

## Reflections on Social Justice, Government, and Society\*

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This article examines the relationship between concepts of social justice as consisting in equal shares and the government's corresponding responsibility to redistribute wealth. As the gains made from capitalism have become clearer, critics of capitalism have shifted emphasis toward problems of inequality, consumption, and stratification. A clear demarcation of the proper responsibilities of government, primarily related to equality before the law, freedom, and protection from those who would do evil, and the broader reality of society and social institutions is necessary for an adequate understanding of social justice. If one does justice to others by not harming them through force or fraud, then one should be able to live free of government coercion and expect protection from wrongful coercion by others.

This essay is organized around the theme of social justice. The term *social justice* has been very prominent in the evangelical world of late, especially among young people. Social justice was certainly one of the themes the president used to reach out to disaffected evangelicals and evangelical young people who felt excessively “cabined in” by a combination of conservative philosophies and triumphal patriotism that they felt was contrary to the gospel and their own sense of the good. The social justice message has been very appealing as it has offered a way for the modern left to supplement the thinness of its thoroughgoing secularism and scientism with a quasi-religious call for economic solidarity.

We have heard this appeal more frequently in the past several years—not for justice but for something more specific called social justice. What is it? How should we view it? What should we do about it?

The primary concern of social justice does not resemble the justice a family member demands when someone has been hurt, killed, or otherwise victimized. Social justice appears to be mostly about distributive concerns. Who is getting what in a given society? Just to ask that question seems to presume that some entity should have power to distribute or redistribute resources. Another way of looking at social justice is to examine whether social arrangements benefit the people of a political community. Do the laws and social understandings broadly benefit everyone or do they only work well for the wealthy and powerful?

Although the phrase *social justice* has just recently come back into vogue, both the words and the fundamental concern have long been common preoccupations of the critics of capitalism. I would like to begin by reviewing the basic case against a free economy and then questioning that case. I will then move on to propose what I think is a better way forward.

## Critics of the Free Economy

One of the major themes of critics of the free economy has been that it only works to enrich wealthy owners while making everyone else either worse off or no better off. Karl Marx is arguably the most influential person to make that argument. In his 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, Marx (along with Engels) pointed to the negative effects of industrial capitalism on the nature of work (reducing it to deadening simplicity and repetition), the distinctiveness of cultures (pushing them aside in favor of commodities), and vastly increasing inequality (as great fortunes became possible). Although he was moderately pleased that capitalism was sweeping away the old European order, he viewed it as a fatally flawed system that simply could not survive its own massive liabilities.<sup>1</sup>

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* criticized capitalism as a social trap maintained by the wealthy to ensure their position at the top. By keeping everyone focused on the need to conspicuously consume commercial goods as a way to demonstrate social status, the rich had effectively placed the masses on a giant hamster wheel designed to keep them working and consuming, thus missing opportunities for leisure and development of higher goals. Whatever gains could be claimed for industrial efficiency are eaten up by senseless consumption created by the social manipulation of the people.<sup>2</sup>

Veblen also suggested that advances in mechanization (a feature of the free and innovative economy) had not actually made the lives of workers any easier. They worked as hard as ever (or harder) without any corresponding improvement in their quality of life. All of this proceeded from the fact of private ownership,

which Veblen viewed as an artifact of the more predatory forms of culture that preceded our own.

In 1906, Upton Sinclair published his treatment of life in and around the slaughterhouses of Chicago, *The Jungle*. The book is still widely read today. He contrasted the good quality of life in simple, rural existence with the brutality of making a living in the unclean, unsafe, frozen commercial nightmare of the Chicago slaughterhouses. He succeeded in drawing great attention to questions of food purity, worker safety, and the potential harshness of capitalism. The workers in his story often had to pay kickbacks to get a job, risk their lives and health to earn their paychecks, and then fend off a small army of swindlers and con men in order to save anything for their families.<sup>3</sup>

