

Stunting our growth

Where have centuries of advances in thinking on economics and freedom gotten us? Not very far



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Whether thugs succeed committing their crimes or are arrested before, the result seems to be the same: our “protectors” restrain everybody’s liberties. Most people are proud to have all these free bodyguards, and don’t notice that George W. Bush is never being searched by his.

This is only one illustration of a much broader phenomenon: despite advances in science and education (at least, in formal, universal education), mankind hasn’t changed as much as we like to think, since the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Africa about 150,000 years ago.

Just think that we are now the victims of a war of religion, as there have been so many during the past millennium. But note that “our” side is also, in many ways, much in tune with former times.

“We cure any disease” is the emblematic, ubiquitous spam header. But the charlatans are also everywhere in official medicine and the public health community: they utter public-policy pronouncements that ignore 300 years of

economic analysis. The public health specialists will have no rest until individual preferences are abolished and liberty is cured.

Like in all times and places, ordinary people want to be entertained, which explains what the media, whether public television or private newspapers, offer them. Having to revise one’s opinions is, for most people, threatening, not entertaining. Hence prejudice and fashionable ideas —pidgin environmentalism, for example—feed on and reinforce themselves.

In 1776, a French economist, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, tried to explain why the control of grain supply by the French state led to shortages. People, he observed, “thought that the one task of government was to procure them cheap bread. The police regulations seemed to have been issued for this purpose. In truth, they produced an opposite effect.” And, Condillac continues, “people . . . regarded the grain merchants as grasping men who took advantage of their needs.”

Perhaps economic literacy has advanced a bit, if only because of the recent collapse of communism. But I am not so sure. Obviously, they haven’t learned anything in Zimbabwe, where the rulers blame the economic collapse on vague enemies. Nor have the populists who

now argue for controlling the price of oil or health care, which are the corn and bread of our day.

The last third of the 20th century has seen the revival of witch hunts. Business executives and financiers have been ruthlessly persecuted by pontificating and self-serving inquisitors. Smokers are being “denormalized” by their own government, even if the official jihad reserves the term to their suppliers. Drug consumers and suppliers are hunted. Pedophiles are convenient scapegoats: each time one is caught, whether guilty or not, everybody’s social sins are expiated.

More than 200 years after Voltaire and the Enlightenment, we are rediscovering formal, unashamed attacks on freedom of speech. Hate speech is expanding. People are prosecuted and even jailed for expressing forbidden opinions. To borrow from Leonard Cohen, “Yes, you’ve come to this.”

Most people happily submit to, and court, the authorities for the sake of bread, social services and circuses.



MORE THAN 200 YEARS AFTER VOLTAIRE, WE ARE BACK TO PROSECUTING AND EVEN JAILING PEOPLE WHO EXPRESS FORBIDDEN OPINIONS

Democratic incantations have replaced the divine right of kings. The statocrat is the new shaman. Except perhaps at the time of the French Revolution, never has citizenship been such a revered fetish, at the very time when citizens, in any meaningful sense of the word, have become beggars, licence carriers, and photo-ID clowns. Whether there remain enough citizens left to reclaim democracy, or when the window will be definitively closed, is a troubling question.

That mankind hasn’t changed much is not surprising. Many of our preferences are hard-wired in our mind, and the gene pool hasn’t changed in the last few thousand years. What has helped man grow were the very social institutions that are now being destroyed.

Thus, we should take very seriously the pressing danger of tyranny, which has been the usual condition of mankind in history. Institutional means to keep tyranny in check were developed in the West, which culminated in the rule of law (the rule of limited law) the rights of man and English liberties, property rights and privacy. These are the institutions that have been undermined in the 20th century, and are now in accelerated decline.

With friends like our protectors, who needs enemies?