



“Where do you get your ideas from?”

It may be a cliché but it's true: sf writers do get asked that question, a lot. I've written two sf novels which have had the odd distinction of being described as left-wing, indeed Trotskyist, by some reviewers, and as free-market libertarian by others. At first glance these contradictory assessments come from opposite sides of the Atlantic, but I rather suspect that the libertarian element in my books is more obvious the more familiar the reader is with libertarianism. British libertarians see it just as readily as do Americans; while the Trotskyist allusions are more easily picked up in the UK, a country where hundreds of thousands of people must have been members of Trotskyist organisations — if only for the three years between the freshers' fair and the finals.

#### A BASICALLY MARXIST ANALYSIS OF THE WORLD

Those hundreds of thousands include me. I was converted to Trotskyism in about 1972, and was active in left-wing politics, off and on, between 1976 and 1991. Even when I got fed up with Trotskyism and became a quite sincere member of the Communist Party — one of the last people to be politically won to the British Road To Socialism — I found that my political reflexes were unchanged: burnt-in like a CD-ROM. These days, well ... I still have a basically Marxist analysis of the world and I still think the people who have to work for a living will eventually have little option but to take over the world and run it as a caring sharing co-op. I don't think the existing left will have much to do with making that happen.

Part of the reason why I think so is suggested in *The Star Fraction*: the Left's alliances are all too often opportunistic and counter-productive. There's a slight tinge of personal bitterness in that book, as well as a smidgin of nostalgia, both of which hark back to the time in the late seventies when I lived in an extended household of Trotskyists, feminists, and exiled nationalists collectively known as The Cats. What I came to feel — in a confused, sullen, resentful way — was that the agenda of my political activity was being set by an ever-expanding coalition of minorities, and had nothing to offer the majority of the population and in consequence had nothing to offer *me*. As Margaret Thatcher, and now Tony Blair, have spectacularly demonstrated, I was not alone in that selfish thought.

#### THE ALTERNATIVE BOOKSHOP

As well as doing the usual Trotskyist stuff — selling papers, going to meetings and marches, reading perspectives documents, splitting and wrecking, underestimating the peasantry and so forth — I was interested in other political ideas, and particularly in other 'extremist' political ideas. I literally wandered across libertarian political theories by accident. The first time I came across real live libertarians was around 1980, when I delivered a bundle of copies of *The Freethinker* to the Alternative Bookshop in Covent Garden. Pamphlets from Amnesty International, the Legalise Cannabis Campaign, and an assortment of unrespectable anarchists, dissident socialists, feminists and gay liberationists were displayed next to critiques of socialism and defences of capitalism.

I was intrigued. Up until then, I'd always thought of free-marketeers as Tories — people who might be for one kind of freedom out of sheer self-interest, but who were against all sorts of other freedoms, including the freedom to enjoy sex and drugs and rock and roll. This was different. And, to be honest, I was alienated enough from my own political activity to welcome, at some level, any stick with which to beat it.

Chris Tame and Brian Micklethwait, who ran the shop and still run the Libertarian Alliance, were not at all put out when I told them I was a communist and I wanted to know what they were all about. They told me, politely and at length. I was amazed to learn that *Illuminatus!*, by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, was (among other things) a satire on the US libertarian movement and its leading personalities. They were intrigued to find that I had an idea for an sf novel set in a society where “the state was privatised”, and they told me the name for this arrangement: anarcho-capitalism.

I already agreed with much of what the libertarians had to say, about sex and drugs and rock and roll. I became reluctantly convinced that free speech meant nothing unless it meant free speech for people you regard as utterly mistaken and thoroughly depraved: fascists, holocaust revisionists, tobacco advertisers, etc. As the eighties wore on, I found it increasingly hard to refute what the libertarians had to say about the economic idiocies and political follies of the left. At the same time, I had to disagree with them on other points, and I still do. There's the little matter of capitalism, for example. My enthusiasm for the free market is a great deal more conditional than theirs.

There is also the tricky question of what 'consent' actually means. An indirect, but personal, acquaintance with the issue of sexual abuse — and the disillusioning effect this had on my notion of how much 'bourgeois respectability' was worth — occasioned some painful reflections on this point. This is what lies behind the section in *The Stone Canal* in which two sympathetic characters go on a killing spree, and what (I think) makes it a communist novel about libertarians, in much the same way as *The Star Fraction* is a libertarian novel about communists.

