

Preface

Our anarchist party won the school election!

It was the autumn term 1988 at my school – we were about 16 at the time – in a western suburb of Stockholm. As usual when it was election year, we were to stage a “school election” of our own. But Markus, my best pal, and I didn’t believe in the system. Majority polls, to our way of looking at things, were like two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for dinner. The school wanted us to elect someone to rule us, but we wanted to rule our own lives.

Partly, I suppose, we did it because we felt different from the others. I was dead keen on listening to synthesizer music and goth, preferably dressed in black and with backcombed hair. We wanted to play music and read books, while the others seemed mostly preoccupied with gizmos and fitting in. The right wing, it seemed to us, was upper class establishment, dead against anything different. But we didn’t feel any more at home with the left, which to us meant drab governmental bureaucracy and regimentation. Even if we preferred Sisters of Mercy and the Swedish punk singer Thåström, it was John Lennon’s “imagine there’s no countries” we believed in. National states must be abolished and people allowed to move freely and cooperate of their own free will everywhere in the world. We wanted a world without compulsion, without rulers. Clearly, then, we were neither right wing nor left wing, neither Conservatives nor Social Democrats. We were anarchists!

So we started “Anarchist Front” and put ourselves down as candidates in the school election on a radical, humorous ticket. We put up hand-written posters on the walls in school, proclaiming things like:

“Who’s going to run your life – you or 349 MPs?” We demanded the abolition of the government and of the ban on bikes in the school yard. Most of the teachers took a dim view of this, feeling that we were making a farce of the election, whereas we thought that we were making our voices heard in true democratic spirit. Being called to the headmaster’s study for a telling-off merely strengthened our rebellious spirit.

We did well in a tough campaign, polling 25 per cent of the votes. The Social Democrats came second with 19 per cent. We were over the moon, convinced that this would be the start of something big ...

That was thirteen years ago. In the meantime I have changed my mind on a number of things. I have come to realise that questions concerning individuals, society and freedom are more complicated than I then believed. There are too many aspects and problems involved for everything to be settled in one drastically Utopian stroke. I have come to realise that we need a government which protects liberty and prevents the powerful from oppressing individuals, and I have come to understand that representative democracy is preferable to all other systems, for this very purpose of protecting the rights of the individual. But my fundamental urge to liberty is the same today as in that wonderful election campaign of 1988. I want people to be allowed freedom, with no one oppressing anyone else, and with governments not being permitted to fence people in or exclude them with tariffs and frontiers.

This is why I love what is rather barrenly termed *globalisation*, the process whereby people, communications, trade, investments, democracy and the market economy are tending more and more to cross national boundaries. This internationalisation has made us less constricted by the map-makers’ boundaries.

Political power has always been local, based on physical control of a certain territory. Globalisation is enabling us more and more to override these territories, by travelling in person and by trading or

investing across national boundaries. Opportunities for choosing other solutions and foreign alternatives have multiplied as transport costs have fallen, we have acquired new and more efficient means of communication, and trade and capital movements have been liberalised.

We do not have to shop with the big local company, we can turn to a foreign competitor; we do not have to work for the village's one and only employer, we can be offered alternative opportunities; we do not have to make do with local cultural amenities, the world's culture is at our disposal; we do not have to spend our whole life in one place, we can travel and relocate. Above all, this leads to a liberation of our thinking. We no longer make do with local routine, we want to choose actively and freely. Companies, politicians and associations are having to exert themselves to elicit interest or support from people who are acquainted with a host of alternatives from the world's diversity. Our possibilities of controlling our own lives are growing, and prosperity is growing with them.

This is why I find it pathetic when people who call themselves anarchists engage in the globalisation struggle, but against it, not for! I visited Gothenburg, Sweden, in June 2001 during the big EU-summit. I went there in order to explain why the problem with the European Union is that in many ways it is fighting globalisation and liberalisation, and to present my view that borders should be opened and controls dismantled.

