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RIP Richard Pipes, the Great Scholar of Private Property

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Richard Pipes, the great Harvard historian, has died at 94. Best known for his clear-eyed work on Russia and its Bolshevik Revolution, a topic on which so many thinkers over the past century have fallen short, Pipes also wrote a terrific 1999 book on private property as a cornerstone of civilization, *Property and Freedom: The Story of How through the Centuries Private Ownership Has Promoted Liberty and the Rule of Law*. It's a favorite on Cato reading lists, including Tom Palmer's on principles of liberty and Ian Vásquez's on economic development. I reviewed it favorably at the time for the *Wall Street Journal* and noted its wide historical sweep, including Pipes's account of the many schools and movements since Plato that have taken a stance hostile to rights of private possession. These include not only communists, syndicalists, and the like, but some romantic nationalists and even cultural anthropologists who, for a time, claimed (wrongly) that primitive peoples dispensed with ideas of mine and thine.

Pipes always had his eye on the real-world consequences of these views for nations and their development. As I wrote, summarizing his argument:

The fork in the road between Britain and Russia, it would seem, came on the issue of whether the ruler could be said to own everything in the country. In England, this idea was challenged and then rejected with the revolutionary consequence that the king had no more right to trespass on an Englishman's freehold than anyone else did. Nor (eventually) could he exact financial penalties from his subjects—or do much of anything else, such as take away life and liberty—without due process of law. The idea that rights were something prior to government soon made England the most property-oriented country on earth.

By contrast, in unhappy Russia, the czars' claim to own everything carried only too much weight. The members of the Russian nobility often found themselves acting as collectors-of-tribute on highly revocable allotments. Serfdom persisted because the obligations of nominal landowners to the crown were too onerous to be met any other way. Whole categories of economic endeavor, such as coach inns and flour mills, were decreed to be the property of the

royal family. When Lenin sought to ensure submission to the authority of his Soviets by ordering the pulping of old title deeds, he was acting in the tradition of the worst czars."

He was equally cogent when he stepped back for reflections of a more philosophical nature, as when he invoked David Hume on redistribution:

Render men's possessions ever so equal, men's different degrees of art, care and industry will immediately break that equality. Or if you check those virtues, you reduce society to the most extreme indigence; and, instead of preventing want and beggary in a few, render it unavoidable to the whole community."

Whole review [here](#). Ira Stoll [rounds up](#) several resources on Pipes's work including his [archive of writings](#) at *Commentary*, where he reviewed such works as Hernando de Soto's *The Mystery of Capital*, Tom Bethell's *The Noblest Triumph: Property and Prosperity Through the Ages*, and Eric Hobsbawm's memoirs, being appropriately scathing about the last of these. A great mind and a great scholar, who chose for his life's work subjects that could hardly be more important for humanity's future.

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