

THE STATE OF FREEDOM AND JUSTICE: GOVERNMENT AS IF PEOPLE MATTER MOST

By Michael Horsman (Published by Shephard-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd., London, 2016)

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An effective author writing on a subject of widespread concern will first describe the nature of the problem, supporting this description with logic and examples. Then, when the problem is made sufficiently clear, offer solutions supported, again, with logic and an explanation of how the world might be changed (for the better) by adopting those proposed solutions. Michael Horsman's new book achieves both objectives in a very readable style.

He begins by challenging readers to set aside any ideological bias they have toward any proposed changes in public policy. He sees such knee-jerk reactions based on traditional left-right positions as "worse than useless." He calls for "a new way of looking at politics." He asks readers to consider as a core principle an essential relationship between the person and the community, or society:

"True and successful individualism is always socially cooperative and responsible; ... To take care of those in need around you is actually long-sighted caring for yourself; one day you may be in need and the measure with which you have given is the measure with which you will be given." [pp.2-3]

The term that comes to mind is *reciprocity*, although the author chooses *responsibility*. What results, he concludes, is a societal state of *cooperative individualism*.

Right from the beginning, the author lets readers know he embraces a belief in a conscious creator and in the inherent justness of "the Laws of nature." Thus, he sees such laws as prescriptive rather than as merely descriptive. By living in accord with such laws, the role of the State is necessarily small. By living in accord with such laws, the condition achieved is justice.

The book is his personal story of discovery, the answering of questions as they presented themselves to him. He began his journey by a study of what the great thinkers of history had to say about the creation of "the State" and the pivotal role played by "taxation." What he learned provided him with insights into how fundamental changes in the means by which societies raise revenue could change the course of history.

He explains to readers that the economic and political system widely described as "capitalism" has delivered far less than what true capitalism could deliver. The collapse of state-socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe served to convince leading figures and most citizens living in the social democracies that the capitalist system is superior, even with its history of periodic "booms and slumps." And so, Michael Horsman joins a small but

growing cadre of thoughtful observers who have accepted the challenge of explaining the cause and identifying the cure. He describes the challenge this way:

"Either we believe that the universe is built on reason and order, and that we are destined to master its systems, or we believe that it is built on chaos and random, and will forever be the domain of the insane." [p.8]

The author found inspiration and insight by studying some of the great contributors to human understanding – John Locke, Frederic Bastiat, Herbert Spencer, Henry George and Franz Oppenheimer. He provides readers with a brief precis on each to bring them to life.

A study of the history of the movement for societal change initiated by Henry George finds passionate supporters among the ranks of dedicated individualists as well as passionate cooperativists. Michael Horsman devotes part of the book explaining why he counts himself among the former. The lesson of history is that the State is inherently dangerous to our liberty. Its powers and its size must be kept to an absolute minimum.

Another important lesson involves the rise of modern economics as a discipline in service to the State and to private privilege. He warns readers against taking mainstream economics too seriously for one very basic reason:

"Neo-classical economics (the current standard global model) has destroyed sense and reason by suggesting that there are only two factors of production, Labour and Capital, thereby blinding the world to the wholesale theft operation conducted by the political elite and their cronies, thus condemning the world to regular, deep and protracted periods of economic failure. By including Land within Capital they cunningly deflect the question of private ownership of natural resources." [p.20]

Hopefully, readers will stop to think deeply about what this brief passage really means. What has happened in the world from the establishment of the first civilizations is the redistribution of wealth from its producers to non-producers who managed to gain control over what nature provides to all for free. The agent of this redistribution is, the author argues, "the State itself." And yet, we do need governance, as expressed cogently by James Madison in the Federalist Papers:

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a (continued on page 15)

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government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."

Even when an internal balance (of sort) is achieved, there is the ongoing risk of threat from external groups seeking to acquire territory, natural resources, or a captured supply of labor and capital goods. To eliminate conflict, Michael Horsman expresses hope in "the transcendent wisdom of faith that points to individual transformation as the cure for society." [p.30] One might reasonably wonder whether we have already run out of time, but that is an expression of defeatism the result of which moves us from probability to certainty.

The author's greatest source of hope rests on generating widespread support for Henry George's proposed shift from taxation to the economic rent of land as the source of public revenue. He takes the time to explain what this would accomplish as well as offering a plan for how it would be implemented. Those with a deeper understanding of the subject could argue with some of his analysis, but this does not take away anything from his overall presentation. Far more important is his forecast that "[t]he abolition of all taxes upon the active components of the economy, Labour and Capital, will I believe be a transformation akin to the abolition of slavery." [p.56]

This transformation also involves the sustainability of human exploitation of the planet. Where we work and live, how we work and how we use land and natural resources are markedly changed by moving to "the Single Tax solution." One challenge he has not considered is that of revenue sharing between levels of government. Which level of government is best to collect the rent of land, and by what mechanism is this revenue to be shared based on services provided by other levels of government?

He hopes and expects that the reason for being of the State will largely wither away once the system of cooperative individualism is given a firm foothold. To facilitate this evolution in governance he suggests the citizens of every country consider a constitutional change combining the best part of the U.S. and U.K. executive-legislative structures:

"If the President or Prime Minister is elected by and from the Legislature, but is then disqualified from direct participation in the Legislature, and can then select his team from within the Legislature or outside it, on the same condition that all Executive members be excluded from the Legislative." [p.82]

He also foresees changes in election procedure, the merit of which I leave to the reader to decide upon. For myself, I see advantages by the elimination of elections to legislatures

altogether, replaced by the selection of legislators by lottery. Those willing to serve would take and pass the equivalent of a civil service examination to establish basic competency in the function of government. Individuals would serve one term in the legislature (unless recalled by their constituents), then be replaced by another qualified citizen.

The third and final section of the book offers assurance to readers who have a difficult time accepting that life would be better, even much better, without all of the departments, bureaus, authorities and programs today administered by government. For good measure, the author might have suggested to readers that they go online or to a used book store or their local library and find a copy of Henry George's masterwork, *Progress and Poverty*, and at least read the chapter (near the end of the book) titled "The Law of Human Progress." I was somewhat disappointed reaching the end of Michael Horsman's provocative and penetrating journey not to find something similar. However, he shares one important belief with that of Henry George:

"In the end ... the truth will win out and Justice will triumph."

Henry George wrongly thought the momentum was sufficiently strong that Justice would soon be achieved. Michael Horsman has added his name to the list of those who have done what they could to keep the torch of liberty from falling to the ground, its embers growing cold.

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