

Globalization, Capitalism, and Collapse in Prehistory and the Present

By Louise A. Hitchcock

Introduction

It is a great honor to be invited to contribute to a volume celebrating my former teacher, Professor John Hospers, with whom I studied while at the University of Southern California. It is through his teachings, his book *Libertarianism*, as well as other related readings in libertarian theory, philosophy, and economics, that I became immersed in the lively libertarian community at USC, which included Tom Palmer and C. Ronald Kimberling. I went on to work in many libertarian campaigns in the 1980s. I later continued my education, finishing graduate degrees in ancient history and ancient art at UCLA. After some time spent researching overseas and teaching in southern California, I accepted a permanent position teaching archaeology at the University of Melbourne in Australia, where I became acquainted with Ron Manners.

Through Professor Hospers, I developed a youthful enchantment with the works of Ayn Rand. *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* continue to delight and empower readers through embracing the heroic creator or inventor, technological and scientific progress, and the competent individual. These are some of the archetypes of the Randian hero.

At the other end of Rand's social scale were the incompetent looters and moochers, who could only function in her world by controlling those with ability, and the savages of ancient or undeveloped cultures who could not comprehend ability, seizing the means of progress before killing the inventor, then retreating into mysticism and magic.

Rand was not an archaeologist and wrote at a time before scholars of prehistory focused on the rational and productive aspects of ancient

civilizations, which enabled the present to emerge in fits and starts. These aspects include technology, record-keeping, maritime trade, and pre-monetary economies, areas that only came to be studied since the 1990s.

Emergence: The Free Market and Globalization in Ancient Times

In my professional work as an archaeologist, I have discovered that technology and maritime trade driven by the quest for metals for making tools and weapons contributed to more intensive maritime activity. Maritime movements created opportunities for cross-cultural influences.²⁵⁶ These influences took the form of technological transfers, trade in the small foreign items that accompanied the new internationalism of elite trade, the exchange of ideas, and movements of peoples. All of these “libertarian” activities flourished and accelerated in the ancient Mediterranean world in the Middle to Late Bronze Age (ca. 1900–1200 BCE).²⁵⁷

Although large-scale activities such as commissioning the construction of galleys, provisioning elephant hunts, or acquiring copper and tin in quantity, required the capital that could be provided by royals or wealthy traders, small-scale trade was also evident.²⁵⁸ Metals, gem-stones, glass ingots, spices, and olive oil all served as commodities-based mediums of exchange.²⁵⁹ Our best preserved Bronze Age shipwreck, the *Uluburun*, which sank in 1305 BCE off the southern coast of Turkey, carried all of these items and more. The three hundred copper ingots it was carrying could have been used to make an estimated twenty thousand swords.²⁶⁰

These market activities demonstrate that unregulated free-market activity was in place at an early period.²⁶¹ Movement was relatively free,

256 J. P. Emanuel, “Maritime Worlds Collide: Agents of Transference and the Metastasis of Seaborne Threats at the End of the Bronze Age.” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 148, no. 4, 2016, pp. 265–280.

257 Terms like Stone, Bronze, and Iron Age refer to the highest level of technology reached by human civilizations.

258 On Bronze Age ship construction, see S. Wachsmann, *Seagoing Ships and Seamanship in the Bronze Age Levant*. Ed Rachal Foundation Nautical Archaeology Series. Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 2008.

259 Libertarian Party Platform, plank 2.7: Money and Financial Markets; plank 2.8: Marketplace Freedom.

260 Barry Molloy, personal communication.

261 Libertarian Party Platform, plank 3.4: Free Trade and Migration; plank 3.7: Self-Determination.

and there was opportunity for self-ownership (including for women),²⁶² while social safety nets were typically the domain of extended families.²⁶³ In Mesopotamia, where there was already a long history of writing, dating to the fourth millennium BCE, contracts were routinely executed for the transfer of land and other commodities,²⁶⁴ and a juridical system was in place as seen in the famous Code of Hammurabi dating to the eighteenth century BCE.²⁶⁵

All of the activities taking place in and among Bronze Age city-states conform to modern definitions of globalization, simply defined as the widening and sometimes free or un- or under-regulated flows of commodities, capital, technology, ideas, and human labor.²⁶⁶ As elite access to such wealth increased, an interest in acquiring exotic luxury items also increased. Among such items were decorated ivory and gold objects to display knowledge of the foreign to kingly retinues, imported spices for the provisioning of feasts, and perfumed oils and textiles to enhance bodily display. Many of the portable art objects acquired were rendered in an “International Style” combining iconography (such as griffins or chariots) common to multiple regions²⁶⁷ The possession of such objects contributed to increased diplomacy and the formation of an elite “brotherhood of kings,”²⁶⁸ who, like modern elites such as the Clintons, Kushners, Trumps, Zuckerbergs, Gateses,

262 Libertarian Party Platform, plank 1.0: Personal Liberty, esp. 1.1: Self-Ownership, 1.2: Expression and Communication, and 1.3: Privacy.

263 Libertarian Party Platform, plank 1.6: Parental Rights, and plank 2.14: Retirement and Income Security.

264 Libertarian Party Platform, plank 2.1: Property and Contracts.

265 *Ibid.*, plank 1.7: Crime and Justice.

