

6-2012

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Recommended Citation

Samson, Steven A., "Global Governance: The Ideological Kenosis of the West" (2012). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 416.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/416

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GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: THE IDEOLOGICAL *KENOSIS* OF THE WEST

Presented at Global Governance vs. National Sovereignty conference, Los Angeles

Steven Alan Samson

<http://www.americanfreedomalliance.org/files/microsite/globalgovernance/introduction.htm>

Global governance is simply the latest in a series of endeavors to create common values, a common loyalty, indeed a common home. *One World* is the title of a book by Wendell Willkie, a failed presidential candidate back in the 1940s. *On Perpetual Peace* is the title of an essay recommending global governance written more than two centuries ago by Immanuel Kant, the most influential modern philosopher. And, of course, everybody should be familiar with the phrase “Tower of Babel.” The point here is that the utopian longing for peace, stability, and unity which stirs every heart is an age-old one. Although it provides occasions for mischief, as do many NGOs [the subject of this panel discussion], our problem has more to do with the would-be architects of what Thomas Sowell calls the “quest for cosmic justice:” ideologues who seek the power to decide what is in the best interest of humanity. They have an agenda and, as Kenneth Minogue puts it, they use despotic means to achieve it: that is, what he calls “political moralism.” Roger Scruton calls this “the culture of repudiation.”

When Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to America in the early 1830s to assess the effects of democracy under what seemed to be laboratory conditions, he was impressed with the individualism of the self-governing citizen and the array of voluntary benevolent and cultural associations that had largely taken the place of the royal and aristocratic

institutions of Europe. Today, instead, the civil society Tocqueville described is itself at risk. Today it is the disconnectedness described in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* that captures something of the spirit of our time.

When Francis Lieber, a German immigrant who became Tocqueville's life-long friend and correspondent, wrote his treatises on political ethics, legal and political interpretation, civil liberty and self-government, he observed the vigor of a society that embodied Edmund Burke's idea of little platoons. In a lecture he gave in 1849, Lieber contrasted the Anglican liberty of the English common law tradition with what he called the Gallican liberty associated with France's highly centralized bureaucracy, which grew into what he called democratic despotism and Rousseauism [Tocqueville called it democratic absolutism] under Napoleon III during the decade that followed.

Such concepts as Johannes Althusius's intermural concept of symbiotic federalism (c 1600), Abraham Kuyper's sphere sovereignty (c. 1900), and the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity express a similar appreciation of diversity and pluralism. For the most part, the nation-states of Europe and America were cultural mosaics rather than melting pots. The NGOs of Tocqueville's and Lieber's day, just as in our own, were capable of doing much good as well as much mischief, but they effectively kept each other in check.

What Lieber cherished about his new homeland, and so carefully detailed, is today at great risk. Under the scrutiny of an ideological inquisition, many institutions are being hollowed out. Some of the little platoons of my childhood – Boy Scouts, summer camp, PTA, and special school projects – may still be found but many are under siege. Yet it was not until I got to college in the mid-1960s that I first encountered systematic

ideological axe-grinding in the midst of a cultural revolution that was then raging on our campuses. The philosopher Sidney Hook, who dedicated one of his books at the time to my mentor, Edward Rozek, called the revolution one of “totalitarian liberalism.” After three centuries, the prevailing liberal philosophy of the West had begun emptying itself of its particular foundational character in favor of the anonymous, humanitarian universalism of the provider state.

In *Democracy Without Nations?* (ISI Books, 2007), Pierre Manent has analyzed what this emergent “democracy” entails. “A state whose mission consists in guaranteeing rights . . . is being progressively substituted for the previous arrangements, which aimed at articulating and connecting the various parts of an independent people and their representatives” (p. 37). As a result, “the state is less and less sovereign, and government is less and less representative. The political institutions of the West are more and more functional-bureaucratic and less and less political. Our political contrivances are more and more artificial, and each day they recede further from the natural movements of citizens’ souls” (p. 33). He adds: “One can detect a fear that we are no longer a people, or at least less and less one. This is true whether one understands the fine word ‘people’ in the sense of a coherent ‘society’ or in a ‘national’ sense. Both the ‘societal’ and the national articulations of the people have been lost or are on their way to being lost” (p. 37). To illustrate: the topic for debate at the Philadelphia Society meeting in 1994 was: “The USA: An Idea or a People?”

