

The Struggle Over Egalitarianism Continues

Introduzione a “Freedom, Inequality, Primitivism, and the Division of Labor”

di Murray N. Rothbard

In the two decades since this essay was written, the major social trends I analyzed have accelerated, seemingly at an exponential rate. The flight away from socialism and central planning begun in Yugoslavia has stunningly succeeded over the entire “socialist bloc” of Eastern Europe, and there is now at least rhetorical allegiance to the idea of privatization and a free-market economy. More and more, Marxism has become confined to the academics of the United States and Western Europe, comfortably ensconced as parasites upon their capitalist economies. But even among academics, there is almost nothing left of the triumphalist Marxism of the 1930s and 40s, with their boasts of the economic efficiency and superiority of socialist central planning. Instead, even the most dedicated Marxists now pay lip service to the necessity of some sort of “market,” however restricted by government.

I. New Areas of Inequality and “Oppression”

But this does not mean that the struggle over egalitarianism is over. Far from it. On the contrary, after the New Left of the late 1960s and early ‘70s had been discredited by its bizarre turn to violence, it took the advice of its liberal elders and “joined the system.” New Leftists launched a successful Gramscian “long march through the institutions,” and by becoming lawyers and academics — particularly in the humanities, philosophy, and the “soft” social sciences — they have managed to acquire hegemony over our culture. Seeing themselves defeated and routed on the strictly economic front (in contrast to the Old Left of the 1930s, Marxian economics and the labor theory of value was never the New Left’s strong suit), the Left turned to the allegedly moral high ground of egalitarianism.

And, as they did so, they turned increasingly to what was suggested in the last paragraph of my essay: de-emphasizing old-fashioned economic egalitarianism in favor of stamping out broader aspects of human variety. Older egalitarianism stressed making income or wealth equal; but, as Helmut Schoeck brilliantly realized, the logic of their argument was to stamp out in the name of “fairness,” all instances of human diversity and therefore implicit or explicit superiority of some persons over others. In short, envy of the superiority of others is to be institutionalized, and all possible sources of such envy eradicated.

In his book on *Envy*, Helmut Schoeck analyzed a chilling dystopian novel by the British writer, L.P. Hartley. In his work, *Facial Justice*, published in 1960, Hartley, extrapolating from the attitudes he saw in British life after World War II, opens by noting that after the Third World War, “Justice had made great strides.” Economic Justice, Social Justice and other forms of justice had been achieved, but there were still areas of life to conquer. In particular, *Facial Justice* had not yet been attained, since pretty girls had an unfair advantage over ugly ones. Hence, under the direction of the Ministry of Face Equality, all Alpha (pretty) girls and all Gamma (ugly) girls were forced to undergo operations at the “Equalization (Faces) Centre” so as all to attain Beta (pleasantly average) faces.^[i]

Coincidentally, in 1961, Kurt Vonnegut published a pithy and even more bitterly satirical short story depicting a comprehensively egalitarian society, even more thoroughgoing than Hartley’s. Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” begins:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

The "handicapping" worked partly as follows:

Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty minutes or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.^[ii]

This sort of egalitarian emphasis on noneconomic inequalities has proliferated and intensified in the decades since these men penned their seemingly exaggerated Orwellian dystopias. In academic and literary circles "political correctness" is now enforced with an increasingly iron hand; and the key to being politically correct is never, ever, in any area, to make judgments of difference or superiority.

Thus, we find that a Smith College handout from the Office of Student Affairs lists ten different kinds of "oppression" allegedly inflicted by making judgments about people. They include: "heterosexism," defined as "oppression" of those with nonheterosexual orientations, which include "not acknowledging their existence"; and "ableism," defined as oppression of the "differently abled" [known in less enlightened days as "disabled" or "handicapped"], by the "temporarily able." Particularly relevant to our two dystopian writers is "ageism," oppression of the young and the old by youngish and middle-aged adults, and "lookism" (or "looksism"), defined as the "construction of a standard of beauty/attractiveness."

