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# The Voluntaryist

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*"If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself."*

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## Tribal Anarchy vs. The State

By Stefan Blankertz

When radical libertarians propose that human society can exist without a state, they often are confronted with the following objections:

1. "As long as human societies have existed, there has always been some kind of state. In the early days of mankind there were chiefs who ruled their tribes like tyrants with absolute power. How much better off we are today, as we can decide on who rules us. Therefore anarchy can be nothing but utopian." I label this objection the 'conservative' one.

2. "In past times, when society wasn't organized by any kind of state, the 'law of the jungle' ruled the land. Today we are much better off, where the state has jurisdiction over civil law and social welfare. Therefore anarchy is the ideology of the strong who want to have their hands free to exploit the weak." I call this objection the 'progressive' one.

3. "Absolute communism existed in tribal societies because people lacked self-consciousness of private property. This kind of tribal communism was based upon what the sociologist Emile Durkheim called 'mechanical solidarity.' This notion of tribal communism is oddly shared by most Marxists and by many classical liberals, as well. One difference between them is that the Marxists appreciate it, while the liberals detest it. The Marxists consider tribal anarchy as the original form of communism, which leads the way to fully developed communism. To them 'anarchy' is an obstacle on the way to 'mature' communism. In contrast the classical liberals see in tribal communism the horrors of the past which we luckily have left behind us. 'Anarchy,' according to their opinion, would degenerate into 'primitive communism.'" I certify this objection as the 'communist' one, whether voiced by the communist or liberal.

In her essay, "The Roots of War," Ayn Rand identifies "the ideological root of statism (or collectivism)" as "the *tribal premise*." She writes that

primordial savages, ..., unable to conceive of individual rights, believe[...] that the tribe is a supreme, omnipotent ruler, that it [the tribe] owns the lives of its members and may sacrifice them whenever it pleases to whatever it deems its own 'good.' Unable to conceive of any principles, save the rule of brute force, they believe[...] that the tribe's wishes are limited only by its physical power ... [CAPITALISM: THE UNKNOWN IDEAL (1966), p. 29]

Rand's statement serves as an example of a deeply

rooted ignorance about tribal organizations and human societies. The purpose of this article is to rectify the false assumptions about the political organization of human society. However, my intention is not to advocate the tribal form of organization as the model for modern communities. Rather, I wish to point out that we should reexamine our attitudes toward anarchy. Given the fact that at the root of all human societies of the past was a well-ordered and self-conscious anarchy we should no longer question - "Is anarchy possible?" - but rather ask "How might anarchy function under modern conditions?"

If you have any doubts about the cultural relevance of tribes, because you have learned at school that all the cultural attainments of mankind are due to the existence of the state, think of the following: Cultural feats, like the pyramids in Egypt, indeed are impressive witnesses to statist organization. The invisible accomplishments of the tribes, however, are much more impressive since they have had much greater influence on the development of society:

1. 'The tribes brought about the so-called 'neolithic revolution' during which agriculture was invented. Agriculture made it possible for mankind to put down roots and leave behind the nomadic way of life.

2. The tribes invented and refined the way of processing and preparing food. They were the first to use natural medicines and conceive of and treat the psychosomatic roots of certain illnesses.

3. They discovered the precious metals, gold and silver, and how to process and refine them. Trade and the use of precious metals for money first occurred as both an intra-tribal and inter-tribal phenomenon.

While I will not dwell on these achievements, I would like to detail two achievements which have played a dominant role in our modern world:

4. The tribes invented the concept of property rights, and it is this idea of property which is still at the base of our modern notions of property.

5. They invented the concept of justice which still dominates our feeling of what is 'just,' despite the long efforts of states to undermine this feeling by forcing the citizenry to become accustomed to state-dispensed political justice.

