**Values-Skepticism as a Rationale for Extremism in Politics:**

**The Push to Limit Democratic Liberty**

We typically associate extremism with absolutism of some kind or other. Absolutism is a claim to certain, finite, comprehensive truth about some important matter, e.g. in religion, politics, or economic life. In contrast, we tend to associate skepticism - the epistemic opposite of absolutism - at worst with inaction or indecision. These inductive associations may have served us well in past; but the landscape has changed; particularly the political landscape. It is now the case, in a trend that began its development in the wake of World War II but only recently, has reached its full, unabashed bloom, that the anti-democratic movement in politics has its footing in a values-skepticism borrowed from mid-twentieth century economic liberalism, known better in the States as *laissez-faire* capitalism, a form of right-leaning libertarianism, whose main spokesperson, perhaps more now than at the time, has become the Austrian-British economist Friedrich Hayek.

His work not well-loved by the great economists of the latter half of the twentieth century, he attained his stature largely as a sort of informal “guru” figure for some of the main conservative political figures in the Anglo-American world, including Barry Goldwater, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, from whence his influence became part of the bedrock of the widespread movement to achieve conservative results in political leadership by limiting the democratic process in various ways, including voter suppression, gerrymandering, and obstruction of government processes. Although it would be unreasonable to blame all such recent shenanigans on Hayek himself, it was he who most boldly laid out his vision of unlimited economic liberty at the expense of unlimited democratic liberty. His arguments at least make it clear that there is a blueprint being followed with an ideology behind it, as nefarious or misguided as that ideology may be. Its failure to be directly enunciated by its present practitioners only serves all the more to condemn them for lack of moral integrity in government service.

Since the understanding of this ideology is based on a fundamental embrace of values-skepticism, our first step here must be to analyze and evaluate this underlying skepticism.

In the wake of World War II, it was clear that the Axis powers that had run havoc over the entire globe and so gravely threatened the future of our species had been driven by one common evil: Nationalism-based political absolutism that considered the state as the absolute value, seeing the individual as subservient and expendable. To many, it seemed clear then that to correct ourselves, we should move in the opposite direction: to exalt the individual and embrace individualism, while limiting the power of the state as much as was practical.

Of course, totalitarian thinking had far from disappeared from the earth, with the Soviet Union still pressing its collectivist policies and China and a handful of other nations unwilling to commit themselves to individual liberty. But the continuing presence of anti-democratic states in the world only increased the sense of urgency of nations choosing to be more-or-less democratic

to move definitively away from the likes of command-economies and authoritarian government.

This potentially led in two possibly compatible directions: first, the optimization of individual economic liberty; and secondly, the maximization of individual democratic or political liberty. To push for individual economic or personal liberty required trusting that free-market processes by and large were self-correcting without need of government intervention to steer them. Similarly, to push for maximization of democratic liberty required faith that democratic deliberative processes, if allowed to proceed at full capacity, would also be in the long run self-correcting without the need to constrain or suppress them. Friedrich Hayek had faith in the processes of personal liberty while distinctly lacking faith in the processes of political liberty. His faith in the first was due to his conviction in the Invisible Hand doctrine of Adam Smith, which he called “spontaneous order”, which he took to be an observable and reliable principle of nature. His lack of faith in the second was based on his skepticism that human beings shared any essential moral common ground by which our political deliberations could be productively guided toward ends non-destructive of personal liberty.

The choice should be obvious to us, Hayek thought, since personal liberty is directly productive of good, while democratic liberty is merely a means for choosing. But the good of government is only the correct choices it makes, not the means by which it makes those choices. Thus, democratic liberty is reduced at best to an extrinsic good, while personal liberty alone is intrinsically good. But even at its best, unlimited democracy cannot be counted upon to secure the essential good of personal liberty, since its processes are chaotic and unpredictable, with an ineluctable tendency to interfere with the “spontaneous order” of the private sector. .

Since for him, the cultivation of unlimited democracy was necessarily to the detriment of personal liberty, Hayek argued we are forced to choose between the two: either the cultivation of unlimited personal liberty coupled with only “limited democracy”, or unlimited democracy at the lost of personal liberty. In short, unlimited democracy leads to uncontrollably big government which is the death-knell for a thriving private sector.

This view is expressed unabashedly by Hayek in his letter to the editor of the London Times on July 11, 1978, in defense of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s purported claim: "that free choice is to be exercised more in the market place than in the ballot box”: “she has merely uttered the truism that the first is indispensable for individual freedom while the second is not: free choice can at least exist under a dictatorship that can limit itself but not under the government of an unlimited democracy which cannot".

The vision Hayek does have of government, which he called “limited democracy”, was that

“of a society organized around a market order in which the apparatus of state is employed almost … exclusively to enforce the legal order … necessary for a market of free individuals to function” (Hayek, Individualism and Economic Order, Chicago, 1980).

