

The Case Against Hierarchy

My Political Beliefs, Part One

Libertarian Socialist Rants

30 August 2013

There are many threats that modern civilisation faces today. The rampant alienation, isolation and apathy that the average human being in the western world faces on a routine basis could lead to large-scale social breakdown, increased violence, homelessness, and poverty. Climate change has the potential to wipe out ecosystems and food chains that we all depend upon to survive, whether we want to believe that or not. With potentially devastating nuclear weapons that have the capability to indiscriminately wipe out giant populations of human beings and animals, the end of our species as we know it could very plausibly be just a few clicks away, and average, working men and women have had no part in this at all.

For years on end, the political establishment and the mainstream corporate media have drilled it into our skulls that these issues can just go away at the flick of a switch. Massive private companies are destroying our environment? Hey, let's just pass a law that says they can't do that. Problem solved. Governments are accumulating devastating weapons of mass destruction? Hey, let's just pass a law that says they can't do that. Problem solved. Some ordinary people are feeling so disconnected from their communities that they turn to psychoactive substances to try to escape from it all? Hey, let's just pass a law that says they can't do that. Problem solved.

But these problems haven't been solved, have they? Not in the slightest. Instead of looking to find the root cause of the multiple social ills in our society, we try to just get rid of the symptoms alone, to absolutely no avail. All of these problems are continuing to get worse and worse, but in our primitive dogma we still insist on going ahead with our childish methods, in spite of the masses of empirical evidence pointing towards the contrary. Our leaders put bucket after bucket underneath the broken pipe to catch the leakage but they can't seem to scrape together the mental wherewithal to fix the pipe. Why? Because they are not the ones who are fit to address the systemic problem that has spread throughout the rotten core of our society: social hierarchy.

What are the adverse effects of hierarchical power relations?

Hierarchical power relations are, by definition, socially divided. Suppose you have a social hierarchy on a minimal level, between two people. Person A gets to do what he or she wants, whereas Person B can only do what is instructed of them by Person A. Immediately, they are divided into the subjugator and the subjugated. Person B is instantly marginalised and loses their personal freedom, and because of the imbalance of power, by definition there is a loss of equality between the two individuals. This is why equality and freedom are not diametric opposites to be

wrestled into a compromise in the middle as the status quo might have you believe, but in fact they require each other. You can't have a free society without equality and you can't have a fair society without freedom.

Because power corrupts, social hierarchies have a tendency to be self-perpetuating. The more stratified and extreme hierarchical power relations become, the more damaging to human creativity, innovation and freedom of thought they are. When people are forced to follow orders at gunpoint, their innate need to survive overrides their scepticism of what they're being told to do. This is why societies built on hierarchical power relations tend to deliberately marginalise and dumb down the critical faculties of the general population in order to sustain power for the elite.

If you take one look at our education system, it's designed specifically to make people subservient. You have to memorise and regurgitate what the authorities tell you to in order to pass the test, and if you don't pass the test, you're less likely to get a job, and if you don't get a job, you suffer. As a result, questioning the legitimacy of what you're being told to recite is highly ill advised; you pretty much have no choice. So, our education system serves the function of weeding out creative and critical thinkers, and nurturing stupidity.

And once the hierarchical system has indoctrinated the masses into stupidity and self-destruction, it then proceeds to punish them for the stupid and self-destructive behaviours that emerge in people as a consequence of that. It uses aggressive force to create disengaged people, and then reacts to their disengagement with more aggressive force, which feeds further into the system. This testifies to the self-perpetuating nature of social hierarchy.

Many of the social problems that we try to fix by mindlessly slapping a law on them are in fact exacerbated by greater social inequality. The more unequal societies suffer from greater rates of mental illness, obesity, imprisonment, infant mortality, teenage births, murder, drug use, and generalised health and social problems. The more equitable societies, on the other hand, have much lower rates of these problems as well as having better child wellbeing, better educational scores and increased social mobility.

It seems pretty clear that equality is generally preferable to hierarchy, and as I demonstrated earlier, there is an inextricable connection between equality and freedom, so much so that they're essentially the same thing. Freedom, by definition, is the power or right to act without restraint. In order for restraint to occur, it requires an imbalance of power. Equality, by definition, is the state of being equal – balanced. So freedom must be an absence of power imbalances – which is equality. Freedom is equality.

