

A Short history of man – Decline and Fall  
Hans Herman Hoppe

Brief and accessible. Not very new, nothing unexpected, but not politically correct.

Hoppe's overriding thesis is that a productive social order is the prerequisite for good government. Philosophers should be looking for a maximally productive society – that is where one is most likely to find good government. Democracy, unfortunately, winds up with the now enfranchised left half of the bell curve, the incompetents, voting themselves booty from the productive members of society. The state itself encourages the process. Its functionaries scrape off their generous portion of the pelf as they redistribute it.

Hoppe leans heavily on recent findings by Clark , [[ASIN:0143127160 Wade]] , [[ASIN:0520228731 Cavalli-Sforza]], [[ASIN:59368021X Richard Lynn ]] and others that humans have been under extraordinary evolutionary pressure for the last 100,000 years at least. His bibliography is a bit dated: add also [[ASIN:B0042FZRPC Cochran and Harpending]] and [[ASIN:0812971469 Spencer Wells]], and look to the authors he cites for their more recent books. The strong conclusion throughout is that human intelligence has improved vastly, and recently. Moreover, it increased differentially as separate human groups survived different evolutionary pressures.

- First, and most important, was the evolution of language. Hoppe puts our acquisition of the ability to use language descriptively and argumentatively at somewhat more than 50,000 years ago. In doing so he evinces more certainty than scholars like [[ASIN:0142003344 Pinker]] , [[ASIN:0199279403 Burling]] , [[ASIN:052167736X Fitch ]] , and [[ASIN:0393040895 Lieberman]] who have made language their life's work. Let's say that Hoppe is at least right that language is recent.
- Second, man's facility in making tools, his inventiveness, exploded during the period 100,000 to 50,000 years ago. This is what others would call the Middle Paleolithic. Spearheads, fishhooks and other tools became more sophisticated, made from a broader range of materials including bone, antlers and tusks. Supporting the language thesis, the evidence that materials were traded over distance increases significantly.
- Third, man changed his environment radically, emigrating from tropical Africa to the temperate, even frigid climates of Europe and Asia. He had to learn how to make clothes and shelter. He had to learn how to hunt large animals cooperatively. He had to extend his planning horizon from the next meal to the next year, planning to survive the winter.
- Fourth, the establishment of permanent settlements with the invention of agriculture brought property rights and nuclear families. Inheritance became important. With children being raised by fathers, not by villages, survival depended all the more on having been fathered by somebody with "the right stuff." More evolutionary pressure.
- Fifth, the settler had to master commerce. Trade entered the picture. A pastoralist would trade with a farmer. They needed units of account. They needed to account for stored goods, especially food. They need to reckon the value of assets such as land, crops and implements.

All these environmental pressures favored increased intelligence. He posits that the two major revolutions, the Neolithic Revolution which brought agriculture and pastoralism, then later the Industrial Revolution, were triggered more by increases in intelligence than anything else. Certainly there were other preconditions, such as property rights, but without smarts they would not have happened. He notes that men have long had both the incentive and time to invent things to improve their lives. What seems to have been missing was the mental wherewithal. One certainly can make the same observation today. In the jungles of the Amazon or the roads of Haiti, people just while their time away doing nothing. In the US the poor waste days on end in front of the TV. Occam's razor says the simplest explanation is best. Go with Hoppe's proposition that they probably don't have the wit to make better use of their time, to improve their lot. Conversely when people did develop the smarts, they changed things.

Up until the Industrial Revolution there was a Malthusian limit to population growth. Like any animal population they had the alternatives of fighting for scarce resources – hunting territory – or moving to where there were no other people. But humans had a third possible alternative: innovate. Even that had its limits. Until two centuries ago, as people got smarter and more productive, their numbers grew to absorb the excess. Average wealth remained relatively static. But then, suddenly, with the surge of invention and the harnessing of water and fossil fuel power, our living standards exploded upward. That was the good news. The bad is that evolution stopped working. Not just the most fit, but everybody survived. [[ASIN:0887387160 Tocqueville]] wrote with amazement that because England fed them, there were more beggars in rich England than poor France. We have coined a term for the phenomenon – dysgenics – and the evidence is all around us. The less fit are having more children, and the developed world is growing dumber generation by generation. SAT and NAEP scores have been falling for half a century. Hoppe cites a

20-year-old work by Richard Lynn. Lynn and his associate [[ASIN:0957391331 Helmuth Nyborg]] have only strengthened their argument in the intervening decades.