Anthropologists have a special term for the tribes I want to discuss in this article. They call them 'centerless segmental societies.' As far as we know, all human societies have their origins in this form of organization. In every religion or myth this origin is referred to as the 'golden age' or 'paradise.' The basic principle of organization in centerless segmental so-

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# The Voluntaryist

Editor: Carl Watner

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## Potpourri from the Editor's Desk

### No. 1 "We're All Outlaws"

Whatever we do, though, we must remember that we are all, already, outlaws. Not one of us can be certain of getting through a single day without violating some law or regulation we've never even heard of. We are all guilty in the eyes of today's "law." If someone in power chooses to target us, we can all be prosecuted for something.

The only way we're going to get off this road to Hell is if we jump off - if we personally, as individuals, refuse to cooperate with evil. How we do that is up to each of us. I can't decide for you, nor you for me (unlike congresspeople who think they can decide for everybody.)

But this *totalitarian* runaway truck is never going to stop unless *we* stop it.

Stopping it might include any number of things: tax resistance; public civil disobedience; wide-scale, silent non-cooperating; highly noisy non-cooperation; boycotts; secession efforts; monkey-wrenching; computer hacking; dirty tricks against government agents; public shunning of employees of abusive government agencies; alternative, self-sufficient communities that provide their own medical care and utilities.

There are thousands of avenues to take, and this is something that most of us still need to give more thought to before we can build an effective resistance. We will each choose the courses that are right for our own circumstances, personalities, and beliefs.

— Claire Wolfe, from "Land-Mine Legislation" as posted on the Internet, July 14, 1998.

### No. 2 "Sovereign Risk and Default"

Don't listen to people who tell you the United States government has never defaulted. That's hogwash. At every historical juncture when the U.S. government has found itself in a bind, it has *stiffed the bondholders*. During the Revolutionary War government stiffed the whole country by inflating the currency. During the War Between the States the Yankee government stiffed the bondholders by 1) inflat-

ing the currency (the Greenback Act and the National Banking Act), and 2) reneging on its promise to pay the bond principal in gold. During the Great Depression the government stiffed the bondholders by 1) reneging on its promise to pay interest in gold; 2) reneging on its promise to pay principal in gold; and 3) inflating the money supply to cheapen the value of the dollars it repaid. Since the Great Depression, the U.S. government has steadily, day in and day out, month in, month out, year in, year out, stiffed all its creditors [and those holding its currency], by a conscious policy of cheapening the dollar by inflation. It borrows dollars worth 100 cents and repays with dollars worth 95 cents. Since 1940 the dollar has lost all but about one-twentieth of its value. The government has inflated the value away *on purpose*, not through error, poor management, or ignorance.

—Franklin Sanders in THE MONEYCHANGER, Box 178, Westpoint, TN 38486, Tel. 1-888-218-9226 (12 issues - \$ 95).

### No. 3 "It's Just BASIC ECONOMICS"

A society in which only members of a hereditary aristocracy, a military junta, or a ruling party can make major decisions is a society that has thrown away much of the knowledge, insights, and talents of most of its people.

Contrast that with a society in which a farm boy who walked eight miles to Detroit to look for a job could end up creating the Ford Motor Company and changing the face of America with mass-produced automobiles - or a society in which a couple of young bicycle mechanics could create the airplane and launch the aviation industry. Neither a lack of pedigree nor a lack of academic degrees nor even a lack of money could stop ideas that worked, for investment money is always looking for a winner to back and cash in on. A society which can tap all kinds of talents from all kinds of sources has obvious advantages over societies in which only the talents of a preselected few are allowed to determine its destiny.

No economic system can depend on the continuing wisdom of its existing leaders. A price-coordinated economy with competition in the marketplace does not have to, because those leaders can be forced to change-course - or be replaced - whether because of red ink, irate stockholders, outside investors ready to take over, or because of bankruptcy court. Given such economic pressures it is hardly surprising that economies under the thumbs of kings or commissars have seldom matched the track record of capitalist economies.

—Thomas Sowell, BASIC ECONOMICS (2000), p. 67.

