

HANS-HERMANN HOPPE

A SHORT
HISTORY
OF MAN

Progress and Decline

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A SHORT HISTORY OF MAN

PROGRESS AND DECLINE

AN AUSTRO-LIBERTARIAN RECONSTRUCTION

HANS-HERMANN HOPPE

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To
GÜLÇİN

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FOREWORD

HANS-HERMANN HOPPE IS ONE OF THE most remarkable libertarian scholars of our time. He began as a private student of Jürgen Habermas, the famous German philosopher and social theorist. Habermas was, and remains to this day, a committed Marxist. He is the leader of the notorious Frankfurt school.

Habermas was very impressed with Hans, and, under the patronage of this eminent Marxist, Hans had every reason to expect a stellar academic career in his native Germany. A problem soon arose, though, one which has had happy results for all those who love liberty. Hans soon came to realize that the leftism and socialism he had grown up with was intellectually barren and morally bankrupt. He discovered on his own the great works of Ludwig von Mises and Murray N. Rothbard.

Austrian economics and Murray's anarchism were not what Habermas had in mind. By becoming a libertarian, Hans effectively ended his chances for a chair at a major German university, even though his intellectual accomplishments easily qualified him for one. Like Murray, though, Hans is a scholar of complete intellectual integrity. He would not surrender what he had come to realize was the truth whatever the cost to his own career.

Hans decided to come to United States in order to study with Murray, who was then teaching in New York. When I met him, I was struck by Hans's firm commitment to Rothbardian principles and his outstanding intellectual ability. Murray, of course, immediately grasped Hans's potential. When Murray was named to an endowed chair in economics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, he worked to get Hans a position in the economics department as well. Together, the two of them made UNLV a major center for the study of Austrian economics; and they did so in the face of much opposition from some of their departmental colleagues.

Murray was especially intrigued by one of Hans's main arguments. Hans's teacher Habermas pioneered an approach to ethics based on the conditions for engaging in rational argument. In a way that Habermas would hardly approve, Hans turned Habermas's ethics on its head. Instead of support for socialism, argumentation ethics as Hans explained it provided powerful support for self-ownership and private property. Murray heartily approved and highly praised Hans's argument:

Hans Hoppe has ... deduced an anarcho-Lockean rights ethic from self-evident axioms. Not only that: he has demonstrated that, just like the action axiom itself, it is impossible to deny or disagree with the anarcho-Lockean rights ethic without falling immediately into self-contradiction and self-refutation. (*Liberty*, November 1988)

Hans had reversed Habermas; but not content with this, he again overturned conventional opinion. Like Murray, Hans is an anarcho-capitalist. The best government is no government at all. The question nevertheless arises: in a world of states, what type of government is the least bad? Almost everybody says "democracy." Unfortunately, many libertarians agree. Hans showed in his classic *Democracy: The God That Failed* that democracy leads to profligate spending and reckless policies. Those in power know that they will remain in charge only for a limited time. Their attitude will be "get all you can and get it now." By contrast, a king will tend to be less exploitative. He will try to preserve the lives and property of his subjects, because he is no temporary ruler, and wants to pass on a prosperous kingdom to his heirs. Hans of course did not say that monarchy was a "good thing," just that it tends to be better than democracy. The great Catholic classical liberal Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, who had influenced Hans, said this was a brilliant insight.

“From Aristocracy to Monarchy to Democracy,” one of the essays included in *A Short History of Man*, summarizes Hans’s position. Readers of this scintillating work will discover that if monarchy is better than democracy, aristocracy is better still. If you haven’t read Hans before, you have a treatise in store for you. In just a few pages, he will make you question everything you have ever read about government.

Throughout *A Short History of Man*, Hans shows how the lessons of Austrian economics can be used to help us understand history. In doing so, Hans is following the path laid down by his great mentor, Murray Rothbard. Like Murray, Hans is a scholar of near universal interests. He is fully at home in anthropology and sociology, as well as global history, economics, and philosophy.

Drawing on his vast knowledge and Austrian insights, Hans addresses two questions. How did the family and private property originate? How did the Industrial Revolution get started? Readers will see how the development of secure property rights and the free market has been essential to human progress. The question for our times then is: Will these developments continue, to the great benefit of mankind, or will the state be able to thwart them?

In its use of economics and philosophy to illuminate history, *A Short History of Man* brings to mind such libertarian classics as Oppenheimer’s *The State*, Nock’s *Our Enemy the State*, and Chodorov’s *The Rise and Fall of Society*. *A Short History of Man* is an ideal introduction to the thought of a major social thinker and outstanding libertarian.

—Llewellyn H. Rockwell, J.

INTRODUCTION:

AN AUSTRO-LIBERTARIAN RECONSTRUCTION

THE FOLLOWING STUDIES TRY TO EXPLAIN THREE of the most momentous events in the history of mankind.

First, I explain the origin of private property, and in particular of ground land, and of the family and the family household as the institutional foundations of agriculture and agrarian life that began some 11,000 years ago, with the Neolithic Revolution in the Fertile Crescent of the Near-East, and that has since—until well through the late nineteenth century—come to shape and leave an imprint on human life everywhere.

Second, I explain the origin of the Industrial Revolution that set off around 1800, only some 200 years ago in England. Until then and for thousands of years, mankind had lived under Malthusian conditions. Population growth was constantly encroaching on the available means of subsistence. Every productivity increase was “eaten up” quickly by an expanding population size such that real incomes for the overwhelming bulk of the population were held down constantly near subsistence level. Only for about two centuries now has man been able to achieve population growth *combined* with *increasing* per capita incomes.

