

The True Meaning of “Libertarian” - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

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The term “libertarian” has been rhetorically beaten and twisted to unrecognizable proportions. I have seen far-right ideologues and race nationalists refer to themselves as “libertarians”, the most authoritarian communists proclaim their ideas “liberatory”, Pinochet-admiring ultranationalists say they are “libertarian” and even “minarchist”, conservatives who wish for the subjugation of all homosexuals refer to their politics as “libertarian”, and the most totalitarian statist who call for the mass slaughter of all criminals, even those who commit the most minor offenses, label their practices as “people’s liberation”. What has happened is in part the result of Marxists on the left mistaking their erroneous views of a “worker’s state” as being liberatory to anyone, and those on the right mistaking their basic fondness of liberty or capitalism for libertarianism.

Most everyone wants some amount of liberty, that does not make one libertarian. This mistake is in part due to the terms’ appropriation by those who support laissez-faire capitalism to its most extreme. They are and have never been libertarians; that is not to say they have a favorable view of the modern state, rather they are unable to critique the actions of the state as being anything other than “economically predatory and inefficient”. They lack the morality of true libertarians and are therefore incapable of wholly critiquing authority, falling for the same “anarchy is chaos” diatribe most

non-libertarians hold. In many ways their philosophy is a sort of “private statism”. They are significantly more libertarian than their traditionally statist counterparts, but still not “libertarian” in the true sense.

What has then occurred is that upon seeing the terms’ use by radical pro-capitalists, most anyone on the right with a favorable view of capitalism has proclaimed themselves “economically libertarian”. They have forgotten that libertarianism is not merely an economic ideology, and they have forgotten that capitalism is not inherently libertarian.

In truth, libertarianism and anarchism are mostly synonymous. Indeed, what is an anarchist but a type of libertarian? We must cease thinking of libertarianism in the way many Americans do, that of being “pro small government”. This is merely conservatism, or otherwise liberalism. Libertarianism is a radical ideology that calls for the abolition (or near abolition) of the state and the private property it protects.[1] We want liberty and we will destroy all that we see standing in our way.

Let us define liberty. Liberty has nothing to do with quality of life, and more importantly it has nothing to do with positive rights. Stopping crime does not “liberate” a population, neither does guaranteeing them health-care, housing, or any other right. Liberty as a concept is solely concerned with negative rights. Stirner defines it nicely:

“What is freedom? To have the will to be responsible for one's self.”
[2]

A population is liberated only when it is granted the ability to “be responsible for one’s self.” If just some of those who so graciously call for “liberation” actually knew what it entailed, they would cease their prattle immediately. No statist, no authoritarian, and no communist could give up their grand notions of what they think the state should do for the people, and what it should make sure the people don’t do. Not one of them would admit to truly believing in each individual's autonomy and ability to “be responsible for one’s self.”

In fact, most people do not fully believe what Stirner has so beautifully written thus. However, this is not surprising to me, for the state has exerted great efforts to stress its own importance to society (having a large political and economic incentive to do so).[3] Rather, I am taken aback that so many have decided to adopt the term “libertarian” (and its adjectival form) for themselves, and have proceeded to erode the meaning of the word to a pale approximate definition of “enjoyer of freedom.” Libertarianism is a potent and radical ideology, and we do not expect most to be on our side. It is therefore bizarre that so many, of all sides of the political spectrum, claim they are.

Indeed those are the fakes, they either call for a “half-liberation” (a sort of “freedom within a small box surrounded by government”), or otherwise have no idea what they are talking about.

However we, as libertarians, do believe what Stirner writes here, and deeply so. We fundamentally believe humans are not corrupt individuals and that liberation of the self is integral to what makes us human. Furthermore, we fundamentally oppose the forceful imposition of one’s will upon another. I close with Pouget:

“The ancients said: ‘The wise man carries his law within him.’

This is all of anarchy in one word.

But it’ll be said: “Sure, but are all men wise?”

This would be misunderstanding the question, for no one has the measuring-stick to size up wisdom. The true wisdom for all would be for everyone to be himself.” [4]

[1] Errico Malatesta, *An Anarchist Programme*, “Conclusion”

[2] Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*

[3] Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy*, Ch. 1

[4] Émile Pouget, *Revolutionary Bread*