

IS GOVERNMENT REALLY INEVITABLE?

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IN RESPONSE TO MY article, “Government: Unnecessary but Inevitable” (2004), Walter Block (2005) offers a detailed refutation of my argument on the inevitability of government. I want to respond to some of what Block said because I think that in his zest to show where he thinks I have erred, he has overlooked the larger issue of how one might determine whether government really is inevitable. I will not respond to everything Block said (his comment was longer than my original article!), partly because I agree with much of it and partly because I have already addressed some of the issues he raised in Holcombe (2005),¹ but also because much of Block’s questioning of the logic behind my arguments is largely beside the point on this issue.

IS AN ORDERLY ANARCHY LOGICALLY IMPOSSIBLE?

The bulk of Block’s extensive refutation is an attack on the logic of my arguments. Essentially, Block argues that the arguments I make fall short of logically proving that government is inevitable. On that point I completely agree with Block, and so I see no reason to go, point-by-point, to note which specific arguments of Block’s I agree with and which I do not. The bottom line is that if Block argues that I have not conclusively proven the inevitability of government, I agree. However, I still believe my argument stands, for reasons I go into below.

But first, some of the arguments that Block uses to attack my logic are logically flawed themselves. For example, in several places Block (2005, pp. 71–72, 77–78, 80) argues that if my claim that government is inevitable is true, my line of reasoning also implies that a single world government is inevitable. Because we never have had

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¹Holcombe (2005) is a reply to comments by Leeson and Stringham (2005), some of which overlap the issues Block raises.

world government, it is apparent that world government is not inevitable; therefore, national governments also are not inevitable. Block's argument commits the logical fallacy of composition. He argues that what is true for a subset (e.g., an individual state) is also true for the whole (e.g., the entire world). Block employs a logical fallacy to try to show that my argument is logically flawed.

While we can debate the logic of our various arguments, there is little point in evaluating Block's arguments one by one to see if he has proven me wrong, because ultimately the issue does not turn on logic alone. I do not argue that an orderly anarchy is impossible because it would produce a logical contradiction. Rather, government is inevitable because of human nature and the physical and institutional structure within which people find themselves.

WHY DOES THE ISSUE NOT TURN ON LOGIC ALONE?

Of course, if an argument can be shown to be logically flawed, then it is incorrect. I am certainly not arguing that people should accept illogical arguments from me or anybody else. But this issue cannot be understood or resolved by logic alone, for reasons Block himself articulates. People have free will, Block asserts, and they can choose to do away with their governments. As Block says,

To say that something—government, crime, slavery, it matters not what—is inevitable is to denigrate free will. If *everyone*, without exception, suddenly converted to libertarianism, on that great and glorious day there would be no government: nada, zip, none at all. Is it a logical contradiction to suppose such a situation? Of course not. (2005, p. 90, emphasis in original in this and all following quotations)

These sentences capture the essence both of why I agree with most of what Block says, and why I nonetheless remain unconvinced by his arguments. Block is correct that as a matter of simple logic, I have not proven that government is inevitable, because people do have free will, and as a matter of simple logic, I cannot prove that people would not choose to eliminate government.² Social science is

²Hummel (2001) makes Block's same argument, and goes a step further to say that, therefore, libertarians should promote the idea of orderly anarchy as a strategy for implementing a libertarian society. Once libertarian ideas are generally accepted, the elimination of government will be possible. Hummel's article is referenced in Holcombe (2004), so it is clear that Block's argument was not unknown to me when I wrote my original article.

not like physics. Objects always obey physical laws, but people can choose their own actions.

Following the methods of social science, we make certain assumptions about human behavior and follow through with the logical implications for aggregate outcomes. But those outcomes are not set in stone, as they are in the physical world, not only because people might choose differently at some point in time, but also because our assumptions are necessarily simplified depictions of more complex real-world institutions and behavior.³ Nevertheless, we, as social scientists, draw conclusions based on assumed tendencies in human behavior, even though people could choose to behave differently from the assumptions.

For example, economists will argue that if a price ceiling is placed on a good that holds its price below the market equilibrium price, a shortage will result. Does this mean that a shortage is a logical implication of the price ceiling? Following Block's argument quoted above: No. People could choose to consume less after the price control is put into place; suppliers could choose to supply more. Conceivably, news about the price control could cause consumers to want to avoid purchasing the price-controlled good. Block (2005, p. 60) would argue that to say that a shortage "is inevitable is to denigrate free will." The quotation of Block here is completely within the context of the argument he makes. My argument that government is inevitable is made in the same way that an economist would argue that a price ceiling holding a price below the market equilibrium price will inevitably lead to a shortage. It is based upon widely-accepted assumptions about human behavior, but they are assumptions, and they are simplified depictions of more complex human action.

