

Excerpts From a Letter to a Friend Apropos Human Rights

Laurance Labadie

1949

Apropos your series of articles on Human Rights:

There was a University of Chicago “professor” who wrote a book entitled *Might is Right*, under the pseudonym of “Ragnar Redbeard.” In it he maintained that life is essentially a battle in which “to the victor belonged the spoils,” and claimed that the truth of this fundamental warfare is disguised by various pretenses, ruses, and moral codes, originated and propagated by the weak who couldn’t stand up to the stern realities and who expected to soften-up their adversaries. He elaborated his contentions by citing history, politics, business, religion, etc., in fact all the activities of humans (and animals?). The book is rather uncomfortably convincing, though I think the author was terribly unscientific and unreasonable in justifying what seems a pretty sorry scheme of things.

It does not seem to require much acumen to realize that the power of might is the most potent ingredient regarding human conduct, and over-rides all “rights,” and until mankind decides to forego the use of might it will naturally be the deciding determinant. Stirner said, I would rather have a handful of might than a bagful of right,” or words to that effect. Anyhow, that is the only language that governments, as such, understand.

“Rights” could hardly have preceded government in some form, as you surmise. Your “rights” are postulated as being *against* something, and the only thing anyone could be against was some hindrance to living, viz., government. “Rights,” therefore, are usually considered as limitations on government (such as the Magna Charta and the American Bill of Rights, etc.). That governments had power, and could often over-ride “rights,” made it appear that the “rights” were *granted* by governments. Naturally, it wasn’t long before the theory arose that governments themselves were protectors of human “rights.” In fact, this is the kind of baloney taught in all “state-supported” schools, everywhere and at all times; and of course religious schools and churches teach that God grants all “rights.”

Whether warfare, even though disguised, was and is a normal mode of human activity, it has been fairly well established that the origin of government was a band of robbers who in conquest set themselves up as rulers over the people they had plundered and subjugated. As it was to no advantage to have these slaves scramble among themselves, the tyrants “maintained law and order” among them, and in time even directed them in “public works,” such as building roads,

making armor, battleships, etc. originally of course for purposes of further plunder and conquest. As time went on, the slaves actually believed they couldn't do without their masters, until today we see them concernedly run to the polls to elect new ones every few years.

These stupid human animals can become inured to almost anything, and only occasionally rebel, and demand "rights" for themselves, against their masters. They never dream of abolishing mastership itself. The most energetic advocates of "rights" are, naturally, authoritarian socialists, communists, fascists, nationalists, 100% Americans and what have you, and other such lack-wits ad nauseam, who want to set up a supreme master in the State which will take care of them and direct them in all things.

Prior to government, there could not have been any concept of "rights" whatever. Men breathed, ate, hunted, propagated, etc., because it was the natural thing to do. No one could even imagine that he did so because he had the "right" to do so. The American Indian, for example, lived in this clime not because he thought he had a "right" to use the earth. "Rights," in land, originated or rather were brought here from Europe where property in land was "right." By the way, I think your obsession about "rights" is a hangover from your ardent single-tax days.

Altho it is improbable, "rights" may have originated by men agreeing to forego the use of might, to make recourse to consultation, compromise, and agreement as the most economical method of getting by in the world. And natural selection might indicate that those who resorted to this method, rather than settling differences by warfare, in the long run survived. This was Kropotkin's and, I think, Herbert Spencer's interpretation. However, mutual agreements put into the form of contracts are of different origin and nature than so-called "rights." They came into existence among *equals*.

At any rate, the stupid belief that "rights" originated from either God or the State is pure superstition, promulgated by preachers and politicians to promote their game of getting a living without work and to enhance their "take."

The plain fact of the matter, it seems to me, is that, like many other transcendental, teleological, and social "truths," all theories of "rights" are merely human inventions, used by one party or another in order to enhance, as they think, their ability in getting along in the world. "Ethics" is another branch of the same tree.

The foregoing is, at least, a hasty outline of my convictions anent the doctrine of "Rights." The very advocacy of "rights" is itself a hostile attitude and I doubt whether a peaceable and gregarious society can be built on such a premise.

A more useful alternative to whatever you might write on the subject (which in any event would only be a rationalizing of your own desires) would be to discard all hallucinations about "rights" and propose acting as one's inclinations direct—in short, that "instinct" is the safest guide. Of course this will demand considerable courage from the individuals in our modern goose-stepping snivelization, and will not meet acceptance by the proponents of the "natural depravity" or "original sin" theory. Another and perhaps better alternative would be to gauge all human action according to consequences. This might involve a "transvaluation of values."

To summarize briefly, I contend that there is no such animal as "natural rights" and that all you might say about governments, constitutions, or edicts of God (ten commandments, etc.) would be mostly hogwash for the gullible. No person has any "right" to do anything, unless he has the *power* to do it, or because his neighbors do not prevent him from doing it. Or, if it be claimed that he *does* have "rights," I maintain that they are not of much value if the State or "Society" takes it in hand to veto them.

The very tendency of thinking in terms of “rights” usually results in the smug assertion of them, and then waiting until politicians embody them in laws before they can be acted upon. Why not try to get people out of the clouds in their thinking about what they may, should, or can do. Direct action is what is needed. Tell people what to *do*, and don’t worry about their “right” to do it, like some pettifogging lawyer.

Humans are neither good nor bad, but egoistic. I personally believe they are rather congenial cusses, but they are so astoundingly stupid and have little confidence in their neighbors. That is why demagogues have such an easy time of it playing on their hopes and, mainly, fears, if they would only have sense enough to treat each other fairly, or at least leave each other alone, there should be no inordinate amount of trouble in the world. They would certainly have to do away with that relic of a warlike age, the State, that messes up all their activities. And yet, when I look around me and see so many of the dubs even more ignorant than myself, I can have but little hope for the human race.

So, my advice to you is to investigate human well-being *directly*, as you have been doing, rather than indulge in a lot of circumlocution and useless speculation about “rights.” The latter can safely be left to metaphysicians and theologians.

Cordially,

Laurance Labadie

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Laurance Labadie
Excerpts From a Letter to a Friend Apropos Human Rights
1949

Retrieved 10/25/2021 from
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/labadie/LabadieEssays.pdf
From a carbon copy of the typed original, signed and dated April 19, 1949. Reprinted in
Laurance LaBadie: Selected Essays (Libertarian BroadSides), James J. Martin, ed., Ralph Myles
Publisher, Inc., 1978.

theanarchistlibrary.org