

The Threat of Voluntary Associations

Written by David Glasner, as published in The Voluntaryist, October 1991.

The notion that a regime — even a totalitarian regime — could survive the universal disapproval of its subjects is difficult to comprehend. Ordinarily one would assume that a nearly unanimous desire by the subjects of a regime to oust it eventually would make it impossible for the regime to retain power. After all, the regime couldn't function if all those who wished to see it replaced stopped carrying out orders. However, unless a sufficient number of people simultaneously stop following orders, it is suicidal for any one person to stop obeying. The goal of a totalitarian regime is therefore to isolate individuals: to manipulate the information available to them so completely that they do not realize that opponents are in the majority, or, even if they do realize it, that they don't trust their compatriots enough to risk exposing themselves.

What a regime must avoid at all costs is a chain reaction in which the opposition of a single individual or a group induces others to resist its authority. That is why it is so important for an unpopular regime to create the illusion of popular support, misleading its opponents into believing that they, and not the regime and its supporters, are in the minority. There is strength in numbers. And believing in one's strength creates courage.

Control over information is absolutely necessary for such a regime. Not only would information about the true (miserable) state of affairs create further opposition, but even the existence of internal opposition cannot be acknowledged. The transmission of such information could encourage latent opposition to surface elsewhere. Individuals must be convinced 1) that opposition does not exist, and 2) that even if it did, its chances for success would be nil. If there are opponents they must be branded as tools of external forces and condemned as traitors.

The few people who start an uprising must take extraordinary risks, because they must expose themselves in the expectation that their example will attract the support of others who will join them in defying the regime. But if too few follow their lead, the leaders will have sacrificed themselves in a futile gesture. Moreover, any organized opposition to the regime requires communication between individuals. If no one expresses his thoughts of opposition to anyone else, opposition to the regime can be virtually unanimous and yet be ineffectual.

Thus, to eradicate all possible opposition, an unpopular regime determined to stay in power must suppress any form of social intercourse — indeed any social relationship — that is outside the master-subordinate relationship it imposes on its subjects. Any social relationship is a potential threat to the regime because it allows the transfer of information

that could be inimical to its interests. But more fundamentally, even the mere expression of thoughts, feelings, and emotions creates a degree of intimacy, trust, and obligation that the regime cannot easily tolerate. Even if the thoughts, feelings, and emotions are completely unrelated to the regime (which as the regime becomes more intrusive into the lives of its subjects becomes ever less likely) the expression of those thoughts, feelings, and emotions is potentially subversive because such expressions build the mutual trust that would allow people to discuss the regime and to voice (however softly and discreetly) their opposition to it.

It was thus profoundly insightful for George Orwell in *1984* to have focused his portrayal of Big Brother's destruction of all opposition on the power to force two lovers to betray each other. Any feeling of intimacy, trust, and mutual dependence by two people for each other was by its nature subversive to Big Brother and had to be extirpated.

All voluntary associations of individuals are suspect under a totalitarian regime and are either suppressed or subverted. Obviously no independent political parties or political associations, no independent labor unions or professional associations, no independent business or enterprise, not even an independent sports team or cultural organization can be tolerated. Religious institutions must therefore either be suppressed outright or co-opted through infiltration by agents of the regime.

Not only is every organized social association suppressed or subverted, but informal social relationships including (indeed, especially) family relationships are controlled or perverted by the regime. The regime assumes the burden of raising and educating (indoctrinating) children. It teaches them to reserve feelings of loyalty and devotion for the regime, not their parents. Loyalty to anything or anyone other than the regime is an intolerable offense. Indeed, loyalty to the regime can best be demonstrated by betraying one's parents or loved ones by denouncing them for disloyalty to the regime.

A totalitarian regime is therefore driven to destroy all relationships that characterize a normally functioning society, because all such relationships create a contest within which opposition feeling could be nurtured, articulated, and perhaps channeled into concrete actions. To convince people that any act of opposition is futile and pointless, they must be cut off from all forms of authentic social intercourse and genuine comradeship. What is left is a collection of disconnected and disoriented individuals whose only meaningful relationship is with the regime. Indeed, any meaningful relationship to which the regime is not a party, is from the standpoint of the regime, a kind of treachery.