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Does the road to serfdom lead to the Servile State?

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Abstract

Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State* is often seen as an antisocialist tract arguing that "socialism is slavery." It is typically assumed that an appreciation and defense of free market capitalism, as well as a general dislike of government intervention must motivate the its thesis. Nevertheless *The Servile State* is an argument against what Belloc saw as unbridled capitalism not collectivism. Belloc defines capitalism to mean a state in which there is a skewed distribution of wealth in society where the majority of people are dispossessed, proletariat, and a minority makes up the capitalist, property owning class. For Belloc capitalism is an inherently unstable system and servile measures arise to ameliorate insecurity and instability.

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1. Introduction

Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State* is widely regarded as a book that contributes to the tradition within economics that is suspicious of the growth of government and especially of a government that takes on an ever-larger number of economic activities. It is often considered to be an elaboration of the arguments that Herbert Spencer developed in his *The Man Versus The State* (Spencer, 1940) (and especially his essay titled *The Coming Slavery*) and as a precursor to Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (Cockett, 1995; Liggio, 2004;

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McInnes, 1998). Indeed, when it is referred to in the literature it is not unusual to see it mentioned in conjunction with both (Gray, 1998; Liggio, 2004).

The fact that Hayek cites *The Servile State* twice in *The Road to Serfdom* is taken to mean that there exists some affinity between their arguments. Even the titles of the two books seem to imply that Belloc's book must provide an analysis of how growing socialism encroaches on the freedoms of the populace and leads to slavery.¹ Thus, in effect the servile state is believed to be a stop on the road to serfdom, if not its final destination. In addition, it is typically assumed that an appreciation and defense of free market capitalism, as well as a general dislike of government intervention must motivate the thesis of *The Servile State*.

In spite of all of this, I will argue that Belloc's *The Servile State* is not a variation on Spencer, that it is hard to see it as a precursor to Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, that it is not a critique of collectivism, state socialism, or even totalitarianism. It is not a critique of the welfare state as we know it and the argument has nothing to do with fears of an ever-growing government bureaucracy or the imposition of coercive regulation.² In fact *The Servile State* is an argument against what Belloc saw as unbridled capitalism not collectivism.³

Here Belloc defines capitalism to mean a state in which there is a skewed distribution of wealth in society where the majority of people are dispossessed, proletariat, and a minority makes up the capitalist, property owning class. Belloc's argument relies on path dependency to make the case that so called incremental socialism serves only to entrench the capitalist class further and leads to a state of society, the servile state, in which the dispossessed have traded their freedoms for economic security and sufficiency. For Belloc capitalism is an inherently unstable system and servile measures arise to ameliorate insecurity and instability.

2. The Servile State is on the Road to Serfdom

Belloc has been described variously as a conservative (Henke, 1919; Levy, 1983), a liberal (Thane, 1984; Elliott, 1991), a libertarian (Elliott, 1991; Nisbet, 1977), a laissez faire liberal (Odegard, 1940), Jeffersonian (Nisbet, 1977), Burkean (Nisbet, 1977), an anarchist a la Kropotkin (Corrin, 1981), a conservative liberal (Clokie, 1947), and the list

¹ As Neil McInnes notes "In fact, Hayek said, central planning led, via cumulative attempts to mend its inevitable failures, to 'a servile state' (he recalled Hilaire Belloc's 1913 book of that name). It led to serfdom, to a condition 'scarcely distinguishable from slavery'" p. 56.

² Robert Nisbet argues in the introduction to Liberty Fund edition of *The Servile State* that growing bureaucracy and coercive regulation is evidence of the servile state. That view is not consistent with the one developed in this paper. Servility requires that there exist a change in the legal status of the working classes. Without a change in the status of the working poor, growing bureaucracy and coercive regulation are not evidence of the servile state.

³ Collectivism for Belloc refers to the state control of the means of production. The problem for the socialists noted Belloc is that they no longer pursued government control of the means of production. Instead they pursued policies that would reduce the status of the vast working class to that of industrial serfs dispossessed of the means of production but protected by rights that would provide for sufficiency and security but no true freedom.

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