

The Things We Do Together?

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“Government is simply the name we give to the things we choose to do together.” This blithe, sunny-sounding phrase, attributed to former Massachusetts congressman Barney Frank, is frequently called up in the service of the advancing march of the American state. It sounds very nice. Certainly government is one of the things people do together. The phrase, though, seems to attempt to describe the fundamental quality that makes government what it is. The words would lack much meaning or import if they simply meant that government is made up of people doing things together; this is too obvious. Frank was trying to tell us something about the character of government, its true nature, as it were. So let us think about this and tease out what lessons we might.

If government was just people grouping together voluntarily to undertake some desired social end, who could object? What even would form the basis of an objection? Free association and decision by consensus hardly seem the sort of things actually underlying our incensed debates about politics, the emotional nature of which seems to hint that the stakes are high (or at least that we honestly believe them to be). I think rather that some people suspect the truth — that government is something more or something other than simply “the things we choose to do together.” I think these people suspect that government presents legitimate dangers, imposing the preferences of some special, limited group on all of society, regardless of what we choose. And the choosing, or lack thereof, is the essential principle that is the heart of the libertarian critique.

We remonstrate with government not because it is government; we are not interested in the word itself or with random opposition to institutions that are called a certain thing. It is the lack of choice — the fact of coercive imposition or aggression — which we call attention to, a certain way of behaving which we see as inhumane, as contrary to human nature, or morality, or some other rubric against which we as sentient human beings grade observed conduct. Libertarians demur to the idea of government on historical, theoretical and empirical grounds. Historically, we see that government was never really about what “we choose to do together,” but was instead first about conquest and domination of a ruled group by a ruling group. As Frank Chodorov teaches, “the premise of the state is the exploitation of producers by the use of power,” “this master-slave economy” being “the earliest manifestation of the state.” No idea as lofty or as virtuous as togetherness or social contract motivated or crossed the minds of the first states, which were nothing more than bastard progeny of vanquishment, of rape, plunder and spoliation.

Theoretically, we oppose government as one specific example of the improper use of force, a discrete, identifiable form of aggression. To the extent that a monopoly on the use of force within a given area is built into the very definition of government, we oppose government on philosophical grounds. Empirically, observing the practical effects of government authority in human society, its failures to even mitigate the problems it was supposedly inaugurated to solve, we surmise that there must be better ways to go about unraveling those problems. Experience teaches us that government has, in point of fact, aggravated, even created, most of what sane, ordinary people regard as problems. Having thus torn aside the the most popular veils of falsehood that cover the state, its historical origin and function and its consequences, the libertarian gets down to the important business of talking about what actually would constitute that which “we choose to do together.”

It should be clear enough that genuinely voluntary, cooperative forms of organization, big and small, for profit or not, are malleable and versatile enough to set about doing the many things we might want to do together. Without the state, always an illiberal force of domination, orthodoxy and conformity, our many experiments would compete perfectly nonviolently with one another. A world of coercive government “solutions” in grayscale would be transformed into a full color panoply of potential answers, none with the power to force compliance or acceptance. It is the lack of such a power that is the source of a free society’s robustness and resilience. We should desire deeply to do things together. Human beings are social and community-oriented by nature. Given freedom from the state and external coercion generally, we are unlikely to simply split off and wander solitarily for the rest of our time on earth. But true togetherness does not and cannot result from defeat and subjugation, which can only alienate us from one another and obstruct any worthwhile goal we might have as fellow humans. Libertarians raise a toast to “the things we choose to do together” — and that’s why we stand in opposition to the state.

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