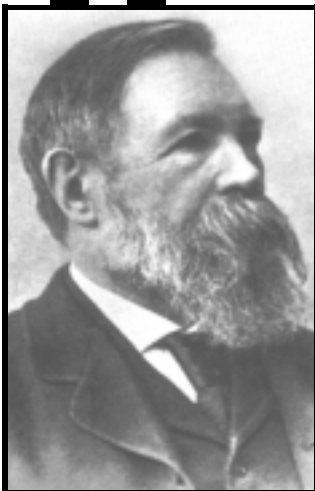
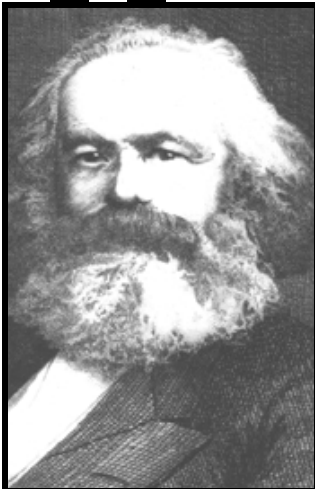


⚡

THE CLASS STRUGGLE IS NOT OVER: WHY LIBERTARIANS SHOULD READ MARX AND ENGELS



CHRISTIAN MICHEL



⚡

Philosophical Notes No. 59

⚡

ISSN 0267-7091 ISBN 1 85637 497 1

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

©2000: Libertarian Alliance; Christian Michel.

This piece was first made available at the Liberalia website (www.liberalia.com), which is run by Christian Michel and which contains a variety of libertarian writings, by him and by others.

Christian Michel was born in Paris 57 years ago. After dropping out of the Sorbonne University, he did odd jobs in the film and advertising industries, before entering real life as a telex operator at an American stockbroking firm. Working his way up the corporate ladder, he eventually became finance director of a public company in Geneva. In 1986, he bought his employer's small portfolio management unit. It grew into one of the largest trust and corporate services companies, with twelve offices throughout Europe. Having sold the business to his partners, Christian Michel moved to London in June 2000. He is the author of "La Liberté, deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle", published by the Institut Economique de Paris, 1986, and numerous articles and conference papers (for some of which see the Liberalia website).

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

Libertarian Alliance

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

THE CLASS STRUGGLE IS NOT OVER: WHY LIBERTARIANS SHOULD READ MARX AND ENGELS

CHRISTIAN MICHEL

What follows is the edited and annotated text of a paper presented at the European Libertarian Seminar, Copenhagen, 28 March 1998.

The Swiss author Denis de Rougemont¹ used to wonder how come it was that he met so many people who had read Marx, but never one who was reading Marx. Well, I am presently *reading* Marx, which I had really never done before, and I am finding the exercise very stimulating.

Studying Marx may sound like a total waste of time. Has history not proven his ideas to be fatally wrong, if not plainly lethal? At the same time, I profess to be a libertarian, so what can I possibly gain by reading an apology of “collective ownership of the means of production” and “dictatorship of the proletariat”?

My interest in Marx finds its source in an article by Hans-Hermann Hoppe, which was published in a French review two years ago.² Since then, I have worked my way through quite a few books and articles. The purpose of my talk today is to tell you why I believe Marx’s analysis of history is fundamentally correct, except for one point — a fairly crucial one, of course, which I will explain — and why Marxism is a tool which libertarians can find extremely useful in making people understand the domination they are subjected to in our social-democratic societies.

The core of Marx’s philosophy of history, as you all know, is *class struggle*. The opening sentence of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*³ reads: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. Marx co-authored the *Manifesto* with his friend and supporter Friedrich Engels, but the manner of beginning a book with this opening salvo is definitely Marx’s; he is the one, not Engels, who has the requisite boldness. Marx is a romantic creator, in a league up there with Victor Hugo and Richard Wagner, one who dares to be heroic. No intellectual today seems to me capable of conceiving a *grand* vision.

Marx is also a moralist. To him, the history of humanity cannot be value-free, it is not the history of rocks and insects and birds, it is rather a cosmic war between Good and Evil, and Marx tells us clearly who are the perennial villains and who are the heroes. Violence in the world has a meaning and it is leading us somewhere. History has a direction.