"Need a helping hand? Look at the end of your arm."

— Anonymous

# Tribal Anarchy vs. The State

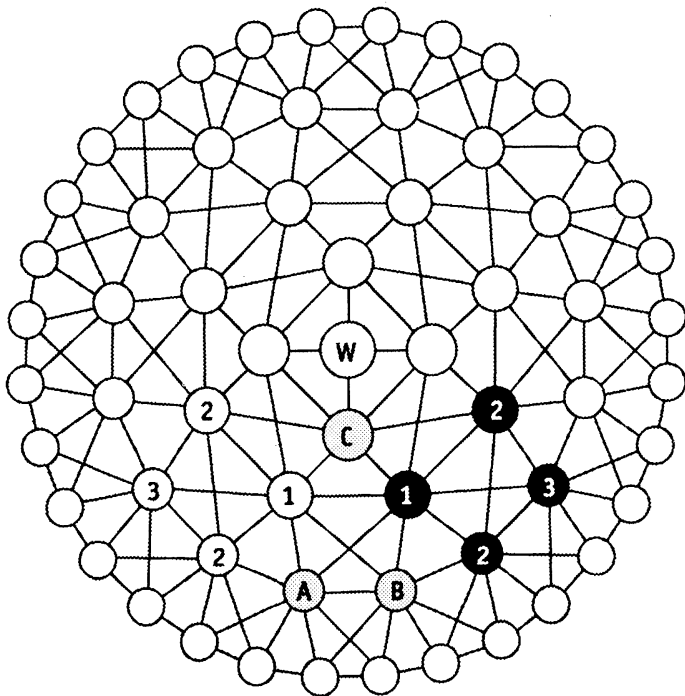
*continued from page 1*

cieties is kinship. Kinship can either be defined by descendent lines of the fathers or by descendent lines of the mothers, or a mixture of both descendent lines. We do not know what makes a society decide in favor of either line. As far as evidence can be produced, the decision whether to take the descendent lines of the fathers or the descendent lines of the mothers does not affect the character of the tribes. It is not true, for instance, that tribes which take the lines of the fathers are more aggressive or more inclined to degenerate into statism. The largest society organized in a centerless segmental way have been the African 'Tiv' who in their best times counted 800,000 people.

The most important feature of the centerless segmental societies is what my professor, the German ethnologist Christian Sigrist, calls 'segmental opposition.' Professor Sigrist declares himself to be a Marxist, although he admits that his ethnological views do not fit smoothly into the Marxist ideology. What I am going to tell you is, to be sure, my own interpretation, not the one of Professor Sigrist.

The concept of 'segmental opposition' demonstrates how tribal anarchies functioned without becoming coercive states:

1. It explains how a society without a center gets stability,
2. It explains how the tribal concept of property rights has evolved; and
3. It explains how justice is possible in a centerless society.



Look at the picture above. Each ball represents an individual, female or male. The lines stand for

the kinship relations. Imagine that what is shown in the picture is only one side of a sphere. Therefore what seems to be the border is no border at all. The balls at the edge stand in relation to the other, unseen side of the sphere. As you can see, everyone is related to everyone else. Of course, it is likely that there are even more kinship relations. Take this picture as a simplified model, otherwise it would have become too busy.

Let us look at the two balls marked with number '1.' Each represents a member of the society. They have a quarrel. The black '1' took a cow from the white '1,' or at least the white '1' says so. The white '1' is weaker than the black '1,' so the white '1' calls very close relatives, the two white persons marked with '2' to help him. But now being stronger, the three persons of the white family in turn take more than the stolen cow from the black '1': as a revenge they take two cows. Now the black '1' feels victimized and calls his black relatives marked with number '2' including another one, the black '3,' for support. To hinder the four persons of the black family to overcompensate in turn, the three persons of the white family ask another relative, white '3' to support them.

