



LIBERTARIANISM VERSUS CONSERVATISM: A DEBATE



CHRIS R. TAME AND GERRY FROST

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www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin:libertarian.co.uk

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Chris R. Tame is the founder and Secretary of the Libertarian Alliance. He edited *A Bibliography of Freedom* for The Centre For Policy Studies and has contributed to such journals as *The Jewish Journal of Sociology, Science and Public Policy*, and *Economic Affairs* amongst many others, and has delivered papers to academic conferences and universities in Britain, the USA and Poland.

Gerry Frost has been a leader-writer for *The Evening Standard* as well as former Secretary and Director of the Centre For Policy Studies. He is currently Director of the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies. He contributes regularly to such journals as *Encounter* and *Survey* and is co-author of *Protest and Perish: A Critique of Unilateralism*. He spoke on "The Soviet Threat" at the LA Conference *Which Way Western Foreign Policy?*

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

WHAT GOOD IS THE STATE?

A CONSERVATIVE VIEW

GERRY FROST

Libertarians and liberals show little understanding of the nation and little understanding and less enthusiasm for the state.

Friedrich Hayek does perceive a major role for the state. But many liberals tend to allow it only a minimal or night-watchman role. They look upon it as some naughty child who doesn't know its place and constantly needs to be reminded of it. Or they grudgingly admit its necessity in certain limited respects but regard it with the same degree of enthusiasm with which Mrs. Thatcher might open a Christmas card from Peter Walker. The view that the state represents an invariable threat to freedom seems to me to be wrong, to represent a shallow, one-dimensional, almost monomaniacal view of politics. A strong state is a necessary precondition of individual liberty. A strong and effective state and liberty are mutually sustaining. Wherever you find people enjoying freedom it is within the context of the state. Individual liberty, along with order and justice, is one of the achievements of civilised modern states. To what other source can we look for protection or redress in the event of our freedom being threatened by others? The state may not do that job very well now and perhaps it does not do it because it has taken too much upon itself, but that is not to justify the conclusion that the state should be somehow got rid of or eroded until the point where it scarcely exists. Supposing it was somehow dissolved in the way that anarcho-capitalists like Murray Rothbard or libertarians like the ghastly Ayn Rand favour, what would happen then? What would prevent the most powerful, charismatic among us from leading a faction that would tyrannise or exploit the rest? Who would prevent rival factions from settling their disputes violently, like feudal barons or rival protection gangs? There would be no independent and impartial authority to adjudicate between them, the recognised and legitimate authority having been abolished.

Human Nature

Liberals take the view that man is a rational creature who acts accordingly to enlightened self-interest and is generally capable of working out what this is. Conservatives, even the modern secular strain, know that human beings are weak, fallible creatures, both morally and intellectually, with a marked capacity for anti-social behaviour. The consequence of men's moral imperfections is that men acting on their uncontrolled impulses will act badly, however good their intentions. They need the restraint of customary and established laws and institutions. It is easier to demonstrate the truth of this proposition, which finds its best articulation from Burke, by pointing out what happens when man is stripped of social context than it is to prove it by arguing positively. Cut adrift from the traditions and customs and norms which sustain morality people do behave rather badly, even savagely and viciously. Witness the behaviour of the French revolutionaries who cut themselves off quite de-

liberately from tradition and custom and obligation. Witness the excesses of marauding armies and armies of occupation who feel themselves no longer bound by the modes of conduct which apply at home. Is it merely an accident that British football fans break even more bones and heads and do more damage when they travel to foreign cities to support their teams than they do at away matches in England? Or is it because they think that the standards which apply at home do not apply away from home?

The point I am making is that when an individual finds himself out of his or her social context, the customary restraints, the institutionalised curbs and inhibitions no longer exist to reign in appetites and impulses and some run riot.

The consequence of man's *intellectual* limitations require that he avail himself of the bank and capital of ages when deciding political and social issues, rather than relying on his own strictly limited stocks of reason. Man is a social creature and the state is a natural extension of man's social character.

The Nature of the State

Underlying all of this is an important difference between the conservative and libertarian positions. Libertarians regard the state in the same way as they regard society, as being no more and no less than the aggregation of the individuals who live in it. Its function is to protect the freedom and property of those individuals. Conservatives believe that the benefits, including liberty, order and justice, which the state confers, depend upon widespread adherence to beliefs and values which are transmitted to succeeding generation via traditions and customs, through myth and prejudice. They believe that the individual may well be hurt when these customs are eroded or overthrown. The state is not therefore just some kind of super Securicor, or security service. Its whole is more than the sum of its parts and the well-being of the whole must be considered if the parts, that is the individuals in it, are to prosper in conditions of freedom, stability and justice. The state may be seen as a civil association which provides the rules within which we live our economic and social and political lives, and which commands respect and loyalty in order to achieve this task. Without them social bonds will be weakened. In the political field consensus will break down and it will become less effective in defending freedom and maintaining justice and order.

Ordinary people have little difficulty in grasping all this, perhaps because they rely on tradition and custom to regulate their attitudes towards the state. Indeed, many ordinary people have shown themselves ready to die for particular nation states. On the whole they do not appear to resent the claims made upon them in times of war or national emergency. Many of those who fought in the last war said they were fighting for freedom. The self-same people said on other occasions that they were fighting for their country.

They saw no contradiction between the two; they realised that liberty depends on the preservation of a traditional social framework.

The Limits of Liberty

A good society is most certainly a free society but it is an ordered, just, cohesive and peaceful society. Yet liberals believe pre-eminently in freedom and attribute almost every social ill from vandalism to race hatred to a lack of freedom. William Roepke, one of the intellectual fathers of the West German economic miracle and himself a classical liberal, is reported as telling an amusing story about the monomania entailed by extreme economic liberalism: Roepke remembered Mises saying that if only the principles of free trade could have been followed from the beginning, World War II might never have happened. I don't recall Roepke's exact reply to this, but he was, in effect, struck dumb. And he remarked to me that it was incredible that anyone with a fair knowledge of German or European history could reduce the German question — the darkest and most somber question of the age, with myriad roots reaching back hundreds of years - to a mere set of economic arrangements. For Roepke, this kind of economic determinism, though employed in the defence of the free market, is just as fallacious as the Marxian version of economic determinism.

Every conceivable social ill is attributed to a lack of freedom; little account is taken of circumstance or particular conditions. The universal panacea therefore is more freedom, and the unthinking corollary of this is often less state. This may well be a cure to particular problems. But it is not the universal panacea that Libertarians suppose it to be. An extension of individual liberty will not solve problems in Northern Ireland or Brixton.

