



It may not be long now. Soon — say within about the next fifty years — anyone who wants to wipe out humanity may be able to do it, or get horribly close in the attempt. Is this true? If it is, what sort of social and political rules ought our species to follow to minimise the chances of such a disaster? What sort of world would give humanity its least worst chance of making it into the fourth millennium?

I ask these questions not because I know their answers. I merely put them forward as questions which we libertarians especially ought to ponder. Not only do they matter in their own right; they also express why many people regard libertarianism (whether or not they know it by that name) not as civilisation's best hope but on the contrary as one of its more frightful nightmares. Libertarianism means enriching and empowering individuals. What if most people think that this is now bad, given how a tiny few "empowered" individuals might now be thinking of using their power. For remember, it may only take one ...

I assume that my fellow humans are on the whole decent enough creatures, and that if they disagree with me about libertarianism they have their reasons. The menace of the apocalyptic individual is, I say, one of these reasons. We libertarians assume freedom to be good. But what if most regular people are coming to believe that freedom is now scary and getting scarier?

RE-FIGHTING THE LAST WAR

The argument about how to get better washing machines is over. Enterprises which are at least semi-free must be allowed to compete with one another to make better washing machines, or any other harmless things that they want to try making. If the state owns and manages the one washing machine enterprise, washing machines will be ghastly. Freedom means the freedom to make good washing machines.

But what of the freedom to do harm? If it is true that the destructive power available to the free individual is getting ever greater, then does it not make sense to accept a more restrictive trade-off between freedom and unfreedom than hitherto? The phrase "new world order" is surely now rattling around the world because millions find the notion very appealing, and regret only that there's not enough of it. When the most damage that a lone

individual could do was something like blowing up a building full of people or sabotaging a railway line, the price of freedom was relatively cheap and worth paying, for the sake of those washing machines and for the products and pleasures of freedom generally. Only huge organisations like governments could unleash major disasters. In such a world anti-statism made sense (even if it was hard to do). But might not anti-statism now be another example of that common phenomenon, the disposition to re-fight the last war (defending civilisation against the monster state) instead of thinking about the next war (defending civilisation against the monster individual)?

Our New World Orderers are hardly monsters in the manner of Lenin or Stalin, Hitler or Mao. They don't even have the romantic exuberance which contemporary rivals of the monsters — like FDR and Churchill — needed in their efforts to coexist with or battle against the monsters. No, the hysteria, the romantic extremity, the artistic flair and the ideological craziness are now to be found lower down in society. Or if that's not really so, this is where such dramas are now widely believed to reside. The main political lesson of the twentieth century is that collectivities can only do so much. Individuals, on the other hand, individually or in freely associating teams, have learned to do more and more. For libertarians this is a cause for celebration, but for many others it is a cause for dread. Granted, the body counts of serial killers and religious sect leaders are almost nothing compared to the slaughters still being unleashed by governments. No lone bomber or serial killer has got anywhere near the numbers of dead killed by such events as the Gulf War or the more recent bombing of Serbia, let alone the mega-slaughters presided over by Hitler, Stalin and Mao. But as the Internet gets ever better at teaching the chemistry and the physics of explosions ... As religious fundamentalisms spread ... As the biochemists get cleverer at devising plagues and as more statelets elbow in on such research, if only in self-defence ... As society gets ever more anti-social ... Surely this is where the next dose of historical horribleness is being cooked up, not in civil service departments or mainstream political parties or sober and besuited policy think tanks. During the twentieth century, the weaponry at the disposal of the average individual human being was nothing compared to the weaponry available to his government. Now these two graphs are inching closer together. If they aren't, they are widely thought to be.

What is the mere availability of washing machines, when set beside such destructive possibilities as these?

These fears are mostly vague and unspoken, and for a good reason. The last thing that sane, civilised people want to be doing is explaining in detail to the insane that it has now got much easier for the insane to commit mass slaughter, for the following technical reasons, A, B and C, see www.blah-blah.org/massslaughter.

GUN CONTROL

This is going to be a short piece, A4 maximum. I am more concerned to state my questions than I am to answer them. I will now elaborate, not on what to do about the apocalyptic individual, but on how the menace of the apocalyptic individual illuminates the difficulties that the libertarian movement has in its dealings with regular humans.

Consider the gun control debate. Regular people, even in the USA, seem willing now to follow the New World Orderers into accepting fiercer laws than hitherto against gun ownership. Insofar as they resist, it is in the relatively small matter of *hand-guns*. I do not hear many claims that individuals should be allowed to own the sorts of larger weapons that governments possess in such abundance. Free market defence, of the kind favoured by science fictionally inclined libertarians, may crop up in faraway places by accident, but it is not on the menu of regular politics. Neighbourhood watch schemes, yes. David Friedman's "protection agencies", no way.

Insofar as libertarians refuse to distinguish between individuals owning hand-guns and owning the bigger and fiercer sorts of

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

weapons, then libertarians will merely make it that much more likely that even hand-guns will also be made illegal.

Unlike libertarians, regular people are, I suggest, looking ahead, to a time when the serious weaponry is going to be a lot more serious than it is now, i.e. than mere “guns”. Accordingly, “gun” control has simply got to be done. Even if tighter gun control does indeed lead to a higher crime rate, maybe this is a price worth paying to ensure that the principle is established, and that the process of developing the necessary governmental institutions and practices and vested interests is embarked upon. Gun control already means lots of government people snooping around looking for trouble, and picking fights with people whom they suspect of being armed, or mad, and especially armed *and* mad. Libertarians curse. The rest say: good. Just what we want. The rule of law? That means catching criminals *after* they’ve done it, and only then punishing them. Right? No good. Too late.

