

Essays on Political Philosophy

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February 20, 2009

Five papers are featured here – liberalism and democratism, Lao Tzu and corruption, Rule of law, Cooperative individualism, and Left and right. The first two papers appeared in my column in the online magazine, www.thelobbyist.biz. The last three short papers were from my blog, <http://funwithgovernment.blogspot.com>.

(1) Liberalism, Democratism and Authoritarianism

30 December 2008

http://www.thelobbyist.biz/column_detail.php?id_article=1042&id_category=25

December 30 is called “Rizal day” in the Philippines to remind the country of the day of execution of the national hero by the Spanish colonizers a little more than a century ago. Rizal did not lead the revolution against the Spanish colonizers who have been ruling the country for more than three centuries already, but he was a top caliber intellectual whose writings and books inspired many Filipino revolutionary leaders at that time.

In periods of foreign occupation and colonization, launching a political movement for national independence and collective freedom was easy because the enemy – the foreign conquerors – were very clear. Thus, launching an anti-Spanish, then anti-American, then anti-Japanese colonization in Philippine history was a bit easy. What was difficult was launching a successful armed uprising as colonizers always have military superiority.

In periods of internal tyranny and local dictatorship, however, launching an anti-authoritarian movement is difficult because the enemy – the local tyrants – are plentier, are more established locally, and are of the same skin color and genes as the oppressed. Police and military harassment is also more extensive.

In periods of no explicit dictatorship but nonetheless extensively corrupt administration, launching an anti-corruption, anti-authoritarian movement is even more difficult as the enemy – the culture of corruption – is less tangible compared to say, abusive and imposing armies under a dictatorship. Also, the culture of corruption tends to be “democratically dispersed” from national to local bureaucracies, and from the Executive to Legislative and Judicial branches.

So various political parties vying for political power and control of the State would position themselves as advocating for democracy and good, non-corrupt government. And almost all political parties, old or new, would consider themselves as “democrats” to hopefully get political acceptance and support from many voters and citizens.

The challenge to competing political parties that consider themselves as democrats, is how to distinguish themselves from other parties, aside from the political personalities that head them. So the liberals would call themselves as “liberal democrats”, the nationalists as “nationalist democrats” or “Filipino democrats”, the welfarists as “social democrats”. Some would add religious adjectives and call themselves as “Christian democrats”, “Muslim democrats”, even “Evangelist democrats”. Even the communists in the country fighting against “imperialism and feudalism” would call themselves as “national democrats”.

So what do those political adjectives and ideological labels signify? For instance, what is “liberalism”, “nationalism”, “democratism”, “authoritarianism” and how are they different from each other? One very important test to define and differentiate these and other political concepts and/or ideologies, is how and where they would put liberty in their scheme or vision of a social order.

Authoritarianism and its cousin ideologies or practices (totalitarianism, dictatorship) has deep-seated belief that people are irrational and are not capable of personal and collective improvement if left on their own. A strong and enlightened political leadership can guide and navigate the energy and resources of people towards achieving a particular social ideal and political order as envisioned and decided upon by the authoritarian political leadership. In short, liberty is concentrated in the hands of the few political leaders and people, as individuals or as a collective, will be stripped of a big portion of their liberty and freedom.

Democratism despises the above idea because of the great danger that it will lead to abuses and large-scale corruption that can push a society towards economic underdevelopment and political persecution and tyranny. Thus, the political will of the majority over the minority, the desire and aspirations of the many should prevail in society. In short, collective liberty should prevail over individual liberty.

Liberalism, while it shares with democratism in rejecting authoritarianism, does not believe that individual liberty should be sacrificed at the altar of national or collective liberty in many cases. The primacy of individual liberty and responsibility is at the heart of this political philosophy. Now, will liberalism later morph or evolve into

authoritarianism because of its rejection of the dominance of the collective over the individual?

Not a bit. The big difference between liberalism and authoritarianism, despite their shared belief in not bowing to the “will of the majority” at all times, is that the former does not prescribe coercion, whether by the individual or the collective, over other people. There is deep belief in the principle of subsidiarity, volunteerism and the role of civil society, and non-role of big and intrusive government, in the lives of people.

The big danger of “majority rule” and democratism, is the use of coercion by the majority to pursue their desires and aspirations. For instance, if the majority will desire socialism or expensive welfarism to legislate and institutionalize social equity, then this will result in large-scale confiscation of the income, savings and liberty of the hard-working and efficient people, the tax money and resources to be distributed to the majority. And a big portion of the majority can afford to be lazy and irresponsible because even if they will not work and drink everyday, the State will assure them of “quality” health care, housing, education, nutrition, and so on.

