

**A SHORT HISTORY OF MAN:
PROGRESS AND DECLINE**
(HANS-HERMANN HOPPE)

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Hans-Hermann Hoppe!, they cried. Hans-Hermann Hoppe! They told me that if I read his books, it would change my life. This is not the first time I have heard that promise; it has been made to me of many books, from Frédéric Bastiat's *The Law* to Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. The promise has always failed me, but each fresh tomorrow brings the possibility that next time, it will not. Thus, I read this book, which aspires to give the history of man in one hundred and fifty pages, as an introduction to Hoppe's thought. It was interesting enough, but I have gone away sad, for that looked-for tomorrow is not today.

Oh, as far as I can tell, I largely agree politically with Hoppe, who is alive and still writing, though he seems to have written less than I would have thought, given how often he is mentioned among circles on the Right. A professor at UNLV, he has been intermittently persecuted for speaking his opinionated mind, among other things for making the unexceptional and obvious point (also made by Niall Ferguson) that homosexuals have less investment in society than, and different perspectives from, normal people. He is particularly known for attacking democracy as inferior to monarchy on economic (and therefore, to him, moral) grounds, a claim I first read of in George Hawley's fantastic *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, and while he discusses that claim in this book, he has written another whole book on it, which I am planning to read. My main reservation about Hoppe, which could be overcome, is that a strong smell of ideologue rises from everything Hoppe writes in this short collection of three essays.

I have often noticed ideology is a besetting sin of the hardcore libertarians. And hardcore libertarian is what Hoppe is. The Mises Institute published this book, and Lew Rockwell wrote the Foreword. Just in case we're unclear, the subtitle is "An Austro-Libertarian Reconstruction." Very frequently, Hoppe acknowledges his tremendous debt to Ludwig von Mises or to Murray Rothbard (or both), and when he departs from their orthodoxy, he bows his head to them first, as heroes leaving the Last Redoubt of Men in William Hope Hodgson's classic tale of the far

future, *The Night Land*, submitted themselves to the Monstruwacans, to be cleansed before leaving their protection and confronting the horrors beyond. All this is, in case we miss it, outlined with crystalline, lime-lit specificity up front in the Introduction, where Hoppe summarizes, “What distinguishes my studies is the fact that they explain and interpret the history of man from the conceptual vantage point of Austro-Libertarianism: with the background knowledge of praxeology (economics) and of libertarianism (ethics).” For the former, it is Mises; for the latter, it is Rothbard.

I have nothing against Mises or Rothbard. Frankly, I know little about them. Theirs are also on the list of books that I am told will change my life; I have copies already of *Human Action* and *Ethics of Liberty*, though so far they gather dust. I’m just always a little, or a lot, wary when informed that The Truth has been discovered by This Specific Modern Man, and I should sit still, open my mind, and get ready to receive. Exacerbating my mistrust, like all libertarians, Hoppe’s primary frame of viewing human society is economic; gain and exchange, never transcendence, virtue, or valor. Unlike Phlebas the Phoenician, Hoppe does not forget the profit and the loss. In fact, so far as I have read, that’s most all he ever thinks about.

This book is exactly what it claims to be, a “short history of man.” It is divided into three chapters: “On the Origin of Private Property and the Family”; “From the Malthusian Trap to the Industrial Revolution”; and “From Aristocracy to Monarchy to Democracy.” In the first chapter, like Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens*, Hoppe is much exercised by the so-called Cognitive Revolution, wherein *homo sapiens*, already *homo sapiens*, apparently suddenly developed the capacity for abstract thought and speech. Fair enough, although my confidence was undermined by errors, such as Hoppe telling us incorrectly that the Flores Island “hobbits,” genetically identified as *homo floresiensis*, are *homo erectus*. He also relies heavily on Luigi Cavalli-Sforza’s claims about the movements of humans in pre-history, which as David Reich has recently shown, have been made obsolete by genetic research. That said, these are not central items, and Hoppe has worthwhile points to make about hunter-gatherer societies. His focus, as befits his frame, is property. He observes that hunter-gatherers were probably quite egalitarian, in terms of sharing property, but that doesn’t mean that there was much individual autonomy. To

a modern leftist, those two things go hand-in-hand, but there is no reason they should, and in fact communitarianism, egalitarian or not, implies lack of individual autonomy, a point I intend to expand upon in a separate analysis.

Quickly Hoppe reaches his core point, which is that hunter-gatherers were necessarily parasites, mere consumers, not producers. The necessary result was small populations, kept low by warfare and migration. While within a group, of no more than around one hundred and fifty people, cooperation was possible based on division of labor, no cooperation between groups was possible, since cooperation is only possible if both groups are producers with something to trade (though Hoppe ignores the trade in women, common in many primitive societies). Even intra-group cooperation was limited by the law of diminishing returns—exemplified here by the Malthusian Trap, that eventually more inputs to labor, in the form of more people, diminish per capita return. So far, a fairly ordinary history, although Hoppe shows subtle notes of the obsession with the genetics of intelligence that later become more prominent. In any case, driven by these spurs and limitations, and reacting to changing climactic conditions, humanity spread around the globe.

