms; it stands for a managed society, and its other titles are communism, national socialism, socialism, economic democracy and central planning. But we will continue to call it collectivism, this being its least emotive

name. And we will assume that the problem of imposing a collectivist organisation upon a society which enjoys a high degree of freedom has been successfully solved – that is, we will assume that the necessary contemporary consensus has been achieved. This is not a tremendous assumption, because (paradoxically enough) collectivism appears most readily to us as a remedy for elements in our society which are agreed to be impediments to freedom. What the libertarian is concerned to investigate is the compatibility of collectivist organisation with freedom as he knows it. To be brief, collectivism and freedom are real alternatives – if we choose one we cannot have the other. And collectivism can be imposed upon a society educated in a love of freedom with an appearance of not destroying continuity, only if men forget their love of liberty. This, of course, is not a new idea, it is how the matter appeared to observers, such as de Tocqueville, Burckhardt and Acton, when the character of modern collectivism was in process of being revealed.

Neglecting the more scandalous charges which may be brought against collectivism in action, let us consider only the defects (from the point of view of liberty) inherent in the system. The opposition of collectivism to freedom appears first in the collectivist rejection of the whole notion of the diffusion of power and of a society organised by means of a multitude of genuinely voluntary associations. The cure proposed for monopoly is to create more numerous and more extensive monopolies and to control them by force. The organisation to be imposed upon society springs from the minds of those who compose the government. It is a comprehensive organisation; loose ends, uncontrolled activities must be regarded as the product of incompetence because they unavoidably impair the structure of the whole. And great power is required for the overall control of this organisation – power sufficient not merely to break up a single overmighty concentration of power when it makes its appearance, but to control continuously enormous concentrations of power which the collectivist has created. The government of a collectivist society can tolerate only a very limited opposition to its plans; indeed, that hard-won distinction, which is one of the elements of our liberty, between opposition and treason is rejected: what is not obedience is sabotage. Having discouraged all other means of social and industrial integration, a collectivist government must enforce its imposed order or allow the society to relapse into chaos. Or, following a tradition of economy in the use of power, it will be obliged to buy off political opposition by favouring groups able to demand favours as the price of peace. All this

is, clearly, an impediment to freedom; but there is more to follow. In addition to the rule of law, and often in place of it, collectivism depends for its working upon a lavish use of discretionary authority. The organisation it imposes upon society is without any inner momentum; it must be kept going by promiscuous, day-to-day interventions – controls of prices, licences to pursue activities, permissions to make and to cultivate, to buy and to sell, the perpetual readjustment of rations, and the distribution of privileges and exemptions – by the exercise, in short, of the kind of power most subject to misuse and corruption. The diffusion of power inherent in the rule of law leaves government with insufficient power to operate a collectivist society. It will be observed, further, that collectivism involves the abolition of that division of labour between competitive and political controls which belongs to our freedom. Competition may, of course, survive anomalously and vestigially, in spite of policy; but, in principle, enterprise is tolerated only if it is not competitive, that is, if it takes the form of syndicates which serve as instruments of the central authorities, or smaller businesses which a system of quotas and price controls has deprived of all elements of risk or genuine enterprise. Competition as a form of organisation is first devitalised and then destroyed, and the integrating office it performs in our society is incorporated in the functions of government, thus adding to its power and involving it in every conflict of interest that may arise in the society. And with the disappearance of competition goes what we have seen to be one of the essential elements of our liberty. But of all the acquisitions of governmental power inherent in collectivism, that which comes from its monopoly of foreign trade is, perhaps, the most dangerous to liberty; for freedom of external trade is one of the most precious and most effective safeguards a community may have against excessive power. And just as the abolition of competition at home draws the government into (and thus magnifies) every conflict, so collectivist trading abroad involves the government in competitive commercial transactions and increases the occasions and the severity of international disharmony. Collectivism, then, is the mobilisation of a society for unitary action. In the contemporary world it appears as a remedy for the imperfect freedom which springs from imperfect competition, but it is a remedy designed to kill. Nor is this surprising, for the real spring of collectivism is not a love of liberty, but war. The anticipation of war is the great incentive, and the conduct of war is the great collectivising process. And large-scale collectivism is, moreover, inherently warlike; the condition of things in which it is appropriate in the end makes its

appearance. It offers a double occasion for the loss of liberty—in the collectivist organisation itself and in the purpose to which that organisation is directed. For though collectivism may recommend itself as a means to 'welfare', the only 'welfare' it is capable of pursuing – a centralised, national 'welfare' – is hostile to freedom at home and results in organised rivalry abroad.

