

Reflections on the Leiter-Caplan Debate

It was a pleasure debating Brian Leiter last week. The resolution, to repeat:

“Social democracy is preferable to market capitalism, but ultimately America will need to move towards a socialist system.”

Here are some thoughts I failed to fully articulate at the live event. As always, I’m happy to publish any reply my opponent wishes to compose.

1. To his credit, Leiter expressed zero sympathy for any actual socialist regime. He even condemned Cuba; good for him. But Leiter still insisted that the totality of these awful experiences show next to nothing about the desirability of socialism, which frankly seems crazy. As far as I could tell, Leiter hews to the classic Marxist position that we should transition to socialism only *after* capitalism creates incredible abundance. Unlike most historical Marxists, however, he doesn’t think that even the richest countries are ready yet. My question: If we finally got rich enough for socialism, why think that a socialist regime would be able to *maintain* the prior level of prosperity, much less provide continued progress?

2. When I discussed the actual performance of social democracy, Leiter was surprisingly apologetic. He conceded that we have wasteful universal redistribution, instead of well-targeted means-tested redistribution. His only defense was to repeat the flimsy argument that it’s too hard to sustain popular support for means-tested programs.

3. On regulation, Leiter appeared to endorse open borders; good for him. He also professed agnosticism on housing regulation. Since these are by far the two biggest forms of regulation in modern social democracies (measured by how much regulation changes the likely market outcome), it’s hard to see why he would believe that increased regulation has, on balance, been good for humanity or the poor.

4. According to Leiter, “ultimately America will need to move towards a socialist system” because automation will one day cause mass unemployment. This position baffled me on multiple levels. Most obviously, why not respond to automation with redistribution rather than nationalization, and thereby avoid killing the capitalist goose that has hitherto laid a mountain of golden eggs?

My fundamental objection, however, is that history teaches us that technological unemployment is only a morbid fantasy. When firms figure out ways to get more output out of fewer workers, this may cause unemployment in the short-run. Soon enough, however, business has repeatedly figured out *new* jobs for workers to perform. Business has already accomplished the miraculous task of creating new roles for the enormous

number of workers disemployed by the mechanization of agriculture. Every future economic transformation pales by comparison. Remember: Almost *everyone* was a farmer for almost *all* of recorded human history. Then industrialization eliminated almost all farm jobs. Yet today, we don't miss these jobs. Instead, we get fat on all the cheap food, and do jobs our agrarian ancestors would have struggled to understand.

Leiter had two responses to my reaction. One was "maybe this time it will be different"; Leiter even appealed to David Hume's **problem of induction** to downplay all prior economic history! If you take this line, however, it would only entitle you to say "it is logically possible that America will need to move towards a socialist system" – a vacuous claim indeed. Frankly, if you take Hume seriously, even the best empirical evidence shows nothing about the future, so why bother debating at all?

Leiter's better argument was that capitalists are perennially trying to cut costs – and that in the long-run capitalism works. So eventually capitalists will figure out a way to run the economy without workers – an outcome that is individually rational for a capitalist, but socially disastrous for capitalism. My response: Yes, capitalists want to figure out how to produce a *given* level of output with fewer workers. Their deeper goal, however, is to *figure out the most profitable way to employ all available inputs*. As long as there are able-bodied people who want to work, there will be a capitalist brainstorming how to make money off the situation. And to echo Leiter, in the long-run this works.

5. Leiter bizarrely insisted that "the" goal of socialism was to allow human freedom – legions of vocally authoritarian self-identified socialists notwithstanding. He followed up with the classic socialist argument that saying "If you don't do what I say, I won't give you the job you need to avoid starvation" is just as much an abridgment of freedom as "If you don't do what I say, I will shoot you."

The standard reply, of course, is that there is a vast moral difference between getting you to do what I want by threatening to take away something to which you *are* morally entitled (e.g., your life) and getting you to do what I want by threatening to take away something to which you are *not* morally entitled (e.g. my assistance). Thus, imagine you will be suicidally depressed unless I marry you. Is my refusal to marry you morally equivalent to making you suicidally depressed by threatening to shoot you unless you break off your engagement to your willing fiancé? Of course not. You aren't entitled to marry *me* if I don't approve, but you and your fiancé are entitled to marry *each other* even if I don't approve.

6. Moral entitlement aside, "If you don't do what I say, I won't give you the job you need to avoid starvation" is rarely relevant in modern labor markets. Why not? First, there are competing employers, so if you don't like an offer, you can shop around for another. (Smarter yet, take what you can get, but keep searching for a better offer). Second, if you

live frugally, even a relatively low-wage worker can save up a nest egg, making it easy to turn down unappealing offers in the future. Naturally, you can object, “I still face the choice to either live frugally, work for some employer, or starve.” If so, we’re back to my original reply: Complaining about being “free to starve” is the flip side of demanding that strangers support you whether they like it or not.

7. Leiter took umbrage at my authoritarian interpretation of Marx. I freely grant that Leiter’s invested more time reading Marx than I have. However, I too have devoted long hours to Marx’s oeuvre (though I’ve spent far more reading about the actual history of socialist regimes), and I stand by my bleak assessment.

Did Marx explicitly say, “We should round up priests and execute them”? To the best of my knowledge, no. Yet that is the most reasonable interpretation of what Marx had planned. What are we supposed to think when Marx makes Orwellian statements like, “[B]ourgeois ‘freedom of conscience’ is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of *religious freedom of conscience*, and that for its part [socialism] endeavors rather to liberate the conscience from the witchery of religion” (*Critique of the Gotha Program*)? It doesn’t sound like Marx plans to respect the rights of people who don’t wish to be so “liberated.” If Leiter is right, why did so few Marxists protest Lenin’s religious persecution? I say it’s because Marx provided the Orwellian language they needed to insist that Freedom is Slavery. As I wrote two decades ago:

Innumerable social thinkers disagree with much of Marx’s thought, but praise his reflections upon human freedom, the depth of his insight in contrast to the shallowness of liberalism. Yet it is difficult to understand how Marx’s concept of freedom is anything more than a defense of tyranny and oppression. No dissident or non-conformist can see society as the “realization of his own liberty.” And what can the attack on “the right to do everything which does not harm others” amount to in practice, except a justification for coercing people who are not harming others? The problem with “broad” notions of freedom is that they necessarily wind up condoning the violation of “narrow” notions of freedom. Under “bourgeois” notions of religious liberty, people may practice any religion they wish (“a private whim or caprice” as Marx calls it); how could this liberty be broadened, without sanctioning the persecution of some religious views?

Listening to Leiter, a law professor at the University of Chicago, I couldn't help but think, "Leiter is talking like Marx's lawyer." When a Mafia enforcer says, "Sweet kids you got there; be a shame if anything happened to them," a Mafia lawyer will vigorously deny that his client threatened to murder children. Any neutral adult, however, knows that the Mafioso did exactly that. I say the same about Marx's writings. "I'm going to bring you *real* freedom" is a classic Offer You Can't Refuse – as Marxist revolutionaries have shown us time and again. A skilled lawyer can obfuscate this scary truth, but a learned philosopher should not.