Let me give you my understanding of Marx’s *class struggle*.

THE STATE

Having declared in the opening sentence of the *Manifesto* that all history is the history of class struggle, Marx adds immediately in a footnote “of *written* history”.

For prior to the invention of writing, societies were nomadic, organised in tribes, with each tribe made up of less

than a hundred individuals. There was scarcely any division of labour, other than sexual. The tribe would designate a chief, and modern ethnology tells us the chief had very little power. His main function was to defuse any conflict among tribesmen, not as a judge (he had no power to judge), but more by using his charisma to talk people out of their quarrels. His authority would be limited to leading the hunt and, of course, the war. That is all. In his essay, *The Origin of Property, Family and the State*,⁴ Engels describes social life in these primitive tribes as something very much like “anarchy”.

I would like to add here that modern anthropology supports Engels’ analysis. Primitive societies did not know anything that resembles political power, let alone a state. They had no use for it. Pierre Clastres, in his fascinating book, *Society Against State*,⁵ notes that the only distinctive feature between “primitive” and “modern” societies is not agriculture, it is not sedentary life, it is the institution of a state. A modern society is a society that is subject to the power of a state. So called primitive societies were not.

In economic terms, nomadic tribes (which Engels calls *gens*) do not accumulate a lot of goods. The only capital they use is what people can carry on their backs or on the back of an animal. Not much. Thus, between tribes, violence is limited (there is not much to conquer and to loot), and war is considered more like a sport, a rough athletic competition. Note that war was a game played by *all* tribesmen. All able-bodied men went to war, when called for; there were no professionals.

How did the state come about? With the development of agriculture began a process of capital accumulation. In order to farm, one must first clear the land. Trees have to be uprooted, fields have to be irrigated, tilled and planted. Granaries have to be built to store grain for the year, pending the next harvest. All this preparation and construction may take many months, and it is hard work. So people started to think: “Why should *we* do it? When we go to war, we take prisoners, so let the prisoners do the hard work.” And so, says Engels, society experienced its first division into *classes*, between a class of masters and a class of slaves, between exploiters and exploited.

Of course, the society which has accumulated such capital becomes the envy and the target of its neighbours. War is no longer a sport: it can pay, and pay well, because if you conquer the enemy’s land which has already been cleared and irrigated, with a year or more of supplies in its storehouses, it saves you the investment and hard work of doing it yourself. So each society had to organise some sort of permanent defence against marauders and invaders. Each society took out of its surplus enough food to pay for a group of people who would have no other function than to protect, i.e., a professional army.

Now once the rulers had an armed force at their disposal, the temptation was there to use it permanently to against their own people, to consolidate the rulers' power. Thus, says Engels, there emerged a new institution, which would maintain "order" in society, and of course an order favourable to the dominant class.⁶ This institution is called "the state".

Let me quote directly from Engels:

In order to maintain this public power, contributions from the state citizens are necessary — taxes. These were completely unknown to gentile society [the so-called "primitives"]. We know more than enough about them today! With advancing civilisation, even taxes are not sufficient; the state draws drafts on the future, contracts loans, state debts. Our old Europe can tell a tale about these, too.⁷

[Engels was writing this in 1867. What would he have to say about our modern Europe, with states plundering a full 50% of all wealth created in society and running debts equivalent to two years of GNP!]

In possession of the public power and the right of taxation, the officials now present themselves as organs of society standing above society ... Representatives of a power which estranges them from society, they have to be given prestige by means of special decrees, which invest them with a peculiar sanctity and inviolability.

The state is therefore by no means a power imposed on society from without ... Rather, it is a product of society at a particular stage of development ...

The first point I wish to emphasise here with Marx and Engels is that the state is a human construct; it is not inherent to mankind, as the queen is to an ant colony or a beehive. Human societies existed historically without a state, and there is no reason why we could not organise ourselves again in the future without a state.

My second point is that, as Marx and Engels tell us, the state is the instrument of oppression used to keep in check the exploited masses. Without the state, mass exploitation would not be possible.

IDEOLOGY

Now, the dominant class amounts to only a fraction of the population, sometimes as low as 10 to 20%. Surely, 10% cannot exploit 90%. How is it therefore that this small minority manages to stay in power?