"Oppression" is also supposed to consist, not only of discriminating in some way against the unattractive, but even in noticing the difference. Perhaps the most chilling recently created category is "logism" or "logo-centric," the tyranny of the knowledgeable and articulate. A set of "feminist scholarship guidelines" sponsored by the state of New Jersey for its college campuses attacks knowledge and scientific inquiry *per se* as a male "rape of nature." It charges:

mind was male. Nature was female, and knowledge was created as an act of aggression — a passive nature had to be interrogated, unclothed, penetrated, and compelled by man to reveal her secrets.^[iii]

"Oppression" is of course broadly defined so as to indict the very existence of possible superiority — and therefore an occasion for envy — in any realm. The dominant literary theory of deconstructionism fiercely argues that there can be no standards to judge one literary "text" superior to another. At a recent conference, when one political science professor referred correctly to Czeslaw Milosz's book *The Captive Mind* as a "classic," another female professor declared that the very word classic "makes me feel oppressed."^[iv] The clear implication is that any reference to someone else's superior product may engender resentment and envy in the rank and file, and that catering to these "feelings of oppression" must be the central focus of scholarship and criticism.

The whole point of academia and other research institutions has always been an untrammelled search for truth. This ideal has now been challenged and superseded by catering to the "sensitive" feelings of the politically correct. This emphasis on subjective feelings rather than truth is evident in the current furor over the teaching of the distinguished Berkeley anthropologist, Vincent Sarich. Sarich's examination of genetic influences on racial differences in achievement was denounced by a fellow faculty member as "attempting to destroy the self-esteem of black students in the class."^[v]

II. Group Quotas

Indeed, one radical change since the writing of this essay has been the rapid and accelerating transformation of old-fashioned egalitarianism, which wanted to make every individual equal, into group-egalitarianism on behalf of groups that are officially designated as “oppressed.” In employment, positions, and status generally, oppressed groups are supposed to be guaranteed their quotal share of the well-paid or prestigious positions. (No one seems to be agitating for quotal representation in the ranks of ditch diggers.) I first noticed this trend in a paper written one year after the present essay at a symposium on *The Nature and Consequences of Egalitarian Ideology*.

There I reacted strongly to the quotal representation for designated groups insisted upon by the McGovern movement at the 1972 Democratic Convention. These victorious Democrats insisted that groups such as women, youth, blacks and Chicanos had fallen below their quotal proportion of the population as elected delegates to previous conventions; this had to be rectified by the Democratic Party overriding the choices of their members and insisting upon due quotal representation of these allegedly oppressed groups. I noted the particular idiocy of the claim that youths aged 18–25 had been grievously “under-represented” in the past, and indulged in what would now be called a “politically inappropriate” *reductio ad absurdum* by suggesting an immediate correction to the heinous and chronic underrepresentation of five-year-old “men and women.”^[vi]

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And yet, only two years before that convention, another form of quotal appeal had met with proper scorn and ridicule from left-liberals. When one of President Nixon’s failed Supreme Court nominees was derided as being “mediocre,” Senator Roman Hruska (R., Neb.) wondered why the mediocre folk of America did not deserve “representation” on the highest Court. Liberal critics mockingly charged the Senator with engaging in special pleading. The self-same charge, levelled against denouncers of “logism” would drive such critics from public life. But times, and standards of political correctness, have changed.

It is difficult, indeed, to parody or satirize a movement which seems to be a living self-parody, and which can bring about such deplorable results. Thus, two eminent American historians, Bernard Bailyn and Stephan Thernstrom, were literally forced to abandon their course at Harvard on the history of American race relations, because of absurd charges of “racism” levelled by a few students, charges that were treated with utmost seriousness by everyone concerned. Of particular interest here was the charge against Bailyn’s course on race relations in the colonial era.