The big change was the Agricultural Revolution, what Hoppe calls the Neolithic Revolution. This, no surprise, he views through the lens of who was deemed to own “ground land” when in human history, asserting that the key step in farming was the ownership of land, a change from the former mere parasitism of humans. Similarly, with animals. This alleviated the effects of diminishing returns to labor and allowed more people to exist. (I suspect that this analysis is meant as a response to other analyses, presumably Marxist ones, but I don’t know enough about it to say, and Hoppe does not say either.)

We then turn to social structure. According to Hoppe, the family had never existed before the reduction of land to ownership, because for hunter-gatherers, as he puts it, both the benefits and costs of additional offspring were socialized. Thus, everybody had “group marriage,” like a permanent, smellier version of a 1970s key party. When agriculture arrived, though, it made sense for individuals to capture the benefits of more offspring (and pay the costs), since, no longer being mere parasites, they could expect a return on investment in creating more people. Hoppe concludes that this new social organization was economically

superior, encouraging production and preventing free-riding, and so it spread, displacing the hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Now, this claim that the family is of recent origin is highly controversial. It's obviously nearly impossible to get archaeological information on what the social arrangements of hunter-gatherers were, and modern advocates of free love have for quite a long time been happy to believe laughable things about primitive societies if they fit preconceived notions (most famously in the case of Margaret Mead, hoodwinked by the Samoans). Thus, you would think that Hoppe would offer strong evidence for this thesis, to reinforce his analysis. Nope. We are instead referred, extensively, to mainly one source—Friedrich Engels, writing in 1884. The mind boggles. In fairness, Hoppe buttresses Engels with one other source—some guy named Lewis H. Morgan, writing in 1871. Hoppe even notes Engels's conflict of interest, that he eagerly wanted to promote free love, but still buys what he's selling, without saying why, or adverting to the century and a half that has passed since. OK, then. And that's the end of the chapter.

In the next chapter, Hoppe turns to the creation of the modern world, something on which it is easier to deliver concrete evidence. He begins with a reiteration and expansion of his earlier discussion of the Malthusian Trap, citing among others Gregory Clark for the data showing that only in the Industrial Revolution did (part of) humanity escape. The causes of this, the Great Divergence, are hotly debated, but Hoppe does not address various theories, merely noting that “the standard answer among economists,” by which he means Mises and Rothbard, is that private property rights had developed by the late eighteenth century enough to permit this takeoff. With due apologies to his mentors, Hoppe disagrees.

The core of his disagreement, that Mises and Rothbard are factually wrong, is pretty obviously correct. Property rights were, in most of Western Europe and particularly in England, quite firmly established by around A.D. 1200, or earlier—better, Hoppe claims, that today, which is probably true, though more variation existed in earlier times. (Films like *Braveheart* and many others have given the average person a grossly false idea of the amount of chaos and lack of rule of law in European medieval times. It's as if people in A.D. 2400 used *Saving Private Ryan*

to judge the daily condition of Europe since 1800.) Certainly, private property is necessary to the takeoff, but not sufficient.

Hoppe's explanation is economic, of course, but with a gloss of science. It is that eventually some people got smarter, because "it takes time to breed intelligence," and only then could they kick-start the Industrial Revolution. What led to the Industrial Revolution was technology invention, by intelligent people, and also that technology gave something for people to invest surpluses in, namely expansion. No more detail is offered; Hoppe appears to think that intelligence self-evidently self-executes awesomeness. As to the origin of this purported increase in intelligence in some human populations, Hoppe offers a potted and unoriginal explanation, combining Toynbee's observations that too-easy or too-hard climates produce little forward movement for humanity, with offerings from controversial modern scientists (notably Richard Lynn) who claim to find gradients in IQ, lowering from north to south. His conclusion is that as a result of challenge-and-response some people, most of all Europeans, became smarter, and thereby, through some inevitable mechanism, escaped the Malthusian Trap.

As I have said elsewhere, questions of intelligence across human populations don't exercise me; I think that any society simply has to work with the different types of people that make up that society, or other societies. But Hoppe's reasoning is not remotely convincing. Narrowly focusing on Europe, there is exactly zero evidence that in earlier times Europeans were less intelligent than now, or than in 1750, and much reason to believe the contrary. Nor could there be evidence—people like Lynn purport to offer evidence about modern populations, but neither Stanford nor Binet was wandering around Europe in the Middle Ages. Moreover, the idea that somehow people reached a step-function tipping point of intelligence in 1750 doesn't make any sense. Why a step-function? If intelligence is normally distributed, and increasing over time, shouldn't invention increase linearly over time? None of this makes any sense, really. I'm willing to believe that more intelligence, all other things being equal, leads to more progress over time, but Hoppe jumps from that to a set of totally unsupported premises and conclusions.