And third, I explain the parallel origin and development of the *State* as a territorial monopolist of ultimate decision-making, i.e., an institution vested with the power to *legislate* and *tax* the inhabitants of a territory, and its transformation from a monarchic State, with “absolute” kings, to a democratic State with “absolute” people, as it has come to the fore in the course of the twentieth century.

While this could suffice as an introduction and the reader could proceed directly to the following chapters, a few additional remarks may be in order for the philosophically minded reader.

Until the early twentieth century, the following would have been classified as *sociological* studies. But with the rise and increasingly dominant influence attained in the course of the twentieth century by the empiricist-positivist-falsificationist philosophy, the term *sociology* in the meantime has acquired a very different meaning. According to the empiricist philosophy, normative questions—questions of justice, of “right” and “wrong”—are not scientific questions at all—and consequently most of modern, “scientific” sociology, then, is dogmatically committed to some variant of *ethical relativism* (of ‘anything goes’). And the empiricist philosophy categorically rules out the existence of any non-hypothetical, non-falsifiable, or synthetic a priori laws and truths—and accordingly modern sociology is dogmatically committed also to some variant of *empirical relativism* (of ‘everything is possible,’ of ‘you can never be sure of anything,’ and ‘nothing can be ruled out from the outset’).

My studies are and do everything a “good empiricist” is not supposed to be or do; for I consider the empiricist-positivist philosophy wrong and unscientific and regard its influence especially on the social sciences as an unmitigated intellectual disaster.

It is demonstrably false that ethics is not a science, and that no universal principles of justice exist and no “true” (non-arbitrary) criterion of distinguishing moral progress from decline. And it is likewise demonstrably false that no universal and invariant laws of human action and interaction exist, i.e., no laws of what is and is not possible and of what can and cannot be successfully done in human affairs, and no non-arbitrary criterion of judging actions as correct and successful or incorrect and faulty solutions to a given problem or purpose.

As for the second, ‘positive’ claim, it is contradicted by the entire body of Classical Economics. Classical Economics, reconstructed, refined, and further advanced during the “Marginalist Revolution,” in particular by its Viennese branch, founded by Carl Menger (1840–1921) with his

Principles of Economics (1871) and culminating with Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973) and his unsurpassed *Human Action* (1940), and by what has since become known as *Austrian economics* provides the intellectual material for a grand, comprehensive system of non-hypothetically true laws of human action, of *praxeology*—the logic of action—and of praxeological laws.

Any explanation of historical events must take praxeology—and specifically Ludwig von Mises—into account, and it is the “empiricists” who are insufficiently empirical in their work. In denying or ignoring the underlying praxeological invariants and constants in their observations of the social world, they fail to see the forest for the trees.

And as for the first, ‘normative’ claim, it is contradicted by the entire body of private law, particular the law of property and contract, that grew up in response to the continued occurrence of interpersonal conflict regarding scarce resources. From the old ‘natural law’ tradition of the Stoics through Roman law, to Scholastic law, to the modern, secular ‘natural rights’ tradition, a body of law and of scholarly literature on matters of law had emerged by the nineteenth century, that should put any ethical relativist to shame.

Buried for a long time under mountains of positivist legal rubbish, this tradition has been rescued and reinvigorated, refined, and rigorously reconstructed in our time above all by Murray N. Rothbard (1926–1995), most notably in his *Ethics of Liberty* (1981), to the until now most comprehensive system of natural law and the political philosophy of *libertarianism*. Any normative evaluation of historical events and developments that aspires to the rank of science, i.e., that claims to be more than an arbitrary expression of taste, must take account of libertarianism, and of Murray Rothbard in particular.

Hence, to indicate the *method* guiding my studies in the history of man, the subtitle of my little book: *An Austro-Libertarian Reconstruction*.

The events in human history that I want to explain are not necessary and predetermined, but *contingent empirical* events, and my studies then are not exercises in economic or libertarian theory. They will have to tell history as it really was and take account of all known facts. In this regard, I do not claim any originality. I do not unearth any unknown facts or dispute any established findings. I rely on what others have established as the known facts. But the facts and the chronology of events do not contain their own explanation or interpretation. What distinguishes my studies is the fact that they explain and interpret the history of man from the conceptual vantage point of *Austro-Libertarianism* with the background knowledge of praxeology (economics) and of libertarianism (ethics). They are conducted in awareness of the non-hypothetical or aprioristic character of the laws of praxeology and of ethics and the fact that such laws impose strict logical limitations on what—which one explanation or interpretation, of all conceivable explanations and interpretations of some given historical data set, can be considered at all *possible* and *possibly (hypothetically) true* (and so logically scientifically admissible), and which ones can and must be ruled out instead as *impossible* and *impossibly true*. History, then, is *rationaly re-constructed*, i.e., with the knowledge that every possibly true empirical explanation and interpretation must be in accordance not only with the ‘data’ but in particular also with praxeological and ethical law, and that every explanation or interpretation at variance with such laws, even if apparently ‘fitting the data,’ is not only empirically false but not scientifically admissible explanation or interpretation at all.

The history so reconstructed and retold is to a significant extent *revisionist history*, opposed not only to much or even most of what the dominant leftist “mainstream” has to say on the matter, but owing to the emphasis placed in my studies on human inequalities and in particular on unequal cognitive abilities and psychic dispositions, opposed also to much pronounced and proclaimed in the

regard by some circles of “politically correct” and “progressive” so-called “cosmopolitan establishment-libertarians.”

