

Norbert Slenzok

**The *A Priori* of Liberty, the *A Priori* of Order. Sociopolitical Philosophy of  
Hans-Hermann Hoppe and the Disputes Over the Foundations of Libertarianism**

**Key concepts:** Hans-Hermann Hoppe, libertarianism, *a priori*, theory of justice, property rights

**Summary**

Hans-Hermann Hoppe (born 1949 in Paine, West Germany) is one of the leading Austrian School economists and libertarian scholars currently living, an immediate successor to the founding father of libertarianism – Murray N. Rothbard. He is an author of a number of books and papers concerning vital questions of epistemology, philosophy of science, ethics, political philosophy, sociology, and economic theory. His numerous writings contain several major contributions to libertarian political thought in particular and social theory in general, ranging from a new justification for the autonomy of social sciences to the path-breaking grounding of the libertarian theory of justice known as argumentation ethics, as well as to a plethora of original insights into the nature of the state and the vision of stateless social order based on private law. This notwithstanding, perhaps due to the radical flavor of his views, Hoppe remains relatively unknown within academia, with his ideas resonating among a rather narrow circle of followers and researchers. The presented thesis is an attempt to change this state of affairs by putting Hoppe's thought to rigorous scrutiny, thereby doing justice to its intellectual merits and, hopefully, drawing scholarly attention to it.

Accordingly, the main method employed in the thesis is the method of rational reconstruction. That is to say, aside from a standard, interpretative reconstruction of the thought at hand, the thesis explicitly deals with questions of its truth-value. Thus, we take the liberty of rethinking, restructuring, reformulating or even rejecting Hoppe's original line of argument whenever deemed appropriate. Needless to say, every such intervention on the part of ours is clearly indicated and textually separated from Hoppe's actual stance.

The central tenet of the following thesis is that Hoppe's ideas constitute a full-fledged system of philosophy and political doctrine, i.e. a holistic edifice of thought starting from core philosophical questions of the theory of knowledge and morals, on whose basis further practical topics of politics are dealt with. To boot, since Hoppe, like Rothbard before him, does not want to be but an ivory tower theorist, his thought covers strategic

recommendations for libertarian political action as well. Hoppe's system, we claim, albeit far from being flawless, offers therefore intellectual foundations for the libertarian political theory in all indispensable fields. In the course of our analyses, we reconstruct and critically problematize these proposals. In sum, it is they that form the bundle of research problems of the thesis. In accordance with the system-building nature of Hoppe's theoretical project, we take the point of departure of his philosophy – an aprioristic epistemology – as the key to construing the system as a whole and its substantial problems. Insofar as the practical part of Hoppe's philosophy is concerned, two categories are of central importance – liberty and order, with the former being conceived of as a state of affairs such that one's legitimate property rights are not violated. It is our contention in this thesis that in light of Hoppe's views these two political values are logical correlates, which manifests itself at the levels of ethics, sociology, and political science. At the level of ethics, the notion of “liberty as property” (the term coined by Frank Van Dun) allows for the establishment of just social relations, based on compossible individual rights ascribed equally to every rational entity. At the level of cultural order, in turn, not only does the application of the libertarian code not lead to deterioration of social fabric, but it indeed strengthens it, resulting in the enhancement of social ties and the revival of traditional institutions such as family and neighborhood. Finally, at the level of politics, what emerges out of respect for the libertarian ethics is not chaos, but rather a stateless, peaceful legal order called “anarcho-capitalism”.

Although Hans-Hermann Hoppe, as the title of the thesis itself suggests, is doubtlessly the main protagonist of our deliberations, he is by no means the only one. On the contrary, given Hoppe's prominent position in contemporary libertarianism, it hardly comes as a surprise that his pronouncements regularly arouse lively reactions among libertarian scholars. Furthermore, as many of Hoppe's ideas are intended to thoroughly remold the foundations of libertarianism and often deviate from what is believed to be the orthodox libertarian position in certain respects, they continually meet with controversies and polemics. Hence, throughout the thesis emphasis is put not only on Hoppe himself, but also on his critics and allies, most significant ones being Murray Rothbard, Stephan Kinsella, and Walter Block. Except for the issues of epistemology, to which little attention has hitherto been paid by other libertarians, each problem of the Hoppean libertarianism is thereby analyzed as subject-matter of an ongoing debate amongst libertarian theorists.

