



# CONTRA HOPPE AND BRAT ON IMMIGRATION

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JEL category: **F22**

## **Abstract**

*What is the proper libertarian position on immigration? Some libertarians favor open borders. An immigrant, merely by showing up at a country's borders, and attempting to cross them, is not committing a per se crime of initiatory violence. Others such as Hoppe and Brat maintain this is indeed a rights violation: trespass. The present paper undertakes a critical analysis of the latter position.*

**Keywords:** *Libertarianism, immigration, trespass, property rights*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Han-Herman Hoppe and Walter E. Block have been having a long-running debate concerning the proper libertarian analysis of immigration.<sup>1</sup> The present paper is devoted to a defense of the open borders position of Block against the critique of this view offered by Hoppe (2014). That is the burden of section II of this paper. In section III we consider, and reject, the views of Congressman David Brat (R, Virginia), which are congruent with those of Professor Hoppe's.

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## **2 HOPPE**

In this otherwise excellent, no, magnificent essay Hoppe (2014) states:

"But on what grounds should there be a right to unrestricted, 'free' immigration? No one has a right to move to a place already occupied by someone else, unless he has been invited by the present occupant. And if all places are already occupied, all migration is migration by invitation only. A right to 'free' immigration exists only for virgin country, for the open frontier.

"There are only two ways of trying to get around this conclusion and still rescue the notion of 'free' immigration. The first is to ..."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For Block's side of this debate, see Block (1998, 2004A, 2011A, 2011B, 2013); Block & Callahan (2003); Gregory & Block (2007). Hoppe's contributions include

his publications of 1989, 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> I enthusiastically agree with Hoppe on his demolition of this first alternative, and thus ignore it.

"The second possible way out is to claim that all so-called public property – the property controlled by local, regional or central government – is akin to open frontier, with free and unrestricted access. Yet this is certainly erroneous. From the fact that government property is illegitimate because it is based on prior expropriations, it does not follow that it is un-owned and free-for-all. It has been funded through local, regional, national or federal tax payments, and it is the payers of these taxes, then, and no one else, who are the legitimate owners of all public property. They cannot exercise their right – that right has been arrogated by the State – but *they* are the legitimate owners."

Before offering my criticism of this viewpoint, let me very briefly summarize this debate. Block, along with Rothbard I (1993) take the open immigration position. There should be no barriers to migration imposed by the state at all. Period. Hoppe, to say the least, along with Rothbard II (1998), demur. One more preliminary point; it is a general comment about the rest of Hoppe (2014), apart from the one point in it on which we disagree: this is a brilliant essay, and courageous too, particularly in this era of political correctness which infests social science and philosophy. As we have come to expect from the pen or computer of this leading libertarian theoretician, the logic is compelling; he does not suffer fools gladly and he takes on crucially important issues. It is a vast understatement to mention that his writing is crystal clear and that he rejects political correctness in all of its malevolent forms. Rather, he devastates the viewpoints stemming from this quarter. With regard to the entirety of this splendid and insightful essay,<sup>3</sup> I am in total and enthusiastic support of every jot and tittle of it, with every word.

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<sup>3</sup> Apart from the small part of it with which I disagree, see below on this.

<sup>4</sup> Not all of the land controlled by the BLM of course, would be up for grabs, e.g., homesteading, by outsiders. For example, Cliven Bundy (<http://www.gq.com/news-politics/newsmakers/201407/cliven-bundy>; <http://abcnews.go.com/US/cliven-bundy-controversial/story?id=23468481>; <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/cliven-bundy/>) is the proper owner of a small amount of it, since he and his family homesteaded, used, this land for generations. But there is plenty of virgin terrain, illicitly claimed by

I am in great admiration of its spirit, its unwillingness to compromise with evil and illogic.

