

# An Open Letter to Walter E. Block

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Breaking up with a person you have known for more than thirty years, with whom you have participated in countless conferences and co-authored a couple of articles, even if only in the somewhat distant past, is nothing done lightly. It is even harder, if one shares with this person a common standing as a public intellectual and both our names are mentioned frequently in one breath as prominent students of the same teacher, Murray N. Rothbard, and as leading intellectual lights of the modern libertarian movement founded by Rothbard.

But then: in this position, it becomes near-imperative to always stay on guard and take notice if a person closely associated with your own name goes astray and falls into serious error, and you may be compelled to publicly distance and dis-associate yourself from this person in order to protect your own personal and intellectual reputation (along with Rothbard's and that of the entire libertarian intellectual edifice). Such is the case with Walter Block.

Block, to his credit, has published countless articles that pass muster by libertarian standards and there are likely many more to come, he has effusively praised Rothbard over and over again and he likes to refer to himself as the "sweet and kind Walter." However, he has also published materials that clearly disqualify him as a libertarian and Rothbardian and that reveal him instead as an unhinged collectivist taken in by genocidal impulses, very much like Rand and the Randians recently taken to task by [Fernando Chiocca](#), rather than a sweet and kind person.

I will offer three exhibits to substantiate this claim.

*Exhibit one:* Block's writings (together with Alan Futerman and Rafi Faber) on the classical liberal respectively libertarian case for [Israel](#), endorsed (surprise, surprise!) by Benjamin [Netanyahu](#).

The cornerstone of the libertarian doctrine is the idea and institution of private property. Property, whether in land or anything else, is lawfully (and justly) acquired either by means of original appropriation of previously unowned resources (homesteading) or else by means of voluntary property transfer from a prior to some later owner. All property is always and invariably the property of some specific, identifiable individual(s), and all property transfers and exchanges take place between specified individuals and concern specified, identifiable objects. In reverse: all claims to property by a person who had neither homesteaded or previously produced such property, nor acquired it through voluntary transfer from some previous owner are unlawful (unjust).

For the potential problem of restitution or compensation this implies: In every case of conflicting property claims brought to trial for judgment, the presumption is always in favor of the current possessor of the resource under consideration, and the burden of a proof-to-the-contrary is always on the opponent of the current state of affairs and current possessions. The opponent must demonstrate that he, contrary to *prima facie* appearance, has a better claim because he has an older title to some specified piece of property than its current owner and whose ownership is hence unlawful. If and only if an opponent can successfully demonstrate this must the questionable possession be restored as property to him. On the other hand, if the opponent fails to make this case matters stay the way they are.

It is not in question that a considerable number of cases exists, where lawful compensation or restitution is owed: where person A can demonstrate that he is the lawful owner of some specified piece of property currently in possession and wrongfully claimed as his own by another person B. It is also not in question that there exist some cases, in which a current property owner can trace back the title to some of his present holdings for many generations. But it should also be obvious that for most people and most present holdings any such back-tracing from present to past ends up lost in history very quickly and, in any case, gets increasingly more difficult and murky with time, leaving little if any room for any present-day reparation-demands for "ancient" crimes.

How about 2000 year old crimes? Is there any one living person to be found today, who can claim lawful ownership of some specific piece of property (land, jewelry) that is and has been for a couple of thousand years in the possession of others, by demonstrating his own prior claim to these possessions through proof of an uninterrupted chain of property title transfers going from him and today back all the way to some specific ancestor living at Biblical times and unlawfully victimized at that time? This is not inconceivable, of course, but I very much doubt that any such case can be found. I would want to see it, before I believe it.

And yet, Block et. al., in their attempt of presenting the liberal respectively libertarian case for Israel, maintain that they can justify the claim of present-day Jews to a homeland in Palestine based on their status as "heirs" of Jews having lived two millennia ago in the region then called Judea. Not surprisingly, however, except for the single and in itself highly questionable case of the Kohanim (Jews of priestly descent) and their specific connection to the Temple Mount, they do not provide a shred of evidence how in the world any one specific present-day Jew, through a time-span of more than two thousand years, can be connected to any one specific ancient Jew and be established as legitimate heir of some specific piece of property stolen or otherwise taken from him two thousand years ago.

