

COMMENT

Compulsive Communism

A Reply to the Reply by Gregory Elliott and Peter Osborne

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In 'Active Citizenship as Political Obligation' (RP 58) I argue that it is in principle as legitimate for us to be required to perform 'community service' as it is for us to be subjected to compulsory taxation. Here I turn Robert Nozick's argument against redistributive taxation on its head into an argument for 'compulsory good samaritanism'. (For further discussion, see my 'Flew on Russell on Nozick' in *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1990.) Except to label the thinking 'authoritarian' and 'despotic' Elliot and Osborne in 'Community as Compulsion' offer no criticism of a recognizably philosophical sort.

I argue further that state-distributed welfare services, funded by taxation, exhibit a form of alienation represented in the fact that the same people complain both about the deficiencies of state provision and about their excessive tax bills.

In part, then, my argument for universal community work is aimed at generating in a practical, face-to-face material way, a direct and appreciable connection between social input and output, hence an appreciation of the take-and-give that is constitutive of social life at a wider as well as the private domestic level. In this sense my concern is with 'political morality' both for itself and for its consequences in improving conditions of life for present and future generations. It is no part of this argument to advocate the replacement of the 'welfare state'. Indeed, if I am right, societies in which my proposals were enacted would be more aware of its necessity. Nor, since the article merely develops the argument of 'Welfare State or Welfare Society' (*Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 1985, where my two critics will find enough historical contextualization to keep them occupied) is it just a reaction to Douglas Hurd's talk of 'active citizenship'.

Elliot and Osborne accuse me, in effect, of utopian idealism – much as the early Marx attacked advocates of such things as 'equal political rights' or religious liberty for Jews. They accuse me of imagining that 'political de-alienation' could offer a 'solution' to the basic 'antagonisms' and 'deprivations' inherent in capitalism. In consequence my 'universal active citizenship' would function only as an 'accessory', masking such basics. Though they defend the welfare status quo, hence 'the powers that be', they accuse me too of imagining that these same 'powers' could implement my proposals in anything but an authoritarian and centralistic manner. No contradictions are allowed within, or among state apparatuses. We are, then, back with a totally unreconstructed 'Marxist' revolutionism, one not even sophisticated by notions of a 'transitional programme'. It seems that anything short of everything is worse than nothing.

My article is predicated on the economically and culturally sustained existence of an important and relatively coherent subset of practices and concerns describable in terms like 'welfare', 'caring', 'environment' which are not readily marketable (privatizable) or thought of in market terms. The vocabulary of 'needs' and 'obligations' remains alive even after the ideological onslaught of the Nozicks and Thatchers. Though he sees each citizen in terms only of entitlement to receive, this is Marshall's 'Citizenship 3'.

Now only a madman would imagine that 'universal active citizenship' as a component of this 'sector' could 'solve society's problems'. But the practical experience in the welfare sector of working for human need constitutes a potential model for infection of the 'economy proper'. At the very least, it promises a more critical and politically aware workforce.

Rather than tiresomely return tiresome jibes it might be better to add a further emphasis to what is in my article. At present the bulk of caring work is done in private by women (I pass by their predominance in nursing, social work and the teaching of children) – as mothers, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, neighbours, child-minders, etc. Implicit in my proposal is not only the recognition of such work as meriting support as 'active citizenship', but the lightening of that burden and its spread among males as well as females. Thereby, perhaps, a major material base of sexism in the gender division of labour would be weakened. And with that might wane the heartless machismo of the hard-nosed 'real struggle' Marxism represented in Elliot and Osborne's reply.

