



# THE ETHICS OF GRADUALISM

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Next to the question "What should be our goals in public affairs?" libertarians must attend also to the topic that was foremost in Lenin's mind, namely, "How to get from here to there?" While it is a mistake to think that the first question has been settled to the satisfaction of all those calling themselves libertarians - there persists discord about goals among us, e.g. anarchy vs. archy, constitutionalism vs. parliamentarism, isolationism vs. internationalism - I want to focus here on the second question.

A clue to the nature of the problem occurs in my mention of Lenin. What is notorious in Leninism, over and above its connections with orthodox Marxist dialectical materialism, is its thesis about the ruthless pursuit of political power, its terrorist techniques as regards the attainment of the ends Marxism strives to pursue. It isn't mere simplification or parody to see in Leninism the full embodiment of the thesis that the end justifies any effective means for its pursuit, that morality has no bearing at all on how to foster the revolutionary advance of humanity. This line may seem to have been implicit already in Machiavelli's writing. The thesis of the Florentine political scientist - indeed, the inventor of that field - could be regarded as much milder than Lenin's, namely, that given the otherworldly conception of moral principles of the virtues - e.g., along Christian or Augustinian lines - the distinctly earthly task of the prince or political leader cannot be guided by them. In Lenin, however, morality is banished through and through because the only matter of importance is the attainment of the revolutionary ideal.

It is not surprising that some libertarians are concerned that we adopt the stance of the old Bolshevik. Are they right? Is there any reason to think that libertarians will likely succumb to the temptation to discard morality as they pursue political success?

There are libertarians who claim that many of us have already succumbed to this temptation and that Leninism, in a mild form, has begun to contaminate our quest for the free society. These guardians of our revolutionary ethics are especially concerned that some libertarians who are approaching the centers of political power - even as mere advisors or authors of tracts on practical politics or public policy - have forgotten their basic principles and are contaminating libertarianism with pragmatist expediency, disregard for libertarian values, thereby threatening the integrity of the movement and thus its prospects for success. They suggest - and at times explicitly declare - that anything but the insistence on the immediate transformation of society to reflect libertarian

principles must be a compromise and must lead to self-destruction. They even fantasize such immediate radical recomposition of society by way of supposing that the idea way to bring about political change is the magic wand/push button method, if it were only possible to us. Barring this possibility, nothing immediately can be done until the constituency is completely reeducated to libertarianism.

The kinds of moves by some libertarians that disturb these purists include:

- Supporting educational vouchers,
- Supporting contracting out government's illegitimate tasks,
- Supporting draft registration instead of conscription,
- Supporting tax reform and balanced budget measures,
- Supporting mere cuts in welfare, subsidies, social security, government regulation, etc.

In short, any effort to merely cut tyranny down in its size or scope, as distinct from abolishing it altogether, is really a compromise of libertarianism and contributes to a betrayal and defeat of our great historic mission.

## The Reality of the Threat

It would be futile to take this challenge to gradualism lightly. Too many examples of selling out are evident, not just vis-à-vis other revolutionary movements but libertarianism itself.

There are several people associated with politics throughout the world who have at one time identified themselves as libertarians only to be seen promoting wholly anti-libertarian measures later in their careers as they have gotten a taste of political power. I recall, for example, the time when Idaho Senator Steven Symms was interviewed in *Reason* magazine as a libertarian hero of sorts, only to be seen abandoning his libertarianism for clearly pragmatic purposes. It is arguable, also, that the Randian protégé Alan Greenspan has effectively sold out, though I would not wish to claim that I have full proof for this contention.

Other one-time luminaries of libertarianism - Martin Anderson, Ed Clark, Robert Poole, Peter Ferrara, Dana Rohrbacher, et al., have at least been taken to task in the past for allegedly betraying their moral and political principles. Indeed, a leading light of anarcho-libertarianism, Sam Konkin III, has made his career in the Libertarian movement largely by fingering others as traitors. By Konkin's lights *Reason* magazine has sold out, as have all those associated with it, myself included.

Now there are of course clear cases of betrayal. But what is interesting is by what criteria such cases may be identified and how these criteria might function to guide those of us who would wish to be both effective promoters of the free society and thoroughly loyal to our principles.

Let me, in the rest of my talk, cover some of the topics that must be reflected upon successfully in order to distinguish between genuine cases of selling out and successful infiltration, for wholly justified purposes and in entirely justified ways, the power bases whence much of the policy guidance in our societies emanates.

## Contextualism vs. Idealism in Revolutionary Politics

Libertarianism is, among other things, a life supporting political theory. Its aim is to help advance life, not to defeat it. It is thus genuinely progressive, unlike communism which talks of the impossible progress of the collective whole of humanity, all at once. But progress requires taking steps to bring about a better state of affairs, to improve the existing conditions of life. It requires, in short, incremental steps, going from a condition A to B, and the rest, until one gets to



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whatever is the most clearly conceived possible best alternative.

The temptation is here to say that "Well, this is right but it implies for libertarians that we must do nothing other than try to convince others of the correctness of our view." But this idea reminds me of the absurd view that there can be no cure of an illness other than one that instantaneously leads the patient from illness to full blown health. Unless the doctor's measure accomplished this result, it betrays the profession of medicine.

