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150 years of Libertarian

1858 first saw anarchists use the word libertarian to
description their ideas

Anarcho

December 11, 2008

This year, 2008, marks the 150th anniversary of the use of the word “libertarian” by anarchists.

As is well known, anarchists use the terms “*libertarian*”, “*libertarian socialist*” and “*libertarian communist*” as equivalent to “*anarchist*” and, similarly, “*libertarian socialism*” or “*libertarian communism*” as an alternative for “*anarchism*.” This is perfectly understandable, as the anarchist goal is freedom, liberty, and the ending of all hierarchical and authoritarian institutions and social relations.

Unfortunately, in the United States the term “libertarian” has become, since the 1970s, associated with the right-wing, i.e., supporters of “free-market” capitalism. That defenders of the hierarchy associated with private property seek to associate the term “libertarian” for their authoritarian system is both unfortunate and somewhat unbelievable to any genuine libertarian. Equally unfortunately, thanks to the power of money and the relative small size of the anarchist movement in America, this appropriation of the term has become, to a large extent, the default meaning there.

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Somewhat ironically, this results in some right-wing “libertarians” complaining that we genuine libertarians have “stolen” their name in order to associate our socialist ideas with it!

The facts are somewhat different. As Murray Bookchin noted, “*libertarian*” was “*a term created by nineteenth-century European anarchists, not by contemporary American right-wing proprietarians.*” [**The Ecology of Freedom**, p. 57] While we discuss this issue in An Anarchist FAQ in a few places (most obviously, section A.1.3) it is useful on the 150th anniversary to discuss the history of anarchist use of the word “libertarian” to describe our ideas.

The first anarchist journal to use the term “libertarian” was **La Liberaire, Journal du Mouvement Social**. Somewhat ironically, given recent developments in America, it was published in New York between 1858 and 1861 by French communist-anarchist Joseph Déjacque. The next recorded use of the term was in Europe, when “*libertarian communism*” was used at a French regional anarchist Congress at Le Havre (16–22 November, 1880). January the following year saw a French manifesto issued on “*Libertarian or Anarchist Communism.*” Finally, 1895 saw leading anarchists Sébastien Faure and Louise Michel publish **La Liberaire** in France. [Max Nettlau, **A Short History of Anarchism**, pp. 75–6, p. 145 and p. 162]

It should be noted that Nettlau’s history was first written in 1932 and revised in 1934. George Woodcock, in his history of anarchism, reported the same facts as regards Déjacque and Faure [**Anarchism: A History of libertarian ideas and movements**, p. 233] Significantly, Woodcock’s account was written in 1962 and makes no mention of right-wing use of the term “libertarian.” More recently, Robert Graham states that Déjacque’s act made “*him the first person to use the word ‘libertarian’ as synonymous with ‘anarchist’*” while Faure and Michel were “*popularising the use of the word ‘libertarian’ as a synonym for ‘anarchist.’*” [Robert Graham (Ed.), **Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas**, p. 60 and p. 231]

authority crime.” [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 2, p. 66]

So, in summary, considered in terms of our political, social and economics ideas it is unsurprising that anarchists have been using the term “libertarian” for 150 years. Regardless of the attempts by others ignorant of both the history of that term and the reality of capitalism to appropriate it for their hierarchical and authoritarian ideology, we will continue to do so.

Which means, incidentally, that Louise Michel is linked with anarchists both using the term “libertarian” to describe our ideas **and** with the black flag becoming our symbol. Faure subsequently wrote an article entitled “Libertarian Communism” in 1903.

In terms of America, we find Benjamin Tucker (a leading individualist anarchist) discussing “*libertarian solutions*” to land use in February, 1897. As we discuss in section G.3, the Individualist Anarchists attacked capitalist (i.e., right-“libertarian”) property rights in land as the “*land monopoly*” and looked forward to a time when “*the libertarian principle to the tenure of land*” was actually applied. [Liberty, no. 350, p. 5] The 1920s saw communist-anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti argue that:

“After all we are socialists as the social-democrats, the socialists, the communists, and the I.W.W. are all Socialists. The difference – the fundamental one – between us and all the other is that they are authoritarian while we are libertarian; they believe in a State or Government of their own; we believe in no State or Government.” [Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, **The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti**, p. 274]