Freedom (or more freedom) in the abstract, idealised way beloved by the modern liberal, all round! Freedom for the Saudis, the Pygmies, the Zulus! The Shah of Persia extended individual liberties in his country and was always being pressed by liberals to go further. The result of that and of rapidly rising income was the collapse of traditional bonds which held that country together. Are we still confident that more liberty would be an unimixed blessing for the Iranians? Would either the Saudis or the oil consuming nations of the West benefit if we pressed the Saudi leaders to grant their peoples a much greater degree of liberty? This seems highly questionable. Unlike libertarians, conservatives believe that liberty flourishes in a particular kind of context. They tend to work for elimination of concerted evils rather than the realization of abstract goals. Conservatives, who know that politics is about the correct application of power according to circumstances, deal with the here and now.

The Character of Libertarians

Liberal and libertarian ideologues do not like complexity. They like single, dominant ideas and themes. They get very frustrated when complexity or circumstance gets in their way. Curiously circumstance and complexity stubbornly hang around. Ideologues nevertheless maintain their faith in

simplicity. Bentham denounced complexity as the nursery of fraud and extolled simplicity: "O rare simplicity Hand-maid of beauty, wisdom, virtue — of everything that is excellent." That sounds to me very like the modern libertarian.

Just in case you think that these lessons have no point in socialist or socially fragmented Britain, consider the way in which libertarian ideologues speak and behave. They dismiss their critics as fools or cretins or crooks. They describe people as "sound" or "unsound". They employ the vocabulary of Right-wing Stalinists. They attribute foul motives. Read their tracts and pamphlets — many are full of the most extreme vituperation. How will such utterances contribute to the enlargement of freedom? I suggest that it will lead to a heightening of political squabbles and tensions and result in greater intolerance, which in the end will lead to the denial of liberty.

Those liberals who believe in some kind of state, albeit of extremely modest proportions, can normally tell you exactly what the state should or should not do, that is to say they set out its function in fine Utopian style. But Popper, the great man who popularized the phrase "The Open Society" and indeed, Hayek, specifically warn against social blueprints of that kind and they warn of the very great dangers entailed in attempting to apply such blueprints.

The Trade Union Problem: No Solution in Liberty

Both liberals and conservatives (though not all libertarians) can agree that it is the job of the state to prevent its citizens from being coerced. In Britain today the principle agencies for coercion and victimisation are trade unions. The trade unions are literally outside the law. They can force the individual to behave in a way in which he would not wish to behave by threats and they can bankrupt companies in pursuit of industrial objectives; even if the company in question is not directly involved in the dispute at hand. Additionally, they are, according to Hayek, the major cause of our economic decline through their effect on the resultant waste of resources. If that situation is to be redressed it can only be done by the state, the state in all its authority. This job can't be accomplished by a night-watchman state or a minimal state or by a state which has been disparaged by the intellectual community. It can only be achieved by a state which commands respect, allegiance and affection. Liberals balk at such notions. But then, if they conceded they might take tough action on that, they might have to admit that there were other occasions on which more than a night-watchman or minimal state was needed. The night-watchman state cannot turn itself into an authoritarian state in a jiffy and then switch back into being a night-watchman again.

The state is not the invariable enemy of liberty and the legitimate exercise of state authority is in my view the necessary concomitant of liberty not its opponent. Burke wrote of the Utopians of his own age: "In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista you see nothing but the gallows." It may seem paradoxical to you to say that in their opposition to the state the libertarians and the extreme liberals present a glimmering of the same danger. But that is what I believe.

THE BANKRUPTCY OF CONSERVATISM

CHRIS R. TAME

It is probably the fate of all unfamiliar ideas that they should be put into the straightjacket of conventional wisdoms and popular stereotypes. Libertarianism, particularly anarcho-capitalism, is no exception. The average classical-liberal-sympathising conservative puts our ideology in a liberty versus order straightjacket, where freedom is seen to be achieved at a cost in social order and security, and where those values can only be achieved at the price of liberty. This is a typically conservative viewpoint in which freedom and order are in tension with one another, and the remedy for social chaos is the state.

Liberty and Order

“I take the view” says Frost “that a strong state is a necessary pre-condition of individual liberty ... Individual liberty, along with order and justice, is one of the achievements of civilised modern states.” He continues, “Supposing (the state) was somehow dissolved ... What would prevent the most powerful charismatic among us from leading a faction which would tyrannise, or exploit, the rest? What would prevent rival factions from settling their disputes violently, like feudal barons or rival protection gangs?”

Madame Roland’s famous words on the way to the guillotine, “Oh liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!” should perhaps be re-phrased: “what misconceptions are presented in thy name!”

Libertarians are as concerned with social order, with the defence of life and property as anyone. What makes them distinctive is that they propose Libertarian solutions to the problems which led Hobbes, Burke and their followers to advocate the strong centralised authority of the state.

Anarcho-capitalists think that the best way of achieving ‘law and order’ is by removing the monopoly of a single coercive agency from the provision of restitutive, protective and adjudication services, and putting those services into the hands of competing, commercial organisations.

The reasoning behind this belief is not particularly new; it has been applied to other important areas of human life for the past two hundred years. It is simply a logical extension of pluralism — the idea that the best way to safeguard the individual’s security is to divide power, to deny it a monopoly so that a many-headed hydra has to work that much harder, and be that much more determined, if it desires to take over society.

No anarcho-capitalists are naive enough to believe that the power-hungry will disappear in a stateless society. What will happen is that they will be denied the monopoly institutions, the automatic routes to power, which provide them with the instruments of coercion even in democratic societies.

The existence of just two competing security agencies, receptive to consumer demand, can do far less harm to the individual and be far more motivated to defend his/her interests than monopoly agencies in even multi-party systems.

For a change of parties in democracies usually signifies no more than a change of ‘management policies’ for the police, the forces and the judiciary; the structure of the provision of these services remains the same: they may reflect the imbalance of a disarmed society ‘protected’ by an armed monopoly.

Despite Frost’s attempt to portray Libertarians as starry-eyed dreamers he, like all advocates of non-market, ‘political’ institutions, subscribes to the hopelessly optimistic belief that agents of the state will achieve a personality transformation so that they will be more able to exercise civilised and ethical judgement than private organisations and individuals. This assumption, usually hidden, but made explicit in, for example, the work of Hannah Arendt, is the basis of most modern forms of statism.

Libertarians take a more realistic, hard-headed view, often inspired by their reading of Von Mises and other economists of both the Austrian and Chicago Schools. We believe there is no magic formula that will make state adjudication more “independent and impartial” than that performed by private individuals. If all power corrupts, as Lord Acton observed, then coercive monopoly power is a dangerous thing indeed.

The Market For Law

History furnishes numerous examples of ‘core’ state activities, clung to by liberal conservatives and minimal-state Libertarians, being performed ‘privately’, that is, voluntarily by individuals and agencies who do not claim to represent anything more than themselves.

The entire law merchant backed by a court system was founded and developed by those individuals who had an interest in its development quite independent of the state. The same applies to admiralty law which deals with seafaring, shipping and salvage.