So if hard work is to be penalized by high income confiscation and laziness is to be rewarded with endless subsidies, society will see less work and more irresponsibility. And this is a perfect formula for social stagnation if not disorder. Pretty soon, democratism and “majority rule” can slowly morph into authoritarianism.

Liberalism or whatever political philosophy that promotes individual liberty and responsibility, and despises the use of institutional and political coercion to attain certain social ideals, is the best antidote to authoritarianism and its silent and creeping ally, democratism.

(Note: for more discussions of the principle of subsidiarity, civil society, dangers of majority rule, rule of law, and related concepts, see the author’s various papers at www.minimalgovernment.net)

(2) Lao Tzu, Corruption and Recession

06 February 2009

http://www.thelobbyist.biz/column_detail.php?id_article=1072&id_category=25

It is now February 2009, or 23 years since the original "People Power" Philippine revolution of February 1986, where a political dictatorship was toppled after 20 years in power. The main issue of the Filipino people then was a revolt against corruption, a revolt against wholesale abuse of power and the related violence and political repression to perpetuate in power a corrupt government.

After 23 years, where four Presidents have taken turns leading the country, including "People Power II" and a failed "People Power III" revolutions eight years ago, corruption remains a very big issue for the people. Not only that corruption has remained, it may have worsened, and not only in the Philippines but also in many other countries around the world.

The recession that affected only a few industrialized countries last year is likely to claim more victims this year. And governments around the world, especially those suffering from recession or drastic economic down-turn, are becoming bigger, more interventionist and more tax- and/or debt-hungry. This means that individual liberty and responsibility will suffer more shock, as governments will intrude more into the pockets and savings of their citizens, intrude and regulate more private enterprises.

Lao Tzu (600 BC), considered the first intellectual in China and the world who championed individual liberty, has a lot of useful things to say regarding the role and limits of government. More than 2,000 years before Adam Smith called for a "simple system of natural liberty", Lao Tzu wrote, referring to government:

"The more restrictions and limitations there are, the more impoverished men will be... The more rules and precepts are enforced, the more bandits and crooks will be produced. Hence, we have the words of the wise (the sage or ruler):

Through my non-action, men are spontaneously transformed.
Through my quiescence, men spontaneously become tranquil.
Through my non-interference, men spontaneously increase their wealth."

The "restrictions and limitations" that Lao Tzu mentioned are now what we call "regulations, permits and licenses." The "bandits and crooks" that he mentioned are now the various officials in government, elected or appointed, who became robbers and plunderers. While the "non-interference" that he mentioned, refers to a minimal and limited government that intervenes and taxes the least.

And further, he wrote:

1. People suffer from famine because of the multitude of taxes consumed by their superiors.
2. People are difficult to govern because of the (excessive) agency of their superiors. It is through this that they are difficult to govern.
3. People make light of dying because of the greatness of their labours in seeking for the means of living. It is this which makes them think light of dying. Thus it is that to leave the subject of living altogether out of view is better than to set a high value on it.

Note again that this was written more than 2,600 years ago. But a number of the issues that the Chinese sage discussed are still with us today: "multitude of taxes", "excessive agency of superiors", and (huge) "labour in seeking for the means of living" or slave-like long working hours.

Multiple taxes is the government's way of telling the citizens, "Give me more of your money. I know how to spend this for you better than you do." Individual responsibility is pushed more to the background as "government responsibility" is taking more space in the lives of the people. Consequently, individual liberty is relegated more to the background, as government power and intervention is taking more space in society.

And this is where corruption would tent to take roots, and later expand to acquire a life of its own. As more prohibitions and regulations are imposed, people need to get the permission, licenses and signatures of those in government before they can start and continue anything – from starting and operating a business, to building and repairing a house, to owning and driving a car. When those in government have the power to approve or deny, to hasten or delay such permits and licenses, this arbitrary power in their hands will naturally lead to corruption.

Recession and corporate failures are no excuse for governments to intervene more. Capitalism without failure is like religion without sin. Capitalism means not only corporate expansion and individual wealth. It also means corporate bankruptcy and individual poverty. And it is precisely this threat of bankruptcy and poverty that will discipline people to be more responsible in conducting their own lives and their own businesses, to live within their means. But government interventions like corporate bail-outs, more taxation and borrowings to finance those bail-outs and endless subsidies and welfarism, corrupt the behavior of people. Many people think they can be shrewd and irresponsible, and when things will foul out, there is always a government that will come in to give them "safety nets", various forms of individual subsidies and corporate bail-outs.