Writing only a dozen years later, Walter Rauschenbusch produced *Christianizing the Social Order*. He argued that business and capitalism represented the unregenerate portion of the social order. In one especially memorable segment, he claimed that if business were a foreign island, we would send missionaries to it! While he conceded that the competitive features of capitalism had perhaps been useful in order to help create economic prosperity, he contended that the time for competition had passed. In his eyes, competition was the commercial version of warfare. Who wanted to be at war? In addition, unregenerate capitalism made possible all kinds of fraud and thievery. The villain “from his office chair” can “pick a thousand pockets, poison a thousand sick, pollute a thousand minds.”<sup>4</sup>

We can follow Rauschenbusch with John Dewey, the Midwestern professor who exerted a gigantic influence on American culture, most specifically in education. Dewey’s 1935 *Liberalism and Social Action* repeated some of the themes reviewed so far. Our science and production have taken great leaps forward, but the lives of human beings have not. Private ownership has prevented the benefits of advances from being broadly distributed. Competition may have had its uses in the overall evolution of human economic effort, but it is no longer valid. To these themes he added the suggestion that politics should be under scientific control. Under that scientific control, the forces of production could be socialized for maximum benefit. Although he rejected Marx’s idea of violent revolution as a mere dogma, Dewey reserved the right to employ violence against a recalcitrant minority.<sup>5</sup> In the middle of the Great Depression with doubts about the free economy apparently reinforced by empirical reality, Dewey’s proposal did not necessarily appear to be extreme.

Fast-forward about three decades to John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*. The book was originally published at the end of the 1950s. Galbraith surveyed history since the beginning of the development of the central tradition

of economic thought. He saw a social science steeped in pessimistic thinking and nearly obsessed with the matter of scarcity. Galbraith was convinced that this focus on scarcity was a reasonable conclusion of the early economists because of the dominant impact of need and want on human beings throughout most of their recorded existence. In Galbraith's account, these men thought that even if better methods of production were to increase wealth, that wealth would be eaten up by human beings having more babies and having to provide for them. Thus men would never rise much above laboring for simple subsistence.<sup>6</sup>

Eager to displace what he called "the conventional wisdom" (Galbraith may have actually coined that term) with a new way of thinking, the Harvard economist pointed to a phenomenon early economists could not have predicted and did not factor into their thinking. What was it? Standing in America just shy of 1960, Galbraith noted that human beings in the West had experienced "a mountainous rise in well-being." Dwell on that momentarily. "A mountainous rise in well-being."<sup>7</sup> This great change is evidenced by the existence of the affluent society, in which we no longer need order our affairs around the notion of scarcity.

Interestingly, Galbraith did not spend much time reflecting on the *cause* of that mountainous rise, though the most likely answer would be something like democratic capitalism. For a man dedicated to debunking the conventional wisdom through clarity of analysis, the omission appears strange. As I examined his argument, I kept wondering how he could make so little of the fact that this new state of affairs—increased real wages, increased opportunity, increased production, better material living conditions, a quantum leap above what human beings experienced just a century or so earlier—coincided with the rise of a modern, free market economy and the innovation unleashed by it? Or rather, perhaps he chose not to spend any time extolling the value of competitive capitalism because he likely viewed it the same way Rauschenbusch and Dewey did, which is to say that it was something like a necessary state in our social evolution but one that is better left behind.

The point that should not be missed here is that Galbraith implicitly conceded that earlier critics of the free economy had been wrong in their repeated assertions that competitive capitalism failed to yield broad benefits to the public. It was obvious that it did yield those benefits in the form of (let me say it once more in Galbraith's words) "a mountainous rise in well-being." If Galbraith was right to observe (if rather obliquely) that capitalism has been the system in place during a period of phenomenal growth in prosperity for human beings generally, then the primary argument of competitive capitalism's critics is void. The free market does result in broad distribution of benefits from economic activity. For a modern demonstration of that to which Galbraith merely alluded, one could look

to the recent Heritage Foundation report on poverty in America that illustrates the astounding degree to which even those officially classified as “poor” enjoy the results of economic advance.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence of this kind has not gone unnoticed, though it may sometimes seem to be the case. The celebrated sociologist Peter Berger wrote in his recent intellectual autobiography that he started out more or less agnostic between socialism and capitalism but ultimately came down squarely on the capitalist side.