The student “grievance” against Bailyn is that he had read from the diary of a southern planter without giving “equal time” to the memoirs of a slave. To the complainants, this practice clearly amounted to a “covert defense of slavery.” Bailyn had patiently explained during the offending lecture that no diaries, journals or letters by slaves in that era had ever been found. But to these students, Bailyn had clearly failed to understand the problem: “Since it was impossible to give equal representation to the slaves, Bailyn ought to have dispensed with the planter’s diary altogether.”^[vii]

Spokesmen for group quotas in behalf of the “oppressed” (labelled for public relations purposes with the positive-sounding phrase “affirmative action”) generally claim that a quota system is the furthest thing from their minds: that all they want is positive action to increase representation of the favored groups. They are either being flagrantly disingenuous or else fail to understand elementary arithmetic. If oppressed group X is to have its “representation” increased from, say, 8 to 20 percent, then *some* group or combination of groups is going to have their total representation reduced by 12

percent. The hidden, or sometimes not-so-hidden, agenda, of course, is that the quotal declines are supposed to occur in the ranks of designated oppressor groups, who presumably deserve their fate.

III. Who Are the “Oppressed”?

In this regime of group egalitarianism, it becomes particularly important to take one’s place in the ranks of the oppressed rather than the oppressors. Who, then, *are* the oppressed? It is difficult to determine, since new groups of oppressed are being discovered all the time. One almost longs for the good old days of classic Marxism, when there was only one “oppressed class” — the proletariat — and one or at most a very few classes of oppressors: the capitalists or bourgeois, plus sometimes the “feudal landlords” or perhaps the petit bourgeoisie.

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But now, as the ranks of the oppressed and therefore the groups specially privileged by society and the State keep multiplying, and the ranks of the oppressors keep dwindling, the problem of income and wealth egalitarianism reappears and is redoubled. For more and greater varieties of groups are continually being added to the parasitic burden weighing upon an ever-dwindling supply of oppressors. And since it is obviously worth everyone’s while to leave the ranks of the oppressors and move over to the oppressed, pressure groups will increasingly succeed in doing so — so long as this dysfunctional ideology continues to flourish. Specifically, achieving the label of *officially oppressed* entitles one to share in an endless flow of benefits — in money, status, and prestige — from the hapless oppressors, who are made to feel guilty forevermore, even as they are forced to sustain and expand the endless flow. It is not surprising that attaining oppressed status takes a great deal of pressure and organization. As Joseph Sobran wittily puts it, “it takes a lot of clout to be a victim.” Eventually, if trends continue the result must be the twin death of parasite and host alike, and an end to any flourishing economy or civilization.

There are virtually an infinite number of groups or “classes” in society: the class of people named Smith, the class of men over 6 feet tall, the class of bald people, and so on. Which of these groups may find themselves among the “oppressed”? Who knows? It is easy to invent a new oppressed group. I might come up with a study, for example, demonstrating that the class of people named “Doe” have an average income or wealth or status lower than that of other names. I could then coin a hypothesis that people named Doe have been discriminated against because their names “John Doe” and “Jane Doe” have been “stereotyped” as associated with faceless anonymity and, *presto*, we have one more group who is able to leave the burdened ranks of the oppressors and join the happy ranks of the oppressed.

A political theorist friend of mine thought he could coin a satiric oppressed group: short people, who suffer from “heightism.” I informed him that he was seriously anticipated two decades ago, again demonstrating the impossibility of parodying the current ideology. I noted in an article almost twenty years old, written shortly after this essay, that Professor Saul D. Feldman, a sociologist at Case-Western Reserve, and himself a distinguished *short*, had at last brought science to bear on the age-old oppression of the *shorts* by the *talls*. Feldman reported that out of recent University of Pittsburgh graduating seniors, those 6’2” and taller received an average starting salary 12.4 percent higher than graduates under 6 feet, and that a marketing professor at Eastern Michigan University had quizzed 140 business recruiters about their preferences between two hypothetical, equally qualified applicants for the job of salesman. One of the hypothetical salesmen was to be 6’1”, the other 5’5”. The recruiters answered as follows: 27 percent expressed the politically correct no preference; one percent would hire the short man; and no less than 72 percent would hire the tallie.