Lao Tzu has guided millions of thinkers and entrepreneurs in China and other parts of the world, to be more independent and responsible. Until communism and forced collectivism came to Europe and China and corrupted people to be become more dependent to the State. While communism has later mellowed, it has morphed to various shades of "soft socialism" and welfare state, both real and trying-hard.

Advocates of more individual responsibility and free markets, as well as their ideological nemesis, will learn a lot from re-visiting the writings of this great Chinese sage.

For additional readings, see also the papers by a friend of this author, "Wisdom of a Chinese sage" by Khalil Ahmad,
Part I, <http://as institute.org/node/83>,
Part II, <http://as institute.org/node/84>.

These 3 short essays below were among the entries in my blog,
<http://funwithgovernment.blogspot.com>.

(3) Essence of the rule of law

DECEMBER 21, 2008

Life will be simpler if there is simply a real "rule of law" as in "no exception", not even the governors and administrators of laws can grant exemption to anyone, even to themselves and their families.

Law = prohibition.

rule of law = rule of prohibition.

Since these are prohibitions, the number of laws should be as few as possible if society is to remain free and non-intrusive and less-interventionist. So maybe only 5 general laws all in all:

1. No killing or attempting to kill
2. No robbery or attempt to steal
3. No stabbing/shooting/poisoning/kidnapping or any attempt to harm other people
4. No censorship, no control of right to self-expression
5. 1 or 2 more.

Then, EVERYTHING ALLOWED!

Drinking, smoking, gambling, drugs, sex, speculative trading, entrepreneurship, job creation, international trade, etc. all allowed, zero or minimal restriction but shooting other people after one got drunk (or even if the shooter is sober) is not allowed.

The number of prohibitions is very small, everyone will remember them, and everyone knows the consequences for violating those very few general laws or prohibitions.

This is the kind of "discipline" that people expect: the predictability of action and penalties when one violates those very few laws.

Too many laws mean lots of leeway and arbitrary powers to the law enforcers and administrators which law will apply to whom and which ones will exempt some people. This is very evident in our traffic "laws". Too many no left turn, no u-turn, one way no counterflow, no right turn on red, etc in our roads, the police and government vehicles, civilian cars but the drivers are politically connected, violate each and all those traffic "laws" with impunity.

(4) Cooperative individualism

February 03, 2009

A friend called my attention about a seemingly "new" think tank that equally champions individual liberty. It's called "Cooperative Individualism". Its website is called "[www.cooperative individualism](http://www.cooperativeindividualism.com)."

Reflecting on this term, the concept there is individualism, individual liberty and individual responsibility. So the term "cooperative individualism" is very similar to "voluntary collectivism", as opposed to "forced collectivism" like socialism and statism. The latter can also mean "forced cooperation" or "forced/coerced cooperative".

One distinguishing characteristic of voluntary vs forced collectivism or cooperativism, is how they look at social inequality. A society that respects and encourages individual liberty will have no problem with social inequality as this will be the natural result when people pursue their individual aspirations, talents, ambitions, or the lack of ambition and aspiration. The main goal of forced collectivism is to coerce equality among people. The ambitious and the lazy will be made equal, more or less, in both political and economic status in society,.

(5) Left vs right

February 13, 2009

For a number of people who strongly believe in free enterprise, personal responsibility, and individual liberty, any government that behaves in a spend-and-spend, tax-and-tax and/or borrow-and-borrow as if they are competing with France and Sweden of who gets to socialism faster, is considered a leftist. Thus, in this country, both the current (and past) administrations and all their armed enemies -- CPP-NPA, RAM-YOU-Magdalo, etc. can be all considered as "leftist". All of them seem to be trying-hard socialists who want the government to take care of our education, health care, housing, pension, credit, agriculture, power and utilities, almost everything. And they also want to take almost everything from our income, almost everything from our savings and investments.

The definition of what is "leftist" or "rightist" depends on the criteria we use in defining things. For me, I just adopt one criteria: personal responsibility. The more that people want to disenfranchise individuals of personal responsibility, to make things and everything as "government responsibility", the more leftist people will be.

Whereas people who assume more personal responsibility and dislike forced collectivism, the more "rightist" they are.

The form of struggle (peaceful vs violent, electoral vs. armed, protracted war vs. coup, etc.), do not reflect how respectful (or disrespectful) of personal responsibility the aspiring leaders of the country would want to be.

Collectivists and political robbers prefer that everything should be State responsibility. So that almost everything will also become State revenues.