Collectivism is indifferent to all elements of our freedom and the enemy of some. But the real antithesis of a free manner of living, as we know it, is syndicalism. Indeed, syndicalism is not only destructive of freedom; it is destructive, also, of any kind of orderly existence. It rejects both the concentration of overwhelming power in the government (by means of which a collectivist society is always being rescued from the chaos it encourages), and it rejects the wide dispersion of power which is the basis of freedom. Syndicalism is a contrivance by means of which society is disposed for a perpetual civil war in which the parties are the organised self-interest of functional minorities and a weak central government, and for which the community as a whole pays the bill in monopoly prices and disorder. The great concentrations of power in a syndicalist society are the sellers of labour organised in functional monopoly associations. All monopolies are prejudicial to freedom, but there is good reason for supposing that labour monopolies are more dangerous than any others, and that a society in the grip of such monopolies would enjoy less freedom than any other sort of society. In the first place, labour monopolies have shown themselves more capable than enterprise monopolies of attaining really great power, economic, political and even military. Their appetite for power is insatiable and, producing nothing, they encounter none of the productional diseconomies of undue size. Once grown large, they are exceedingly difficult to dissipate and impossible to control. Appearing to spring from the lawful exercise of the right of voluntary association (though as monopolistic associations they are really a denial of that right), they win legal immunities and they enjoy popular support however scandalous their activity. Enterprise monopolies, on the other hand (not less to be deplored by the libertarian), are less dangerous because they are less powerful. They are precariously held together, they are unpopular and they are highly sensitive to legal control. Talren separately, there is no question which of the two kinds of monopoly is the more subversive of freedom. But in addition to its greater power, the labour monopoly is dangerous because it demands enterprise monopoly as its complement. There is a disastrous identity of interest between the two kinds of monopoly; each tends to foster and to

strengthen the other, fighting together to maximise joint extractions from the public while also fighting each other over the division of the spoils. Indeed, the conflict of capital and labour (the struggle over the division of earnings) is merely a sham fight (often costing the public more than the participants), concealing the substantial conflict between the producer (enterprise and labour, both organised monopolistically) and the consumer. Syndicalism, then, has some claim to be considered the pre-eminent adversary of freedom, but it is not less the enemy of collectivism. A collectivist government faced with numerous functional minorities each organised monopolistically with power to disrupt the whole plan of production unless its demands are met and each (when not making large demands) keeping the civil war going by means of promiscuous little hindrances to the orderly conduct of business, would be the easy victim of blackmail. And if the collectivist government derived its political strength from highly syndicalist labour organisations, its desperate position would be that of a victim of blackmail in a society which had not made the activity an offence. Of all forms of society, a collectivist society is least able to deal with the disruptive potentialities of syndicalism.

Where collectivism and syndicalism have imposed themselves upon societies which enjoy a libertarian tradition they appear as mutually exclusive tendencies (sometimes anomalously in alliance with one another) threatening achieved freedom. But to the libertarian who still has faith in his tradition, the chief danger lies, not in the possibility that either will establish itself exclusively, but in their joint success in hindering a genuinely libertarian attack upon the accumulated maladjustments in our society and upon our real problems. That attack is certainly long overdue, and the delay must not be attributed entirely to the popularity of these pseudo-remedies. Libertarian society has not been entirely idle in the past fifty years; liberty has been extended by the correction of many small abuses. But the general drift of reform in this country has too often been inspired by vaguely collectivist motives. Liberty has been lost inadvertently through the lack of a clearly formulated libertarian policy of reform.

However, Simons now comes forward with such a policy. He is not the first to do so, but no friend of freedom will fail to benefit by reflecting upon what he has to say. Nobody could be less complacent about the present state of liberty than Simons; and his proposals are not only libertarian, they are in many respects (as he points out) more radical than the projects of the collectivists. A planner who aims at change by means of promiscuous intervention and the use of discre-

tionary authority, while destroying liberty, does less for reform than a libertarian who would extend and consolidate the rule of law. Simons calls his policy a 'positive programme for Laissez *Faire*', mainly because it aims at malting competition effective wherever effective competition is not demonstrably impossible, at re-establishing a diffusion of power now deeply compromised by monopolies of all sorts, and at preserving that division of labour between competitive and political controls which is the secret of our liberty. But, both in England and in America, the policy he proposed in 1934 would now in part be a programme of laissez *faire* in the historical sense – a programme of removing specific restrictions upon competition which have established themselves not by default but by the activity of collectivists. Nevertheless, his proposals have, of course, nothing whatever to do with that imaginary condition of wholly unfettered competition which is confused with *laissez faire* and ridiculed by collectivists when they have nothing better to say. As every schoolboy used to know, if effective competition is to exist it can do so only by virtue of a legal system which promotes it, and that monopoly has established itself only because the legal system has not prevented it. To know that unregulated competition is a chimera, to know that to regulate competition is not the same thing as to interfere with the operation of competitive controls, and to know the difference between these two activities, is the beginning of the political economy of freedom.'

