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Against Reactive Liberty

Ryan Calhoun

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“You call yourself free? Your dominant thought I want to hear, and not that you have escaped from a yoke. Are you one of those who had the *right* to escape from a yoke? There are some who threw away their last value when they threw away their servitude.

Free *from* what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: free for what?”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, from “The Way of The Creator”,
Thus Spake Zarathustra

Within the philosophy of libertarian anarchism, there has been a great deal of value expressed of an original nature. This philosophy has been the seat of the most penetrating critiques of political authority that have ever existed. However, there is a disease present in nearly all the minds this movement has been host to: the disease of resentment. Resentment is the character trait present in all who find themselves on the losing side at some point or another. It is a trait which we adopt to cope with what has, up until this very day, been our utter failure and defeat. However, I will argue it has also been a source of that failure.

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There's been a debate in recent years among libertarians as to what values one finds they must be beholden to in order to be a fully realized advocate of libertarianism. This is the thin-thick debate initiated in a paper by Charles Johnson. In that paper, Johnson tries to demonstrate the certain kinds of commitments one must have as a result of his preference for the thin, definitional foundation of libertarianism. Libertarian philosophy is essentially, according to this thin base, opposition to unjustified aggression against person and property, or NAP (Non-Aggression Principle) to the colloquial libertarian. Too many words have been added to this debate for me to take either side, but no matter where one finds themselves in this intellectual battle, it is revealing of a common attitude among us all: liberty has a definite referent, and that referent is a negation of certain (anti-)social relations.

While the "consistent" libertarian will be in opposition to all forms of aggression, the state has always been the centerpiece of their critical aim. Tomes and tomes have been accumulated in discussing the problem with state action and the virtue of life beyond it, but a question arises in your author's mind time and again: What exactly is libertarianism without the state? What is it free from, the existence of aggression? What fruit does it give us which is not mere reaction? This is where those who defend thin conceptions often get into trouble. We anarchists have envisioned and created great theoretical structures and tools for management outside the state, but if thin libertarianism exhausts the liberty canon, we are left without much of interest. We are left with bewailings and moral condemnations from the losers of history. "The Machinery of Freedom" by David Friedman, for example, is a splendid text, but there is hardly much of unique merit in it that is libertarian. Rather, it is imaginative creation absent the state. We call this not liberty, but economics or an analysis of how institutions function and can maximize our preferences.

However, those who proclaim libertarianism to have thick commitments do not escape this problem, for they too still declare that

not original to the state, it cannot be addressed by their philosophy. In fact it can if they were to realize that all oppression does not begin in the state, but in the individual and their relations with the world they find themselves in. Power, the ability to effect the world through our actions, is not simply a synonym for oppression. It is a process within all our social lives. It need not and hardly ever is carried out explicitly.

Let us get beyond this peculiar form of identity politics, this posturing of our victimhood defining our struggle against the state. We are not victims, we are agents. We affirm our own values and declare with them that state power is impotent in thwarting them. This will require a sobering and constant understanding of where the source of oppression in the world lies, among ourselves. Let us fight then for ourselves, and not for the state's ideology, nor for any ideology. Creation, not negation, will be the creed of those who side with Liberty. Liberty exists so that we may create in it our own projects. Continue the fight against the state, but know that power is everywhere and will not die with it. Power is in us, in the institutions we participate in. Let us utilize it in order to enhance our own lives, whatever that may mean, and leave behind for good the illusion that we are powerless. Don't fight the power, be the power. Be the power that eliminates domination, and which creates in its place more beauty, pleasure, and freedom for it to revel in. In the flames of the state, let your own power be illuminated.

Libertarians see power as unnatural and put emphasis on voluntary social interaction as the home of the natural world free from this bizarre experiment known as oppressive social control. However, a foundational text in modern political philosophy, Etienne De La Boetie's "Discourse On Voluntary Servitude" reverses this image of power. Rather than the State originating from a world unlike our own, La Boetie finds the source of state power in the continued obedient, voluntary perpetuation of that power structure in the mind and deed of its subjects. From this perspective, we see power as diffuse, dispersed, originating as much from the "natural" world as any other human affair. People long for safety, civility, a solid edifice on which to concretize social arrangements. We accept the state because we accept this state ideology. And this is not simply a criticism of the contented serfs, but of the libertarian rabble rousers who nonetheless leave this ideological power intact by not truly exposing it.

The point from La Boetie I wish to highlight here is the source and the ontological placement of power in our social philosophy. The state is not powerful. The state is a result of an ideology which we all take part in. When the libertarian bemoans the oppressive state as the source of all domination, they participate in this ideological game. They affirm the lie that the state does have all the cards, all the force, all the capacity to govern. The libertarian makes of herself a subject, and then wonders why she is subjected. This is the process of resentment. This is the act of willing negating itself, denying its origins, trading off its capacity to the state ideology in exchange for the identity of the helpless.