I never got the chance to hold my speech. The place where I was to speak was suddenly in the middle of a battle zone, when so called anti-globalisation anarchists were smashing shops and throwing stones at policemen who were trying to defend a democratic meeting. They are anarchists who demand prohibitions and controls and throw stones at people with different values. Anarchists who demand that the government resume control of those people and enterprises who no longer find their initiative restricted by national boundaries. They

make a mockery of the idea of freedom. To our cheerful Anarchistic Front, people like that had nothing to do with anarchism. In our simplified teenage vocabulary they were, if anything, fascists.

But this is only the violent appendage of a broader movement which is critical of general globalisation. In the past few years more and more people have been complaining that the new liberty and internationalism have gone too far, amounting to a “hypercapi-talism”. The protest movement against this capitalism may call itself radical and profess to stand for exciting new ideas, but its actual standpoints belong to the same old opposition to free markets and free trade which has always been shown by national rulers. Many – authoritarian Third World régimes and Eurocrats, agrarian movements and monopoly corporations, conservative intellectuals and new left movements – are afraid of globalised humanity acquiring more power at the expense of politics. All of them are united in viewing globalism as a monster completely out of control. A monster that has to be rounded up and restrained.

Much of their criticism of globalisation is based on portraying it as something big and menacing. Often they do so, not by reasoned argument but through flat statements of fact, e.g. that 51 of the world’s biggest economies are business enterprises or that something like 1.5 trillion dollars are moved around in financial markets every day. As if size itself were intrinsically dangerous and terrifying. This is mathematics, not argument. It remains to be proved that big enterprises or high turnover are a problem in themselves. Often the detractors forget to prove any such thing. In this book I propose pleading for the opposite. So long as we are at liberty to pick and choose, there is nothing wrong with certain forms of voluntary co-operation growing large through success.

Figures like this, and the abstract term “globalisation” – itself apparently little over ten years old – conjure forth the image of an anonymous, enigmatic, elusive force. Simply because it is governed by peo-

ple's individual actions in different continents, and not from a control centre, it seems uncontrolled, chaotic. "There is no head office, no board of directors, no control panel," one critic complains.¹ Many feel powerless at the prospect of globalisation, and this feeling certainly comes easily when faced with the decentralised decisions of millions of people. If others are at liberty to run their own lives, we have no power over them, but in return we acquire a new power over our own lives. This kind of powerlessness is a good thing. There is no one in the driving seat, because all of us are steering.

The Internet would wither and die if we did not send e-mails, order books and download music every day through this global computer network, no company would collect goods from abroad if we didn't order them, and no one would invest money over the border if there were no entrepreneurs there willing to invest in response to customer demand. Globalisation consists of our everyday actions. We eat bananas from Ecuador, drink tea from Sri Lanka, watch American movies, order books from Britain, work for export companies selling to Germany and Russia, holiday in Thailand and save money for retirement in funds investing in South America and Asia. Resources may be channelled by finance corporations and goods carried across frontiers by business enterprises, but they only do these things because we want them to. Globalisation takes place from beneath, even though politicians come running after it with all manner of abbreviations and acronyms (EU, IMF, WB, UN, UNCTAD, OECD) in a bid to structure the process.

Of course, keeping up with times doesn't always come easily, especially to intellectuals in the habit of having everything under control. In a book about the 19th century Swedish poet and historian Erik Gustaf Geijer, the Swedish intellectual Anders Ehnmark writes, almost enviously, that Geijer was able to keep abreast of all principal

1. Elmbrant 2000, p. 98.

happenings in the world at large, just sitting in Uppsala reading the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*.² That is how simple and intelligible the world can be when it is only a tiny élite in the capitals of Europe that makes any difference whatsoever to the course of world events. But how complex and confusing everything is becoming now that the other continents are awakening and developments are also beginning to be affected by ordinary people's everyday decision-making. No wonder then, that influential people, decision makers and politicians claim that "we" (i.e. they) lose power because of globalisation. They have lost some of it to us, ordinary citizens.