For controlling the state is not enough. Maintaining an army of professional warriors to keep in check citizens who very often do not have the right to bear arms is indeed a way of enforcing your power over society, but it is not a guarantee. An insurrection, a massive taking to the streets, a general strike, can overthrow any government, even supported by the military, as history has witnessed so many times. So the ruling class always used another means of wielding its power, *ideology*, and understanding how ideology works may be Marx's greatest contribution to the study of history.

Ideologies are the changing ideas, values, even feelings, through which individuals experience their society.⁸ Ideologies present the dominant ideas, the beliefs and values of the ruling class, as being the ideas of society as a whole. Thus individuals, because they think by using the concepts, the words and the references of others, are prevented from

grasping how society actually functions, to the extent that they cannot even suspect that they are exploited. Marxist thinkers, like Gramsci, Lukacs and Althusser, have expanded greatly on Marx's concept of ideology, and it goes further than Ayn Rand's *sanction of the victim*. For Marx, and especially for Gramsci, I would say ideology achieves the perfect crime. A perfect crime is not when the criminal remains unknown, it is one that nobody even suspects to be a crime, where death is declared purely accidental, and no one will look for a criminal. For Marx, the victims have nothing to consent to, they do not even see themselves as victims. Quite the reverse. They say: "the master is good, he feeds me every day, he does not beat me more often than I deserve to be beaten."

The production of ideology is the intellectuals' job, and up until recently, intellectuals were part of a clergy. You know the famous definition given by Marx of religion as being the "opium of the people."⁹ Religion was perceived as a sort of sedative of the mind. So even when people might have become aware of their oppression, there came the ruling class' second line of defence: "Yes, my friend, you are right, God placed you at the bottom of society, but it is for your own good, you will be all the happier in a later life"; "it is God's plan for society that there exist lords and servants ; sorry, old chap, you are one of the servants, but you wouldn't want to rebel against God's will, would you ?"

Armed with such powerful tools as the state police and ideology, the dominant class never gives up its power gracefully. Why would it? It seems it has the means to rule forever. Yet, history shows us that changes did take place. Marx identifies two such transformations in human history, from slavery to feudalism, and from feudalism to capitalism.

REVOLUTIONS

So what caused these momentous changes?

The answer is: technical innovations, which forced changes in the production process. Marx is often interpreted as a technological determinist on the basis of such isolated quotations as: "The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam-mill gives you society with the industrial capitalist."¹⁰ It is of course more complicated than that. But basically, what we can say is that the dominant class' power base is the control over certain commodities, over certain sources of wealth. But the dominant class cannot predict, let alone control, the emergence of a new technology. When this technology emerges, it may be in the hands of a group of people who are not members of the dominant class. And suddenly these pioneers generate a transformation in the means of production, in the way society is organised, and therefore in the way society thinks, how it apprehends itself, because, says Marx, the way we work, the function of production, what we do, influences who we are. And the growing number of people who are involved in the new technology see society with new eyes, they start questioning whether the power of the dominant class is legitimate.

This is exactly what has happened throughout history, of course. For instance, new inventions in the 18th century, including the steam engine, were both a consequence and a cause of the philosophy of Enlightenment, which exposed the arbitrariness of the "divine right of Kings", and hence of all aristocratic privileges, and led to the American and French revolutions.

It is difficult to dispute the relevance of Marx's and Engels' analysis of history. I concur with all they say about class struggles and the function of ideology — prior to the Enlightenment. Quite obviously, the slave is dispossessed, he may not own anything, he is clearly exploited. The feudal serf is hardly in a better condition. He is tied to the land, he cannot leave it and is sold with it.

But when Marx goes on to say that workers under the capitalist regime are dispossessed as the serfs were, I have a problem following his reasoning. Marx believes that the new dominant class after the Industrial Revolution is the one made up by the owners of capital, the bourgeoisie. But this deduction is wrong, plain wrong. There is a logical fallacy here.

