

The Problem with Ancap Thought Experiments

I think we market anarchists make our lives difficult when we try to convince people that statelessness will “work” with a thought experiment in which we start from scratch using examples that might have been relevant to primitive humans, but can be difficult to relate to in the modern age. Yes, you can make a point with using an example of a small number of people interacting in an isolated system, but you could just as easily create a thought experiment starting from our current situation that people might find easier to follow. Such a thought experiment might look something like this.

1) Suppose we peacefully disassembled the federal government. Unless you believe that one world government is necessary, then you’ve already accepted the premise that states can be subdivided without major problems. The states could provide for defense through contracts with each other (they already do this for emergency response). No abstract concepts or major jumps of logic so far. Whether this is a good strategy is beside the point. This is a thought experiment.

2) Now relax the travel requirements usually associated with state borders (presumably through contracts between the states). Suppose you can easily travel to or live in Arizona while remaining a citizen of Colorado and largely subject to Colorado’s laws. Colorado and Arizona governments would probably either have an agreement about jurisdiction or would abide by a prevailing convention. This isn’t too hard to visualize because it’s already the case both in the US and with those living outside of their home countries. It’s also the case with many businesses that incorporate in Delaware but operate in many other states. There’s also an analogy to be made with religion. In this scenario, the individual would be largely subject to the law of wherever they are citizens, rather than only those of the region in which they reside. This requires a little imagination, but not too much.

3) If you get to step 2, you probably realize that borders don’t serve as much of a purpose anymore, especially for certain aspects of law. In principle, people could subscribe to any state’s laws and live anywhere so the states are essentially competing for members and are not significantly different from businesses. The states that provide better and more widely accepted laws, better security solutions, etc. at lower cost will win out in the market. “States” (not really an appropriate name anymore) will reconfigure themselves to add value to their shareholders just as corporations do now and market forces will do their thing. I might subscribe to one state’s laws for one thing and another state’s laws for another thing and as long as both of those sets of laws were recognized by whatever state I was living in, there likely wouldn’t be any problems with it.

It’s not perfect, but this decentralized legal system isn’t terribly far off from the kind of decentralized legal systems that many anarcho-capitalists envision for a stateless society.

Again, this is not intended as a strategy, but rather as a more relatable thought experiment than those that are frequently offered. What do you think? Comment below!