Capitalism has lifted millions of people from dehumanizing misery to a decent standard of living. In other words, the myth of growth holds out a promise that, by and large, is empirically valid. By contrast, no socialist revolution has ever fulfilled its promise, not even in cases that were more humane than that of the Chinese Communists.<sup>9</sup>

The central critique of capitalism has been that it fails to provide broad-based benefits. That is also clearly untrue.

Of course, as the empirical situation has changed, so has the argument. Critics of the free market now argue more on the basis of inequality and relative deprivation instead of on the basis of absolute deprivation. This point is harder to dispute. There is little doubt that economic freedom will lead to stratification in terms of wealth and income. We should not fail to notice here, though, that relative deprivation is a very different thing from absolute deprivation. The moral force of it is not nearly so strong. If one neighbor is able to purchase a new BMW and the man next door can only afford a used Chevrolet, it is a very different situation than if one man sits upon a pile of ready cash while his neighbor starves. Add the possibility that the same system that allows for relative deprivation may well result in a higher general standard of living for all (yielding such advances as antibiotics, air-conditioning, and cell phones), and the moral force of pointing to its existence is even less compelling.

It should also be noted, as Thomas Sowell has often written, that a free economy is a dynamic economy. Winners are not always winners and many different people occupy varied positions on the ladder of success at points in their lives.<sup>10</sup> The indictment against inequality is not so strong if mobility along the scale is possible. How many of us can point to arcs of mobility within our families as generations have moved from subsistence family farms to blue collar work to professional work, advanced degrees, and/or entrepreneurial opportunities? Clearly, the system has not been a static one like the rigid and paternalistic chain that existed in old Europe and was so well described with mixed emotions by Alexis de Tocqueville in his work on America.

Another important point is that even if we drag everyone back to the starting line, those with talent and drive will again move to the head of the pack. In his classic case against government efforts to bring about equality, Robert Nozick observed that the only way to ensure equality is continuous interference by the government. That continuous interference should be seen as a major threat to human freedom.

There are negative practical consequences, as well. What tends to happen is that if the government changes the basis of economic advance, say from economic achievement to some ideological goal such as equality, then those who are able to cultivate political networks are likely to enjoy the highest standards of living. One might ask which system of reward is likely to provide more innovation and efficiency to the benefit of the broader society: One that rewards skill, work, and expertise or one that rewards political acumen? It is possible to have an equality-based society that produces more even economic shares *nearly all of which are smaller* than most of the unequal shares in a free economy.

What about another major charge lodged against competitive capitalism, which is that it leads to fraud, theft, and negligence from unscrupulous operators? The first answer is that such things clearly exist in a free economy. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* aptly demonstrated the potential ills of a production economy run for short-term gain to the exclusion of all other considerations. We could point to Enron as an example of the sorts of fraud that can emerge in a modern corporation. Players all along the spectrum in a free economy can be cheats or frauds.

An immediate answer to the problem is that the existence of competition can remedy the existence of shady operators. People will not long do business with someone who is defrauding them. We hear Sinclair's story and push for more federal regulation, but his exposé would also have created opportunities for competitors willing to make guarantees of better safety and cleanliness in their production. The Enrons eventually are exposed and lose their market share.

Nevertheless, with freedom comes the possibility of gain from unethical behavior. That objection is undoubtedly true. There is little question that these bad acts have happened, are happening, and will happen. The first answer is that competition allows for rapid natural reform because bad actors cannot hold their customer base. However, the second answer comes in the form of a question: If human beings can create negative outcomes through their bad acts in a free society, how much worse and how much more comprehensive can the possible effects be when the acts of individuals or groups are wedded to extensive government power?

The critics of competition deplore what they perceive as the great waste of effort caused by human beings trying to excel one another in the market.

