

In defense of "opting out"

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Back in the early 1970s, when I was still a baby libertarian, El Ray, later Rayo, was a widely published activist who represented what was often called disparagingly the "retreatist fringe" of the movement. While others pursued electoral politics to further liberty, El Ray explored more radical avenues to expand personal freedom and actually live a free life. He was a great theorist and, in a way, a forefather to Samuel Edward Konkin III's "counter-economic" Movement of the Libertarian Left. For a decade, from his camper and campsites socked away in the mountains and woods, he wrote pieces on freedom theory and strategy for little publications like *Innovator*, *Free Trade*, *Libertarian Connection*, and *Vonu Life*. Then, in 1974, *whoosh*, he was gone. Not *dead-gone*. *Gone-gone*. Rayo disappeared.



For all anyone knows, he was eaten by savage warthogs. He might even have slipped quietly into a conventional suit-and-tie lifestyle. Who knows? I like to think that, 33 years later, El Ray's still hunkered down in his own Galt's Gulch somewhere, far away from prying eyes.

What follows is a short essay El Ray wrote for the Winter 1969 issue of *Innovator*, titled "On Strategy of Cultural Change." It's a fantastic repudiation of the "retreatist" charge made against anti-politics and, in turn, agorism.

Libertarians who choose to secure their own liberty often find themselves accused of "anti-intellectualism" by other freedom advocates. The charge goes:

"Statism is basically an intellectual problem and requires an intellectual solution; liberty cannot be achieved until popular attitudes become compatible with liberty. The way to gain liberty is not by 'opting out' of society but by disseminating rational ideas within the society."

This criticism is rather beguiling because it is half true: statism is indeed an intellectual problem and requires an intellectual solution. But statism is not EXCLUSIVELY intellectual; it is a SYMBIOSIS of philosophical deceit and institutionalized violence, each sustaining the other. Neither is alone the cause; each is both cause and effect.

Coercivist governments largely control the mass communication media; directly through administration of "public schools," indirectly through licensing of radio/TV stations and intimidation of publishers under tax and regulatory laws. And the controlled communication media in turn inculcate attitudes and misinformation in support of institutionalized coercion.

Equally important but not so well recognized: Most people accept statist propaganda not merely because they are brainwashed but because they WANT to believe. They feel powerless to change the society or to liberate themselves from it ("You can't fight City Hall.") and therefore prefer to believe that somehow it is all for the best. And the more despotic the system, the greater their credulity. Most inmates of German concentration camps were pathetically eager to believe the "explanations" of Nazi administrators, against all evidence to the contrary. Most Russians, even more than most Americans, believe that infringements

of their liberty are necessary; opposition, if any, is reserved for details of implementation where change appears possible. One can observe this for himself; most people encountered are not merely deceived; they WANT to be deceived and bitterly resent any attempt to demolish their rationalizations of The Way Things Are.

Certainly liberty cannot be achieved society-wide until popular attitudes become compatible with liberty. But the inverse is equally true; changing popular attitudes is impossible until liberty is realized or at least appears imminent. Together, these lead to the conclusion: a coercivist philosophic/politico-economic system cannot be radically changed BY ANY MEANS from within. Establishments can and do evolve, but mostly in response to developments external to the system.

I suggest that liberation is possible only on the individual level and only by changing attitudes and living-patterns together. Refutation of statist propaganda and opting out must go hand-in-hand. To seek self-liberation is not to be “anti-intellectual”; it is to integrate intellect with reality — to follow thought with action.