SOME UNSUSPECTED APPLICATIONS OF THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF LIBERTARIANISM

Walter E. Block

Harold E. Wirth Eminent Scholar Endowed Chair and Professor of
Economics, Loyola University, New Orleans, USA

Nelson David Chavez Salazar

Tanque de Pensamiento Ludwig von Mises - Bogotá (Ludwig von Mises
Think Tank – Bogota), Bogota, Colombia

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This is an interview with Professor Walter E. Block, one of the most important contemporary theoreticians of libertarian political philosophy, and economics in the tradition of Austrian School. It is a pedagogical exercise around the ideas of freedom, and is addressed to all those who wish to know or deepen their knowledge about Block's theory. The methodology used was the "structured interview", very common in qualitative research, which consists of a list of pre-established questions that were answered in writing. Four thematic areas are considered: Block's life and career, his opinions on political reality, his theory, and his final reflections. In the interview, an emphasis was made on the Hispanic "world", a place to which the defenders of freedom have paid attention in recent times, due to the consolidation of totalitarian regimes (Venezuela is the case that stands out the most), and to the presence important social problems. However, it is also important to note that the Hispanic world has also been important for the development of libertarian theory, because there have emerged great thinkers of this current, which are widely mentioned by Block.

Nelson David Chávez Salazar: Professor Block, thank you very much for accepting this interview. It is an honor to be able to talk with you.

1 LIFE AND CAREER

NDCS: Professor, you are one of the most important libertarian theoreticians nowadays and a reference for all those who identify ourselves as

anarcho-capitalists. In addition to this, you are also one of the leading exponents of the Austrian School of Economics. I would like you to tell us a little about your beginnings, how did you become one of the most important defenders of the ideas of Liberty? Did you ever participate in the "dark side of force" (statism)? And if so, how did you reach the light?

Walter E. Block: David, thanks for your very, very kind words. I was born Jewish in 1941 in Brooklyn, New York. Pretty much everyone I came in contact with was a leftist of some sort. Some were out and

Address of the corresponding author:

Nelson David Chávez Salazar

nelsondavidchavez@yahoo.es

out card-carrying Communists; others were merely “fellow travelers.” By osmosis, I started out as a liberal pinko, pretty much of the Bernie Sanders stripe (a fellow Brooklyn Jew, he and I were on the Madison High School track team together, and ran in similar events: half mile and longer).

NDCS: You were related to the objectivist movement of Ayn Rand. In your opinion, what are the two most valuable things that this system of thought has? And what are the two of the things you definitely reject?

WEB: Yes, I was indeed so “related.” Miss Rand came to Brooklyn College, when I was a senior there, and I attended her lecture to boo and hiss at her, since she favored free enterprise, and “everyone” knew that this was economic fascism, and responsible for vast exploitation and poverty. To make a long story short, she and her then chief lieutenant, Nathaniel Branden, started me on my long road of conversion to libertarianism. They did so by recommending to me two books: *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, and *Economics in One Lesson* by Henry Hazlitt. Throughout my teaching career, I have used these two books as required reading for my introductory to micro economics classes. This path of mine toward libertarianism pretty much ended when I met my friend and mentor, Murray Rothbard, who converted me to anarcho-capitalism.

NDCS: Now let's talk a little more about your brilliant academic career. For the knowledge of our readers, Professor Block has more than 500 peer-reviewed publications, as well as dozens of books. He was a senior economist at the Fraser Institute and he is a senior associate at the Ludwig von Mises Institute. In fact, I had the honor of being his student at Mises University 2017. He has also taught at prestigious universities in the United States, and this is where I want to highlight a fact that catches my attention a lot and is that some of those universities are public, such as Baruch College, Rutgers University, State University of Stony Brook, and University of Central Arkansas. So, someone might ask, how can an anarcho-capitalist work in a state institution? Of course, you are not the only one, both your teacher Murray Rothbard and your colleague Hans Hermann Hoppe taught at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. I confess that, personally, if I were

presented with the opportunity to teach in a public university, I would consider the offer. How to resolve this apparent moral dilemma?