Cooperation, in their minds, is the answer. The problem with cooperation is that *cooperation for* can just as easily become *cooperation against*. Governments with the loftiest goals have often become the enemies of their people. Power, once centralized with a noble purpose, is extraordinarily difficult to limit and disperse. Competition may not be optimal in the same way democracy probably underperforms government by a saintly king, but it is a decidedly lower risk proposition in a fallen world.

## Social Justice and the Role of the Government

Thus far I have addressed some of the criticisms lodged against capitalism by partisans of a particular type of social justice that is sympathetic to the use of greater government power to bring about a closer approximation of a kind of equality believed to be more just. Rather than simply defending capitalism or the free market against the arguments against them, I want to spend some time addressing a major structural problem I perceive in the call for social justice in which social justice implies redistribution and strong government efforts to create equal conditions rather than equality before the law. My question is this: Is government the right instrument for achieving the kind of gains enthusiasts of social justice want to accomplish? Is there something in the nature of the achievement of that goal, especially in terms of constant interference and coercion of those who have not committed wrongs that should lead us to look for a different solution?

Should there be a connection between government and justice? Undoubtedly. But we have to find the right connection. What does it look like for government to properly dispense its function of providing justice?

Stanley Fish once highlighted the reason for his antifoundational stance on morality by pointing to the very different positions people take on fairness.<sup>11</sup> He is right to a point. While one man might think fairness is vindicated through the enforcement of a formal set of rules, another might think fairness requires much more, such as active intervention, compensation for differences, redistribution, and so on. Yes, people have different positions, but we would be remiss if we failed to notice that there is a common denominator. The second man would not want to do away with the formal rules. For example, the common rule of the classroom is that professors assign grades on the basis of performance. If the professor were to hand out grades in a random distribution, virtually everyone would be outraged. Let us imagine a professor who decides to redistribute points from more successful students to other students he perceives to have a social claim of some kind to grade assistance. There would likely be a significant disagreement between students as to whether the practice is justified. The difference over the

much disputed social redistribution of points over against the near unanimity of the common rule that professors give students the grade they earn rather than random marks helps highlight the degree to which governments can or should attempt to provide justice.

Government will be most successful, Milton Friedman contended, when it acts as an umpire or referee who enforces the formal procedural rules of the game. When it begins to attempt to affect substantive outcomes through active interference, it sets citizens against each other and threatens the social cohesion necessary for the broader society.<sup>12</sup>

The formal rules that government should make and enforce can be found in the fundamental purposes of law. None of us are free if we do not have basic justice and order. Martin Luther wrote in *On Secular Authority* that men and women need a lawful order in the same way they need food, air, and water.<sup>13</sup> When we read news accounts about people living in zones of extreme oppression and lawlessness such as have existed in Sudan due to ethnic hatreds or in Mexico because of drug cartels, we realize that the innocent men and women living in those places are unable to do much more than survive. They cannot build any kind of a life because whatever they do can be destroyed or stolen at any time. Surely, the most common denominator of our understanding of justice is the prevention of (and punishment of) life, property, and freedom-destroying evil by those who do not recognize even the most basic duties of human beings toward each other. If government cannot put on a convincing show of accomplishing this goal, political scientists begin to employ the term *failed state*.

Recognizing this reality, Luther construed the Sermon on the Mount to mean that the Christian must suffer any assault or insult to his person, but should always act to protect his neighbor. Government has been ordained in order to restrain predatory, evil men and to prevent them from victimizing everyone else. On that logic, a Christian could certainly serve under the government, and even take men's lives when acting with authority to protect the innocent.<sup>14</sup>

The implication here (and you could reason to this point using John Locke just as well as Luther) is that those who do wrong make themselves justly vulnerable to restraint, coercion, and correction by the state. If some men by their unrighteous acts have made themselves fit subjects for coercion and restraint, then what does that say about those who do not commit wrongs against others? The logical corollary is that those who do not commit wrongs should be free and uncoerced. They have earned the right to be free and uncoerced because they govern themselves. *In other words, if one does justice to others by not harming them through force or fraud, then one should be able to live free of government coercion and expect protection from wrongful coercion by others.*

One reader of this text asked me why I would start with those who do wrong and reason back to the freedom deserved by those who do not do wrong. The reason is that we more readily identify justice through its violation and remedy than we do through positive visions. We know when we have suffered an injustice that requires a remedy. We are far less certain about whether positive conditions of justice have been met. The common basis of justice is understood in its breach.

