

The Root of Totalitarianism Is Social Engineering

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Commentary

Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich Hayek were both knights of classical liberalism in the twentieth century—an age dominated by statism. Scholarly work has [often focused](#) on the differences in their views on liberty. Their contrasting definitions of liberty are significant for

anyone interested in liberal theory. In a famous [1958 lecture](#), Berlin distinguished between positive and negative liberty. Negative liberty, in his view, is the absence of obstacles to human action, whereas positive liberty is the freedom to act on one's will and pursue one's goals. Hayek, on the other hand, [defined liberty](#) as the absence of arbitrary coercion and “independence of the arbitrary will of another.” They also differed in their views on the importance of economic freedom. For example, Berlin, in [his letters](#), criticized Hayek for placing too much emphasis on economic freedom.

Despite these differences, however, they shared a common definition of what constitutes totalitarianism.

Where These Two Meet

What is the root of communism, fascism, or, more broadly, any modern totalitarian ideology? This is the question on which Hayek and Berlin, two giants of classical liberalism, agreed. This shared insight is so crucial that it merits emphasis—the very reason for writing this piece.

Berlin, in his article “[Democracy, Communism and the Individual](#),” argues that the root of communism lies in “the belief that all questions, including those of morals and politics, can be answered with absolute certainty, like those of science and mathematics, by correct use of reason or correct observation of nature.” Anyone familiar with Hayek's critique of the abuse of reason will notice the similarity. In “[The Counter-Revolution of Science](#),” Hayek discusses the origins of [scientific hubris](#). In the second part of the book, he addresses the root of the ideologies that dominated the twentieth century and brought civilization to the brink of collapse.

Hayek echoes Berlin's concerns, [writing](#): “Any general refusal to accept existing moral rules merely because their expediency has not

been rationally demonstrated ... is to destroy one of the roots of our civilization.”

The belief that rules should be rational is important, but assuming that society can be reconstructed based purely on rationally derived principles is the root of totalitarianism. The constructivist desire to remake society based on logic, while disregarding traditions and rules that have evolved through an organic process, [often leads](#) to [unintended consequences](#) beyond the [planners’ comprehension](#). This skepticism toward social engineering is where Hayek and Berlin converge.

Fighting Against the Engineers of the Human Soul

Berlin and Hayek lived in a time when the temptation to organize society was popular among intellectuals—from visions of a “[deliberately organized society](#)” aimed at improving human conditions through “superior knowledge” to Marxist fantasies of [ending capitalist](#) “anarchy of production” and achieving a rational economic order. At that time, defending a society in which free individuals pursued their own goals, rather than those imposed by the state or nation, seemed irrational.

But history remembers the contrarians.

Christopher Hitchens, in “[Letters to a Young Contrarian](#),” describes what makes a great intellectual: “Great men are most frequently not honored in their own time or country.” Few fit this description better than Hayek and Berlin, two champions of classical liberalism who resisted the urge to engineer human society—or, worse, in [Stalin’s terminology](#), to engineer the human soul.

Joshua Cherniss, in his [work on Berlin](#), argues that Berlin traced the

intellectual roots of elite-driven social engineering back to [Auguste Comte](#) and [Henri Saint-Simon](#). Interestingly, Hayek made a similar argument in “The Counter-Revolution of Science.” Both thinkers saw the social physics of Comte and the [positivism](#) of Saint-Simon as laying the foundation for modern socialism. In their perspective, the attempt to apply the methods of natural sciences to human society reflected the naïve utopianism of French intellectuals. To appreciate the gravity of their argument, one must grasp the distinction between the conscious direction of society and spontaneous order.

The Conscious Direction of Society

Hayek [warned against](#) the assumption that “processes which are consciously directed are necessarily superior to any spontaneous process,” calling it an “unfounded superstition.” This insight aligns with the [Scottish Enlightenment](#) view of institutions. Thinkers like Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith emphasized that many institutions are not the product of conscious human design, but rather of human action.

One might initially question why society should not be rationally planned and social outcomes designed. The answer lies in the nature of human society: it is not a technical problem to be engineered, but a complex, organic system that continuously adapts and generates new knowledge. Unlike machines, society consists of millions of subjective minds interacting in unpredictable ways. The crucial task is not to dictate outcomes, but to allow for the free discovery of new possibilities. The limits of human knowledge, coupled with the tacit and subjective nature of information, make the conscious direction of society impossible. When planners confront this impossibility, they often resort to coercion to impose their preferred outcomes. The result has been unthinkable violence and cruelty in pursuit of human perfection.

Liberalism and the Pursuit of Happiness

The root of fascism, communism, and all totalitarian ideologies lies in the naïve belief that there is only one correct way to live and that intellectuals can determine it with the certainty of natural sciences. Liberalism, by contrast, does not prescribe a singular way of life and this is its strength. It enables individuals with diverse beliefs, goals, and ambitions to coexist. This principle is embodied in the *Declaration of Independence*, which proclaims the “pursuit of happiness”—a pursuit meant for individuals to discover, not for the state to dictate. This is the core belief of liberalism.

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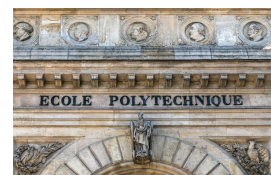
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