Not all of us are going to be global jet-setters, but we don't have to in order to be a part of the globalisation process. In particular, the poor and powerless can find their well-being vastly improved when inexpensive goods are no longer excluded by tariff barriers and when foreign investments offer employment and streamline production. Those still living in the place where they were born stand to benefit enormously from information being allowed to flow across frontiers, and from being free to choose their political representatives. But this requires more in the way of democratic reforms and economic liberalisation.

Demanding more liberty to pick and choose may sound trivial, but it isn't. I understand the objection, though. To us in the affluent world, the availability of non-local options may seem a luxury. Say what you will about herring and Swedish talk shows, but they aren't insupportable – not the herring, at any rate. But the existence from which globalisation delivers people in the Third World really is insupportable. To the poor it is often an existence in abject poverty, in filth, ignorance and impotence, always wondering where the next meal is coming from and whether the water you have walked so many miles to collect is lethal or fit to drink.

2. Ehnmark 1999, p. 60.

When globalisation knocks at the door of Bhagant, an elderly agricultural worker and untouchable in the Indian village of Saijani, this leads to houses being built of brick instead of mud, and to people getting shoes on their feet and clean clothes – not rags – on their backs. Outdoors, the streets now have drains, and the fragrance of tilled earth has replaced the stench of refuse. Thirty years ago Bhagant didn't know he was living in India. Today he watches world news on television.³

The new freedom of choice means that people are no longer consigned to working for the village's only employers, the powerful big farmers. When the women get work away from home, they also become more powerful within the family. New capital markets mean that Bhagant's children are not compelled to borrow money from usurers who collect payment in future labour. The yoke of usury, by which the whole village was once held in thrall, vanishes when people are able to go to different banks and borrow money from them instead.

Everyone in Bhagant's generation was illiterate. In his children's generation, just a few were able to attend school, and in his grandchildren's generation *everyone* goes to school. Things have improved, Bhagant finds. Liberty and prosperity have grown. Today the children's behaviour is the big problem. When he was young, children were obedient and helped in the home. Now they have grown so terribly independent, making money of their own. This can cause tensions, of course, but it isn't quite the same thing as the risk of having to watch your children die, or having to sell them to a loan shark.

The stand taken by you and me and other people in the privileged world on the burning issue of globalisation can decide whether more people are to share in the development which has taken place in Bhagant's village or whether that development is to be reversed.

3. Berg & Karlsson, 2000 chap. 1.

Critics of globalisation often portray economic internationalisation as a menace by hinting that it is governed by an underlying intention, invoked by ideological fundamentalists indifferent to the accuracy or otherwise of their map-making. The critics try to paint a picture of neo-liberal market marauders having secretly plotted for capitalism to assume world mastery. In a book targeting what is termed “hypercapitalism”, the Swedish radio journalist Björn Elmbrant claims that in the past two decades we have witnessed “a species of ultra-liberal revolution”.⁴

Deregulation, privatisation and trade liberalisation, however, were not invented by ultra-liberal ideologists. True, there were political leaders – Reagan and Thatcher, for instance – who have been inspired by economic liberalism. But the biggest reformists, entitling us to speak in terms of a globalisation of capitalism, were communists in China and the Soviet Union, protectionists in Latin America and nationalists in Asia. In many other countries – Sweden, for example – the progress has been spurred by Social Democrats. In short, the notion of conspiratorial ultra-liberals making a revolution of shock therapy is completely wide of the mark. Instead, it is pragmatic, often anti-liberal politicians, being of the opinion that their governments have gone too far in the direction of control-freakery, have for this very reason begun liberalising their economies. The allegation of liberal-capitalist world dominion has to be further tempered by the observation that we today probably have the biggest public sectors and the heaviest pressures of taxation the world has ever known. The liberalisation measures introduced have been concerned with abolishing a number of centralist excesses occurring previously, not with introducing a system of *laissez-faire*. And because the rulers have

4. Elmbrant 2000, p. 195.

retreated on their own terms and at their own speed, there is also reason to ask whether things really have gone too far or whether they have not even gone far enough.