WEB: Thanks again for your compliments. I think the resolution to this “apparent moral dilemma” can be found in the words of Murray Rothbard, who famously said: “The libertarian sees the State as a giant gang of organized criminals, who live off the theft called ‘taxation’ and use the proceeds to kill, enslave, and generally push people around. Therefore, any property in the hands of the State is in the hands of thieves, and should be liberated as quickly as possible. Any person or group who liberates such property, who confiscates or appropriates it from the State, is performing a virtuous act and a signal service to the cause of liberty.” (Source: *Confiscation and the Homestead Principle* (1969), <https://www.panarchy.org/rothbard/confiscation.html>)

If this is literally true, and it is, it is, then “taking” money from the government is a virtuous act, not one in need of defending in the first place, as seemingly illicit. Nor is it only, I, Hoppe and Rothbard who are “guilty” of so doing. Pretty much everyone in society is “immoral” on this ground, for we all use government roads, eat food subsidized by the state, utilize city and national parks, use statist fiat currency, mail letters in its monopoly post office, live in homes covered by zoning and building regulations, avail ourselves of doctors mandated by law to pass its licensing requirements, etc., etc. The only ones who do not face this presumed “dilemma” are those hermits who live isolated in the woods; or those who kill themselves. But libertarianism is not a suicide pact. So, it is a positive virtue, not something to apologize for, to “take” money from the government. But this only applies to libertarians and other innocent people, not statists. For them, taking money from government is akin from transferring from one pocket to another.

2 POLITICS

NDCS: Since we are talking about thorny issues, let's talk a bit about politics. In the United States presidential election of 2016, you launched a group called “Libertarians for Trump.” What was it exactly? Did you want Donald Trump to simply get

the Republican nomination? Or was it a support that also extended to the general election?

WEB: Yes, I was among those who started not only "Libertarians for Trump" but also "Scholars for Trump." I did so not for the Republican nomination (my favorite, then, was Rand Paul), but only for the general election. Why? And how do I reconcile this with my decades-long, unwavering support for the Libertarian Party, which also had a candidate in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Gary Johnson?

An economist was once asked, "How is your wife?" Came the answer, "compared to what?" In like manner, I vastly preferred the Donald to Hillary. The latter seemed to want to pick a war with Russia, of all places. The former said he could get along with Putin, and, further, claimed that US intervention in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, etc., were unwise and would not occur under his watch. (In the event, I am greatly disappointed in Trump's foreign policy, but still think Mrs. Clinton would have been worse). As for the LP, my advice to libertarian votes was to support Gary Johnson in all clearly red or blue states, but in the purple ones, then support Trump. In this way we could have our cake and eat it too: run up national support for the LP, and keep "crooked Hillary" out of the white house. As for the second group, Scholars for Trump, Hillary supporters took the position that only rednecks, ignoramuses, "deplorables," denizens of fly-over country, would favor her opponent. I wanted to demonstrate that scholars (people with PhDs, medical degrees, lawyers, etc.) would also support him. In the event, we garnered over 4000 signatories for "Libertarians for Trump" and about 150 for "Scholars for Trump."

NDCS: This interview is aimed at the Hispanic world (Spain and Ibero-America), so I would like to ask you about an issue that is very close to all Hispanics: Venezuela. What is your reading of the situation that exists there? And, in your opinion, what measures could help to overcome the crisis?

WEB: Short answer: socialism is what ruined the Venezuelan economy, and capitalism is the only cure for it. Long answer: socialism is what ruined the Venezuelan economy, and capitalism is the only cure for it. Ok, ok, let me add to that a little bit. We need capitalism of the laissez faire variety, not crony capitalism, in which large business

concerns preclude competition so as to feather their own nests. And, this includes respect for private property rights based on homesteading, and licit title transfers, such as trade, gifts, gambling.

NDCS: Let's talk about your vision on libertarianism. Within this philosophy has emerged a group whose social thinking is very similar to that of the modern left, what in the United States you call the "liberals", or what we call "progress" in Spain and Ibero-America. These "libertarians" are in favor of anti-discrimination laws and foster a wrong view of tolerance, according to which we must give our approval to all the behaviors that come our way, even if they may seem immoral or unpleasant. That is why public opinion often believes that libertarianism is synonymous with licentiousness. But, paradoxically, these "libertarians" cannot accept that there can be libertarians who profess the principles of bourgeois morality, or libertarians who oppose multiculturalism or gender ideology. What is your opinion?

WEB: I think a sharp distinction must be drawn between libertinism and libertarianism. They are spelled almost in the same way, and, indeed, they are not 180 degrees apart from each other. All the more reason to strive mightily to distinguish between them. Libertinism says it is good, virtuous, admirable, to engage in deviant sexual and other types of practices, such as drinking, drugging, unusual sex practices, sado-masochism, etc. Libertarianism maintains, only, that if these practices are engaged in by consenting adults, they should be legal. This philosophy offers no other evaluation of them. That is in a nutshell, "thin" libertarianism. It is limited to the non-aggression principle (NAP), and private property rights based upon homesteading. In sharp contrast, left wing "thick libertarians" maintain that these practices, plus many others such as being tolerant of all non-invasive practices, favoring mixed marriages, supporting the LGBT community, are part and parcel of libertarianism. In this they are totally and completely mistaken. One can be a libertarian in perfectly good standing while hating all these groups and activities. The only thing required is that no violence be initiated against them. Contributors to the Bleeding Heart "libertarian" blog are in the main such people. In effect they are

trying to hijack libertarianism to their own personal ends. I regard that as an evil. As it happens, I like chess, baroque music and swimming. Suppose I was to define libertarianism as inclusive of these tastes of mine. I would then claim that if you didn't engage in these preferences of mine, you were not, really, a libertarian. If I did this, I should be roundly condemned for misrepresenting libertarianism. I would be engaged in almost fraudulent behavior. This is precisely what these thick libertarians are doing. Their views should be vociferously rejected by all supporters of our beloved philosophy.