Order, justice, and freedom are clearly related. Justice is the result of the enforcement of a *moral* order that protects the freedom of human beings from malignant interference. We are able to live together in peace and freedom with the government standing by to exercise coercion and restraint upon those who would do wrong.

What about that word *equality*, one we also tend to associate with justice? The most realistic kind of equality we can achieve is equality before the law. Every citizen should be able to expect the same treatment by the government. Liberty and protection for him who lives rightly, coercion and punishment for him who does wrong.

Is equality before the law, freedom, and protection from those who would do evil justice enough? The persecuted women and children of Darfur would likely leap at the chance to make a life under such conditions. Men and women living in Mexico currently witness a deadly struggle between the forces of the legitimate government and the drug cartels that are increasingly armed with sophisticated weapons and are trying to impose their *ungodly* order upon everyone. The people yearn for their officials to enforce the peace. As these oppressed people hope for justice, they are looking for the government to perform its God-given function in restraining these evil men who willfully commit murder and foment mayhem in local communities. Justice will be done when the government puts down this satanic rebellion against both earthly and heavenly kingdoms.

There are others, occupying a higher position in whatever is the political analog for Maslow's hierarchy of needs, who would earnestly reject such a concept of justice as too limited. Equality before the law is not enough, they might say, because even that results in substantial inequalities in the experience of life. Some have billions of dollars, while others spend most of their lives paying off debts or perhaps worse, are unable to even gain access to credit so as to run up debts. Some will travel the world, while others may never get far from the place of their birth. More prosaically, some will grow up in a home with two parents who love each other and provide a good example, guidance, support, and financial assistance, while others will have an unmarried mother and virtually no ready-made advantages to take into their development of a life and career.

What do those facts tell us about justice? Does the sheer fact of the difference in what some have and others do not justify government intervention to create balance? Once the scales are balanced, say, through substantial redistribution of wealth, how will stratifications be prevented from reemerging? Why do we focus mostly on difference manifested in terms of wealth? Some have better personalities and more rewarding friendships. Others have more natural strength or physical beauty. Some go through life with outstanding health and no allergies. We cannot redistribute these things unless we go the lengths of the absurdity envisioned by Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron" in which the nation is ruled by a Handicapper General of the United States who finds ways to nullify *every* advantage. The Handicapper General is the absurd end of the trail of reasoning that demands continuous interference in the name of distributive (or redistributive) justice.<sup>15</sup>

Majoritarian tyranny (a strong word, but one naturally associated with the easy resort to coercion) was a prime concern of many American founders that explains the many difficulties purposely built into our constitutional design intended to frustrate easy action. The great chronicler and observer of the young American nation, Alexis de Tocqueville, thought majoritarianism posed a threat potentially greater than that of an absolutist government because of the moral certitude crowds often associate with their numbers.<sup>16</sup> The point is straightforward. Majority decision-making is highly logical as a matter of process, but the proper subjects of those decisions are not nearly so obvious. The action of a majority can be just or unjust. The example of modern day Greece is instructive. Nearly a third of the citizens have government jobs at the time of this writing (2011). Generous retirement packages become available at age sixty. Faced with news of the unsustainability of this state of affairs, citizens riot. If it were possible to solve the problem by confiscating the wealth of citizens making more than a specified sum each year, one supposes a majority of voters would jump at the chance. Would they be right to do so? Of course, no such magic is actually available. Mass confiscations have occurred in other times and places without solving problems. It was said of the Romans that at the end of the empire, taxes were high and the coffers were empty.

No matter how much many Americans, and of late many young evangelicals, would like to think so, large transfers of wealth authorized by a majority of citizens do not create social justice. Rather, they raise serious questions about injustice. Many of those subject to the transfer will have done nothing to merit suffering a financial penalty in order to bring about better conditions for other citizens. They are not suitable subjects of coercion. Force is what lies behind

the often-friendly face of government action. It should be employed with great reluctance and only when all other solutions have been exhausted.

