

Are Republican “Libertarians” Anarchists?

The Accusation of Anarchism

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Democratic Party politicians have denounced right-wing Republicans 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?

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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 Republicans 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 Republicans (who dominate their party caucus) “anarchists.”

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There may be three reasons. One is that the real anarchist movement has grown and impacted on popular consciousness. Anarchists were part of the Occupy movement. Calling rightists “anarchists” manages to smear them with the conventional opprobrium of the left-wing, masked, bomb-throwing, window-smashing, anarchists (as widely pictured). Simultaneously it smears real anarchists 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 “socialists,” 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 “democracy” 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 Affordable Care Act because they want “to keep government out of health care.”

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

Is the Far-Right Against Government?

It is true that the far-right loudly declares its opposition to government 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 Workers' Party. So it was "national" and "German" but also "socialist" and "workers" — in short, "National Socialist" ("Nazi"). But its leaders really aimed to provide benefits for German big business, not for the workers. (Again, I am not calling the Republicans "fascist.") Today, in the US, there is a strong, valuable, belief in freedom and individual rights, as well as (a wholly justified) distrust of government. So it makes sense for the right to claim to represent that anti-government, pro-freedom sentiment, whatever its real program.

In certain ways the right really is against government. Of course it opposes taxes, or at least taxes on its core constituency, the wealthy. It does not agree with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s comment, "Taxes are the price of living in a civilized society." It wants others to pay this price. (An anarchist society would not have taxes because it would not have either a state or capitalism.)

Further, it is against any use of the government for social benefits for the middle class, the working class, or the poor. It has opposed every social program ever implemented, no matter how popular they became: from Social Security to Aid to Dependent Children to "Obamacare." They oppose any government enterprise, no matter how efficient, from the post office to the Tennessee Valley Authority. The question for them is the class issue. Benefits for the working class strengthens it, makes it more independent of the boss class. If the government provided enough services, then people might ask whether business is necessary, and think in terms of some sort of socialism.

The right vigorously opposes any sort of government regulation which effects the rich. Anti-pollution laws may be good for the whole community, but cut into profits. Worker safety laws, anti-discrimination in hiring laws, and protection of the right to unionize strengthen the workers against the owners. All are opposed. They oppose laws against landlords' discrimination against African-Americans or GLBT people.

In short, the wealthy do not want to be told what to do with "their" property or "their" workers. That is what the right's "anti-state" program comes down to.

The right also campaigns around any government limitation on gun ownership. The right raises this topic in order to get support, 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. They 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.

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.

“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/military forces. This would then be the new (capitalist) state, in all but name. (Socialist-anarchists also propose to replace the state’s police and military by voluntary armed people, so long as it remains necessary. But this would be in a society of equality, with coordination by workers’ and community assemblies and councils.)

“Anarcho-capitalism” was created by mixing classical liberalism with “individualist anarchism.” But there were core aspects of individualist 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 than an individual to 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 program on the labor

theory of value — as it appeared in various versions 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 anarchism and the labor theory of value. They advocate the wage system 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, “primitivist” 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) anarchists 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 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.

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