

Diseases of affluence and other paradoxes

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In rich countries today, five decades of sustained economic growth have left the great majority living lives of abundance. For them, the 'economic problem', which for the classical economists was the object of political economy, has been solved. To be sure, minorities remain who live in poverty, but it would be an act of faith, contradicted by the evidence, to believe that another doubling of average incomes would see it disappear. Poverty persists because we lack the willingness rather than the ability to eliminate it.

At the same time, the citizens of rich countries have never enjoyed greater political and personal freedoms. Political and civil liberties, while always contested at the margins and subject to erosion, are robust; there are no social movements advocating any significant extension of freedoms or proposing more democratic forms of government. Moreover, the shackles of minority oppression and social conservatism have been cast off. The traditional standards, expectations and stereotypes that were the target of the various movements dating from the 1960s – the sexual revolution, the counter-culture and the women's movement – ushered in an era of personal liberty that could barely have been imagined by the classical advocates of liberalism.

Yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century citizens of rich countries must confront a deep contradiction: despite decades of sustained economic growth which have seen the real incomes of most people rise to three or four times the levels enjoyed by their parents and grandparents in the 1950s, people are no happier than they were. This fact is now well-established.

Indeed, the extraordinary proliferation of the diseases of affluence suggests that the psychological wellbeing of citizens of rich countries is in decline. These diseases include drug dependence, obesity, loneliness and a suite of psychological disorders ranging from depression, anxiety, compulsive behaviours and widespread but ill-defined anomie. Perhaps the most telling evidence is the extraordinary prevalence of depression in rich countries. In the five decades after the Second World War, the golden age of economic growth, the incidence of depression in the USA increased ten-fold and, according to the WHO, major depression, is expected to become the world's second most burdensome disease by 2020. Anti-depressant drugs free of side-effects are now the holy grail of global pharmaceutical corporations.

This leads to a disturbing question that goes to the heart of the modern world. If high incomes, the object of so much determined effort, fail to improve our wellbeing, then why have we striven so hard to be rich? Indeed, has the pursuit of riches required the sacrifice of those things that do contribute to more contented and fulfilled lives, such as the depth of our relationships with each other, our links with our communities, a deeper understanding of ourselves and the human condition, and the quality of the natural environment? In short, has the whole growth project failed?

There is another, equally troubling, question that must be posed. Has the struggle for freedom been worth it? While the gains in themselves cannot be decried, we must ask whether the personal and political freedoms won through social and political movements over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have succeeded in giving us societies peopled by autonomous, creative, contented individuals living harmoniously in their communities. The answer must be 'no'. The euphoria of liberation has been short-lived.

It now appears that by removing the obvious sources of oppression, the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s have left us free to be miserable in new and more insidious ways. If all of the barriers to the flourishing of our potential have been removed, and yet we fail to flourish, depression appears to be a natural response. Moreover, the liberation movements have ceded to us a moral confusion unprecedented in history. The 'ethic of consent' that replaced the strictures of conservative morality has led to forms of behaviour that raise deeper questions about personal responsibility that we have barely begun to understand.

These disappointments of money and freedom must be seen as a profound challenge to liberalism, and especially its more dogmatic child, libertarianism. For decades libertarianism has been making the implicit promise that the way to a good society is through economic growth and higher incomes. Writing as early as 1944, the high priest of libertarianism, Friedrich von Hayek, observed that the success of expansion of individualism and commerce has 'surpassed man's wildest dreams'.

What in the future will probably appear the most significant and far-reaching effect of this success is the new sense of power over their own fate, the belief in the unbounded possibilities of improving their own lot, which the success already achieved created among men.

While not disparaging the types of daily freedoms this abundance has bestowed on ordinary people, the sense of power over their own fate is almost as distant as ever; von Hayek's grand vision has failed miserably.

As if in recognition of the disappointment of liberalism, in rich countries today there are signs that ceaseless striving for personal freedom and economic security has been superseded by a new project. The political demand for democracy and 'liberation' of earlier generations has in recent times become a personal demand for freedom to find one's own path. Now that the constraints of socially imposed roles have weakened, oppression based on gender, class and race is no longer tenable, and the daily struggle for survival has for most people disappeared, we have entered an era characterised by 'individualisation' where, for the first time, individuals have the opportunity to 'write their own biographies', as sociologists such as Ulrich Beck have it, rather than have the chapters foretold by the circumstances of their birth.

For the first time in history, the ordinary individual in the West has the opportunity to make a true choice. In place of the class struggle and demands for liberation, the citizens of affluent nations have a new quest, the search for authentic identity, for self-actualisation, for the achievement of true individuality. While some have found promising paths in certain spiritual traditions and psychological 'work', most have ended up seeking a proxy identity in the form of commodity consumption. People

continue to pursue more wealth and consume at ever-higher levels because they do not know how better to answer the question ‘How should I live?’.

It is the paradox of our lives. We’ve never had more freedom to shape ourselves in the way we want but we’ve also never been subject to so many pressures telling us what is desirable. While we stand in front of a supermarket display confronted with more bewildering choices than ever before, the voices telling us what to reach for are more insistent, and insidious, than ever. This is widely understood; in fact the previous three sentences are quoted directly from an article in *The Times* of London.

The present essay came about because the emerging critique of economic growth needs to be rooted in a more considered philosophical framework. John Stuart Mill’s famous essay ‘On Liberty’, first published in 1859, provides an appropriate place to begin. Mill set out a world of personal and political freedom that he and his followers imagined would bring about a society of free and contented individuals.

A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has character.