But Hoppe's point in all this is not just history; it is to attack the institution of the State. He and Albert Jay Nock would get along well.

(No doubt Hoppe has a tentacled voodoo doll in his office, labeled “The State,” which he sticks with pins when he’s bored.) His claim is that in a pre-Malthusian society, the state is merely a type of pest, self-limiting since there is only so much the host of a parasite can take. But in a post-Malthusian society, the state has no natural limit, for if per capita output keeps going up, the state can “continuously grow without lowering the per capita income and reducing the population number,” thereby becoming “a permanent drag on the economy and per capita incomes.” Worse, the post-Malthusian state allows the stupid people to breed by removing the tie between getting money and intelligence, creating dysgenics, rather than Hoppe’s desired eugenics, and so the “population stock becomes increasingly worse.”

Finally, in the third chapter, we get the meat of Hoppe’s political claims, why democracy is a terrible system and what we should install instead. I can certainly get one hundred percent behind democracy being terrible. On the other hand, the reader’s confidence in Hoppe’s analysis is eroded in the first paragraph, when we are instructed that all human conflicts result from only one cause, the “scarcity of goods.” This is self-evidently false; Hoppe ignores that man is not *homo economicus*. Did Achilles lack goods? Hoppe then declaims that the modern state, arbiter of all things and judge in its own cause, is a contradiction, and only an insane person would submit to it, in the same way only an insane person would agree that someone with whom he has a conflict should assume all power over him. This suggests that Hoppe adheres to some type of contractual theory of the origin of the state. But that’s not right; it’s much more organic than that, in Hoppe’s narration.

In Hoppe’s reconstruction, the natural human default is a system where what each person owns is clear and agreed-upon. If that were possible, permanent total peace and harmony would automatically result. Of course, it’s not possible, since disputes always arise about who own what. To settle these disputes, someone has to decide somehow—that is, in Hoppe’s words, someone has to discover the law, a valid exercise, as opposed to make new law, an inherently illegitimate exercise. In Hoppe’s telling, the progression from earlier forms of government to the modern liberal democratic state (we will ignore here whether the modern Western state is actually either liberal or democratic) is a story of decay, not progress. Hoppe even inverts the claim, most forcefully made

by Steven Pinker, that progress is shown by us being richer. Rather, he says that we would be far richer if we had stayed with an earlier system, namely mixed government consisting of an aristocracy combined with elective monarchy. Such a system is best at discovering the law in a way that preserves everyone's property.

Hoppe observes that to decide disputes outside of a government framework, people most often turn to other people (they could turn to violence, and sometimes do, but that's expensive). Not just random ones, though—to those with “intellectual ability and character,” whose decisions are more likely to be sound and more likely to be respected by everyone. Such people are the “natural aristocracy.” “Due to superior achievements of wealth, wisdom, bravery, or a combination thereof, some individuals come to possess more authority than others and their opinion and judgment command widespread respect.” Such authority tends to accumulate in families, “because of selective mating and the laws of civil and genetic inheritance.” As a result, “It is the leaders of the noble families who generally act as judges and peacemakers, often free of charge, out of a sense of civic duty. In fact, this phenomenon can still be observed today, in every small community.”

Critically, these decision-makers, given authority to decide disputes, are still under the laws like everyone else. They can “only apply law, not make it.” This distinguishes them from the state. For more details, Hoppe refers us to another book of his, *Democracy: The God That Failed*. In essence, though, he recommends that society be structured as an idealized version of early medieval Western Europe, where (an elected and removable) king and aristocracy ruled jointly, unable to tax without consent and unable to make new law, which was a contradiction in terms. It's not that Hoppe says this system was perfect; it was merely “a natural order,” unlike modern orders. Most importantly, the king maximized the value of the society, in the interests of benefiting himself in the long-term (as well as, potentially, his heirs). That is, in Hoppe's terms, he had a “time preference” that weights the future.