Thus the first momentous event in the history of man, the Neolithic Revolution, is reconstructed as a cognitive achievement of the first order and a great progressive step in the evolution of human intelligence. The institution of private land ownership and of the family and the practice of agriculture and animal husbandry is explained as a rational invention, a new and innovative solution to the problem faced by tribal hunters and gatherers of balancing population growth and increasing land scarcity.

Similarly, the Industrial Revolution is reconstructed as another great leap forward in the development of human rationality. The problem of balancing land and population size that had been temporarily solved with the original invention and subsequent spread and worldwide imitation of agriculture had to eventually re-emerge. As long as the population size increased, per capita income could be increased only if and for as long as productivity increases outstripped population growth. By steady productivity increases, i.e., the continuous invention of new or more efficient tools for the production of ever more, new or better products, requires a continuously high level of human intelligence, of ingenuity, patience, and inventiveness. Wherever, and as long as such a high level of intelligence is lacking, population growth must lead to lower—and not to higher—per capita income. The Industrial Revolution, then, marks the point, when the level of human rationality had reached a level high enough to make the escape from Malthusianism possible. And the escape is reconstructed as the result of the “breeding,” over many generations, of a more intelligent population. High intelligence translated into greater economic success, and greater economic success combined with selective marriage- and family-policies translated into greater reproductive success (the production of a larger number of surviving descendants). This combined with the laws of human genetics and civic inheritance produced over time a more intelligent, ingenious and innovative population.

Lastly, while the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions are reconstructed as correct and innovative solutions to a persistent problem: of a population size encroaching on living standards, and hence on great intellectual advances, the third momentous event to be explained is the invention of the State. The State is a territorial monopolist of ultimate decision-making and its successive transformation from a monarchic to a democratic State, is reconstructed as the outcome of a sequence of cumulative intellectual—moral and economic—errors and as a step back in the development of human rationality and a growing threat to the achievements attained with the Industrial Revolution. *Per* construction, the State *cannot* achieve what it is supposed to achieve. It is supposed to produce justice, i.e., to uphold and enforce the law, but with the power to *legislate* the State can—and inevitably will—*break* the law and *make* law in its own favor and so produce instead injustice and moral corruption. And the State is supposed to protect the property of its subjects from foreign invasion, but with the power to *tax* its subjects it can—and inevitably will—expropriate the property of these subjects not, obviously enough, to protect *them* and their property, but to ‘protect’ *itself* and its expropriations against any so-called “invader,” foreign or domestic. As an “expropriating property protector,” i.e., as a fundamentally “parasitic” institution, the State can never help but will always *hinder* in the production of wealth and so *lower* per capita incomes.

In combination, then, with the following studies I hope to make a small contribution to the tradition of grand social theory and render the long course of human history from its very beginning to the present age more intelligible.

Hans-Hermann Hoppe

ON THE ORIGIN OF PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE FAMILY

I. THE SETTING: HISTORY

IT IS REASONABLE TO BEGIN HUMAN HISTORY five million years ago, when the human line of evolutionary descent separated from that of our closest nonhuman relative, the chimpanzee. It is also reasonable to begin it 2.5 million years ago, with the first appearance of *homo habilis*; or 200,000 years ago, when the first representative of “anatomically modern man” made its appearance; or 100,000 years ago, when the anatomically modern man had become the standard human form. Instead, I want to begin only 50,000 years ago, when “anatomically modern man” had evolved into “behaviorally modern man.” This is an eminently reasonable starting point, too.^[1]

“Behaviorally modern human” refers to the existence of hunter-gatherers, of which even today some small pockets have remained. Based on archeological evidence, humans living 100,000 years ago were apparently still largely inept at hunting. They were certainly unable to take down large and dangerous animals, and it appears that they did not know how to fish. Their tools were almost exclusively made of stone and wood and made of materials of local origin, indicating the absence of any distance travel or trading. In distinct contrast, about 50,000 years later the human toolkit took on a new, greatly advanced appearance. Other materials were used besides stone and wood: bone, antler, ivory, teeth, shells, and the materials often came from distant places. The tools, including knives, needles, barbed points, pins, borers and blades were more complex and skillfully crafted. The missing technology was much improved and indicated highly developed hunting skills (although bows were invented only about 20,000 years ago). As well, man knew how to fish and was apparently able to build boats. Moreover, next to plain, functional tools, seemingly purely artistic implements, ornaments, figurines and musical instruments, such as bird-bone flutes, appeared on the scene at the time.

It has been hypothesized that what made this momentous development possible was a genetic change leading to the emergence of language, which involved a radical improvement in man’s ability to learn and innovate. The archaic humans—*homo ergaster*, *homo neanderthalensis*, *homo erectus*—did not have command of a language. To be sure, it can be safely assumed that they employed, as do many of the higher animals, the two so-called lower functions of language: the expressive or symptomatic function and the trigger or signal function.^[2] However, they were apparently incapable of performing the two higher, cognitive functions of language: the descriptive and especially the argumentative function. These unique human abilities—so uniquely human indeed that one cannot think them ‘away’ from our existence without falling into internal contradictions—of forming simple descriptive statements (propositions) such as “this (subject) is ‘a’ (predicate),” which claim to be *true*, and especially of presenting arguments (chains of propositions) such as “this is ‘a’; every ‘a’ is ‘b’; hence, this is ‘b’,” which claim to be *valid*, emerged apparently only about 50,000 years ago.^[3]

Without language, human coordination had to occur *via* instincts, of which humans possess very few, or by means of physical direction or manipulation; and learning had to be either through imitation or by means of internal (implicit) inferences. In distinct contrast, with language—that is, with words: sounds associated with and logically tied to certain objects and concepts (characteristic

—coordination could be achieved by mere symbols; and learning thus became independent of sensory impressions (observations) and inferences could be made externally (explicitly) and hence became inter-subjectively reproducible and controllable. That is, by means of language knowledge could be transmitted to distant places and times (it was no longer tied to perception); one could communicate about matters (knowledge acquired and accumulated) far away in time and place. And because of the reasoning process, our train of thought leading us to certain inferences and conclusions became ‘objectified’ in external, inter-subjectively ascertainable arguments it could not only be easily transferred through time and space but at the same time be publicly criticized, improved, and corrected. It is no wonder, then, that hand in hand with the emergence of language revolutionary changes in technology would come about.

