THE REDISTRIBUTION OF AUTHORITY

by Butler Shaffer

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NOTE: The "forthcoming book" that Butler references at the beginning is likely *Boundaries of Order: Private Property as a Social System*, which is available for purchase at The Mises Institute and on Amazon. And for more about Butler Shaffer and his work, or to purchase his books, please visit his bio at The Mises Institute.

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We seem to be living in a period of significant cultural and philosophical change which may prove to be as transformative as the "Renaissance" or the "Industrial Revolution." I have chosen to refer to this apparent period of transformation as "The Quantum Age," to refer not only to the study of "quantum mechanics"—which has both inspired and informed these broader cultural changes—but to the focus on "local events" (i.e., the behavior of subatomic PARTICLES) as well as the realization that the theoretical CERTAINTY of Newton's "clockwork" universe has given way to considerations of the PROBABILITY of events. The increased interest in the behavior of discrete subatomic particles—rather than just the collective behavior of matter that characterized earlier physics—has its counterpart, I believe, in the increasing social importance of the individual, and the relative decline of the significance of institutional collectives.

My own focus, in this paper, is not upon quantum mechanics per se, but upon some of the social implications of this "Quantum Age." I am content to regard the insights from quantum mechanics as offering but an ANALOGY, or METAPHOR for some of the ideas I shall be discussing. Since, as KORZYBSKI reminded us, "the map is not the territory"—words and other abstractions are not the things they represent—we can see that ALL models of reality are metaphorical in nature. In the words of Norman O. Brown: "all that is, is metaphor."

In its social context, the "Quantum Age" is manifested by processes of DECENTRALIZATION. There has been a noticeable shift away from emphasizing collective, organizational interests, in favor of a greater emphasis on the personal implications of human behavior. For EXAMPLE:

- I suppose that as long as there are institutions, there will be "institutional economists." These are the people who advise political and corporate officials on what they, perceive to be economic trends. They are the people you see being interviewed on network television news shows, and hear on radio talk shows. But in recent decades, we have seen the emergence of what I shall call the "individual economist," the person who advises individual investors—as well as the intellectually curious—about the implications and trends in economic behavior. People such as Harry Browne, Jerome Smith—and, in our own group, Doug Casey and Jack Pugsley—have been enormously successful in writing books and

conducting seminars directed NOT toward politicians or the "Fortune 500," but to individual men and women. The degree of their success was reflected in an "investor's fair" I attended a few years ago in Los Angeles. [Jack Pugsley will recall that event.] There were a number of individual workshop sessions offered throughout the day and at competing times. One very prominent "institutional economist"—whose name each of you would at once recognize—became very upset by the fact that only a very small handful of people chose to attend his workshop. For, at the same time this man was speaking, Harry Browne was conducting a session in another large room, and listeners were literally standing in the aisles and doorways, and pressed up against the walls to hear what Harry had to say. When the institutional economist complained to one of the conference organizers about the fact that so few people had come to hear him speak, he was told, quite politely: "well, that's the free market for you!" The success and popularity of such people as Harry Browne, Doug Casey, Jack Pugsley, and many other individual economists, derives—I believe—from the fact that the interests of institutions are not synonymous with the interests of individuals—that "what is good for General Motors is not necessarily what is good for individuals"—and that the advice institutional economists give to their constituency does not always translate into good advice for individual investors.

- As in the field of economics, health care has become very individualized, and with an emphasis on alternatives to traditional health/medical practices. From alternative methods of childbirth and cancer treatment; to the subject most of us prefer not to think about, namely, how and when to die; to cryonics, and organ transplants and substitutes, more and more health options are under consideration by individuals. Books, seminars, health food stores, television and radio programs, magazines, computer networks, newspaper and magazine sections, now regularly advise individuals on how to eat and live in a more healthy, life-prolonging manner. Again, two of our participants—Durk Pearson and Sandy Shaw—have achieved great success in this field of endeavor.

