

Oliver Kamm And The Missing Argument

Oliver Kamm recently wrote that **he would not have reconsidered** his position that the war to depose Saddam was right, however things had turned out afterwards. He wrote:

Deliberately allowing such a regime to remain in place when we had the power to remove it would have been to violate values that are axiomatic. Again, I can't easily argue for them, they merely seem to me obvious and irreducible. That's not to say it would be right to overthrow a bestial regime regardless of any other considerations, ever; there would, however, be an overwhelming presumption in favour of such action where it was possible to take it.

It was indeed a matter of moral values and we agree with Kamm's conclusion. However, we do not think that the relevant values are axiomatic and we shall now supply an argument for them.

We human beings do not understand the world all that well. That is not to say that there aren't some things that we understand very well indeed. The current state of human knowledge is an astonishing achievement for which we should feel pride and awe. However, the fact remains that our ignorance dwarfs our understanding – and (as Donald Rumsfeld recently **remarked**) when we are ignorant of something, we do not always know what. Therefore, when we think we are following a good policy based on a good underlying theory, we will sometimes be wrong. So we need to have a way of coping with such errors.

The way that we in the West do this is through institutions that allow people to withdraw their support from policies, ideas or leaders that they think are in error. Liberal democracy is one such institution: if we think that a political party that we once supported was so badly in error that we no longer wish to support it, we may vote for another party and try to persuade other people to do the same. Because of such institutions, the West is not necessarily doomed to be limited by the mistakes of any of its subcultures. This has made it the first and only society in history that is stable under rapid changes, and therefore also the first ever to be capable of sustained rapid improvement.

In some countries – of which pre-liberation Iraq was certainly one –

the rulers go out of their way to destroy such institutions or to prevent their formation. They do this to maintain themselves in power, to murder and extort with impunity. Such societies never thrive, and are doomed to suffer the errors of their rulers indefinitely.

From the point of view of these evil dictators, the open and self-improving nature of the West is an ever-present threat to their legitimacy and their lives. If they realise this, as they often do, they will be willing to go to considerable lengths, and take considerable risks, to hurt, cripple or destroy the West if they possibly can. If we let an evil dictator such as Saddam persist in acquiring weapons of mass destruction we run the risk of facing a mortal threat to our open society: there is the direct threat of mass casualties and the fear thereof; and there is the fact that in a society that cannot effectively suppress the intimidation of good people by evil factions, political progress is, at best, on hold. We also sacrifice the possibility that the dictator's victims would one day have contributed something distinctive to our understanding of the world.

A possible reason why Oliver Kamm missed this argument is that he is of the left. The left generally wants the state to interfere in economic transactions. Now, in short, you can switch your electricity company in a rather short time without going to jail, but you can't stop paying tax to the current government anywhere near as quickly or as certainly. In this and many other respects the market is an even better institution of criticism than liberal democracy. This argument is closely related to the one given above. Leftists, by definition, either do not know this argument or do not understand its generality. Hence being a leftist puts one at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the reasons why the war to depose Saddam was right.

Fri, 04/30/2004 - 20:48 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Leftists by Definition

I am a Leftist, by definition, hypothetically. Please state further why I do not know this argument or do not understand its generality. This is not to debate the point of Leftism or Rightism so much as to better understand the argument. Can one be a Leftist not by definition?

by a reader on Fri, 04/30/2004 - 23:40 | [reply](#)

Leftist by Definition

'I am a Leftist, by definition, hypothetically.'

A person is not a leftist by definition, they are a leftist by choice. It's just that believing leftism entails thinking certain things that contradict this particular argument.

'Please state further why I do not know this argument or do not understand its generality.'

If you're a leftist you want to let the state rather than the market

control certain parts of the economy. However, a state institution providing a good is not as easily criticisable as a free market institution providing that good. If a person thought that criticisability was an important criterion for all institutions they would favour free markets over states. So leftists evidently don't see that this argument applies to the state/market issue in the areas where they think the state ought to interfere. Thus they either don't know the argument at all, or they are unaware that it applies to this case.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Sat, 05/01/2004 - 00:44 | [reply](#)

not quite right

Hence being a leftist puts one at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding *****a reason***** why the war to depose Saddam was right.

to explain their misunderstanding of the other reasons, we must point out some of their other flaws.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sat, 05/01/2004 - 02:08 | [reply](#)

Good job!

This was a great post.

AIS

by a reader on Sat, 05/01/2004 - 02:16 | [reply](#)

Could it be argued...?

Could it be argued that if one understands that argument and its generality even better than the average non-leftist, one will conclude that the deposing of Saddam is a job best done by private enterprise, and so government should keep out of it?