About 100,000 years ago, the population size of “modern humans,” our immediate predecessors is estimated to have been around 50,000, spread across the African continent and northward into the Middle East, the region of today’s Israel.[4] From about 80,000 to 70,000 years ago, the earth experienced a significant cooling period. As a consequence, the Neanderthals, who lived in Europe and in the course of many millennia had adjusted to cold climates moved southward, where they clashed with and apparently destroyed their African relatives in large numbers. In addition, an extended drought period beginning about 60,000 years ago robbed “modern man” of much of his subsistence basis, such that 50,000 years ago the number of “modern humans” may not have exceeded 5,000, confined to northeast Africa.[5]

However, from then on the rise of modern humans has been uninterrupted, spreading all across the globe and eventually displacing all of their archaic relatives. The last Neanderthals, holed up in some caves near Gibraltar, are believed to have become extinct about 25,000 years ago. The last remnants of *homo erectus*, found on the Indonesian island of Flores, date back about 13,000 years.

The “modern humans” led a nomadic hunter-gatherer life-style. Societies were composed of small bands of people (10–30), which occasionally met and formed a common genetic pool of about 150 and may be up to 500 people (a size which geneticists have found to be necessary in order to avoid dysgenic effects[6]). The division of labor was limited, with the main partition being that between women—acting mostly as gatherers—and men—acting mostly as hunters. While private property in tools and implements was known and recognized, the nomadic lifestyle only allowed for little possessions and hence made hunter-gatherer societies comparatively egalitarian.[7] Nonetheless, life initially appears to have been good for our forebears.[8] Only a few hours of regular work allowed for a comfortable life, with good (high protein) nourishment and plenty of leisure time. Indeed, fossil findings (skeletons and teeth) seem to indicate that our hunter-gatherer forebears enjoyed a life expectancy of well above 30 years, which was only reached again in the course of the nineteenth century.[9] Contra Hobbes, their life was anything but nasty, brutish, and short.[10]

However, the life of hunters and gatherers faced a fundamental and ultimately unanswerable challenge. Hunter-gatherer societies led essentially parasitic lives. That is, they did not add anything to the nature-given supply of goods. They only depleted the supply of goods. They did not produce (apart from a few tools) but only consumed. They did not grow and breed but had to wait for nature to regenerate and replenish. At best, what they accomplished was that they did not overhunt or overgather so that the natural regeneration process was not disturbed or even brought to an entire standstill. In any case, what this form of parasitism obviously involved, then, was the inescapable problem of population growth. In order to permit the comfortable life just described, the population density had to remain extremely low. It has been estimated that one square mile of territory was needed to comfortably sustain one to two persons, and in less fertile regions even larger territories

were necessary.[11] So what was one to do when the population size exceeded these more or less narrow limits?

People could of course try to prevent such population pressure from emerging, and indeed hunter-gatherer societies tried their best in this regard. They induced abortions, they engaged in infanticide especially female infanticide, and they reduced the number of pregnancies by engaging in long periods of breast-feeding (which, in combination with the low body-fat characteristic of constantly mobile and moving women, reduces female fertility). Yet while this alleviated the problem it did not solve it. The population kept increasing.

Given that the population size could not be maintained at a stationary level, only three alternatives existed for the steadily emerging “excess” population. One could *fight* over the limited food supplies, one could *migrate*, or one could *invent* and adopt a new, technologically advanced societal organization-mode that allowed for a larger population size to survive on the same, given territory.

As for the first option, i.e., fighting, a few remarks shall suffice. In the literature, primitive man has been frequently described as peaceful and living in harmony with nature. Most popular in this regard is Rousseau’s portrayal of the “noble savage.” Aggression and war, it has been frequently held, were the result of civilization built upon the institution of private property. In fact, matters are almost exactly the reverse.[12] True, the savagery of modern wars has produced unparalleled carnage. Both World War I and World War II, for instance, resulted in tens of millions of deaths and left entire countries in ruins. And yet, as anthropological evidence has in the meantime made abundantly clear, primitive man has been considerably more warlike than contemporary man. It has been estimated that on the average some 30 percent of all males in primitive, hunter-gatherer societies died from unnatural—violent—causes, far exceeding anything experienced in this regard in modern societies.[13] According to Lawrence Keeley’s estimates, a tribal society on the average lost about 0.1 percent of its population in combat each year.[14] Applied to the population of the twentieth century, this would amount to a casualty rate of some 2 billion people instead of the actual number of “merely” a few hundred million. Of course, primitive warfare was very different from modern warfare. It was not conducted by regular troops on battlefields, but by raids, ambushes, and surprise attacks. However, every attack was characterized by utmost brutality, carried out without mercy and always with deadly results; and while the number of people killed in each attack might have been small, the incessant nature of these aggressive encounters made violent death an ever-present danger for every man (and abduction and rape for every woman).[15] Moreover, increasing evidence for the widespread practice of cannibalism has been accumulated in recent times. Indeed, it appears that cannibalism was once upon a time an almost universal practice.[16]

