Are Republican “Libertarians” Anarchists?
The Accusation of Anarchism
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the far-right Republicans, who present themselves as against the state. It shows that anarchism has made an impression on society. It is also a compliment that some supporters of unfettered capitalism declare themselves to be anarchists. Unfortunately, both uses of anarchism are misleading. Anarchism is the struggle for the fullest achievement of freedom in all spheres, the end of the state, of capitalism, of classes, and of all other oppressions. Nothing else.

References


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than an individual to be be “voluntary associations” (p. 67), self-
managed by the workers. “The anarchists are simply unterrified
Jeffersonian democrats” (p. 69). He based his analysis and his pro-
gram on the labor theory of value — as it appeared in various ver-
sions in Smith, Proudhon, and Marx. He saw this as “the basis of a
new economic philosophy” (p. 63).

Rothbard and other theorists of libertarian capitalism reject both
the anti-capitalism/pro-socialism of Tucker’s individualist anar-
chism and the labor theory of value. They advocate the wage sys-
tem of capitalism, where workers work for a boss, who pays them
as little as possible and works them as hard as possible, producing a
profit from their labor (that is, exploiting them). Instead, anarchists
advocate self-managed workers’ associations.

In my opinion, Tucker’s theory (and Proudhon’s) pointed in two
contradictory directions. One was toward revolutionary socialist-
anarchism, as began to be developed by Bakunin and Kropotkin.
(For example, Voltairine de Cleyre developed from a follower of
Tucker to a class-struggle anarchist, without abandoning her basic
beliefs — Brigati 2004.) The other was to pro-capitalist, pro-market,
politics. That is, out of anarchism.

I am usually pretty broad-minded about “who is an anarchist?”
questions. There have been debates among anarchists as whether
to include “primitivists,” “mutualists,” Pareconists, gradualists, etc.
In general I do not care. I would rather argue that, say, “primi-
tivist” anarchists are wrong on various topics, than argue whether
they are anarchists. (People have accused me of not “really” being
an anarchist, due to my various unorthodoxies, although I think I
am in the broad anarchist tradition.) However, I draw the line at
“anarcho-capitalists.” People who support capitalism may be good
people with all sorts of virtues, but they are not anarchists. As I
have shown, even the historical individualist (pro-market) anar-
chists believed in a version of decentralized, libertarian, socialism.

It is a sort of back-handed compliment that even conventional
politicians and editorialists raise “anarchism” as an insult to attack
Democratic Party politicians have denounced right-wing Repub-
licans as “anarchists.” Why? Are they “anarchists”? What about
rightwingers who call themselves “libertarians”? Are “anarcho-
capitalists” really anarchists? Are they consistent with the tradition
of “individualist anarchism”?

Historically this is very unusual. Far-rightists have usually been
called “conservatives.” (They are rarely called the more accurate
term, “reactionaries” — those who want to go backward.) Those in
the center or the left may call them other names, such as “nuts” or
“fascists.” (They are mostly not “fascists” in the sense of wanting to
overthrow bourgeois democracy and replace it with a rightwing
dictatorship — but they shade into such people.) But they were
rarely, if ever, called “anarchists.” Why now?

A strange thing happened during the October 2013 battle in the
US Congress over a government shutdown and threat of default.
The Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid, denounced the Repub-
licans as “anarchists.” So did Elizabeth Warren, one of the most
liberal Senators. As did the editorial page of the New York Times.
Other leading politicians and pundits also called the far-right Re-
publicans (who dominate their party caucus) “anarchists.”

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There may be three reasons. One is that the real anarchist move-
ment has grown and impacted on popular consciousness. Anar-
chists were part of the Occupy movement. Calling rightists “anar-
chists” manages to smear them with the conventional opprobrium
of the left-wing, masked, bomb-throwing, window-smashing, an-
archists (as widely pictured). Simultaneously it smears real anar-
chists with the opprobrium of the far-right politicians. For once, 
the Democrats have turned the tables on the Republicans. After all, 
the latter regularly denounce Obama and the Democrats as “social-
ists,” or even “communists” or “Marxists” (leaving aside “Muslims”). 
If only.

A second reason is that the far-right is loudly “anti-statist,” due
to its supposed love of “liberty” and “freedom” (but not “democ-
racy” and certainly not “equality”). The newspapers refer to them 
as “libertarians,” meaning pro-capitalist anti-statists (almost no one 
knows that “libertarian” once meant socialist-anarchist, and still
does in much of the world). They declare, in the famous words of 
President Ronald Reagan, “The government is not the solution; the 
government is the problem.” They claim they oppose Obama’s Af-
fordable Care Act because they want “to keep government out of 
health care.”

A third reason, I suspect, was that the far-rightists were gen-
erally acting in a destructive, uncompromising, and chaotic fash-
ion. For the Democratic politicians and editorialists, this brought 
to mind the behavior of the “anarchic” anarchists, who are suppos-
edly committed to chaos, destruction, and ruin.

Is the Far-Right Against Government?

It is true that the far-right loudly declares its opposition to gov-
ernment and a love of liberty. An analogy might be seen in 1920s 
Germany. Then there were large workers’ parties, the Socialist 
and the Communist parties. The far-right organized its own party, 
which aimed to draw off some of the discontent channeled through 
the left parties. It called itself, the National Socialist German Work-
ers’ Party. So it was “national” and “German” but also “socialist” 
and “workers” — in short, “National Socialist” (“Nazi”). But its lead-
ers really aimed to provide benefits for German big business, not

“Anarcho-Capitalism”?

Finally, there are those who believe in a free-market capitalist 
economy, completely unregulated because there is no state at all 
(Rothbard 1978). Besides labeling themselves “libertarians,” they 
have also called themselves “anarcho-capitalists” or similar terms. 
That is, they themselves claim to be “anarchists.”