He further ventures that the real forum for democratic process should not be in the public sector at all but in the private:

The conception that government should be guided by majority opinion makes sense only if that opinion is independent of government. The ideal of democracy rests on the belief that the view which will direct government emerges from an independent and spontaneous process. It requires, therefore, the existence of a large sphere independent of majority control in which the opinions of the individuals are formed” (Hayek, The Constitution of Liberty, Chicago, 1960).

In other words, the democratic process should proceed out of the same processes and be guided by the same competitive forces as those of the economic free market. The fact that this frees political discourse entirely from the reins of truth-oriented dialectic, a process quite distinct from free-market competition, did not bother him because his deep-seated skepticism in the objectivity and universality of values, upon which productive dialectic argument is based, led him to the opinion that dialectic could not lead us reliably toward the truth rather than falsehood, or the better rather than the worse. In contrast, he fully endorsed the capabilities of his mysterious force of “spontaneous order” which was the Invisible Hand of Adam Smith guiding the free market to optimal results even with no apparent input but human self-interest and expected this same mysterious force could do the same for political discourse based on the same competitive, self-interested input. He considered the force of human self-interest as real and reliably manipulable by market forces not only for our ultimate economic benefit, but our economic benefit as well.

He justifies his skeptical position in a manner reminiscent of Socrates:

“All political theories assume, of course, that most individuals are very ignorant. Those who plead for (economic) liberty differ from the rest in that they include among the ignorant themselves as well as the wisest. All political theories assume, of course, that most individuals are very ignorant. Those who plead for liberty differ from the rest in that they include among the ignorant themselves as well as the wisest”(Hayek, The Constitution of Liberty).

Living in the most skeptical of times, Hayek could not conceive of the possibility of democratic dialog based on justified recognition of an objective and universal common ground that would free us fully and directly to exercise truth-oriented rational process with self-corrective properties of its own.

In fact, the objectivity and universality of rational dialog is far less mysterious and far more familiar to us than Hayek’s spontaneous order, which resides not in human thinking, but somehow in nature itself, organizing our own self-interested preferences into a harmonious and productive polity both economically and politically. In contrast, rational dialog is something we control and manage not from the input of self-interested impulses but by truth-oriented argument based on a common ground of universality and objectivity. Its universality derives from our notice of nature and especially of ourselves as organized into species, while its objectivity derives from the fact that reasons are public; that there is no such thing as private reasons.

Our ready and immediate intuitive notice of species makes it easy for us all to distinguish between individual detail and species detail, not just of our own species or of *infima species*  alone but going up from species to higher genera as well. These are not merely constructs, but in the sense that Aristotle describes as “rudimentary” (Analytica A Posteriori, II,19), they are grasped by us to a potentially infinite degree, while other animals also grasp them to a more limited degree. A grizzly cub could never be taught by its mother to fish for salmon unless the cub were capable with great accuracy on the species being fished for, or be aware of the species at all. Without species awareness the cub could gain nothing from witnessing its mother catch, since that individual fish, having been caught and eaten, cannot be fished for again.

Or think of someone losing a diamond ring in the middle of Manhattan, After having called to report it lost and being asked for a description, they know immediately without any confusion that what is being asked for is an individual description and not a species description and have no trouble keeping the details of each separate and unconfused. In such a case, the detail that the gem on the ring is crystallized carbon is utterly irrelevant!

Or again, think of a scientist out in the field who discovers a human skeleton, with her job now being to give a detailed description of the find. Whether she should give an individual description or a species description depends on what kind of science she is doing. If she is a physical anthropologist, she will have to provide a species description of the find, ignored all the idiosyncratic individual details as irrelevant. On the other hand, if she is a forensic anthropologist, her interest is not in the species, but only in the idiosyncratic individual detail.

People have no trouble doing these things, not from switching back and forth between the two as needed without confusion. Even other animals are capable of the same, but to a more limited extent, recognizing both species identity and species similarity in ways that helps them survive better.

Our common ground is based also on our ready recognition of the essential publicness of reasons. If I present a valid argument to others, they in all honesty recognize the inanity of simply continuing to deny the conclusion without any critical review of the premises. They cannot viably counter that the reasons I gave are my reasons and not theirs. Such is clearly baby talk. The reasons we have for believing or not, for choosing or not, and for acting or not are never and can never be private, but in essence are always subject to review and criticism by others. To be sure, I may choose not to share my reasons with others and thus keep them hidden. But hidden reasons are still in their logical essence public.

Our confusion over universality and objectivity comes from the fact that we misguidedly have been looking for them in metaphysics rather than logic and simple organismic awareness. We cannot fail to have common grounds simply because we are rational beings, and rationality is a truth-oriented enterprise. The fact that our truth orientation is so commonly corrupted by self-deception does nothing to remove those common grounds, but perhaps only at times our willingness to acknowledge therm.