#### WHAT IS LIBERTARIANISM?

So far as the *political* ideas are concerned, it's easy enough to explain where they came from. They came from thinking about my experiences with the British far left; from thinking about the implications of various libertarian proposals; and from thinking about the implications of the 'non-market socialism' associated with the few but persistent propagandists of the Socialist Party of Great Britain. The conflicting political interpretations of my novels have their roots in the inevitable tensions that result.

What is libertarianism, anyway? 'Libertarianism', like 'freedom', is a contested term. It's used as a synonym — in fact, it was originally a euphemism — for socialist anarchism. It's also used, particularly in the US, to describe an outlook which at its extreme could be called capitalist anarchism. This tends to be regarded as an American import, quite irrelevant to Britain. This is a mistake. Libertarianism is rooted in elements of a political and legal system which America shares with Britain, and which originated in Britain. Its first organised political expression was the radical wing of the English Revolution, the Levellers. Contrary to a labour movement myth, the Levellers weren't pioneer socialists — that honour belongs to the Diggers. The Diggers opposed property, root and branch. The Levellers based their whole political theory on it. They were libertarians of the 'propertarian' persuasion, without a doubt.

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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

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The first time I came across the word ‘libertarian’ was not in a text of political philosophy but in James Blish’s *Cities in Flight*: “Under the relentless pressure of competition from the USSR and its associated states, Earth’s Western culture had undertaken to support a permanent war economy, under the burden of which its traditional libertarian political institutions were steadily eroded away.” (p. 168 of the Arrow 1974 edition). Since the West’s traditional institutions are hardly notorious for socialist anarchism, Blish here clearly refers to a political ideology which affirms the rights, however derived, to ‘life, liberty and justly acquired property’ — the principles of classical liberalism, developed by John Locke, Adam Smith, Lord Macaulay, Lord Acton, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill.

### THE TRUTH ABOUT THE ISOLATIONISTS

Interestingly enough, the analysis of the ‘permanent war economy’ and its predicted political effects, to which Blish alludes, was advanced in the US by one wing of American Trotskyism, later influential on the New Left; and at almost the same time by the remnants of what is now called the Old Right, the maligned ‘isolationists’ who opposed the New Deal and US involvement in World War Two and the Korean War and the Cold War. Most of them, it turns out, were classical liberals. Nowadays this truth about the isolationists has gone down the memory hole: any opponent of Roosevelt’s domestic and foreign policies is vaguely assumed to have been some kind of fascist. Dimitrov, who launched this smear at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, would be proud of its continuing success.

The tradition of liberal anti-imperialism has been carried into the present, most notably by the late Murray N. Rothbard, whose *For a New Liberty* is one of the manifestos of modern anarcho-capitalism. Rothbard’s anti-imperialism extended to an attempt to ally with the US New Left against the Vietnam War, not to mention his memorable response to the Falklands/Malvinas campaign: “Finish the American Revolution! Sink the Brits!” Whatever this was, Thatcherism it wasn’t.

### INTERESTING TEMPLATES FOR SF

Libertarianism, like sf, has a respectable past and a disreputable present: its roots in the work of people who are conventionally admired, even revered, certainly regarded as mainstream; its leaves and branches populated by obscure pamphleteers and amateur publishers and indigent academics and Internet addicts like us. Just as there are people who will indignantly deny that *Nineteen Eighty-four* and *Brave New World* are sf, there are plenty of people who profess to be shocked at the idea that John Locke and John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith were (ugh!) *libertarians*.

So I’ve found, anyway, in discussions on the Internet. I used these discussions, and conversations with some of the friends I made through them, to bring into focus the anarcho-capitalist enclave of Norlonto in *The Star Fraction*. The ideas behind Norlonto derive from Rothbard’s *For a New Liberty*. The slightly different anarchy of New Mars, in *The Stone Canal*, owes more to another exposition of anarch-capitalism, *The Machinery of Freedom* by David Friedman. (The court system of New Mars is partly inspired by one of Friedman’s real-world models of ‘free market anarchy’, the Iceland of *Njal’s Saga*.) I have no strong views about the likelihood of such societies arising or persisting, but they certainly provide interesting templates for sf — as I’m far from the first to discover.

