

Notes on Liberty and the Boundaries of the Promised Land, Aldous Leonard Huxley

Notes on Liberty and the Boundaries of the Promised Land

'Mediaeval liberty,' said Lord Acton, 'differs from modern in this, that it depended on property.' But the difference is surely a difference only in degree, not in kind. Money may have less influence in a modern than in a mediaeval court of law. But outside the court of law? Outside, it is true, I am legally free to work or not to work, as I choose; for I am not a serf. I am legally free to live here rather than there; for I am not bound to the land. I am free, within reasonable limits, to amuse myself as I like; archdeacons do not fine me for indulging in what they consider unseemly diversions. I am legally free to marry any one (with the possible exception of a member of the royal family) from my first cousin to the daughter of a duke; no lord compels me to marry a girl or widow from the manor, no priest forbids the banns within the seventh degree of consanguinity. The list of all my legal freedoms would run to pages of type. Nobody in all history has been so free as I am now.

But let us see what happens if I try to make use of my legal liberty. Not a serf, I choose to stop working; result, I shall begin to starve next Monday. Not bound to the land, I elect to live in Grosvenor Square and Taormina; unhappily, the rent of my London house alone amounts to five times my yearly income. Not subject to the persecutions of ecclesiastical busybodies, I decide that it would be pleasant to take a young woman to the Savoy for a bite of supper; but I have no dress clothes, and I should spend more on my evening's entertainment than I can earn in a week. Not bound to marry at the bidding of a master, free to choose wherever I like, I decide to look for a bride at Chatsworth or Welbeck; but when I ring the bell, I am told to go round to the servants' entrance and look sharp about it.

All my legal liberties turn out in practice to be as closely dependent on property as were the liberties of my mediaeval ancestors. The rich can buy large quantities of freedom; the poor must do without it, even though, by law and theoretically, they have as good a right to just as much of it as have the rich.

A right is something which I have at the expense of other people. Even my right of not being murdered and not being made a slave is something which I have at the expense of those stronger than myself who could kill me or force me into servitude. There are no such things as 'natural rights'; there are only adjustments of conflicting claims. What I have at your expense ought not to be more than what you have at my expense: that, whatever the practice may be, is the theory of Justice.

Many murdereres and slaves, however feeble, are stronger, in the last resort, than a few slavers and murderers. From time to time the slaves and murdereres have actually demonstrated this in sanguinary fashion. These revolts, though rare, though quite astonishingly rare (the abject patience of the oppressed is perhaps the most inexplicable, as it is also the most important fact in all history), have been enough to scare the oppressors into making considerable concessions, not only in theory, but even in practice.

Legally and theoretically, we are all free now; but the right to make use of these liberties must continue, under the present dispensation, to

depend on property and the personal abilities which enable a man to acquire property easily. Some people, like tramps and certain artists, enjoy, it is true, a good deal of liberty without paying for it; but this is only because, unlike most human beings, they are not interested to stake out a claim among the things which can be paid for with money.

In the egalitarian state of the future all excessive accumulations of property will be abolished. But this implies, apparently, the abolition of all excessive enjoyment of liberty. When everybody has three hundred a year, nobody will be less, but also nobody presumably will be more, free than the contemporary confidential clerk. 'But in the future state,' say the prophets, 'three hundred a year will buy five thousand pounds worth of liberty.' And when we ask how, by what miracle? they invoke, not the god from the machine, but the machine itself.

Every right, as we have seen, is something which we have at other people's expense. The machine is the only 'other person' at whose expense we can have things with a good conscience and also the only 'other person' who becomes steadily more and more efficient.