The claim of present-day Jews to a homeland in Palestine, then, can only be made if you abandon the methodological individualism underlying and characteristic of all libertarian thought: the notion of

individual personhood, of private property, private product and accomplishment, private crime and private guilt. Instead, you must adopt some form of collectivism that allows for such notions as group or tribal property and property rights, collective responsibility and collective guilt.

This turn from an individualistic to a collectivistic perspective is on clear display in Block's et. al. summary conclusion (p.537):

"Rothbard supports homesteading as the legitimate means of ownership (the first homesteader gets the land, not any subsequent one)...Libertarians deduce from this fact that stolen property must be returned to its original owners, or their heirs. This is the case for reparations. Well, the Romans stole the land from the Jews around two millennia ago; the Jews never gave this land to the Arabs or anyone else. Thus according to libertarian theory it should be returned to the Jews."

Bingo. But homesteading is done by some specific Ben or Nate, not by "the Jews," and likewise reparations for crimes committed against Ben or Nate are owed to some specific David or Moshe as their heir, not to "the Jews," and they concern specific pieces of property, not all of "Israel." Unable to find any present David or Moshe that can be identified as ancient Ben's or Nate's heir to some specified piece of property, however, all reparation claims directed against any current owner are without any base.

Another property theory is needed to still make the case for a Jewish homeland. And Block and his coauthors offer such a theory: property rights and reparation claims can allegedly also be justified by genetic and cultural similarity. Ancient Jews and present-day Jews are genetically and culturally related and hence present-day Jews are entitled to the property stolen from ancient Jews; and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs immediately before and in the aftermath of the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, then, is not a crime but simply the re-possession of what legitimately belongs and has belonged for two millennia to the Jews.

Yet this theory is not only obviously incompatible with libertarianism. It is also plain absurd.

Just consider: Jews lived for hundreds of years in Egypt and when they finally reached their "promised land" this was by no means empty. According to Deuteronomy and Joshua quite a bit of killing, pillaging and raping had to be done before taking over the land. Ancient Jews were not just homesteaders, they were also perpetrators, and there had been already plenty of ethnic mixing with other people of other tribes, with Egyptians, Greeks and all sorts of other people around the Mediterranean, long before the Romans arrived and took over, and this genetic admixture, later also with Arabs, continued up to the present day. Any genetic linking of present-day Jews to ancient Jews, then, becomes an impossible task. There are contemporary Jews that show no genetic traces to ancient Jews, and there are plenty of Gentiles who do show such traces; and in any case, the genetic similarities

to be found between the ancient and the present Jews will be one of countless variations and degrees. How to decide then who of the contemporaries is entitled to what part or portion of the holy land? (Interestingly, it appears that the closest genetic similarity to ancient Jews could be found among indigenous Christian Palestinians.)

Moreover: what if this fanciful new theory of property acquisition and inheritance via genetic similarity were generalized to all tribes and ethnicities? There are countless cases of expropriations and expulsions of one group or tribe by another in human history, of victims and of perpetrators, involving non-Jews as well as latter day Jews. How about every group of present descendants of some historical victim group demanding the restitution of assets currently held by the members of another group or tribe on account of the fact that such assets had been stolen from one's ethnic forebears some time way back in history (whether by the group of present owners or any other group)? The result would be legal chaos, interminable strife, conflict and war.

If this collectivistic nonsense is not enough to disqualify Block as a libertarian, the following exhibit, demonstrating its monstrous consequences, should remove even the slightest remaining doubt that he is anything but a libertarian, a Rothbardian or a sweet and nice person.

*Exhibit two:* This is a recent editorial by Block (again co-authored with Futerman), originally most prominently published (although behind a paywall) by one of *the* most establishment papers, the [WSJ](#), (what a surprise!) and subsequently easily accessibly reprinted on Block's own [newsletter](#) on October 12, 2023. It is titled "*The Moral Duty to Destroy Hamas. Israel is entitled to do whatever it takes to uproot this evil, depraved culture that resides next to it,*" and as the title already indicates, it is this screed of his, then, that reveals Block as an unhinged, bloodthirsty monster, rather than a libertarian committed to the non-aggression-principle as the second, complementary foundational pillar of the libertarian doctrine.

Subject here are the events of October 7th, 2023, its aftermath and consequences. On that day, members of the so-called Hamas, running the Gaza strip, attacked, maimed, killed and kidnapped a large number of Israeli soldiers and civilians. (As is to be expected in any type of war, both warring parties are presenting widely different stories concerning the actual events and numbers. What has become clear so far is only that the number of casualties runs in the several hundreds to low one thousands, and that a considerable portion of such casualties were actually the result of "friendly fire," per helicopter, by the Israeli Defense Forces.)