T. Anderson and P. J. Hill in their essay, “An American Experiment in Anarcho-Capitalism: The *Not so Wild, Wild West*” (*Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. III, No. 1, 1979) have argued that the so-called “Wild West” was not, in fact, without a system of law and order before the state stepped in, and that a crime wave only occurred *after* the state replaced the private agencies.

Anthropologists and other scholars have provided evidence of how ancient societies had highly developed non-state legal systems. Iceland and ancient Ireland are particularly good examples, the latter dealt with by Joseph Peden in “Stateless Societies: Ancient Ireland” (*Libertarian Forum*, April 1971) and “Property Rights in Celtic Irish Law” (*Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol., 1 No. 2, 1977). Other notable works are *Tribes Without Rulers*, edited by J. Middleton and D. Tait (Routledge, London, 1968): “Stateless Society” by A. Southall in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 15 (Macmillan, London, 1968); and *Society Against the State* by P. Clastres (Blackwell, Oxford, 1977).

Far from being a bastion of order and security, the state has proved to be not only society's greatest thief, its biggest threat to security and to peace, but also usually a poor counter-force to violence and theft by others. Not least of the reasons for this is the fact that monopoly state agencies can afford to be less responsive to demands for adequate protection and penalties that actually work, for exactly the same reason that British Telecom provides such a shoddy, inefficient service.

One important consequence of taking protection, law and adjudication out of the market is that these services cease to be consumer oriented. They cease to be concerned with the victim, a feature of modern 'justice' which is becoming increasingly apparent. The principle of restitution, in which the offender as far as possible paid back the victim, was enshrined in English common law, which evolved independently of central authority (see Bruno Leoni, *Freedom and the Law*, Nash, Los Angeles, 1972).

Conflict in an Anarcho-Capitalist Society

The possibility of violence between competing protection agencies, and of attempts to seize illegitimate power, is a question which naturally exercises anarcho-capitalists. There is no absolute guarantee that this will not happen, any more than there is a guarantee that governments will not abuse their powers, or that there will not be fighting between different branches of the government. However, a society in which power is very diffused is far more able to resist violence and tyranny than a society where power is exercised through monopoly agencies and where individuals are disarmed. Some economists now believe that it is in their nature for all states to grow more oppressive.

There are in anarcho-capitalist societies structural checks, balances and brakes on the acquisition of coercive power that would be far more efficient than those in liberal democratic regimes. These are discussed in detail in Murray Rothbard's *For a New Liberty* (Collier-Macmillan, New York, 1973); David Friedman's *The Machinery of Freedom* (Harper and Row, New York, 1974); and J. Wollstein and M. and L. Tannehill's *Society Without Government* (Arno Press, New York, 1972).

Any commercial, consumer-oriented organisation making a bid for coercive monopoly power would lose far more than just a battle if the attempt failed (as it is likely to do in a heavily armed society prone to litigation): a functioning business is dependent for survival on its reputation and goodwill.

The role of private arbitration would be even more important in an anarcho-capitalist society than it is in our own, where it already resolves a great many business disputes via social and economic sanctions and the bonding system.

Tradition and the State

Frost's second main thrust of argument concerns the role of the state in defending custom; he implies that Libertarians are not sensitive to the importance of traditional mores. In fact, many Libertarians would agree with him on the importance of customary restraint and precedent in setting a standard of civilised behaviour. But, as the conservative Michael Oakeshott has pointed out, tradition and law are not the same thing and they do not necessarily support one another.

If custom is to function at all it must be spontaneous, that is, freely held. Given the way that Frost uses tradition as an

argument for statism, it is ironic that about two hundred years ago conservatives were defending spontaneous 'folkways' against liberal-rationalist legislation! One of the greatest twentieth century Libertarians, Albert Jay Nock, was an ardent defender of particular traditions, and of the role of tradition in history. In his great work, *Our Enemy, The State* (Free Life Editions, New York, 1973) Nock stresses the conflict between what he terms "social power" and "state power", the former the nexus of customs, trends and institutions evolved by the people to serve them, the latter the brute force of the state, the tool of particular groups and individuals to impose their values and goals upon society. Frank Chodorov explored similar themes in *The Rise and Fall of Society* (Devin-Adair, New York, 1959).

Unlike other social theorists, Libertarians do not have a moral blueprint ready for their ideal society (except, of course, for the non-aggression principle): such a blueprint would be incompatible with the spirit of Libertarian pluralism. It seems likely that most people will retain a blend of cautious conservatism and adaptability to change, while more *avant garde* minorities will have complete freedom to follow their lifestyles, as long as they are non-coercive, on their own property and in their own communities. That state and custom do not have to go together is evidenced by the many stateless societies of primitive tribes which were nevertheless rigidly bound by traditional rules of behaviour.

Frost supports the claim that the state is a "natural extension of man's social character". Quite the reverse is true: it is an extension of his *anti-social* character, because it attacks "social power", the many ways in which individuals and communities organise their activities.

What Libertarians seek is a framework of justice and liberty - provided by the free market in the anarcho-capitalist version - in which individuals and groups can pursue their distinctive traditions and mores in so far as they do not violently interfere with others. As Robert Nozick put it in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1974): "Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Taylor, Bertrand Russell ... Picasso, Moses, Einstein, Hugh Hefner ... Frank Sinatra, Freud ... Ayn Rand ... Bobby Fischer, Emma Goldman ... you, and your parents. Is there really *one* kind of life which is best for each of these people?" (p. 310)

Frost's concept of a moral state enforcing morality or tradition can only cause conflict between different groups and individuals, all of whom battle for control of the state in order to defend themselves or attack others, to impose their "social context" or resist the imposition of others. *Which* contexts, which values, which traditions, Mr. Frost? Libertarians prefer the social context of liberty, a context which allows all sorts and conditions of people the space to pursue the good — or the bad — life as they see it. As Judy Tame said in an essay in *Free Life*: "freedom's special character is negative. It is a complete vacuum, a 'space' in which a variety of options, circumscribed only by 'the possible' are open. 'The possible' includes natural and human obstacles. Freedom is *not* the ability to do something in particular or be something in particular." ("Killing Freedom by Stealth", Spring, 1980.)

The Alleged Limitations of Freedom

Frost makes the tired old Burkean claim that "The consequences of man's intellectual limitations require that he avail himself of the bank and capital of ages when deciding political and social issues, rather than relying on his own strictly

limited stocks of reason.” This argument remains the same hot air now that it was when Burke first emitted it. The intellectual bank and capital of ages is the product of past individuals’ strictly limited stocks of reason. Which particular deposits are we to draw from this bank? The wisdom of Marx or Adam Smith, Burke or Paine, Keynes or Hayek, Plato or Aristotle? Why are past attempts to understand the world superior, on principle, to our own? What alchemy will turn our reasoning into an acceptable deposit in the bank of ideas in a hundred years’ time? Tradition, if it is to be saved from fossilisation as mere *traditionalism*, must be an evolving thing in the present, subject to criticism and modification.

