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PERSPECTIVE

Destructive Achievement

Twenty-five years ago I met a nineteen-year-old man who liked to brag that he had "torn up" seven cars. Apparently that was the only noteworthy thing that he had ever done. Today he would be forty-four years old, assuming he is still alive. Recently I wondered what had happened to him and what he is now doing.

Is he still tearing down the achievements of others? If so, how does he justify it? How does he "get away" with it?

Might he be a member of the political establishment that limits the amount of land that farmers may cultivate? Might he be blocking the work of loggers, or of coal miners, or any of uncounted other productive individuals?

At least the young man was honest about what he did. He said that he "tore up cars." His specialty was overwhelming transmissions but anything that would disable a car satisfied him. He knew that what he did was destructive, was counterproductive, and he made no bones about it.

Unfortunately, the advocates of various causes and the elected officials and bureaucrats who assist the advocates claim to be guided by nobler motives. But their counterproductive actions are often far more harmful to the economy, and particularly to others, than was the warped young man who tore up cars as a way of satisfying his need to achieve.

Unless the car wrecker caused an accident that involved someone else—and, fortunately, he had not at the time I met him—the damage which he caused affected primarily his own property and economic well-being.

Those who seek to limit the productive actions of others may appear to be less deserving of our condemnation but, in reality, they actually do far more total damage than did the car wrecker.

This is not to excuse the young man. It is simply to point out that seemingly respectable people who claim that they are acting with good motives, even sacrificing for the

benefit of others, are often either hypocritical or else are fooling themselves when they act in ways that destroy far more than did the young man who "tore up cars."

—ROGER CLITES

Professor Clites teaches at Tusculum College in Tennessee.

The Role of the West

Americans do not share a common ancestry and a common blood. They and their forebears come from every corner of the earth. What they have in common and what brings them together is a system of laws and beliefs that shaped the establishment of the country, a system developed within the context of Western Civilization. It should be obvious, then, that all Americans need to learn about that civilization if we are to understand our country's origins, and share in its heritage, purposes, and character. . . .

The assault on the character of Western Civilization badly distorts history. Its flaws are real enough, but they are common to almost all the civilizations known on any continent at any time in human history. What is remarkable about the Western heritage and what makes it essential is the important ways in which it has departed from the common experience. More than any other it has asserted the claims of the individual against those of the state, limiting its power and creating a realm of privacy into which it cannot penetrate. . . .

It has produced the theory and practice of the separation of church from state, thereby protecting each from the other and creating a free and safe place for the individual conscience. At its core is a tolerance and respect for diversity unknown in most cultures. One of its most telling characteristics is its encouragement of criticism of itself and its ways. Only in the West can one imagine a movement to neglect the culture's own heritage in favor of some others.

—DONALD KAGAN

(Excerpts from an address to Yale University freshman class, September 1, 1990)

The Blessings of Earthquakes?

A January *New York Times* article cited experts who claimed that the Kobe earthquake could give a boost to a Japanese economy struggling to recover from a long recession. Henry Hazlitt has passed on, but I imagine he would have said, "There you go again using the 'broken-window fallacy.'"

"The broken-window fallacy, under a hundred disguises, is the most persistent in the history of economics," Hazlitt observed in *Economics in One Lesson*. The fallacy is "solemnly reaffirmed" daily by editorial writers and "professors of economics in our best universities" who see "almost endless benefits in enormous acts of destruction" with its consequent stimulation of production.

Of course, what makes the fallacy so initially tempting is that the "experts" are at least right in the first conclusion that there will be more business for the construction industry. But this new activity arises at the opportunity cost of lost business elsewhere, which will not occur because money is redirected toward reconstruction. As Hazlitt put it, the experts "see only what is immediately visible to the eye" while neglecting the invisible costs to the rest of the economy.

Hazlitt was right. Resist the temptation of the broken-window fallacy! If the fallacy is accepted, we should then be prepared to accept bombing campaigns as part of the next fiscal stimulus package!

—THOMAS L. MARTIN

Dr. Martin is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.

This item is an adaptation of his letter to the editor, the New York Times, published January 25, 1995.

For more on Henry Hazlitt's enduring influence, see page 276.

Henry Hazlitt: Journalist of the Century

by Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr.

Henry Stuart Hazlitt wrote brilliantly and presciently for more than eight decades on culture, government, economics, and political affairs. He warned against deconstructionism, against Freudianism, and against the attack on reason. He censured the income tax, central banking, the New Deal, Keynesianism, socialism, war socialism, price controls, unionism, the welfare state, and deficits.

Like one of the great Romans he admired, he had more than knowledge and talent. He had a vigorous will, strong moral conviction, and supreme courage. He was never discouraged, and never slackened in the fight.

His lifetime bibliography—recently compiled by Jeff Tucker*—includes a novel, a trialogue on literary criticism, two large treatises on economics and moral philosophy, several edited volumes, some sixteen other books, and countless chapters, articles, commentaries, reviews—more than 6,000 entries in all—and even so, this figure cannot include everything, because so many

of his earliest works were unsigned and uncollected. Hazlitt himself once estimated that he had written 10 million words, and that his collected works would run to 150 volumes.

Yet he lost every prominent job he ever held—literary editor at *The Nation*, top editorialist at the *New York Times*, weekly columnist at *Newsweek*—because he refused to bend or compromise.

Family circumstances prevented him from getting a complete formal education, so he read all the classics of ancient and modern literature on his own initiative, while working in jobs that offered very low pay.

Harry Hazlitt was born on this day, one hundred years ago, in Philadelphia. His father died when Henry was a baby, and when he was six, his mother enrolled him in Girard College, a home for “fatherless white boys” set up by a local philanthropist. His mother remarried and they moved to Brooklyn when Henry was nine, where he attended public schools. His earliest ambition was to become a psychologist “like William James,” but his family’s financial situation forced him to give up that idea. After a year and a half at City College, he had to look for a way to earn money.

Late in life, he told the story of his job search to an interviewer, not passing up the opportunity to explain something about labor economics:

Mr. Rockwell is president of the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama. This speech was delivered at a Mises Institute Conference commemorating Henry Hazlitt, held on November 28, 1994, in New York City.

**Henry Hazlitt: A Giant of Liberty* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1994), 158 pages.