In defending capitalism, what I have in mind is the capitalist freedom to proceed by trial and error, without having to ask rulers and frontier officials first. This is fundamentally the liberty which I once thought anarchy would bring, but under the control of laws ensuring that one person's freedom will not encroach on other people's. I want everyone to have that liberty in plenty. If the critics of capitalism feel that we already have a superabundance of that liberty today, I would like to have more still – a super-duper-abundance if possible. Especially for the poor of the world's population, who as things now stand have little say regarding their work and consumption. That is why I do not hesitate to call this book *a defence of global capitalism*, even though that world capitalism is more a possible future than a genuinely existing system.

By capitalism I do not specifically mean an economic system of capital ownership and investment opportunities. Those things can also exist in a command economy. What I mean is the liberal market economy, with its free competition based on the right of using one's property, the freedom to negotiate, to conclude agreements and to start up business activities. What I am defending, then, is individual liberty in the economy. Capitalists are dangerous when, instead of capitalist ownership, they join forces with the government. If the state is a dictatorship the enterprises can actually be a party to human rights violations, as for example in the case of a number of western oil companies in African states. By the same token, capitalists frequenting the corridors of political power in search of benefits and privileges are not capitalists either. On the contrary, they are a threat to the free market and as such must be criticised and counteracted. It often happens that businessmen want to play politics and politicians want to play at being businessmen. This is not a market economy, it is a

mixed economy in which entrepreneurs and politicians have confused their roles. Free capitalism exists when politicians pursue liberal policies and entrepreneurs do business.

There is a further point I would like to make in penning this defence of capitalism. Basically, what I believe in is neither capitalism nor globalisation. It is not systems or regulatory codes that achieve all we see around us in the way of prosperity, inventions, communities and culture. These things are created by people. I believe in man's capacity for achieving great things and in the combined force which results from encounters and exchanges. I plead for greater liberty and a more open world, not because I believe one system happens to be more efficient than another, but because I can see it provides a setting which liberates individuals and their creativity as no other system can. That it spurs the dynamism which has led to human, economic, scientific and technical advances, and which will go on doing so. Believing in capitalism does not mean believing in growth, the economy or efficiency. Desirable as they may be, these are only the results. Belief in capitalism is, fundamentally, belief in mankind.

This also means that, in common, presumably, with most other liberals, I can endorse the opinion of French socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin that we must have a "market economy, not a market society". My aim is not for economic transactions to supplant all other human relations. My aim is freedom and voluntary relations in all fields. The market economy is a result of this in the economic field, in the cultural field it means freedom of expression and press freedom, in politics it means democracy and the rule of law, in social life it means the right to live according to one's own values and to choose one's own company.

It is not the intention that we should put price tags on everything. The important things in life – love, the family, friendship, one's own way of life – cannot be valued in money. Those who believe that to the liberal mind everyone does everything with the aim of maximising

their income know nothing about liberals, and any liberal of such persuasions knows nothing of human nature. It is not a desire for better payment that moves me to write a book about the value of globalisation instead of, say, coarse fishing. I am writing because this is something I believe in, because to me it matters. And I wish to live in a liberal society because it gives people the right to choose what matters to them.

Last of all, my heartfelt thanks to the friends who helped me to marshal my thoughts on these matters, for the simple reason that this subject also matters to them, especially in the case of Fredrik Erixon, Sofia Nerbrand and Mauricio Rojas. A great thanks also to Barbro Bengtson, Kristina von Unge and Charlotte Häggblad for their efficiency in making my manuscript possible to publish.

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