Economic Determinism

Frost accuses Libertarians of monomania about freedom, especially economic freedom, citing an alleged statement by one of the greatest twentieth century liberals, Ludwig von Mises, as proof of his economic determinism and ignorance of history’s complexity. The fact that Mises devoted a considerable part of his many writings to refutations of economic determinism (see especially *Theory and History*, Cape, London, 1958, pp. 73-177) renders this a rather strange accusation. Unfortunately Frost, like Roepke (the original reporter of Mises’s alleged statement) does not understand Mises (if the statement was even made in the form reported). He meant that the rise of nationalism and protectionism signified the eclipse of the peaceable, productive and internationalist ideals of liberalism and the creation of an institutional context in which (quite unlike the free trade context) it became advantageous for powerful interest-groups to press for aggressive expansionist policies. It is not “determinism” to attribute the world wars to the intellectual, political and economic consequences of nationalist protectionism; it sounds more like determinism to assert that these wars were bound to occur just the same because of inexorable yet unspecified historical influences, if modern nationalism had not arisen.

In his *Omnipotent Government* (Arlington House, New Rochelle, N.Y., 1969) written during the Second World War, Mises strove to analyse in detail the causes of the crises. His own words in the Introduction effectively refute Frost’s — and Roepke’s — claims: “It is the task of this present book to trace the outline of the changes and events which brought about the contemporary state of German and European affairs ... It deals both with history and with fundamental issues of sociology and economics. It tries not to neglect any point of view the elucidation of which is necessary for a full description of the world’s Nazi problem ... Whoever wishes to understand the present state of political affairs must study history. He must know the forces which gave rise to our problems and conflicts.” (pp. 8, 14)

Freedom as a Panacea

It is not true that “every conceivable social ill is attributed to lack of freedom” by Libertarians. One notable example springs to mind immediately: Rand’s critique of the ethical and cultural values of altruism and Christianity.

Lack of freedom is the cause of countless problems, social disharmonies and suffering (for example, the explosion of organized crime as a result of the prohibition of alcohol in the USA; the increase of drug addiction as a result of anti-drug laws; the corruption of the Metropolitan Police as a result of laws against prostitution and other “vices”). Nevertheless,

for Libertarians freedom remains the precondition, the necessary but not sufficient, basis for the pursuit of other values. The achievement of some of those goals I deem desirable — the end of bigotry and superstition, the creation of the polite and orderly society, sexual enlightenment — are quite clearly not achieved *automatically* by the creation of a free society. Such values are the product of persuasion, education, and agreement.

Ulster, Brixton and Persia

Frost cites Northern Ireland and Brixton as examples of situations where “an extension of individual liberty will not ... solve problems.” In both cases the issue of freedom is very relevant. The British state has shown little enthusiasm to defend the lives, liberty and property of the majority of the population from the aggressive war waged against them by a minority aiming to bomb them into a united socialist Ireland. As I have pointed out before, the free society is the orderly and secure society; in it the full weight of its protective services falls upon those who destroy lives and property; unfortunately this committed defence of individual liberty is not evident in the British state’s actions in Northern Ireland.

In Brixton government agencies have proved particularly inept at protecting the lives, liberty and property of citizens, black or white. While policemen waste their time bursting into private houses and coffee bars hunting for cannabis, old women remain prey to violence on the streets. The list of central and local government restrictions of freedom which have exacerbated Brixton’s problems is endless: rent control; high rates; council housing; planning controls; victimless crimes such as smoking cannabis which help to alienate blacks from the police; non-market policing which can afford to be abusive to the black section of its ‘customers’; few alternatives to poor state education; and last but not least, a lack of political will on the part of those who make the decisions, to do what is necessary to give adequate protection from genuine crime to the ordinary people of Brixton.

It does not take a Libertarian to point out the error of Frost’s third example as cases where individual liberty has not worked. Frost says that the Shah of Iran attempted to extend individual liberties, resulting in “the collapse of traditional bonds which held that country together.”

The Shah followed a vigorous policy of technocratic, Keynesian statism, backed by the ferocity of the SAVAK secret police, estimated at between 30,000 and 60,000 strong. It has been well documented that under the Shah’s regime tens of thousands of individuals were imprisoned, tortured and murdered.

Iran’s modernization consisted of massive taxation, explosive inflation, centralized banking, an army of western and western trained Keynesian economists, macro-economic fine tuning, price controls, Soviet-style ‘five year plans’, centrally directed investment, prohibitions on private housing, and large state building schemes. This statism brought in its wake a network of graft and corruption, conferring unearned privileges and wealth on those with power and influence.

The reasons for the return of militantly traditional values in Iran are no doubt many and varied; what cannot be held responsible is individual liberty, for the simple reason that under the Shah vast areas of personal freedom did not exist. It is far more realistic to see the events in Iran as the product of a power struggle between westernised, secular statists and

the religious authorities, a tension which is common in developing countries.

Roy Childs made an important contribution to analysis of the Iranian revolution in his essay, "The Iranian Drama" (*Libertarian Review*, February, 1980). Here Childs points out that when the Shah tried to promote genuinely modern values (for example, the liberation of women) he did so gun in hand. This, predictably, created the bigoted, reactionary backlash that occurred.

Far from providing an argument for statism, Iran underlines my earlier argument against the conservative idea that the state can be used to enforce morality, social behaviour and mores. In Roy Childs' words: "This indeed is the continuing contradiction which lies behind so much of the 'modernization' or 'Westernization' which is taking place in the Third World ... there are in fact always two routes to progress: the path of free, spontaneous development, of free men and women engaging in voluntary exchanges, producing economic growth through their own voluntary savings and investment, changing their own social mores through their own growing understanding; and the path of state coercion, violence and planning, which imposes a preconceived notion of progress on men and women at the point of a gun. The Pahlavi dynasty has always followed the second route, backed by Western governments anxious to use Iran's oil resources for their own benefit." (p. 32)

Liberty and Its Context

Frost claims that "Unlike libertarians, conservatives believe that liberty flourishes in a particular kind of context. They tend to work for the elimination of concerted evils rather than the realization of abstract goals." Nothing could be further from the truth. Libertarians have always been well aware that particular values, traditions or mores are conducive to the degree of liberty that societies are capable of achieving. From Smith, Ferguson, Millar (the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers), through Charles Comte, Dunoyer, Thierry and Spencer to Mises, Rand and Rothbard, liberals and Libertarians have never ceased being concerned with the cultural and ethical environments conducive to liberty, and their inter-relationship with the economic structure.

Equally untrue is Frost's claim that Libertarians are concerned only with abstract, idealized freedom, and not with anyone's freedom in particular. A passing acquaintance with Libertarian literature would disabuse anyone of such a fallacy. From Spencer's *Social Statics* to Mises's *Liberalism*, from Rand's *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* to Hospers's *Libertarianism*, from Rothbard's *For A New Liberty* to Machan's *Human Rights and Human Liberties*, Libertarian works are replete with analyses of specific freedoms or our lack of them. The diverse American Libertarian press — *Reason*, *Libertarian Review*, *Libertarian Forum*, *Liberty*, *Free Texas*, *New Libertarian*, *Objectivist Forum*, *The Freeman* etc. — presents an ongoing spectacle of Libertarian analysis to countless specific issues such as the railways, education, private health insurance, urban renewal schemes in New York, and so on.

