

Property, Liberalism and Co-Optation

By Arnold August, March 2012

John Locke is considered the father of liberalism, a philosophy integral to his opposition to the divine rights of the monarchy and the older feudal classes. “Everyone sees that Locke’s assertion and justification of natural individual right to property is central to his theory of civil society and government.”¹

Possessive individualism is particularly appropriate to a possessive market society [and] ... the continued existence of liberal-democratic states in possessive market societies ... has been due to the ability of a possessing class to keep the effective political powers in its hands in spite of universal suffrage.²

This insight leads to the seriously neglected role of political and ideological co-optation in the market-based, political system of democracy (how the possessing class maintains effective political power). Co-optation is one of the main themes in Chapter 2 of my book. In addition, “liberalism” and its related concept of “freedom,” as applied to the political system in the U.S., cannot in any way be detached from the extreme individualism of individual property rights. One cannot expand liberalism to include a concept more positive than its real foundation, built on reflecting property rights based on extreme individualism. A magic wand *cannot* transform liberalism into a phenomenon that has somehow superseded its original intention as expressed openly in Locke and in the barely veiled tweaking by Jefferson. To fall under the spell of misconceiving liberalism leads to a distorted vision of U.S. democracy. It may entice some to assume the “City upon a Hill” U.S.-centric attitude of a chosen people whose duty is to bring democracy (and barely disguised “civilization” and “humanity”) to other countries, especially those in the South. Humanity, as defined by the West, has become sensitive to “cultural specificities,” and thus is no longer universal as such, resulting in the “clash of civilizations.” However, this clash can only be resolved if the other cultures and nations succumb to the domination of the North.

Co-optation and the American Dream were crystallized during the very early stages of the Thirteen Colonies in the epoch of the Declaration of Independence:

*Self-made men were the best known standard-bearers of wealth. A humble immigrant could become the richest man in America, because two did ... French-born Stephen Girard, who came to Philadelphia as a merchant ship officer, and Astor, son of a poor German butcher.*³
(emphasis added)

Keep in mind that only “two” made it. This “trickle-up” effect contributes to the conjuring up of the American Dream. There is, however, a basis for the American Dream in comparison to the old Britain of European society:

In contrast to stratified Europe, the more fluid society in America offered a double opportunity: both to make money and *to criticize its abuse* by the rich, pointing out how excess wealth and stratification undercut the democracy that had nurtured them.⁴ (emphasis added)

On the basis of this wedge forged between, on the one hand, the old British aristocratic, caste-like society and, on the other hand, America’s wide-open spaces and superficial fluidity (superficial because only the odd few were able to rise from “rags to riches”), the American Dream was invoked as the cornerstone of U.S. democracy. This continues today.

Note that three concepts fed this early U.S. democracy, which today carries even more significance. First is the myth of “rags to riches” as a widespread phenomenon (“anyone can do it if you put your mind to it”). Second, instrumental to fostering and promoting this myth is that those very few who do “make it” are willingly recruited as symbols of the American Dream to which they have to pay homage as part of their duty as club members of the *nouveau riche* section of the upper classes. Third, as Phillips points out in the above citation, as part of the American Dream, one can “make money and criticize its abuse by the rich.” It is important to note that, right up until today, what is permitted and even encouraged is to point out or complain about abuse by the very tiny rich minority, in this way protecting the economic and political system itself. These concepts serve as the built-in cover on the pressure cooker. In addition, individual morality (so engrained in the U.S. political culture stemming from the first settlers), an essential ingredient of this unique feature of the American Dream, leads to blaming “abuse” rather than the very foundation of the system. Following this logic, people are thus left with the dream that rich individuals

will somehow relinquish their “greed” and inherent tendency to “abuse” the majority, characteristics arising out of their privileged position. In this manner, they supposedly would act with more restraint toward their privileges in relationship to others.

Tocqueville, as the admirer par excellence of U.S. democracy, wrote about the American Dream, but, in his own words, “It seemed as if New England was a region given up to the dreams of fancy and the unrestrained experiments of innovators.”⁵ There is no denying the important contributions from the U.S. to the world on the basis of innovation and U.S. know-how. However, the purpose was to serve the system nurturing this innovative spirit.

There are extremely stringent limits on upward mobility and other characteristics of liberalism. One has to keep in mind the third portion (happiness) of the triple notions of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The latter, we recall, was originally the “pursuit of property” tweaked to happiness. In addition, “liberty” and “freedom” are based on definite notions and cannot be viewed in the abstract or devoid of their historical context. The meaning of liberty and freedom in the case of the U.S. cannot escape the system on which they were founded. If a society is based on extreme individualism of private property (or today’s capitalism), then other concepts, which may conjure up high-sounding ideals, are also put into circulation in order to serve the individual — to the detriment of the collective or the society. This is the fate reserved for liberty and freedom, the right of each individual, irrespective of any other consideration, to pursue his or her own interests with the least amount of outside (social and governmental) influence. This is the altar on which Tocqueville kneeled, indicating that “this principle of liberty was nowhere more extensively applied than in the States of New England.”⁶ However, the question remains, now as then: liberty for whom and for what purpose?

¹ Macpherson, C.B. 1990. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. NY: Oxford University Press, p. 197.

² Ibid., p. 270, 274.

³ Phillips, Kevin. 2003. *Wealth and Democracy*. NY: Broadway Books, p. 5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2004. *Democracy in America*. NY: Bantam Books, p. 39.

⁶ Ibid.