FREEDOM

The logical fallacy is to posit that if two events occur simultaneously, one must be the consequence of the other. This logic reminds me of one of Husserl's favourite anecdotes: There is this guy who drinks whisky and soda, and he gets drunk, then he takes gin and soda, and he gets drunk, and he takes vodka and soda, and he gets drunk, and he concludes that he gets drunk on soda. I don't want to denigrate Marx's vast intelligence, but he is telling us that slave masters had political power, they exploited their slaves and they got rich. Feudal lords had political power, they exploited their serfs and they got rich. Capitalists are rich, therefore they must exploit their workers, right? Hang on. Capitalists have no political power. This surely must make a difference. Unlike feudal lords and slave masters, capitalists cannot coerce anybody to work for them, to consume their products, or to finance their endeavours. Marx feigns to ignore that with the emergence of the industrial revolution came another revolution, which redistributed power within society. It was the classical liberal revolution in the 18th century and it changed radically the political and legal environment. People were free to work where they wanted, for whomever they wanted.

Marx pooh-poohs the achievement of that revolution and what he refers to as "formal freedom". You know the argument that Marx belabours in *Capital*: We say the worker "agrees" to work for the capitalist because no policemen are dragging him from his home to the factory, but this means only that "he is compelled by social conditions". In his treatise, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx writes: "Indeed the individual considers as his own freedom the movement no longer curbed or fettered by a common tie or by man, the movement of his alienated life elements, like property, industry, religion ..." And Marx adds: "In reality, this is the perfection of his slavery and his inhumanity." This is rather poor philosophy on Marx's part. Freedom is "the movement no longer curbed" by other men, freedom is freedom of property, of industry, of religion ... There is none other. Take it away and you get Stalinism.

The wealth of kings, slave masters, feudal lords and all their lackeys, was acquired through the exertion of violence, by way of military conquest, tax, confiscation, enslavement ... But not necessarily the capitalists' wealth. The capitalist makes money, indeed, and for a few of them, that money may be numbered in billions, but he is not an exploiter. The ownership of the means of production by itself does not make anyone an exploiter. This is where Marx got it wrong. Making money in a trade between consenting parties is not exploiting anyone; how could it be?

WORK

Marx was a believer in property rights. It is because the worker's work is his property that Marx may conclude the worker is dispossessed of his remuneration. But Marx's crude materialism blinds his vision and prevents him from seeing that it is not work that is remunerated, what is remunerated is work which is of service to someone, and to someone who values this work enough to pay for it. Work by itself is destructive. The Bible has already taught us that work is a malediction.¹¹ Paradoxically, the record of the Marxist states proves my point. Armies of workers toiled literally like slaves for dozens of years, not creating wealth, but actually destroying it. They extracted perfectly good copper mineral and crude oil, and turned it into unusable electric wires and plastics. Economists have calculated that if all the people in the Soviet Union had stopped working and had been content to sell their vast commodity resources without attempting to transform them, they would have been far better off. Work has no value by itself. The value is in the service you render to somebody. It so happens that in most instances you cannot be of service to somebody without performing a certain amount of work, but Marx confuses the end and the means. If someone could bring me clients whilst he slept, I would pay him to sleep.

So it is not work for which the capitalist pays, it is for the service the worker is rendering. There are people who for whatever reason are able to render a great service to a great number of buyers, and they make bundles of money, and there are others who have not found a way to prove their usefulness, resulting in differences of revenues, sometimes very substantial ones. But the capitalist pays for all services exactly the fair price, for if this were not so, the worker, in a politically free society, could immediately check the classified ads to see whether another employer offered a higher price for the same service, and if that other employer could not be found, then it would be evidence that the salary paid is exactly the fair and present value of the services rendered.

So if capitalists pay fair wages, and if workers are not exploited by their employer, who are the exploiters? Who makes up the dominant class today? This question will become clear if we bear in mind there are two ways to move goods in society: by the use of violence, which is the political way and by trade and gifts, which is the economic way.¹² Capitalism is the use of trade and gifts, not the use of politics, to distribute goods in society. All other regimes resort to violence. Marx and Engels emphasise the point themselves. Feudalism and slavery are based on state coercive powers. The results of their work are simply confiscated from the workers, and if they do not like it and try to escape, policemen and soldiers will drag them back to where they belong, so they may continue to be exploited. Now, is there not a class today, which uses the powers of police and the army to confiscate the results of our labour? Is there not a class today, which resorts to political constraint to acquire its means of living?