This system went to hell, though, when “feudal and then constitutional kings” replaced the elective kings. These new kings made new law, arrogated to themselves the unilateral ability to tax, and in effect turned all private property into their own property. Moreover, the kings increased violence, since in the past the costs of violence were generally

borne by those who chose to engage in it, whereas the kings could externalize the costs onto “tax-payers and draftees.” And how did the kings manage to put themselves in this position, when other men of power in the society would naturally resist? The king enlisted the benighted masses; he “aligned himself with the ‘people’ or the ‘common man.’” What he offered them was appeals to envy, freedom from contractual obligations, and an improved economic position that they did not earn. At the same time, he defanged the aristocrats by offering them baubles in the form of court positions (which seems like a trade they would not accept), and flattered intellectuals, so they would “produce the necessary ideological support for the king’s position as absolute ruler.” Such support took the form of falsely claiming the past was bad and imagining that the people had agreed to the king seizing property and making new laws. Here, as throughout the book, Hoppe is pithily nasty. “The demand for intellectual services is typically low, and intellectuals, almost congenitally, suffer from a greatly inflated self-image and hence are always prone to and become easily avid promoters of envy.”

Eventually absolute monarchy mutated into constitutional monarchy, which is even worse, since at least under an absolute monarchy some memory of the past system is retained, and the king has an incentive to maximize long-term societal value, but under a constitutional monarchy, it is forgotten, and the mass of people delusively believe that they have more freedom than under an absolute monarchy, when in practice they have far less. And, in turn, we were subjected to “an even greater folly,” democracy. The egalitarian sentiments the kings had encouraged were turned against them. Democracy, though, is not a return to the natural law, but the creation of a system in which, in theory, every person can aspire to be an absolute monarch, seizing the property of others and making new law to his own benefit, enforcing his will with the power of the State. So-called public officials, that is, agents of the government, are the recipients of this power. “Everyone can participate in theft and live off stolen loot if only he becomes a public official.” Rather than a natural aristocracy, those in power are universally “morally uninhibited demagogues,” supported by plutocrats who use the mechanisms of the state to enrich themselves by theft and thereby control the demagogues. This leads directly to evil outcomes, and it also means that all of society becomes politicized, because people can aspire to live by handouts and

favorable redistribution, whereas under aristocracy the vast majority of people got what they got from their own “value-productive efforts.” Such redistribution is not only from the rich to the poor, it is just as, or more, often from the poor to the rich, since “After all, the rich are characteristically bright and industrious, and the poor typically dull, lazy or both. It is not very likely that dullards, even if they make up a majority, will systematically outsmart and enrich themselves at the expense of a minority of bright and energetic individuals.”

The result is that democracy is a value-destroying system, where unproductive behavior is encouraged and productive behavior discouraged. And not only in production; war is also more likely and more destructive (echoing Carl Schmitt’s point that when wars are conceived of as for human rights, they are far more brutal). Moreover, the State then debases the money supply (it would not be a book of Austrian economics without a plug for gold). The end result is an ever-growing and ever-more-exploitative state, pushing war and offering circuses, until an inevitable economic crisis and the state’s collapse. By this Hoppe explicitly means not just states in general, but the United States, which no longer protects life and property of its citizens, instead through its ruling class of politicians and plutocrats engaging in exploitation, oppression, and global war. With any luck, Hoppe says, the current system, globally, will be replaced with government along his preferred lines, perhaps along the lines of Swiss cantons or the Hanseatic League.

This is dubious history but pretty good abstract analytics. I can get behind, for example, that we would probably all be richer under a restrained monarchy, not just in that we could keep more of our property, and use it to multiply our property, but that science and technology would advance more quickly (a double-edged sword, to be sure). And certainly a natural aristocracy is exactly that. But Hoppe, at least in this book, offers a very narrow version of history. He does not explain the political development of states east of the Elbe, much less Ancient Egypt, or Ancient Greece, or Rome or other empires of the classical era (say, the Sassanids), and nothing is said about government in Asia or the Americas. How does the Pax Romana fit into Hoppe’s analysis, I’d like to know?

In fact, Hoppe doesn’t even begin to attempt the kind of historical analysis that others, such as Francis Fukuyama, have offered on the

development of political systems. I suspect Hoppe's narrow focus on Europe is because he wants to ascribe the success or failure of societies to mechanical effects, easy to delineate and possible to quantify. Parsing history is messy, because history is messy. That would detract from Hoppe's attempt to instruct us that he has found the formula for human success, and it is paint-by-numbers, if only we will listen.

But quantification is exactly not what human nature, and therefore human action, is subject to. I think that the exact same limited monarchical system that works ideally in one culture would be a disaster in another. Many important variables affect culture, obviously, not only the history of a place, but the religion, the climate, the geography, and much, much more. Hoppe, like all ideologues, claims to have found the universally applicable perfect system, and even aside from any errors in his analysis, that is extremely unlikely.

I suspect I will be told I should give Hoppe more of a chance; that is the usual response from acolytes of ideologues when one attacks the Leader. I did watch a lengthy video of him. It was boring. On the other hand, maybe his book on democracy has more meat on the bones, and answers some of my questions. So, as I say, that's up on the reading list, for the simple reason that whatever the details, I agree with Hoppe that democracy as practiced in the modern world is both stupid and doomed.