Served by mechanical domestics, exploiting the incessant labour of metallic slaves, the three-hundred-a-year man of the future state will enjoy an almost indefinite leisure. A system of transport, rapid, frequent, and cheap, will enable him to move about the globe more freely than the migrant rentier of the present age. Nor need he forgo (except in private) the rich man's privilege of living luxuriously. Already mass production has made it possible for the relatively poor to enjoy elaborate entertainments in surroundings of more than regal splendour. The theatres in which the egalitarians will enjoy the talkies, tasties, smellies, and feelies, the Corner Houses where they will eat their synthetic poached eggs on toast-substitute and drink their surrogates of coffee, will be prodigiously much vaster and more splendid than anything we know today. Compared with them, the hall of Belshazzar in Martin's celebrated picture will seem the squalidest of little chop-houses, and Bibbiena's palaces, Piranesi's imaginary Roman temples, mere dog-holes, hutches, and sties.

Urbs Sion unica, mansio mystica, condita coelo (or rather mundo),

Nunc tibi gaudeo, nunc tibi lugeo, tristior, anhelo . . .

Opprimit omne cor ille tuus decor, o Sion, o pax.

Urbs sine tempore, nulla potest fore laus tibi mendax.

O nova mansio, te pia concio, gens pia munit,

Provehit, excitat, auget, identitat, efficit, unit.

Well, let's hope that this mansio mystica will prove to be as jolly as its prophets say that it looks. Let's hope in particular that its inhabitants will enjoy their universal egalitarian liberties as much as we enjoy the little freedoms which the present dispensation allows us unjustly to buy or punishes us for criminally stealing.

My own hopes are tempered, I must confess, with certain doubts. For there's a divinity, as I see, that misshapes as well as one that shapes our ends. Suitably enough (for like bad dogs, bad gods deserve bad

names), this malignant deity is called the Law of Diminishing Returns. It was the economists who gave him the name and who first recognized and clearly described his unfriendly activities. But it would be a mistake to suppose that this demon confines himself solely to the economic sphere. The law of diminishing returns holds good in almost every part of our human universe.

Here, for example, is a very melancholy man who starts drinking Burgundy with his dinner. His melancholy soon wears off and is replaced by cheerfulness, which increases steadily with every drop of Burgundy consumed, until, three-quarters of the way through his first bottle, a maximum is reached. He goes on drinking; but the next half-bottle produces no perceptible alteration in his condition; he remains where he was—at the top of his high spirits. A few more glasses, however, and his cheerfulness begins once more to decline. He becomes first quarrelsome, then lachrymose, and finally feels most horribly unwell and therefore miserable. He is worse off at the end of his second bottle than he was on an empty stomach.

Similarly, beyond a certain point the return in happiness of increased prosperity steadily diminishes. This is an ancient commonplace. It is only our lingering belief in the eighteenth century heresy of perfectibility that makes us still loath to admit the hardly less obvious facts about education. For education is as much subject to the end-misshaping law as wine, or prosperity, or artificial manure. Increase in the amount or intensity of training gives returns in the form of increased mental efficiency and moral excellence; but after a certain maximum (which varies for each individual) has been passed, these returns steadily diminish and may even take on a negative value.

Thus the oblate children in mediaeval monasteries were subject to a long and Spartan training in virtue. 'Children should ever have chastisement with custody and custody with chastisement,' says the author of the constitutions of Cluny; and for a century or two the oblates got these things—with a vengeance. But the system broke down; for as a conscientious abbot complained to St Anselm, 'we cease not to chastise our boys by day and by night, yet they grow daily worse and worse.' The returns of education had diminished to the point of becoming negative.

Much the same thing happens in the sphere of politics. The democratization of political institutions gives returns in the form of increased justice and increased social efficiency. A peak is reached, and, if the process goes any further, the returns begin to diminish. In Italy, for example, just after the introduction of proportional representation, their values were rapidly ceasing to be positive. Hence, among other reasons, the rise of Fascism.

What has the end-misshaping divinity to say about liberty? Let us consider a few particular cases and try to guess how the god will pronounce himself on each.

'Perfect machinery,' say the prophets, 'will give us increasing freedom from work, and increasing freedom from work will give increasing happiness.' But leisure also is subject to the law of diminishing returns. Beyond a certain point, more freedom from work produces a diminished return in happiness. Among the completely leisured, the returns in happiness are often actually negative and acute boredom is suffered. As soon, moreover, as they are freed from the servitude of labour, many leisured people voluntarily abandon themselves to a servitude of amusement and social duties, more pointless than work and

often quite as arduous. Will the leisured majority of the egalitarian world be different in character from the leisured few today? Only the eugenists have any reason to suppose so.

