

Group interests and the ‘good of the whole’

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The libertarian argument against civil rights laws strikes many progressives as fundamentally wrong because they view civil rights as the best way to promote liberal values including individual liberty. But any so-called values that lead inexorably to the destruction of society are not “liberal” in the true sense. In “Liberalism,” Ludwig von Mises explains the importance of pursuing what is good for society as a whole, rather than what seems good for one particular group.

This seems counterintuitive to progressives, who reason that since liberalism is concerned with individual rights, no attention needs to be paid to the common interest or what is good for society as a whole. They reason that if even one individual is offended or hampered in pursuit of his ideals, that would justify compelling the majority to respect the individual’s preferences — after all, is that not the purpose of protecting individual rights?

The problem with that argument is that to modern liberals, everything an individual wants is his “right,” so the principle that the state should protect individual rights becomes the foundation for reconstructing society according to progressive ideals. The next step in their reasoning is that when individuals “identify” as a particular race or sex, it follows that their identity group should have special rights to protect individual members of the group. Thus arose the “civil rights” template of conferring special protections on identity groups based on race, sex, religion, gender or sexuality. This reasoning is wrong. As [Mises argues](#):

“Liberalism has always had in view the good of the whole, not that of any special group. It was this that the English utilitarians meant to express — although, it is true, not very aptly — in their famous formula, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” Historically, liberalism was the first political movement that aimed at promoting the welfare of all, not that of special groups.”

This notion of the good of the whole is also analyzed in “Human Action,” where Mises [argues](#) that group conflict — conflict between different races, for example — is inherent in human nature:

“Nature does not generate peace and goodwill. The characteristic mark of the ‘state of nature’ is irreconcilable conflict. Each specimen is the rival of all other specimens. The means of subsistence are

scarce and do not grant survival to all. The conflicts can never disappear ... This is a dilemma that does not allow any peaceful solution."

With that in mind, the good of the whole refers to civilization, for which peace is an essential prerequisite. There can be no civilization when groups are embroiled in endless war.

If human beings do not intentionally and purposefully set out to promote the common interest in civilization and pursue that goal with determination, the only alternative is to close ranks within their different groups and fight against other groups in endless revolution and conflict. This is currently unfolding under the purview of civil rights litigation. Women fighting for women's interests, transgenders for transgender interests, Jews for Jewish interests, Muslims for Islamic interests, each group for its own. Thus, the battles continue, with new identity groups emerging almost daily. For example, there is now a new group of adult men who identify as [babies](#). They want to dress like babies and want support in expressing their identity. Sight is lost of the interests of society as a whole in peaceful coexistence. Political debates focus not on how to achieve peace but on how different groups should be defined and which groups deserve special protection, which is a form of stirring up conflict.

Murray Rothbard in "Marshall, Civil Rights, and the Court" [depicts](#) this as a "civil rights trap," the trap being the idea that the only way to prevent one group from oppressing another is to create group rights and forbid each group from discriminating against other groups:

"On the one side, left-liberalism, which in the name of equality and civil rights, wants to outlaw 'discrimination' everywhere, has pushed the process to the point of virtually mandating representational quotas for allegedly oppressed groups everywhere in society ... but the Official Conservative opposition, which includes not only neocons but also regular conservatives, conservative legal foundations, and Left-libertarians, adopts the self-same axiom of civil rights and equality."

This path cannot lead to peace. As Mises [explains](#) in "The Clash of Group Interests," this is not peace but rather the uneasy *détente* of people preparing to strike: "As far as there is peace, the reason is not, to be sure, love of peace based on philosophical principles, but the fact that the groups concerned have not yet finished their preparations for the fight." The only way out of this death spiral is by repealing all laws that protect group interests, starting with civil rights laws. Pursuing the good of the whole cannot be achieved by creating even more special groups and giving groups more power to protect their special group interests. The only path to the good of the whole is through productivity and exchange. This is the only way to avoid mutually assured annihilation. As Mises explains: "What makes friendly relations between human beings possible is the higher productivity of the division of labor. It removes the natural conflict of

interests. ... A preeminent common interest, the preservation and further intensification of social cooperation, becomes paramount and obliterates all essential collisions.”

This shows the Misesian foundations of the argument against civil rights.



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