The libertarian, then, finds the general tendency towards a policy of collectivism a hindrance; but the unavoidable (and exceedingly uneconomical) collectivism which sprang up in libertarian societies engaged in a war of survival is recognised as an evil not without compensation. The believer in collectivism naturally looks upon war as an opportunity not to be missed, and the demobilisation of society is no part of his programme. But to those who believe in liberty and yet remain hesitant about demobilisation, Simons addresses some wise words: 'If wars are frequent, victories will probably go to those who remain mobilized ... [But] if there are vital, creative forces to be released by demobilisation– by return to a free society – the nation may thereby gain enough strength to compensate handsomely for the rislts involved.' Every man, whom war took away from his chosen vocation, returned to it with pent-up energies ready to be released; and what is true of an individual may here be true also of an economy. Demobilisation offered an opportunity for the springing up of a revitalised and more effectively competitive economy (an oppostunity of which the

collectivists deprived us), which would have made us more able to withstand future wars. There is a potential gain, if it can be harvested, for a society with a libertarian tradition, in the successive shocks of mobilisation and demobilisation. And just as a civilian will fight better (for he has something to fight for) if in the intervals of peace he is permitted to be a civilian (and not kept bumming around in an industrial army), so an economy which is, in peace, allowed to stretch itself and flex its limbs will be found, when it is mobilised for war, to possess superior stamina to one kept permanently mobilised.

The main principles of the policy are simple, and we have already noticed them. First, private monopoly in all its forms is to be suppressed. This means the establishment and maintenance (by means of the reform of the law which gives shape to the world of business and industry) of effective competition wherever effective competition is not demonstrably impossible: a genuine 'socialization' of enterprise in place of the spoof 'socialization' of the collectivist. The monopolies and the monopolistic practices to be destroyed are monopolies of labour. Restraint of trade must be treated as a major crime. In respect of enterprise, the absurd powers of corporations must be reduced. 'There is simply no excuse,' says Simons, 'except with a narrow and specialized class of enterprise, for allowing corporations to hold stock in other corporations – and no reasonable excuse (the utilities apart) for hundred-million-dollar corporations, no matter what form their property may take. Even if the much advestised economies of gigantic financial combinations were real, sound policy would wisely sacrifice these economies to preservation of more economic freedom and equality.' The corporation is a socially useful device for organising ownership and control in operating companies of size sufficient to obtain the real economies of large-scale production under unified management; but the corporation law which has allowed this device to work for the impediment of freedom is long overdue for reform. In respect of labour, the problem of reducing the existing or threatened monopolies and monopoly practices is more difficult. The best one may hope, perhaps, is that labour monopolies, if not fostered and supported by the law, will cease to grow and even decline in power. And if we deal intelligently with other, easier problems, it is to be expected that this problem will become less intractable by progress in other directions.

Secondly, undertaltings in which competition cannot be made to work as the agency of control must be transferred to public operation. Now the difference between this policy and that of the collectivist

should be observed. There is, in the first place, a difference of emphasis. The collectivist would, in the end, take over every undertaking the 'nationalisation' of which does not offer insuperable technical difficulties; the libertarian would create a government controlled monopoly only when monopoly of some sort is unavoidable. The collectivist favours monopolies as an opportunity for the extension of political control; the libertarian would break up all destructible monopolies. And the ground of this emphasis is clear. To the libertarian all monopolies are expensive and productive of servility. While the collectivist welcomes and sees his opportunity in a society in which (owing to growth of population and changes in the technique of production) enterprise tends to become gigantic even when the law does not encourage undue size, the libertarian sees in this tendency a threat to freedom which must be warded off (and can be warded off) by the appropriate legal reforms. And from this difference of emphasis springs all the other differences: the disinclination to create monopolies where there are none (in education, for example), the disposition to reduce and to simplify all monopolies taken over so that they may contribute as little as possible to the power of government, the strongest legal discouragement to the appearance of syndicalist tendencies within these monopolies, and the recognition that the effect of all such proposals upon the power of government is as important as their effect upon 'society'. In short, the political economy of freedom rests upon the clear acknowledgment that what is being considered is not 'economics' (not the maximisation of wealth, not productivity or the standard of life), but politics, that is, the custody of a manner of living; that these arrangements have to be paid for, are a charge upon our productive capacity; and that they are worth paying for so long as the price is not a diminution of what we have learned to recognise as liberty.

The third object of this economic policy is a stable currency, maintained by the application of fixed and known rules and not by day-to-day administrative tricks. And that this belongs to the political economy of freedom needs no argument: inflation is the mother of servitude.

Politics is not the science of setting up a permanently impregnable society, it is the art of knowing where to go next in the exploration of an already existing traditional kind of society. And in a society, such as ours, which has not yet lost the understanding of government as the prevention of coercion, as the power which holds in check the overmighty subject, as the protector of minorities against the power of

majorities, it may well be thought that the task to which this generation is called is not the much advertised 'reconstruction of society' but to provide against the new tyrannies which an immense growth in population in a wantonly productivistsociety are beginning to impose; and to provide against them in such a manner that the cure is not worse than the disease.

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