

IMPERIALISM FOR SALE

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Defining words before using them is usually tiresome, but there are some arguments where the meaning of a certain word is crucial to the whole issue. Does “racialism” refer to belief about how races differ, asks Roderick Moore in Political Notes 16 (*Facts, Values and Racialism*) or to beliefs about how they should be treated differently. (The first sort of belief, even if true, doesn’t excuse the second.) John Scott Shea (in Political Notes 15) scrutinises the word “Exploitation”.

So it is with the word “imperialism”, some of whose common meanings are:

- Rule inflicted by foreigners.
- Wickedness inflicted by foreigners.
- Anything done by foreigners.
- Anything wicked, done by anyone anywhere.
- Belief in any of the above, acted upon or not.

The importance of the word “imperialism” in contemporary debate is that it has established that rule by foreigners is by definition wicked. Rule by foreigners is imperialism. Imperialism is wicked. Q.E.D..

You might think that a libertarian would be the last to challenge such thoughts. Libertarians dislike “rule” of any kind, certainly state rule of the usual kind. Pay this, pay that, don’t do this, do do that, and so on. A plague on it.

However, the mere nationality of the state’s functionaries has nothing to do with the libertarian case against the state. It is what they do that is wrong, not who they are or how they were chosen. He who taxes me may be Chinese. He may be “democratically elected”. He may be “educated to rule” or even “born” to rule. He may proclaim himself to be “God’s chosen one”. Irrelevant. It is still wrong for him to take my wealth without my consent, using it to forbid me from doing harmless things, and to force me to do other things.

Thus, the question of whether it is better to be ruled by the IRA, for instance, or by “British Imperialism”, is from the libertarian point of view a matter of tactics. Neither arrangement is the libertarian utopia.

I can imagine several versions of British “home rule” that would make me prefer other forms of rule administered from Brussels, or Washington DC. An extreme left, Allende type British government might well make me hope for foreign deliverance. So might a fascist government of the type that failed leftist regimes often leave in their wake.

I’m told that many Puerto Ricans now want their island to become a permanent part of the United States, and be a state like Florida or Texas. If that happened it would certainly be called “imperialism”. But would it be bad for Puerto Rico? According to many Puerto Ricans, no.

Suppose a clique of Cuban tradesmen had fixed thirty years ago for Cuba to become part of the USA, as did happen for Hawaii eighty years ago. Might not the Cubans have been better off?

By a fluke of imperial collision, Hong Kong has been ruled by a group of expatriate British. By far the most serious complaint about this system is that it will probably soon end.

ENSLAVING THEMSELVES?

A commercial company enslaves a nation comprising two hundred millions. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what those words mean. What does it mean that thirty thousand men ... have subdued two hundred million? Do not the figures make clear that it is not the English who have enslaved the Indians, but the Indians who have enslaved themselves?

Wendy McElroy quotes the above words by Leo Tolstoy at the end of her Voluntaryist Series Pamphlet No. III, called “Demystifying the State”, and ends her pamphlet thus:

People today enslave themselves when all that freedom requires is the word: “No”.

But suppose these millions had said “No” (to the British East India Company). Would that automatically have guaranteed “freedom”? Might not more vexatious, locally staffed political institutions have resulted? Presumably many Indians thought so.

Local rulers know about their locality and may maybe — govern it in a way better suited to local wishes than any ignorant foreigners could contrive.

But what if local rulers use their expert local knowledge to oppress the people more skillfully than any ignorant foreigners could contrive? As American libertarians like to say: if you thought taxation without representation was bad, try the other kind.

Consider tribally divided societies. Maybe a gang of foreign invaders just means more misery. But maybe the overwhelmingly superior foreigners can suppress otherwise endless tribal squabbles with bland impartiality. The local ex-chiefs may get angry, but might not the people be more content?

“Imperialism” won’t definitely be better, but it might be.

Furthermore, it might make rather an attractive service industry.

THERE ALREADY IS A MARKET IN GOVERNMENT

Some Libertarian Alliance subscribers want a “limited state” not unlike Hong Kong. Others — including me — go further, and seek a market in “government” itself. Free market police forces. Free market law courts. Free market “defence”.

But how are those of us wanting this “anarcho-capitalist” world to get it? It seems to me that there are two ways to look at the existing governmental arrangements of the planet with a view to improving them in a libertarian direction: the protesting, moralistic way; and the way that might work.

Moralistic protest is Ms. McElroy’s strong suit. “Does any individual” she asks “have the right to initiate force?”

Insofar as people actually do “mystify” the state in their own minds, such questions are valuable. But underneath the pieties most adults take a more practical view. Whether or not the personnel of governments have the “right” to initiate force, the fact is that they do, and so do lots of other people. The best most people can hope for is to have a less rather than more rapacious, more rather than less “protective” government.



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



The simplest way to get a less bad government is to move to an area where they have a less bad government. A campaign to achieve major improvements (culminating perhaps in outright abolition) of one's own government can only be economically rational if combined with other more achievable aims, such as trying to make one's name as a writer.

But what sort of campaign ought it to be? We anarcho-capitalists want a world that has "protection agencies" instead of "governments". "Government" would become a service industry, with costs, customers, production problems, advertising, battles (how ferocious?) for market share, and so on. But there are ways and ways of getting to such a world.

Why not also agitate for a succession of governmental changes that would make governments themselves steadily more like "protection agencies", so that in due course they would truly become that?