More importantly, these findings regarding primitive man’s war-likeness are not just anthropological curiosities, i.e., features that one might consider incidental to the true nature of hunter-gatherer societies. To the contrary, there exist fundamental theoretical reasons why such societies were characterized by incessant warfare and peaceful relations were almost impossible to attain, in particular if the possibility of evading one another was foreclosed because all surrounding land was occupied. Because then it became unavoidable that the members of different hunter-gatherer tribes encountered each other more or less regularly on their various expeditions in search of plants and animals. Indeed, as the population size increased such encounters became ever more frequent. And because hunters and gatherers did not add anything to the nature-given supply of goods but only consumed what was provided by nature, their competition for food was necessarily of an antagonistic nature: either I pick the berries or hunt a given animal or you do it. No or little trade and exchange

between the members of different tribes existed, because the members of one tribe engaged essentially the same activities as those of any other tribe and neither one accumulated any surplus goods that could be exchanged for others' surplus-goods. There existed only ineradicable conflict and the more conflict the more the population number in each tribe exceeded its optimum size. In this situation, where everything appropriated by one person (or tribe) was immediately consumed and the total supply of goods was strictly limited by natural forces, only deadly antagonism could exist between men. In the words of Ludwig von Mises, men became "deadly foes of one another, irreconcilable rivals in their endeavors to secure a portion of the scarce supply of means of sustenance provided by nature. Each man would have been forced to view all other men as his enemies; his craving for the satisfaction of his own appetites would have brought him into an implacable conflict with all his neighbors. No sympathy could possibly develop under such a state of affairs."[\[17\]](#) On the death of one's rivals provided a solution to one's own desire to survive. Indeed, to spare another man's life would have left him equipped to create even more offspring and hence reduced one's own future chance of survival still further.[\[18\]](#)

The second available option to deal with the steadily re-emerging problem of excess population was migration. While by no means costless—after all one had to leave familiar for unfamiliar territories—migration (as compared to fighting) must have appeared frequently as the less costly option, especially as long as some open frontier existed. Hence, setting out from their homeland in East Africa, successively the entire globe was conquered by bands of people breaking away from their relatives to form new societies in areas hitherto unoccupied by humans.

It appears that this process began also about 50,000 years ago, shortly after the emergence of behaviorally modern man and the acquisition of the ability to build boats. From about this time on until around 12,000 to 11,000 years ago global temperatures gradually fell (since then we are in an interglacial warming period) and the sea levels accordingly fell.[\[19\]](#) People crossed over the Red Sea at the Gate of Grief, which was then merely a narrow gap of water dotted with islands, to land at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula (which enjoyed a comparatively wet period at that time). From there onward, preferring to stay in tropical climate zones to which one had been adjusted, the migration—of possibly not more than 150 people—continued eastward. Travel was mostly by boat because until about 6,000 years ago when man learned how to tame horses, this form of transportation was much faster and more convenient than travel by foot. Hence, migration took place along the coastline—and proceeded from there into the interior through river valleys—first all the way to India. From there, as the genetic evidence seems to indicate, the population movement split into two directions. On the one hand it proceeded around the Indian peninsula to southeast Asia and Indonesia (which was then connected to the Asian mainland) and finally to the now foundered former continent of Sahul (of Australia, New Guinea, and Tasmania, which were joined until about 8,000 years ago) which was then only separated from the Asian mainland by a sixty mile wide channel of water dotted with islands permitting short-distance island hopping, as well as northward up the coast to China and eventually Japan. On the other hand, the migration process went from India in a northwesterly direction, through Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey and ultimately Europe. As well, splitting off of the stream of migration, people pressed in a northeasterly direction into southern Siberia. Later migrations, most likely in three waves, with the first about 14,000–12,000 years ago, went from Siberia across the Bering Strait—then (until about 11,000 years ago) a land bridge—and onto the American continent, apparently reaching Patagonia only about 1,000 years later (archeological findings of human remains in southern Chile have been dated as 12,500 years old). The last migratory route set out from Taiwan, which was occupied about 5,000 years ago, sailing across the Pacific

reach the Polynesian islands and finally, only about 800 years ago, New Zealand.[20]

The process was essentially always the same: a group invaded some territory, population pressure mounted, some people stayed put, a subgroup moved further on, generation after generation, along the coastline, following rivers and game and avoiding deserts and high mountains. The migration from Africa all the way to Australia may have taken about 4,000 to 5,000 years, and migration to Europe 7,000 years (the oldest artifacts there ascribed to modern humans, found in Bulgaria, date about 43,000 years back) and another 7,000 years to reach western Spain.[21] Once broken up, practically no contact existed between the various hunter-gatherer societies. Consequently, although initially closely related to one another through direct kinship relations, these societies formed separated genetic pools and, confronted with different natural environments and as the result of mutations and genetic drift interacting with natural selection, in the course of time they took on distinctly different appearances. By and large, the genetic difference between various societies increased in correlation with the spatial distance between societies and the duration of their separation time.[22] Different ethnicities emerged, and later also distinctly different human races. These emerging, genetically based differences concerned matters such as skin color, physical build and strength, resistance to cold temperatures and to various diseases, and tolerance *vis-à-vis* certain substances. They also concerned cognitive matters, however. Thus, genetic evidence exists for two significant further developments regarding the size and cognitive powers of the human brain. One such development occurred about 37,000 years ago and affected most of the population in Europe as well as in East Asia (but left very few traces in Africa), and another occurred about 6,000 years ago and affected mostly people in the Middle East and Europe (but had less impact in East Asia and almost none in sub-Saharan Africa).[23]

