

CAN YOU SLEEP OUT ALL THE YEAR ROUND?

A CONJECTURE ABOUT HOW CLIMATE INFLUENCES FREEDOM



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There are many reasons why people believe in — or don't believe in — having a free, non-state-dominated society. In this piece I offer the suggestion that there is a particular way in which *climate* makes a difference. In cold places, I conjecture, statism — especially welfare statism — is relatively easy to do, and is accordingly done a lot and believed in a lot. In warmer places, welfare statism is harder to do, and is accordingly done less and believed in less.

“WE FOLLOW ORDERS OR PEOPLE DIE”

Ask this of a country: Can you sleep out in the open all the year round, winter after winter, or would sleeping out condemn you to death this winter?

In Scandinavia, you *must* have a roof over you, every night, all winter long. If you don't, you die of cold. It's that simple, or such is my understanding of Scandinavian weather conditions.

In the West Indies, by contrast, you can sleep out all the year round. Sleep out in the West Indies, and you *don't* die of cold. It's *that* simple.

Readers who share my taste in movies may recognise the line: “It's that simple.” It's from the Tom Cruise, Jack Nicholson

military courtroom drama *A Few Good Men*. Says the Nicholson character, a Marine Colonel: “We follow orders or people die. It's that simple.” My argument concerning how easy it is to do state welfare also concerns the degree to which disobedience might result in death. Scandinavian welfare recipients must follow orders or die, but in the nice-all-the-year-round West Indies, no such law of nature asserts itself.

I haven't been to Scandinavia recently, and never during the winter. Maybe you can dig a hole in the snow and survive for months on end. I recently talked with someone who was born and brought up in the West Indies, and she confirmed the basic all-year-round outdoor survivability of its climate, at any rate of her bit of it. But maybe the West Indies has freezing-cold-in-winter places as well as warmer ones. Maybe it isn't that simple.

But suppose that it is. Suppose that trying to survive the Scandinavian winter outdoors is suicide, but suppose that sleeping outdoors through what passes for the West Indian winter is a breeze.

A FIXED ADDRESS

Looked at from the point of view of the welfare bureaucrat, most of the “problems of welfare”, of the sort with which we Brits are wearily familiar, are problems caused by him, the welfare bureaucrat, not being able to *control* the welfare recipient. The welfare bureaucrat can't *make* the welfare recipient do what he wants him to do in exchange for welfare payments. He can't even know for sure what his name is, where he lives, who with, what (if any) work he does, and what anyone pays him to do it. It is much easier to lie to a government official if you don't live anywhere in particular. The government can't so easily investigate your life, because it doesn't know where you live it.

The Scandinavian winter means that a Scandinavian can't afford to take an “I'll worry about that when it gets dark” attitude to where he'll sleep each night. You must have a solid deal with someone that you can definitely stay somewhere, well before dark sets in. You must have a fixed address. Which means that the government has you where it wants you, where it can always find you and learn all about you.

A West Indian government, on the other hand, can never be sure where its less respectable and settled citizens will be from one night to the next. If a West Indian government shovels out welfare payments to apparently deserving cases, these cases can just grab the money and vanish. So, in the West Indies, welfare recipients don't need to supply true information or keep any of their promises. They can just use whatever welfare money anyone is silly enough to give them to carry on wandering around, begging and scrounging, robbing and trading. In the West Indies, I surmise, respectable citizens are far less approving of welfare arrangements than are their equivalents in Scandinavia.

A PALL OF GOVERNABILITY

In Scandinavia, everything is far better organised, because it can be. The welfare recipient promises to spend the money he gets in proper rather than improper ways, and does so. If he promises to look for a solid, respectable job, he duly goes looking for such a job, and is very likely to find such a job. Once he finds it he does it diligently. The job is solidly unionised, the employers paternal and nice. (It's far easier to be nice to people who are completely at your mercy.)

In the above paragraph I put “he”, but only because “he or she” every time would have been clumsy. Scandinavia is famously full of mothers who are married to the state rather than to individual men.

But these are old-fashioned marriages, in which the wives love, honour and obey their husband (the state), and in which the husband is a genuinely quite good provider. The resulting

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

children are good citizens. When a Scandinavian government spends money on education, education occurs. The pupils behave well, pay attention to their teachers and do their homework.

(In Britain, welfare mothers and the state have a less happy marriage, their offspring tending to be more barbaric. The lower depths of British state education are notoriously chaotic.)

The fact that in Scandinavia you *must* have a roof over your head casts, I assert, a pall of governability over the whole of Scandinavian society. The life of one of Ibsen's *Enemies of the People* is no life at all.

Scandinavian socialism and Scandinavian capitalism years ago arrived at a contented and mutually profitable working relationship.¹ In Scandinavia the rulers of Volvo and of Saab and the rulers of the Welfare State have been hand in glove for decades. Taxation in Scandinavia is vast in scale, but much of the money goes straight back to Volvo, Saab and the rest of them, and the more usual sort of welfare has long been tweaked to make sure that people still worry about getting and keeping their Volvo-type jobs. Scandinavian welfare is benignly inegalitarian. Scandinavians can neither scrounge upward social mobility, nor degrade themselves by trying. If they want to move up, they must earn it.

