

Wish You'd Stop Bein' So Good to Me, Cap'n

Kevin Carson

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You may be familiar with Murray Rothbard's article "Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature." Hans-Hermann Hoppe, beloved eminence grise at *LewRockwell.com*, takes things a step further and makes belief in human inequality the defining characteristic of right-libertarianism ("A Realistic Libertarianism," Sept. 30). This isn't just a hill he's willing to die on, but a hill on which he's willing to make his own one-man reenactment of Pickett's Charge.

The Left... is convinced of the fundamental *equality* of man, that all men are "created equal." It does not deny the patently obvious, of course: that there are environmental and physiological differences, i.e., that some people live in the mountains and others on the seaside, or that some men are tall and others short, some white and others black, some male and others female, etc.. But the Left does deny the existence of *mental* differences or, insofar as these are too apparent to be entirely denied, it tries to explain them away as "accidental."...

In fact the Left (or at least most members of it) does *not* deny that there are differences in individual ability and intellect. But never mind that. Hoppe isn't satisfied to stop there:

...[The right libertarian] realistically notices that libertarianism, as an intellectual system, was first developed and furthest elaborated in the Western world, by white males, in white male dominated societies. That it is in white, heterosexual male dominated societies, where adherence to libertarian principles is the greatest and the deviations from them the least severe (as indicated by comparatively less evil and extortionist State policies). That it is white heterosexual men, who have demonstrated the greatest ingenuity, industry, and economic prowess. And that it is societies dominated by white heterosexual males, and in particular by the most successful among them, which have produced and accumulated the greatest amount of capital goods and achieved the highest average living standards.

Some people might see an internal contradiction between Hoppe's repeated use of the term "dominated" to describe the role of certain privileged segments of society, and the idea that "libertarian" ideas were formulated by societies based on domination.

But obviously Hoppe does not, since he makes little effort to hide his salivation at the prospect that his avowedly principled belief in self-ownership, non-aggression and rules of initial acquisition will have the effect — just coincidentally, of course — of perpetuating the *domination* of these same white heterosexual males. So the primary beneficiaries of the ideas of liberty that straight white men invented will be those same straight white men.

Hoppe is fond of arguing that every single bit of naturally scarce property should be assigned to “some specified individual.” From there, in a typical restatement of his stock argument, he goes on to assume the universal appropriation of all land within a country. And with all land in the entire country, including roads, under individual ownership, it follows that nobody can enter the country or travel along any stretch of road without the permission of some private landowner or landowners. This, at one stroke, solves the “problem” of immigration, since — although national borders as such do not exist — no one but an invited employee or *bracero* can enter a universally appropriated America without trespassing on somebody’s land. It also solves the gay rights “problem” since, the country being composed overwhelmingly of God-fearing Christian folk like Hoppe himself, nobody will want “those people” on their property. If you find the libertarianism of Thomas Paine and William Godwin hard to stomach, through the miracle of universal appropriation you (assuming you’re a straight white propertied male) can make your own “free” neo-feudal society in the image of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Maybe everybody else who’s not straight, white or male will benefit from having those smart straight white men managing them for their own good.

Hoppe’s ideas of universal appropriation don’t seem to hold up so well, though, at least from the perspective of someone without Herr Doktor Professor Hoppe’s Mount Rushmore-sized brain. Even among right-libertarians, the usual standard of legitimacy in private appropriation of land is that of John Locke and Murray Rothbard: actual occupancy and use. A piece of land that is undeveloped and unaltered is, by definition, unowned. And the vast majority of land in the United States, as no less a libertarian than Albert Jay Nock noted, is vacant and unimproved. The only way — now and in the foreseeable future — that land could ever be universally appropriated is through what Franz Oppenheimer called “political appropriation” and Nock called “law-made property.” This is the same thing that Rothbard — a name you’d think would carry some weight with Hoppe — called engrossment: the enclosure of land not yet occupied or developed, in order to collect tribute from its rightful owners, the first people to occupy it and put it to use.

Leaving aside Hoppe’s views on the universal appropriation of land and exclusion therefrom of “undesirables,” he also neglects the fact that the benevolent, naturally libertarian white men in the “civilized” West spent a few centuries robbing, pillaging and enslaving the non-European parts of the world that it colonized, before they decided to share the blessings of liberty with them. In the process of doing so, they also destroyed an awful lot of preexisting civilization and gutted a lot of civil society — and wealth — there.

Jawaharlal Nehru argued with some plausibility that Bengal was the poorest part of India because that was its first site of infection by the disease of British colonialism, via Warren Hastings. The British systematically stamped out the Indian textile industry as a competitor with Manchester, and also (starting with Hastings’ Permanent Settlement) robbed most of the population of their property in land and turned local elites into wealth extraction conduits for Empire.