Moreover, hand in hand with the geographical and correlated genetic differentiation of humans went a linguistic differentiation. Very much in agreement with and supported by genetic (biological) evidence, some linguists, in particular Merritt Ruhlen,[24] following in the footsteps of the pioneering work of Joseph Greenberg, have made the plausible case for a single human proto-language, from which all human languages can be derived as more or less distant relatives. Obviously, the original emigrants from the African homeland, some 50,000 years ago, would have spoken the same language and so it seems hardly surprising that the above-sketched population movement, and the splitting of groups of people into different genetic pools, more or less separated in time and space from one another, should be closely mirrored by a differentiation of languages, the grouping of different languages into language families, and the grouping of these into still larger super-families.[25] Likewise, the process of the proliferation of languages appears to have followed a predictable pattern. First, with the spread of humans around the world as hunters and gatherers and the concomitant proliferation of distinct, separated genetic pools, a successively increasing number of different languages emerged. Thus, for instance, of the 6,000 different languages still spoken today, some 1,200 languages are spoken in New Guinea, one of the most "primitive" remaining world regions, half of which have no more than the "magic" number of 500 speakers and none more than 100,000. Then, however, with the beginning of human settlement some 11,000 years ago and the following transition to agriculture and the attendant expansion and intensification of the division of labor (more on which later on), a countervailing and even contrary tendency appears to have come into existence: just as the genetic pools appear to have widened, so the number of different languages spoken has successively diminished.

II. THE PROBLEM: THEORY

About 35,000 years ago, i.e., 15,000 years after the initial exodus from Africa, practically all of Europe, Asia, Australia and, of course, Africa itself had been occupied by our ancestors, the modern humans, and archaic humans: *homo neanderthalensis* and *homo erectus*, were on the verge of extinction. About 12,000 years ago, humans had also spread all across the Americas. Apart from the Polynesian islands, then, all land and all of the naturally given supply of earthly (economic) goods: plants and animals had been taken into human possession; and, given the parasitic lifestyle of hunter-gatherers, humans did not *add* anything to this land and the nature-given supply of goods but merely reacted to natural *changes*.

These changes were at times quite drastic. Changes in global climate, for instance, could and did significantly affect how much inhabitable land was available and the natural vegetation and animal population. In the time period under consideration, in the 20,000 plus years between 35,000 and 11,000 years ago, drastic changes in such natural conditions occurred. 20,000 years ago, for instance, during the period known as the *Last Glacial Maximum*, temperatures fell sharply and most of Northern Europe and Siberia became uninhabitable. Britain and all of Scandinavia was covered by glaciers, most of Siberia turned into polar desert and steppe-tundra extended as far south as the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea. After 5,000 years, about 15,000 years ago, the glaciers began to retreat, allowing people, animals, and plants to re-occupy previously deserted regions. Twenty-five hundred years later, however, within merely a decade, temperatures again plummeted back to almost the previous frigid conditions; and only another 1,000 years later, about 11,500 years ago, and again quite suddenly, did temperatures then experience a long-sustained increase and the earth entered the so-called *Holocene*, the latest and still lasting interglacial warming period.^[26] (The Sahara began to turn into the present, extremely hot desert only less than 3,000 years ago. In pre-Roman times, the Sahara—and similarly the central Asian deserts—was still a green savanna with an abundant supply of wildlife. The power and the attraction of Carthage, for instance, was based largely on the fertility of its hinterland as a center of wheat production; this fact was an important reason for Rome's desire to destroy Carthage and gain control of its North African territories.^[27])

In any case and regardless of all complicating details and all changes that future empirical researches will no doubt bring about concerning the foregoing historical narrative, at some point in time the landmass available to help satisfy human needs could no longer be enlarged. In economic jargon, the supply of the production factor “land” became fixed, and every increase in the size of the human population had to be sustained by the same, unchanged quantity of land. Of the formerly three available options in response to an increasing population pressure: to move, to fight, or to invent, only the latter two remained open. What to do when faced with this challenge?

To bring the problem faced into even sharper relief it is useful to first take another, more detailed look at the admittedly rather limited extent of the division of labor within a hunter-gatherer society.

So far the antagonism between the members of *different* bands or clans has been explained which it has been taken for granted that *within* a given band or clan collaboration—peaceful cooperation—exists. But why should this be so? Intra-group cooperation is almost universally assumed as a matter of-course. Nonetheless, it too requires an explanation, because a world without even this limited degree of cooperation is certainly *conceivable*. To be sure, there exists a biological basis for *some* forms of human cooperation. “The mutual sexual attraction of male and female,” writes Mises, “is inherent in man's animal nature and independent of any thinking and theorizing. It is permissible to call it original, vegetative, instinctive, or mysterious.”^[28] The same can be said about the relationship between mother and child. If mothers would not take care of their offspring for an extended period of time, their children would instantly die and mankind would be doomed. However, this necessary

biologically determined degree of cooperation is a far cry from that actually observed in hunter-gatherer societies. Thus, Mises continues,

neither cohabitation, nor what precedes it or follows, generates social cooperation and societal modes of life. The animals too join together in mating, but they have not developed social relations. Family life is not merely a product of sexual intercourse. It is by no means natural and necessary that parents and children live together in the way they do in the family. The mating relation need not result in a family organization. The human family is an outcome of thinking, planning, and acting. It is this fact which distinguishes it radically from those animal groups which we call *per analogiam* animal families.[\[29\]](#)

Why, for instance, did not each man and each woman, after they had left infancy, hunt or gather alone only to meet for occasional sex? Why did it *not* occur what has been described as having occurred for *groups* of humans *already on the level of individuals*: one person, faced with a strictly limited supply of nature-given goods, breaking away from another in order to avoid conflict until a land was taken into possession and then a war of everyone against everyone else (rather than merely war of the members of one group against the members of all other groups) breaking out? The answer to this is: because of the recognition that cooperation was more productive than isolated, self-sufficient action. Division of labor and cooperation based on such division of labor increased the productivity of human labor.