The structure of the thesis corresponds to its scope. It consists of eight chapters.

In the first chapter, we scrutinize what we consider to be the epistemological foundation of Hoppe's libertarianism. To wit, we describe the Hoppean theory of knowledge

as encompassing the following components: apriorism, transcendentalism, (classical) rationalism, foundationalism, (Kantian-style) criticism, accentuation of the role played in cognition by language, activism, instrumentalism, scientific realism, and antinaturalism. Most importantly, we identify two interrelated fundamentals, on whose stone the entire body of Hoppe's philosophy is set: the *a priori* of action and the *a priori* of communication and argumentation. From the historical point of view, we also stress the influence of Jürgen Habermas and – to an even greater degree – Karl-Otto Apel on the latter part of Hoppe's epistemology.

In the second chapter, we discuss Hoppe's foremost contribution to libertarianism – the so-called argumentation ethics. We scrupulously examine Hoppe's meta-ethics and then move to the presentation of the substantive elements of his normative doctrine. Here, the idea of "liberty as property" and its justification proposed by Hoppe are elaborated on at length. When it comes to the Hoppean grounding of the libertarian ethics, we once again emphasize the paramount significance of Apel's impact on Hoppe, the neglect of which seems to be one of the sources of the common misrepresentations of the libertarian argumentation ethics. Furthermore, we stress the notion of conflict-freedom as the usually overlooked logical cornerstone of Hoppe's ethics. From this standpoint we examine the debate over Hoppe's ethics, trying to dismantle the most popular objections directed against it. Finally, we reconstruct Hoppe's theory in a formal fashion, distinguishing between two similar yet slightly different lines of argument that can be found in Hoppe's writings. Even though the chapter offers support to Hoppe's theory, in highlighting its epistemological underpinnings, we also construe his ethics as resting upon certain background theories that are far more contentious than Hoppe himself would like to have it. Our defense of the libertarian argumentation ethics represents therefore a conditional one.

Chapter three, in turn, addresses Hoppe's criticism of the state. We explicate Hoppe's conception of the state as an "expropriating property protector", whose existence cannot be reconciled with the objective standards of morality and economic efficiency whatsoever. The greatest weight is put on the austro-libertarian class struggle theory expounded by Hoppe. Against critics, we offer some support to Hoppe's theory by arguing that class analysis is entirely consistent with the individualist take on the methodology of social sciences that is widely accepted as a hallmark of the Austrian School of Economics.

The fourth chapter deals with the economic foundations of Hoppe's libertarianism. We present his original typology of socialism and explain why in Hoppe's opinion socialism and the state are two sides of the same coin, i.e. why every state is and must be socialistic. We

also elaborate on Hoppe's economic critique of socialism and his defense of the free-market economy. The critical part of the chapter pertains to logical relations between libertarianism and economics. We contend that economic science, as is practiced by modern Austrian scholars following into the tradition of Rothbard, is anything but value-free. Hence, not only does libertarian political philosophy draw from Austrian School's insights, but also, conversely, certain aspects of the Austrian School hinge upon libertarian ethics. In other words, at least to some extent, it is libertarianism that constitutes a foundation of the Austrian School.

The subject-matter of chapter five is Hoppe's vision of anarcho-capitalism, also known as a private-law society or natural order. We describe in detail how according to Hoppe such stateless, free society would operate, coping with tasks commonly ascribed to governments – the enforcement of law and order, as well as the protection from domestic and foreign threats. Additionally, we critically analyze the ongoing anarchist-minarchist debate. From the perspective of economics and political science, we argue that anarcho-capitalism surpasses any conceivable statist regime in providing peace and order, at least insofar as one could foresee it. More importantly, we defend anarchism as the only political position consistent with the moral principles of libertarianism. In so doing, we demonstrate that political anarchism is indeed a political foundation of libertarianism, which makes minarchism an incoherent, watered-down variant of this philosophy.

