Human Nature and the Right

Introduction

The Radical Right’s assault on the classic welfare state was intended as a key step in laying the foundations for a new political consensus replacing the Social Democratic compact which had dominated political life between 1945 and 1979. The new politics of the 1980s and 1990s not only gave rise to a different policy agenda, but also promoted a new vision of human nature based on the spirit of individualism, enterprise and consumerism. However, the realization in the 1990s that this project had not overcome the shortcomings of Social Democratic policy and had its own shortcomings, contributed to a deepening sense of disillusionment in the two major political agendas and cast doubt on their respective views of human nature. This chapter seeks to define the Radical Right’s view of human nature, to explore the meta-theory that characterizes it, and to assess how far it has influenced social policy and what new directions policy might follow. In particular, it addresses the scope within the Right’s view of human nature for fulfilling, what we have called, mutual human needs through market exchange based on voluntary association and competition among producers and on communal life among consumers. The term Radical Right is used to refer to the influence of neo-liberal economic thought, especially that of Hayek, on the Conservative Party in Britain and its satellite think tanks which influenced the policy agenda in the 1980s and 1990s. Essentially this creed stands for the liberation of human energy and enterprise by removing the shackles of state bureaucracy and regulation and by re-establishing the private market as the central institution for allocating goods to meet human need. This project involves not only deregulating various economic institutions – by opening financial, manufacturing and service industries to international competition – but also privatizing former state agencies involved in the provision of health, welfare, education, security, culture, communication, transport and the production of basic raw materials and components.
The human nature discourse of the Right

We begin by examining the Right’s discourse on human nature as a set of propositions about the factual, motivational and normative content of human nature.

1 Human nature is based on the supply of innate natural abilities and needs found within a given group of individuals

The Right generally argue that a group of individuals – a community, nation or ethnic group – share a given stock of different abilities and basic needs. However, individuals differ in how effectively they harness these abilities to meet their needs. Conservatives among the Right see human nature and needs as unchanging and unalterable (Thorne 1990, 21). Liberals like Hayek – on whom this chapter focuses – by contrast, see human nature in terms that are more dynamic. Though sharing the same basic needs, individuals are born with different talents and go about meeting their needs in diverse ways. Consequently, a persistent theme in Hayek’s work is the belief in the limitless possibilities of human fulfilment under circumstances of minimum state intervention. As early as in *The Road to Serfdom* he speaks of humankind’s ‘unbounded possibilities of improving their own lot’ (1943, 13; also 1960, 86). Whether human nature is portrayed as bounded and unchanging or as unbounded and dynamic, these two views generate factual generalizations about motivation among humans in a state of nature. Within the range of motivations described, the dominance of self-interest is central, even if other motivations such as altruism and the selfless pursuit of knowledge also exist, as liberals such as Hayek and Friedman acknowledge. However, the idea that the state of nature consists in the raw unformed motivations of individuals in a state of anarchy – ‘a battlefield of contending forces’ (Thorne 1990, 27) – presents the Right with the problem of social order.

2 Human nature is dominated by self-interest

This is the driving force leading individuals to produce and consume for self-fulfilment. This theory of motivation, about how natural drives give rise to particular courses of action, argues that the pursuit of self-interest is best realized in market institutions, wherein numerous individuals can optimize their many different desires in an ordered way. The Friedmans voice a common theme on the Right that the market unwittingly contributes to optimizing each person’s ends without their being necessarily conscious of it, that ‘economic order can emerge as the unintended consequence of the actions of the many people, each seeking his own interest’ (1980, 13–14). Specifically, the price system organizes the multitude of individual decisions to buy and sell by transmitting information, by providing incentives to individuals to lower costs and maximize returns, and