- For at least the past three decades, there has been a great deal of interest focused on individual lifestyles, with more and more people coming out of "closets" of various descriptions to discuss the personal advantages of living in a given manner. So far reaching has the range of lifestyle choices become that, in Los Angeles alone, a partial listing of organizations devoted to particularized lifestyles or activities fills a periodically published directory such as this one. Again, in our own group, we have the publisher of *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, a publication that helped to pioneer interest in alternative ways of living. What is just as remarkable—at least in Los Angeles—is the emergence of widespread attitudes of

> "tolerance"—a wonderfully civilizing word that went out of vogue in the '60s—for the expression of the lifestyles of others. Our culture is decentralizing: men and women are becoming increasingly freer to experiment with and choose ways of living that satisfy their personal preferences, rather than being ground down and made to "adapt" themselves to some dominant set of social norms.

There are, of course, strongholds of institutional opposition to such decentralist trends. Tom Wolfe has labeled these practices rather derisively as the "me generation." Former President Carter has spoken of the "crisis of the American spirit," which he defined as "a growing disrespect for government, for the churches, schools, the news media and other institutions." And what critic of so-called "New Age" lifestyles has not had occasion to cluck about the current generation's "self-indulgence?" Just a few days ago, I heard a mossbacked army veteran condemn those who were "too selfish" to be willing to go off to the middle east and give their lives, when commanded by the government. I personally regard such reluctance as one of the most encouraging traits to emerge in this country in my lifetime. Nevertheless, defenders of the institutional order don't take lightly any stirrings of independence in their "conscript clientele."

I will be the first to admit that much of the behavior of people experimenting with new lifestyles can be downright silly, like watching those old pre-Wright brothers films of human efforts to fly, in contraptions not unlike Chuck Estes' car—but let us keep our responses in perspective. As anyone who has used "brainstorming" as a problem-solving method can attest, experimentation that proves to be wrong—whether in flight or lifestyles—is a necessary part of the creative process. And does the critic of "selfishness" mean anything more profound than that his younger neighbors are unwilling to put their "greedy" interests ahead of his?

This leads me into one of the more apparent expressions of the "decentralist" tendencies in our world: the DECENTRALIZATION OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY. In such far-flung places as eastern Europe. Tibet, Northern Ireland. Quebec—even Boston and the suburbs of Los Angeles—efforts are being made to secede from existing political ties; to dismantle larger political systems; Such ideas are not new, of course: Jane Jacobs has written of the desirability of having political systems return to earlier "city-state" forms. At the same time, two of our participants—Frances Kendall and Leon Louw—have proposed a dismantling of the State of South Africa into a confederation of independent cantons. More and more people seem to be understanding what many of us have been saying for decades, namely, that the interests of the political STATE are not synonymous with the interests of INDIVIDUALS; and that any increase in the authority of the State has a correlative diminution in the authority of individual over their own lives.

Such efforts toward institutional decentralization have been accompanied by the fragmentation of "politics" into such specific issue areas as "abortions," "pornography," "drug use," "animal rights," "environmentalism," "feminism," "gay rights," and the like. This fragmentation reflects underlying assumptions by more and more people that political decision-making should promote their specific, individual values, an objective that politics, by definition, is incapable of achieving. As a consequence, electoral politics has become even more meaningless than it already was, as witness the 1988 presidential campaign in which the two principal issues were whether the "pledge of allegiance" was a good thing, and whether Willie Horton should have been granted a parole.

All of these tendencies may reflect the beginnings of a process of what CARL JUNG called "individuation." Time limitations do not permit an in-depth analysis—pardon the pun—of this process. Let me say only that, in Jung's view, the greatest social danger in the world was the emergence of the "mass mind." Such "mass mindedness" was triggered by the mobilization of the "dark side" of the "collective unconscious" that Jung believed to be at work within each of us. This "dark side"—or, as Jung called it, "shadow"—consists of those tendencies that our conscious mind rejects, and which, therefore, we would prefer not to have. In order to rid ourselves of these undesirable attributes—which might include our tendencies for violence, bigotry, dishonesty, greed, cowardice, or other qualities—we have learned to PROJECT such traits onto others—whom we shall call "scapegoats"—and then purge ourselves of these unwanted influences by regulating, punishing, or destroying the scapegoat. One will at once see the history of all politics in these tendencies; of the need for all nation-states to have "enemies" around which to organize their populations. When, for instance, the specter of the Soviet Union began to wane as a believable "bogey man," the American government had to scramble to find a believable substitute "enemy" to take the place of the Soviets as the raison d'etre of the American police State. After experimenting with such possible threats as "illegal aliens," "child abusers" (remember all those pictures on grocery sacks and milk cartons?), "terrorists," "pornographers," "street corner gangs," "cultists," "Satanists," and others—as well as combinations of some of these "threats"—the institutional order finally settled upon the "drug user" as the new "enemy," and the same apparatus that had been set up to deal with the "commies,"—i.e., the military, government concentration camps [called "relocation centers"], "security tests", etc.—were simply shifted over to the "war on drugs." The army would now be used to help local police, and to guard the borders; the navy and the air force would be used to patrol the seas and skies in search for drug traffickers; while the "security check" gave way to "drug testing."