3 THEORY

DCS: Now let's talk a little about your theoretical approaches, all of them very deep and interesting. You have a book entitled "Defending the Undefendable", the only title is truly provocative, and I recommend it to our readers, you can find an edition in Spanish produced by Unión Editorial. Basically, you defend there a series of activities that the common man might seem scandalous and controversial, but always, within the limits of the Non-Aggression Principle, such as prostitution, drugs use, blackmail and non-contribution to charity, just to mention a few. Among all these issues, I would like to ask you about one: child labor, which is a very common phenomenon in some countries of Ibero-America. What is your vision on this issue?

WEB: I do indeed have a chapter in Defending I (I have already published Defending II, and am now working on Defending III, both with an entirely new cast of characters) on the employer of child labor. So, I do not think that child labor is per se a violation of rights. Much of this depends upon context, wealth in the society, culture, common practices, etc. I think it is a crime and a shame for the government to require schooling up to age 16, in the U.S. Many children, even far younger than that, feel that such compulsory education is akin to a jail sentence, solely for the "crime" of being young. They would be far better off in the work force, and, were it not for the minimum wage law, they would be able to attain gainful employment from which they could learn on the job. On the other hand, to nowadays in a developed country force a 3 year old child to work in a mine, or in a factory, would properly be called child abuse, a

crime under libertarian law. However, in a very poor country, where the only way to keep such a youngster alive would be such employment, then that would be legitimate. Why did we have such child labor in the past, up until the early days of the industrial revolution? It was because we were so poor then, and the work of children was necessary to keep them alive. We no longer suffer from such squalid conditions, not due to legislation prohibiting it, but because of greater wealth, caused in turn, by economic freedom.

NDCS: One of the great debates within libertarianism revolves around abortion. It seems that you have managed to overcome the classic division between "pro-life" and "pro-choice". Could you tell us how you did it? What is your theoretical approach?

WEB: If I had to summarize all of my work in libertarianism, it would be that I apply its basic concepts, the NAP, property rights, not merely rigorously, not even fully, nor consistently, but rabidly and maniacally. I am an extremist on this matter. I go wherever these basic principles lead me, without fear or favor. This includes my Defending series, and abortion, too. Here, I ask: Who is the owner of the "property" in question: the womb? My answer: the first possessor of it, the woman. Then, I ask, what is the status of the unwanted fetus? My answer is, Trespasser. This is certainly clear in the case of rape; less so when the pregnancy involves voluntary sexual intercourse. My many publications on this subject, one of these days I'll come out with a book on this subject, justify this position. What does libertarianism have to say about the ejection, or eviction, of innocent trespassers as are all pre-born infants, no matter the source of their creation? Removal in the gentlest manner possible. As a result, I have created the evictionist position, and now vociferously defend it: the mother may remove the fetus, a human being ever since the fertilized egg stage, whenever she desires to do so, and for any reason or no reason at all, but she may not murder that young person. In the last trimester, with present medical technology, the fetus will be viable; but not in the first six months. However, medical technology will improve the timing. The pro-life position maintains that the mother may not kill this young child, nor remove it from her "premises." The pro-choice philosophy opines that she may do both. My

evictionism stance is thus a compromise between the two, allowing the latter but not the former. In my view, this is the only correct libertarian solution to this challenge. And challenge it is. Ron Paul is staunchly pro-life, while Murray Rothbard was equally strongly pro-choice. There can hardly be any two more highly credentialed libertarians than these two. Yet, they were 180 degrees apart on this matter. Happily, I think, evictionism can point in the proper libertarian direction.

NDCS: Another issue that is very striking within your theory is that of "voluntary slavery", an expression that may sound contradictory. How do you understand it?

WEB: In my view, our rights are alienable, not inalienable. If the latter, then we may not sell or give them away. But, to the extent we may not, our ownership is attenuated. If I "own" a pen, but may not sell it or give it away, then my "ownership" is improperly truncated. But the same goes for my freedom. If I may not sell or donate it, then I am not truly free. (See what I mean about rigorously following basic libertarian principles wherever they may lead?) My child, say, has a horrid illness. It will cost \$5 million to cure him. I don't have that amount of money. But you, David, are a rich man, who has long wanted me to be his slave. So, I sell myself into slavery to you. I benefit, since I value my child's life more than my freedom; you, since you rate my servitude to you more than that measly amount of money. We both gain, in the ex-ante sense, as is the case with all voluntary commercial interaction. Should this contract between us, David, be declared invalid? Then, my child dies. And, libertarian principles are violated.

