

COMMENTARY

Looking for the Good Life

Bob Brecher

It is almost impossible these days to stumble across anything like a vision of the good society lurking even in the background of a left position. From the intellectual void that is the Labour Party, to the labyrinthine morass of postmodern and postfeminist postponements that constitutes the post-positions of the ragged remnants of the Left, the individual is sovereign. Some might think, of course, that this hardly matters, since there are rather more urgent things to worry about than the present intellectual shortcomings of what passes for socialism – its very survival, for instance, in however attenuated a form. But that would be to underestimate the damage done by the fashionable, but barely considered, obeisance to the foundational conceptions of the Right. For if liberalism's notions of the individual and of society are allowed to direct our opposition, it is hardly surprising that the Left has no coherent position to put, whether theoretically or in everyday practice. If choice, flexibility and the freedom to pursue our individual wants are paramount – if, in short, the atomic individual of classical liberalism determines our thinking and our policy – then it is hardly surprising that Thatcher's claim that there is no such thing as society should be followed by Skillen's objections to the welfare state; or that Hare's myopic preference-utilitarianism, so often rightly derided in this journal in its early days, should spawn a knowing dismissal of anything so politically incorrect as attempting to articulate differences between right and wrong, or even right and left. Any and all other differences, by all means: but not these.

The immediate roots of all this go back to the 1960s, when, in its determination to reject the post-war consensus on the one hand, and Stalin and his legacies on the other, the New Left inadvertently prepared the ground for the New Right. A few examples will do. What was 'flower power' but a romantic reassertion of the individual of Mill's *On Liberty* (without, however, even benefit of education)? What was the Left's espousal of Hart's private-public distinction – as against Devlin's clear understanding that 'private' action almost always has public effects – but a precursor of the current corruption of the profoundly important claim that the personal is *political* into the narcissistic insistence that the *personal* is political? What was the adoption of a Wittgenstein-inspired (if perhaps not intended) relativism – hailed as the escape-route from

authoritarianism – if not the precursor of the depredations wrought by the New Right's newest ally, the inevitably self-serving anti-foundationalism of an often self-satisfied pragmatism? So empty of ideas and ideals is today's Left, so vapid its vision, that it is in full retreat before this latest apology for liberalism.

From the Spanner case to sex-selection; from surrogacy to therapy; from ex-socialists' references to students as 'clients' to 'a woman's right to choose': the socialist case either goes altogether unheard or – even worse, because so much more destructive – it is advanced in liberal guise. What do we want?... When do we want it?... But never: What is right?... And why?... And yet socialism cannot simply be founded on what people want, as even a moment's thought makes obvious: the conditions which give shape to the wants we have are precisely those that require transformation. Nor are these observations true only of socialism: coincidentally for some, necessarily for others, they hold also for morality itself. If morality is to function as a means of resolving the problems created by conflicting wants, it cannot be based in them. As the Right has long understood, moral education, in whatever form, is a means of getting people to want the right thing – a lesson the contemporary Left seems to have overlooked.

In short, as the New Right knows full well, the liberal commitment to eschewing any substantial concept of the Good is self-contradictory. It is the intellectual vehicle whereby liberalism can so easily be drawn to the right; and the reason the conception of individuals and their purported autonomy in which it is based must always be at the very least *problematic* for socialists. So much the better, then, if socialists manage to saddle themselves with this contradiction – a process which the contemporary vogue of aversion to intellectual authority so greatly eases, on a Left increasingly influenced by postmodern currents. In confusing the particular content of a vision with its form, in confusing the propriety of particular conceptions of the good life with the propriety of having any such view at all, the Left all too often – in effect if not by intention – concedes at the outset. Rather than counterposing a left vision of the good society to that of the Right, we are inveigled into arguing that no such vision is possible, let alone respectable.