The first and most important principle of the segmental opposition becomes visible in this example:

1. In every conflict segments of equal strength oppose each other. It is not possible for one segment to dominate or even conquer another segment because the victimized segment gets help from the next relatives as long as the segment is victimized.

To show you why the segmental opposition is limited to the case of defense, let us first turn to the black '3' and the white '3.' Their relation to the persons of the original quarrel is not as close as the relation of the four persons with the number '2.' The persons marked with number '3' will come to help only if the request for support is plausible and convincing.

But this is not the only principle of justice in the segmental opposition. Look at the grey balls marked with 'A' and 'B.' The white '3' probably gives the white '1' the advice to turn to the grey 'A' to get help, grey 'A' being a much closer relative. But grey 'A' will hesitate to help white '1,' because he also has a strong relationship to black '1.' If black '1' turns to grey 'B' to get help, 'A' and 'B,' who are very closely related to each other, would fight against each other, one on the side of the black family, the other on the side of the white family.

Thus, the second principle of the segmental opposition is the preservation of conquest and power-seeking:

2. Because every one is related to every one else in some way, it is only possible to get support in the case of defense (but not in the case of offense or attack). If someone would help another one to victimize a third person, he would help to victimize a relative (at least, indirectly) which is impossible to think

about in tribal ethics.

Instead of carrying on an endless quarrel, something else happens within the structure of segmental opposition. In our consideration we have left out the grey 'C.' The grey 'C' is equally close to black '1' and white '1,' closer than every one else. Due to his position in the kinship net it is impossible for the grey 'C' to decide which one to support. Such a decision would be even more impossible for him than for the grey 'A' and 'B.' So, grey 'C' turns to a Wise Woman or Man, marked with 'W,' to settle the matter between the white '1' and the black '1.'

And this is the third principle of the segmental opposition which is the origin of the juridical system:

3. Because in the segmental opposition no individual and no party can ever really 'win,' the incentive to arrange matters peacefully by applying to a specialist in mediation is strong. This specialist in early times was called a 'judge.'

Now there is a system of balanced power, which ethnologists call 'segmental opposition.' This balance of power logically calls for a peaceful solution to end quarrels. Winning a victory in a battle would destroy the balance of power and would thus produce losers. But how can a Wise Woman or Man restore quarreling parties or individuals to friendship? Who determines what is right and what is wrong? If a judge is to be consulted, it is already assumed that the judge has a theory of justice which will provide a solution to the quarrel which he is to settle. And this is the fourth principle of the segmental opposition:

4. The accepted theory of justice in tribal societies is best described by the words 'property,' 'contract,' and 'consent.' There is no other way. There is no law and no police available for the judges. It is their understanding, reason, and intelligence or wisdom, if you prefer this term, which qualifies them for their role.

To understand why property and contract are the only possible standards according to which judges in tribal anarchy can solve problems, let us take a closer look at the nature of quarreling. I said that the black '1' has taken a cow which the white '1' considers to be his own.

The black '1' states: "I took your cow because I wanted it." The white '1' states: "It is my cow." So they ask the Wise Woman or Man, who is right and who is wrong. If the Wise Woman or Man says that the black '1' is right, of course the white '1' can take back the cow from the black '1' in turn, because the Wise Woman or Man had just said that anyone could take what he likes (regardless of whether it is his own or not). Therefore such a solution would not end the quarrel. It would be the starting point of endless fighting.

The only way to end the quarrel is to state that no one is allowed to take what is the property of someone else without his consent. Only then both parties can keep what is theirs. The task of the judge is to

establish whether the cow taken by the black '1' indeed is the property of the white '1.' That means, the judge has to find out whether the white '1' took possession of the cow while it was wild, or had raised it, or bought it from someone. And this is the fifth principle of segmental opposition:

5. It is a universal truth that in a state of anarchy the only reasonable way of thinking of a right is the universality of action, which means that everything which goes for one person goes for every one else as well. This natural law or natural rights theory has been discovered by experiment in tribal societies.