Now for the criticisms. There are two errors in this essay of Hoppe's as I see it. First, a relatively minor one. My fellow libertarian does not appear to realize what a big concession he makes to the open borders position when he talks of "already occupied," "virgin country" and "open frontier." Take the case of the U.S. for example. There are truly *vast* tracts of land that are completely unoccupied. Virtually all of Alaska is empty of human habitation. There are millions of acres of land in the Rocky Mountains that have not been homesteaded, in Montana, Colorado, Wyoming. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) controls, without ever having homesteaded as much as a square inch of this land, many more swatches of territory. *None* of these hectares have been "funded through local, regional, national or federal tax payments," a requirement of Hoppe's. Suppose an immigrant from Africa or Asia or Mars for that matter were to parachute or helicopter into some of these areas; become the first human (or Martian) to mix his labor with the land; bring in a crop, etc. Would he have per se violated any right a libertarian is obligated to respect? It is difficult to see how he would have done so.<sup>4</sup>

It may be objected that some of this land is sub-marginal, unfit for human occupation. And, yes, there is something to be said in behalf of this view, particularly for the middle of Alaska. But "sub-marginal" is a subjective<sup>5</sup> term. One man's sub-marginal is another's fertile valley. It might be the case that much of this land is sub-marginal for virtually all of the present U.S. population, but this would not apply to those children running away from gangs in South America through Mexico to

government, which is unowned in terms of libertarian homesteading theory.

<sup>5</sup> States Hayek (1979, 52): "And it is probably no exaggeration to say that every important advance in economic theory during the last hundred years was a further step in the consistent application of subjectivism." Also, see the following on this issue: Barnett (1989), Block (1988), Buchanan and Thirlby (1981), Buchanan (1969, 1979), Butos and Koppl (1997), Cordato (1989), DiLorenzo (1990), Kirzner (1986), Mises (1998), Rothbard (1979, 1997), Stringham (2008).

the southern U.S. border.<sup>6</sup> It would scarcely be true of a starving North Korean. Nor are most of those BLM territories sub-marginal by any stretch of the imagination. No, free immigration to those lands cannot properly be construed as trespass, Hoppe to the contrary notwithstanding. There is no proper understanding of the libertarian philosophy is compatible with that conclusion.

Let us now consider the more serious flaw in this Hoppean analysis: the word “abandonment” nowhere appears in his exegesis.<sup>7</sup> He does not even contemplate such an occurrence. And yet, I argue, this concept is crucial to the matter under discussion.

Block (2009) calls for the streets, roads and highways to be privatized. They should not be auctioned off by government, for then this illegal institution would receive the receipts of the sale, and what did it do, pray tell, to receive such largesse? Certainly nothing, compatible with libertarianism. Rather, given a God’s eye view, different properties should be divided up in accordance with the amount of taxation forcibly taken from each person to build these facilities, and/or the degree to which they mixed their labor with them. If and only if we cannot determine who are the rightful owners should we resort to anything like syndicalism, where the bakers receive shares in the newly established private bakeries, the farmers the collectivized farms, the steel makers the steel mills, etc. And even here there is a rough approximation to justice, in that these were the people who were long “mixing their labor”<sup>8</sup> with the relevant properties.

But, is this likely to occur? To ask this is to answer it: of course not. Hoppe (2014) attributes this to the fact that “They cannot exercise their right – that right has been arrogated by the State.” True enough. This cannot be denied. But is this the only reason? Is this even the most basic explanation? No. There is another one that eludes our author:

the vast majority of the supposed owners of this “public property” agree with the status quo. Ask the next 100 people who walk by on the street if they support the notion that government roads, streets, parks, museums, schools, libraries, BLM land, etc., should be given to their rightful owners, the people from whom taxes were mulcted to pay for these facilities and/or who most used them. And this is to say nothing of distributing ownership shares in the nation’s lakes, rivers, streams, aquifers, etc.<sup>9</sup> Namely, people just like them should become the owners of these amenities. All you will get is blank stares from 99% of these passersby.<sup>10</sup> These propositions might not even garner disagreement; just incredulity that they would even be asked. Do not these people deserve to lose their property? Can we not say that they have in effect long ago abandoned it, if ever they deserved to own it? Is there nothing that anyone can ever do to abandon any property? It would appear not, in Prof. Hoppe’s philosophy. And yet, in this case, where people will specifically disavow anything like ownership in what is supposed to be their property, it would appear there lies a good argument for just that: these people, the overwhelming majority of the populace, have long ago abandoned any rights they have in acreage, buildings, roads, rivers, etc., claimed by the government. If an immigrant steps up and confronts the state over these properties, their supposed owners are in no position to object. In Kinsellian terms (1992, 1996), these people would be “estopped” from objecting to such an occurrence.