Those who resort to violence today to get their revenues, as the feudal lords did three hundred years ago, are, of course, all state employees. They do not make money in exchange for a service people find useful enough to pay for. State employees simply collect the means they need through the use of violence, coercion, racket, taxes (all these words being synonymous here). They form the new ruling class. We are the oppressed. So it is obvious, my friends, that the

class struggle is not over. We are still face to face with our exploiters, class against class.

The mystery is why this exploitation by the ruling class of state employees and their lackeys is not obvious to everyone. How come it lasts, how come the vast majority of the population is not conscious of the oppression it is subjected to?

For it is true that most people in Europe do not perceive taxation as robbery and government-imposed regulations and controls as coercion. You meet people nowadays who would take out a gun and shoot a youth who is stealing a cassette player from their car, and these same people allow the taxman to walk away with 50% of what they earn, every month, year after year, during their entire lifetime. Furthermore, when you assess how much you are robbed by the taxman, it is not just what you pay today that you should take into account, but the compounded value of all what you have paid since the VAT you incurred on your first ever purchase and the income tax on your first salary, plus the opportunity cost of all the projects and desires you could not fulfil with that money because it was taken away from you. Try to work out for yourself what these numbers add up to for yourself and you'll be staggered.

THE RULING CLASS

Now the first answer to the question of why we allow ourselves to be exploited seems to be that the dominant class does not appear to be the wealthiest in society, and the fact is it is not. So how come they exploit us, if they don't make more money than the richest amongst us?

Some people in the new ruling class may not be rich, it is true, but neither were many slave owners or feudal lords. Many lived no better and were much poorer even than commoners, who were active in trade and other businesses. It is not the amount of wealth that makes you a member of the ruling class, but the way this wealth, however modest, is acquired. It is not how much you earn, but how you earn it, that qualifies exploitation. Do you make your money by political means or economical means? Is it earned or is it extorted?

Madonna makes a thousand times more money than a secretary in the European Union's Brussels bureaucracy, but no one is forced to buy Madonna records or attend her concerts. Every single penny, therefore, that Madonna gets is given to her, often enthusiastically, by her fans. Every single penny the EU secretary gets in salary is extorted from taxpayers.

I grant you that some people who acquire their revenues through coercion may still render a useful service. I am sure one finds learned professors in state universities and dedicated practitioners in state hospitals. The feudal lord too offered the services of justice, policing and defence to his serfs, the official church provided education and social services ... But there is no way of knowing how much these services offered by state employees are really worth. Are they rendered in an optimal fashion? Do they correspond to the true needs of the people? Because you are not free to pay for them (and often the provision of these services is a monopoly protected by law), no one can tell how useful the service really is, how much of this service would be needed and at what price. More importantly, the end never justifies the means. As Albert Camus used to say: "A political assassination is not a political act, it is an assassination."

Likewise we may say: "Robbing the rich to assist the poor is not assistance, it is robbery."

You can test by yourself how useful a profession is by the way you would like those engaged in it to practice it. You want an airline pilot, a hairdresser, a lawyer, a cook, a prostitute ..., to be hard working, dedicated, and creative in their job, but now think of customs officials. If you have to pay them at all, pay them for doing nothing, in this way you would get better value than paying them for interfering in your affairs. This is how useful these exploiters are to society.

I must confess that, among exploiters, I nourish a special aversion to customs officials, and if I may pause here, I would like to tell you a story. It is about a tourist who is visiting a foreign city. He notices an antique shop, and a very odd small statue of a cat in the window. The tourist walks in and asks the price. "The statue is only \$100", says the antique dealer, "but the story that goes with the statue is \$1,000." "I don't need the story", the tourist shrugs, "I want to bring a souvenir home, and this statue will do just fine." "I'll sell it to you, but believe me", warns the antique dealer, "you'll soon come back for the story." The tourist leaves the shop, with the statue in his pocket. As he is returning to his hotel, he notices a cat is following him. This is unusual. He looks back again, and now four cats are on his tail, and soon twenty cats. The tourist realises he cannot walk into the hotel with a herd of cats behind him, so, as he is crossing a bridge, he throws the statue into the river. Immediately, the whole army of cats jump from the bridge into the water and drown. Flabbergasted by what has happened, the tourist pauses for a while; then he takes a sudden decision and retraces his steps to the shop. The antique dealer wears an indulgent smile: "I see you are already coming back for the story." "No", replies the tourist, "I would like to buy a statue of a customs official."