Mill’s thoughts on liberty provide the core of how we in the West understand ourselves as democratic societies. Yet after reading ‘On Liberty’ today one is left with a niggling sense that Mill’s optimistic vision has turned out to be a disappointment. Oddly perhaps, the germ of a new understanding of freedom can be found in F. A. Hayek’s *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), which might be considered the seminal text for the libertarian philosophy that from the 1970s has had such a defining influence on the modern world.

It is apparent from reading Mill and Hayek that both political philosophers began with the world as they found it (and this is why I have begun this essay with a brief statement of where we are in our history). John Stuart Mill was absorbed by the great political debates of his time, a time when representative democracy was still emerging in Europe and legal protections for the individual remained an ideal only half-realised in some countries and still under threat. Mill’s radical successors in the second half of the twentieth century, libertarians such as Milton Friedman inspired by Hayek, were reacting to what they saw as the greatest threat to the freedom at the time, socialism in all of its forms and the threat they posed to economic freedoms.

In this context, it should be said that I take it as self-evident that the advancement of human wellbeing is in itself a good thing and should form the overriding objective of any society. There are two modern perspectives that demur from this view. In general, environmentalism argues that the ecological integrity and health of the Earth should be the overriding objective of human action, individually and collectively, and that the wellbeing of humans is a desirable by-product of this objective. The decline of environmental health inevitably damages the wellbeing of humans, although the maintenance of human populations should not always take precedence.

Some have maintained that sharp reductions in human populations, through birth control, are necessary to meet the overriding objective. Other environmental thinkers argue that 'sustainability' must encompass social as well as ecological sustainability, that is, the long-term viability of communities that cultivate the factors that contribute to human happiness consistent with the ecological goals.

Secondly, and more importantly for the purposes of this essay, the dominant political philosophy of our age, libertarianism, explicitly rejects the view that promotion of human wellbeing is self-evidently good and should be the dominant objective of any society. It holds that the purpose of society and of government should not be to set or endorse goals, but to promote as much individual freedom as is feasible and to allow individuals to determine their own goals. Hayek was unabashed in this belief:

Above all, however, we must recognise that we may be free and yet miserable. Liberty does not mean all good things or the absence of all evils.

In his feted defence of liberal democracy as the political and economic system that is both inevitable and best, Francis Fukuyama argued that some states or conditions are natural or inevitable even though people may be happier in other states. For Hayek, Friedman, Fukuyama and other champions of the free market, liberty, not happiness, is the ultimate or inevitable goal.

In my view, if social conditions and the political and economic structure are making people miserable, even if they are free to pursue misery in their own ways, then this is a matter of public concern. And just as Hayek defends liberty against the tyranny that may be imposed by majorities, so the very freedoms that he wants to protect may be jeopardised if the masses in their misery are told they are ungrateful if they question the value of the freedoms they have been given. This is not an argument in support of the proposition that it is better to be happy in chains than miserably free; rather, it is a call to examine more closely the nature of the liberties that Hayek and his followers have so successfully advanced and the social circumstances in which they have taken root.

It seems to me that there is a need, more urgent by the day, to question the value of the economic, political and personal liberties that have been won. For it is fair to say that free market capitalism in the West is, to use a much-abused term, in crisis. Not just under attack from various forms of fundamentalism (Islamic from without and Christian from within), it is suffering from a process of internal decay characterised by widespread anomie and a deep but mostly private questioning of the value of modern life. Of course, the fundamentalist assault and widespread alienation are not unrelated. At the heart of the matter is this question: If the freedoms won, combined with abundance, are so good for us, why are we so discontented?

If the objective of liberalism has been to allow humanity to lead fulfilled and satisfied lives then, without in any way maligning the liberties won, it must be asked whether these freedoms are enough, and whether other forces have been unleashed that commit us to a new and more deep-rooted form of servitude. Indeed, the extension of the freedoms of the market, along with the personal freedoms won by the liberation movements, have actively worked against our freedom to choose to lead authentic

lives. Consequently, people today find it more difficult to know who they are and thereby to understand how to advance their interests. I will argue that the dominating political issue in rich countries today is the conflict between economic and political liberties on the one hand and 'inner freedom' on the other, and that only in a society that protects and promotes inner freedom is it possible to live according to our true human purpose.

Some, especially social democrats, may interpret the argument of this essay as an unduly individualistic political philosophy, one that pays too little attention to our social natures and the imperative of cooperation in the pursuit of our own wellbeing. Mrs Thatcher's epoch-marking assertion that 'there is no such thing as society, only individuals' was so shocking because it seemed to deny that each of us is a product of our society and is in constant interaction with it. It would be more true to say 'there is no such thing as an individual', certainly in the form imagined by neoclassical economists.

But it has to be conceded that we have made the transition to an individualized society and that the 'social' as traditionally conceived by social democrats no longer exists. That is, the social groupings that in the previous era defined us in practice and provided the categories for sociological and political analysis are no longer relevant (or at least of greatly diminished relevance). So, in one sense, we are each individuals for the first time. The form that this has taken has been highly individualistic, in the sense of self-focused, a product of the combined impact of the liberation movements, neoliberal ideology and the market.

The task now is to reconstruct the social in an individualized world. In a world where we are no longer bound together by our class, gender or race, why we should live cooperatively? There are utilitarian reasons (which neoliberalism concedes): reduced transaction costs, economies of scale, savings from providing certain goods publicly and so on. These forms of cooperation are generally justified on the grounds that they are more 'efficient'. But that is not enough; indeed, these arguments reinforce a neoliberal conception of the individual that is fundamentally hostile to the social. We must reconstruct the idea of solidarity not on the basis of economic benefit but on the basis of our common humanity.

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