

Libertarianism is Self-Empowerment

Written by Marco den Ouden.

One of the things I have been trying to do with this blog is look at why libertarianism isn't widely accepted by the masses and how it can effectively be sold. In one entry I used Isaiah Berlin's discussion of the **Hedgehog and the Fox** to argue that libertarians were hedgehogs in their thinking whereas Joe Public thinks like a fox.

To reiterate, Berlin argues that "there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle."

The former he calls hedgehogs and the latter foxes. Hedgehogs see the world through an ideological lens. Hedgehogs try and make reality fit their ideas, or try and force the world into a narrow perspective. The fox is a pragmatist. He is flexible. He does what works.

In Karl Popper's terminology, (taken from *The Open Society and Its Enemies*), hedgehogs believe in wholesale social engineering, whereas foxes are prone to piecemeal social engineering.

In another blog post I argued that libertarianism is all about **growing up**. Shedding the notions of childhood and learning to become independent and productive individuals. As I put it, "The statist mentality is that most people are too stupid to be autonomous individuals. They must be treated like children. If they don't want to use their seat belts, then, by God, we'll compel them to do so with a threat of punishment if they don't comply. If they don't want to eat healthy food, then, by God, we will ban super-size drinks in theaters or put a tax on junk food. The adult in a libertarian society, on the other hand, is treated as an adult, encouraged to make decisions and make his way in the world."

The other day I came across a great quote from Eric Hoffer which made me question whether libertarians are going about the idea of selling liberty altogether wrongly. We try and sell freedom. We sell an abstract idea – the non-aggression principle. But is this something that is, in and of itself, saleable? Libertarians are clearly hedgehogs – ideologues ruled by one central idea. In a world of foxes, can a hedgehog change the world other than by force?

What Hoffer said in an essay from March 2, 1969 called *The Worth of an Average*

American is this: "If we want to bring freedom to non-free countries we cannot do it by inculcating a love of freedom, or by having them copy our constitution, but by transmitting to the common people the technological and social expertise which would enable them to do things on their own without masters to shove them around." (page 129 in *The Syndicated News Articles*)

Hoffer goes on to tell a personal story. At the height of the Depression, he was living on Skid Row. A construction company that was building a road through the San Bernardino Mountains, instead of engaging an employment agency, sent two trucks around to the slums and picked up anyone who wanted to work. They arrived at the work site to find all the supplies and equipment needed and one foreman. He said little and let the men organize themselves. They built the road.

Hoffer speculated what sort of man this guy was. "Not an intellectual – that's for sure. Not a businessman either. An ex-hobo perhaps?" Hoffer speculates he might have been an ex-military officer. He cites General Patton, "Never tell an American how to do a thing. Tell him what you want done and he'll surprise you by his ingenuity."

In another essay on *The American in Every Man*, Hoffer says, "To me it seems axiomatic that the common people everywhere are our natural allies and that our chief contribution to the advancement of mankind should be the energizing and activation of lowly folk. We must learn how to impart to common people everywhere the technological, political, and social skills which would enable them to dispense with the tutorship of the upper classes and the intellectuals. We must deflate the pretensions of self-appointed elites. These elites will hate us no matter what we do, and it is legitimate for us to help dump them into the dustbin of history."

Now Hoffer was writing in the 1960s and the Americanism he was writing about was the self-reliance of the average man, the limited government that does not interfere with a man's pursuit of his own good and his own happiness. Since then, many changes have taken place both materially and technologically.

But the elites still want to rule us. They want to limit our actions through taxes and regulations. They want to limit our freedom by restricting what we can say, do and ingest. To be sure, our governments and ruling elites are not the "non-free countries" he mentions. But we can treat them as such for the purpose of this argument.

And as Hoffer says, we cannot sell liberty as such to the people, "we cannot do it by inculcating a love of freedom, or by having them copy our constitution" (read adopting the non-aggression principle). The way to sell liberty is to "deflate the pretensions of self-appointed elites", to promote the idea that the people can do things for themselves, that they don't need to be directed or ordered around by the elite.

We must appeal to the inherent foxiness, the inherent natural abilities of people to do things for themselves, rather than wait for orders or kowtow to masters.

When libertarians pontificate about the evils of government, the sanctity of the non-aggression principle and so on, when we focus on a narrow ideal and split hairs over minor points, we become hedgehogs. We become another elite.

Another way of looking at it is that libertarians can achieve a lot by taking a leaf from the self-help movement – by teaching people that they are capable of self-rule. Instead of focusing on a negative, focus on the positive.

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