And when these good-hearted white Western males they finally did get around to sharing these nifty new ideas of liberty with the people of color they ruled, they kept all the stuff they’d

looted in the meantime — as a reward, I suppose, for their selflessness in inventing liberty for the good of all those brown and black people who would otherwise never have heard of it.

It almost makes you wonder, though, if there wasn't some other, less costly way those unfortunate people of color might have acquired ideas of liberty.

Speaking of which, I almost forgot David Graeber's account of consensus-based decision-making as an almost universal phenomenon throughout history, as opposed to Hoppe's idea of "human rights" and "democracy" being some unique creation of the White Male Canon that required a Manhattan Project-level of effort and genius to come up with. Western conservatives (of whom Hoppe is one) typically see human liberty and self-government as the kind of advance ideas that only white males in places like Periclean Athens or Philadelphia ca. 1787 could come up with. On this assumption, Graeber comments:

Of course it's the peculiar bias of Western historiography that this is the only sort of democracy that is seen to count as "democracy" at all. We are usually told that democracy originated in ancient Athens — like science, or philosophy, it was a Greek invention. It's never entirely clear what this is supposed to mean. Are we supposed to believe that before the Athenians, it never really occurred to anyone, anywhere, to gather all the members of their community in order to make joint decisions in a way that gave everyone equal say? That would be ridiculous. Clearly there have been plenty of egalitarian societies in history — many far more egalitarian than Athens, many that must have existed before 500 BCE — and obviously, they must have had some kind of procedure for coming to decisions for matters of collective importance. Yet somehow, it is always assumed that these procedures, whatever they might have been, could not have been, properly speaking, "democratic."

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The real reason for the unwillingness of most scholars to see a Sulawesi or Tallensi village council as "democratic" — well, aside from simple racism, the reluctance to admit anyone Westerners slaughtered with such relative impunity were quite on the level as Pericles — is that they do not vote. Now, admittedly, this is an interesting fact. Why not? If we accept the idea that a show of hands, or having everyone who supports a proposition stand on one side of the plaza and everyone against stand on the other, are not really such incredibly sophisticated ideas that they never would have occurred to anyone until some ancient genius "invented" them, then why are they so rarely employed? Again, we seem to have an example of explicit rejection. Over and over, across the world, from Australia to Siberia, egalitarian communities have preferred some variation on consensus process. Why?

The explanation I would propose is this: it is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it. Consensus decision-making is typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision—either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making. If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along

with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose. Voting would be the most likely means to guarantee humiliations, resentments, hatreds, in the end, the destruction of communities. What is seen as an elaborate and difficult process of finding consensus is, in fact, a long process of making sure no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored.

* * *

“We” — whether as “the West” (whatever that means), as the “modern world,” or anything else — are not really as special as we like to think we are; ...we’re not the only people ever to have practiced democracy; ...in fact, rather than disseminating democracy around the world, “Western” governments have been spending at least as much time inserting themselves into the lives of people who have been practicing democracy for thousands of years, and in one way or another, telling them to cut it out.

Those poor brown folks also arguably had more respect for the idea of “property” than their white instructors, when you consider that the white men selflessly extending the benefits of Western civilization to the rest of the world had already robbed the great majority of their own domestic population of their property (e.g. the Enclosures in England) before they decided that property rights were sacred. And that they went on to loot most of the property of the people in the Third World before they finally adjudged the locals as capable of enjoying the blessings of liberty without white supervision. But by that point, again, the commandment “Thou shalt respect property rights — starting *NOW!*” wasn’t retroactive — it didn’t apply to the enormous mass of wealth those white men and their ancestors had already looted, and continued to sit on. So the primary effect of those Western ideas about “property rights” was to protect the property rights of landed elites and transnational corporations who retained possession of all the land and mineral resources that previous generations of libertarian Western white men had looted for them under colonialism.

So as it turns out, ordinary people throughout the world had already somehow managed to find ways of dealing with each other as equals and settling their differences peacefully without white Western males thinking up libertarianism for them, and when white Western males finally came around with their new and improved idea of Capital-L Liberty they killed, enslaved or robbed most of the human race as compensation for their benevolence.

There’s a great line in *Cool Hand Luke* that applies here. One of the guards at the prison farm tells Luke that the clanking of the irons he’s wearing will “remind you of what I’ve been telling you — for your own good.” And Luke responds: “Wish you’d stop bein’ so good to me, Cap’n.”

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