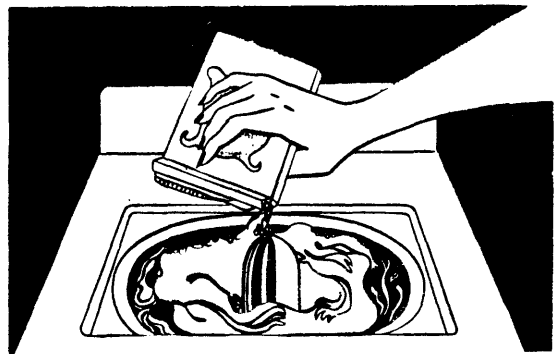
The Right and Choice

Let me offer a case by means of an initial example, one which I hope might give pause in its deliberate provocation: the slogan 'a woman's right to choose' – which, understandably if unfortunately, has become a shibboleth on the Left. Now, to voice doubts about 'a woman's right to choose' may seem heretical: indeed, it may in fact be heretical. But before dismissing this as merely some politically incorrect aberration, just consider its implications if we take it literally: the possibility of arguing for any collective responsibility is lost at the outset of any debate. First, where does such a right (or any other) come from? And second, are any conceivable objects of choice included? More important even than these questions: what about everyone else involved? If such questions are approached within a framework based on the liberal individual, the consumer in the supermarket of wants, preferences and values, then what happens is that the consumer who can call the shots wins what cannot be an argument and has to be a battle. For the first question is unanswerable other than by recourse to some manifestly inadequate myth of 'natural rights'. (Whence? By whose grace?) The second is not even askable unless interpreted as a rhetorical device designed to elicit the answer, 'Of course, so long as they don't interfere (unduly?) with others' choices' (a response which is merely a banal restatement of the problem). And the third question either falls to the dictates of the 'freely chosen' market of a Rawlsian equality, or even worse, to the jungle of the actual 'free' market.

What is needed is to start from what the Left might surely be expected to know already – namely, that the ghost of the atomic individual of the liberal tradition was laid to rest by Marx (among others). Unfazed by this febrile ghost, socialists might argue a case via an articulation (however provisional) of the good (or at least better) society. On the liberal model of the sovereign individual, however – or in its latest version, the sovereign customer – no rational movement beyond the exigencies of the currently perceived, manufactured, encouraged and manipulated wants and preferences of individuals can ever occur. But it is just such a transformation of the individual which is integral to any properly un-Stalinist socialism. To remain within liberal-individualist confines is just what the Right would have us do: for not only do we thereby engage in a very practical self-contradiction, but we become decreasingly able to notice what the Right is up to – materially refashioning individuals to fit its conception of 'the individual'.

Unsurprisingly, I suppose, many of those the Left needs to attract know this perfectly well. Unhappily, however, while the demand that socialists have an entirely clear blueprint has increasingly – and rightly – been resisted (some eco-socialists apart) over the last twenty years, it appears to have been replaced by a rejection of the very idea of even the most rudimentary survey map. In view of the deserved fate of such blueprints as have existed in eastern and central Europe and elsewhere, the effect is to impress those unpersuaded of socialism less with the Left's open-

-mindedness than with its vacuity or disingenuousness. Would that it were at least the latter! If the answer to the question, 'Well, what would *you* do?' is based either on what the 'socialist' in question happens to want, or on what 'the public' is thought to want – rather than consisting in at least some sort of articulation of how the world ought to be – then it is hardly surprising that sceptics continue to prefer their own preferences, or even the dubious certainties of those currently in power. Nor is this just a tactical or rhetorical – or even moral – point: rather, it concerns what may be known of and in the world. If the individual is the ultimate authority, epistemologically as well as morally, then one individual's view – whatever their socialist pedigree – cannot be more rational, more accurate, more properly persuasive, than another's. And since, if disinterested rational criteria are unavailable for the resolution of disputes, then all that remains is the exercise of power of some sort or another, so that might is right, it is not at all irrational to stick with such power.



Consider abortion. (And let me say at the outset, lest I be all too easily misunderstood, that my own position is fully to support the free availability of abortion to any woman who wishes it, and for whatever reason. My quarrel is not with its provision, but with the sorts of grounds so often adduced in its favour, grounds which, I think, all too easily undermine just such provision. A position is one thing, its grounds quite another.) Where does a woman's right to abortion come from? Well, it actually comes from other people's willingness to accord her that right. And that is why the debate about the circumstances of abortion, its use as a form of birth control, etc., is a real one, and why the questions raised by infanticide, for example, cannot be ignored if a woman's right to have an abortion is to become recognised as such: that is to say, if it is to be accorded by society to its members. These considerations immediately imply recognition of the pertinacity of my third question above. If women do have a right to abortion, then who, if anyone, has the concomitant obligations to realise such a right in practice? Should willingness to assist in abortions be part of the job specification of all nurses and doctors? What about *their* right to choose? On what grounds should medical staff with deep convictions about the wrongness of abortion be required nevertheless to perform abortions? (If they ought not so to be required, then the problem immediately arises – and the notorious situation in Birmingham comes readily to mind – of the actual provision