I surmise that the reason why so much fuss is now made about “mass” killings is not because of the body count, nor even because of mere New World Order scare-mongering. The body counts on these occasions are now trivial, seldom more than a few dozen. No, what matters is the desire on the part of this or that deranged individual to kill *in numbers as large as he can now contrive*. That’s the scary bit, because in a few decade’s time the possible body count could get far higher, into the millions or even billions.

THE INTERNET

Or consider the ongoing row about political control of and censorship of the Internet. The New World Orderers don’t care about naughty sex, we libertarians shout, and I’m sure they don’t. Nor, I should guess, do regular folks, that much. No, what worries people is the prospect of all those diabolical, not yet invented formulae and computer add-ons — capable of doing wonderful twenty first century things but also of turning the normal contents of a fridge into fusion bombs and super-bugs. The Internet is scary because it looks like it’s going to remain impossible for “us” to find out who is either supplying or downloading such devilry. Mad religions now don’t have to have any social contact with the lunatics who support them to get their destructive results. Ideas of all kinds now stride around the world with a life of their own, independent of any of the social or retail networks hitherto needed to spread them. Once again, that’s something that libertarians like me celebrate and exploit, but which scares regular people.

PERHAPS I’M NOT A LIBERTARIAN

I can imagine all kinds of fierce libertarian responses to the above, along the lines that I am playing into the hands of the enemy and doing their scare-mongering for them. Worse, perhaps I am not even a libertarian?

Well, maybe I’ll decide that I’m not. If I am ever persuaded that libertarianism means helping humanity to destroy itself, and that opposing libertarianism means making such self-destruction less likely, rely on me to switch sides. Any movement that regards the purity of its ideology as more important than the survival of humanity strikes me as just the sort of clever-mad freakshow that regular people are now becoming so scared of.

Instead of denouncing the fears I allude to in this piece as mere excuses for tyranny, spread by self-consciously evil tyrants to further their own tyrannical purposes, does it not make sense to get these fears out on the table, so to speak, and to try to answer them? Step one is to treat these fears as genuine, and based on a real desire for the continuing happiness, health and welfare of our species. Then, pin down in more detail than I’ve so far done what these fears consist of. Then, ask if they are technically and psycho(patho?)logically reasonable. Insofar as they are all of these things, try to think how best to slay these new monsters.

I am not bothered here merely with “defending libertarianism against its critics”. I want to know the answers to my questions. Will an average human ever be able to kill all or most of hu-

manity? If so, what’s the best way to stop such horrors? To hell with libertarianism, how will humanity keep going?

... BUT I STILL AM FOR THE TIME BEING

Nevertheless, for the time being I remain a libertarian. For I now believe that stopping mass-murdering psychopaths from doing their worst is more like the making of washing machines than is commonly believed.

The sort of process I have in mind is the one that we libertarians call “crowding out”. I’m thinking of how, in the bad old days of extreme economic derangement, the fact that the government was *trying* — not succeeding, merely *trying* — to make washing machines, caused other potential washing machine makers to stay out of the washing machine business. Governmental washing machine efforts failed, and most other washing machine efforts were aborted. I fear that the New World Order may *try* to prevent lone mass murderers from committing their mass murders, will not do the job very well, but will crowd out many of the freelance efforts which might have done the job better.

Keeping an eye on *every* potential free enterprise mass-murderer is a task that is beyond the power of the mere state, *however tyrannical*. This is the sort of job where we’ll all have to chip in, and all of us keep an eye on each other. (This itself may not be nice, but I’m not concerned here with niceness, I’m concerned with humanity doing whatever it has to do to get by.)

To put the same point another way, I am struck by a particular shortage that afflicted the USSR in its last days. Forget washing machines — which of course the USSR was also comically short of. No, I’m thinking of *citizenship*. Public spirit, the willingness of individuals to put themselves out for the common good — that vital ingredient of civilisation *also* became unobtainable, in the old USSR. Simply, nobody cared. Was something disastrous clearly about to happen? Sod it. Let *them* deal with it and if they don’t, who gives a shit?

That is the spirit that could kill humanity. What could save humanity is that minimal level of “concern” (or meddlesomeness, take your pick) that consists of noticing that your clever neighbour has been keeping himself to himself lately, and getting some rather odd parcels, and remembering that ... didn’t he used to have some decidedly dark and nutty notions about politics, religion, etc., and some *very* peculiar looking friends? So you knock on his door to see if all is well ...

Other saviours might include under-employed journalists who take it upon themselves to join crackpot religions or their local deepest-green fragment of the green movement (a rich source of mass-murder rhetoric), or some policemen chasing up some unpromising but perhaps portentous leads which they were too busy to bother with when they were regular policemen, and feeding their new discoveries to a TV documentary team. (The main method used by official terrorist-watchers these days seems to be to collect books and newspaper articles by freelancers.)

Libertarianism, I assert, means a world in which such public-spirited meddlesomeness is more rather than less likely. Libertarianism is the freedom to do good. Libertartarianism frees up the supply of good works.

I also think that, because it is better at making washing machines, freedom is, in general, better at keeping unbalanced people out of mischief. The devil, as they used to say, finds work for idle hands. Freedom keeps your hands busier than does state control. It gives you a non-destructive place in the world, or it’s more likely to. It’s surprising how often the philosophical profundities that excuse terrorism are triggered by the superficiality of the terrorist not getting a nice enough job.

GOOD QUESTIONS

This piece is intended to provoke debate, or, if such a debate is already in progress without my knowledge, to plug me into it. I am not trying to settle anything. I think my questions are good questions. Do you? If not why not? Discuss.