Interestingly, Rudolf Rocker’s 1949 book, published in Los Angeles, states that individualist anarchist Stephan P. Andrews was “*one of the most versatile and significant exponents of libertarian socialism.*” [Pioneers of American Freedom, p. 85] It should also be noted that 1909 saw the translation into English of Kropotkin’s history of the French Revolution in which he argued that “*the principles of anarchism ... had their origin ... in the deeds of the Great French Revolution*” and “*the libertarians would no doubt so the same today.*” [The Great French Revolution, vol. 1, p. 204 and p. 206]

The most famous use of “*libertarian communism*” must be by the world’s largest anarchist movement, the anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain. After proclaiming its aim to be “libertarian communism” in 1919, the CNT held its national congress of May 1936 in

Zaragoza, with 649 delegates representing 982 unions with a membership of over 550,000. One of the resolutions passed was “*The Confederal Conception of Libertarian Communism*” [Jose Peirats, **The CNT in the Spanish Revolution**, vol. 1, pp. 103–10] This was resolution on libertarian communism was largely the work of Isaac Puente, author of the widely reprinted and translated pamphlet of the same name published four years previously. That year, 1932, also saw the founding of the **Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias** (*Iberian Federation of Anarchist Youth*) in Madrid by anarchists.

The term “libertarian” has been used by more people than just anarchists, but always to describe socialist ideas close to anarchism. For example, in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s Maurice Brinton and the group he was a member of (**Solidarity**) described their politics as “libertarian” and their decentralised, self-managed form of socialism is hard to distinguish from anarchism. So while “libertarian” did become broader than anarchism, it was still used by people on the left who aimed for socialism.

Unsurprisingly, given this well known and well documented use of the word “libertarian” by anarchists (and those close to them on the left) to describe their ideas, the use of the term by supporters of capitalism is deplorable. And it should be resisted. Writing in the 1980s, Murray Bookchin noted that in the United States the “term ‘libertarian’ itself, to be sure, raises a problem, notably, the specious identification of an anti-authoritarian ideology with a straggling movement for ‘pure capitalism’ and ‘free trade.’ This movement never created the word: it appropriated it from the anarchist movement of the [nineteenth] century. And it should be recovered by those anti-authoritarians ... who try to speak for dominated people as a whole, not for personal egotists who identify freedom with entrepreneurship and profit.” Thus anarchists in America should “restore in practice a tradition that has been denatured by” the free-market right. [**The Modern Crisis**, pp. 154–5]

As we note in section F.2, anarchists tend to use an alternative name for the right-wing “libertarian”, namely “**Propertarian.**” Interestingly, Ursula Le Guin used the term in her 1974 classic of anarchist Science-Fiction, **The Dispossessed**. One of the anarchist characters notes that inhabitants of Anarres (the communist-anarchist moon) “*want nothing to do with the propertarians*” of Urras. Urras is, however, a standard capitalist world (with A-Io representing the United States and Thu representing the Soviet Union) and not explicitly right-“libertarian” in nature. The anarchist protagonist, Shevek, does discover some people who describe themselves as “libertarian” but these declare themselves close to communist-anarchism (asked whether they are anarchists they reply: “*Partly. Syndicalists, libertarians ... anti-centralists*”). Shevek, needless to say, is unimpressed with claims he should visit Thu to see “socialism”, replying that he was well aware how “*real socialism functions.*” [**The Dispossessed**, p. 70, p. 245 and p. 118]

It should be noted that “*archist*” and “*propertarian*” is used pretty much interchangeably in **The Dispossessed** to describe Urras, showing clear understand of, and links to, Proudhon’s argument in the first self-labelled anarchist book that property was both “*theft*” and “*despotism.*” As we noted in section F.1, Proudhon argued that “*violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism*” and has “*perfect identity with robbery.*” [**What is Property**, p. 251] Little wonder French syndicalist Emile Pouget, echoing Proudhon, argued that:

“*Property and authority are merely differing manifestations and expressions of one and the same ‘principle’ which boils down to the enforcement and enshrinement of the servitude of man. Consequently, the only difference between them is one of vantage point: viewed from one angle, slavery appears as a **property crime**, whereas, viewed from a different angle, it constitutes an*