So it follows with certainty that if equality is better than hierarchy, then by definition freedom must also be preferable to subjugation.

Thus, in order to unlock and maximise our full potential as human beings, we should seek to get rid of hierarchical and authoritarian power relationships, and replace them with free and equal relationships, so that person A and person B can *both* flourish and succeed, not just person A.

What are some examples in our society of hierarchical institutions based on authoritarian social relationships that ought to be dismantled?

#1 – Organised religion

'Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man, living in the sky, who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do! And if you do any of these ten things he has a special place

full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live, and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry, forever and ever, until the end of time... ..But he loves you.'

- George Carlin

This very idea is hierarchical and authoritarian. The idea of humanity being utterly subservient to some grand, ultimate deity who is so insecure as to demand perpetual worship at the threat of eternal torture is about as totalitarian as you can get. Not only is this idea most likely not true, but I wouldn't want it to be true. As Mikhail Bakunin once said, 'If god really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.'

'The main reason for this, I think, is that it is a totalitarian belief. It is the wish to be a slave. It is desire that there be an unalterable, unchallengeable, tyrannical authority, who can convict you of thought crime while you are asleep, who can subject you, who must indeed subject you, to a total surveillance, around the clock, every waking and sleeping minute of your life - I say of your life, before you are born, and, even worse and where the real fun begins, after you are dead. A celestial North Korea.'

- Christopher Hitchens

As well as being authoritarian in theory, religion is also authoritarian in practice.

For a very long time, the power to discuss and exchange ideas about how the universe is and came to be was strictly and forcefully monopolised in the hands of illegitimate and tyrannical religious authorities, and if you challenged that idea, you were a heretic and you faced social exclusion and burning at the stake. The religious authorities held a great deal of power over the average person.

They had a long history of stifling public debate and limiting the spectrum of discussion because it was the only way to sustain their own existence. If they didn't limit the spectrum of discussion and instead allowed a free exchange of ideas, then they would be recognised for how unbelievably full of shit they really are, and they'd eventually be dismantled. Again, this is another example of hierarchical and authoritarian institutions marginalising the public in order to sustain their own power. For a long time, religion has been used to control people. But now it's on its way out.

Since the scientific enlightenment, the power of the church in the Western world has been significantly scaled back. Atheism is on the rise, and many people, both religious and non-religious, are beginning to advocate secularism, and are waking up to the reality that religious authorities should not have political power.

We've made tremendous progress as a species since then. We've put a man on the moon, we've more than doubled our life expectancy, we've taken diseases that used to wipe out populations and rendered them virtually harmless, and it's now possible to carry an entire library of information in the palm of your hand. What caused these leaps in progress to be made? Ultimately, there was one core change in social organisation at the root of it all. Ideas about how the world works were no longer forcefully concentrated at the top of the hierarchical and powerful religious authorities, and instead they were brought down to the public. Instead of being controlled from the top down, understanding the universe was done from the bottom up.

Instead of presupposed conclusions shaping the public discussion, the public discussion shaped fresh, new conclusions. So there was a structural change there. It went from being hierarchical to being non-hierarchical. This is just one form of hierarchy, and we're beginning to overcome it once and for all. However, there are two other forms of social hierarchy that we're yet to overcome that I'd like to discuss as well.

#2. Capitalism

Socialists on the left, generally speaking, agree on the sort of society they want to arrive at, but the means to achieving such a society is quite heavily disagreed upon. Marxists favour a transitional phase from capitalism to communism through the workers utilizing state power to dismantle the capitalist system. However, there's also a current of socialists that don't want to do this, and instead believe that the state is inherently capitalistic, so in order to truly get rid of capitalism you have to get rid of the state as well. These were the original libertarians.

Since then, the word 'libertarian' has been distorted to mean something entirely different, particularly in America, although this usage has also begun to spread to the UK. Now, libertarian has come to mean 'free market' enthusiast. Libertarian means right-wing capitalist. With this section of the video, I'd like to dispel the myth that capitalism has anything to do with liberty.

