

Preface to
Jeffrey Tucker, *Right-wing Collectivism: The Other Threat to Liberty*

Forthcoming, Foundation for Economic Education 2017

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We call it “populism.” That makes it sound even a little good, at any rate to people who cannot remember the past. Why shouldn’t the will of the *people* trump all? Surely the result of a vote is the *volonté generale*, said Rousseau, believing he had thereby solved the problem of unfreedom in a collective. Surely populism is a Good and General Thing? So one might feel, at any rate until vague memories of Huey Long and Juan Peron and Benito Mussolini crowd in.

Jeffrey Tucker in his brilliant book calls right-wing populism what it actually is, namely, fascism, or, in its German form national socialism, nazism. “Fascism” has of course been corrupted by its promiscuous use on the left, as by Anti-Fas nihilists in Berkeley throwing rocks and insults at the police and the non-violent protestors against President Trump’s latest. Tucker dusts off the word for present use. It’s exactly the word we need. Urgently.

In elegant prose and deep history Tucker tells the story of how the twin anti-liberal, fathered c. 1820 by Gottfried Hegel, parted company. Prussia and Russia, you might say. Anything but England. The twin on the right, from Carlyle and recently Breitbart News, elevated the state with nationalism. The twin on the left, from Marx and recently MSNBC, elevated the state with socialism. Either way, the state, with its monopoly of violence, was elevated. English liberalism--which meanwhile gave us our liberties and then our riches--elevated instead the individual people and their voluntary agreements. As the ur-liberal Adam Smith put it in 1776, what we need, and for a while what we got, imperfectly, was “the liberal plan, of equality [in social standing], liberty [in economic action], and justice [in legal standing].”

Tucker raises the alarm against Trumpian Putinism worldwide, from Hungary to the Philippines. He denies the myth that “fascism” is out of date because it was bravely defeated in 1945 by the left. Our friends on the left (I speak sincerely: I have many) imagine they are still fighting a fascism in alliance with friendly Uncle Joe Stalin puffing on his pipe. Actually they are practicing a left version of fascism. As George Orwell discovered in the Spanish Civil War, and recorded in *Animal Farm*, the left is fully as authoritarian as the right. Both use the state’s power to push people around. As Tucker documents, after 1989 the greatest threat of pushing around is as much from the right as from the left. The fascist threat comes not from a Berliner but from a Trumpian Wall.

A true liberalism breaks down walls, of tyranny and tariffs as much as migration and censorship and occupational licensure. It stands against both of the authoritarian twins and their splendid walls. Tucker urges the humane liberals to stand up, and get straight their

people-centered principles. He urges them to stop believing that they are “conservative” and should therefore tolerate a little the drift into fascism, the better to get tax reform.

A host at MSNBC harassed a fellow from the libertarian Cato Institute, whom he tagged as “conservative,” and did not let him speak. The guest squeezed in a brief protest that he was *not* a conservative. The point got lost, and the show broke for a commercial. The man from Cato, and Jeffrey Tucker (the man from the Foundation for Economic Education), and Rose Wilder Lane and Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman are all liberals, not conservatives, not progressives. The liberals stand against the twins of violently enforced state action.

Still, the ugly, violent twins remain popular. The fresh popularity of the fascist twin worries Tucker. It should worry you.

Why on both left and right, one might ask, is the state the central actor in the political and economic drama. Why is it the drama most people love?

One reason, first, is ancient, the primitive suspicion we have that a deal in the market is unfair. The suspicion made some sense in the zero-sum world in which most people lived until the nineteenth century. The sociologist Georg Simmel put it well in 1907: “The masses – from the Middle Ages right up to the nineteenth century – thought that there was something wrong with the origin of great fortunes. . . . Tales of horror spread about the origin of the Grinaldi, the Medici, and the Rothschild fortunes . . . as if a demonic spirit was at work.” It is the masses, the populists, *hoi polloi*, who hold such views vividly. A jailer in the thirteenth century scorned a rich man’s pleas for mercy: “Come, Master Arnaud Teisseire, you have wallowed in such opulence! . . . How could you be without sin?”