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In addition to this clear-cut oppression of tall over short, Feldman pointed out that women notoriously prefer tall over short men. He might have pointed out, too, that Alan Ladd could only play the romantic lead in movies produced by bigoted Hollywood moguls by standing on a hidden box, and that even the great character actor Sydney Greenstreet was invariably shot upward from a low-placed camera to make him appear much taller than he was. (The Hollywood studio heads were generally short themselves, but were betraying their short comrades by pandering to the pro-tall culture.) Feldman also perceptively pointed to the antishort prejudice that pervades our language: in such phrases as people being “short-sighted, short-changed, short-circuited, and short in cash.” He added that among the two major party candidates for president, the taller is almost invariably elected.[viii]

I went on in my article to call for a short liberation movement to end short oppression, and asked, where are the short corporation leaders, the short bankers, the short senators and presidents?[ix],[x] I asked for short pride, short institutes, short history courses, short quotas everywhere, and for shorts to stop internalizing the age-old propaganda of our tall culture that shorts are genetically or culturally inferior. (Look at Napoleon!) Short people, arise! You have nothing to lose but your elevator shoes. I ended by assuring the tallies that we were *not* anti-tall, and that we welcome progressive, guilt-ridden tall as pro-short sympathizers and auxiliaries in our movement. If my own consciousness had been sufficiently raised at the time, I would have of course added a demand that the tall compensate the shorts for umpteen thousand years of tall tyranny.

IV. The Romantics and Primitivism

Turning from the topic of the oppressed, my own view of the Romantics, certainly jaundiced twenty years ago, is far more hostile today. For I have learned from such sources as Leszek Kolakowski and particularly the great literary critic M.H. Abrams, of the devotion of the Romantics, Hegelians, and of Marxism to what might be called “reabsorption theology.” This view stemmed from the third-century Egyptian Platonist, Plotinus, seeping into Christian Platonism and from then on constituting a heretical and mystical underground in Western thought.

Briefly, these thinkers saw Creation not as a wonderfully benevolent overflow of God’s goodness, but as an essentially evil act that sundered the blessed pre-Creation unity of the collective entities God, Man, and Nature, bringing about tragic and inevitable “alienation” in Man. However, Creation, the outgrowth of God’s deficiencies, is redeemable in one sense: History is an inevitable “dialectical” process by which pre-Creation gives rise to its opposite, the current world. But eventually history is destined to end in a mighty “reabsorption” of these three collective entities, though at a much higher level of development for both God and Man.

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In addition to other problems with this view, the contrast with orthodox Christianity should be clear. Whereas in Christianity, the individual person is made in God’s image and the salvation of each individual is of supreme importance, the allegedly benevolent reabsorptionist escape from metaphysical alienation occurs only at the end of history and only for the collective species Man, each individual disappearing into the species-organism.[xi]

As for primitivism, later anthropological research has strengthened the view of this essay that primitive tribes, and premodern cultures generally, were marked, not by communism — à la Engels

and Polanyi — but by private-property rights, markets, and monetary exchange. The work of the economist Bruce Benson has particularly highlighted this point.[xii]

V. *The Division of Labor*

I have come to realize, since writing this essay, that I overweighted the contributions and importance of Adam Smith on the division of labor. And to my surprise, I did not sufficiently appreciate the contributions of Ludwig von Mises.