(In Britain, where our winters are nasty but just about survivable in the open, we have a large but chaotic and demoralising welfare state, which lurches between idiot generosity and idiot cruelty. The British administrative class, who favour state welfare but yearn for it to work more smoothly, cast envious eyes to the north.)

To a semi-West-Indian like me, Scandinavia is deeply boring. But the truth (which many of my ideologically West Indian comrades refuse to face) is that in its own boring way, Scandinavian welfarism works. It adapts from decade to decade, but shows little sign of collapsing.

VARYING SEXUAL MORES

Sex in Scandinavia is famously well organised, and is another classic source of British administrative-class envy. The late twentieth century post-contraception peace settlement between adults and adolescents which is only now establishing itself in Britain — have sex, but don't have unwanted babies or horrid diseases — has long been a regular feature of Scandinavian life. Contrast the consensual healthiness of that with the anarchic, exuberant, diseased sexuality that prevails among non-respectable West Indians. You can have sex out of doors in the West Indies, all the year round. What the adults think about that counts for nothing among West Indians who do not care to be guided by adults. Climate helps to explain contrasting attitudes to sexual freedom, as well as to other kinds of freedom.

CLIMATE CHANGE — THE CASE OF SOUTHERN ENGLAND

If climate does influence enthusiasm for liberty, then what of climate *change*? Might the extreme hostility felt towards global warming by collectivists be related to the fact that a warmer world might also be a freer one? I'm now finishing this piece over the Christmas of 2000. It was the amazing mildness of London's "winters" of 1999 and, so far, of 2000 — so mild as to provoke inverted commas around the word "winters" — that caused me first to sketch and then to finish this piece. I have already alluded to the current "crisis of the welfare state". Has climate been part of that story, in places like the south of England? England endured its fiercest winter since World War II in, I think, 1946/7, just when our modern welfare state was being so confidently built, and our last really nasty winter was, if I recall it rightly, in 1962/3. Tramps sleeping in the streets of London were rare before 1962. Now they are an annual focus of political breast-beating and Christmas-tide charity.

A SMALL CONJECTURE — NOT A FULLY WORKED OUT THEORY

I am not here proposing a fully worked out theory, whose wrongness, if proved, would cause me severe hurt. This is but a small conjecture, and I see no purpose in taking up more than the small handful of days I've spent so far in elaborating it until I've learned more of what others think of it, and may already have thought of it.

Someone should make a map of the world (*can* sleep out through the winter — *can't* sleep out through the winter) and see what other parts of the world it makes sense of besides the two bits I've picked on. Maybe someone already has. Who else has said things about how the outdoor survivability of the winter influences welfare statism, freedom and so on?²

Do any of our quite numerous Scandinavian libertarian comrades have any response to offer? Is their weather really as I have described it?

Have I confused "Scandinavia" with Sweden, and the "West Indies" with Jamaica?

I don't think the Libertarian Alliance has any West Indian subscribers, but does any West Indian nevertheless have anything to say about this matter?³ My understanding of, in particular, Jamaica is that it indeed enjoys a most pleasant climate and that it contains many extremely laid-back folks, but that it also contains many other persons of extreme, even pugnacious, respectability. Is this right? Does the weather seem to locals to have anything to do with it?

There are other forces at work in the world besides climate, and other parts of the world (Russia? The deserts of North Africa?) to be considered. It's no good not dying of cold if instead you die of starvation or of thirst. Does the *extreme* cold of the Russian winter perhaps help to produce a collectivism so ingrained that "freedom" is, for other than a few globetrotting aristocrats, so silly an idea as to be unthinkable, and does the absence of any big liberal tradition in Russia make Russian collectivism uniquely irresistible, and hence uniquely destructive? (Even as I ask, I can feel my simple conjecture being swallowed up by the complexities of the real world, and by the obvious importance of other things besides climate.)

So, that's my conjecture, and now I'll move on to other conjectures. I'd rather move on, for example, to a closely related conjecture concerning how *geography* — rivers, coastlines, shapes of coastlines, and so on (in other words the stuff that makes Sweden so different from the other parts of Scandinavia) — influences the freedom-lovingness or lack of it of different places. Meanwhile, any responses to this conjecture would be welcome.

NOTES

1. See John-Henri Holmberg, *The Origins and Nature of the Scandinavian Welfare State*, Historical Notes No. 17, Libertarian Alliance, 1991.
2. Typically, historians and other commentators discuss the impact of climate in terms of the economy as a whole, rather than in terms of its impact on personal behaviour. Look in the index of a recent book much admired by economic liberals and libertarians, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* by David Landes, and you get, under "climate": "arid, 13-14, 19-20; continental, 19; economic development and, 14-15, 174; productivity and, 15-16; temperate vs. tropical, 4, 5-16, 68." The emphasis is on the collective production of food, rather than on the individual experience of whatever is the minimum temperature.
3. The Libertarian Alliance did recently (re)publish a piece (Tina Terry, *How Gun Control "Worked" in Jamaica*, Personal Perspectives No. 12, 2000) about the sudden and disastrous imposition of gun control in Jamaica in the early 1970s, but this was by an American lady who was merely living in Jamaica at the time.