



THE TYRANNY OF THE FACTS

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I was asked a year or two ago by a free market policy institute to do a piece about museums. My commitment to the project was cemented at a *free lunch* at which Kingsley Amis was also present. The meal was delightful and Kingsley Amis his usual genial self, full of wisdom about The Arts, and about how the Government should stop giving The Arts money.

But as the meal progressed I already began to have misgivings about the project, and these became crystalised in my mind when finally, months later than I had promised, I sat down to write the thing. My problem was that the institute's boss, Sir Alfred Sherman, had said that I ought to deploy "the facts" about museums. These "facts" were supposed to prove beyond doubt that our collective view of the museums issue was the correct one.

Casting about for "facts", however, is not my strong suit. I felt as if these were known beforehand by others anyway - certainly the questions were, and the general tone and direction of the answers - and that I was accordingly being marked out of ten at an age when I am beyond such indignities. Having for several years been a member of a pro free market editorial junta myself I am rather spoilt. I am no longer happy to wait on the unpredictable verdict of other editors. So, in a state of mild but definite rebellion, I did something rather different to what I took Sir Alfred to be wanting.

We - Kingsley Amis, Sir Alfred Sherman and the rest of us - had all decided what *we* thought about museums. We didn't need any more "facts" to "prove" to us that a free market in

museums, less government spending on museums and so on, was a good idea. *We already thought this.* So I decided to do a pamphlet explaining why I for one *did* think this, and why no "facts" about museums of the type I assume Sir Alfred to have been seeking from me were going to change my mind.

The resulting polemic apparently did not please Sir Alfred, maybe because of the facts shortage, or maybe for other reasons, and that was the end of that. The thing will probably end up being published by the Libertarian Alliance.

Sir Alfred's Institute is now no more. Its premises, carpets, secretaries, computers, photocopiers and free lunches were impressive, but it didn't publish very much or cause any particular stir of any kind, a combination which presumably annoyed its backers. Perhaps Sir Alfred should have published more of what he was given by his writers, instead of just sitting there wishing that he had been given something different.

TWO MODELS OF HOW MINDS ARE MADE UP

All of which was, as they say in America, a learning experience. And what I mostly learned, by thinking about the matter and by considering my own experience and the experience of other pro free marketeers, was that "facts" are not what they are cracked up to be by the average pro free market institute.

There are two models about how people are caused to make up their minds on public issues. The first goes as follows.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

An issue is raised, such as whether the health service should be sold off, non-pasteurised milk banned, museums denationalised, whatever. Not being an expert on health, milk, museums or whatever, the Intelligent Layman goes out and looks for a little clutch of The Facts concerning that particular subject, usually by consulting Experts. If it's health, he studies some health statistics. If it's milk, he looks at The Figures concerning milk. And so on. And in the light of these Facts, in a totally objective and unbiased manner, he reaches his verdict.

Now for the way human beings actually think about things.

Should unpasteurised milk be banned? Most people need no Facts in order to start cranking out immediate verdicts. Yes, if they believe that it's the government's job to protect people from health hazards. And no, if they think people ought to be left to decide such things for themselves, and seek their own advice (e.g. from shops) if they are unsure.

The two points of view (it usually is only two) are both vigorously stated and elaborated. If a would-be milk-suppressor is as fond of arguing as I am and he is trying to argue with me, there is then an argument. But it is not an argument merely about milk. The argument is about the truth and relevance of the principles we are both basing our opinions on.

We discuss these principles by considering other matters to which these same principles would seem also to apply. What about government factory regulations? Am I against them? (Yes.) Does my milk-suppressing adversary favour the government control of *all* decisions that may be severely risky for the decision maker? Should people, for example, be obliged to apply to the government for permission to move house, on the grounds that any errors they make might prove very costly, and might, for example, severely affect the health and wellbeing of their children? (I see what you mean.) Very quickly, milk is forgotten.

The point is that the banning of milk has little if anything to do with The Facts about milk. That people might die from drinking poisoned milk is one of the few things about which I and the milk-suppressor both agree about. What is at stake are two contrasting views of the world and of the corrective actions needed to right its wrongs. There is the way which consists of letting people solve their own problems and of offering solutions to other peoples' problems only on a voluntary basis. And there is the way which involves one lot of people taking it upon themselves to decide what all the problems are and what shall be done about them. The "chaos, anarchy, inequality, inhumanity and exploitation of monopoly capitalism" clashes with the "democratically controlled production for need rather than for profit", or to put it another way, freedom and prosperity clashes with tyranny, degradation and despair.