I am not arguing, then, that as a matter of simple logic, it can be proven that government is inevitable. Rather, I am arguing that based on commonly accepted assumptions about human behavior, if somehow an anarcho-capitalist society were to come into existence today, anarchy would erode into a society ruled by government. The full argument is given in Holcombe (2004) so I will not repeat it here.

³I discuss the role of assumptions in more detail in Holcombe (1989). The analysis of social science is always couched in terms of a framework simpler than the real world it analyses. If the real world could be understood just by observing it, there would be no need for the analysis. Because the real world is more complex than that, simplified models are employed with the idea that if the model can be comprehended, and if the world behaves analogously to the model, then understanding the model helps to understand that aspect of the real world.

The point is that following Block's own argument about free will—that I agree with—no outcome that turns on human behavior is logically inevitable. Yet as social scientists we still draw conclusions based on assumptions about human behavior, and my conclusion regarding the inevitability of government is completely consistent with the conclusions economists draw about the results of human action.⁴

EXAMPLES

In Holcombe (2004, p. 333) I cite Bosnia, Somalia, and Afghanistan in the 1990s as the best real-world examples of places without a central government, but I note that despite the absence of government they fell short of the ideals of anarcho-capitalism. Block says,

But these are not cases in point. Here, there most certainly were bands of thugs and warlords on the loose. Are these not governments? Anyone who denies this must show a relevant difference between these marauders and the governments of such worthies as Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, and their ilk. (2005, p. 85)

If one accepts Block's argument that these are governments, this appears to be evidence for my argument, not his. For in all cases, a central government was displaced and the vacuum of power was rapidly filled by new bands of thugs that established themselves in what Block refers to as governments. At least as I argued it, these were places of anarchy, where there was still a chance that anarcho-capitalism could displace Hobbesian anarchy. As Block sees these examples, the extinguishing of one government rapidly leads thugs to replace it with another, just as the article he objects to argues would happen.

Block (2005, p. 84) quotes me as saying that every place in the world is ruled by government, but objects, saying "that this is not entirely correct. Apart from the lack of world government, there are the oceans, and there is Antarctica, where the foul breath of the state hardly exists at all." But the Law of the Sea, originally ratified by United Nations Convention in 1982 and regularly updated, most recently in 2005, effectively divides up authority over the oceans—including fishing, shipping, mineral rights—among national governments.⁵ The same is true of Antarctica, following the Antarctic Treaty

⁴In some ways, libertarian anarchists resemble the utopian reformers that Mises (1998) refers to on page 2, so Mises's observations may be relevant here.

⁵See www.un.org/Depts/los/index.htm for a guide to the Law of the Sea.

of 1959.⁶ No single sovereign government rules those places; rather, many governments have agreed among themselves to divide up the rights to them. Block's examples seem more to demonstrate a move toward world government than to refute the claim that every place in the world is ruled by government. These examples Block uses appear so inconsistent with his arguments that I will leave them without further comment, but with the hope that in future work he will clarify why he believes that areas governed by international treaties among governments provide any evidence against the claim that every place in the world is ruled by government.

IS THIS AN ARGUMENT FOR GOVERNMENT?

To argue that government is inevitable is not an argument in support of government. I did argue the advantages of a limited government to preempt the establishment of a more predatory government. I said,

Therein lies the libertarian argument for a limited government. People benefit from an institutional mechanism to prevent their being taken over by a predatory gang. They can provide this mechanism by preemptively establishing their own limited government, in a form they themselves determine, not on the terms forced upon them by outside predators. (Holcombe 2004, p. 337)

People have done this, to a degree, in Eastern Europe and in the republics of the former Soviet Union, by overthrowing their former governments and establishing in their places governments that, if not meeting the libertarian ideal, are closer to it than the governments they replaced. I went on to say,

The libertarian argument for a minimal government is not that government is better than private arrangements at doing anything, but that it is necessary to prevent the creation of an even more predatory and less-libertarian government. (Holcombe 2004, p. 338)

This argument must be taken in the context of the current state of affairs, where there are no places in the world without government.