of abortion.) If a right not to assist with abortions *is* rejected – on professional grounds, for example – then what about the appropriate pay for such a job? What about the obligations we all have to vote for and pay the taxes necessary if the exercise of such a right is to be open to all women, regardless of economic position? What about private arrangements? Is a woman's right to choose an abortion in circumstances where NHS facilities are inadequate a right which overrides others' rights to choose to oppose its exercise – especially, as is all too commonly the case, where one outcome of such an exercise, however unintended, is the further erosion of public health provision? One of the features that surely distinguishes socialism from liberalism – if not, crucially, from illiberal conservatism – is that none of these are questions for particular individuals. They are all, however, questions about individualism. To disagree with the conservatives' answer does not at all imply that their question is mistaken; to be taken in either by their present use of liberal ideology or by that ideology itself seems scarcely excusable. (Similar arguments arise, of course, in connection with such issues as child-minding facilities; sex-selection of children; traditions and practices of female genital mutilation; the consumption of pornography and use of prostitutes; and marriage, whether straight or gay.)

My point here is not to try to propose any solutions, but rather to suggest that no solutions which are based simply on what an individual or set of individuals want can be anything other than a further entrenchment of the Right and its power. For if a woman's wanting an abortion is the beginning and end of any argument about whether or not it is right that she should have one, and thus whether or not other people have obligations in relation to her having an abortion, then her 'right to choose' an abortion – actually no more than her desire to have one – cannot be weighed against others' desires. And this in principle as well as in practice: a doctor's 'right to choose' the embryo's continuation; a husband's 'right to choose' to become a father; an anti-abortionist's 'right to choose' to picket or bomb a clinic; an MP's 'right to choose' to uphold the Roman Catholic church's teachings – all of these are equally valid in the market-place of preferences and visions. For what counts is *the want* – the sheer phenomenon of desire – and not the nature of *what is wanted*, its object. And that means, as the Right knows very well, that might is right, however much liberal-minded apologists try to avoid this implication. But if right and wrong are not a matter of the nature of the action or practice concerned, but rather of the identity of the individual agent, then the Left might as well give up straight away – if for no other reason, then simply because the identities which actually *do* count in this society are not ours.

A Revolution of the Spirits

Doubtless this is why we are faced with the spectacle of so many who were once on the Left enjoying the rewards of management on the back of a spurious postmodern rationalisation. Take what is currently happening to

education, a fine example of the New Right's pursuit of its vision, however repellent, on the broken back of the Left's own ideology and language. Having in some cases started out under the misguided and misleading spell of Mao's Cultural Revolution – a variety of revolution now actually being achieved by the Right with valuable support from all too many erstwhile adepts of the Chairman – many (ex)socialists, and particularly in the new 'new universities', are busily helping to establish redoubts of the Right's vision of education. 'Modularisation', for instance: the calculated betrayal of sustained thought and intellectual development, pioneered by eager leftish liberals unable to look beyond the trough to the American factory-production model on which it is based, or to understand the real reasons for the Government's commitment to the spurious 'choice' which it is said to afford students (sorry, customers). This 'choice', of course, is itself another modish nonsense: and yet it is simply assumed to be A Good Thing, rather like Sunday morning shopping at Asda. So too with 'flexibility', that ingenious ideological device for the efficient cutting and casualisation of jobs which helps ensure that education is properly circumscribed so as to permit only what it is safe to allow those who now have 'access' to what we are still pleased to describe as higher education. Most importantly of all, I suspect, the Left's sudden discovery of such 'access', itself now hopelessly hijacked, has come thirty years after the insistence of so many in the early sixties on defending, in terms borrowed from the Right, the ivory towers of higher education. Although clearly not in each individual instance, it was in effect – however unwittingly – in order to retain the (class) purity of academe that the Labour Government's creation of clearly second-class, purportedly 'vocational' polytechnics was supported on the Left. Finally, in education as elsewhere, the Left's squeamishness about such 'authoritarian' and 'elitist' basics as literacy, numeracy and analytic thought has come to haunt us. Janet and John don't like learning: but who are we to impose on them those tools which have enabled us to get where we are, to have such little power as we actually possess?

Socialists, of all people, should surely know that if socialism is to make any sense, let alone have any appeal, then it will do so in virtue of its vision of life. Therewith – in form if not, of course, in substance – its position resembles that of the New Right, which possesses just such a vision. But this should not mislead the Left into a jejune reluctance to conjure up anything of the sort. On the contrary, we need to learn from the Right in order both to expose its appropriation of the liberal 'individual' and to avoid succumbing to the liberal-postmodern trap it has carefully helped to lay, and into which we seem so easily and often to fall. The more intelligent elements of the New Right use such a conception simply as a smokescreen – however much its more crudely Thatcher-esque acolytes actually cleave to it, and whatever some of its strategic rhetoric. For the Left to be suborned into reliance on the liberal 'individual' would be merely bathetic, were it not for the fact that it is also tragic.