Such "scapegoating" practices reinforce our commitment to the "collective thinking" that has produced the madness of the 20th century. One cannot understand the horrors of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, for instance, without plumbing the depths of the "collective mindedness" that produced them. Perhaps—and I emphasize "perhaps"—the decentralist tendencies I have referred to reflect the early stirrings of what Jung called "individuation." "Individuation" is a process by which the conscious mind confronts, and becomes fully aware of, the nature and content of the unconscious mind. It is an integrative process, with the conscious and unconscious minds becoming reconciled. In so doing, the conscious mind both (a) accepts its unconscious qualities, and, (b) in so doing, to separate ourselves from the influences of the collective unconscious that lead us into mass mindedness. The result of this is to cause us to withdraw our projections and cease the practice of scapegoating. Indeed, as Jung suggests, the psychological maturity of a society is premised upon the degree to which people have individuated themselves from collective thinking. But individuation requires a realm of personalized decision-making that permits us to give real world expression to this process. Without the opportunity to express one's sense of individuality in the material world, any attempts at individuation become restricted to intellectual abstraction and theorizing. We require not so much the idea as the fact of individuation; not just the concept. but the mechanism for maintaining peace, order, and freedom in society.

For decades, socialists have been advising us that peace, freedom, and order can be had in society only through the redistribution of wealth. But as the repressive and disorderly nature of State socialism becomes more evident, and as non-socialist political systems give evidence of their equally repressive and disorderly natures, it is timely to suggest that what mankind requires is not a redistribution of wealth, but a redistribution of authority. The mechanism for producing peace, order, and freedom in society is, I believe, to be found in the private ownership of property.

Many of the specific issues referred to previously have their origins in a property analysis, for they are grounded in the fundamental question: do you own yourself? This is a very profound question, not one to be answered with the kinds of conditioned responses we are so accustomed to giving.

Before proceeding to answer this question, we must understand what is meant by "ownership." As I use the word, "ownership" is a function of "control": the person who exercises effective decision making authority over an item of property is, to the degree of such control, the owner. It matters not where some "legal" title resides, or what the courts or legislatures say about who is and who is not an owner. The inquiry is a purely functional one: who gets to make what decisions about what"items of property? Since "freedom" is the exercise of control over oneself, one can see the necessary

relationship between "property" and "freedom." Indeed, every political ideology and system is nothing more than a statement about how property is to be owned and controlled in a given society. "Communism" is premised upon State ownership of virtually all property in a nation. More limited forms of "socialism" are premised upon State ownership of the principal means of production, transportation, and communication. A "fascist" system is premised on property remaining privately owned—at least in terms of legal title—but subject to State control. "Anarchy," by contrast, presupposes all property being owned privately, whether by individuals or voluntary associations of individuals. TELL ME HOW PROPERTY IS OWNED AND CONTROLLED IN ANY SOCIETY, AND I WILL TELL YOU HOW MUCH FREEDOM EXISTS THERE.