Many Orientals live in houseboats in their countries of origin. Suppose they were to set up shop in Lake Superior, or along the Mississippi River. Which property rights a libertarian must respect would they be violating? I suggest none whatsoever. Hence, Hoppe’s closed border policy

<sup>6</sup> This of course is due to U.S. drug policy, but that is entirely a different matter.

<sup>7</sup> For libertarian theories on this concept, see Block, unpublished, 2004B; Block and Nelson, unpublished; Kinsella, (2003, 2009A, 2009B, 2009C, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> On homesteading, see Block (1990, 2002); Block & Edelstein (2012); Block & Yeatts (1999-2000); Bylund (2005, 2012); Hoppe (1993, 2011); Kinsella (2003,

2006); Locke (1948); Rothbard (1973); Rozeff (2005); Watner (1982).

<sup>9</sup> These facilities are a particular weakness for the Hoppe hypothesis since they were not “funded through local, regional, national or federal tax payments.”

<sup>10</sup> At best, that is. Far more likely, you will be accused of being an extremist, or a terrorist or a communist; don’t ask about the latter.

is plainly erroneous, at least from the libertarian point of view.

Why is it that 99%+ of the American electorate would spurn such a return of property rights they supposedly own, were these but offered to them? Libertarian ruling class theory<sup>11</sup> provides the best answer to this conundrum. It does not pay for the richest 90% of the people to prey on the poorest 10%. Pickings will be very slim. No, things are entirely the other way around: it is the most wealthy 10% of the populace that tends to exploit the weakest 90%. But this sets up a problem at least for the minority in charge. The victims vastly outnumber the criminal class; were they to realize the reality of the situation, they would have little difficulty in overthrowing their masters.<sup>12</sup> Enter the intellectual classes: the professors, experts, scientists, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, journalists and others of Hayek's (1990) second hand dealers in ideas. They are paid, and paid well, to weave apologetics about the system: it is necessary, it is beneficial, etc. The idea that the people themselves could own shares in all government properties after privatization is just plain silly, from their point of view. Hence, the conclusions of my imaginary public opinion survey. But the point is, for whatever the reason, the masses have swallowed whole the idea that government control of property is legitimate, necessary, beneficial for the public weal. This strongly suggests an abandonment of rights, I contend. If so, then it is not trespass when our foreigner, or Martian, immigrates to the U.S. without anyone's by-your-leave and starts homesteading some of this property improperly claimed by the state apparatus.

Consider this statement of Hoppe (2014): "In a world where all places are privately owned, the immigration problem vanishes. There exists no right to immigration. There only exists the right to trade, buy or rent various places."

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<sup>11</sup> See on this Block (2006); Domhoff (1967, 1971, 1998); Donaldson & Poynting (2007); Hoppe (1990); Hughes (1977); Kolko (1963); Mises (1978); Oppenheimer (1975); Raico (1977); Rockwell (2001).

