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Freedom for Capital, Not People

A Philosophy of Greed

by PETE DOLACK

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Libertarianism is a philosophy of might makes right. The natural philosophy for the age of neoliberalism, as well demonstrated by the Koch brothers, but also, it would appear, a justification for the ugliest elements of United States history.

Consider the following words of Ayn Rand:

“Now, I don’t care to discuss the alleged complaints American Indians have against this country. I believe, with good reason, the most unsympathetic Hollywood portrayal of Indians and what they did to the white man. They had no right to a country merely because they were born here and then acted like savages. The white man did not conquer this country. ...

Since the Indians did not have the concept of property or property rights — they didn’t have a settled society, they had predominantly nomadic tribal ‘cultures’ — they didn’t have rights to the land, and there was no reason for anyone to grant them rights that they had not conceived of and were not using. ...

What were they fighting for, in opposing the white man on this continent? For their wish to continue a primitive existence; for their ‘right’ to keep part of the earth untouched — to keep everybody out so they could live like animals or cavemen. Any European who brought with him an element of civilization had the right to take over this continent, and it’s great that some of them did. The racist Indians today — those who condemn America — do not respect individual rights.”

The occasion for Ayn Rand’s cold-blooded, racist words was her speech to the graduating class of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point on March 6, 1974. She said the above during the question-and-answer session, but the text of the actual talk wasn’t much more humane. During her talk, among many head-slappers, the infamous philosopher of greed said:

“Something called ‘the military-industrial complex’ — which is a myth or worse — is being blamed for all of this country’s troubles. Bloody college hoodlums scream demands that R.O.T.C. units be banned from college campuses. Our defense budget is being attacked, denounced and undercut by people who claim that financial priority should be given to ecological rose gardens and to classes in esthetic self-expression for the residents of the slums.”

Civilizing them with a gun

I recall someone named Dwight Eisenhower raising concerns about a “military-industrial complex.” It seems to me he was in a position to know what he was talking about, even if he waited until the end of his career to provide a warning after devoting so much of it building up said complex.

At the time of the West Point talk, three million Vietnamese were dead due to a war nearing its conclusion. Was it valid to protest? Among other feats, the U.S. leveled major cities — 77% of the buildings in Hue, one of Vietnam’s biggest cities, were completely destroyed. Dams were blasted away, allowing salt water from the South China Sea to flood farmland, making the growing of food impossible.

In South Vietnam, 9,000 of 15,000 hamlets were damaged or destroyed, as were 25 million acres of farmland and 12 million acres of forest. Killed were 1.5 million cattle. In North Vietnam, 34 of the largest 36 cities suffered significant damage, with 15 completely razed, while 4,000 of about 5,800 communes were damaged. More than 1 million acres of farmland and 400,000 cattle were destroyed in the North. (These statistics are from *Manufacturing Consent* by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman.)

The Vietnamese were ungrateful for this exemplary treatment, in the imperialist mind, similar to the ungrateful Native Americans who are “racist” because they have failed to appreciate the lessons in civilization they were being taught while the subjects of a genocide.

I don’t see why the above words of Ayn Rand should be considered any different than Nazi pronouncements on Jews.

Domination in the age of financialization

Although there is a temptation to think of libertarians as young conservatives who want to smoke marijuana — a picture sometimes true of libertarian *followers* — when libertarian *leaders* talk about “freedom,” what is really meant is freedom for the holders of capital to pursue profit maximization without limits. The cult of the market is a logical expression of the extreme individualism embodied in libertarianism.

One of the most influential articulators of that was Friedrich Hayek. The Austrian School economist asserted that solidarity, benevolence and a desire to work for the betterment of one’s community are “primitive instincts” and that human civilization consists of a long struggle against those ideals. “The discipline of the market” is the provider of civilization and progress, he wrote.

Thus, unregulated capitalism is “civilization” and anything else is a product of “primitive” group instincts that have survived from our prehistoric hunter/gatherer ancestors in the Hayekian worldview.

From these ideas, it is a small step to the concepts of “money equals speech” and “corporations are people” promulgated by the U.S. Supreme Court. This is an extension of “shareholder rights” to the political sphere — the more you own, the more say you have. A form of conquest and domination for the age of financialization.

If there is no community, no common interest, then why can’t someone, anyone, take whatever they want from the less strong? Give Ayn Rand credit for one thing: She stripped away all the accretions of individualist verbiage, all the rarefied theory of orthodox economics, and enunciated with unusual clarity what lies at the core of capitalist triumphalism. It hasn’t served the world very well.