Part 6

Miscellaneous Essays

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Medieval Christendom and Libertarianism

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Notwithstanding the unforgiving rain and wind, I have very fond memories of the years that I spent in Liverpool, working on my doctoral dissertation. That blessed period of my life was devoted to studying in the library, writing in my office, and warming up in woody pubs as the English understandably and wisely do. A few brilliant officemates brightened up my days with discussions about the medieval world, and I recall listening for hours to my good friend Teng LI, ever-cloaked in cigarette smoke, as he effortlessly moved from pneumatology and other mysterious aspects of 11th-century Christian theology to the horrors of Communism and the Cultural Revolution in his home country. I absorbed much from books and conversations, from prayer and encounters, from visiting archives and mastering the art of teaching. Crucially, during those intense years I understood the malaise of modernity, the crisis in the Catholic Church, and the unjust nature of the modern state. After reading, among others, Edmund Burke, Warren H. Carroll, Reynald Secher, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Massimo Viglione, I also formed the conviction that something had gone badly wrong at least since 1789. Obviously, after my two years at Roosevelt University in Chicago, I knew very well that higher education has been hijacked by the Left, and that it was very dangerous for a young academic to hold any view to the right of Hillary Clinton. Still: I did not care. Teng and I were surrounded by many “normal” PhD students and senior faculty members who embraced Socialism, cheered for Obamacare, and posed as rebels by falling in line with every single slogan that The Guardian and the BBC dictated on a given week. Yet, I was amused by the feeling of being a maverick, constantly outnumbered.

What started to bother me during those merry and vibrant years in Liverpool was something else: the problem of a fracture within the Right. The realization that an alliance between libertarians and social conservatives is absolutely necessary was accompanied by the discovery of a great misunderstanding between these groups. Tragically, most conservatives and traditionally-minded intellectuals of our age accept the modern state and are skeptical towards free markets, while most libertarians have no understanding of the medieval period and underestimate the role played by the Church, the natural family, and localist traditions to check the power of political authorities. I was saddened and frustrated by this situation. And it must have been at this point, probably just after submitting my thesis in early 2015, that, following my reading of Tom Woods and my discovery of the Mises Institute, I eventually came across the work of Hans-Hermann Hoppe. Unapologetic, uncompromising, and very much aware that households, local institutions, and traditional culture are our only true shield when facing the Leviathan, Hoppe was the exact opposite of the annoying, self-indulgent and modernist lefty libertarians whose greatest ambition is to legalize pot. Hoppe’s criticism of democracy struck me, and his defense of property rights shined because always brought to its logical conclusions—even to the point of frankly attacking the bogusness of classical liberalism. Exemplifying the liveliness and depth of theoretical debates within Anarcho-capitalism, his stance against mass immigration (a stance that now appears prophetic) finally suggested to me that tensions between conservatives and libertarians could be resolved. On top of all this, the fact that he had been one of the first to suffer from the rise of the neo-Maoist tactics of ‘cancel culture’ at the University of Nevada (Las Vegas) gave him credibility.

I am sure that other authors in this volume are more qualified than me to comment on Hoppe’s contribution to political and social theory, economics, epistemology, and other issues. Here I prefer to briefly pursue this different, and seldomly recalled aspect of his thought: which is the position assigned to the medieval period in European history. Perhaps inspired by intellectual giants like Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Hoppe had the enormous merit to introduce libertarian audiences to a traditionalist view of history, which rehabilitates medieval civilization. This is evident if one reads *From Aristocracy to Monarchy to Democracy*, a short yet invaluable book that followed (but works as a perfect introduction to) his more famous *Democracy: the God that failed*. The statist narrative that we have all been fed by state-approved textbooks and curricula portrays the rise of modern nation-states as a march towards progress and liberty. This narrative must necessarily rest upon a negative view of the historical period preceding the birth of the modern state. Therefore, generations of obedient citizens have been taught that the Earth started to spin during the Enlightenment, that constitutionalism is an invention of the revolutionaries, and that the world before the appearance of centralized governments was a Hobbesian nightmare.

Yet, as any scholar of the Middle Ages would readily concede (yet not so readily affirm to publicly contradict and shame those who still parrot the black legend against medieval Europe), the millennium between the fall of Rome and the conquest of Tenochtitlan produced an extraordinary amount of social, artistic and intellectual (not to mention spiritual) achievements. During this period, Europe experienced the commercial revolution, invented the university system, built the great cathedrals that still attract tourists from all over the world, planted the seeds of modern science, and gave birth to an array of sophisticated political arrangements. In fact, I would go further and say that the Middle Ages were the formative period of Western civilization. This was a time of constitutional experiments, a time when taxation was still viewed with suspicion and hostility, and when communities developed a jealous sense of law and traditions of rights claims. I always remember the words of Brian Tierney: medieval society was “saturated with a concern for rights…. Medieval people first struggled for survival; then they struggled for rights.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And all this, I shall add, was achieved while Islamic armies and fleets relentlessly put Christendom under siege.

