William E. Simon’s Capacities’ Approach to Liberty: An Essay in Economic Citizenship

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Abstract

This paper discusses the philosophical underpinnings of William E. Simon’s productive public service and his championing of liberty in economic citizenship and the furtherance of entrepreneurial capitalism in America. The discussion suggests that his understanding and advocacy of the instrumental role of liberty made him distinctive among policymakers and unique among political and social conservatives. Two central themes are highlighted: the principle of liberty and private initiatives to further the cause of liberty. Secretary Simon was a passionate advocate for individual liberty being ascribed the highest value in American political life and called for vigilance against the unnecessary intervention of the state in people’s lives. He committed his intellectual and financial resources to the promotion of these ideals through significant initiatives in support of institutions including universities and colleges, foundations and community organizations, and groups that exhibited a strong belief in, and support of, the cause of liberty. This, Secretary Simon believed, would “strengthen the free enterprise system and the spiritual values on which it rests.” (JEL H10)

“The overriding principle to be revived in American political life is that which sets individual liberty as the highest political value—that value to which all other values are subordinate and that which, at all times, is to be given the highest priority in policy discussions.”

William E. Simon

Introduction

In this essay, Secretary William E. Simon’s contribution to the important cause of liberty is highlighted. The philosophical underpinnings to his admirable and productive public service were his recognition and advocacy of the important instrumental role of liberty in the advancement of the general capabilities of people and their economic citizenship, and in the furtherance of entrepreneurial capitalism in America. William Simon valued liberty not only for its intrinsic worth, as is the case with most conservative political philosophers, but more importantly for its instrumental intermediate role in promoting the market’s ability to create wealth and utility. Most critically, and what distinguishes Simon, was his understanding and championing of liberty as a means to the end objective of even greater individual liberty. His deeper understanding of this critical linkage underpinned much of his advocacy, for he understood that greater awareness of, in Milton Friedman’s [1980] words, “the fecundity of freedom,” and improved capabilities to pursue liberty among citizens, were essential to the

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sustenance of entrepreneurial capitalism in America. This context is the proper framework within which to understand and appreciate William Simon's commitment to the development of media establishments, educational institutions, policy institutes, and community organizations.

This essay will discuss the philosophical and analytical properties of the instrumental worth of liberty in entrepreneurial capitalistic economies, including its boundaries of relevance and its usefulness in addressing contemporary problems. The framework is used to explain William Simon's strong support of educational and knowledge-based institutions and associations that focus on the building of social capital and the teaching of values.

**Simon's Philosophical Roots**

William Simon was clear in his view on the threat to liberty posed by governments and other central organizing authorities and called for “a conscious philosophical prejudice against any intervention by the state into (people's) lives, for by definition, such intervention abridges liberty.” Furthermore, Simon argued that “state intervention in the private and productive lives of the citizenry must be presumed to be a negative, uncreative, and dangerous act, to be adopted only when its proponents provide clear overwhelming and incontrovertible evidence that the benefits to society of such intervention far outweigh the costs” [Simon, 1978, p. 218]. Simon ascribed great importance to the role of private initiatives in furthering the cause of liberty and in protecting America from an invasion of the ‘left-wing intelligentsia’ determined to impose its “coercive leveling of egalitarianism” on the society [ibid, p. 223]. To this end he committed substantial financial and intellectual support to intermediary institutions including universities, colleges, foundations, and community organizations with a demonstrated strong belief in, and advocacy of, the cause of liberty.

Simon’s conviction that the instrumental role of liberty should be accorded high priority in attempts to create a superior and just society, and his passionate efforts to strengthen the mechanism through which liberty can be promoted and achieved, underscore his personal agenda. However, the reality of the all-too-common heavy-handed and intrusive intervention of governments and other central organizing authorities in the personal and economic lives of citizens around the world would suggest that the Simon agenda is misunderstood or its objectives under-appreciated. Compounding the issue is the fact that in many societies this misguided intervention takes place with the full support of the collective will of said citizens, which, the authors surmise, William Simon would find counter-productive to the cause of liberty. The essence of the issue is not primarily a philosophical discord over the intrinsic worth of individual liberty, but a lack of a full appreciation of the instrumental role of liberty in promoting justice, fairness, capacity building, and greater personal liberty. Therefore, the more global discussion over the import of the Simon agenda is framed as follows. While there is a fair degree of consensus on the primacy and high intrinsic worth of liberty, especially in America where individual freedom takes center stage in defining and sustaining the country’s preferred way of life, its instrumental worth, and the roadmap towards its realization, remain controversial.

**Unresolved Issues on Liberty**

Two unresolved issues underlie much of the debate and experimentation surrounding the promotion of liberty. One, the role that government should play in the pursuit of liberty is a priori indeterminate, or in the words of John Gray [1993, p. 6], “subject to the need for recurrent redefinition.” According to Gray [p. 7], the role of a government (and by extension that of any central organizing authority) “cannot be...fixed and unalterable (because) as technology develops and social conditions change, the rules, conventions and practices which