With the transformation of society, the face of oppression changes to reflect different circumstances. This is why we don't readily recognise exploitation for what it is. For instance, in most European countries, government bureaucrats are employed for life. It is the rule in France. When a talented young Frenchman is recruited by a state agency, the whole of French society finds itself saddled with a legal obligation of 7 to 10 million dollars towards this new employee. This is how much it will cost society on average to fund this person's useless activity from the first pay-check through retirement and until he dies. This 7 to 10 million dollars is the *capital* the exploited class is forced to guarantee by law to each member of the state exploiters' class. And in France, there are more than 5 million of them, some 20% of the active population.¹³

"DROWNING BY NUMBERS ..."

This figure of about 20% of the active population, by the way, is at the high end of the proportion of feudal lords and the official clergy to the total population during medieval times.

There seems to be a natural law that prevents the ruling class from growing above that number of 20%. Ecology offers us many examples of such a fixed ratio between exploiters and exploited, between the number of predators and their preys. Wolves, for instance, feed on caribous. When the wolf population increases, they kill off too many caribous; they start to go hungry, the weakest starve to death, and their total population settles back to where it was.¹⁴

This analogy tells us that there is no difference *in nature* between socialism and social-democracy. The difference is only in degree. In the USSR and everywhere in the socialist world, the predators exterminated their prey, at least those who did not manage to flee the country, so the predators ended up starving. Social-democratic states were clever enough not to scare off all the “caribous” and keep enough of them alive, so that the ruling class could prosper.

The political environment however is changing before our eyes. Social-democratic economies are not growing as steadily as they were, and joining the predators’ class is seen as the short and safe way to make a living. Families want their daughters to land a job at a Ministry, farmers demand subsidies, industrialists beg for tariff protections, the elderly want higher pensions ...

Every dominant class throughout history has faced this demand from outsiders to share in the loot. At first, the exploiters found ways to restrict entry. For instance, participation in the class of feudal lords came by birth only. But sooner or later, the dominant class had to give in to allies’ and dependants’ pressure. Athens had to integrate its *metèques*, its resident aliens; too many colonials became Roman citizens (think of the Apostle Paul); in France, under Louis XV, as state coffers were emptying, the King simply auctioned off access to the noble ranks ...

The present ruling class is even more vulnerable. It finds it impossible to restrain the number of predators, as new entries are conferred not by birth, but by an examination. This method of selecting predators on the basis of expertise was what the Enlightenment considered its highest achievement: “*La carrière ouverte aux talents ...*” Not the scions of ancient families, but the ablest citizens, whatever their social origin, would rule the country. Of course, these new rulers, as they took over public education, would make sure the curriculum would favour their own kin. You seldom see an ambassador’s son working on a factory line, and there are not many factory worker’s sons who make it to an ambassadorship. It is a defining characteristic of a ruling class that it perpetuates itself through generations. The problem for the present ruling class, however, as Marx anticipated, is again technological innovation. As the economy evolves from the Machine Age to the Information Age, it requires better qualified people, not illiterate factory line workers. Information Age workers are people who have the capacity to pass all the barriers for admission to the ruling class. So the number of predators is swelling. It is the ruling class’ “internal contradiction”.

DEMOCRACY

Of course, this is not the only problem the exploiting class is facing. Its other worry is that the ideology which supports its legitimacy, the Enlightenment philosophy, also supports the political regime known as democracy.

Democracy’s perversity is that it turns all of us into accomplices of the violence exerted against society. We accept this violence inasmuch as we hope to become the oppressors ourselves. In a feudal society, it is clear who are the oppressors, and who are the victims, because you are born into one camp or into the other, as I mentioned earlier. You are born a slave or a serf, and all your life, you remain an innocent victim of your oppressors.