First and foremost, one of the defining features of the capitalist system is wage labour – you own your labour, and therefore you can sell your labour to an employer. The difficulty here is that the concept of ownership implies that there are two separate entities, the owner and the commodity. If I own a chair – there's the owner, me, and then there's the commodity, the chair. If I own a pair of shoes, there's the owner, me, and then there's the commodity, the shoes. If I own my labour, there's the owner, me, and then there's the commodity, m-... Oh. There appears to be a bit of an issue here, because my labour and myself are not two separate entities, are they?

Well, what if my labour is just some magical ghost that goes to work while I go and do something else? Well that's quite clearly nonsense. Your labour doesn't go to work, *you* go to work. This begs the question, what are you doing when you're selling your labour?

Well, if it holds that you are your labour, then the system of selling your labour essentially turns human beings into commodities to be bought and sold. That's bad news. Let's explore this further. If you are the commodity, then who is the owner? It's the capitalist class. And because you have rented yourself out to them, they can control and subjugate you. Did I miss a meeting? How is this system of renting human beings considered radically different from slavery or prostitution? It *is* slavery. It *is* prostitution.

Where does their money come from? It comes from you. They use you to make money for themselves and only give some of it back. They enslave and exploit you for their own benefit, and yet the people who are wildly enthusiastic about this get the generous label of being a libertarian?! This is not liberty. This is tyranny, slavery, exploitation, subjugation, and prostitution, and to have the audacity to refer to this as liberty is a cruel and sick joke.

Now, that's just a case of logically analysing and breaking down the concepts behind the wage labour system. But we have to look at the empirical evidence as well. Look at the extent of the dominion that the capitalists at the top of the private sector have over the workers at the bottom. It's tyranny, it really is, and in many different ways, they have such a powerful influence over the public consciousness.

If you don't count the time you spend sleeping, on average about half of your time awake is spent in the workplace. In many workplaces, you're told from a hierarchical authority what to do, how to do it, how long to do it for, how to act, what to wear, what to say, and what to think. You must obey orders and be compliant. Corporations are strictly organised from the top down. Decision-making powers are held in the hands of the CEOs, the presidents, the vice presidents, the managers, the bosses and so on and so forth, while the workers at the bottom tend to get very little say in these matters at all, and yet they are the foundation of the company's profits. This is

unjust, and it runs completely counter to what any logical conception of democracy is supposed to be.

Workplaces in the capitalist system are inherently totalitarian, there's no two ways about it. Workers in Tesco have to wear electronic armbands that monitor how hard they're working with some sort of points system, and they lose points if they go for a toilet break. That's insane. Some might say, 'Oh well if they've got nothing to hide then it's fine.' By this logic, why not let a government subject its citizens to this extreme level of total round the clock surveillance? Can you imagine where that might happen? Nazi Germany? America? The UK?

Everyone is set against each other and they are treated as though they are mindless, lazy, selfish robots that exist for no reason other than to carry out mundane, mechanical tasks. This is not normal. Human beings are not machines. These hierarchical corporations are fundamentally anti-human institutions, based on relationships of control and subjugation. That is unacceptable.

According to capitalists, inhumane treatment towards workers can be self-regulated out of existence by market forces. The free market will take care of it, they say, by simply boycotting the companies with bad practices. But this is nonsense and will never work in practice because consumers do not have perfect information, nor do they have perfect reasoning capacities. The trouble is, if you walk into a shop, you will find hundreds and thousands of different products. And each and every product might have lots of different companies from around the world involved in its production. How can anyone be expected to know the business practices of every single one of these companies? You'd be in the shop for fucking hours before you'd even come to a conclusion! And even then, you're only as free to act on your beliefs as your wages, which are decided by the capitalists of course, will allow. Fundamentally though, it is profitable for the capitalist class to have a population that are as stupid and gullible as possible. This is where the mass media comes in.

In 'Manufacturing Consent', Noam Chomsky and Edward S Herman explore the way that the mass media is used by the ruling class and the elites to indoctrinate, divert and distract people from the causes of their own suffering. People are being systematically lied to. The mass media strictly limits the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allows for very lively debate within that spectrum. This is a very sophisticated propaganda machine, much more so than that of the Soviet Union. The mass media is owned and funded by a mixture of private companies and the government, it's sourced by think tanks and front groups, and it has a constant atmosphere of either misguided fear or just pure distraction. People are having their brains dulled completely with the fucking X Factor and American Idol. This whole system is set up to make people absolutely compliant, stupid and subservient. Again, this is to do with hierarchy. The people at the top of the hierarchy smash critical thinking and creativity in order to sustain their own position.