What is a libertarian supposed to make of this event? First, he must recognize that both, Hamas and the State of Israel, are gangs financed and funded not by voluntary membership contributions but by extortion, taxation, confiscation and expropriation. Hamas does so in Gaza, with the people living in

Gaza, and the State of Israel does it with the people living in Israel as well as the Palestinians living in the West Bank. Gaza is a tiny, poor and densely populated territory, and Hamas is accordingly a small, low-budget gang, with only some rag-tag army and little and mostly low-grade weaponry. Israel is a much larger, significantly more prosperous and less densely populated territory, and the State of Israel, subsidized long-lastingly and heavily by the world's mightiest and wealthiest of all gangs, the USA, is a big and high-budget gang, with some large, well-trained professional army, equipped with the most sophisticated and destructive weaponry available, including atomic bombs.

The older one of these two fighting gangs is the State of Israel, itself established only recently, in 1948, by mostly European Jews of Zionist persuasion, and by means of intimidation, terrorism, war and conquest directed against the then-present, and for many centuries before, mostly Arab residents of the region of Palestine. And it was also by means of intimidation, terrorism, war and conquest, then, that the explicitly Jewish State of Israel was successively expanded to its present size. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs were uprooted, expropriated and expelled from their homes and turned into refugees as a result; and large numbers of these victims or their direct heirs are still in possession of valid title to land or other properties now in possession of the State of Israel (the Israeli Land Authority) and its Jewish citizens. (At best, only a meager 7 percent of the present Israeli territory was regularly acquired or purchased by Jews before 1948, and could thus be claimed as legitimate Jewish property.)

Hamas, on the other hand, is one of several Arab resistance movements, parties and gangs formed in reaction to the Israeli-Jewish take-over and occupation of Palestine. Founded originally in 1987, and since 2006 in control of the Gaza Strip, which was and still is subject to a rigorous land, air and sea blockade by Israel and hence frequently referred to by knowledgeable observers as an open-air concentration camp, Hamas is committed to the reconquest of the lost territories, including by means of violence and acts of terror such as on October 7th. Explicitly directed not against Jews qua Jews but specifically against Zionists, it actually received funding also from Israel in its beginnings, in order to build it up as a counterweight to the growing influence of the larger, more moderate and better funded secular underground resistance group Fatah, and its PLO leadership in exile in Tunisia. As Fatah and the PLO were put in charge of some parts of the West Bank and Gaza as part of the Peace Process that started in 1993, the more militant and Islamic fundamentalist Hamas' relative intransigence became a useful tool for the increasingly influential extremist Israeli factions which sought to derail the peace process, and succeeded in doing so by increasing their building of Jewish settlements that split up the West Bank into non-contiguous open-air prisons controlled by Israel, rendering a Palestinian state essentially impossible. (There has been speculation as to the motive for this seemingly strange Israeli decision of lending support to Hamas. Quite plausibly: because events such as those of October 7th, can and are indeed currently being used by Israel as a dramatic proof and public demonstration of its long-held contention that there can never be any two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem,

and Israel, for the sake of regional peace, must be still further expanded and restored as one single State to its alleged original, biblical size.)

In any case, then, before this background, how is a libertarian to react and evaluate the 10/7 events? First off, he would want to wish the pox on the leadership of both gangs and on all gang-leaders of foreign states that have lent and continue to lend support to either one of the two warring gangs with funds stolen from their own subject population. As well, he would acknowledge that the Hamas attack on Israel was no more “totally unprovoked” than the Russian attack a little while ago on the Ukraine. The attack on Israel was definitely provoked by the conduct of its own political leadership, much like the Russian attack on the Ukraine had been provoked by the leadership of the Ukraine. And he would not fail to note also that in both cases, that of Israel as well as that of the Ukraine, their provocations had been encouraged, backed up and supported big time by the predominantly Jewish neo-con gang-leadership in charge of the US government.