I also say,

A libertarian analysis of government must go beyond the issue of whether government should exist. Some governments are more libertarian than others, and it is worth studying how government institutions can be designed to minimize their negative impact on liberty. (Holcombe 2004, p. 337)

⁶www.antarctica.ac.uk/About_Antarctica/Treaty/treaty.html. is a link to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty and a number of follow-up documents and treaties.

My argument is not that we should establish governments in places where there are none—because no such places exist—but rather that if we really want to reduce the impact of government in our lives, the best libertarian strategy is to design and promote ways to curtail the power of the governments that now exert their power over us rather than arguing the merits of anarcho-capitalism.

CONCLUSION

Block's (2005) comment does not address the major point I was trying to make in my original article (which is also the article's title), so I will make it again briefly here. The major line of reasoning libertarian anarchists have used to support anarcho-capitalism has been that government is unnecessary because market institutions can replace all of the activities undertaken by governments. This argument is insufficient to make the case for libertarian anarchy. I argued that while it is true that government is unnecessary, this falls short of making the case for libertarian anarchy because even though government is unnecessary, it still is inevitable. Block (2005) argues that there are logical flaws in my argument, but even if he is correct, this still does not show that government is not inevitable.

My original article showed that libertarian anarchists must demonstrate more than just that government is unnecessary to support their case: they must also show that it can be self-sustaining and that it can defend itself from predatory groups that might arise both from inside and from outside the libertarian anarchist society. Block has limited his arguments to a refutation of what I said, so has left this critical step unaddressed.⁷ Leeson and Stringham (2005) do address this issue by arguing that anarchy, once established, would be able to sustain itself, and this is the line of reasoning libertarian anarchists must take to make their case. Merely showing that my

⁷Actually, Block (2005, p. 74) argues he does not need to address the issue, because merely showing that government is unnecessary is persuasive by itself, without addressing the issue of whether a libertarian anarchy is self-sustaining. Again the fallacy of composition is relevant: showing that each individual component of something is unnecessary does not say anything about all the components as a whole. For example, modern jet aircraft are designed with sufficient redundancy that a failure of any one part will not stop the aircraft from flying, so taken individually, each individual part is unnecessary for the aircraft to fly a person from one location to another. But one would not therefore say that all the parts taken together are unnecessary, so that the person could still fly from one location to another without an airplane.

arguments are in some way flawed, as Block has attempted to do, does nothing to demonstrate the viability of libertarian anarchy.

As Block notes, because people have free will, any conclusion in the social sciences which is based upon an assumption about human action can never be shown to be applicable to the real world simply as a matter of logic alone. People may decide to act differently. Nevertheless, Block's arguments have not convinced me that I am wrong in my conclusion regarding what is possible in today's world.⁸ As a practical matter, Block and I both want smaller government, and leaving aside the issue of whether it is possible to completely eradicate government, it is inconceivable to me that the scope of government could possibly shrink so much in my lifetime that I would no longer think it is excessive. In that sense I believe that Block and I share the same libertarian agenda of reducing the scope and power of government, and that our debate on this issue has no immediate practical relevance.

I admire Block's principled stand in support of the complete eradication of government, even though I do not believe that goal is possible. In response to Leeson and Stringham's (2005) comment on my article, I said,

I support their intellectual agenda of promoting libertarian anarchy as an ideal social order. However, if government is inevitable, promotion of libertarian anarchism has a limited potential policy payoff, and it may distract good minds from the pursuit of a more productive libertarian agenda. In contrast, potential immediate and tangible benefits can be reaped by working now to design, promote, and implement mechanisms that limit the scope and power of government. (Holcombe 2005, p. 556)

If someone believes that libertarian anarchy is possible in the foreseeable future, promoting its cause appears to be a course of action that can have a practical payoff. For people who believe—as I do—that government is inevitable for the foreseeable future, the

⁸It is interesting to speculate on what about today's world might have to change for government to no longer be inevitable. From my original 2004 article, it is apparent that government will not disappear once we develop private sector alternatives for all government-produced goods and services, because we have already done that. Rather, at a minimum individuals would have to develop the power to successfully resist the force of others without outside assistance. Changes in the balance of power along these lines have happened in the past; for example, when the invention of gunpowder enabled individuals to arm themselves and escape the power of their feudal lords.

cause of liberty is better served by designing and promoting mechanisms to limit the scope and power of government rather than arguing that it should be abolished altogether.

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