Hoppe finds that the third momentous event to be explained (besides agriculture and the industrial revolution) is the invention of the state. The state is supposed to administer justice, but it also has the power to legislate – to establish what justice is. The state will, and can, inevitably break the law and make the law in its own favor and produce social injustice and moral corruption. As I write this, Greece is collapsing (again!). The state borrowed money, supposedly to be spent in the public interest on things such as roads, but certainly to be paid back by the taxpayers. Cronies favored by the state took the money via generous salaries, sweetheart contracts and other forms of corruption. Some roads got built. Now the bill has come due, and the Greek people, only the supposed beneficiaries but certainly the stuckees expected to repay this debt, are rebelling. To the libertarian Hoppe, this is the story of government throughout history. Take what you can. Help your friends. To hell with the taxpayer.

The most surprising aspect of the discussion is a reflection on feudal monarchy as an ideal system for a state. According to Hoppe, a feudal king didn't make laws, he simply applied them. There was recourse to other judges if the king's judgments were unfair. Per Hoppe, the state was minimal, and private property was more secure than it has been since. Other historians – Stephen Pinker, Gregory Clark and Fritz Rörig to name three off the top of my head – look back on that benighted era as a time of violence and uncertainty. One can grant Hoppe some nice features, but to grant that the human condition was better seems inconsistent with other historians. I add on the day it comes out that the first paragraphs of [[ASIN:B00U58Y4EA Why Did Europe Conquer the World?]] read "Imagine that a time machine could carry you back to the year 900 and land you anywhere on earth for an extended stay. Where would you go live? As you consider the possibilities, you might want a bit of useful advice— namely, avoid western Europe at all costs. 1 Why reside there, when it was poor, violent, politically chaotic, and by almost any yardstick, hopelessly backward? There were no cities, apart from Córdoba, but it was part of the Muslim world."

More to the point is a discussion of current states that seem to work. Some spin-offs of England – Hong Kong, Singapore and the Emirates – have not been democratic but have worked well. The argument, which I believe Hoppe makes elsewhere, is that these models can be expanded to apply to larger polities, or that the large polities can be broken up into manageable-sized pieces so that government is again local. Switzerland, in which most government takes place at the canton level, is the favored example of such a place. One can also look back at the early United States, in which the state and local governments were much more powerful vis-à-vis the Federal Government. The federal government's income was mostly limited to tariffs, and its expenses mostly to defense. State populations were small enough that people knew one another. A libertarian would agree that such state as existed was somewhat corrupt – any state is bound to be – but those states were preferable because they were less powerful and more local.

Like every philosopher, Hoppe at times ventures off into abstruse realms that the common reader finds difficult to follow. He opens with the proposition that questions of justice and of right and wrong are not scientific questions at all, and that sociology is dogmatically committed to some very into ethical relativism. The empiricist philosophy rules out the existence of any non-hypothetical, non-falsifiable or synthetic a priori laws and truth. Hoppe regards this philosophy is wrong and unscientific, and unmitigated intellectual disaster.

Hoppe then introduces a new word, praxeology. He defines it as a logic of action. With this preamble he launches into his history of man, things as they were, per praxeology, rather than things as modern liberals would like to see them. The question of equality pervades the discussion. Hoppe argues that we aren't equal, we can't be equal, and a state system premised on equality (viz, democracy) is bound for failure. The strong and unscrupulous will bow unctuously to the gods of equality as they rob you blind. Better, in his view, to acknowledge the great inequalities that exist in human ability and find a system that maximizes the overall good. I gather that it should be something like a benign aristocracy, one in which the rulers have a vested interest in the future of the polity they govern rather than an incentive to take as much loot as possible during their limited term of office. I look forward to reading more on the subject.