

Libertarianism: A Home for Conservatives?

Marxism of the Right

By Robert Locke

Free spirits, the ambitious, ex-socialists, drug users, and sexual eccentrics often find an attractive political philosophy in libertarianism, the idea that individual freedom should be the sole rule of ethics and government. Libertarianism offers its believers a clear conscience to do things society presently restrains, like make more money, have more sex, or take more drugs. It promises a consistent formula for ethics, a rigorous framework for policy analysis, a foundation in American history, and the application of capitalist efficiencies to the whole of society. But while it contains substantial grains of truth, as a whole it is a seductive mistake.

There are many varieties of libertarianism, from natural-law libertarianism (the least crazy) to anarcho-capitalism (the most), and some varieties avoid some of the criticisms below. But many are still subject to most of them, and some of the more successful varieties—I recently heard a respected pundit insist that classical liberalism is libertarianism—enter a gray area where it is not really clear that they are libertarians at all. But because 95 percent of the libertarianism one encounters at cocktail parties, on editorial pages, and on Capitol Hill is a kind of commonplace “street” libertarianism, I decline to allow libertarians the sophisticated trick of using a vulgar libertarianism to agitate for what they want by defending a refined version of their doctrine when challenged philosophically. We’ve seen Marxists pull that before.

This is no surprise, as libertarianism is basically the Marxism of the Right. If Marxism is the delusion that one can run society purely on altruism and collectivism, then libertarianism is the mirror-image delusion that one can run it purely on selfishness and individualism. Society in fact requires both individualism and collectivism, both selfishness and altruism, to function. Like Marxism, libertarianism offers the fraudulent intellectual security of a complete *a priori* account of the political good without the effort of empirical investigation. Like Marxism, it aspires, overtly or covertly, to reduce social life to economics.

Continued on Page 18

In Defense of Freedom

By Daniel McCarthy

Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote a marvelously cynical manual of eristics called *The Art of Always Being Right*. The philosopher advised his readers against resort to logic; *ad hominem* attacks and other plays upon the passions could be much more effective. Put the opponent’s argument in some odious category, he urged.

Conservatives are long accustomed to residing in such a category: as their enemies would have it, conservatism is the ideology of the rich, the racist, and the illiterate. That this caricature bears no resemblance at all to the philosophy and social thought of Edmund Burke or Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver or Robert Nisbet, is irrelevant. The stereotype endures not because it is true but because it is useful.

Sadly, a few conservatives seem to have learned nothing from their experience at the hands of the Left and are no less quick to present an ill-informed and malicious caricature of libertarians than leftists are to give a similarly distorted interpretation of conservatism. Rather than addressing the arguments of libertarians, these polemicists slander their foes as hedonists or Nietzscheans. In fact, there are libertine libertarians, just as there are affluent and bigoted conservatives. But libertinism itself is as distinct from libertarianism as worship of Mammon or hatred of blacks is distinct from conservatism.

Libertarianism is a political philosophy, not a complete system of ethics or metaphysics. Political philosophies address specifically the state and, more generally, justice in human society. The distinguishing characteristic of libertarianism is that it applies to the state the same ethical rules that apply to everyone else. Given that murder and theft are wrong—views not unique to libertarianism, of course—the libertarian contends that the state, which is to say those individuals who purport to act in the name of the common good, has no more right to seize the property of others, beat them, conscript them, or otherwise harm them than any other institution or individual has. Beyond this, libertarianism says only that a society without institutionalized violence can indeed exist and even thrive.

Continued on Page 20

Marxism of the Right

Continued from Page 17

And like Marxism, it has its historical myths and a genius for making its followers feel like an elect unbound by the moral rules of their society.

The most fundamental problem with libertarianism is very simple: freedom, though a good thing, is simply not the only good thing in life. Simple physical security, which even a prisoner can possess, is not freedom, but one cannot live without it. Prosperity is connected to freedom, in that it makes us free to consume, but it is not the same thing, in that one can be rich but as unfree as a Victorian tycoon's wife. A family is in fact one of the least free things imaginable, as the emotional satisfactions of it derive from relations that we are either born into without choice or, once they are chosen, entail obligations that we cannot walk away from with ease or justice. But security, prosperity, and family are in fact the bulk of happiness for most real people and the principal issues that concern governments.

Libertarians try to get around this fact that freedom is not the only good thing by trying to reduce all other goods to it through the concept of choice, claiming that everything that is good is so because we choose to partake of it. Therefore freedom, by giving us choice, supposedly embraces all other goods. But this violates common sense by denying that anything is good by nature, independently of whether we choose it. Nourishing foods are good for us by nature, not because we choose to eat them. Taken to its logical conclusion, the reduction of the good to the freely chosen means there are no inherently good or bad choices at all, but that a man who chose to spend his life playing tiddlywinks has lived as worthy a life as a Washington or a Churchill.

Furthermore, the reduction of all goods to individual choices presupposes that all goods are individual. But some, like national security, clean air, or a healthy culture, are inherently collective. It may be possible to privatize some, but only some, and the efforts can be comically inefficient. Do you really want to trace every pollutant in the air back to the factory that emitted it and sue?

Libertarians rightly concede that one's freedom must end at the point at which it starts to impinge upon another person's, but they radically underestimate how easily this happens. So even if the libertarian principle of "an it harm none, do as thou wilt," is true, it does not license the behavior libertarians claim. Consider pornography: libertarians say it should be permitted because if someone doesn't like it, he can choose not to view it. But what he can't do is choose not to live in a culture that has been vulgarized by it.

Libertarians in real life rarely live up to their own theory but tend to indulge in the pleasant parts while declining to live up to the difficult portions. They flout the drug laws but continue to collect government benefits they consider illegitimate. This is not just an accidental failing of libertarianism's believers but an intrinsic temptation of the doctrine that sets it up to fail whenever tried, just like Marxism.

Libertarians need to be asked some hard questions. What if a free society needed to draft its citizens in order to remain free? What if it needed to limit oil imports to protect the economic freedom of its citizens from

“The most fundamental problem with libertarianism is very simple: freedom, though a good thing, is simply not the only good thing in life.”

unfriendly foreigners? What if it needed to force its citizens to become sufficiently educated to sustain a free society? What if it needed to deprive landowners of the freedom to refuse to sell their property as a precondition for giving everyone freedom of movement on highways? What if it needed to deprive citizens of the freedom to import cheap foreign labor in order to keep out poor foreigners who would vote for socialistic wealth redistribution?

In each of these cases, less freedom today is the price of more tomorrow. Total freedom today would just be a way of running down accumulated social capital and storing up problems for the future. So even if libertarianism is true in some ultimate sense, this does not prove that the libertarian policy choice is the right one today on any particular question.