In contrast, consider conservatism. Here we find little more than a rag-bag of phrases about liberty and tradition, with very little specificity and analysis. At their best, conservatives like Frost appear to want to pick and choose in a supermarket of values, taking a little liberty here, a little authority there. The logic of their choice seems arbitrary, based on the

easy principle: freedom for anything I like or am indifferent about; no freedom for anything I dislike.

When it comes to abstraction, Frost's typically conservative consigning of the non-Western world to backwardness and statism on the grounds that it is not ready for liberty (or does think they can never be free?) is a spectacular example. I wonder if Frost has ever taken the trouble to consider what this inhumane principle actually means in *concrete* terms for the people of the poorer countries? The prolongation of poverty and despair, of hunger and disease, of torture and other violence, of endless toil under landed and industrial magnates and political masters, the condemnation of independent-minded women to purdah and ceaseless child-bearing ... this is what Frost's abstract traditionalism means in practice.

Frost apparently shares Enoch Powell's unabashed relativism which in effect takes the attitude "I'm all right, Jack" with respect to ourselves in the West, and condemns the rest of humanity to poverty and suffering because they were not lucky enough to be born within the pale of Britain's traditional liberties. In other words, the "good life" is for those of European descent only, because they thought of it first. In this way, conservatives like Powell and Frost raise historical accident to an inhumanly abstract principle. What could be more cut off from concrete reality than the consigning of millions of individuals to backwardness and despair in the name of an assertion — relativism — found in sociological textbooks?

Political and Social Values

Frost argues that Libertarians see liberty as "the single object of all political endeavour, almost of all human endeavour." The first part of the statement is correct. This is what Libertarianism is all about, the claim that human interests are best served by the abolition of legitimized coercion and violence. The second part of the statement is incorrect. Libertarians have many views of what constitutes the good or virtuous society, from Rand's atheistic egotism to the Christian Libertarianism of the Galatians Fellowship. But we all believe that an orderly society, let alone a free one, can only be attained or maintained by the pursuit of other moral, intellectual, social or cultural goals. As Tibor Machan has put it: "Libertarianism is, put plainly, the view that the task of politics is liberty, nothing more or less, and the task of virtue, human excellence or happiness, is a task that only the individual on his own can strive to fulfill either alone or in personal and voluntary association with others, never by force or coercion." ("Libertarianism and Conservatives", *Modern Age*, Winter, 1980).

Abuse and Argument

Frost claims that Libertarians "speak and behave" in objectionable and unpleasant ways. "They dismiss their critics as fools or cretins or crooks. They describe people as 'sound' or 'unsound'. They employ vocabulary of right-wing Stalinists. They attribute foul motives. Read their tracts and pamphlets — many of them are full of the most extreme vituperation."

Since Frost does not give specific examples I find is somewhat difficult to deal with his claim. From my very wide reading of Libertarian literature I have noticed that the tone is usually serious, courteous and scholarly. It is a mistake frequently made to confuse vigorous argument with abuse.

Individuals vary in their tastes and temper, and in their propensity to refer to spades, bloody shovels or agricultural implements. It is probably true that Libertarians use stronger language than conservatives, but we do not think that conservative moderation is something to emulate! If Frost had observed Libertarians at work and play more closely he might have noticed that friends and colleagues can engage in vigorous debate with one another without ceasing to be friendly afterwards.

Frost himself is certainly not immune from the use of vituperative and immoderate language when referring to Libertarians; we have, he says, a “mystical glaze” in our eyes, Ayn Rand is “ghastly” (no reason given), reasoned argument is traduced as “furious protestations” and our “utopian” visions will lead to “nothing but the gallows”. Even conservatives find it appropriate to employ abuse at times; what a pity it should be directed at exponents of liberty rather than liberty’s enemies.

Unlimited Freedom and Unlimited Despotism

Frost informs us that “if one demands unlimited freedom one ends up with unlimited despotism”. This is an assertion unsupported by a shred of argument or evidence. A moment’s thought will remind us that the world’s most despotic regimes — in the USSR, Eastern Europe, China and South America — are those with authoritarian traditions often centuries old, and certainly pre-dating communism and fascism. It is odd that someone as sensitive to tradition as Frost should not have noticed this. Apart from this point, I cannot think of one political movement in history that has called for “unlimited freedom”. Libertarians, with their concept of a society constrained by rules based on property rights, certainly do not.

Unions and the State

Frost ends his essay by citing trade unions as an example of a problem that only the state can remedy. He fails to see that the state is the problem. It is precisely the state that has conferred upon trade unions their uniquely privileged position, by granting them legal immunities.

The remedy is the *removal* of the state from its role as patron and benefactor of the unions, not more legislation creating further inequalities under the law between citizens. As a

Libertarian Alliance leaflet says, “Trade Unions should be voluntary associations (like chess clubs, charities, churches or business corporations), free to run their internal affairs as they please ... [they] ought to be treated by the law just like any other voluntary association, without privileges or special disabilities.”

Frost claims that we need an “authoritative state”, a state which “commands respect, allegiance and affection” in order to deal with the unions and other problems. In his view this is incompatible with the minimal, night-watchman state and with liberalism. It is difficult to see why a state, limited in the areas in which it is allowed to intervene, should not nevertheless be vigorous, authoritative and respected in its own domain. Anarcho-capitalists, of course, accept no function for the state at all, but they still recognise the importance for an anarcho-capitalist society of respect and affection for its institutions (if you like, a nationless ‘patriotism’). No society can persist for long, not least a Libertarian one, without a positive commitment on the part of its members to its way of life and to its system of authority and justice. This is a concept — “legitimacy” which can be found in any political science and sociology textbook, and is not an insight peculiar to conservatives.

Conclusion

Most of Frost’s criticism of Libertarianism could be more accurately applied to conservatism, which seems to be suffering from a bad case of what Freudian analysts would call “projection” — the attribution of its own characteristics to its opponents. While Libertarians reveal an appreciation of tradition as a living and spontaneous force in the present, it is conservatives — many of whom are concerned with little else — who try to fossilise and thus destroy the tradition. While Libertarians believe in leaving tradition alone, conservatives want to interfere with it by enforcing those traditions they approve of. While Libertarians believe in a vigorous defence of life and property, conservatives help to undermine *just* law and order by sanctioning non-market protective and adjudicatory services and the concept of the victimless crime.

Gerry Frost’s essay suggests that conservatism is ideologically bankrupt, and that it has no claim to the interest of those seeking individual liberty.