I don't think the absurdity of this idea needs to be demonstrated. Similarly, to move from ignorance to the state of learnedness required taking steps, but these steps do not achieve the end result in one instance. Rather from ignorance one moves to various stages of partial education, until one reaches the optimum stage.

But perhaps these points will be admitted again, with the reminder that none of them implies that one need cooperate with the powers that be or that any support for half-way measures needs to be accepted. In short, gradualism is acceptable only if it is not mixed with the evil of statism, something that is clearly not the case with the kind of measures some libertarians take who support measures of the kind I have listed earlier - e.g., educational vouchers. What is permissible is only to try to persuade people, which admittedly must take time and go through stages of relative success. But any actual acceptance of half-way measures involves betrayal. So let us move on to some hard cases.

When Ed Clark ran for president of the United States, he proposed certain tax reforms. Libertarianism regards all taxation as morally and politically impermissible, no ifs, buts or maybes. (I assume there is no debate about this here!) Was, then, Ed Clark betraying libertarianism?

To answer, consider the doctor who knows that his patient would be optimally healthy only if he stopped his addiction to heroin, cold turkey. But he is also aware of the fact that his patient is hooked and is psychologically unable to kick his habit fully. If, however, he first undergoes a methadone program, the chap can advance to a stage from which the further advance towards kicking his drug dependency is more likely, albeit not guaranteed. Would the doctor betray his profession by recommending this course of conduct? It is clear that he is not at this moment recommending the full attainment of an idea or optimal state, but it is also clear that he is doing the right thing. So may indeed have Ed Clark been in proposing tax reform.

The basic reason for this is that morality is always constrained by the principle that "ought implies can". Whenever one says that "A should do X", this could only be true if X is itself a doable deed for A. Recommending half-way measures which indeed are the optimal means for reaching closer to the fullest realization of one's standards or principles is itself fully justified by one's standards or principles.

Consider another, perhaps more apt analogy. A peace or police officer is fighting crimes - of course, crimes with victims, since we wouldn't want a contaminated experiment to run our test on. In any case, our officer is conscientiously striving to do his duty but it turns out that in order to catch or remove from the midst of a free society a menacing private taxcollector - in other words, a thief - she must cooperate with a pickpocket who, though himself a thief, is in fact far less menacing than our private tax-collector. Without this measure the defender of private property will only be able to remove the pickpocket from our midst, but through this measure he can catch the more menacing criminal, without

necessarily condoning the pickpocket but merely postponing his steps to deal with him. Are we to say that our peace officer is betraying his principles? I don't think so.

Here emerges an important principle of libertarian revolutionary ethics. It is clear that such ethics must be consistent with a central ingredient of libertarianism itself, namely that it is essentially a life-supporting political theory. Self-sacrificing cannot be required in such a political theory. Nor can its practical policy proposals include self-sacrificial measures. And its ethics of political change, including its revolutionary ethics, preclude those measures that are self-sacrificial.

### **No Blank Cheque**

Let me end by noting that none of the above condones the policy of betraying one's principles for advancing one's narrow self or vested interests. If a libertarian cooperates with the statist for purposes of gaining a better salary or obtaining a position in a better climate - to give you some clear cases of narrow self-interest - or merely to advance his standing in the organization - a case of promoting one's vested interest - then he is clearly betraying his principles. Let me give you a case I have in mind.

Governments distribute a lot of money these days and it is very tempting to go along with the game and dip into the coffers just because there is nothing much one can do to combat the policy. After all, when governments distribute wealth some of that wealth belongs to the people to whom it may well be distributed, so it might be argued it is just getting even to get some of it from the state.

If you had a gang of burglars in your community, with no legal authority to retaliate against it, and the gang occasionally gave some of its loot away, it might be sufficient to know that the goods do not belong to the gang in the first place and some of it belongs to you, in order to justify standing in line with your hands out. But there is the added dimension that you also have an obligation to fight the gang, so unless you use this measure for combatting the gang, taking the loot may well be a betrayal of your belief in property rights because it contributes to the legitimization of the process the gang is engaging in.

Similarly, if you take a hand-out from the state but use it to help destroy the very process that makes giving hand-outs possible, there is nothing necessarily wrong with what you are doing. But if it merely serves to enhance some other goal, including your narrow self or vested interest, then, in light of your obligation to promote justice, what you are doing is wrong.

Now, finally, if you believe that I have not managed to come up with a very precise criterion for distinguishing justified from unjustified cooperation with the state, let me plead guilty. The simple fact is that when one must act with dignity and decency in highly complex, morally muddled situations, then discretion is indispensable and no reliance on firm, stable rules is possible. No libertarian can escape from the requirement of clear thinking, which involves applying very general principles to highly diverse, unanticipatable concrete contexts. In short, no code book of revolutionary conduct can be written. But neither is it the case that anything goes.

One need not become a Leninist and abandon moral considerations in fighting the good fight. But one cannot fight the good fight if one insists on living by arid rules the implementation of which already presupposes that the revolution has been successfully won.