Consider those museums. The case against government spending on museums includes two very potent sorts of facts neither of which has anything to do with the mere statistics of museums. Fact one is that taking money from people without their consent and dishing it out to other people so that these other people can indulge more abundantly in their mere hobbies is *wrong*, regardless of the size of the sums involved. And fact two is that public spending of most other kinds causes havoc, so why should museums be any different?

At the free lunch, a lady attender had spoken most eloquently about how I ought to investigate The Facts of how

museums pay far too much money for many of their treasures, that a scandalous proportion of these "treasures" are in fact forgeries - a Fact which they all know but all conspire to conceal, and that the real treasures are all too liable to rot in basements instead of being properly preserved or shared with the public. It figures. This is how other nationalised industries operate. One day I might even get around to looking into the matter. My preferred technique will be (is) to publish my opinion, and let whoever knows The Facts of this matter supply them to me.

THE DIALECTICAL HIGH GROUND

Lest anybody imagine that this question of The Facts is some kind of arcane philosophical dispute of no practical relevance, consider what comes of conceding that The Facts of the usual kind *are* of decisive importance, and that if one does not deploy an abundance of them one not only *will* lose each particular argument but will *deserve* to lose it. Immediately, this hands the dialectical high ground over to the people whose daily routine causes them to be immersed in The Facts, and more or less guarantees defeat for any mere interloper such as me. For me to fail to insist on the *general* case for the free market is to fight the battle with one arm tied behind my back. Given that I can never know as much about museums as the people who daily work in them and daily seek grants for them from the government, does it not make sense for me to concentrate on those arguments for a free market in museums with which I am familiar and with which they may not be, namely those arguments drawn from the world generally, and from those particular parts of the world of which I have expert knowledge of my own and first hand experience of my own to draw on?

It's not that The Facts about museums are of no importance. They are important, to the argument about museums, and as yet one more particular proof of the general superiority of free market institutions over state owned or state controlled or state funded institutions, assuming (as I do) that this is what they do prove. The problem is that by focussing only on The Facts concerning each particular topic they address, the various pro free market policy institutes tend systematically to misrepresent the nature of the argument they are engaged in.

A MATTER OF OPINION

A particular fact which The Facts tend to steamroller into the ground is the subjectivity of preferences. Recently the government has been making grants to some museums conditional on the museums charging an entry fee. (This much I did learn.) So a typical museum Fact might concern itself with how many people now visit a particular museum compared to the number that used to visit it before entry charges were introduced. Anti-chargers would emphasise how visitor numbers have declined, while the pro-chargers might choose instead to talk of the increased attention now being devoted to "marketing" the museum, and the resulting visits made by persons who previously had never heard of the museum, but who had no objection to paying to get in once they *had* heard of it.

The shared assumption underlying such a debate is that for people to be visiting museums is necessarily a good thing. A view which tends to get left out of the discussion is the one which says that museums are a bad thing and that, if anything, they ought to be *discouraged*. It so happens that

museum activity in this country is now occurring at a rate bordering on frenzy. Many welcome this, but many others do not. For surely, a country may become - may it not? - rather too obsessed with its past, and not attentive enough to its future. Might we not end up burying ourselves under our history, and by that very process become incapable of making any more history worth bothering with? Maybe so, and maybe not, but it's undoubtedly a reasonable point of view. My opinion, strongly expressed in my pamphlet for Sir Alfred Sherman's institute, is that whether I like a museum depends on what's in it, and that the real plus of a free market in museums will be to make the exhibits qualitatively different and better than state funded exhibits. This is the kind of argument Kingsley Amis uses when attacking state funding for The Arts. Less government money, says Amis, and there'd be fewer meaningless daubs and tediously nihilistic plays and novels. I agree.

And, the fact that people have such widely differing views about whether museums are a good thing or a bad thing is one of the most compelling arguments in favour of a free market in museums. In a free market, those who want more museums can pay for them. Those who don't want any more museums need not pay any more. Those who want this museum but not that one, can pay accordingly.

It is of the essence of the case for state control and state provision that The Facts about the world can be reduced to numbers whose moral or aesthetic significance is not a matter of controversy, and that by attending to these numbers - boosting the good numbers and discouraging the bad numbers - state officials can set about improving things. And it is of the essence of the case *against* state control and state provision that this assumption is false.