Despite the enormous emphasis on specialization and the division of labor in the *Wealth of Nations*, much of Smith's discussion was misplaced and misleading. In the first place, he placed undue importance on the division of labor *within* a factory (the famous pin-factory example), and scarcely considered the far more important division of labor among various industries and occupations. Secondly, there is the mischievous contradiction between the discussions in Book I and Book V in the *Wealth of Nations*. In Book I, the division of labor is hailed as responsible for civilization as well as economic growth, and is also praised as expanding the alertness and intelligence of the population. But in Book V the division of labor is condemned as leading to the intellectual and moral degeneration of the same population, and to the loss of their "intellectual, social, and martial virtues." These complaints about the division of labor as well as similar themes in Smith's close friend Adam Ferguson, strongly influenced the griping about "alienation" in Marx and later socialist writers.[xiii]

But of greater fundamental importance was Smith's abandonment of the tradition since Jean Buridan and the Scholastics that emphasized that two parties always undertook an exchange because each expected to gain from the transaction. In contrast to this emphasis on specialization and exchange as a result of conscious human decision, Smith shifted the focus from mutual benefit to an alleged irrational and innate "propensity to truck, barter, and exchange," as if human beings were lemmings determined by forces external to their own chosen purposes. As Edwin Cannan pointed out long ago, Smith took this tack because he rejected the idea of innate differences in human talents and abilities, differences which would naturally lead people to seek out different specialized occupations.[xiv] Smith instead took an egalitarian-environmentalist position, still dominant today in neoclassical economics, holding that all men are uniform and equal, and therefore that differences in labor or occupations can only be the *result* rather than a cause of the system of division of labor. Moreover, Smith inaugurated the corollary tradition that differences in wage rates among this uniform population can only reflect differences in the cost of training.[xv],[xvi]

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In contrast, the recent work of Professor Joseph Salerno has illuminated the profound contributions of Ludwig von Mises's emphasis on the division of labor as the "essence of society" and the "fundamental social phenomenon." For Mises, as I wrote in the essay, the division of labor stems from the diversity and inequality of human beings and of nature. Salerno, in addition, brings out with unparalleled clarity that for Mises the division of labor is a conscious choice of mutual gain and economic development. The process of social evolution therefore becomes "the development of the division of labor," and this allows Mises to refer to the worldwide division of labor as a vital "social organism" or "*oecumene*." Mises also points out that division of labor is at the heart of biological organisms, and "the fundamental principle of all forms of life." The difference of the "social organism" is that, in contrast to biological organisms, "reason and will are the originating and sustaining form of the organic coalescence." Therefore, for Mises "human society is thus spiritual and teleological," the "product of thought and will." It therefore becomes of the utmost importance for people to understand the significance of maintaining and expanding the *oecumene*

that consists of the free market and voluntary human exchanges, and to realize that breaching and crippling that market and *oecumene* can only have disastrous consequences for the human race.[xvii]

In the standard account, writers and social theorists are supposed to mellow and moderate their views as they get older. (Two glorious exceptions to this rule are such very different libertarian figures as Lysander Spooner and Lord Acton.) Looking back over the two decades since writing this essay, it is clear that my views, on the contrary, have radicalized and polarized even further.

As unlikely as it would have seemed twenty years ago, I am even more hostile to socialism, egalitarianism, and Romanticism, far more critical of the British classical and modern neoclassical tradition, and even more appreciative of Mises's great insights than ever before. Indeed, for someone who thought that he had absorbed all of Mises's work many years ago, it is a constant source of surprise how rereading Mises continues to provide a source of fresh insights and of new ways of looking at seemingly trite situations. This phenomenon, in which many of us have experience, bears testimony to the remarkable quality and richness of Mises's thought. Although he died almost two decades ago, Ludwig von Mises remains more truly alive than most of our conventionally wise contemporaries.

which was written in 1970.

Note

[i] See the discussion in Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), pp. 149–55. Schoeck's work was originally published in German in 1966 under the title *Der Neid*, and the English translation was first published in 1969.

[ii] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), in *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Dell, 1970), p.7.

[iii] John Taylor, "Are you Politically Correct?" *New York* (January 21, 1991, p.38. Also see *ibid.*, pp. 32–40: "Taking Offense," *Newsweek* (December 24, 1990), pp. 48–54.

[iv] *Newsweek*, loc. cit., p. 53.