LIBERTARIANS VERSUS LIBERTY

GERRY FROST

Chris Tame’s reply (“The Bankruptcy of Conservatism”) to my article “What Good is the State” sadly demonstrated that I failed dismally in the task I had set myself. This was to show to friends of libertarian persuasion, in a gentle if provocative way, they they perhaps do not after all possess the whole of political truth, if such there is: that temperance (not to be confused with “moderation” in its modern political sense), intellectual humility, and scepticism are essential to the well-being of a pluralist society: that those who seek liberty do not do their cause much good by treating with contempt those with whom they disagree; that there are unper-

ceived dangers lurking in the universalism and utopianism of much libertarian writing: that adherence to libertarian, liberal or conservative views should imply a mode of discourse as well as particular views, and that self-deprecation is often a sign of judgement and is therefore to be cherished; and, most importantly, that adherence to the single, dominant cause and the theme of unlimited freedom will — paradoxically — help strengthen the fetters that bind us.

However, writing with all the certainty of one who has recently had the truth exposed to him by Divine Revelation, displaying the intellectual humility that one associates with

Alfred Sherman and the degree of self-deprecation of Edward Heath, Chris Tame concludes triumphantly: “Gerry Frost’s essay suggests that conservatism is ideologically bankrupt, and that it has no claim to the interest of those seeking individual liberty.”

What follows is dedicated to all those ideological bankrupts who, on Tame’s definition, appear to make up the entire population save the membership of the Libertarian Alliance.

While I prefer liberal ideologies to Marxist ones, this exclusivity, this sense of being virtuous in a sea of vice, does strike me as disagreeable. Why is it that those who should presumably adopt a live and let live attitude towards life do in fact approach it with the intensity of a Calvinist suffering from constipation and so often display the temperament and language of authoritarians?

However, I leave this question to psychology students in search of a PhD thesis, in order to make the following points about Chris Tame’s critique.

Tame misunderstands me (and, more importantly, Burke) when he says that I reject reason. Traditional conservatives simply assert that reason is fallible and that there are mysteries which the human intellect cannot immediately penetrate. Hence the need to take notice of “the capital and bank of ages”.

I do not assert that past attempts to understand the world are always superior to one’s own and I did not say that they were. I merely assert that in an age in which there is a pathetic and unworthy worship of everything that is new and trendy we ought to better understand and value that which has been tried and tested and which has worked over the years (e.g., markets, parish councils, Oxford and Cambridge, the WRVS, the laws of supply and demand). I believe that many disasters, e.g. reorganisation of local government, “fine tuning” etc. would have been avoided had so many intellectuals not concluded that all ancient institutions were “past it” and that everything written before the last decade was *passé* unless it happened to be by Marx or Engels.

Chris Tame implies that conservatives have no means of selecting between different ideas and principles formulated in the past. This is not of course the case. Tories are empirical, pragmatic, sceptical, tolerant, and have a particular view of man and humanity. They can and should judge on the basis of this distinctive philosophical outlook.

Chris Tame also asserts that accumulated wisdom is due to past acts of individual rationality. Not so, Mr. Tame: custom, tradition, prejudice, instinct, imagination, and luck, have all played their part. His description of the process by which we acquire learning also overlooks the extent to which we are constantly comparing the ideas and experience of the present with the established truths and experience of the past.

Social Values

In advocating a society in which we buy our values off the peg according to our predilections, Chris Tame quotes Nozick as stressing the absurdity of supposing that there is a single way of life suitable for Moses, Frank Sinatra, Wittgenstein, Russell, Picasso, et al. Since no conservative would ever suggest a single way of life for individuals so diverse in background, culture, nationality and generation, I don’t see the relevance of this. However, in favouring a society in which there is an almost infinite array of competing values,

mores and assumptions, I think he is sadly mistaken. A cohesive society tends to be one in which there is a broad consensus: a society in which anything goes, or in which there are sharply conflicting values, tends to be a society which is socially disintegrating (for examples, see s.a.e).

Inhumanity

For suggesting that freedom may not be the answer to all known problems (e.g. those of Iran and Brixton) I am described as inhumane. With Enoch Powell I am accused of “consigning” millions of third world citizens to poverty, despair and backwardness. To say the least, this would appear to attribute to me a degree of influence — nay, power — I never knew I possessed.

What I was endeavouring to say was that the dilemmas of human society are complex and various. It is extremely arrogant to suppose that the application of a single panacea — whether more freedom or some other social good — would help alleviate the hardships of various people in various situations in different parts of the world of which we are all more or less ignorant. It might very well have the opposite effect. It is difficult to understand what is happening in one’s own country: still harder to fathom the mysteries and complexities of peoples whose perceptions and attitudes are remotely different. Chris Tame suggests the whole matter can be cleared up if I read a noted Libertarian expert on Iran: I wonder whether it is the author’s libertarianism or his deep knowledge of Iranian ways that commends itself to Mr. Tame.

As for his suggestion that I am inhumane because I aver that there are differences in the mores and attitudes of different races, it sounds like the authentic voice of the Loony Left. I shall assume that Chris has employed Ken Livingstone on one of those numerous MSC grants to assist him in drafting the article. I refuse to take the point seriously because if I did I would have to treat it with contempt.

Abstract Liberty

Chris wholly misunderstands me when I suggest that libertarians are concerned mainly with a pallid intellectualised and generalised liberty and not anyone’s liberty in particular. I do not doubt that there is a whole industry devoted to “difficult cases”. What I was suggesting, on the basis of personal observation, is that libertarians are not greatly moved by the personal predicament of individuals whose liberty is threatened by trade unions or other agencies of coercion. His reply, which is in effect a bibliography, confirms my point.

State Action

Conservatives are concerned with the here and now, rather than the distant and idealised future, with particular solutions to concrete problems. One of these is the coercive behaviour of the trade unions. It seems to me that this cannot be dealt with without a radical and determined State (which was responsible for this situation in the first place is not in dispute). What I want to know from him is this: how can this problem be removed without determined State intervention, the State in all its authority? He has so far ignored the question.

Roepke and Von Mises

Roepke’s criticism of von Mises (whom Roepke admired) seems to me wholly sound and the quote which Roepke at-

tributes to von Mises wholly in keeping with von Mises' character. It is simply arrogant of Chris to say that Roepke, who was present at the time, didn't understand von Mises, but he, Tame, who wasn't, and who hadn't heard the quotation until now, knew precisely what he meant by it. In any case, Roepke cannot be the only person to have found von Mises both instructive and stridently dogmatic.

Conservatism, Freedom and Tradition

Not surprisingly, I do not concur with Chris Tame's conclusion. The charge against modern-day conservatives is surely not that they have tried to impose traditions on people who don't want them — in any case, traditions don't need to be imposed — but that they have been suckers for every new idea that has come along, and have wholly lacked confidence in their own extremely rich intellectual tradition. Thus

conservatives have frequently behaved like social democrats or socialists and those like Edward Heath who have strayed furthest from the tradition have joined libertarians in seeking to dispose of this nation state.