Power is everywhere. The ability to control does not lie in the hands of violent institutions alone, but in our own. This confronts many who name themselves Voluntarists with a stark image of their denial of any social problem which escapes analysis leading back to the state and aggressive force. The libertarian is identified often as amoral because they shrug off any and all social questions not pertinent to their anti-state obsession. If women's oppression is

at its core, liberty is a negation. Philosophy centered around negation shall always rely on and be structured by the power it opposes. Whatever one might say of the value of the libertarian's utopia building, the utopia always has the stamp of the state's ghostly remains. Libertarianism therefore does not get us beyond the state, transgressing and moving past power. It too is structured deeply by power's existence. The identity of servitude status as a subject is essential to what so many of these supposed advocates of freedom and spontaneity hold as their most precious creed.

When Nietzsche spoke of the anarchists in his day, he noted that they were not propelled forward by a creative vision, by a revaluation as he would put it, but by a devaluation. Anarchists do not have clearly elucidated, deliberate values to offer, so they play instead the perpetual critic of all philosophies but their own slave morality. What is wrong with our current predicament has nothing to do with us and everything to do with the state, or with the more abstract hobgoblin of aggression. We place our resentment where we ought to place our own continual self-creative projects. Locked into an academic feedback loop of unconscious inferiority, libertarians doom themselves to never be seen or appreciated or feared or reviled as anything but naysayers, who assure us the world will fall into place and all that is bad in our social lives will begin to turn in a positive direction once this dragon has been slain. It is a fact about the world acknowledged since the dawn of modern political philosophy that human beings find themselves in voluntary, often enraptured, servitude to their respective state. But why do they support the state? Growing up in the context of state-rule is certainly a forceful contributor, but does that alone answer the question? People see value in governments. They not only have a practical judgment of the necessity of states, they see it as a representative of goodness in their life. Their rulers are an immovable aspect of their conception of freedom. Their view of the state is not only an assumptive necessity, it is an identification of ethical and aesthetic worthiness. More on that later.

What then might their view of the Libertarian reactionary be? It is the identification of nihilism, of a deliberate lack of value. Perhaps you do not see yourself as a nihilist, but when you present yourself as this kind of libertarian, you come to people not with a vision but with the elimination of vision. It is of course important to expose authoritarians as charlatans. More than anything people desire states because they value safety. The libertarian knows this desire is utterly unfulfilled in the relationship established between a despot and their captive. It is not the creation of a secure environment, but a carceral one. But when we make these proclamations, how foolish we must look to anyone who has obtained some modicum of privilege from these power relations. Our words, our denouncements, they mean nothing to those who live with the illusion of armed men in blue and black uniforms as their faithful protectors. So in our negations, we must also create. I do not want the denial of the legitimacy of state power to disappear, but for it to be demonstrated.

This has been part of the philosophy motivating Defense Distributed (DD), whose co-creator and public personality Cody Wilson has provocatively demonstrated in material terms the negation of the state through creation. By printing 3D weapons and producing mills that make guns untraceable, DD has demonstrated by the generation of their own value the Big Lie propping up not only gun control laws, but all law. The lying behemoth tells us that by restricting our freedom, they make us safer. What will not suffice to abolish this lie is an abstract, intellectual denial of it, but by showing the world through your own actions that they are not safe, that the sense of tranquility they experience is a facade.

There lays the power, the positive, self-generated value in Wilson's project, and the projects of crypto-anarchists like him. Dark Wallet, along with darkweb markets for illegal trading, offer up a service. Ghost Gunner offers a service. The Liberator offers a service. They are not meant as a pose against state power, but a direct opposition to it at its own level and meeting power eye to eye

rather than proclaiming behind its back how pernicious it is. People have grown tired, apathetic, bored, indifferent to our railings against the system. What the non-radical desires is not another political tract, another protest, another philosophy paper, but value for themselves. In an interview, Wilson stated,

Using technology to avoid, or as best you can avoid, traditional analysis or mediation of these technical powers and corporations is a good thing, but what I like to add on top of that is a friendly contempt, really give it to them. Negation isn't enough. When California tried to ban the entire domestic production of firearms in their state, everyone responded as you traditionally expect... They know you don't want it, they hate you. They actively hate you... They're not interested in a traditional conversation like "We want to keep our right to violence"... You have to use technical means, means of culture and spectacle to actively thwart them.

This is the philosophy we need, if any, in our attack on power. It is not a lowly attack, but one which recognizes in ourselves the power to not just beat the state at its own game, but to be rid of the state game entirely. What these sorts of tactics accomplish is to expose the lies given to us as promises and inculcated in us as ideology. We must strike at the heart of the notion that enables voluntary servitude.

Our resentment of the state, where does it come from? Libertarians have made this particular institution the sole focus of their criticism because they view it as the prime source, the root of illegitimate power. Without this unnatural aberration on the face of our social lives, domination is sure to be thwarted for the most part if not totally. In its place will be the market place and our own personal connections to one another unperverted by this vast mechanism of power.