We must also ask, upon what basis does such a claim of self-ownership rest? By reference to what criteria could anyone possibly answer this question with either a "yes" or "no"? I have never been comfortable with so-called "natural rights" grounds for the assertion of some claimed "right." Neither am I comfortable—for reasons that should be apparent from history, if not from careful reasoning—with basing such claims upon positivist legal grounds. I believe, rather, that whatever freedom of immunity from coercion we enjoy, derives from whatever our neighbors are prepared to recognize on our behalf. I believe that, like every other benefit we enjoy in a truly free society, we negotiate for our so-called "rights" with our neighbors. (By "our neighbors," I do not mean to refer to the State, but to the "community" in its broader sense. I am using this sense of "community" in the same sense that economists speak of "the marketplace.") In so negotiating, we will base our claims upon the strongest grounds that our audience will support. In a strongly religious age, we will claim that our "rights" are "god given" or based upon "divine will." In an age of reason, we will likely have recourse to arguments based upon "right reason" or the "moral imperative.11 In a scientific era, we will probably find arguments premised on "natural law" more persuasive.

As one who could never understand why I ought to have to justify my claim to not being coerced on any grounds other than my own will, I am willing to have my arguments on behalf of the private ownership of property rest solely on grounds of personal preference. I do believe that a strong case can be built—based on consequential grounds—for the private ownership of property, but I deny that there is any such thing as a "moral imperative" or "natural right" to such interests. My observations of nature do suggest two bases for private property:

> **[1]** what I have chosen to call the principle that "everything's gotta' be someplace"—since each of us, as a material entity, must occupy space and time, there must be a locus for our being. This is nothing more than a fact of existence,

as true for a mushroom or a rock or an elephant as it is for a human being, and thus not a basis for some transcendent moral principle;

[2] every living thing must, in order to sustain itself, overcome entropy. This can be done only by living things consuming energy from other living things. "Life," in other words, is a mutual eating system. In order for any of us to live, in other words, we must be able to consume externally derived resources to the exclusion of everyone else, a fact that requires private property ownership. But, again, this is a truism as applicable to the cobra or the stingray or a pine tree as it is to humans and, unless one adheres to Old Testament notions of "special superiority," advances no philosophic principle greater than a preference to eat rather than to be eaten. [It should be noted, parenthetically, that the entropic nature of life brings the "animal rights" position full circle to an anti-life philosophy. Unless one is to take refuge in arbitrary distinctions among various species ("dolphins 'yes,' tuna 'no,' " or, "animals have rights, but plants do not"), the recognition of "rights" in all living systems consigns us all to a "moral imperative" of starvation. Still, I am glad the "animal rights" people are around, for they may help the rest of us to finally see the absurdity of using a "rights" doctrine—instead of a subjectively experienced sensitivity to the nature and value of life—as a basis for understanding "freedom.")

It is sufficient, I believe, to acknowledge our biological needs for property, and to observe—in a utilitarian fashion—that our lives will be materially better served where we are individually free to pursue, to claim, and to control property. While we will likely not be consigned to "eternal hell," nor have any black marks entered beside our names in any cosmic register for our failure to live in harmony with principles of property, our lives on this planet will most assuredly be affected thereby. In the words of Lenin—as well as Richard Weaver—"ideas have consequences."

The question, "do you own yourself," underlies many of the major political issues of the day. For instance:

- **Abortion issue:** at the core of this issue is the confrontation between the position that a woman owns her own body, and therefore controls the decision as to whether to have an abortion, versus the position that the fetus is also a self-owning person who is entitled to not have its life terminated by an act of abortion.
- **Drug use issue:** opposition to the State's "war on drugs" is based upon the idea that each of us owns our own bodies and, therefore, we are entitled to ingest any substances that we choose. I might add that the entire area of "victimless crime" turns upon this sort of property analysis: illegal drug use, prostitution, pornography, gambling, smuggling, and the like, do not involve victims because

each such act is engaged in only by persons making decisions for themselves, with no act of trespass to the property interests of others occurring.

- **Alternative health care:** should a woman be entitled to give birth to her children at home, under the supervision of a midwife? Should a sick person be legally compelled to submit to traditional forms of medical treatment, or should that person be entitled to seek out whatever form of treatment his or her judgment suggests is best? The answers to such questions turn on the prior question of whether a person owns his or her own body.

