

PRIVATE PROPERTY

In this day of increasing disregard for property rights by government and common criminals alike, one may wonder why libertarians advocate such an "outdated" concept.

The concept of property rights has been greatly misunderstood throughout history. Its opponents, the collectivists, believe that all private property is the result of brute force originally used by kings or warlords. The alleged defenders of property often justified ownership on utilitarian grounds. They argued that society would be better off if it permitted people to keep what they produced. In a similar vein, some conservatives (Andrew Carnegie for one), believed that property owners were actually trustees for society's possessions.

So the lines were drawn: Socialists proclaimed that property is the result of theft while the conservatives apologetically pleaded for society's permission to own property.

The Moral Basis of Private Property

One position was conspicuously missing. This position is embodied in the birth of contemporary libertarianism, inspired by author-philosopher Ayn Rand and others. It proudly proclaims that the individual has a *moral right* to the product of his effort.

As Rand has shown, the foundation and purpose of morality is the maintenance and furtherance of life. Man obviously needs a code of values to guide his actions and choices because he cannot survive in any random manner. Man's life is the only logical standard of value.

The right to life means the freedom to take those actions necessary to maintain and further the life of a rational being. It is absurd to attempt to conceive of this right without its derivative: the right to the product of one's efforts, i.e., property. Man is not a ghost. He has material needs. Therefore, the right to life logically implies the right to property.

The Meaning of Property Rights

Property rights do not mean that an individual has the right to a *given object*. What it means is that a person who produces a material value, or trades for one, has the exclusive right to use and dispose of it as his judgment dictates. The right refers to freedom of action. Just as the individual has a right to defend his life, so too he has a right to defend his possessions from theft, whether committed by a common criminal or by a government (which is more common than the criminal). It is this right that morally invalidates taxation, eminent domain, open housing, and all other laws that attempt to deprive the individual of his freedom to use and dispose of his values.

Collective & Private Ownership

To the collectivist who shouts, "Property is theft!", we reply that he contradicts himself since "theft" presupposes property that is owned. Those who fear that property means coercive power should also realize that the nationalization of all property would create the very evils ascribed to private ownership. Under state ownership, every person is a potential trespasser. There is no refuge from the totalitarian State.

On the other hand, in a *laissez faire* society, no one can be forced onto someone's property. Individual rights include the right *not to* associate with others. But how can one not associate with the State when it controls all property? Socialists who claim to be voluntarists must choose between the right to private property (even if *they* choose not to exercise that right) and the totalitarian state. There is no third alternative.

The concept of private property rights is that the individual has the right to his body, his mind and all those things which he earns through exchange of his ideas and/or labor with others. Private property rights are morally fundamental to both the concept of individual ownership which rightists stress *and* to collective ownership which many voluntary collectivists of the left advocate.

The private property of the rightwinger is his. He chooses to own and use it individually. To some leftwingers, the right is just as important because they choose to use their private property collectively and to give up individual control of it.

It is doubtful that those who support private property would forcefully prevent those who wish to co-mingle it from voluntarily pooling their wealth. Likewise, those who believe in collective ownership should not use private or political violence to interfere with individual's exercise of their property rights.

Advantages of Private Property

The advantage of private over collective ownership of property is, in most cases, rather profound. Private control usually results in property going to its highest value use. When an individual owns a piece of property, he tends to seek its highest valued use.

Because a private owner stands to gain most of the benefits of good decisions and suffers most of the losses resulting from bad decisions, he will invest more time and effort in finding the highest valued use than a group which owns property but few if any of the losses resulting from poor management decisions.

If large tracts of property are controlled collectively, it becomes impossible to know how best to use it, and management decisions become wasteful and destructive political battles between contending special interest groups. The result of collective control of large tracts of property is thus poor management, to the detriment of everyone in society.

There is, in fact, no single best way to control collectively owned property. Different individuals have different preferences. Thus, for example, we find parents in sharp conflict over what subjects should be taught in the collectively owned "public schools", bicyclists and drivers in conflict over use of the public roads, campers and conservationists

in conflict over how to use the public parks, devotees of classical and country music in conflict over how public funding for the arts should be dispersed and so on. These conflicts are magnified a thousand-fold in a society in which *everything* is publicly owned.

