

Labor Day, 2003

Serf. A slave.

2. a person in feudal servitude bound to his masters land and transferred with it when it passed to another owner

3. any person who is oppressed or without freedom

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary Deluxe 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

Some time ago a good friend, who describes himself as a conservative, encouraged me to read *The Coming Serfdom*. Sight unseen, I recommended the book to all of you; subsequently I got a copy from the library, read it, and now enthusiastically urge you to read the book – if you can find it. In the event you cannot find the book, or choose to pass it by I offer a few thoughts based on my own reading of the text. You can “google” using *The Coming Serfdom* Friedrich A. Hayek and you'll find 1360 possibilities. Most likely, if you reviewed them all, none of them would agree with my below comments, which flow out of a socially liberal conscience. (There are different definitions of “liberal” – Hayek was a British “liberal”, which is different than the commonly understood American notion of liberal. I will probably misapply other words. My apologies in advance.)

I expected the book to have a conservative slant – that is never a problem for me: many views make a world.

I was surprised at how old a book it was – originally written in perhaps 1943, by a highly distinguished London economics professor who was Austrian by birth and upbringing, and very much a proponent of the virtues of free market capitalism. When the book was being written in England, the West was waging war in Europe against two national socialist regimes: Hitler's Third Reich, and Mussolini's Fascist Italy. Another arch-socialist empire, Stalin's Communist Soviet Union, was an ally of the “west” for their own reasons. Hayek seemed worried about the growth of radical socialism in England.

It does not take long for Hayek to get to what seems to be the main point of his book: the evils of national socialism compared with the virtues of the free market. In every chapter, his thrust is a variation on this theme: essentially good against bad. I kept marking sections, and before I returned it to the library I had copied 36 pages with what I considered to be significant quotes on the issues, as seen by Professor Hayek.

What really struck me about the book was the utter lack of difference I saw between the capitalism he extolled; and the socialism he reviled. In both systems, the issue at the end was not whether someone(s) would control the rest of the population; the only questions were who would be in control, and what their system would look like. In both schemes there were winners and there were losers; in both schemes it is ultimately the control of government - whether by Business or Communist or Nazi or Fascist regime makes no difference – that is the unstated goal.

As I read, I couldn't help but think of a recurrent theme I have long heard from avowed “leftists” – that the current Bush administration and dominant Republican leaders approach to domination bears an unhealthy and even striking resemblance to many aspects of the developing Hitler Reich and the Mussolini Fascism.

Among the many sections of the book that struck me was one from the chapter “Why the Worst Get on Top”, where Hayek talks practically about the collective body of people in any society and how something called negative selection can lead to control of a people by a dictatorship. He divides people into three distinct groups:

*“...If a numerous group is needed, strong enough to impose their views on the values of life on all the rest, it will never be those with highly differentiated and developed tastes [Group 1] – it will be those who form the “mass” in the derogatory sense of the term [Group 2], the least original and independent, who will be able to put the weight of their numbers behind their particular ideals. If, however, a political dictator had to rely entirely on those whose uncomplicated and primitive instincts happen to be very similar, their number would scarcely give sufficient weight to their endeavors. He will have to increase their numbers by converting more to the same simple creed.*



*"Here comes in the second negative principle of selection: he will be able to obtain the support of all the docile and gullible [Group 3], who have no strong convictions of their own but are prepared to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently. It will be those whose vague and imperfectly formed ideas are easily swayed and whose passions and emotions are readily aroused who will thus swell the ranks of the totalitarian party.*

*"It is in connection with the deliberate effort of the skillful demagogue to weld together a closely coherent and homogeneous body of supporters that the third and perhaps most important negative element of selection enters. It seems to be almost a law of human nature that it is easier for people to agree on a negative program – on the hatred of any enemy, on the envy for those better off – than on any positive task. The contrast between the "we" and the "they", the common fight against those outside the group, seems to be an essential ingredient in any creed which will solidly knit together a group of common action. It is consequently always employed by those who seek, not merely support of a policy, but the unreserved allegiance of huge masses. From their point of view it has the great advantage of leaving them greater freedom of action than almost any positive program. The enemy, whether he be internal, like the "Jew" or the "kulak," or external, seems to be an indispensable requisite in the armory of the totalitarian leader." (1994 edition, pp 152-53)*

Each of you will interpret Hayek's philosophy as you wish. In my opinion, they are well worth reading more than once, and thought about, and discussed. As I interpret Hayek's thoughts, in the context of the totality of his book, our contemporary American Capitalist system (basically already controlled by Wealth and Big Business) is using this very strategy to achieve and keep control (note he emphasizes the word "negative"): extolling of simple values, constantly repeated, with a necessary enemy to glue people together and consequently keep control over them. It does not require a highly analytical look to see in Hayek's description of people, those described in George Orwell's society of "1984", (which Orwell wrote in postwar England in 1948, four years after the publication of Hayek's work).