If not, why not?

by a reader on Sat, 05/01/2004 - 03:17 | [reply](#)

private armies? and more not right

private armies are a nice idea, and I hope to see them someday, but we do not have them yet, and we can't just wait around and refuse to have any wars until they are created -- defense is necessary ***now***.

also i wanted to add another objection to the post. most right wing people do not ***explicitly*** understand the argument about markets being better institutions for criticism (how many get it inexplicitly is hard to say). but anyway, also, most right-wing people supported,

for true, *explicit* reasons. (how many people said they supported the war but didn't know why..?) therefore, i just don't see how you can claim this leftist failing was a significant handicap to having the right view on the war.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 05/01/2004 - 07:35 | [reply](#)

A reader

Good post. But I think you need to add some explanation of the following:

1. Why was the West willing to tolerate - and indeed support - Saddam throughout the 80s?
2. Why did the West not take the first Gulf War into Baghdad?
3. Why did the West not give support to the Shites during the 1991 uprising?

Did the best suffer from a moral failure? Or was it the case that Saddam served a useful purpose: namely keeping militant Islamism in check? And isn't the fact that we are still in Iraq a reflection of the truth of that?

by a reader on Sun, 05/02/2004 - 22:56 | [reply](#)

Good post. Re: comments, I

Good post.

Re: comments, I'm still trying to figure out what "I am a Leftist, by definition" is supposed to mean.

-Blixa

by a reader on Mon, 05/03/2004 - 19:52 | [reply](#)

"By definition"

I think you're somehow mis-parsing the sentence. The phrase "by definition" is enclosed in parenthetical commas. So to understand the sentence, read it omitting that phrase, and then add: "(This follows from the very definition of Leftists, given above.)"

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 05/03/2004 - 20:11 | [reply](#)

Not a Leftist Then

"The left generally wants the state to interfere in economic transactions."

I do not generally want the state to interfere in economic

transactions. Therefore, by definition, I am not a Leftist. That was helpful to get that straight. Neither am I completely trusting of "the market" in all respects, unless the market is governed by natural market factors which are untethered from manipulation intended to distort markets or to imbalance them for solely personal gain.

Note the qualifier, "untethered from manipulation intended to distort".

by a reader on Mon, 05/03/2004 - 22:24 | [reply](#)

market distortion

can you give an example of a market distortion you're worried about? one that doesn't involve initiating force (which would make it illegal. no one says the market can withstand unlimited illegal acts...)

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Tue, 05/04/2004 - 00:31 | [reply](#)

market distortion

Agreed, no one says the market can withstand unlimited illegal acts.

There are also acts which are not illegal but legal within the bounds of the international marketplace. Walmart is a legal act, but that is far too easy. Eliminate the competition by volume. Corner the world market on cheaply made goods. Buy low high volume, sell low high volume, but sell relatively real price high and high volume. Exploit world market inequities in labor prices caused by world market forces of overpopulation and poverty.

Another would be to exploit market inequities caused not by market forces per se but by circumstance of source and resource and personal holdings. Is OPEC a market, a state, a private enterprise collaborative, or a princely fiefdom?

Another example, more troubling even, would be ships which fly the Liberian flag unregulated for safety or seaworthiness, and while still afloat on the high seas, ship hazardous chemicals worldwide with impunity.

Another example, this time to argue for natural market forces with limited oversight, would be the world diamond market. The market is normally driven by efficient market forces. In 2000 and 2001, Al Queda operatives sold extensive reserves of diamonds bought in Liberia and other gems, tanzanite from Tanzania legally, to finance illegal terrorism. The sales were legal. The sudden glut of gems on the market drove prices substantially higher. No one knew who was selling or why the market was distorted. There was no oversight In this case it was not distortion for personal gain but rather to finance worldwide destruction under the cloak of a free market. Perhaps

this is an anomaly.

You are right. The market does work without initiating force. Some limited oversight may always be needed to see that it continues to be free.

by a reader on Tue, 05/04/2004 - 14:15 | [reply](#)

Market Distortion

I don't understand the criticism of Walmart. Isn't what they do helping to alleviate the "World market inequities in labor prices caused by world market forces of overpopulation and poverty"?

I also don't see why a sudden glut of gems on the market would drive prices substantially higher. Seems to me it would do the opposite.

Gil

by **Gil** on Tue, 05/04/2004 - 15:39 | [reply](#)

i don't get it

you're mad at walmart for cheaply providing products people want to buy, and hiring people who wanted to be hired?

you're mad at al quaeda for selling us gems?

you're mad at people willing to use unsafe ships *at their own risk* to bring you cheaper stuff?

as to oil, i'm not sure what you're mad at.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 05/04/2004 - 19:44 | [reply](#)

Gems Correction

Prices were driven lower ultimately, buy high sell low, because the Al Queda operatives were trading heavily at non-market driven prices. They wanted liquidity and cash fast. The market was distorted.

I am not mad at any of the above. These are examples of market distortion. Granted they are not good things. They are reasons for considering limited oversight. If Walmart begins to rape and pillage, I might get mad. If a rusty oil tanker breaks apart and sinks next to my favorite beach, I might get mad. I am already mad at Al Quaeda for attempting to blow us all up. As to OPEC, I have a question.

by a reader on Mon, 05/10/2004 - 14:12 | [reply](#)
