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*A review of social and political trends and events
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TO DEFINE CLINTON, TRY "UTOPIAN REDISTRIBUTIONALIST," RATHER THAN "SOCIALIST."

Mark L. Melcher

For a variety of good reasons, the 18th century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham is anathema to most conservatives. But I confess to having a soft spot in my heart for him. One Bentham attribute I admire was his love of language and his insistence that words should be used with precision.

Bentham argued, for example, that charity to the poor should not be termed "benevolence," since economic science demonstrated that such offerings usually make matters worse. (This was in 1789 mind you!) He also contended that the word "natural" did not apply properly to "rights." "Rights," he said, are established by governments in an effort to favor one class over another. They are not bequeathed by nature and therefore should not be called "natural." "For every right which the law confers on one party, whether that party be an individual, a subordinate class of individuals, or the public, it thereby imposes on some other party a duty or obligation."

Because of Bentham's concern over the proper use of words, I often think of him when I hear Bill Clinton called a socialist. This is not uncommon. In fact, a front page *Wall Street Journal* story last spring reported that after meeting Clinton, even Boris Yeltsin characterized him as a "socialist."

Many conservatives, myself among them, were initially amused, pointing out that an expert on the subject had finally confirmed what they had been saying all along. On reflection, this was dumb. Clinton is not a socialist. Despite what Boris Yeltsin thinks, Clinton is not selling pre-packaged, archaic, 19th century, economic pish posh, that has lost virtually all credibility in the Western world, except with a small group of permanently confused European "leaders," and a handful of perplexed U.S. academics, who would be flipping hamburgers if it were not for tenure.

Clinton is selling redistributionalism, which like socialism, is a brand of utopianism. I'll return to redistributionalism later. But first a word on utopianism. Utopianism is the idea that man can

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create a perfect social order, if he tinkers around enough with government. Utopianism is the mother of socialism. It is also the mother of all the other "isms," from communism to fascism, that have caused so much pain in the 20th century.

Whatever form it takes, utopianism is pernicious. Some people argue that this is so because it is at heart totalitarian, others because it is founded on a false, secular premise, that humankind can perfect itself.

Utopianism constantly redefines and repackages itself. Thus Clinton can despise socialism while endorsing another "ism" that encompasses many of the same characteristics. This is reminiscent of many leftist academics in Europe and the United States, who insisted throughout the cold war that the failure of communism to enrich the lives of citizens either spiritually or economically in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was not evidence of intrinsic problems with communism per se, but with the failure of those societies to properly implement it.

Part of the reason I underestimated Clinton during much of the presidential race was that I sincerely believed that a plurality of the American public wouldn't buy his redistributationalist, big government philosophy. I was, of course, as Waylon Jennings said in his hit country song of last year, "Wrong!"

I should have realized that redistributationalism, Clinton's brand of utopianism, is enormously appealing in the United States today, especially to those people who have been brought up to believe that happiness is a "right," largely unrelated to individual responsibility, and that it is a primary roll of government to guarantee this right.

As someone who enjoys history, I also should have realized that capitalism fosters secularism, and this inevitably leads to popular support for some form of utopianism, always fine-tuned for the times. This isn't exactly what Joseph Schumpeter said in his 1947 book, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, but it is close (ie. "capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own.")

As I said earlier, the subset of utopianism that I think defines Clinton's economic philosophy best is "redistributationalism." This is a word used by French political scientist, Bertrand de Jouvenel in his 1949 lectures on the subject, republished in 1989 by Liberty Press in a wonderful volume entitled *The Ethics of Redistribution*. This small book and the introduction it contains by Oxford scholar John Gray is chilling in its portend of things to come in the United States, should redistributationalism continue to thrive.

De Jouvenel points out that socialism is the suppression of private property in an attempt at communal moral solidarity. It is incompatible with modern society, he says, and can be realized, if at all, only in monasteries, where material goods are spurned, or in communities that are small, simple, and even primitive. Redistributationalism, he maintains, differs from socialism in that it is based on the relatively new twin beliefs that government should be centrally involved in the relief of poverty, and that economic inequality is itself unjust or evil.

These beliefs, he says, have led inexorably to the view that government is responsible for ensuring rising popular living standards and that government should provide a subsistence floor beneath which no one may fall. De Jouvenel claims that redistributionalism is not a linear descendent from socialism, but finds its origins in Lloyd George's budget for 1909-10, which, by introducing progressive taxation, "abandoned the idea that for taxation purposes, equality implies proportionality."

At heart, de Jouvenel says, redistributionalism is based on the notion that "The richer would feel their loss less than the poorer would appreciate their gain; or even more roughly: A certain loss of income would mean less to the richer than the consequent gain would mean to the poorer."

Recalling one of Friedrich Hayek's most important theses, de Jouvenel notes that redistributionalism is based on the mistaken believe that government bureaucrats know "how to achieve the maximum sum of individual satisfactions capable of being drawn from a given flow of production, which must always be assumed to be unaffected."

Redistributionalism, de Jouvenel claims, moves society toward the medieval situation, "nul homme sans seigneur," or the "flight of individuals into the protection of lords or chapters." This period, he notes, "came to an end when the individual again found it to his advantage to set forth on his own." The end result of redistributionalism, he says, is an enormous strengthening of the state. Here I'll let Baron de Jouvenel speak for himself.

The State sets up as trustee for the lower-income group and doles out services and benefits. In order to avoid the creation of a 'protected class,' a discrimination fatal to political equality, the tendency has been to extend the benefits and services upward to all members of society, to cheapen food and rents for the rich as well as the poor, to assist the well-to-do in illness equally with the needy.

The more one considers the matter, the clearer it becomes that redistribution is in effect far less a redistribution of free income from the richer to the poorer, as imagined, than a redistribution of power from the individual to the State.

Insofar as the State amputates higher incomes, it must assume their savings and investment functions, and we come to the centralization of investment. Insofar, as the amputated higher incomes fail to sustain certain social activities, the state must step in, subsidize these activities, and preside over them.

This results in a transfer of power from individuals to officials, who tend to constitute a new ruling class . . . This leads the observer to wonder how far the demand for equality is directed against inequality itself and is thus a fundamental demand, and how far it is directed against a certain set of "unequals" and is thus an unconscious move in a change of elites.

I cannot do justice in such a short article to de Jouvenel's full thoughts on this important subject. But John Gray did a wonderful job of compressing some of his more important points. So I'll end with a few short, but disturbing quotes from his introduction to de Jouvenel's book.

A subsistence minimum cannot be derived solely, or even primarily, from taxation of the rich. Such resources must be extracted from the middle classes, who are also the beneficiaries of income-transfer schemes. . . [de Jouvenel] further notes that a policy of redistribution is bound to discriminate against minorities, since it will inevitably favor the preferences and interests of the majority--a fact remarked upon also by Hayek."

The regime of high taxation inseparable from the redistributionist state has the further undesirable consequences of diminishing the sphere of free services in which people engage in convivial relations without the expectation of payment—and thereby corroding the culture of civility that sustains liberal civilization.

The modern welfare state is not defensible by reference to any coherent set of principles or purposes. It has not significantly alleviated poverty but has instead substantially institutionalized it. This is the upshot of pathbreaking studies such as Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*. A generation of welfare policy has inflicted on its clients such disincentives and moral hazards as to leave their last state worse than their first. . . If any social group benefits it is likely to be the middle class majority rather than the poor.

"The institution of the family is disprivileged under any redistributionist regime: "To such views, families are disturbing; for within a family occur transfers that upset the favored distribution.

Sound pertinent?

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