

## LIBERTARIANISM WITHOUT CAPITALISM

by John Hospers

Whether libertarianism implies capitalism has apparently become a matter of recent controversy. It has even been declared that libertarianism is a political philosophy which is neutral with respect to economic systems, and is equally compatible with both capitalism and socialism.

I would not have thought that a controversy was necessary on a matter so obvious. A libertarian, as the name implies, is a believer in liberty; and economic liberty is a part of total liberty - it is liberty in the economic sphere; freedom of production and trade. And "freedom of production and trade" is the phrase that most accurately describes the economic system (one might even call it the lack of a system) known as capitalism.

One can, of course, mean different things by the word "capitalism." It is not the word that is important; it is Karl Marx's word anyway, and as such I have no attachment to the word itself. But what the word stands for does indeed matter very much, and should matter to every libertarian. The importance of it can be illustrated as follows, if any illustration is necessary:

Suppose that a man has a brilliant idea for a new product which will be of use to thousands or millions of consumers. He starts a processing plant, hires workers, produces the product and sells it to those who wish to buy it. Many do buy it, and he becomes wealthy. At this point, either he will be allowed to keep it or he will not. (1) If he is not, e. g., if other individuals rob him of it, they will quite rightly be called thieves, and hopefully they will be hunted and caught. If government takes it away from him, in an act of legalized looting under the cry of "Share the Wealth!", then its officials too are thieves and plunderers. In this sense, of course, every government now existing in the world is to varying degrees composed of thieves and plunderers. But this should be no news to libertarians. That is why they disapprove of expropriation by governments. (2) But if our man is allowed to keep it, then we have freedom of production and trade without interference by bandits of either type. He can produce according to his choice, and keep the fruits of his labor; and what is this, when generalized to include everybody, but laissez-faire capitalism? And how can anyone who calls himself a libertarian fail to believe in it? If he doesn't, consider the alternative: socialism, of whatever kind or degree - the government expropriating the products of his labor in order to give it (or sell it for votes) to those who have not produced them.

But, it is said, a libertarian society can contain socialists too. Yes, it can contain those who (because libertarians advocate freedom of speech) advocate socialism; and it can also contain many who practice socialism in one very restricted sense of that word: a libertarian society can contain many

people who voluntarily choose to live and work together, say in a commune, and share their goods equally (or in any other manner that they have mutually agreed upon). But it cannot contain those who practice socialism in the sense in which that term is almost universally used in our century; an economic system in which the state owns the means of production, and distributes the products of that productive process as it (i. e., the reigning bureaucracy) sees fit. The reason why a libertarian society cannot contain such persons lawfully, is obvious; all such persons initiate the use of force to make others conform to a central economic plan. And such a practice violates the most important libertarian principle of all: that the lives of others are not yours to dispose of. Socialism does dispose of the lives of others without their consent; ergo, a libertarian society cannot contain those who practice socialism in that sense.

I have tried to explain the mechanics of capitalism in my book Libertarianism, especially Chapters 3 - 7; I thought I had made the matter so clear (as had others before me) that no further discussion was necessary as to whether libertarianism implied capitalism. The truth is surely plain enough: capitalism is libertarianism applied in the economic sphere. You cannot consistently believe in libertarianism without believing in capitalism, any more than you can believe that the United States exists without believing that its western half exists.

To say that libertarianism is not wedded to any particular economic system, then, is false; freedom of production and trade (capitalism) is as much a precept of libertarianism in the economic sphere as freedom of religious belief is a precept of libertarianism in the religious sphere. To say otherwise is to court popularity among potential members and by deceiving them as to what they are being invited to believe in, preparing for disillusionment when they discover it. It is true that they may be put off by the word "capitalism"; but the thing to do when that happens is to explain to them in detail the fallacies they have been guilty of in thinking that the thing to which the word applies is harmful and evil. You do not shrink from the implications of your own statements just in order to win their favor; you assert your position boldly, and then explain to them in detail (again, Chapters 3 - 7) why their beliefs about the thing they have been taught to hate are mistaken.