266 The libertarian argument in favor of globalization has been enthusiastically advanced by David Boaz at the 8th Annual Friedman Conference organized by the Australian Taxpayers Alliance, July 11, 2020, see <https://www.alsfc.com.au/schedule> as promoting a freely collaborative means of lifting people out of poverty through sharing information and goods that bring them into the world economy, while portraying populism as a threat to the liberal world order through limiting free trade and free movement; Bremmer, I. *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* (New York: Random House, 2018); T. L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); T. Hodos, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Globalization and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2017).

267 M. H. Feldman, *Diplomacy by Design. Luxury Arts and an “International Style” in the Ancient Near East, 1400–1200 BCE*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006a).

268 M. H. Feldman, “Assur Tomb 45 and the Birth of the Assyrian Empire.” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 343, 2006b, pp. 21–43.

and others, had more in common with each other, despite professed differences, than the peoples they ruled over.²⁶⁹ They used knowledge of the exotic to advertise their access to specialized knowledge, not unlike elites do today through advertising their access to knowledge of food, art, and specialized beverages. As in the present, some of the vast wealth in ancient times was earned, and some was achieved through influence peddling. In addition, wealth was obtained by conquest and by restricting technological knowledge by shrouding it in mysticism.

Collapse and Re-Emergence:

The pace of change through the intensification of wealth acquisition manifested in monumental building programs throughout the Mediterranean was particularly rapid prior to the nascent Iron Age. It likely contributed to a collapse of city-states in the twelfth century BCE.²⁷⁰ We do not know the exact causes of this collapse, beyond references to destructions of entire cities by bands of marauders collectively known as the Sea Peoples. This is a lively area of discussion and debate with possible causes identified as agrarian revolt against *corvée* labor practices and competition from migrants.²⁷¹ It is likely that bands of pirates took on followers as they sacked the rich maritime centers of the Mediterranean such as Ugarit in Syria as well as small coastal villages in Crete.²⁷² The result of their widespread destructions was a redistribution of power and capital.²⁷³ In addition, ship-borne illnesses may have affected supply chains and transportation hubs, contributing to economic dislocation.²⁷⁴ In other words, it represented populist dis-

269 E.g., J. Shafer, "Donald Rodham Clinton: The Trump Presidency is Taking on a Decidedly Clintonian Flavor." *Politico Magazine*, April 13, 2017. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/donald-rodham-clinton-215024>

270 E. H. Cline, *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

271 T. G. Palaima, "Maritime Matters in the Linear B Tablets." In *Thalassa: L'Egee Préhistorique et la Mer, Actes de la troisième Rencontre égyptienne internationale de l'Université de Liège, Station de recherches sous-marines et océanographiques (StaReSO), Calvi, Corse (23–25 avril 1990) (Aegaeum 7)*, edited by R. Laffineur and L. Basch, p. 308. (Liège, Belgium: University of Liège, 1991).

272 L. A. Hitchcock and A. M. Maeir. "A Pirate's Life for Me: The Maritime Culture of the Sea Peoples." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 148, no. 4, 2016. pp. 245–264.

273 P. T. Leeson, *The Forbidden Hook: The Hidden Economics of Piracy*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).

274 L. A. Hitchcock, "Plagues and the Bronze Age Collapse: Naue II Swords, Germs, and Iron," *Ancient History Magazine*, January 2021, pp. 52–57.

content against the foreign and the elite. Such discontent is historically blamed on the cheaper labor of migrants, rapid technological change, and on increasing consumption of imported goods.

The ensuing “Dark Ages,” which were actually a return to simpler agrarian lifestyles, were marked by a resilience embedded in the preservation of most Bronze Age technologies²⁷⁵ that enabled civilization to rise again. This time, there were new and initially homogeneous societies: the Greek polis, the Roman Republic, Israelite monotheism, and Phoenician trading colonies. The technologies and literatures of the preceding Bronze Age that were never entirely destroyed provided the material foundations to develop iron-working technology, improve maritime shipping, develop alphabetic writing, and formulate new religious and philosophical views. Since these times, the world has gone through periodic upheavals and continues to do so today, with pandemics similarly threatening transportation hubs and supply chains as well as displacement, which is also threatened by increasing automation.²⁷⁶

Conclusion: From Cato to NATO

Globalization and populism aren't new phenomena; they are cyclical, manifested on different scales and in different ways by a multiplicity of ideological, technological, and cultural factors. However, it is suggested here that collapse is a possible outcome of over-globalization when enough stresses are placed on social systems. A full explanation of these events is quite detailed, but with the limits of space herein, I can only say that my cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and cross-temporal research in politics, history, and archaeology has enabled me to develop a large-scale frame of reference from which to evaluate material evidence from Mediterranean and maritime excavations that has helped me and other scholars collaborating in this research see the

275 For example, ship building, writing, textile production, ceramic technology, and bronze and iron working technology among the most important as these activities drove the ancient economy, supported by a food surplus achieved much earlier through the domestication of plants and animals.

276 Universal Basic Income, advanced as early as 1797 by Thomas Paine in *Agrarian Justice*, might serve a transitional role to sustain older cohorts of the workforce as the world transitions to new technologies, see M. Tanner, *The Pros and Cons of a Guaranteed National Income*. Policy Analysis 773. Cato Institute, Washington, DC, 2015.

distant past of human development and its relationship to the present in a whole new light, one that shines brightly on evidence of libertarian themes running through ancient history.