There are three reasons for this: First, there exist tasks which exceed the powers of any single man and require instead the combined efforts of several men in order to be successfully executed. Certain animals, for instance, might be too large or too dangerous to be hunted by single individuals but require the cooperative engagement of many. Or there exist tasks which could, in principle, be executed by a single individual but that would take up so much time for an isolated actor that the final result does not appear worth the effort. Only concerted action can accomplish these tasks in a time span sufficiently short in order to deem the task worthwhile. Searching for edible plants or animals, for instance, is fraught with uncertainties. On one day one might stumble across suitable plants or animals quickly, but at another time one might search for them in vain seemingly without end. But one pools this risk, i.e., if a large number of gatherers or hunters begin their search separately only to call upon each other once anyone of them has turned out to be lucky in his search, then gathering and hunting might be turned into routinely successful endeavors for each participant.

Second: Even though the natural environment faced by each person might be more or less the same, each individual (even identical twins) is different from any other. Men, for instance, are significantly different in their abilities than women. By their very nature, men are typically better hunters and women better gatherers. Adults are significantly different in their abilities than kids. Some people are physically strong and others show great dexterity. Some are tall and others are quick. Some have great vision and others a good sense of smell. Given such differences it is obviously advantageous to partition the various tasks necessary to perform in order to secure a comfortable life in such a way that each person specializes in those activities in which he has an advantage over others. Women gather and men hunt. Tall individuals pick fruits from trees and short ones specialize in hunting mushrooms. Quick runners relay messages. Individuals with good eyesight will spot distant events. Kids are used for the exploration of small and narrow holes. People with great dexterity produce tools. The strong will specialize in going in for the kill, etc.

Third: Moreover, even if the members of one tribe are so distinguished from one another that one person is more efficient in every conceivable task than another, division of labor is still all-around more productive than isolated labor. An adult might be better at any task than a kid, for instance. Given the inescapable fact of the scarcity of time, however, even in this conceivably worst-case scenario it makes economic sense—that is, it leads to a greater physical output of goods produced per unit of labor—if the adult specializes in those tasks in which his greater efficiency (as compared to that of the kid) is particularly pronounced and leaves those tasks for the kid to perform in which the latter's all-around lower efficiency is comparatively smaller. Even though the adult might be more efficient than the child in collecting small firewood, for instance, the adult's far greater superiority in hunting large game would make it a waste of his time to gather wood. Instead, he would want the child to collect fire wood and use all of his own precious time to perform that task in which his greater efficiency is especially marked, namely large game hunting.

Nonetheless: While these advantages offered by the division of labor can explain intratribal cooperation (rather than fight) and, based on such initially maybe purely “selfishly-motivated” collaboration, the gradual development of feelings of sympathy (good will) toward one's fellowmen which go above and beyond whatever *biological* basis there may exist for the special, more-than-normally-friendly relationship between close kin, this explanation still only goes so far. Given the peculiar, parasitic nature of hunter-gatherer societies and assuming land to be fixed, invariably the moment must arise when the number of people exceeds the optimal group size and average living standards will fall, threatening whatever degree of intragroup solidarity previously might have existed.[\[30\]](#)

This situation is captured and explained by the economic *law of returns*.

The law of returns, popularly but somewhat misleadingly also called the *law of diminishing returns*, states that for any combination of two or more production factors an optimum combination exists (such that any deviation from it involves material waste, or “efficiency losses”).[\[31\]](#) Applied to the two original factors of production, labor and land (nature-given goods), the law implies that if one were to increase the quantity of labor (population) while the quantity of land and the available technology (hunting and gathering) remained fixed, eventually a point will be reached where the physical output per labor-unit input is maximized. This point marks the optimal population size. If there is no additional land available and technology remains fixed at a ‘given’ level, any population increase beyond the optimal size will lead to a progressive decline in per capita income. Living standards, on the average, will fall. A point of (absolute) overpopulation has been reached. This is, as Mises has termed it, the *Malthusian law of population*.

Because of the fundamental importance of this *Malthusian law of population* and in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, it is advisable to make also explicit what the law does *not* state. The law does not assert where exactly this optimal combination point lies—at so-and-so many people per square mile, for instance—but only *that* such a point exists. Otherwise, if every quantity of output could be produced by increasing only one factor (labor) while leaving the other (land) unchanged, the latter (land) would cease to be scarce—and hence an economic good—at all; one could increase output without limit the return of any piece of land by simply increasing the input of labor applied to that piece without ever having to consider expanding the size of one's land). The law also does not state that *every* increase of one factor (labor) applied to a fixed quantity of another (land) must lead to less than proportional increase of the output produced. In fact, as one approaches the optimum combination point an increase of labor applied to a given piece of land might lead to a more than proportional increase of output (increasing returns). One additional man, for instance, might make

possible that an animal species can be hunted that cannot be hunted at all without this one extra hunter. The law of returns merely states that this cannot occur without definite limits. Nor does the law assert that the optimum combination point cannot be shifted upward and outward. In fact, as will be explained in the following, owing to technological advances the optimum combination point can be so moved, allowing a larger population to enjoy a higher average living standard on the same quantity of land. What the law of returns does say is only that *given* a state of technological development (mode of production) and a corresponding degree of specialization, an optimum combination point exists beyond which an increase in the supply of labor must necessarily lead to a less than proportional increase of the output produced or no increase at all.