The democratic process blurs this line between villains and victims. It gives everyone an easy chance to take part in

oppression. Every time we cast our vote, we are signifying that we wish to take control over part of the population, that we want to impose upon these men and women our ideas and values and we want to extort from them the financial means to achieve our own goals. Democracy is the system that perverts every individual’s soul and turns every man and woman into a racketeer.

With the conjunction of democratic racketeering and an inflating ruling class, the burden on the exploited masses is becoming unbearable. Exploitation is naked and brutish. Even ideology soon will not be able to explain away why we are ransomed.

THE BIG LIE

Yet the ruling class’ ideology has done a good job so far, when you think of it. It has made us believe that without the state, roads would not be built, the poor would suffer in the streets, hospitals would not be funded, and no one would write theatre plays any more ... On radio and television channels, in the newspapers, at schools and in universities, at churches, everywhere, we are told that democracy is the only viable regime; that “social justice” is the common good; that it is morally acceptable to coerce any individual if it is for the collective good; that the end justifies the means; that there are experts up there in government, who are taking care of our well-being, who know better than we do what is good for us, if only we would let them ...

Conservative ideologues maintain that class struggle does not exist any longer, we are all middle-class now ... Leftist ideologues still believe in this idea that we are exploited, but exploitation, they say, comes from the rich, from multinationals, from Wall Street financiers and Swiss bankers ... No one ever mentions that the exploiters are the state bureaucracy and its lackeys, the military-industrial complex, subsidised farmers and industrialists, living off funds extorted from the productive masses.

Such blindness is amazing. On my left, you have a class of people with guns. They run the army, the police and justice, they control the media through broadcasting licenses, they exert censorship. All the means at their disposal come from taxation, your revenues and savings extorted literally at gun point.¹⁵ On my right, you have multinationals and small entrepreneurs, productive workers and creators ... They bring you the food you consume, they build your houses, they connect you to telephone networks and television channels, they supply you with clothes, they manufacture your automobiles and your computers; they are so afraid that you would stop buying their goods, which you can do at any time, that they spend zillions advertising them on glossy paper and video clips.

Now, who are the exploiters? The people with guns, right, the people who offer you nothing you wish to have, or they would have no need to confiscate your money in order to produce it, the extortionists? Wrong. The exploiters are the capitalists. Isn’t it a feat of genius on the ideologues’ part that they have us believe the exploiters are the producers, the creators, the providers, of the goods you enjoy buying?

The bigger a lie, the more completely it is believed. In a François Truffaut film, there is a schoolboy who arrives late in class. He knows the teacher won’t believe a story about trains running late, bus accidents, and the usual excuses. So he makes a sad face and declares: “My mother has just died.” The whole school assembles immediately and offers

sympathy; no one suspects this tragic death could be a lie. Political lies have to be so gross as to be believed.

THE VANGUARD OF THE PRODUCTIVE CLASS

Will oppression last forever? Marx tells us ruling classes get overthrown when the productive classes become conscious of their exploitation as a class. Class consciousness can be raised by the action of an avant-garde, by people who are already themselves class-conscious and who militate inside an organisation to lead the productive masses towards their liberation. The conditions for this liberation are fulfilled if, at the same time, a major technological revolution debases the ruling class' power.

A technological revolution, as you are well aware, is in full swing. I don't need to reiterate to you, wired people, the many ways by which the information revolution is shattering the nation-state. It is interesting, however, to note, as Lenin pointed out, that the ruling class always co-operates unconsciously in its own demise, this time by allowing such developments as higher education, multiculturalism, globalisation, the internet ...

Nevertheless, don't expect people who have enjoyed political power, privileges, life employment, to give it all away gracefully. Ruling classes of the world are uniting to control our creative activities and our life, from banning cryptography to persecuting drug users and producers. Ruling classes are uniting to prevent tax avoidance; they call it "tax harmonisation". Can you imagine the directors of the largest oil companies or the largest airlines getting together to decide on "price harmonisation"? Every trust buster would be gunning at them. This is what exploitation is about. An exploiter makes his own laws and does not need to obey them. The defining characteristic of exploitation is when people are not equal before the law. The master is not subject to the same law as the slave. Governments do not apply their own laws, whether it is gun control or price fixing. Expect the ruling classes to fight back, because they will. Viciously.