Let me summarize the principles that characterize the political structure of centerless segmental societies:

1. Balancing the use of power: Segments of equal power oppose each other. This is the principle of 'segmental opposition.'

2. Limiting the use of power to defense: Helping someone to victimize a third person would mean to help

## Letter from a Subscriber

2275 Woodcliff S.E.  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546  
March 25, 2001

Dear Carl,

I have been a subscriber to THE VOLUNTARYIST for about a year. It has been a great pleasure to absorb every issue of your publication. Around the same time that I began to subscribe, I purchased a copy of your book, I MUST SPEAK OUT. I have been reading an article every day over lunch the last few months.

Voluntaryism is what I have been looking for all these years. I've been referring to myself as an anarchist for many years, but in most people's minds anarchism = chaos. People are not open to the idea of chaos, but they at least have a sliver of openness to voluntaryism. People are not open to concepts (such as life without government) without past examples of success, but your book changes all of that. What a fabulous job you have done researching history and bringing things to light that have been buried by professional "historians." Your article on the voluntary history of time zones blew me away. I had no idea that this came to be without government "help" even though it was not really that long ago.

I MUST SPEAK OUT is a literal textbook for the concept of voluntaryism. I plan to buy dozens of copies and give them to all the people I care about. Thanks a million for your hard work in bringing these magnificent ideas to light. I look forward to many more years of your publication.

Sincerely,  
Kurt Fuller

[Reprinted by permission of the author dated April 9, 2001.]

him to victimize one's own relative.

3. Installing judges: The balance and limitation of power is a strong incentive to settle quarrels peacefully by experts in mediation.

4. Limiting the power of judges: There are no laws or police available for judges but only the power of their word to convince the quarreling parties.

5. Enforcing property rights: The only way to solve quarrels by the judges has been to refer to the universality of rights. Without property rights there could be no rights at all. This means that all the parties to the dispute, that is - the two disputants and their mediator - must accept property rights as the basis for justice and deciding their case.

The anarchy of the tribal societies is stable and does not ordinarily degenerate into statism. The Wise Woman or Man cannot become a tyrant. This is because the Wise Woman or Man is part of the segmental opposition. If the Wise Woman or Man should harm someone, the harmed person is supported by the closest relatives. This starts a quarrel by which the Wise Woman or Man loses her or his reputation as a judge.

Unfortunately the segmental opposition has a flaw which led to the evolution of the state. The precondition of segmental opposition is kinship. Imagine two tribes violently clash. In such a case, the balancing power of segmental opposition would not come into play. In the majority of such cases, the inferior tribe is forced out of their territory. There are, however, cases where natural obstacles lead to another result. This is, for instance, the case when a nomad tribe clashes with an agricultural tribe. The nomad tribe is flexible, not bound to a territory whereas the agricultural tribe, naturally, is bound to the land. Therefore strong nomads have a likely chance to conquer an agricultural tribe.

The theory that the state evolves out of the conquest of agricultural tribes by nomad tribes was first formulated by the German sociologist Franz Oppenheimer. This theory is convincing, but unfortunately it is too simple. Therefore it has been rejected by many ethnologists and sociologists. However, my opinion is that there is no need to reject the Oppenheimer theory completely. The theory, rather, needs refining. Conquest of one tribe by another is not the only way a state can evolve. The other way is what I call 'internal conquest.'

Consider the following case: An agricultural tribe is attacked constantly by a nomad tribe. However, the nomad tribe is not strong enough to conquer the agricultural tribe. So, for its defense the agricultural tribe builds up an army. Part of the tribe becomes professional soldiers while the other part of its members remain peasants in order to keep their agricultural base. This professional army acquires the means not only to protect their own tribe, but also the means to conquer it. It is the age old problem of "Who guards us from our guardians?" Furthermore,

the professional soldiers begin to shift their loyalty from their relatives to their military commanders. Therefore it becomes unlikely that the soldiers would splinter into groups and fight against each other, even if by the logic of segmental opposition this would become necessary.