Where I have left things so far will be a source of great frustration to many well-intentioned people. Michael Sandel, professor and teacher of the famous and popular “justice” course at Harvard, would likely be one of them. He divides political thought into two primary camps. One is based on what the *abstract, choosing self* that guards freedom of decision and action fairly zealously against the notion of group-imposed duties. The other proceeds from *the situated self* that fully accepts the great solidarity it should feel with other selves in a community and should easily accept nonconsensual duties that attach for no greater reason than that one is part of a particular group of people at a certain time. Community is like family in this account.<sup>17</sup> The situated self should feel a Bobby Kennedy-esque drive to use government to redistribute wealth for the good of the community.

Christians who push for social justice are, I think, motivated by this account of the situated self who sees himself wedded in solidarity with the other members of the community and very much ready to put the government in service of this bond. The situated self does not see redistributive taxation and the social control of business as coercion so much as they see virtue at work. For Christians, this view can be very attractive and it has proven so for young evangelicals especially.

If the situation were as Sandel presents it (basically an either/or between a cold, impersonal freedom and a rich, warm-hearted nicely coercive government), then I would probably feel constrained to opt for the latter choice. I believe, however, that Sandel is committing an error by putting the burden of social solidarity on law and government. What if it is the case that government is potentially very good at providing the more limited type of peace, order, and justice to which I referred earlier, and is much less good at creating the conditions for some kind of idyllic vision of justice between persons that requires continuous government intervention and readjustment of circumstances? What if there were other strategies that could be placed in the service of civic affection and solidarity?

Peter Drucker once listened to John Kenneth Galbraith give a lecture in which he acted as if government and business were the only two sectors in society. He spoke with him afterward and reminded him that there was an entire sector left out of the discussion and that Galbraith’s own Harvard University was part of that sector. Would it make more sense to look to government to remain within its core competency of administering the more fundamental form of justice and then embark on a strategy of encouraging and facilitating efforts by the voluntary sector? Further, should government make use of its moral and legal authority to encourage the sort of institutions that tend to reduce the need for

larger interventions by the state such as marriage and the rearing of children within intact, two parent households? It happens to be the case that this was the direction our public policy was heading prior to September 11, 2001, when the war on terror became (justifiably) our national preoccupation. One of the great social liabilities of that event was the loss of momentum for a thoroughly edifying attempt at reducing the government's direct role in the inequality business and increasing its indirect role.

If we could return to that kind of public policy, we would not be giving up hope for a better way of life for all citizens. Rather we would be working to develop a low coercion model of the type suggested so far to bring about the good life for citizens.

## The Government/Society Distinction

If we keep our idea of government's role in justice centered on the coercion of wrongdoers, punishment of wrong, and freedom for those who govern themselves, it will lead us back to a simple and valuable distinction set forth by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*. In *Common Sense*, Paine distinguished between society and government.<sup>18</sup>

Society is the voluntary association of human beings. We rationally recognize that something like building a house would take a very long time for a man working alone or might even be beyond his ability. If he chooses to work with others, though, he may be able to have a habitable dwelling much faster. He can compensate the others with valuable goods he may possess or by giving his labor and/or knowledge to help with projects that they may be interested in pursuing. Because of the much greater ability to live a good life by cooperating with other human beings, we choose to live in society. Society is a positive and voluntary enterprise that results in great blessings for those who participate in it.

Government, on the other hand, is different. Our vices create the need for government. While it is necessary, we must also fear that it will become a means of suffering.

The key to Paine's model is recognizing that society is the platform on which we build our positive visions. It is voluntary with participants choosing to join and give back in a reciprocal way so that they may continue to enjoy the benefits of society with others. Government is merely the remedy for bad behavior in society. It should be a corrector and a marker of boundaries rather than the engine of progress that drives civilization forward through constant application of force or the threat thereof. It is not well-suited to serve as the driver of advance because of the constant temptation to gain success by passing laws or gaining government

favor rather than through real achievement. The ability to put together a block of votes is far from synonymous with competence in other critically important areas of social, commercial, and cultural improvement.