<sup>12</sup> According to Mises (1969B, pp. 65-66): "Government, taught Hume, is always government of the many by the few. Power is therefore always ultimately on the side of

Here, I suggest, are the seeds of a possible reconciliation between our two seemingly very different positions. We libertarians do not have to be "realistic." We are not in charge of U.S. immigration policy. Hoppe and Block can both, hopefully, unite behind this view: the proper libertarian position is full, free and open immigration. If people are afraid of hordes of unruly immigrants flooding our shores, let us privatize every single square inch of U.S. lands and waterways, without exception: roads, parks, rivers, lakes, sub-marginal land, BLM holdings, museums, libraries, the entire shooting match.<sup>13</sup> Then and only then will we be protected from this inundation scourge. Then and only then will Hoppe's analysis make sense: any uninvited "immigration" would indeed constitute trespass against private property.<sup>14</sup> We libertarians can utter a "threat" to the powers that be: privatize everything, without exception, or be swallowed up by immigrant hordes. And keep those borders completely open.

### 3 BRAT

Hans Hoppe is and has been a leading libertarian theoretician for decades. Obviously, his views on immigration are not only germane to this philosophy, but crucial to it. Why not conclude the present paper at this point, and entirely ignore the views on immigration of Congressman David Brat (R, Virginia) who might be seen by some as a bit of a Johnny come lately to the libertarian scene? There are several reasons. First of all, Mr. Brat is not at all a recent entrant to libertarianism. He lists on his c.v. (<http://faculty.rmc.edu/dbrat/BRAT2012-CV.pdf>) the following articles, which are certainly part and parcel of this philosophy: Brat (2011), and Brat and Holland (2010). Further, he has given lectures on the ethics of Adam Smith and has attended several Cato Institute events. Among his listed lectures are: "Moral Foundations of Capitalism

the governed, and the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. The struggle for freedom is ultimately not resistance to autocrats or oligarchs but resistance to the despotism of public opinion."

<sup>13</sup> Let us do this in any case, since it is part and parcel of libertarianism: full privatization of everything.

<sup>14</sup> But not before. Not when there are still vast amounts of really unowned land, and water.

Talk,” “Money, God and Greed – Why Capitalism is the Answer and not the Problem.” If this does not establish libertarian credentials, then nothing does. Secondly, and far more important, he is not only a United States congressman, but attained that office in perhaps the most stupendous victory by an underdog in the nation’s history, his win over then Congressman Eric Cantor.<sup>15</sup>

With this introduction, let us now consider Congressman Brat’s views on the matter.

Stated Brat (2014) as cited in Redden and Corn (2014):

“On the amnesty card, it’s a matter of motivation. I teach third-world economic development for the past 20 years, I love all people, I went to seminary before I did my economics, and so you look at the motivation. Why is Eric (Cantor) pushing amnesty? It’s not a big issue in our district, everyone’s opposed to it, and so why is he doing it? And the answer is, ‘cause he’s got his eye on the speakership. He wants to be speaker, and big business, right? The Business Roundtable and the US Chamber of Commerce wants cheap labor. So he actually is selling out the people in our district. He’s not representing the district, the will of the people, and he’s getting big paychecks by doing so. So he’s very clear on amnesty” (Material in parenthesis supplied by present author).

This is an interesting, not to say contrary to libertarianism, argument against amnesty for illegal immigrants: big business wants, and can benefit from cheap labor. But there are problems here. For one thing, immigration is a victimless “crime.” It is a basic understanding of the liberty philosophy that such activities as addictive drug use, pornography, prostitution, between consenting adults, should be legal. Amnesty should be declared for all of those incarcerated for such “crimes,” since they do not violate rights. But immigration, too, falls under this rubric. Therefore, amnesty is justified in this case also. For another just because “big business” wants something, does not make it a per se violation of rights. This is a strange position for a libertarian to hold. It all depends upon, precisely, what it is that is so

desired by the corporate world. If it is a bailout for a firm “too big to fail,” well and good; this must be rejected. But a desire for “cheap labor” is hardly objectionable. Do we not all want to purchase goods and services at the lowest prices possible? Should this be considered a crime under libertarianism? Certainly not. Were it the case, we would all be in jail.