To be sure, when we count the numbers of tribes we have knowledge of and also count the years they have existed in stable anarchy, the evolution of the state has to be considered an exception to the historical rule that for most of mankind's history the coercive state was not to be found. Moreover, when we compare anarchist tribes to statist tribes, the anarchist tribes do better than statist tribes in regard to the accumulation of wealth and the peacefulness of life. On the one hand, we have to admit that in the last two or three thousand years statist systems have become a success story; they have turned out to be our contemporary standard. The success of the state, late in the history of the human race, seems to be based on its strength to comprise more tribes and a greater territory, whereas tribal anarchy was limited to just one tribe in one region.

On the other hand, I recommend a closer look at the evolution of states. It is not true that states with a distinct statist structure were more successful and superior. Quite the contrary: States with the residual features of tribal anarchy were more successful in the long run. Let me introduce in evidence:

"When people own things, they take care of them. When society owns things, nobody takes care of them."

—Taxi Driver, Havana, Cuba

1. The Chinese Empire. The Chinese emperor was looked upon more or less as a Wise Man, not a tyrant. An emperor who ruled by enforcing laws was said to be weak, whereas he who gave a good example in his own behavior was highly respected. In this respect the communist dictator Mao Ze Dong did not stand in the tradition of Chinese emperors. He was totally alienated from the Chinese tradition.

2. The civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome, which laid down the patterns for the whole world today, were not based upon strict leadership but upon democracy among the ruling tribe. The Roman empire is a good example of the refined Oppenheimer theory: The ruling tribe retained freedom, property rights, and democracy among its own members, whereas it repressed the tribes it conquered. Those tribes which successfully fought against the Romans afterwards unfortunately copied its statist format. As a consequence, even the tribes that resisted the Romans suffered from internal conquest.

3. Many European societies during the Middle Ages displayed signs of a "relapse" toward tribal anarchy and a lessening of the influence of their statist heritage from Rome. There was no central government,

and the political structure consisted of rival aristocrats and more or less free associations.

4. In the clash between the USA and the USSR, the state which was less strict, less organized, less centralized won over in the end. The USA itself evolved out of some sort of benign colonial anarchy. Again, the evolution of the statist system in America is closely related to the wars she fought. The outcome of the First and the Second World Wars, which America won, is another perfect example of 'internal conquest' by the state. The increased levels of taxation and intervention in the economy, allegedly required by the "all out" effort to win these wars, has never diminished. Even though the fighting has ceased long ago, the government controls "required" by the war still exist.

I don't mean to hold up these examples as historical models. However, history does demonstrate that only those states succeed in the long run which allow a considerable amount of freedom, of respect for rights and property, and of anarchy. In my opinion, anarcho-capitalism opens the possibility of renewing the principles of tribal anarchy on the level of a global civilization and economy. The 'tribes' or associations of competing security agencies with no central authority would be the best way to enforce peace and respect for property all over the world.

Let me come back to the objections to anarchy I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Now we are able to make a convincing rebuttal to them:

1. The 'conservative' objection is: "Some kind of state has always been there. Therefore anarchy is a utopian dream." The answer is very easy: "It is simply not true that the state has always been there. Anarchy was for real during much of human history."

2. The 'progressive' objection is: "Without the state, the law of the jungle rules the land. This has always been the case and will be the case in the future." Again, we have to say: "No! The experience with anarchy has shown that anarchy has brought forth a structure which is characterized by the balance of limited power and by the respect for justice."

3. The third objection, the 'communist' one (with two opposing valuations) is: "Total communism based on 'mechanical solidarity' is true for tribal societies." This notion is not true, whether evaluated by the Marxist or the classical liberal. To them we say:

A. "The centerless segmental tribes were not communist in the sense of the absence of property rights. Equality to them meant equal rights and equal defensive power."