Anarchism, as a historical movement, has never been simply an 
anti-statist struggle. Anarchists have opposed all oppressions, in 
every sphere: political, social, familial, religious, and economic. A 
hypothetical society without a state but with, say, human slavery, 
would hardly be regarded as “anarchist.” In particular, anarchists 
have always opposed both the state and capitalism as such. The 
“anarcho-capitalists” do not.

Nor would their program work very well. As they see it, the 
state would be “replaced” by private security forces, armed rent-
a-cops. We could expect the big corporations to hire the largest 
private police forces. Then they would work together to develop 
common policies, including coordinating their private police/mili-
tary forces. This would then be the new (capitalist) state, in all but 
name. (Socialist-anarchists also propose to replace the state’s po-
lice and military by voluntary armed people, so long as it remains 
necessary. But this would be in a society of equality, with coordi-
nation by workers’ and community assemblies and councils.) 

“Anarcho-capitalism” was created by mixing classical liberalism 
with “individualist anarchism.” But there were core aspects of indi-
vidualist anarchism which were left out of the mixture.

Benjamin Tucker was a great US individualist-anarchist of the 
19th century. He opposed “state-socialism” and advocated use of 
the market rather than planning. But he regarded himself as anti-
capitalist and a “socialist.” He saw anarchism and state-socialism 
as “the two schools of socialistic thought” which were “united by 
the common claim that labor shall be put in possession of its own” 
(Tucker, 1966; p. 62). Like Proudhon, he wanted enterprises larger
Yet they are both strongly against women’s right to choice to have an abortion if they want. For this, the Rands do not mind having the police intervene in the most personal of matters. Similarly, they are for repressive governmental anti-immigration policies. These are hardly “libertarian” opinions.

There are those who have tried to be more consistent than the Rands or the Republican right. Calling themselves “libertarians,” they oppose the big military and overseas wars, are against large police forces, are against government spying (but are not against all military and police forces), are for civil liberties and free speech (but not for civil rights for oppressed people), against government regulation of business, big or small, against government support of unions, against laws related to drugs, sex, abortion, and “morality,” etc. They even have a party, the Libertarian Party. Ron Paul ran for president on the party’s ticket (a compromise on the part of both, since he does not agree with its pro-choice position).

Even if these so-called “libertarians” fully reject the pro-state opinions of the Republicans — they still have an inconsistency. They reject the big, bureaucratic, centralized state. But they accept big, bureaucratic, centralized businesses. Why is this any better? Would not the big corporations of today’s monopoly capitalism work together and be the new (big, bureaucratic, centralized) state?

Once upon a time, there were small businesses and a weak state. Over time these businesses evolved into gigantic multinational semi-monopolies. The weak state also evolved, partly to try to control the huge businesses for the good of all but mainly to serve the big businesses for the good of the corporate rich. A magical return to the days of small businesses and a weak state would just start the cycle all over.
helping it to fight for its real, pro-business, agenda. It is almost impossible in the US to have a sensible discussion about guns at this time, or for the majority to get its voice heard. Authentic anarchists are not for banning guns, but might be for some reasonable community regulations for safety. In any case the right is not for replacing the standing, official, army with a popular militia, which is what the Second Amendment is really about — and which anarchists favor.

However, the rest of their program is quite heavily pro-statist. There are parts of the government which they cannot get enough of.

The Republican Party is strongly for the expansion of the US military (so are most Democrats). They never see a weapon, or missile, or base they do not like, especially if it is built or located in their district. This is consistent with their mostly pro-war stance. Military spending is actually a huge subsidy to a central group of big businesses. It is a form of government underwriting of the corporate economy.

Similarly, the rightists are strongly pro-police and heavily subsidize police forces, local and national. They support big government snooping into everyone’s lives through the NSA, the FBI, the CIA, and all the other alphabetical agencies — unless it involves spying on business secrets. They want a strong police force to prevent immigrants from coming over the border, and to expel as many immigrants as possible. For justification, they build up hysteria about war, terrorism, and crime. (Again, these policies overlap with most Democrats.)

Finally is their use of government to impose their cultural and religious values on everyone else. To whip up support for their core program of supporting big business, they deliberately play up cultural and “moral” issues, especially around sex. They have vigorously campaigned to outlaw abortion at all stages. They have tried to limit contraceptives. They have opposed sexual education for youth. They have sought to suppress homosexuals in every way. These very intrusive policies are to be carried out through the legislatures, courts, and police of local and national governments.

This ties in with their effort to use the government to impose (their version of) Christianity onto everyone, in the form of school prayers, other public prayers, denial of evolution in the schools, twisting school curricula in other ways, public displays of Christian symbols, and open rejection of Islam and other religions. They are also among the strongest supporters of the drug laws. They campaign for “getting tough on crime,” that is, more police, more prisons, more executions.

These are not the policies of “anarchists,” nor of “libertarians,” however you stretch the definitions.

Groupings on the Right

I have been writing of “the right,” “the far-right,” and “the Republicans.” A conservative reader might object that I have been melding together a range of people with quite a variety of views. There is some truth in this complaint. I have been summarizing the overwhelmingly common views held within today’s Republican Party, especially its dominant right wing. Yet there are many variants of these views, often subtle.

For example, Rand Paul and his son Ron Paul are well-known far-right Republicans, with their own quirks. The oppose the Fed (the central bank of the US, without which it would not work very well) and want to put US money back on a “gold standard,” which would no doubt cause a depression. They call themselves “libertarians” and oppose most of the laws and rules that let the government spy on US citizens. They oppose the big military and the US’s current wars. Their pro-civil liberties and anti-war stance has made them somewhat popular among people who might otherwise be attracted to anarchism.