Where Charity Begins & Why it Should End

Socialists refuse to support charities on the grounds that such organisations are merely trying to deal with the symptoms of capitalism rather than capitalism itself.

Socialists seldom win popularity contests in the current ideological climate. Take for example our opinions on the subject of charity: I believe that charity ought to be abolished. Am I unfeeling, uncaring, when confronted with the evidence of great misery and poverty in the world? Hardly, but I think I understand, as do other socialists, that misplaced caring within a capitalist system is as useful to the poor and dispossessed as no caring at all.

The word charity comes from the Latin caritas meaning love or affection, so we could assume that charity in its abstract sense was bound up with the loftiest feelings, but it was soon complicated by its link with morality and organised religion. Where Christianity was the theory, charity became the practice.

Socialists believe that poverty is unacceptable and unnecessary, whereas Christians tend to see poverty as acceptable, perhaps even a necessary tool in the moral teachings of the bible. Jesus could always lay a hand to someone wretched and needy in order to illustrate a point— rather like Princess Diana. Forget any fantasies of Christ as the first great communist—Christianity has sought to alleviate some suffering but never abolish poverty. Ultimately for it, the poor have one recourse . . . God will reward this world's suffering in the next. Socialists dismiss this as ludicrous.

Guilty rich

Even removed from the clutches of Christianity, most of us would define charity as 'the giving of help to those in need', but socialists recognise that charity is used as a mask: a pretty face for many less lofty motivations. Most obviously charity is used to assuage rich guilt from the bourgeois straight-on up to the monarch: "Well, yes, they do cost us an awful lot of money, but look at all the good work they do for charity." Are the ladies who lunch really so concerned about Ethiopian famine, or are they just looking to fill their filofaxes with good deeds? Is charity just a brilliant excuse for the idle rich to stay idle because they are too busy with "good work" to actually work?

It's not just the rich who use charity as an excuse for other behaviours. Gone are the days of skulking into dark betting shops or poring over the football pools. Now when we want to gamble, we can buy an establishment-approved lottery ticket and say we are "making a charitable donation" to such "worthy causes" as plush velvet seats in a London opera house.

Surveys reveal that charitable donations are hardly proportional to income. Poorer people give a higher proportion of their income to charities than their better-off counterparts, a fact that offends my Robin Hood sensibilities. When it comes to using charities to pay for essential services, the poor pay the most, thus, like the lottery, charity is merely a regressive tax in sheep's clothing.

So even if charity redistributes wealth in the wrong direction, doesn't it still help those in acute need? No. Charities are at best, ineffective, at worst, downright harmful in addressing society's needs.

First, they are ineffective, because they put the responsibility for dealing with some of our biggest problems in the hands of well-meaning but ill-equipped do-gooders. Thus, the government is very happy to relinquish this chore of providing essential services to charities eager to pick up the slack, charities who are accountable only to their trustees. The current government has made an art of such surrendering, and John Major even speaks of the widening role of charities with pride.
Because, as we are told, charities are doing us such a favour (and saving millions for the government—a dividend we never see) they are allowed to run their "businesses" as they see fit, with their own priorities, and in isolation from other organisations. Crucial tasks are left to well-meaning amateurs rather than well-rewarded professionals, a practice that undermines workers. Don't get me wrong—I know that volunteerism is the basis of a truly socialist society, but that's volunteerism across the board, not replacing a decently paid, well-trained builder by someone who likes to dabble with a hammer on the weekends when the squash court is booked.

Tin rattling

In the past charities used to top up services mostly provided by the government. Now charities are involved in every aspect of our lives and there is seemingly nothing we will not trust them to do. Ambulances used to be well-stocked, but now they are delivered bare to communities until a charity fills them with the most basic resuscitation equipment. Is it any wonder you are more likely to die of a heart attack in the poorer neighbourhoods?

The other day someone came to my door rattling a tin for life-saving gear for the neo-natal intensive care unit of the local NHS hospital. A worthy cause, I agreed, and one that should be publicly provided. Ah, yes, but you see the government won't pay, the tin-rattler retorted. Why should they when they can count on you to collect the funds for them, I answered. Something is severely sick in a society that regards its children so lightly. Think of this the next time you are asked to get vouchers at Tesco's for your local school's computers, and just wait ... next year you may collect vouchers from McDonald's to buy your neighbourhood a police constable. It's already happening in some places. Every pound you give to charity is a step in the wrong direction.

A car sticker slogan echoes in my head: "It will be a great day when our schools have all the money they need and the airforce has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber." The popularity of this slogan in America, further illustrates my point. Does the military ever have to resort to the effort- and resource- wasting tactic of a cake sale to fund its operations? Did anyone ever come to your door during the Gulf War rattling a tin for a new tank? What a preposterous notion! When the military wants a new toy, they draw a cheque from public funds, and we have little recourse to challenge them. The money is always there, so why isn't the money there to fund schools and hospitals properly? Is there a sudden shortage of money, material, or human resources? Socialists know better.

Anyone with a whiff of understanding of socialist ideas, and anyone who has ever been a have-not under a capitalist regime, knows that "caring capitalism" is a contradiction in terms. Capitalism in order to maintain itself has to put profit and economic growth ahead of people's needs. If in a time of "economic boom" profit and people's needs coincide, then we are told to believe that this will always be the case, that capitalism brings the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Socialists see this feeble brainwashing technique a mile away. It insults our intelligence, as do the advertisements that tell us that world hunger will only stop when we all phone the 0800 number with our credit cards ready.

Glossy campaigns

Millions of pounds and thousands of working hours are spent every year devising glossy campaigns to part us from our charitable contributions. There is no way to ensure under capitalism that Cancer Research will fare better than Holidays for Hunting Hounds if the latter can pull more heartstrings with Saatchi & Saatchi on its side. When they run out of sympathy pleas, the agencies try hard-sell and harassment: "How many more babies will die before you pick up the phone?"

Charities are a poor way of dealing with society's problems. Even the most efficiently run charity is grossly inefficient because of the nature of the beast. Charities respond to constant needs with inconsistent sources of income subject to the tides of a boom/bust economy and the public's response to this year's advertising campaign. Corners are cut as charities try desperately to balance their books. Charities look for quick-fix schemes that will impress contributors; long-term planning is an approach they can ill-afford. This is why, in the long run, charities are likely to damage more than help a worthy cause.
Charity is a means of economic oppression because it maintains an ideology that is directly in opposition to socialism. Charity reinforces so many misconceptions about society: that social change relies on us being nice and feeling generous with what little disposable income we have; and that the disadvantaged should wag their tails with gratitude every time the wealthy toss them a bone labelled "charity".

Every charitable donation strengthens the notion that our basic needs –food, shelter, adequate medical care, basic education –are actually privileges. We have no right to expect our needs to be met, and we are meant to grovel like the degraded beggars we are when by accident we get what we need. We are conditioned to rightfully expect little of our 'democratically elected' governments. Capitalism and Charity have worked hand in hand to turn us into a world of few benefactors and millions of beggars. For those of you happy with the world as it is, by all means carry on dropping your change into the nearest charity box. But for those of you who seek solutions to our problems beyond the quick fix, rage against the charity machine.

Or better put in the words of Jack London, in *The Iron Heel*, his visionary novel of socialism:

"I had become convinced as Ernest was when he sneered at charity as a poulticing of an ulcer. Remove the ulcer was his remedy; give to the worker his product; pension as soldiers those who grow honourably old in their toil, and there will be no need for charity. Convinced of this, I toiled with him at the revolution, and did not exhaust my energy in alleviating the social ills that continuously arose from the injustice of the system."

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