Apart from this, there is little a libertarian can do except raise his voice in favor of peace, talks, negotiations and diplomacy. The Hamas leadership should be accused for having brought about through its terrorist actions the danger of some massive retaliation by a militarily far superior and more powerful enemy gang, the State of Israel. And the Israeli leadership should be blamed for having failed blatantly in protecting its own population owing to its apparently severely deficient surveillance agencies. The leadership of both gangs should be encouraged – and indeed pressured through public opinion – to agree to an immediate truce, and at once negotiations concerning the return of the hostages held by Hamas should be started. And as for the identification, capture and punishment of the various individual perpetrators and their superior commanders (including incidentally also those responsible for the Israeli victims of “friendly fire”), this should be left to regular police-work, to detectives, headhunters and possibly also assassins.

What must be avoided, however, in any case and at all costs, is an escalation of the armed conflict through a massive retaliatory strike by the Israeli military against the Hamas housing and hiding out in Gaza. This even more so, because Israel, with some 10 million inhabitants, including a minority of some 2 million Arabs, is surrounded exclusively by some less-than-friendly or even openly hostile neighboring states with a total population counting in the hundreds of millions, and any escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hamas may well expand and degenerate into an all-out war, engulfing the entire region of the Near- and Middle-East.

But this is precisely what Block et.al. are demanding. Based on their collectivistic theory of inheritance presented in exhibit one and the alleged “historical right” of “the Jews” to a homeland in Palestine derived from this theory, Block, in response to the events of October 7th, advocates an all-out attack by

Israel on the Hamas hiding out in Gaza (and while we do not know if Netanyahu has read Block's piece in the WSJ, Israel, under his leadership, has exactly done what Block has been asking for).

Leaving Block's sketchy, characteristically one-sided remarks on the history of modern Israel and the region aside, which could have come directly from the Israeli ministry of propaganda, and that show himself completely oblivious to the genocidal impulses openly expressed by several leading members of the mighty Israeli military and government, all the while making much hey out of the reciprocal sentiments on the side of the (comparatively speaking) almost powerless Hamas leadership, this, in his own words, are Block's demands (with my italicized comments interspersed in parentheses):

"The West needs to understand that to defend human life and dignity, it isn't enough to claim to side with Israel. It needs to understand what this means: total, unrestricted support. (*Does such support also include taxes forcibly taken by the various gangleaders in charge of Western States from their own population?*) That is nothing less than allowing this beleaguered country to defend itself fully. To recognize that Hamas needs to be destroyed for the same reason and by the same method that the Nazis were. (*Does 'Nazis' refer to all Germans living in Germany at the time, including all non-Nazis, Nazi-opponents, and all German babies and children; and does the method of their destruction include also the carpet bombing of entire cities such as Dresden, filled with mostly innocent civilians?*) Israel is entitled to do whatever it takes to uproot this evil residing next to it. (*How about Israeli Jews opposed to war? Silence them, too, whatever it takes?*) And, more important, that once it begins to proceed in that direction, it won't be demonized for defending that which is the core of Western civilization (*does this core also include the sort of apartheid practiced in Israel?*) and which its enemies hate the most: the love of everyone's right to human life, dignity and happiness."

"In other words, it needs to support a complete, total and decisive Israeli victory. If this implies an overwhelming, unprecedented use of military force, so be it. Hamas is and will be responsible for any civilian casualties. Cause and effect. They created their own destruction, and its consequences." (*So, there is no need whatsoever to distinguish between members of Hamas and inhabitants of Gaza generally? They all, including all babies and children, are indiscriminately guilty, part of a depraved culture and a collective evil that must be rooted out once and for all? How about dropping an atomic bomb on Gaza, then, as the US did about eighty years ago on the civilian population of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as collective punishment for the crimes committed by the Japanese government-gang?*)

"Mere victory isn't enough. Israel has won every war it ever fought. This time, the triumph must be so thorough and conclusive that there will never be any other war for this country. (*Haven't we heard this before: the war to end all wars?!*) Israel has a moral right to finish the job, and the West has a moral duty to support it. Let Israel do whatever it must to finish this war in the fastest way possible, with the minimum civilian and military casualties on its side. (*How considerate, and totally meaningless, even*

*shameful, after everything said to the contrary before about the irrelevance of civilian casualties!)* The consequences of this lie on the group that initiated the causal sequence – the one that must be completely destroyed, Hamas.”

