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Carter and I

The difference between President Carter and me—besides the size of the houses we live in—is that he is in favor of human rights, and I am in favor of the rights of humans.

Nowadays, we hear “human rights” mentioned a lot. Champions of human rights are emerging all the time to proclaim themselves as such. President Carter is one, and so am I. However, I suspect that our focus on the problem is so different that, in reality, we end up polar opposites.

Is there, perhaps, a human right that is more important than each person’s right to life itself? Or more important than the right over one’s own body and what emanates from it: energy, ideas, initiatives, and feelings? Or the right to exclusive ownership of the things and qualities inherent to one’s self needed to sustain and enjoy life? Or the right to freely use one’s own short lifetime, for the ends one chooses? Or the right to free will, to choose among peaceful alternative opportunities, for the purpose of pursuing one’s own happiness?

If we recognize such a right for all individuals, we also accept that limits must be placed on what those who wish to live together in society may do without impunity. Whoever fails to respect the right and freedom of others cannot expect reciprocity, especially because abridging the rights and freedom of others constitutes a violent act of aggression, something that justifies defense on the part of the offended party. It is not possible to participate peacefully in an organization of people without a prior agreement to respect the rules of the game. That is why the recognition of individual rights is, at the same time, the ultimate restriction on the actions of persons in society.

In an abstract and general manner, I suppose that Carter accepts the above premises. His incongruities emerge when you translate this into reality, into concrete ideas, into specifics, into daily life.

The right to exclusive property of one’s own self is freedom, and it is the most fundamental human right. To deny this would mean being in favor of slavery. However, it seems to me that this way of framing that right provokes rejection due, I think, to my use of the words “property” and “exclusive.” I attribute such aversion to the fact that open, frank, and clear acceptance of such a right would make it impossible to rationally deny its logical and congruent consequences:

- No one else has the right over what a person manages to acquire as a consequence of the exercise of that person’s right of exclusive property of his own self over his lifetime, provided that during the process of acquisition he has respected the same right of others; that is, that he has not used coercion or deceit. The only limit on the right of possession is the legitimacy of the process of acquisition.

- As a consequence of the previous statement, human rights are violated when one or many establish, beyond the above, any quantitative limit to what people acquire. It matters not if he who establishes this is a feudal lord, a dictator, or a group of few or many.
- Given that it is legitimate for a man to defend himself from being stripped of the fruit of his labor, inventiveness, and time—obtained through equal respect for the rights of others—human rights are violated when such dispossession is legalized. This happens when a law uses public power to prevent the individual, through force or the threat of force, from defending the possession of that to which he has a fundamental right.
- It follows from the recognition of the exclusive right to possess one's own self that one's participation, renewed daily in the organization known as society, constitutes a means chosen by the person for his own convenience, and not the other way around. Therefore, one's exclusive right to property of one's own self and time is violated when the product of one's effort is expropriated without payment, so that others who did not produce it may use it and call that which has been expropriated a "social contribution." If persons have the right to life, "society" cannot be logically an entity with rights, since rights are individual.

The previous examples clash with prevalent ideological currents of thought, because the derived conclusions are unacceptable to those whose solution to Peter's problem is invariably to take something away from Paul. They clash with the ideology of those who argue that social justice consists of equality of the material effects of people's actions. They clash with the beliefs of those who think that the world's wealth is a fixed quantity, and that the wealth of some is the cause of the poverty of others.

In addition to the double standard in judgment that Mr. Carter and his spokespersons call into play when they clamor for the rights of certain human beings, it seems to me that he has forgotten about the human rights of Americans by failing to propose the abolition of legislation that redistributes the product of their right to property:

- Fiscal rates that discriminate according to how much an individual has or produces (income tax).
- The obligation of some to sustain others who choose not to accept a lower-paying job (forced unemployment "insurance").
- The obligation for some to pay salaries greater than those mutually agreed upon between employees and employers (minimum wages).
- Fiscal rates to prevent some from buying from others, forcing them to purchase from a third party, which they would not have freely chosen (protectionist import taxes).
- Devaluation of the real income—through devaluation of the dollar—of the elderly who subsist on pensions and insurance they bought with their work during their youth (when the right thing to do is avoid the most cruel of taxes: inflation).

And so on. You could cite endless examples of “humanitarian” legislation based on the principle that man is not the sole owner of his own being, his ideas, his energy, his time in life, his labor, his efforts and sacrifices; that “society” is man’s owner and that, in its magnanimity, it allows him to be the owner of part of his being. Thus, we have a fistful of destructive ideas on fundamental human rights that Carter would do well to begin to try to correct.

You could argue until you’re blue in the face as to the convenience of all of these social reforms. But I do not see how to reconcile them, logically and congruently, with the right to life. I am reminded of what the character Charlie Brown in the cartoon strip *Peanuts* exclaims: “I love humanity. It’s humans I can’t stand.” Maybe Carter would say something like this: “I’m in favor of human rights. It’s the rights of humans I’m against.”

Translated from the original Spanish

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