To live, man needs material goods. He must be free to use those goods as he sees fit, so long as he does not violate the same right of others. Any interference with the individual's controls of his own property violates the principles of rational morality and economically harms society in general.

Those who advocate freedom must also defend the right to private property. Only by upholding individual rights in all areas of human action can a free, humane and prosperous society be achieved.

BUILDING THE FREE SOCIETY

"The birth of S.I.L. marked the beginning of the modern libertarian movement. We are in the midst of an enormous advance of libertarian ideas and activities. In this existing ferment, S.I.L. has an increasing role to play, especially among young people and on college campuses."

Dr. Murray N. Rothbard
CATO Institute

"I must commend you on what is, I believe, the longest and largest libertarian educational effort in world history: S.I.L., its publications and activities. I cut my teeth on S.I.L. position papers in college back in 1969."

Karl Bray

"I do hope the Society's work in favor of the cause of freedom will succeed in spite of all endeavors of the totalitarian parties."

Dr. Ludwig von Mises

"From my observation, since its inception in 1969, the Society for Individual Liberty has been an important factor in introducing and disseminating libertarian ideas. It has helped to provide a cohesive link for libertarians."

Robert LeFevre

SIL DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLE

Adopted October 1969

As Advocates of Individual Liberty We Affirm:

That every person has an inalienable right to their own life, liberty and property;

That the only proper use of force is in retaliation against those who violate human rights;

That the basic violation of human rights consists of the initiation or the threat of the initiation of force against the individual;

That all proper social organization can only be a consequence of voluntary association between individuals;

That the only economic system consistent with human prosperity and happiness is laissez-faire capitalism;

That the ideologies and instrumentalities of coercive collectivism are the basic threat to human rights and the existence of moral human societies;

And that both moral individuals and moral societies have the obligation to act in their own rational self-interest to protect themselves from those who seek to coercively control, direct and enslave them.

With the apostles of coercion increasingly predominant in the councils of man, it is the duty of all those who value their life, liberty and property to take appropriate action—intellectual and social—to preserve and extend their freedom.

We as libertarians resolve to resist all forms of involuntary collectivism and all programs and activities of government which violate our rights and attempt to take from us the ability to set our own goals and to determine our own destiny.

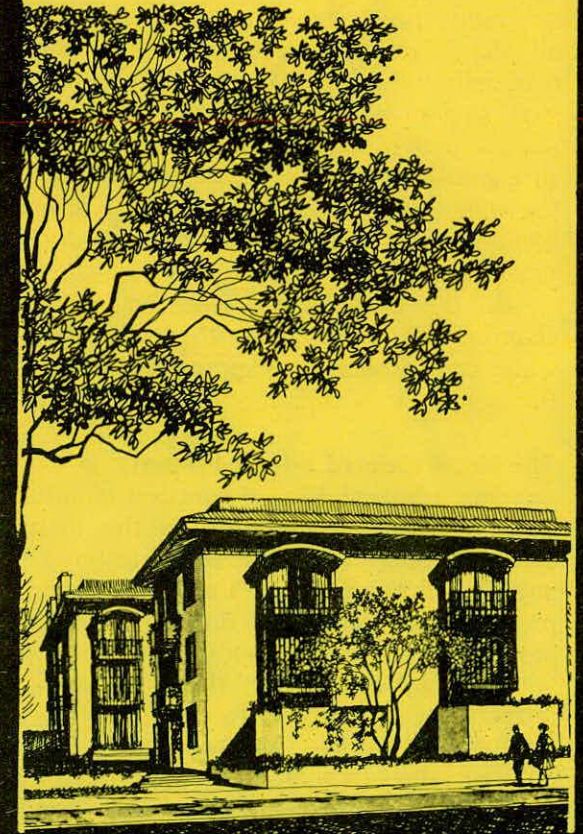
We work for the day when all individuals are free, and we look forward to a society of peace, plenty and freedom where the individual's rights are truly politically inalienable. As advocates of reason and liberty we seek and will settle for no less than:

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SHELDON RICHMAN



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