NDCS: Another topic that you have written a lot about is the environment. In fact, you are one of the great references of "free market environmentalism". A couple of years ago, you wrote a book with engineer Peter L. Nelson entitled "Water Capitalism: The Case for Privatizing Oceans, Rivers, Lakes, and Aquifers" I tried to make [a summary in Spanish](#), so that people are encouraged to read it. There you propose the privatization of absolutely all water bodies. Could you tell us a bit about it? In particular, how could rivers be privatized, bearing in mind that they change course? Or the groundwater? A subject that in the book is treated very technically.

WEB: Yet again we have an example of me following basic principles, this time private property rights, wherever they lead us. I have a three-part series on this general topic. First my book on privatizing roads, streets, highways, all vehicular thoroughfares. This is but an implication of property rights; plus, it will save thousands of lives, due to competition from private road owners. Second, is the book to which you refer, which does indeed involve "the privatization of absolutely all water bodies." There is no difference in principle between land and water. Water is like fast moving land (mudslides); land, is like slow moving water (ice). If privatization is justified in the one case, it is in both. What are the benefits? Removing the tragedy of the commons. In the aftermath of Katrina, some 1900 people died in Louisiana. A tragedy. The cause? The levees holding back the Mississippi river failed. Who built them? The U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers. Are they still in business? Yes. If anything like that happened in the private sector, those responsible for the calamity would be long gone. That is one of the important reasons why we have a reasonably good economy. If we privatized this river, and, indeed, all bodies of water, we would put this aspect of our economy on the same reasonable basis. The third installment in this series, also co-authored with Peter Nelson, is Space Capitalism. We maintain that the same principles should apply to the Moon, Mars, all other heavenly bodies, and our attempts to lift off the third planet from the sun. Private property is more just and more efficient than either non-ownership or government ownership. Period. My motto in this is, If it moves, privatize it; if it doesn't move, privatize it; since everything moves or does not move, privatize everything.

4 FINAL THOUGHTS

NDCS: Thanks for exposing part of your theory, Professor Block. To finish, a couple of simpler questions. The first is: with what libertarian thinkers from Spain and Ibero-America do you identify more?

WEB: I strongly identify with the following: Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Martín de Azpilcueta, Tomás de Mercado, and Francisco Suárez, Luis de Molina, Diego de Covarubias y Leyva, Diego del Castillo de Villasante, Domingo

Banez and many others from the School of Salamanca of the 16th century. In the modern day, I am greatly indebted to Jesús Huerta de Soto Ballester and his colleagues at King Juan Carlos University of Madrid such as Philipp Bagus and Miguel Angel Alonso. There is also, in Spain, the Juan de Mariana institute of Madrid.

In Brazil there is the Instituto de Estudos Empresariais in Porto Alegre. In Sao Paulo is located Helio Beltrao of the Mises Institute Brazil. Guillermo M. Yeatts is a leader in the Argentinian Austro-libertarian movement. There is a Mises Institute in Cuba, whose leaders have recently been arrested for supporting free enterprise in that country. Such courage is extraordinary. There is also the Peruvian Hernando De Soto who wrote "The Other Path" and who can forget the very important Universidad Francisco Marroquín in Guatemala. This is one of the fountainheads of free market thinking in Central America. There are Mises Institutes in the following Hispanic countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba and Spain. As far as I am concerned, no nation can be all bad that boasts a Mises Institute.

NDCS: Finally, what advice would you give to all of us who try to spread libertarian ideas in the Hispanic world? Here we are faced with a hostile

terrain, we are facing giant Welfare States, and in some cases totalitarian regimes, as is the case of Venezuela, of which we have spoken here, but also that of Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia.

WEB: The two people responsible for converting more of the population to libertarianism are Ayn Rand and Ron Paul. These two had almost opposite personalities and techniques for publicizing our philosophy. Dr. Paul is and always was a "sweetie pie." His personal demeanor was always kind and gentle. Anyone who characterized Miss Rand in that manner would be subject to the rough edge of her tongue in no short order. What do I infer from this? It is that there is no one best way to "spread libertarian ideas in the Hispanic world" or in any other world for that matter. So, what is my advice? Enjoy yourself. Promoting liberty should be FUN! Engage in this activity in the manner that best suits your own personality, your own style.

5 FINAL GOODBYE

NDCS: Professor, it was a real pleasure. Thank you very much for your time.

WEB: David, I am honored that you would interview me for your important organization.

*The interview was conducted by Nelson David Chávez Salazar
in New Orleans on November 25th, 2017*

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