Thus, if we want to have a great society, then the way to achieve it is not to enact a program such as The Great Society, which was set forth by President Lyndon B. Johnson as a series of massive welfare programs in the form of payment to poor, single mothers of children, food stamps, and medical insurance for the poor and elderly. While the intent of the program is admirable, the overall merits have been debatable, at best. Less charitably, we might note that the outcome was a vast increase in the size and powers of the government and substantial damage to the voluntary sector of society. If we keep Paine's distinction between society and government in mind, the program would better have been called The Great Government.

Society, by any measure, has taken quite a hit since the enactment of Johnson's programs in the 1960s. Far fewer children are born to a married mother and father today than was the norm at that time. The divorce rate is much higher. Many more women become pregnant without getting married. There are large segments of the populace in the lower socioeconomic registers in which married fatherhood has nearly disappeared as has the experience of the child seeing a father get up every day and go to work. Government assistance has become a much more important source of revenue for charitable social service providers and non-profit entities such as colleges, hospitals, orphanages, rehabilitation programs, and a variety of others. It is also much less common to see multiple generations living in the same home. This, to some degree, is due to the expectation that seniors can make it on their own with social security and other government assistance. The federal government has gone from being primarily a defender of the nation (50 percent of revenues went to defense in 1960!) to being a provider of social services and entitlements (which are now by far the largest category of expenses in the budget). Critics of The Great Society are able to make a compelling case that it diminished cultural and social capital among the poor, established enduring cycles of poverty, and subsidized ways of life inimical to upward social mobility.

Through the growth of government, we have taken responsibility from the society sector and have transferred it to a giant, collective authority (a more friendly Leviathan). Although the goal is unquestionably benign, the outcome may not be.

Perhaps the best way to explain the problem is to highlight one of Aristotle's responses to his teacher, Plato. In *The Republic*, Plato hoped to illustrate the true nature of justice by enlarging the proper relationship of the reason, the will, and the appetite into a model of a whole community. In the community model, there

is a class of guardians who are intended to care only for the city rather than for themselves and their particular interests. In order to facilitate that effort, the guardians are to be denied private property. Additionally, they will have no wives and children of their own. All property will be held in common, as will wives and children. The idea is that their only interest will be the general interest. They will care for everyone rather than for their own wives or their own children. On this plan, children might be said to be better off because instead of one set of parents, they will have thousands of attentive adults, all invested in their well-being.<sup>19</sup>

Whether the presentation of the guardian class was intended to be metaphorical or not, Aristotle chose to respond to Plato as though his proposal were a serious one. In his *Politics*, he wrote:

What is common to the greatest number gets the least amount of care. People pay most attention to what is their own: they care less for what is common; or, at any rate, they care for it only to the extent to which each is individually concerned. Even when there is no other cause for inattention, people are more prone to neglect their duty when they think that another is attending to it....

Speaking specifically to the question of the family, he noted:

[Under the plan of *The Republic*] each citizen will have a thousand sons; they will not be the sons of each citizen individually; any son whatever will be equally the son of any father whatever. The result will be that all will neglect all.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the word *son* loses its meaning when abused in this fashion. The same is true of the concept of property. Utopian (or maybe dystopian) schemes that have attempted to displace traditional notions of family and property have failed even when backed by the full power of a totalitarian state.

The critical insight here is that human beings tend to love the particular rather than the general. When we expand government and attempt to accomplish an ever-greater proportion of our social goals through its power, we go against the grain of human nature. In other words, we generalize. Family relationships, churches, local charities, and local connections all take on less importance as a purportedly omniscient state lays claim to collect and distribute a large (and getting larger) portion of resources. Individuals and local communities lose the joy, blessing, and accountability of right giving and helping as individual virtue generalizes into state provision. Recipients no longer have a tie with the giver, nor do they feel a strong need to respond properly to gifts and help by demonstrating that the aid has had an effect. Proper charity and assistance is degraded into the logic of entitlement. Being entitled is a much more comfortable place to be. It

leads to poor stewardship of life and property and creates the conditions for the establishment of enduring cycles of poverty.