B. "The 'solidarity' of the centerless segmental tribes was not 'mechanical'. They choose to have a political structure to equalize differences in individual power and at the same time to prevent the development of a central power. They achieved this political aim by segmental opposition.

C. "The centerless segmental societies cannot be considered as 'primitive' forerunners of a 'fully de-

veloped communism,' but rather as pioneers of the future global libertarian society."

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## Non-Voting as an Act of Secession

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form of personal secession—the form of secession that is most readily available to them.<sup>4</sup>

This choice is exercised by many millions of Americans because they understand that elections are nothing more than tugs-of-war between tweedledum Democrats and tweedledee Republicans. Both parties seek the mantle of power to impose their agendas on society. Politicians of every political party want to continue the flow of tax money into the treasury and to pass laws allowing the government to increasingly invade the social spheres of daily life. As social commentator, one-time political candidate, and author Gore Vidal once noted: there is really only one political party in this country, and it has two incestuously related branches.<sup>5</sup>

Whether based on intuition or practical understanding, non-voters realize they only have a subservient role in the political structure described by Vidal. Without money, position or connections, they are disenfranchised from having any meaningful say-so in the government's impact on their lives. Yet, in spite of this handicap, choosing not to vote can have a dramatic and positive effect on society. This is because a government's survival is dependent on having a sufficient number of people grant it the appearance of legitimacy to act and elicit obedience.<sup>6</sup>

Whether it is an explicit intention or an implicit result, the decision not to vote is a way of decreasing governmental legitimacy. As Vladimir Bukovsky, the Russian dissident put it: "Power rests on nothing other than people's consent to submit, and each person who refuses to submit to tyranny reduces it by one two-hundred-and-fifty-millionth, whereas each who compromises [with it] only increases it."<sup>7</sup> Finally, there reaches a point at which a government no longer has enough consensus to act under any authority other than the exercise of raw, naked power. Once the mirage of legitimacy is gone, a government must become openly despotic to remain in power. This, in turn, tends to turn even more people away

from supporting it, and can put its continued existence in doubt.

This isn't armchair speculation. History records that variations of this scenario have occurred numerous times.<sup>8</sup> Who would have predicted that the Marco regime would fall from power in the Philippines? Who ever expected that the Communist government in Poland would be succeeded by Solidarity? Who ever thought that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would "splinter apart" in what seemed like the blink of an eye? However, it is usually a surprise to the "experts" when it happens, because it occurs quickly and at a time when a State appears, from the outside, to be at the height of its power.

This phenomenon of seemingly sudden social change is explained by physicist Per Bak's theory of self-organizing criticality.<sup>9</sup> This theory, for example, explains how millions of grains of sand can methodically be added to a seemingly stable sand pile until a "point of criticality" is reached. At that point, adding only one more grain of sand will trigger an avalanche. Professor Bak's theory has been used to help understand such diverse things as traffic flow and the trading of stocks. It is equally applicable to the delegitimizing impact any one non-voter can have on a political regime.

It is within the realm of possibility that some day the illegitimacy of the government of the United States might reach the point of criticality. What would happen if impassioned non-voters used the many methods of modern communications to express their ideas and dissatisfaction to others? At first thought it might seem preposterous to seriously consider that government in the United States could become delegitimized. It isn't. As sociologist Sebastian Scheerer has observed: "[T]here has never been a major social transformation in the history of mankind that ha[s] not been looked upon as unrealistic, idiotic, or utopian by the large majority of experts even a few years before the unthinkable became reality."<sup>10</sup>

For a variety of reasons which the French author, Jacques Ellul, outlined in his book, *The Political Illusion*, non-voters choose to dispel the myth that the voters control the political process.<sup>11</sup> Instead of debasing themselves and dignifying the elections that have no positive impact on their lives, over a hundred million Americans regularly choose to distance themselves from the voting process and the political regime legitimized by it. They do so by selecting the option of not voting. The non-voters are right, and they are winning every election held in America.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the Confederate States successfully seceded, and that each state had to reapply for admission to the United States. The States were occupied by federal troops in order to coerce them into complying with these conditions. If the use of

coercion to obtain their "consent" was illegal and immoral (as it would be in obtaining a signature on an ordinary contract), then what does this say about the status of these states today?