- **Right to commit suicide:** this question derives from the previous issue, and was asked in the title of a recent movie dealing with this topic: "Whose Life Is It, Anyway?" The right to commit suicide is so strongly resisted by institutional authorities—particularly the State and organized religions—precisely because it goes to the essence of property ownership. Ownership is a matter of control. and the ultimate act of ownership lies in the "right" to destroy said property. Whoever may destroy something without asking the permission of another, is the owner. Thus, if it is admitted that men and women should be free to choose to destroy their own lives, this would likely call into question all of the commitments people have made vis-a-vis the Church and State. It is not the death of a would-be suicide that disturbs judges and politicians: most of them are quite prepared to sentence others to capital punishment for their crimes, or to send tens of thousands of young men into battle on behalf of the State. What does bother Church and State officials about suicide is the diminution of institutional control over the lives of people.

- **Conscription:** the implications of conscription—whether of the military or so-called "public service" variety—for the question of "self-ownership" should not require much elaboration here. Furthermore, that people ought not to be free to take their own lives, but ought to be compelled to sacrifice those same lives when the state commands it, is a contradiction so apparent that even newspaper editors sometimes notice it.

All of these issues deal with the question of whether "property"—including the property interest we have in our own lives—is to be owned and controlled by individuals, or by the State. How we answer this question depends on our attitudes about where we think "life" has its principal expression and meaning: among the individuals who embody life, or within institutions whose images we have become conditioned to revere above ourselves. Does life—with all of its self-controlling, self-serving qualities—belong to the living, or to those institutionalized collectives to which we have traditionally attached ourselves? Such questions necessarily lead us to examinations of the nature of power

in society, and where paramount authority over people and their property is to rest. Will it remain centralized in the hands of the State, or decentralized among each of us in the only expression of "equality" that nature seems to have bestowed upon us, namely, the capacity for self-governance?

There will, of course, be those voices of institutional elitism who will snarl and whine their discontent that questions such as these are even being asked. After all, there is nothing that any institutionalized systems fears quite as much as a fundamental change in the consciousness of its conscripts. Such fears lay behind the inquisitions, heresy trials, and other forms of open hostility to scientific inquiry by the medieval Catholic Church. They have fueled the religious wars, witch trials, ideological purges, State psychiatric practices, and ministries of propaganda throughout human history, as political and religious institutions have felt their holds on the minds of their followers threatened by the appearance of new ideas. Even today, the institutional order's fears of a transformation in consciousness is a major contributor to the establishment's "War on Drugs," campaigns against so-called "cults," and the abominable failures of the public school system. There was even a bill introduced in Congress, a few years ago, that would have made it a federal crime to attempt to "alter one's consciousness."

In each of the issue areas mentioned—as well as other politically-centered questions—we see the same confrontation between decentralized. individual decision-making, and the centralized, collective decision-making of the State. Though we prefer trivial to fundamental questions, and would rather work the periphery of issues than invade their inner core to inquire into matters we have been told are forever settled and beyond question, the continued articulation of debate in these areas will more than likely lead us back to the question: do we own ourselves? When we begin to understand the implications of a "yes" or "no" answer to this question, we will—to the degree the spirit for life remains alive within us—begin to take back the control we have been so willing to allow others to exercise over our lives. in that day, we shall at last understand the significance of property: not as a measure of success or status. but as a vehicle for allowing the human spirit to express itself in the material world; not as an instrument of power over others, but of control over oneself!

Rather than joining with the "people-pushers" and other voices of institutional domination who would have us back on our knees where they believe that we belong, I hereby declare myself on the side of the "me generation." Just as I would prefer spending eternity in "hell" with my kind of life-affirming people, to spending even five minutes in "heaven" with the kinds of psalm-singing, Bible-thumping misanthropes we see on Sunday television shows, so, too, do I prefer the kinds of lifestyles and behavior—even with the ostrich feathers thrown in—that insist that one's experiences be in

furtherance and expressive of one's individual purposes in life. Mankind has suffered enough under those various doctrinal hypocrisies that have paraded themselves as the "us generation," but which always turn out to be the "them generation." There are, today, in such places as China, Tibet, South Africa, Central America, and the "iron curtain" countries, men and women who have learned—if we have not—that "human freedom" and the "ownership of property" are synonymous; and that what the "oppressed" millions of the world is not a "redistribution of wealth," but a "redistribution of authority" so that they may each become the "controllers" of their own lives, and the "owners" of their own souls.

Note: *For more about Butler Shaffer and his work, or to purchase his books, please visit his bio at The Mises Institute.*

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