Finally, I plead guilty to the charge of being ideologically bankrupt, but since conservatives have always eschewed ideology as such, it is no great admission. Indeed, to make the charge is rather like condemning a teetotler for failing to stand his round. However, there is, I believe, a distinctive conservative way of looking at the world: it is not based on the single, over-riding cause of unlimited liberty because conservatives believe that if you seek unlimited freedom or unlimited anything else, you will end up with unlimited despotism: but I am inclined to the view that it better serves the cause of individual liberty than the strident simplicities of libertarianism.

LIBERTARIANISM VERSUS CONSERVATISM

CHRIS R. TAME

I fear that Gerry Frost's rebuttal of my critique of conservatism only serves to underline not merely the ideological, but intellectual, bankruptcy of conservatism.

Abuse and Contempt

Gerry Frost starts by firing another salvo of *ad hominem* attacks, assertions and abuse at libertarianism in general, and myself in particular. Libertarians are alleged to lack, "temperance", "humility", "self-deprecation", to treat others with "contempt", and display "the temperament and language of authoritarianism". I am accused of being intellectually arrogant and of writing with "all the certainty of one who has recently had the Truth exposed to him by Divine Revelation".

Now it is, alas, true that libertarianism has not proved immune from secular religiosity, and from the whole range of pathological motivations that have manifested themselves in every other ideology or intellectual system, from socialism to conservatism, from Christianity to Freudianism. I will leave it to readers to decide, however, whether my writing gives evidence of such characteristics. Throughout our exchange, I should point out, it is Gerry Frost who has consistently employed the most extravagant abuse and name-calling, in place of reasoned argument.

Humility

As for Gerry Frost's encomiums to "humility" and "self-deprecation", this merely resembles the grumbings of a primitive witch-doctor. His charms don't work, and he can offer no reasons why they should. But faced with the criticisms - and successful remedies — of a Western doctor, he simply accuses the doctor of "dogmatism" and "arrogance". If it is arrogant and dogmatic to offer reasoned arguments and critical analysis, then so be it, and I plead guilty.

The Alleged Limits of Reason

Gerry Frost argues that he does not reject reason, but merely recognizes that reason is fallible and that there are mysteries that the human intellect cannot immediately penetrate. This is mere playing with words. If there are such "mysteries" why should "the capital and bank of ages" (the product of individual reason in the past) be more trustworthy than the current deposits of reason? Gerry Frost also proceeds to set up an absurd straw-man. No one with an iota of sense would merely assert that just because an idea or an institution is old it is incorrect or outmoded. The intellectual and institutional examples he gives were not attacked because they were "old", they were attacked because of their supposed deficiencies when judged by critical analysis. If that analysis was incorrect it was incorrect because of faulty reasoning. Vague assertions that "old" institutions or ideas shouldn't be rejected merely because they are old cut no ice with anyone. It was precisely the conservatives' failure to defend anything intellectually, with carefully reasoned arguments, that has led to their repeated defeats. All they can offer is exactly the sort of vague and irrelevant generality uttered by Gerry Frost.

Choosing Our Values

Gerry Frost argues that conservatives do have means of selecting between traditions. If this is the case, then why does he spend so much time and effort on defending tradition *per se*, tradition(s) in general? It is quite clear that Gerry Frost is merely shifting his ground when the absurdity of his case for tradition is demonstrated.

Gerry Frost now argues that conservatives have a "distinctive philosophical outlook" enabling them to judge and select amongst traditions. Let us be told, then, the detailed, reasoned arguments for this outlook. Let us see its superiority to other outlooks demonstrated. Gerry, of course, does no such thing. He merely offers us a list of more or less appealing epithets - "empirical", "pragmatic", "sceptical", "tolerant". The first three words are almost devoid of meaning. As for

the last, one is left almost speechless by a conservative claiming tolerance as a major characteristic of his ideology. Conservatism and conservatives are constantly seeking the repression of ideas, values, life-styles, minorities and traditions they do not favour — all in the name, of course, of social cohesion, or tradition, order, decency, the public good, etc.

Gerry Frost also attempts to rescue his position by shifting the meaning of words. He argues that “Chris Tame asserts that accumulated wisdom of the past is merely the product of past acts of individual rationality”, whereas “custom, tradition, prejudice, instinct, imagination and luck, have all played their part.” What he is doing here is dodging between “wisdom” meaning demonstrated truths, correct ideas, etc. and “wisdom” as useful or functional social patterns. Quite clearly, useful social functions have emerged from more than mere individual rationality. They have indeed emerged from “custom, tradition, prejudice, instinct, imagination and luck”. No libertarian would deny this. In fact, libertarian scholars have spent much time analysing the “unintended consequences of human action”, the economic interpretation of history, the complex ways in which social orders emerge — for both good and evil — from the interplay of many factors. But it is precisely the critical rational intelligence which performs this task of evaluation (not the credulous, uncritical tradition-bound mentality) and which judges precisely what is useful in a human context.

Choosing Our Values

Gerry Frost also argues that “no conservative would ever suggest a single way of life for individuals so diverse ...” But conservatives are constantly doing this. Gerry Frost himself immediately argues for a “broad consensus” in which there are only “relatively minor variations”. In his view, where there are sharply conflicting values, we have social disintegration. Gerry Frost is tantalisingly vague as to what exactly are the permissible variations, or the grounds upon which incredibly serious and vital judgements are to be made. (Conservatives constantly make the most amazing claims regarding society and social institutions, usually without even the slightest conception of what it would take to scientifically verify their hubristic claims. Observe their arguments about the effects of homosexuality, or various other alleged practices which they claim will “undermine” society).

In fact, Gerry Frost is clearly right when he says that a society where “anything goes” is undesirable, perhaps even impossible. But no libertarian wants this. Libertarians want a society where life, liberty and property are maintained, where invasive coercion is prevented, and non-invasive actions are not interfered with. Clearly some sort of “broad consensus” is necessary, if by that we mean — as libertarians mean — adherence to non-aggressive behaviour. Many other values (politeness, rationality, benevolence etc., to name but a few) would also create a much more workable, enjoyable and productive society, and libertarians support such values.

Is Conservatism Inhumane?

Gerry Frost sneers and makes jocular remarks about my argument that conservatism is inhumane. But it clearly is. How else can one describe an ideology which in the name of one of ‘orthodox’ sociology’s most contentious doctrines — cultural relativism — consigns millions to poverty, supersti-

tion, stagnation, and despotism merely because of the misfortune of geographical location. Gerry Frost resorts once again to the old accusation of “arrogance”. I cite an interesting and well-informed libertarian analysis of Iran which refutes Gerry Frost’s amazingly ill-informed assertions about that nation. Gerry Frost is unable to offer any detailed reply to that analysis, any demonstration of its falsity, so instead he simply pontificates about mysteries and complexities.