Earlier generations of Americans, who were still engaged in building their common enterprise, took steps to “protect their brand.” Justice Joseph Story, who was

one of the major contributors to Lieber's *Encyclopaedia Americana*, wrote a constitutional catechism nearly two centuries ago. Along with Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary, it was part of a new nation's education for liberty. Lieber's publications also helped shape the education of Americans from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt. Literacy was valued at that time. Americans were a people of the book. But too many American schoolchildren today learn very little of a constructive character about American history, geography, and civics. Revolutionary tracts pass for textbooks in many classrooms. The change I have witnessed as a college professor just in this past generation has been dramatic.

We need instead to preserve the institutions that built up the foundations of our civilization. *E pluribus unum* is the national motto of America but it is equally true of the larger civilization. A diversity of self-governing institutions answerable to the supreme law of the land was once recognized as a source of strength, not as a design flaw to be remedied. Some things are too important to entrust to public officials and the mandarins of the administrative state. James Madison, who helped design the federal Constitution, had an answer to institutional overreach: "The government of the United States is a definite government, confined to specified objects. It is not like state governments, whose powers are more general. Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government." Today, the American government is operating more under what Edward Corwin called a Constitution of Powers rather than the earlier Constitution of Rights. Thus the improvident servant becomes an unprofitable master.

But the problem is not public institutions and it is not NGOs, which may also be part of the solution. It comes down to what one president called the "vision thing." The

question is whether what Thomas Sowell called the “vision of the anointed” is good for us. Does justice require that we reduce everything to “one size fits all,” as determined by international conventions and tribunals, the UN, and transnational legislation? Or will people still be allowed a bit of elbow room so that they may be self-governing in the way the framers of the Constitution intended? No system is perfect, of course, but why do today’s opinion leaders perpetually try to wipe the slate clean and start over? Why did European leaders in the 1980s collaborate with Mikhail Gorbachev to create a “common European home,” as revealed by Vladimir Bukovsky and Pavel Stroilov? For the last century the American Progressive movement and its successors have continually sought to move their reform plans to higher venues that are out of the reach of the public.

Major NGOs tendentiously tear at the traditional fabric of American life in pursuit of this “vision of the anointed.” In my library I have a book published back in the 1980s entitled *The Coercive Utopians*. It is a good title. The siren song of the social engineers has been around throughout our history. An assessment by Katrin Flikshuh gave of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy is right to the point: “for Kant the concept of right is inherently coercive, but we also saw that the authority to enforce coercive rights claims can only lie with an omnilateral public authority that settles the rights claim of all in accordance with the universal law of right.” It is a “one size fits all” mindset that would collectively stamp us all with its signet ring. Too many NGOs and too many idealists seek to use the coercive arm of government to reshape humanity in their own image. The now century-old Fabian Society stained-glass window has a picture of a globe on

an anvil with Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw hammering away at it. As the motto put it: “Remould It Nearer to the Heart’s Desire.”

It is time to retire the Romantics’ infatuation with the myth of Prometheus in which the good guys have to steal something, like fire, from the gods, the 1%, or whoever happens to be the villain *du jour*. This is the dust that our collective utopians throw into our eyes to keep us distracted. The Philadelphia convention instead built on more than 150 years of common experience that had shaped the character of the American people, who proved to be exceptionally inventive in the area of self-government. Francis Lieber devoted a chapter to what he called “American liberty,” over and above “Anglican liberty,” in his treatise *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*.

The founders largely agreed with Thomas Jefferson: “In questions of power, let no more be heard of confidence in man, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution.” A century later, Charles Evans Hughes took a step away from this understanding by remarking: “the Constitution is what the judges say it is.” Even later, Fred Vinson went further in *Dennis v. United States* (1951): “Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes. . . . To those who would paralyze our Government in the face of impending threat by encasing it in a semantic straitjacket we must reply that all concepts are relative.” In this fashion, we have gradually broken the very foundations of constitutionally-limited self-rule and substituted the entangling Lilliputian threads of global governance for a system of clearly articulated constitutional restraints that still left the citizenry free.