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David Boaz on Avatar as a Defense of Property Rights

Ilya Somin • February 1, 2010 3:37 am

In a recent LA Times op ed, David Boaz of the Cato Institute joins economist David Henderson in interpreting the blockbuster film *Avatar* as a defense of property rights:

Conservatives have been very critical of the Golden Globe-winning film "Avatar" for its mystical melange of trite leftist themes. But what they have missed is that the essential conflict in the story is a battle over property rights....

But conservative critics are missing the conflict at the heart of the movie. It's quite possible that [director] Cameron missed it too.

The earthlings have come to Pandora to obtain unobtainium. In theory, it's not a military mission, it's just the RDA Corp. with a military bigger than most countries. The Na'vi call them the Sky People.

To get the unobtainium, RDA is willing to relocate the natives, who live on top of the richest deposit. But alas, that land is sacred to the Na'vi, who worship the goddess Eywa, so they're not moving. When the visitors realize that, they move in with tanks, bulldozers and giant military robots, laying waste to a sacred tree and any Na'vi who don't move fast enough.

Conservatives see this as anti-American, anti-military and anti-corporate or anti-capitalist. But they're just reacting to the leftist ethos of the film.

They fail to see what's really happening. People have traveled to Pandora to take something that belongs to the Na'vi: their land and the minerals under it. That's a stark violation of property rights, the foundation of the free market and indeed of civilization.

See also David's follow-up post [here](#).

As I explained in this post, I'm skeptical that this message was either intended by the

filmmakers or perceived by most American viewers. On the other hand, in the same post I also noted that that was precisely how it was received by many Chinese, who saw the film as an allegory of their own government's large-scale violation of property rights. Since then, the Chinese government has forced most theaters to stop showing Avatar, which suggests that its censors interpret the film that way too.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST WATCH: I am a Cato Institute adjunct scholar, which is an unpaid position.

Categories: Property Rights, Science Fiction/Fantasy

22 Comments

1. **One viewer says:**

There are lots of films about rent-seeking, but most people call them gangster films.

Quote

February 1, 2010, 4:23 am

2. **Guy says:**

Yes, but the Na'vi seemed to have a communal concept of property rights, so I don't think it really counts. At any rate, the corporation decided that taking the land by force was cheaper than buying it, so *a fortiori* it was the most economically efficient approach, except that they didn't factor in the possibility of a sentient ecosystem mucking up their calculations. Maybe it's a parable about incorporating externalities based on the findings of environmental scientists (represented by Sigourney Weaver).

I still don't understand why they couldn't just drift mine, was the tree too heavy for the ground to support if they mined under it? Set up some structural supports or something, it's got to be cheaper than warfare.

Quote

February 1, 2010, 4:56 am

3. **Ilya Somin says:**

Yes, but the Na'vi seemed to have a communal concept of property rights, so I don't think it really counts.

Boaz addresses this in his second post. Communal property rights can be a form of private property.

At any rate, the corporation decided that taking the land by force was cheaper than buying it, so a fortiori it was the most economically efficient approach,