Being a libertarian, therefore, may become a dangerous occupation. It is nonetheless a necessary one. Our libertarian mission, I believe, is to make the creators of wealth and beauty, the entrepreneurs and the productive workers, aware of their exploitation as a class. Our calling, as the libertarian vanguard of the oppressed, is to denounce the oppressors and to deconstruct their ideology.

We can engage in this endeavour with enthusiasm and optimism: The future is ours. Governments will fight to retain their privileges, but our societies are becoming too complex, too global, to be structured in any other form than self-organisations. The economy and the arts require creators, not subjects. They require "the free and equal association of producers", sharing ideas and trading services, co-operating without political interference. So, who needs a state? All the signs tell us the big moment has arrived. This is it. The real thing. The classless and stateless society is possible and is near.

Let me give Engels the last word:

The state, therefore, has not existed from all eternity. There have been societies which have managed without it, which had no notion of the state or state power. ... The society which organises production anew on the basis of the free and equal association of producers will put the whole state machinery where it will then belong — into

the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe.¹⁶

Thank you.

NOTES

1. One of the founders of the Mont Pèlerin Society.
2. Hans Hermann Hoppe, a disciple of Murray Rothbard, originally published this article in the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. IX, No. 2, Fall 1990. It was reprinted as Chapter 4 in his *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property* (Boston, Kluwer Academic Publishers). I read this article in a French translation by François Guillaumat, *L'analyse de classe selon Marx et selon l'école autrichienne*. A digital version is available at: <http://myweb.worldnet.fr/^girodou/libres.htm>
3. A digital version of the *Manifesto* may be found at <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>
4. A digital version of the *Origin* may be found at <http://csf.Colorado.EDU/psn/marx/Archive/1884/Family>
5. Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'Etat*, Paris, 1974. For an English translation, see www.amazon.com — *Society Against the State, Essays in Political Anthropology*.
6. This institution of the state, which seems to so many anthropologists and historians a progress towards a higher level of civilisation, was not at all perceived as such by the Athenians. This is what Engels has to say about the Athenians' reaction: "The Athenians ... instituted a police force simultaneously with their state. But this gendarmerie consisted of slaves. The free Athenian considered police duty so degrading that he would rather be arrested by an armed slave than himself have any hand in such despicable work. That was still the old gentile spirit. The state could not exist without police, but the state was still young and could not yet inspire enough moral respect to make honourable an occupation which, to the older members of the *gens*, necessarily appeared infamous."
7. The cancerous growth of the state ruling class tells us something about the often discussed differences between *classical liberals* and *libertarians*. Liberals are utopian, libertarians are realist. Liberals, such as Ayn Rand, advocate a "minimal state"; they believe violence can be restrained. Libertarians have learnt from past experiences, since the 19th century, that once out of the box violence can never be put back in. Why, in fact, should we institutionalise even "a little violence"? Libertarians are not only realists, they are moralists too.
8. For an introduction to the study of ideologies, see <http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/marxism.html>
9. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Rights*, <http://csf.colorado.edu/cgi-bin/mfs/24/csf/web/psn/marx/Archive/1844-Hegel/index.html>
10. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, <http://csf.colorado.edu/psn/marx/Archive/1847-pov.html> The book is a stinging reply to Proudhon's earlier treatise, *Philosophy of Poverty*. "By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food." Book of Genesis, 3, 19.
12. Franz Oppenheimer, *The State*. (I am quoting from memory, it seems I have lost my copy of the book.)
13. The French state bureaucracy sets its own law. With its arrogance and inaccountability, one can argue it functions less as a ruling class than as an occupying army.
14. For a discussion of ecology and politics, see Davidson and Rees-Mogg, *The Sovereign Individual*, Simon & Schuster, 1996.
15. If you believe taxes are voluntary contributions, just stop paying them and wait to see what happens.
16. Engels, *Origin of Property*, op. cit. Most of the books I have used for preparing this paper are published in French. A good introduction in English to Marxist studies is Thomas Sowell's *Marxism, Philosophy And Economics*. It may be ordered through www.amazon.com or <http://laissezfaire.org>