Take something as apparently uncontroversial as the crime rate. Crime bad, crime prevention good. Right? Maybe. But *how much* crime prevention is appropriate? Crime prevention might also prevent other less wicked things. What of the holidays no longer afforded, because the money to pay for them has instead been spent on crime prevention? Would it not be better for people to be able to *choose* how much zealotry and expense ought to be tolerated from those combatting crime? For example, people could choose where to live partly according to which styles of free market provided police services they preferred, and how much of a risk they were prepared to take of being set upon by criminals indulging in a higher crime rate than others might prefer? And that doesn't even mention the vexed question of what exactly a crime is.

THE MEDIA AND "THE FACTS"

There is a simple explanation of why so many pro free market publications contain only The Facts, instead of arguments of the type that real people have when changing their minds. This is that an appalling proportion of such publications are not intended to be read at all. Their purpose is to be noticed (but not read) by the media. Journalists love Facts, that is, numbers which refer in a brief and seemingly objective manner to a problem, in a way that everybody can at least very approximately understand, and the publication of which approximates to a news item. If a group of people publish something saying that museums shouldn't be funded by the government because that would be stealing, it's very hard to pass that off as news. Plainly, the people who are saying this have been thinking it for some time, and the only "news" involved here is that they have finally got around to

publishing what they have always thought. Groups who seek press coverage know this, hence the passion for The Facts. The Facts can be presented as having only recently been discovered, the minds connected with The Facts can be presented as only recently having been made up, and the whole charade can be dressed up as an event. The group knows that The Facts were only scattered on afterwards like salt and vinegar onto a bag of chips, and the media people know this too. (Media people know everything there is to know about pseudo-events.) Nevertheless, the pretence is acceptable to all concerned, and on it goes.

This was all brought home to me with particular force when my Libertarian Alliance colleague Chris Tame recently told me that if we do publish my blistering rant on the immorality - nay the absurdity - of state funding for museums, he may be able to get some press coverage for it, provided he calls it a "report".

The system has, I suppose, a certain logic to it. Only strongly and consistently held opinions get media coverage, because only those who strongly mean what they are saying can spare all that time and trouble to assemble appropriate clutches of The Facts to decorate their opinions and get the media to pay attention.

OBJECTIVITY

The Adam Smith Institute has taken this business of The Facts a stage further, by automating the process by which they are produced. Their response to the assumption that The Facts are of decisive importance is positively to embrace this falsehood, and to set about unleashing groups which have a vested interest in those aspects of The Facts which are of a pro rather than anti free market nature.

Thus, the ASI urges changes which bring into existence powerful interest groups, and which hint at the possibility of yet more profitable business to be done. It gathers together free market medicine and education peddlers, would-be free market road operators and prison governors, and gets them to emit statements of an impeccably non ideological nature, full of The Facts, and totally in favour of what the ASI has been saying and is about to say next. The implication is that these persons had assembled themselves in a spirit of open-minded objectivity, and that only *after* they had perused The Facts did they arrive at their scrupulous non-ideological opinion of the matter in hand.

The ASI encourages the government to sell off state industries, and thereby causes entire civil service departments to be devoted - with all their time and secretaries and filing cabinets and word-processing equipment, and their huge advertising budgets - to the organising of the relevant Fact hurricanes.

HOW DID THE ASI START?

I am impressed. I truly am. The ASI's publications-per-square-foot-of-carpet ratio is splendid, and its policy-changes-per-square-foot-of-carpet ratio is even more amazing. When yet another ASI publication emerges from the cramped squalour of its offices, the world listens to what is said, and not infrequently it does what is said.

But what interests me is how people get to be the founder members of something like the Adam Smith Institute in the first place. Where did the ASI come from? Is that a mere lobby, brought into existence by the mere deregulation of the policy institute trade, or by the publishing expenses of

free market propagandists having been made tax deductible? Of course not. The ASI was founded by people who read long and deeply in the literature of the free market, and who consequently decided that the free market world view is a good one. The Facts came later.

And what of their numerous allies, out there in the world, surrounded by The Facts, and helpfully sharing them with the ASI for their next publication? Are they cooperating merely because of their particular, partial experience in one tiny sector of the economy? Have they too not looked beyond their mere interests, to the question of how the world - all of it - ought to be?