<sup>2</sup> See Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> See "Remarks on the Psychological Aspects of Totalitarianism," in Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, pp. 317-332.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Watner, editor of this anthology, first suggested this concept to me.

<sup>5</sup> See "Homage to Daniel Shays," in Gore Vidal, *Homage to Daniel Shays: Collected Essays 1952-1972*, New York: Random House, 1972, pp. 434-449.

<sup>6</sup> See Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Bulovsky, *To Build a Castle—My Life as a Dissenter*, New York: The Viking Press, 1977, p. 240.

<sup>8</sup> See Kenneth E. Boulding, "The Impact of the Draft on the Legitimacy of the National State," in Sol Tax (ed.), *The Draft*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, pp. 191-196. Also see Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (reprint edition).

<sup>9</sup> Per Bak, *How Nature Works: The Science of Self-Organized Criticality*, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Sebastian Scheerer, "Towards Abolitionism," in *Contemporary Crises*, Vol 10, p. 7; quoted in Thomas Mathiesen, *Prison on Trial: A Critical Assessment*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1990, p. 156.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Ellul, translated by Konrad Kellen, *The Political Illusion*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.

[Editor's Note: This essay is reprinted by permission of the author. It first appeared in *Dissenting Electorate* (edited by Carl Watner with Wendy McElroy): Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2001, pp. 126-129.] ▣

"The single step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie. One word of truth outweighs the world."

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn

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# Non-Voting as an Act of Secession

By Hans Sherrer

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence made it plain that in America, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive..., it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it,..." The consent theory stated by the Declaration is standard fare in American politics. The Declaration, however, failed to address a very important question: How do individuals express their disapproval of a political regime and/or withdraw their consent from a government that they deem "destructive?"

There are several methods that Americans have used to demonstrate their lack of consent. One way is to renounce allegiance to an existing political order. The colonists in North America seceded from the British empire by successfully waging the Revolutionary War. On the other hand, the eleven Confederate states removed themselves from the federal union from 1861 to 1865, before being forcibly reintegrated back into the United States.<sup>1</sup>

A second way someone can express a lack of consent is to move to a different country. This is what several commentators have called "the exit option."<sup>2</sup> History teaches that the last resort of the individual

against tyranny is to escape from its jurisdiction. The Jews left Egypt; the Separatists fled England. History is replete with examples of people who "voted with their feet."

A third way people express a lack of consent is by not voting. Although political pundits might not call it a withdrawal of consent, the fact is that millions upon millions of Americans show their displeasure with their government by not registering for and/or casting a ballot in political elections. Non-voting represents an exit from political society. It is a silent form of "social power" that speaks volumes. Choosing not to vote may be a form of apathy, but it is simultaneously an expression of "what I perceive is best for me."

In other words, millions of non-voters are implicitly stating that voting is a meaningless and unimportant activity, so far as it applies to them and their loved ones in their own lives. After all, government programs, and spending and tax policies will continue regardless of how anyone votes. Furthermore, for those thinking individuals who understand that the government must "get out the vote," the choice not to vote is a form of personal empowerment and a psychologically life-affirming act.<sup>3</sup> Those men and women who consciously choose not to participate in politics expose the lie behind the myth of "government by consent." They have not consented to anything. In other words, their decision not to vote is a

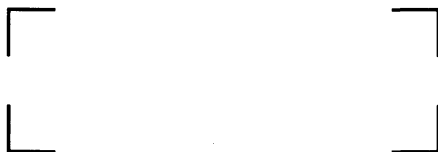
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