Gerry Frost also misrepresents my arguments. He states that I suggested he was inhumane because he “aver(s) there are differences in the mores and attitudes of different races”. I did no such thing. Clearly different ethnic, racial, national, linguistic and other groups *do* have different mores and attitudes. What I question is whether those different mores and attitudes are of equal moral status, and whether the present hegemony of particular values over particular groups should be sacrosanct and immune from criticism.

Abstract Liberty and Libertarians’ Motivations

Gerry Frost states that I “wholly misunderstood” his point about libertarians being “concerned mainly with a pallid intellectualized and generalized liberty and not anyone’s liberty in particular”. He argues that my references to the numerous libertarian treatments of specific issues, freedoms and lack of freedoms merely “confirms (his) point”. His point, apparently, was that Libertarians “are not greatly moved by the personal predicament of individuals whose liberty is threatened by trade unions or other agencies of coercion”. I fail to see how my references confirm his point. Why do libertarians spend so much time writing impassioned and highly specific accounts of countless injustices? Why do they devote themselves to helping the victims of such injustice? Why do they sacrifice lucrative academic and professional careers to do so? (Gerry Frost’s claim is falsified by the biographies of so many libertarians it seems almost superfluous to cite examples. But take Martin Anderson, an important advisor to Ronald Reagan. Originally a ‘left liberal’, his analysis of the horrors of the urban renewal programme, its blighting of hundreds of communities and thousands of lives, led him directly to become a libertarian.) Gerry Frost’s claim to apparent omniscient knowledge of the motives of the hundreds of thousands of libertarians is most interesting.

State Action

Returning to his example of trade union privileges Gerry Frost repeats his claim that this demonstrates the need for “radical and determined State action”, and asserts that I have “ignored the question”. I thought that I had given a detailed and lucid reply. If Gerry Frost wants to call the repeal of a State law granting coercive privileges to trade unions and example of “radical and determined State action, then so be it. I would have thought it more appropriate to call it the *abolition* of “radical and determined State action”. Gerry Frost’s tactics here are, as in his original essay, to portray legitimate law enforcement (i.e., the protection of property and non-coercive behaviour) as statism and then gleefully proclaim that statism is necessary.

Roepke, Von Mises and Monomania

I am amazed that Gerry Frost should still be trying to milk this feeble story to support his attribution to libertarianism of “monomania” and “economic determinism”. He attempts to ridicule my comments by stating that that I wasn’t present when this alleged conversation took place. But, of course,

neither was Gerry Frost, and reports about conversations are frequently inaccurate. (There are, incidentally, a number of apparently apocryphal stories circulating about von Mises, many of which have been demonstrated to be untrue, misunderstandings or misreportings.) Roepke clearly misunderstood von Mises. The latter, as my quotation (let alone even the most superficial reading of his work) demonstrates, was *not* an economic, or any other sort of, determinist nor an intellectual monomaniac. Indeed, even the words themselves reported by Roepke and Frost are not an example of economic determinism. Gerry Frost ignores the substance of my reply and attempts to bolster an absurd allegation with further abuse, accusing von Mises of being “stridently dogmatic”.

Conservative Tradition

Gerry Frost’s comments about the “extremely rich intellectual tradition” of conservatism was more a product of imagination than a reference to anything in reality. Apart from those occasions when conservatives have imbibed, in varying degrees, a draught of liberalism (e.g., the early writings of Enoch Powell, some of the Centre for Policy Studies associates, the circles influenced by the Institute of Economic Affairs), the conservative tradition was, and remains, exactly

at the level of discourse manifest in Gerry Frost’s two essays — grandiose and glittering generalities, pompous and empty word-mongering. Its history is an appalling one. Rhetorical formulae embellish the protection of vested interests and special privileges. At best the conservatives want to have their cake and eat it. They clearly don’t want totalitarian statism, but they would like a little bit of liberty (for themselves and their friends) when it suits them, and a little bit of statism when that suits them too. To camouflage this sorry mess they denounce reason and rationality and proclaim the virtues of something called “moderation” or “pragmatism”, concepts of extreme vagueness and little value. When they cannot win an argument they abuse their opponent. Edward Heath is no “abberation from the conservative tradition”, he embodies its essence, and Gerry Frost is, alas, only quantitatively and not qualitatively removed from him. Gerry Frost recognizes the cogency of the libertarian case in many areas, but still wants his statist “cake”, still wishes to hang on to the little bits of statism, the little bits of control and repression that he favours. Since he has at least taken some steps along the road *from* serfdom, it would be marvellous if he could only bring himself to join us at its destination: the free and open society.

SOME SECOND THOUGHTS

CHRIS R. TAME

This debate was first published in 1982 and 1983. Looking back at it there is nothing very substantial I would want to add to my reply to Gerry Frost’s critique of Libertarianism, although obviously all my points could be elaborated and made more persuasive. Gerry’s arguments still seem to me to be wrongheaded and characterised by windy rhetoric and ill-tempered sarcasm and abuse.

Conservative Virtues

However, I would like to retract one of my statements, namely the assertion that Conservatism has “no claim to the interest of those seeking individual freedom”. This is clearly incorrect, and the sort of massive overstatement into which even the most scrupulously rational person can sometimes be drawn in the heat of debate. *Mea culpa*. Conservative scholars have made many significant contributions to our understanding of freedom, and my overstatement gives no indication of this fact. Moreover, no Conservative has ever plumbed the depths of credulity, fantasy, irrationality and power lust attained by Socialist intellectuals. (At least, no Anglo-American Conservative; European Conservatism is rather a different animal.)

The Pathology of Intellectuals

This leads on to another point where I would want to qualify my argument somewhat. Gerry Frost describes libertarians as being personally an unpleasant bunch, prone to fanati-

cism, intolerance and offensive behaviour. I would want to concede that there is a *measure* of truth beneath his massively overstated characterisation.

Just as there are unsocial Socialists and unchristian Christians, so one can find coercive and immoral Libertarians. Indeed, as a result of some painful personal experience I would be disposed to concede the existence of quite a few individuals like this, individuals prepared to act in grossly coercive, dishonest and unpleasant ways and who use “libertarianism” as a mask or excuse (the old “for the good of the cause” ploy!) for their behaviour. This is explainable principally as being part of what I would want to describe as the “pathology of intellectuals”. It is certainly not confined to libertarianism, but runs as a constant thread through all intellectual movements. It is something to do with the nature of intellectuals and intellectual movements *per se*, and is urgently in need of proper analysis. (Paul Johnson’s widely criticised recent work *Intellectuals* is a welcome contribution, but much more is needed.) Insofar as Conservatism is much less intellectual it suffers to a lesser degree from the pathology of the intellectual. However, it does have its own distinctive failings, of which hypocrisy is the most striking. If I had a pound for each of the homophobic, Bible-bashing, purity-preaching Conservatives caught with their trousers down in homosexual relationships, adultery, affairs with underage girls, drug-taking, or pornography consumption I would be a wealthy man!