Hayek's view was not and is not a far-out view of a single capitalist. It would likely be viewed by today's capitalists as very reasonable and logical. The 1994 edition of his book includes a long forward by Milton Friedman, the noted free-market capitalist who, even today at 92 years of age, still holds almost a demigod status in the contemporary American business community.

In my view, Hayek missed the point by focusing on "them", and losing all awareness that he might be espousing essentially the same philosophy that repulsed him. This is not an unusual problem; nor is it restricted to Hayek. Everyone of us, if we become overly zealous in our point of view, may miss an essential point: that we may in fact be just like the hated "them".

I offer two summary comments from my own perspective:

Like it or not, our universe, our world, our everything, demands equilibrium/balance. This includes political philosophies. Anything else has a result much like a washing machine with an unbalanced load – lack of equilibrium leads to problems. If there are only two poles to the political conversation, there must be balance. If there are 20 poles, the same need exists. Just my opinion. Domination leads to problems...for the dominator and the dominated.

Those who achieve the greatest power and control are doomed to fail. Hitler learned that lesson; they all do. This doesn't stop a new generation of dominators from thinking they are an exception to the rule. The most powerful seem blinded to what should be obvious reality. They just don't get it. The old axiom, "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" comes to mind.

Do take the time to seek out *The Coming Serfdom*, and read it with an open and reflective mind. I think you will be glad you did. There is much to be learned.

Some concluding remarks:

SAK, from London, August 28, 2003: "... remind ourselves that [Reagan-era British Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher was wrong when she said there is no society, only individuals. Communities working together can avert disasters that decimate solitary individuals no matter how entrepreneurial." I asked SAK, who has lived in London for many years, for more detail on this quote. Here's the Thatcher quote: "I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. "I have a problem, I'll get a grant." "I'm homeless, the government must house me." They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." *Women's Own* magazine, October 3, 1987. My opinion: "The Iron Lady" identifies well the tension between extremes of ideologies; the tension between those who think their responsibility ends at the door of their home; and those who feel that society at large is



a critical definer of the entire community of humankind. I'm firmly in the latter camp.

The twelve days which end today are Minnesota's annual State Fair, held in St. Paul. It is a magnificent fair, one of the two or three biggest in the United States. Each year it attracts well over one million people, and this year was no exception. It is located in an urban area, one side filled with "normal" family housing. And every year, many of these homeowners make extra money by making their lawns parking lots; setting up their mini-donut franchise; selling t-shirts – to bypassers heading into the much-more expensive businesses on the fair grounds. This year, no difference. I always go, at least one day.

But, there was one difference this year: two little girls, about ages 5&7, were "shut down" by a city inspector for selling pop and water on their lawn without an \$80 license from the city of St. Paul. The issue became front page news in the Twin Cities, and became a cause celebre. From my own listening point, I heard "right wingers" rail against interference with this small act of free enterprise on somebody's lawn; I also heard "left wingers" rail against interference with this small act of free enterprise on somebody's lawn.... On this one issue, most everyone seemed to agree: it was dumb, dumb, dumb....

What was this regulation, and how did it come to be, and then come to be enforced? Whose proposal was it, initially? I have not a clue. It would be an interesting history to uncover. Perhaps it was initiated by fair businesses themselves, who, if they couldn't control discount competition off the grounds, at least wanted them licensed; perhaps it was someone concerned about health; or about the types of things that were being sold on city streets (Soda isn't the only commodity for sale, after all). Probably, the regulation has been on the books for a long time, and the person who pinched the local waifs (who actually were a physician's kids) was simply doing his or her job, which was to make sure the lawn merchants had the requisite permit.

The game of regulation/deregulation has been played for a long time...and whether it is good or bad it depends on which side of a particular issue you're on, what position you personally will take.

Talk radio has fun with this kind of issue, as do politicians who get hot under the collar – at least publicly...raging over the alleged absurdity. There will doubtless be committee meetings about the rule (which will probably not be changed because the age old problem of where do you draw the line): if there's an exception for five year olds, then will some parents make their kids child laborers for the twelve days of the Fair to avoid paying the license fee? It can get absurd. And it may, still.

(As best as I know, the little girls got back in business, politicians falling all over themselves to take the credit and avoid the blame for the problem).

An End Note: Two hours after I completed the above, I was preparing for my occasional Greeter assignment at the Basilica of St. Mary. I was there early. Sunday was a beautiful day here.

First person to arrive at my door was an ordinary looking older lady, who came by bicycle and was walking into the church: "Beautiful day, isn't it?", I said. "So nice I might go to the State Fair again."

It was a most innocuous comment. I didn't expect the calm response:

"I won't be going to the Fair this year. It costs too much, and if I go I won't be able to afford groceries this month."

She went in, and took her seat, second row from the front.

Surely, I thought to myself, there's a story here, with many questions: She's obviously an individual. Does she have a family? Was she once lucky, and something went wrong for her? All questions, doubtless with answers.

Mass over, she left. We exchanged smiles. No words needed to be said.

Enroute home, the radio said that the State Fair is setting records for attendance.

I know one person who didn't go.

Peace...and Justice.