Yet in a voluntary deal you the demander and he the supplier both gain. Both profit. Win-win. In the nature of mutual gain, however, each could possibly have got *more* gain. There’s always that annoying gap. The man in the street calls the gain achieved by his suppliers of groceries and housing their “profit,” and resents that he can’t shift more of it to himself. He does not reflect that he himself is earning a species of profit – or else he would not have agreed to the sale in the first place. From a supplier’s point of view, the demander is himself a profiteer. Both sides are. Marshallian economists call the gap between willingness to pay and willingness to accept “the sum of consumer’s and producer’s surplus.” Marxists call it, more vividly, and with disapproval, “exploitation” or “surplus value.” Anyway it is the social gain from trade – the value created by trade – to be divided somehow into your profit from the transaction and the supplier’s. We grumble. Did I get the best deal I could? Has he made a fool of me? He is a vicious profiteer. Why doesn’t he gracefully give me more?

When democracy began to flourish and hierarchy began to die we start believing that there’s a solution handily available. The ancient prejudice against trade generates a modern notion that the state will fix it, giving us all the dignity and sustenance we require. (No one in 1600 believed such an absurdity, because it was obvious that the state was a band of robbers into whose clutches we had fallen.) From a single citizen’s point of view, indeed, the state’s gifts *do* seem like wonderful free lunches. Roads. Public schools. A nice post office, with a friendly postman. They just appear. No cost. No wretched bargaining, or work.

And, second, such a fantasy of a benevolent state handing out costless goodies, whether run by an imagined central planner in socialism or by an imagined *Führer* in nationalism, has another (and now exclusively modern) narrative support. The new narrative leans against the economic truth that the modern world comes out of fantastically ramified trade with strangers. “No, no”, replies the new narrative. “We are all members of a loving family at home. Let’s go forward together.”

When we all lived on farms, and knew where meat came from, no one dreamed of socialism. We knew that market prices mattered, and could make or break our lives. We knew that income came from work. We knew on our pulses the truth of diminishing returns and the universality of scarcity. My students from farms or small businesses in which the children participated are able to understand economics swiftly. The others, including myself, are not. When incomes began to come massively if mysteriously from The Office we began to think that the problem was not production but distribution, as at a loving family’s dinner table. Pass the potatoes, Helen. Certainly, John. Have some more.

Swedish politics in 1928 was transformed from liberalism to a tentative socialism when Per Albin Hansson gave his classic speech in Parliament recommending *folkhemmet*, “the people’s home”: “There is equality, consideration, co-operation and helpfulness in the good home. Applied to the greater home of people and citizens, this would mean breaking down all the social and economic barriers that now separate citizens into privileged and neglected [categories], ruling and dependent, rich and poor, propertied and impoverished, plunderers and exploited.”

When a generous modern child first realizes how very poor the people are in the next neighborhood, she naturally wishes to open her wallet, or still better Daddy’s wallet. It is at such an age – fourteen or sixteen – that we form political identities, which we seldom then revise in the face of later evidence. By contrast, in an ancient hierarchical society of slaves and owners the slave-owning child had no such guilt, because the poor were fated to be slavish. But once the naturalness of hierarchy was questioned, as it was during the eighteenth century in northwestern Europe, it was a short step to socialism or, if you prefer, after a while, national socialism. Our families are little socialist economies, with Mom as central planner. Neat.

“Amoral familism,” observed the political scientist Edward Banfield in 1958, characterizes a pre-modern society. It protects family members, but cheats and murders everyone else. Consult the long-form TV show of 1999-2007, *The Sopranos*. A modern society in its authoritarian version expands the family to the nation, the *folkhem*. We cheat the bosses and murder the enemies, *en masse*.

You need Tucker’s book. You need to worry. If you are a real liberal, you need to know where the new national socialism comes from, the better to call it out and shame it back into the shadows. Now.