### HOW UTOPIAN IDEAS BRING ABOUT CHANGE

What’s the political relevance of writing about the extreme implications of a way of political thinking? After all, we all know that — except in extreme circumstances, like Germany in the thirties — extremism loses votes, as the alleged socialists in the Labour Party demonstrated in the eighties and the alleged libertarians in the Tory Party may yet demonstrate in the nineties. The fact is that while utopianism is useless as an electoral strategy, it is very useful indeed as a way of changing people’s minds over the long run.

Take the example of socialism. The utopia of *News From Nowhere* has nowhere been achieved, but the *idea* of it has helped to bring-about changes that were once considered ‘socialistic’ — although William Morris himself would almost certainly have regarded them as paltry at best and going in completely the wrong

direction at worst, i.e. towards state capitalism, albeit democratic welfare-state capitalism. The point is that if people see Morris’s vision of socialism — a world-wide classless, stateless, moneyless society — as desirable (and personally I find it difficult to read *News From Nowhere* without desiring it, without indeed feeling something as intense as homesickness or unrequited love for it) and if people believe — as Morris emphatically didn’t — that democratic welfare-state capitalism is a stepping stone to socialism, then *News From Nowhere* undoubtedly helped to bring about our present wonderful society. Similarly, the dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-four* has done a great deal to undermine support for even democratic state socialism, despite the fact that George Orwell actually supported the Labour Party and was a pretty authoritarian democratic state socialist himself.

The threat of a ‘1984’ society is (we may charitably assume) what motivates the ‘libertarian’ militarism of sf’s cold warriors: the Defence of the Free World. There is a case for this: faced with the choice between Stalinism and liberal democracy, tens of millions of people have supported the sort of policies advocated in fiction by Niven and Pournelle. Unfortunately the methods used, from nuclear deterrence through napalm bombing to *contra* terrorism, actually undermine what you’re allegedly trying to defend. To refer back again to Blish, the relentless competition with the Soviet bloc has been won, but the West’s traditional libertarian political institutions have been eroded in the process, and are still eroding by the day.

We live in a country where the knee-jerk response to a perceived social problem, or to the misuse of objects — from handguns to hooch — is a hasty, *ad hoc* law, or the *threat* of a law; and a world where the knee-jerk response to a national problem is an international intervention, with the new missionaries of the Non-Governmental Organisations softening up the stricken populations for the new colonial marines, the boys in the blue berets. Humanitarianism and peace-keeping have become the new ideologies of imperialism, undermining fragile states of national independence which millions fought, and sometimes died, to achieve.

As a socialist, I have no hesitation whatever in opposing this erosion of the West’s traditional libertarian political institutions; and as an sf writer, I have no compunction at indicating the grievous consequences of their loss, and suggesting the glorious consequences of their future recovery.

### A LINK BETWEEN LIBERTARIANISM AND SOCIALISM

So much for the loony left and libertarianism. What about the secrets of the Illuminati? Most of us who have heard of that mythical conspiracy at all have heard of it via Robert Anton Wilson. (It was quite a surprise to me to find that it actually existed.) Wilson and Shea used it as a deliberately confusing metaphor for both the ‘conspiracy’ of big capital and the state which makes up the New World Order (the phrase was used by conspiracy theorists long before George Bush — as they see it — incautiously blurted it out) and as a metaphor for the alliance of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ libertarians which their book projects as the last, best hope of defeating it.

It was that idea which inspired the ‘Last International’ in *The Star Fraction*, and which Wilde plays with in *The Stone Canal*. But I sometimes wonder if there isn’t something in it, and I recently stumbled on an intriguing link between libertarianism and socialism, in a series of personal connections between Robert Anton Wilson and one of the founding fathers of socialism. This common ancestry may be as spurious as Piltdown Man, but here it is:

Of all the libertarian writers, Robert Anton Wilson must be the best known and best liked by socialists and anarchists of the left. RAW’s individualist anarchist ideas were influenced by his friend Laurance Labadie, whose father Joseph Labadie worked with the great American libertarian Benjamin Tucker. Tucker regarded his venerable friend Josiah Warren (1798-1874) as his “first source of light”. (“Light”? Another masonic/illuminist allusion? Ha!) Warren founded individualist anarchism after the collapse of a utopian commune founded by his venerable mentor, the English communist Robert Owen.

According to Nesta Webster, the first and probably worst of this century’s great conspiracy theorists, Robert Owen was a member of the Illuminati ...

I rest my case.