The most infuriating aspect of all of this though is that all of these difficulties which quite clearly subjugate people and destroy creativity will be brushed aside by free market capitalists, because it's all voluntary, isn't it? Not in any meaningful sense. If you are given a 'do this or suffer' situation, quite clearly it's not a meaningful choice because your critical faculties are overridden by your need to survive. A free society should be based on voluntary action, that is true, but voluntary action is a necessary but not sufficient condition for this.

Capitalism subjugates its participants through its authoritarian power relations, and because it assumes endless growth, like a giant, throbbing, cancerous tumour on the face of the earth, if you refuse to participate and go and live in the woods by yourself instead, at some point, some private owner will come along with some money and you will have nowhere to run. They will

not acknowledge you as a human being and you will most likely be forced off of the land. They have the money and power to do that, so why not?

So, capitalism subjugates both participants and non-participants. It coerces people both internally and externally. Capitalism is not liberty. It never was, and it never will be. It truly is the antithesis of freedom.

#3 – The State

We often get very big-headed and arrogant about how wonderfully democratic we apparently are in the West, so much so that we like to spread democracy around the world, using brute physical force if necessary, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians, torturing terror suspects without trial and plundering the Earth's natural resources while we're at it to line the pockets of the numerous private companies that pay for our politicians to be here. Anyways, where were we? Oh yeah, democracy. Ha! Almost forgot about that!

In the UK, our parliament has three components - the monarchy, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons. Two out of three of these components, the monarchy and the House of Lords, are completely unelected, and the actions of the House of Commons must be approved first by these two unelected components. That's absurd. And these so-called 'representatives' in the House of Commons don't even do what we tell them! This supposed 'representative democracy' that we sing praises about is a total illusion, because the politicians don't represent who votes for them, but who pays for them. He who pays the piper calls the tune! It's the same with politics.

Political parties have to campaign if they want to have political power and influence. They need to travel up and down the country canvassing, making election promises they're never going to keep, making signs and placards, fear mongering, push polling, and making leaflets to carry out their mudslinging smear campaigns. All of this requires a fair bit of money. Where's that going to come from?

Well, members of the public will just voluntarily donate to these parties at will. Here's the problem – in a capitalist economy, some members of the public are inevitably going to have a lot more money than others and a class system develops. Political campaigns are financed primarily by the capitalist class, because they have the most money. Because of this, the politicians, left or right, tend to represent their interests, because that's where most of their campaign money comes from. As a result, a mutually beneficial, business-government power elite tends to develop.

Now, as I've discussed, having a capitalist system tends to just result in total, top-down tyranny by the ruling class against the workers. So if we're going to have capitalism, we're going to unfortunately need a state to protect ordinary workers from the tyranny that results. But as we've just discovered, the state serves the interests of the ruling class. As an institution, the state in a capitalist economy serves the function of being both pro-tyranny and anti-tyranny at the same time, which is a rank contradiction.

This internal conflict of interests is the reason why progress in this system tends to be really slow. All of the politicians in the state apparatus, regardless of which party they come from, face a moral dilemma between whether to represent who votes for them or who pays for them. Things go forwards and backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards and backwards again. Regardless of the political will of the public, progress tends to be incredibly stagnant.

So, what happens if you use the state to get rid of the ruling class in capitalist society? Historically, when this has been attempted, and it has been numerous times, the state has become a new ruling class in itself. Is this really socialism at all? Do the workers have control over the means of production? Is collectivisation carried out by workers' self-management? Is it based on

free associations? Is there social equality? The answers to these questions are as follows: no, no, no, no, no! This isn't socialism. This is government-run capitalism. It is control and subjugation.

To sum up - capitalism with no state doesn't work. The state with no capitalism doesn't work. Capitalism with the state doesn't seem to work either. So, given this process of elimination, what's the logical conclusion we ought to arrive at? It is, of course, libertarian socialism.

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