

Urban Planning, Clairvoyance, Movie: Harper



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"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).

I have put my Spooner quotations and logic fallacy series on a two-week hiatus. I usually have one or two free form conceptual topics per column, and I have two this time. The third segment is the establishment of a new series on movies and/or books with strong voluntaryist themes.

Urban Planning

One of the sins that I must confess to, from time to time, is that I spent part of one year in my twenties studying and working in urban planning. I have since had half a century to repent. In the days that I was a student, during the LBJ regime, urban planning was all the rage. Every taxpayer supported university (virtually all universities but one or two in the US) was cobbling together a new urban planning department from their faculty in more classical disciplines. Where I went, to the University of Cincinnati, the faculty came from the Architecture college. Other schools might have centered their effort around Public Administration, Geography, Sociology, or even Law.

Three really great things happened to me directly as a result of my joining that popular wave.

- I had the worst educator and course of my academic career before and after. The professor was egotistical, incompetent, goal-free as regarded the students, and goal-enslaved with respect to his quest for federal funds. But he helped me to form a mental model, the opposite of him, of where and whom I wanted to be as a person.
- I had the best educator and course of my life. The course was an elective and its title was Human Ecology. The best text book I ever encountered was a great part of the package, *Human Ecology* by Amos Hawley. Don't be misled by the ecology reference, the word infrastructure would likely have been a better fit. The professor was

egotistical, but in a good sense, and perfectly in sync with both his audience and his topic. The course was about how human environments occur. The best part was that evidence was provided that human communities persisted in being, growing, and declining in natural, organic ways, despite the fussy interventions of the central planners.

- I decided that I could do something more honest for a living, so I became a grad school dropout, and more specifically a central planning dropout.

I must have been *clairvoyant*. No area of statist intervention, in American cases, has demonstrated more clearly, more quickly the disaster of central planning. But there were immediate, human infrastructure incentives that compelled my decision — my wife and I were having trouble buying groceries for ourselves and our baby daughter. The lesson of *Human Ecology* is that we live in a world of causes, many of which cannot be planned for in advance or in isolation. In the short run the confluence of causes cannot be well predicted, but in the longer run the pattern becomes amenable to analysis. This is a broader application of Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*. Neither view counts central planning as anything more than flotsam and jetsam in the flood of events.

Clairvoyance

Since I mentioned *clairvoyance* in the segment above, and it is a concept that figures largely in my view of the world, this seems as good a time as any for me to talk about it at more length. I have italicized the word because it is borrowed from the French language. In French, it means literally clear sighted. But, typically, it has a fuzzy meaning as well, when we use the word to mean fortune telling — a field which includes futurism, in my view. A fortune teller pretends to bring mysticism to the table to tell a customer's personal fortunes, while a futurist pretends to tap into past and current events, usually technological where he claims some expertise, to extrapolate a vision of the future. This is quite distinct from Sci-Fi writers, who work in fiction for entertainment but along the way may also produce useful, and sometimes brilliant, philosophical ideas.

Let me state this plainly, nobody knows the future — I am certain of this likelihood. We each have a garbled set of perceptions about the past, and whatever those perceptions are, each of us sees a different set and sees that set in a peculiar way. Each of us has a different window on the present — well drawn by Plato in his *Allegory of the Cave*. Concerning the future, it is the sheerest chance that our prognostications might come true. My mentors told me that even a blind hog finds an acorn from time to time. But that is not crafty prediction work.

But sometimes we make pretty good guesses about linear event series that may happen during a single attention span. The driver flashing a left turn light will in most cases turn left soon. Even in matters too long for rapt attention, we can be fairly sure, for instance,

that a pregnant woman will in large likelihood have a baby.

But in the main even our predictions about our own individual spheres are chancy at best. Knowledge is necessary to reduce the element of chance, but it alone is not sufficient in guessing the future. Risk is the most important element of the future. We go into the future with a level of preparedness only through good risk management — the only thing we know for certain is that things will be uncertain. A good general risk recognition scheme provides four paths, i.e. avoidance, preparation, transference, and acceptance.

Avoidance (negate your involvement) — if you see a known bully on the sidewalk ahead, cross the street. If you are doing electrical work at home, flip the correct circuit breaker.

Preparation (optimize trade-offs) — Get a watchdog. Turn down the heat control on your hot-water unit below scalding temperature.

Transferring (outsource or insure) — if you see a known bully on the sidewalk ahead, send your little brother or your very big friend ahead as an advance party (not a good NAP solution). Royal tasters have found lots of work in this field in the past.

Acceptance (gather resources and budget for risk) — Take *karate* lessons. Achieve whatever belt that will handle your bully on the sidewalk exposure (a NAP solution). Develop negotiation skills.

Voluntaryist Movie View #4 — Harper

I have previously written about Captain Phillips, Gravity, and Ender's Game. With the possible exception of Ender's Game, I did not regard those as "voluntaryist" movies. They were movies about which I made voluntaryist observations. This movie is different. I intuit that the protagonist and the form, the private eye *noir*, and the content are voluntaryist in nature.

This is one of my favorite movies, and perhaps my most favorite Paul Newman movie. The film is entitled Harper, and it is based on the novel, *The Moving Target*, by Ross Macdonald, from his Lew Archer series. It was made with a star-studded cast and a premier script writer in 1966.

I don't know why they changed the PI's name from Lew Archer in the book to Lew Harper in the movie. I won't speculate.

I have read every book published by Ross MacDonald, and I love the classic hard-boiled private eye genre of literature. The protagonists are lone objectivists with only an entrepreneurial motivation. They are not interveners. They are not social engineers. They have distinct moral codes which usually contain the non-aggression principle (NAP),

independence, and very strong individualism. But the stories are not so much about the PI, they are about the morality play that he or she is observing. They are about unforeseen consequences.

I recommend Harper highly. It is an excellent introduction to the form, and may lead you to others like Philip Marlowe (with numerous movie incarnations), Sam Spade, the Continental Op, Kinsey Milhone, Hieronymus Bosch, and Arkady Renko.

Frequently you will see me celebrating the lone hero (I hasten to exclude people who kill for mercenary pleading), the strong individualist who values self, the gritty practitioner of a workaday version of the golden rule. This person certainly rejects central planning and intervention as attempts to control the uncontrollable. This person wastes very little time gazing into crystal balls or deceiving others into believing that he has a special access to the future. She is very good at observing and gauging likelihood, probability, and risk. This person does not spend much time with belief systems. This person, it seems to me, is a voluntarist.

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