In chapter six we turn to Hoppe's views on historiosophy and comparative analysis of political systems. The vision of the political history of Western civilization that emerges from Hoppe's views is one of moderate pessimism. Whilst in the field of economy and technology the Western man has continually been moving onwards, in the realm of politics there has been a constant retrogression since the medieval period with its polycentric, feudal social order, consisting in an unhampered expansion of political power. This tendency is thought to have been greatly aggravated in the wake of democratization in the modern era. In order to prove this thesis right, Hoppe embarks on his famous comparative analysis of democracy and monarchy as – respectively – publicly and privately owned government. In this respect, we argue contra Hoppe that his theory represents an abuse of the Austrian School's methodology. More precisely, we assert that whereas Hoppe's sharply critical assessment of democratic regime is roughly correct from the libertarian perspective, his austro-libertarian rehabilitation of monarchical rule runs afoul of both economic theory and historical experience. On top of that, we focus on Hoppe's stance towards classical liberalism and liberal components of modern democracy, highlighting the one-sidedness of his views. In

short, all the while Hoppe finds classical liberalism co-responsible for the hypertrophy of statism in the modern era and at the same time classifies the most radical currents of liberalism as the only genuine ones, we hold that although the former is indeed the case, Hoppe underestimates liberalism's positive impact on politics and at the same time unduly neglects its more moderate strands. Again, Hoppe's views on the aforementioned subjects are analyzed against the background of the broader libertarian tradition of thinking about liberalism and democracy.

The seventh chapter explores the Hoppean idea of the great conservative-libertarian synthesis. Hoppe posits that it is the modern welfare state that bears responsibility for the alleged decay of morals and culture. And conversely, under anarcho-capitalism, one would likely witness a revival of traditional values and institutions. Hence, both progressive libertarianism and statist conservatism must be deemed internally inconsistent. Hoppe postulates therefore that libertarians be hard-line cultural conservatives and that conservatives become uncompromised libertarians. We assess this view as partly one-sided, nevertheless pinpointing its rational core that we propose to term "communitarian libertarianism" instead of the rather exaggerated label "anarcho-conservatism". In addition, in this chapter we discuss Hoppe's controversial stance on migration, according to which so long as the state exists, the genuinely libertarian policy towards the international movement of people must be "restricted immigration", that is, immigration restricted by government acting as a trustee of the domestic taxpayers. We describe the current state of debate over Hoppe's theory and eventually take the side of his critics by arguing that the "restricted immigration" position is not in line with the basic premises of the libertarian theory of justice. Likewise, Hoppe's cultural conservatism is examined in juxtaposition with ideas and politics of his opponents – various currents of the libertarian left.

Finally, chapter eight deals with Hoppe's libertarianism as a political doctrine, that is, in Habermas' words, a theory aimed at bridging the gap between "is" and "ought" by putting what ought to be into practice. More specifically, we analyze Hoppe's ideas of the alliance between libertarians and far-right (especially the so-called Alt-Right) and his libertarian secessionism, which in turn can be divided into two variants – the idea of so-called "Europe of Thousand Liechtensteins" (a somewhat moderate approach consisting in the decomposition of modern nation-states in order to introduce a medieval-like, polycentric order) on the one hand and the plea for stateless secession on the other. For that matter, we concur that secessionism poses indeed an inspiring and relatively realistic model for the application of the libertarian political ideal. We nonetheless acknowledge threats associated

with its pursuit, particularly in regard to the "Europe of Thousand Liechtensteins" way. In our opinion, those are mainly due to the dominant position of nationalism in the contemporary political culture of the West. Much harsher is our criticism of Hoppe's sympathy to the extreme right, which we find decidedly at odds with the libertarian principles. This part of Hoppe's doctrine is once again scrutinized in juxtaposition with the views of libertarian left, as well as in connection to late Rothbard's right-wing libertarianism.

The last section concludes.