If government stays focused on its most critical functions relative to justice and order, then society must act to help bring those who need help along. In doing so, communities will discover that what John Stuart Mill said about localizing government as much as possible applies also to social responsibility for community improvement: to think and act is the equivalent of exercising muscles and helping them grow. Personal and social responsibility, located as near to the source as possible develop the strength of citizens and of their communities. Moving that responsibility out into some distant Leviathan government results in the atrophy of virtue both among givers and recipients and to social atomization.

## Conclusion

The Great Government does not produce a great society. A great society has the potential to develop in a political regime that focuses on the basic tasks of government while the voluntary sector flourishes. What is required is that we respect the idea of justice as coercion and restraint for those who do wrong and as freedom for those who do no evil, while still remaining committed to making a better life for the people around us.

The first moves are the most immediate. If you are a child, be a respectful child who wants to learn and grow. If you are an adult, take care of your parents as they age. If you are a husband or wife, stay committed to your spouse. Work on sustaining a stable and peaceful household in which all the members feel heard, cared for, and respected. If you are a parent, focus on loving your child's other parent, providing financially and emotionally for the child, and encouraging the child in learning. If you are a grandparent, help young parents adjust to the newness of their role and encourage them in the hard work of taking care of children. If you live in a neighborhood, work on getting to know your neighbors and doing favors for each other. If you are a member of a church, focus less on what the church is doing to entertain you and spend time finding out how you can help others both in their quest to know God and by meeting needs in their daily lives. When you engage in business whether as a producer or customer, honor your contracts, pay your bills, and do not take advantage of others. God gives us many offices to occupy in this life. Were we to take all of them seriously, the need (and appetite) for government to fill voids might be far less great.

If we will take care of the many particulars of living together in society, the larger goods will follow in their wake. The church should be the alternate *civitas*, leading the way as a kingdom of voluntary love and commitment.

One of the great questions of political philosophy has been whether government should concern itself primarily with small government in the form of something like a mutual defense alliance or if it should instead be far more ambitious about achieving some great dream for all people. The question, it turns out, is a false one. Government is armed with the powers of coercion and force because it must in order to do the job that God has given it, which is to frustrate the designs of those who would do evil. The broader society does not necessarily require those same weapons in order to achieve its goals. Nor is the use of those weapons well justified in many instances. We should be far keener to work in the voluntary sector than in the coercive one.

## Notes

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- 1. The 1848 manifesto is widely available in the common domain. It may be accessed online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/61>.
- 2. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).
- 3. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Doubleday, 1906).
- 4. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912). With regard to the specific quote, it appears Rauschenbusch was echoing sentiments expressed (essentially word for word) earlier by Edward A. Ross in *Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-Day Iniquity* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1907).
- 5. John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1935).
- 6. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society: 40th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998), 23.
- 7. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 65.

8. Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, “Understanding Poverty in the United States: Surprising Facts about America’s Poor,” posted on September 13, 2011. The Heritage Foundation report may be accessed at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/understanding-poverty-in-the-united-states-surprising-facts-about-americas-poor>.
9. Peter Berger, *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist: How to Explain the World without Becoming a Bore* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011), 131.
10. For an example, see Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 48–49.
11. Stanley Fish, “Mission Impossible: Settling the Just Bounds between Church and State,” *Columbia Law Review* 97 (December 1997): 2255–2333.
12. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 23–24.
13. Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority,” in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. and trans. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13–14.
14. Luther, “On Secular Authority,” 15.
15. The futuristic short story has been much anthologized. My students report to me that it still is assigned in high schools.
16. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, pt. 2, chap. 7.
17. Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2010), 208–43.
18. Paine’s widely read American revolution-era tract is available in the public domain. One reliable place to find it is at <http://www.constitution.org/tp/comsense.htm>.
19. Plato outlines his ideas on this front in *The Republic*, sections 416d,e and 457d.
20. Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1261b.