Whatever these outpourings of Block’s are, they have nothing whatsoever to do with libertarianism. In fact, to advocate the indiscriminate slaughter of innocents is the total and complete negation of libertarianism and the non-aggression principle. The Murray Rothbard I knew would have immediately called them out as unhinged, monstrous, unconscionable and sickening and publicly ridiculed, denounced, “unfriended” and excommunicated Block as a Rothbardian.

Indeed, unforgivably, with his WSJ piece Block has made a contribution to the horrors actually following the events of October 7th and still unfolding: the near complete destruction of Gaza and its reduction to little more than some huge pile of rubble and a vast field of ruins, the slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent civilians by the Israeli military, and the continuous widening of the armed conflict, including by now also the Lebanon and Yemen, and of the Israeli leadership itching (egged on in this endeavor by its neo-con compatriots in the US) to further include as a target for destruction also the Iran, as Israel’s alleged deadly arch-enemy.

Incidentally, Block’s supplementary reason given for his categorical “We Must All Stand with Israel” position (Israeli government leadership and all), is also faulty and implies a betrayal of the non-aggression principle. Essentially, it boils down to this: The Jews in Israel have made more and better use of the territory under their control than the Arabs made or are currently making with the territories controlled by them; and hence, the Jews have a better claim to some territory-in-dispute than the Arabs do. This reasoning is actually quite popular. However, even if the first part of this statement is accepted as true, the second part does not follow from it. Otherwise, every man-of-proven-success would be permitted to take the property of any long-proven-loser, which can hardly be reconciled with the libertarian non-aggression principle. Even “losers” have a right to life, property, and the pursuit of happiness.

If that is not already more than enough to forever disqualify and discredit Block as a libertarian, he manages to top it off in some short final exhibit that reveals him as a man without sense of measure and proportion.

*Exhibit three:* This concerns Block’s reply to a short piece by [Kevin Duffy](#), contrasting a passage taken from Rothbard’s *For A New Liberty: A Libertarian Manifesto* with a passage from the just quoted screed of Block’s in the WSJ, and concluding that both are obviously incompatible and impossible to reconcile. Block’s response can be found [here](#). Remarkably, in his reply, he does not even try to provide further reason for his advocacy of total, unrestricted war (not surprisingly, as that would mean trying to defend

what is absolutely, truly and genuinely indefensible!). Instead, he evades the direct challenge and then quickly digresses into some entirely different and unrelated subject matter.

Libertarians are not pacifists, and indeed, Rothbard, as Block excusingly notes, was not opposed to all war. But conspicuously, Block then fails to say that the wars Rothbard considered possibly or potentially justified had nothing whatsoever in common with the sort of war actually proposed by him. What Rothbard had in mind was defensive violence used by secessionist movements against some central occupying powers trying to prevent them by means of war from leaving, i.e., something obviously a world apart from the total war advocated by Block.

Yet in stating that Rothbard “does not at all oppose war, period,” Block tries to create the deceptive impression that his deviation from Rothbard, then, is merely a minor one, only a matter of degree. Various deviations from Rothbard, he then continues, have been suggested or proposed before by other authors. And he cites (and links) to this effect several contributions of his own, of Joseph Salerno, of Peter Klein and also of myself, and notes that none of these has led to the exclusion of anyone of them as Austro-libertarians, nor would Rothbard himself have excluded them as such on account of these writings. Indeed, Rothbard embraced some of these deviations (such as mine, for instance), and he may well have seriously considered the others. Such then, Block claims, should also be the appropriate reaction to his deviationist position on the “war question,” and such also, he believes, would have been Rothbard’s personal reaction upon reading his WSJ piece.

Grotesque. If anything, this assessment of Block’s only indicates that he has lost any sense of measure and proportion. None of the other “deviationist” writings mentioned by him in comparison to and as an excuse and justification for his own deviationist position on the war question is, or can be interpreted by any stretch of the imagination as a break with or renunciation of the fundamental principles of the Austro-libertarian intellectual edifice. But his call for total and unrestricted war and the indiscriminate slaughter of innocent civilians is actually the complete and uninhibited rejection and renunciation of the non-aggression principle that constitutes one of the very cornerstones of the Rothbardian system. To believe that Rothbard would have given serious consideration to his WSJ piece is simply ridiculous and only indicates that Block’s understanding of Rothbard is not nearly as good as he himself fancies it to be. The Rothbard I knew would have denounced the piece in no uncertain terms as monstrous and considered it an unforgivable aberration and disgrace.



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