

The Inflation of Rights

Guest post by Sir Alfred Sherman. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, April 1987.

In this essay I wish to argue that the inflation of rights, in the sense of hypertrophy of claims on society that the state is responsible for levying, is inherently self-defeating. It is bound to generate conflicts of rights that will end by threatening social stability and freedom. ...

The lavish promise of rights beyond all possibility of fulfillment creates inflation of rights followed by defaults and devaluation of rights. It can no longer be taken for granted that the right to a decent home, education, safety, medical care, and so forth, will necessarily be honored. The more spent on education, housing, health, and social welfare, the worse conditions appear to be. People therefore feel deprived who would not have expected these rights in the first place had they not been promised.

Since there are limits to what the state can take in order to give, but none to what can be claimed from it, claims must increasingly exceed performance. Everyone ends by fighting the state for rights that can only be fulfilled at everyone else's expense. The war of every man against every man takes place through the state and therefore against the state. Hence the paradox that beyond a critical limit the more the state gives, the more it is hated. And since the state can give Peter only what it takes from Paul, it comes to be doubly hated as parsimonious giver and as prodigal taker.

Public opinion is becoming increasingly embittered against the state, whether for failing to provide what it is now believed should be provided, or for encouraging parasitism and diminishing rewards and incentives to effort. In traditional society, people are resigned to their lot. In a meritocratic society—whether merit be measured by commercial success, examinations or performance in a hierarchy—there is room for belief that distributive justice prevails, or that if it does not, it can be made to. But in a claimant society, all criteria dissolve. ...

As some intellectual underpinnings of society are eroded, others are exposed to doubt. As the welfare state comes increasingly to be questioned on both economic and ethical grounds in light of experience, the political system that gave rise to it is not escaping unquestioned. Throughout human history, the main shares in the social product have been political rents, and returns to productivity. For most of the time in most places, political rents have absorbed the greater share. Political rents can be returns for physical or spiritual coercion, or any combination of the two.

From the eighteenth century onwards, Britain and Western European society (including

North American) were to be distinguished from almost all other known societies past and present by the decline in the share of the social product levied in the form of political rents by either physical or spiritual coercion. The heirs to the Whig Settlement, who shaped British thought for two centuries, took this phenomenon for granted. Their successors can no longer afford to do so.

While the share of rewards to productivity has declined in the claimant society, the political rentiers have not been the only ones with power to coerce. The unions, student mobs, and organized *lumpenproletariat* also exercise political influence. The new political rentiers are, for almost the first time in human history, those whose only powers of coercion have been freely given to them, the claimant electorate, composed increasingly of elderly people, unmarried mothers and unemployed, and workers whose jobs are technologically or economically obsolete—for example, miners, printers, shipbuilders, railway men—and who therefore can make little if any use of the strike weapon.

The productive classes and age groups find their share increasingly consumed by the non-productive and weak. So long as the decrease in their share was relative, thanks to economic expansion due to the inventiveness and initiative of a minority, the decline in relative return to effort was tolerated. But as the burdens generated by a claimancy on the part of both the welfariat and the parasitic sectors of the economy grow, and economic growth falters and is actually reversed, the rules of the game come to be questioned. ...

To recapitulate, our times have seen the postulation of new categories of what are called rights but which are in effect claims on society for material and other benefits. ... (T)hese claims can be met only by the state at the expense of other citizens. These claims thereby entail aggrandizing the state. But the hypertrophy of claimant rights at the inevitable expense of return to effort erodes criteria and expands demand beyond the possibility of fulfillment. The state becomes a battleground and comes to be blamed for all shortcomings of society. ...

Fifty years ago, Ortega y Gasset warned that mass society could saw away the branch on which it sat. Mass man—he argued—looked for satisfaction to the state. But the state could grow only at the expense of civil society, which it would deprive of spontaneity, suck dry, and destroy, after which like any parasite that destroyed its host, the state too would collapse. Our problem is how to reverse this process once begun.