[v] Paul Selvin, "The Raging Bull of Berkeley," *Science* 251 (January 25, 1991): 369.

[vi] Murray N.Rothbard, "Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature," in *Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature and Other Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Libertarian Review Press, 1974), pp. 7–8.

[vii] Taylor, "Are You Politically Correct?" p. 33.

[viii] Feldman's case would have been strengthened had he written after the 1988 campaign: not only did Bush tower over Dukakis, but Representative Charles Wilson, (D., Texas) was able to express the tallist bigotry of his region: "No Greek dwarf can carry East Texas," without calling forth protests and marches by organized short-dom. On the Feldman study, see Arthur J. Snider, "Society Favors Tall Men: Prof," *New York Post* (February 19, 1972). On all of this, see Murray N. Rothbard, "Short People, Arise!" *The Libertarian Forum* IV (Arril 1972): p. 8.

[ix] It might be instructive to study whether the savage treatment accorded to Senator John Tower in his confirmation hearings for Secretary of Defense was due to discrimination against his short size.

[x] A possible project for American historians: most of the big business tycoons of the late-nineteenth century (e.g., Jay Gould and John D. Rockefeller, Sr.) were very short. By what process did the tallies quietly seize power in the corporate world?

[xi] See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. I, *The Founders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 9–39; M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971); M.H. Abrams, "Apocalypse: Theme and Variations" in C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich, eds., *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp.342–68; Ernest L.

Tuveson, “The Millenarian Structure of the Communist Manifesto,” in *ibid.*, pp. 323–41; and Murray N. Rothbard “Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist,”[PDF File] *The Review of Austrian Economics* 4 (1990): 123–179.

[xii] Bruce L. Benson, “Enforcement of Private Property Rights in Primitive Societies: Law Without Government,”[PDF File] *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 9 (Winter 1989): 1–26; and Benson, *The Enterprise of Law: Justice Without the State* (San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, 1990), pp. 11–41. Also see Joseph R. Peden, “Property Rights in Celtic Irish Law,”[PDF File] *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 1 (1977): 81–95; and David Friedman, “Private Creation and Enforcement of Law: A Historical Case,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 8 (March 1979): 399–415.

[xiii] On Ferguson’s influence, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, pp. 220–21, 508.

[xiv] Edwin Cannan, *A History of the Theories of Production and Distribution in English Political Economy from 1776 to 1848*, 3rd ed (London: Staples Press, 1917), p. 35

[xv] Contrast Smith’s egalitarianism with the great early-fifteenth-century Italian Scholastic, San Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444). In his *On Contracts and Usury*, written in 1431–33, Bernardino pointed out that wage inequality on the market is a function of differences of ability and skill as well as training. An architect is paid more than a ditch-digger, Bernardino explained, because the former’s job requires more intelligence and ability as well as training, so that fewer men will qualify for the task. See Raymond de Roover, *San Bernardino of Siena and Sant’Antonino of Florence: The Two Great Thinkers of the Middle Ages* (Boston: Baker Library, 1967), and Alejandro Chafuen, *Christians for Freedom: Late Scholastic Economics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp. 123–31.

[xvi] Modern neoclassical labor economics fits in this tradition by defining “discrimination” as any wage inequalities greater than differences in the cost of training. Thus, see the standard work by Gary Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

[xvii] Joseph T. Salerno, “Ludwig von Mises as Social Rationalist,”[PDF File] *The Review of Austrian Economics* 4 (1990): 26–54. See also Salerno’s critique of Eamonn Butler’s uncomprehending reaction to Mises’s insights, charging Mises with the “organic fallacy,” and “difficulty with English.” *Ibid.*, p. 29n. The implicit contrast of Mises’s view with Hayek’s emphasis on unconscious action and blind adherence to traditional rules is made explicit by Salerno in the latter part of this article dealing with the socialist calculation debate, and in Salerno, “Postscript,” in Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, Al.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1990), pp. 51–71.