Consider another point often insisted upon by the prophets of Utopia. 'Travel,' they say (and with reason), 'is a liberal education. Freedom to travel has been a privilege reserved to the rich. Leisure, with cheap and rapid transport, will make this privilege accessible to all. Therefore all will receive the liberal education which only a few were once at liberty to enjoy.' Once more, however, the end-misshaping divinity intervenes. Travel is educative because it brings the traveller into contact with people of different culture from his own, living under alien conditions. But the more travelling there is, the more will culture and way of life tend everywhere to be standardized and therefore the less educative will travel become.

There is still some point in going from Burslem to Udaipur. But when all the inhabitants of Burslem have been sufficiently often to Udaipur and all the inhabitants of Udaipur have been sufficiently to Burslem, there will be no point whatever in making the journey. Leaving out of account a few trifling geological and climatic idiosyncrasies, the two towns will have become essentially indistinguishable.

'Nature uplifts; the sublime and the beautiful are moralizing and spiritualizing forces. In Utopia all men will have the means, financial and mechanical, to make themselves familiar with the beauties and sublimities of nature.' But, as I have remarked elsewhere, only such peoples as dislike the country possess any country to dislike. Nations that love the country destroy what they adore. Witness the two thousand square miles of London's suburbs. Beauty-spots accessible to whole populations cease to be beauty-spots and become Blackpools. Liberty depends on property; when few had property, only a few were free to go and seek inspiration or solace among the 'Beauties of Nature.' In the egalitarian state all will have property or its communistic equivalent. All will therefore be free to go and inspire or solace themselves in the country. But the greater the number which avails itself of this liberty, the less will this liberty be worth. And this would seem to be true, not only of travel and the pleasures of country life, but of practically all the privileges and freedoms hitherto reserved to the few. We have seen that, after a certain point, any increase in the amount of liberty brings a diminishing return of happiness; so also, it would seem, does any increase in what may be called liberty's area of incidence.

A conclusion imposes itself. Continuous general progress (along present lines) is only possible upon two conditions: that the heritable qualities of the progressing population shall be improved (or at any rate changed in a specific direction) by deliberate breeding; and that the amount of population shall be reduced.

Increase of material prosperity, increase of leisure, increase of liberty, increase of educational facilities are perfectly useless to individuals in whom every such increase beyond a quickly reached maximum gives diminishing returns of happiness, virtue, and intellectual efficiency. Only by raising the critical point, at which increase of goods begins to give diminishing psychological returns, can we make continuous progress a reality for the individual and, through the individual, for society at large. How can we raise this critical point? By deliberate breeding and selection. At any rate, no other method offers us the least prospect of success.

So much for the first condition of continuous progress; now for the second. Certain experiences, we agree, are valuable. They are enjoyed at present by a few privileged human beings; it would be a progress in the sphere of social justice if they could be enjoyed by all. But, as we have seen, to extend privileges is generally to destroy their value. Experiences which, enjoyed by a few, were precious, cease automatically to be precious when enjoyed by many. A certain number of these precious experiences might be made accessible to all the members of a population provided that it were sufficiently small. (For example, where populations are small, beauty-spots need not become Blackpools.) In these cases progress can only become a reality to the individual on condition that the progressing community, of which he is a member, is absolutely small. Where the community is large, its numbers must be reduced.

There are other cases, however, in which the precious experiences could never be made accessible to whole populations, however small, absolutely. For in these cases the preciousness of the experience is found to consist precisely in the fact that it can only be enjoyed by a minority. To provide such experiences, it will be necessary in any future egalitarian society to create a number of mutually exclusive clubs or, better, secret societies, religious sects, even witches' covens. Only by such means can the members of an egalitarian society be made free of the infinitely precious experience of being in a superior minority.

The end