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Boris Johnson a ‘libertarian’? What a joke

Jon Bigger

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It’s really frustrating when people use anarchist terms and phrases out of context or for their own advantage. Libertarian is a word that is consistently bastardised by the new right. Over the last few days the word has been used to describe the UK prime minister in his apparent desire to not introduce the draconian measures to deal with Covid19 that the country is now facing.

We need to be really clear. Boris Johnson is not a libertarian. The term was first used by anarchists to differentiate themselves from the followers of Karl Marx. By declaring themselves libertarian socialists, early anarchists were able to position real socialism as anti-state and anti-authoritarian, unlike the Marxists who can’t seem to get enough of these things. To be a libertarian then is to demand equality without hierarchy, socialism without government, progress without political party. There is no other valid definition as all the other people using the word do so while still promoting hierarchy. And yet the new right (and even some deluded Trotskyists) continue to use the term as if they have the right.

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To become free we have to work together. Our individual freedom has to be collective because if one person is not free then freedom does not exist. Johnson believes that freedom is related to the choices people make about utilising their money. For him, individual freedom is related to the freedom of the market and collective activities such as trade unionism or even protesting are a threat to the market. He will go to great lengths to protect the market, as the last week and a half of money being pumped into the system shows. His 'freedom' includes bosses and wage slaves. The hierarchy of capitalism is far from libertarian as many people end up dominated by the people who set their wages and decide whether they are even allowed to work. The power of the bosses is enshrined in law. The power of the workers to act collectively is restricted. The hierarchy of domination prevents liberty; it does not secure it.

Johnson has come under criticism for being too 'libertarian' in his handling of Covid19. The new right believe that individuals in the free market make rational decisions and that those decisions drive society forward. They paraphrase this with the term 'the market will provide'. They have found their ideology somewhat lacking in recent weeks as governments around the world have had to step in to save capitalism at a time when a virus has eaten into profit margins in a dramatic way. They hope that by propping up the system, things will go back to normal soon. Johnson has said he expects a boom in the UK economy once the virus spread has slowed down. People are dying and getting ill in large numbers and the free market approach has been for firms to fire staff. The UK government is trying to slow that down by providing money to the businesses to keep their staff. Note this isn't about giving people money directly. Note also that because these days are unprecedented we're all being asked to not turn this into anything political. As if the way this virus spread isn't being handled politically.

The new right is terrified that the effects of the virus will lead to a breakdown of society, possibly a full scale insurrection. Johnson's

approach has been to resist the urge to follow countries where draconian lockdowns have occurred, until last week.

Collective decision making and collective planning is a truly libertarian agenda. Crucially that needs people to fully understand the situation and be convinced that the plan agreed to is going to help. Johnson has taken an altogether different approach. It might lean towards his vision of libertarianism but even judging it on its own terms it is a terrible failure. For it to work the government would need to be putting out consistent messages in multiple formats. The government isn't in a position to consult everyone. Instead it has relied on top down mixed messages with ambiguous wording and the people have responded in multiple ways. The daily press conferences which started last week are inadequate, partly because they include Johnson himself. The UK prime minister is incapable of repeating a consistent message outside of the times he is in campaign mode.

Indeed, last week he started to treat the virus measures like a campaign and fell foul immediately by suggesting the virus could be 'sent packing' in 12 weeks. His jovial tone sent out the message that people should be unconcerned. This is then contrasted with the news that 1.5m of the most vulnerable people are going to be isolated for three months, showing just how serious this virus is. As if the growing number of deaths isn't enough to show that. Conflicting messages are happening day by day and sometimes within an individual press conference as Johnson meanders around subjects.

It would have been wonderful if people had already decided to ignore the prime minister with his mixed messages and keep themselves to themselves as much as possible. The evidence from around the world suggests such activity can stem the tide of the virus spread, which will help to ensure that the NHS can cope. But when it comes to people ignoring government advice it is hardly surprising.

This is not a call for a better prime minister or better government. This is simply to point out that we have one who is utterly rubbish

at doing what he's wanted to do all his life. He is literally as terrible as the last one. Anarchists, the real libertarians, use processes all the time to ensure that people in their myriad groups understand and agree with the decisions that are taken in their names. Johnson is merely a politician who believes that domination and hierarchy at work are akin to freedom whilst government is something that should protect those arrangements.

There will be a reckoning. There will be radical change. The world will not go back to how it was. Those of us who survive must carry on putting forward our radical ideas for the way our new world can work. It starts in our streets, our communities, and it could change the world for the better. It is libertarian socialism.