Let us consider another viewpoint put forth by this newly credentialed congressman. According to Laura Ingraham (2014), a supporter of David Brat’s candidacy against Congressman Eric Cantor (cited in Epstein, 2014):

“The lives of most Americans aren’t getting any better year after year... Their wages are down or flat as the cost of living is going up. And for the past two years they’ve seen Eric Cantor focus an inordinate amount of time on how to improve the lives of illegal immigrants. So why should they be expected to return the same politicians back to Washington election after election? Eric Cantor was perceived as arrogant and disconnected—and voters thought it was time that he try to find a real job in this lousy economy.”

Again, this is problematic from a libertarian point of view. If these “illegal immigrants” were actually guilty of a crime that falls under the libertarian criminal code, then, yes, it would be unwarranted to “improve” their lives. Criminals, real ones that is, ought to be punished to the full extent of the law. However, it cannot be established, at least not according to libertarian law properly interpreted, that any such status prevails. As for the “inordinate amount of time” focused on this one issue, Mr. Brat may well have a point. It is difficult to know, for reasons mentioned by Mises (1969A) just how much effort would be optimal for a bureaucrat to spend on any one effort. This is due to the Austrian economic calculation problem (Mises, 1949); since there are no market prices in this sector of the economy, there are no objective answers. Brat may be correct in his criticism of Cantor in this regard, and then again he may not be.

Let us consider one last point emanating from this source. Epstein (2014) wrote as follows: “Mr. Brat

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<sup>15</sup> Brat’s triumph over Democrat Jack Trammell in the 2014 Congressional election is less remarkable, given the GOP sweep of that year.

campaigned as a stark opponent of comprehensive immigration reform. To Fox (News), he couched his opposition to immigration reform as part of a broader theme accusing Mr. Cantor as being too allied with corporate interests.

“The issue is the Republican Party has been paying way too much attention to Wall Street and not enough attention to Main Street,” Mr. Brat said.

“Of immigration reform, he said: ‘It’s the most symbolic issue that captures the difference between myself and Eric Cantor in this race but it also captures the fissures between Main Street and Wall Street.’”

Again, there are problems. At least for libertarians, the issue is not between Main and Wall Streets. There are businesses on both of these avenues that may be counted as crony capitalist, and also those that operate within the bounds of laissez faire capitalism.<sup>16</sup> It all depends upon whether or not<sup>17</sup> a firm relies on benefits, subsidies, protections, from government. If it does, no matter whether its location is on Wall or Main Street, it is operating illicitly.

Brat’s attack on free immigration is to be sure far less sophisticated than that of Hoppe’s, but it is no more correct.

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<sup>16</sup> and of course there many that pursue both means of gathering profits.

<sup>17</sup> and the degree to which

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Received for publication: 07.10.2015  
Revision received: -  
Accepted for publication: 19.10.2015

### **How to cite this article?**

#### **Style – APA Sixth Edition:**

Block, W. E. (2016, January 15). Contra Hoppe and Brat on immigration. (Z. Cekerevac, Ed.) *MEST Journal*, 4(1), 1-10. doi:10.12709/mest.04.04.01.01

#### **Style – Chicago Sixteenth Edition:**

Block, Walter E. 2016. "Contra Hoppe and Brat on immigration." Edited by Zoran Cekerevac. *MEST Journal* (MESTE) 4 (1): 1-10. doi:10.12709/mest.04.04.01.01.

#### **Style – GOST Name Sort:**

**Block Walter E** Contra Hoppe and Brat on immigration [Journal] // MEST Journal / ed. Cekerevac Zoran. - Belgrade-Toronto : MESTE, January 15, 2016. - 1 : Vol. 4. - pp. 1-10.

#### **Style – Harvard Anglia:**

Block, W. E., 2016. Contra Hoppe and Brat on immigration. *MEST Journal*, 15 January, 4(1), pp. 1-10.

#### **Style – ISO 690 Numerical Reference:**

*Contra Hoppe and Brat on immigration*. **Block, Walter E.** [ed.] Zoran Cekerevac. 1, Belgrade-Toronto : MESTE, January 15, 2016, MEST Journal, Vol. 4, pp. 1-10.