The libertarian "protesting moralist" demands the abolition of immigration controls. But what if governments were to sell citizenship, and use the proceeds to lower the tax burden (thus making the product more attractive, thus boosting revenue, thus lowering taxation yet again)? This would be "gradualism", and there's certainly no point in concentrating only on that one scheme, but such a change might at least cut through the ferocious absolutes that now rage in arguments about immigration controls. Think of the indirect benefits that might begin to occur. If the entry fee was impressive enough, governments would advertise for more immigrants, and the publicity department would, like all publicity departments, nag the production people (the government) to make the promises be true ones ("govern" well).

Britain's local "authorities" already advertise for people and businesses to come and live and trade in their territories, and the various states compete even more fiercely in the USA, to the great benefit of the "consumers". People have been able to vote with their feet for lower taxes. The "advertisers" of high tax states said that cheap government would mean shoddy government. The "market" in state government has proved them wrong. (For the details of this story see *The Economy in Mind* by Warren Brookes.) The more people come to think in these "market in government" terms, the less need there'll be for all the inverted commas.

FREE MARKET "IMPERIALISM"

And what of the brand new protection agencies for which libertarians agitate? Seeing government as already being a market will push libertarian protection agency entrepreneurs towards gaps in the market rather than towards head on collisions with established businesses.

The market in preventing civil war in the Western democracies is sewn up, at the moment. (See my *Liberty Versus Democracy*, Political Notes 5, which deals with the civil war preventing function of democracy.) Those libertarians who allow their opinions (many do) to read like recommendations for free enterprise civil war between provinces of hitherto peaceful countries, fought by "private armies", will get few customers even for their opinions.

Preventing civil war in tribally divided societies is, on the other hand, being done less well, mostly because of obsessive belief in the intrinsic virtues of democracy. There's a definite market gap here.

The trick might be for the civil war prevention traders to start cranking out verdicts, together with the necessary threats to make the verdicts stick. Easier said than done, I agree, but most would-be "world statesmen" never even say such things. Say: this is our verdict, for which we will push, despite the fact that it is "imperialism" and that we have "no right" to behave in this arrogant way. And say: only the unanimous verdict of the locals will change our minds. (This technique is the origin of the jury system. The king didn't want to defy a united local public opinion, and juries ensured that he never did.)

How might all this be paid for? Stick the process on world-wide television, and administer it not as a "smoke-filled-room" operation, but as a televised free market court of law.

The role of "electronic imperialism" is very important here. Already, without anyone trying to do much besides make lots of

money, the new communications technology is making nonsense of national boundaries. By settling about seven civil wars at once, dotted all over the globe, our sellers of tribal harmony could put on a really good television show for a global and hence very lucrative audience.

Peace making of this kind could all too easily start wars rather than stop them, and be a menace generally. Such power is dangerous. All the more reason to make the process public.

SELLING LAW AND ORDER

At the more local level, there's a "law and order" problem in many of the Third World "banana republics", and in the centres of large cities, especially in the USA if Charles Bronson movies are anything to go by. There's a market gap in the business of curbing muggers, rapists, urban and rural terrorists and so on. Again, pay for it by sticking the thing on television. Why have actors playing Cops and Robbers? Use the real thing. Cameras are already used for surveillance and to provide evidence.

Once successful protection agencies are in business, they can extract payment from local property owners by threatening to switch off the service. Or, the protection agency could invest in land in the places it intends to pacify.

SELLING "WORLD PEACE"

The biggest gap of all in the protection market is at the global level, where the same states that stop internal battles now threaten to blow each other and everyone else to nuclear smithereens.

The problem is to intimidate the rulers of the nuclear superpowers into being nice to one another, and I agree, that's quite a problem. It would require big changes in the Communist world, or the "free" world, or both, before the world's many leaders ever get round that table everyone talks about.

The "peace movement" has made a not wholly contemptible effort to get into this business, but their publicity department, which asserts most persuasively that "peace" would indeed be very nice, has run ahead of the production side. There is more to peacemaking than waving banners, and if the "peace movement" people did make any "peace", what sort would it be?

I believe that the kind of electronic imperialism described above will best tackle this problem. Anarcho-capitalism, far from being a starry eyed impossibility, is for this particular purpose the ideal mental equipment. There's no point in arguing for a "world government" (complete with unstageable elections, an impossible to agree "world constitution", and so forth). This would fail for the same reason that the United Nations already has failed. Because the search for "world peace" is defined as an intrinsically political task, no progress has been made. Expecting the United Nations to solve the "world peace" problem is like expecting a bunch of gangland lawyers to solve the problem of organised crime.

A libertarian approach to nuclear disarmament might be to say: What offers might a tradesman make to the politicians that they couldn't refuse? What would that cost? Who would gain from it, and hence who might be persuaded to pay for it? I'd say that since "world peace" will benefit lots of people a bit, but very few very much, and certainly not the existing rich, the search for it should — economically speaking — be an exercise in show business. This trade also pays for itself by getting numerous small amounts of cash from many people, mostly of quite slender means.

Libertarian discussion concerning "peace" tends to be too sentimental. Some libertarians suppose that if only "the world became libertarian" all would be well, when in fact libertarianism (like socialism) might merely become the new language of human antagonism, local, national and global. Sometimes peace just happens. But often peace is either made or absent, like shoes or combine harvesters. It is seldom the mere consequence of shared philosophical assumptions.

Which is not to say that my entrepreneurial hunches about how to make peace — for that is all they are — are necessarily wise ones. Many libertarians will say that the "services" I've been describing would be an anti-libertarian monstrosity.