Indeed, for hunter-gatherer societies the difficulties of escaping the Malthusian trap of absolute overpopulation are even more severe than these qualifications regarding the law of returns might indicate. For while these qualifications might leave the impression that it is “only” a technological innovation that is needed to escape the trap, this is not the full truth. Not just any technological innovation will do. Because hunter-gatherer societies are, as explained, “parasitic” societies, which do not add anything to the supply of goods but merely appropriate and consume what nature provides, any productivity increase *within* the framework of this mode of production does not (or only insignificantly so) result in a greater output of goods produced (of plants gathered or animals hunted) but rather merely (or mostly) in a reduction of the time necessary to produce an essentially unchanged quantity of output. The invention of bow and arrow that appears to have been made some 20,000 years ago, for instance, will not so much lead to a greater quantity of available animal meat to consume, thus allowing a larger number of people to reach or exceed a given level of consumption, but rather only to the same number of people enjoying more leisure with an unchanged standard of living in terms of meat consumption (or else, if the population increases, the gain of more leisure time will have to be paid for by a reduction in meat consumption per capita). In fact, for hunter-gatherers the productivity gains achieved by technological advances such as the invention of bow and arrow may well turn out to be no blessing at all or only a very short-term blessing. Because the greater ease of hunting that is thus brought about, for instance, may lead to overhunting, increasing the supply of meat per capita in the short-run, but diminishing or possibly eliminating the meat supply in the long run by reducing the natural rate of animal reproduction or hunting animals to extinction and thus magnifying the Malthusian problem, even without any increase in population size.[\[32\]](#)

III. THE SOLUTION: THEORY AND HISTORY

The technological invention, then, that solved (at least temporarily[\[33\]](#)) the problem of a steadily emerging and re-emerging “excess” of population and the attendant fall of average living standards was a revolutionary change in the entire mode of production. It involved the change from a parasitic lifestyle to a genuinely productive life. Instead of merely appropriating and consuming what nature had provided, consumer goods were now actively produced and nature was augmented and improved upon.

This revolutionary change in the human mode of production is generally referred to as the “Neolithic Revolution”: the transition from food production by hunting and gathering to food production by the raising of plants and animals.[\[34\]](#) It began about 11,000 years ago in the Middle East, in the region typically referred to as the “Fertile Crescent.” The same invention was made again seemingly independently, less than 2,000 years later in central China, and again a few thousand years later (about 5,000 years ago) also in the Western hemisphere: in Mesoamerica, in South America, and

in the eastern part of today's United States. From these centers of innovation the new technology then spread to conquer practically the entire earth.

The new technology represented a fundamental cognitive achievement and was reflected and expressed in two interrelated institutional innovations, which from then on until today have become the dominant feature of human life: the appropriation and employment of ground land as private property, and the establishment of the family and the family household.

To understand these institutional innovations and the cognitive achievement underlying them one must first take a look at the treatment of the production factor "land" by hunter-gatherer societies.

It can be safely assumed that private property existed within the framework of a tribal household. Private property certainly existed with regard to things such as personal clothing, tools, implements, and ornaments. To the extent that such items were produced by particular, identifiable individuals or acquired by others from their original makers through either gift or exchange they were considered individual property. On the other hand, to the extent that goods were the results of some concerted or joint effort they were considered collective household goods. This applied most definitely to the means of sustenance: to the berries gathered and the game hunted as the result of some intratribal division of labor. Without doubt, then, collective property played a highly prominent role in hunter-gatherer societies, and it is because of this that the term "primitive communism" has been often employed to describe primitive, tribal economies: each individual contributed to the household income "according to his abilities," and each received from the collective income "according to his needs" (as determined by the existing hierarchies within the group)—not quite unlike the "communism" in "modern" households.

Yet what about the ground land on which all group activities took place? One may safely rule out that ground land was considered private property in hunter-gatherer societies. But was it collective property? This has been typically assumed to be the case, almost as a matter-of-course. However, the question is in fact more complicated, because a third alternative exists: that ground land was neither private nor collective property but instead constituted part of the *environment* or more specifically the *general conditions* of action or what has also been called "common property" or in short "the commons."^[35]

In order to decide this question standard anthropological research is of little or no help. Instead, some elementary as well as fundamental economic theory, including a few precise definitions, is required. The external world in which man's actions take place can be divided into two categorical and distinct parts. On the one hand, there are those things that are considered *means*—or *economic goods*—and on the other hand, there are those things that are considered *environment*—or also referred to, sometimes, if somewhat misleadingly, as *free goods*. The requirements for an element of the external world to be classified as a means or an economic good have been first identified with all due precision by Carl Menger.^[36] They are threefold. First, in order for something to become an economic good (henceforth simply: a *good*), there must be a human need (an unachieved end or an unfulfilled human desire or want). Second, there must be the human perception of a thing believed to be equipped and endowed with properties or characteristics causally connected (standing in a causal connection) with and hence capable of bringing about, the satisfaction of this need. Third, and most important in the present context, an element of the external world so perceived must be under human *control* such that it can be employed (actively, deliberately used) to satisfy the given need (reach the end sought). Writes Mises: "A thing becomes a means when human reason plans to employ it for the attainment of some end and human action really employs it for this purpose."^[37] Only if a thing is thus brought into a causal connection with a human need *and* this thing is under human control can one say that the

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