The truth is that Latin Christendom was a civilization characterized, firstly, by a dichotomy between empire and Church. The jurisdictional autonomy of the Church created a separate sphere, a distinguishable entity without the reach of government control. Especially after the Gregorian Reforms, the Catholic Church avoided the caesaropapism of the East, where the emperor managed ecclesiastical matters as part of his bureaucracy. In the West, in Latin Christendom, the Papacy and its transnational authority constituted an immediate and effective obstacle to the absolutist and centralist projects of emperors and kings. In addition, within each of the two spheres (empire and Church), medieval order was the result of a further dispersion of power through the proliferation of associations, corporate bodies, and jurisdictions: nobles and city-states, merchant law and private courts, guilds and charters of rights, parliaments and universities, as well as bishops and religious orders, monasteries and lay confraternities, cathedral schools, parishes, and military orders. Freedom of association (and disassociation!) underpinned for centuries this genius plurality of jurisdictions and diffused   
a tradition of local self-government and liberties throughout Europe. One only needs to recall the Magna Carta, or spend some time learning the basic functioning of fascinating composite monarchies like the Crown of Aragon, to easily dismiss the nonsensical lie that we had to wait for the modern state before having thriving communities, rights discourses and political liberty. In fact, I believe that modern state-building can be defined as the imposition through systematic violence of a territorial monopoly of legislation, jurisdiction, policing, banking, defense and education; hence, the rise of the state brought the progressive dissolution of Latin Christendom, of its traditional multiplicity of jurisdictions, and of its rich tapestry of experiments in local governance.

Hoppe has proposed a working framework that sees the early Middle Ages as a time that more closely approximated a natural social order. In particular, the absence of any legal monopoly of judgeship prevented the formation a centralized and militarized state. Besides his more theoretical hypothesis in *From Aristocracy to Monarchy to Democracy*,[[2]](#footnote-2) I would suggest readers to brush up a thought-provoking interview published by the Mises Institute in 2020, in which Hoppe explained the following:

Whether you are a believer or not, there is no way of denying that religion has played a hugely important role in human history and that it is the West, i.e., the part of the world shaped by Latin Christendom in particular, that has surpassed all other world regions both in terms of its material as well as its cultural achievements, and that among its superior cultural achievements in particular is also the idea of natural human rights and human freedom. The Christian notion that each person is created in the image of God contributed to the uniquely Western tradition of individualism and was instrumental in abolishing, at long last, the institution of slavery within the Christian orbit (all the while it lingered on outside the West, even until today). And the institutional separation and jealous competition for social recognition and authority in the West between the Christian church and its hierarchy of popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests, on the one hand, and all worldly power with its hierarchy of emperors, kings, nobles, and heads of households on the other contributed greatly to the uniquely Western tradition of limited (as opposed to absolutist) government.

This happy, power-limiting arrangement began to crumble already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries… .[[3]](#footnote-3)

Such accurate interpretation of medieval Christendom is one of the many ways in which Hoppe bridged the gap between conservatives and libertarians. It is not by chance that Hoppe has always included in his conferences speakers like my incredibly knowledgeable friend Keir Martland, who would comment on the Middle Ages and guide the audience towards the modes of social cooperation and coexistence, the languages and institutions of liberty of pre-modern Europe. I was myself invited to Bodrum in 2019 to reflect on Genoa’s medieval tradition of private governance and private defense.[[4]](#footnote-4) When, on this occasion, I had the opportunity to talk at length with Professor Hoppe, the impression that I had had at our first, brief in-person meeting in London one year earlier was confirmed. I perceived that his unyielding dedication to freedom and his many scholarly accomplishments are joined by a gentle, generous, friendly personality. This is surely one of the reasons why Hoppe is able to bring together voices from a truly diverse array of backgrounds and philosophical positions (including a Catholic Thomist like myself who finds libertarianism reasonable but surely not rising to the level of a complete account of human ontology and ethics). These voices are not in agreement on every single issue, but they are nevertheless united in the quest for truth and in the resistance against the ever-growing power of modern states (and super-states) over our lives, speech, thoughts, and property.

1. Brian Tierney, *The Idea of natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150–1625* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 54–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *From Aristocracy to Monarchy to Democracy: A Tale of Moral and Economic Folly and Decay* (Auburn, Ala.: Mises Institute, 2014; https://mises.org/library/book/aristocracy-monarchy-democracy). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeff Deist & Hans-Hermann Hoppe, “Hoppe: The In-Depth Interview,” *The Austrian* (March–April 2020; https://mises.org/austrian/hoppe-depth-interview). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For Keir’s and my PFS talks, see episodes PFP150, PFP169, PFP188, PFP210, and PFP211 of the Property and Freedom Podcast at https://propertyandfreedom.org/pfp/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)