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The Mirage of Social Justice



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F. A. Hayek made many valuable contributions to the field of economics as well as to the disciplines of philosophy and politics. This volume represents the second of Hayek's comprehensive three-part study of the relations between law and liberty. Here, Hayek expounds his conviction that the continued unexamined pursuit of "social justice" will contribute to the erosion of personal liberties and encourage the advent of totalitarianism.

The Mirage of Social Justice Details

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Eric Stein says

Law and governance having been dealt with, Hayek turns to the chimera of social justice.

Azriel says

Hayek mixes a few sections of eminently quotable ideas about the inability to determine Justice by a non-totalitarian society, into a work that generally is so dense that it has, in the words of Robert Coram (about another writer) "the specific gravity of Plutonium". This still is an excellent reminder that Hayek was, like Adam Smith before him, as much a moral philosopher as a market philosopher.

Eugene Kernes says

'The Mirage of Social Justice' is a great book which describes how the term 'Justice' is used inappropriately. Justice can only look at actions of particular individuals, not a spontaneous order of events which were not determined by direction of an individual. When those who are hurt by condition use the phrase 'unjust', they can manipulate the authority to provide for their ends by taking away resources from those who gained. When an authority uses the term 'social justice', they inevitably take away freedom from those who benefited from their conditions. As people have different values for different services, it is not unjust that some services obtain a higher income than others. This book is amazing at showing how the individual can benefit society out of self-interest and that a group actually undermines the value derived from society. The only problem with this book is that some parts of it are not easy to read. It would have helped to provide examples to allow digestion of the material.

Craig Bolton says

"Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice by F. A. Hayek (1978)"

Otto Lehto says

I have reviewed the other volumes elsewhere. I think they all support each other, but the second volume is perhaps the one that is the most controversial - and also most repetitive of the stuff he already said in Constitution of Liberty, which I still think is Hayek's best work.

Volume 2 is primarily a negative book: a critique of the notion of "social justice." Hayek argues that a complex market society, where individuals are free to pursue their own ends, cannot and should not have a unified conception of justice applied to its (freely evolved) outcomes. Although his criticism of the term "social justice" is quite harsh and venomous, the underlying point is clear. He wants to argue that politics and

law should not have the power to grant special privileges, or issue specific orders, to specific individuals or groups within the complex society. This means that inequalities of outcome, or disappointed expectations, cannot be a cause for a "balancing of the scales" in favour of the less fortunate. Law that tries to take from the "haves" and give to the "have nots" will destroy the foundations of the free society - which ALONE has the power to give rise to increased wealth and well-being to everybody (in the long term).

I think the controversy is justified: Hayek doesn't clearly define "social justice" - and indeed his point is that it CANNOT be so defined. But his dismissal is perhaps too early. Certainly the Rawlsian notion of "social justice", for example, is much more robust and interesting than that?

Judge says

I'm a Hayek zealot, so of course I loved the book. It confirms - and demonstrates very persuasively - what I have long intuitively believed: "social justice" is a completely meaningless expression.

Daniel says

Hayek's rejection of social justice is mostly based on very simple economic theories and where it goes beyond that it is little more than an opinion piece that is neither fair nor necessarily consistent. He argues that social justice is impossible to clearly define and that therefore, politicians won't know where to stop, but will be under pressure from interest groups to more and more severe intervention. It is not much of an exaggeration to summarise his warning as a claim that everything is a slippery slope.

For example, start doing something about unequal starting opportunities and you will necessarily end up in totalitarian socialism, in which "government would have to control the whole of physical and human environment of all persons". This is obvious nonsense and Hayek, having studied law, certainly knew this. You'd get to a point pretty soon, where it becomes very difficult to control and equalise environments and where any such effort will conflict with constitutional basic rights.

A remarkable exception to Hayek's slippery slope thinking is his approval of minimum incomes, that should protect "against severe deprivation". It is puzzling why this should be less of a slippery slope than other kinds of interventions. Certainly a minimum income in a developed country should not merely prevent biological poverty/ starvation, but will depend on ideas of decent standards of living that often manifest themselves in demands for ever-increasing minimum wages. Therefore, I think Hayek is not consistent when he agrees with minimum incomes but rejects policies to improve starting chances for the most disadvantaged.