The ASI people often sound to me as if they believe their own propaganda in this matter. Not long ago, ASI President Madsen Pirie asked me what I was busy doing, and I said: Libertarian Alliance publications! Yes, he said, but what are they for? I said, what do you mean, what are they *for*? They're *publications*. People will *read* them. No no, he said, what will *happen* as a *result* of them? Will anything immediately be created, closed down, defunded, deregulated, etc. etc.? What will they *achieve*? The answer to that, of course, is: in the short run, nothing. And in the long run everything. People's minds will be changed, and with their changed minds they will decide how The Facts have changed in the years and decades to come. Hopefully, many of these Facts will involve parts of the world which the ASI is now obliged to leave severely alone.

True, if you want to denationalise the police this Thursday, it helps to have a few policemen on hand who can be quoted and photographed agreeing with you. It may even help to have the policemen saying that they are purely practical coppers, in no way influenced by mere ideology. But that doesn't mean that others have to believe such nonsense.

TRUTH IS STILL TRUE

I am not attacking the principle of evidence as such. A fact is a fact is a fact, and is entirely to be preferred to a statement which only purports to be a fact, but which is, in fact, not a fact. Do not mistake this piece of writing for one of those revolting "What do we mean by truth anyway?" things, which socialists write nowadays instead of admitting that truth is as fine as ever it was and that socialism lacks it. My point is that the particular case for any particular category of free market activity should partake of *all* the evidence for the free market, rather than only a tiny bit of it.

I can *imagine* a world in which pro free market rhetoric consisted *only* of the kind of moralising and abstract generalisations and cross-referential arguing that I am recommending more of, read carefully by a slowly growing circle of enthusiasts and ignored by the media, and in which the search for The Facts ought, both on tactical and more solidly intellectual grounds, to be intensified. But I do not think this is the world we now inhabit.

"THE HARSH FACTS OF THE MARKET"

The obsession with The Facts among pro-capitalists is often associated with a way of arguing for capitalism which is not just unpersuasive but downright repellent.

I refer to constant claims by free marketeers that "the market" or "capitalism" embodies "reality", while anti-capitalism embodies only "theory". From the claim that "I don't

deal in Theory - I prefer to look at The Facts" it is all too easy to slide into "The Hard Fact that Britain must compete in the Harshly Competitive Modern World", in which, alas, we must all live, *whether we like it or not*. The non-capitalist alternative is allowed to seem soft and comfortable by comparison, a haven for the free spirit and the individual imagination. These grim pro-capitalists can't just say that they prefer capitalism because it's so much *nicer*, even though that's what all of them think; they've got into a way of arguing which makes something so true and so obvious seem unsayable. By denying to themselves the joyous language of whim and caprice, of defiantly subjective preference and individual indulgence, these foul weather friends of capitalism manage to suggest that surviving foul weather is all that capitalism is good for.

The implication is that capitalism is what you *have* to do when you are in economic difficulties, but that *as soon as you can afford to get rid of it you should*. It is often necessary, but never nice.

The truth is utterly at odds with this harsh and pessimistic rhetoric, as anyone with even the slightest and most indirect knowledge of the non-capitalist world well knows. The reality of non-capitalism is so harsh and so ferociously competitive that it makes even humdrum, mixed economy capitalism such as we have in Britain seem like a utopian dreamland by comparison. In the USSR they now understand this, and the word has gone out from Moscow that the Soviet economy must become more responsive to human whims and caprices, that it must deal more humanely and conscientiously with the desires of disparate individuals ... and that those who disobey this edict will be harshly punished.

GENTLEMANLY DISAGREEMENT

Because you can't tell beforehand which of many facts or opinions will finally decide somebody to prefer freedom to tyranny, I have mentioned a great variety of facts and opinions in this piece, and as a Libertarian Alliance editor I encourage others to produce a great many more facts and opinions, regardless of whether these are attached to a particular "policy issue" - i.e. government decision in the immediate offing - of the type that obsesses the free market policy institutes.

I will end by flying off at yet another tangent. One of the things I especially like about capitalism that it allows me publicly to disagree with such inside-track grandees as Sir Alfred Sherman and Madsen Pirie, without having to worry about what this will do to my income, to the smooth functioning of my telephone, to my relationship with the police, and so forth. In the unlikely event that my remarks here make difficulties for me in the free market propaganda sector of the economy, I can switch to some other sector and keep on living comfortably. Where capitalism is suppressed, on the other hand, there is only one economic sector and to disagree in public with those who run it could mean sinking into a state of poverty which is almost beyond the Western imagination.

Capitalism, in other words, enables those sustained by it to disagree like gentlemen.

Which, incidentally, is yet one more reason why museum operators should also be capitalists rather than mere state employees.