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Right-Wing Collectivism

William Gillis

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There are few figures the alt-right hate more than Jeffrey Tucker — which may be something of a plot twist, given his alleged hand in the racist Ron Paul newsletters of the 80s. Yet Tucker has evolved into a passionate critic of racism, the alt-right and Trump. An affable and optimistic proponent of cosmopolitanism and classical liberalism, his tone has taken a more desperate and furious tilt in the last two years, becoming the most prominent outspoken figure against fascism within libertarian circles.

Right-Wing Collectivism is a compilation of Tucker's writings between 2015 and 2017 as he sought to emphasize and explain the menace of fascism to his audience. Taken together they form a volume that isn't bad, but also remains deeply incomplete.

Tucker is clearly shooting for historical generality, to tell a very broad story, yet he instinctively focuses on policy positions and a few big name philosophers more namechecked than explored, rather than a sociology of fascist movements or exploration of how the ideology found wide appeal.

Right-Wing Collectivism is also incontrovertibly written for a very specific audience, it wears its tribal affiliations on its

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sleeve. And while I have no issue with the political content — a book on fascism by a libertarian for libertarians is a perfectly fine undertaking — the cultural signaling is stark.

Tucker himself is infamously a creature of fancy suits and McDonalds. The split in bourgeoisie culture, between aspirations to aristocratic rarification and suburban simplicity, bridged together unabashedly in one person. This personal class allegiance is very loud and explicit in *Right-Wing Collectivism*, which at points practically revels in his own ignorance of fascist movements and the struggles against them. I don't begrudge Tucker his cultural affiliations, but his loud screams of in-group status to his audience, which is primarily — as we would see it — right-wing and bourgeois detract from the book becoming anything remotely timeless or substantive. Yet this signaling is an irritation we should look past precisely because Tucker's message is so needed given his audience.

Beyond the infamous turn to fetishize Pinochet's mass murder of dissidents, the last two years saw a particularly stupid trend of young libertarians saying things like "fashies are friends" and getting suckered by "anacp – fascist alliances." While the upper echelons of libertarian academia has been relatively immune — with only a little bit of lapping up fascist narratives re antifa and a few particularly horrendous "blood and soil" debacles — the libertarian base of 20 something white men has incontrovertibly shifted out from underneath them, gobbled up by fascism and reaction. The moral of this story I feel should be that ideologies are rarely directly representative of what the ostensible proponents of those ideologies actually believe or are motivated by. Many libertarians never embraced libertarianism as codified by its theorists, what they embraced was libertarianism as a grab bag of justifications for feeling elite and for resisting critique of their privilege and the status quo. Libertarianism, in short, provided the only remotely acceptable shield for reactionaries who wanted intellectual

many socialists throughout history have been motivated by the same worldview, even if their embrace of statist means has been catastrophically stupid. If you're going to see noble beauty in the culture and preoccupations of bourgeoisie why not in subcultures like the unwashed rabble of activists so declasse and gauche as to (quelle horreur) *protest*? Might there be spontaneous self-organized beauty and order beyond the border of Tucker's cultural tribe?

Sincere proponents of liberty are everywhere, the indomitable bubbling up of human creativity and compassion. What they need more of is audacity.

Tucker is infamously optimistic and his vision is infectious. Cosmopolitan commerce leaking through the iron fist and improving the lives of everyone in a decentralized flurry of unparalleled beauty. I share his wonder, at least among other useful lenses through which to view our world.

But just as optimism is a useful lens, so too is outrage at the inefficiency and slowness of such. Forget how many have been saved, how many remain starving today because of statist horrors like the international apartheid of borders?

In our war on power we cannot afford to merely hack at branches, we must strike the root. The state is just one expression of power. To fight the horror of fascism we must understand the appeal and function of things like nationalism outside the state apparatus proper. We must seek to, in the words of Karl Hess and anarchists throughout history, *abolish power*.

Far beyond the myopic, limited half-measures of liberalism and libertarianism lies a full-throated anarchism. Undaunted and ceaseless in ruthless critique of all power. The distance is vast, but it can be crossed in an instant if you have the gumption to but take the step.

airs. Now that fascism is speakable in public they've rushed to either abandon or attempt to redefine libertarianism.

A book like *Right-Wing Collectivism* should be judged primarily by its explicit goal — its effectiveness in helping to wrench libertarianism back from the fascist abyss. However, while I go to libertarian conferences and debate libertarian theorists, I make no pretenses of being embedded in the flows of libertarian culture and identity. I am a very conventional anarchist who became convinced of the value of markets, and am not a native in the libertarian tribe. I am thus poorly equipped to judge the rhetorical and political context in which *Right-Wing Collectivism* is embedded.

I cannot predict how potent Tucker's book will be in pursuit of his ends, what I can do however is explicitly bring to bear my outsider perspective to examine the book in a more abstract capacity. If libertarians truly wish to enter the realm of antifascist scholarship and commentary on fascism it is imperative that they actually be challenged, so as to ultimately better their analyses and discourse. We shouldn't give them gold stars for trying.

The objectively weakest part of *Right-Wing Collectivism* is what you would expect: Tucker is aggressively and proudly ignorant of antifascist activism (a proud preening ignorance unfortunately shared by the otherwise lovely Deirdre McCloskey in her introduction). At one point Tucker literally says, "Remember, this was 1999. We had no notion then of the alt-right or The Antifa." Oh Jesus. Is it even possible to be this embarrassed for someone? I assure you, Jeffrey, antifa activism was widely known in many cities in 1999. Particularly in working class industrial towns like Portland and Minneapolis that had not so many years prior been so thick with neonazis that you would see clusters of them driving down any major street. It was hard to grow up in certain towns or certain neighborhoods and not be hyper-aware of the difference that antifa organizing

made in cleaning out the once omnipresent gangs. Truly the epistemic bubble of the right is astonishing.

This is unfortunately tied to how Tucker's signaling to culturally-right folks involves a lot of framings of "the left" and the left-right divide that are inaccurate or misleading simplifications and can lead to hamfisted prescriptions. And I say this as an outspoken critic of the left. There's no mistaking the fact that Tucker carries right-libertarian political baggage — in particular a weakness when it comes to opposing the centralization of power in the market outside of the evil state.

Yet Tucker rightfully brings to attention the progressive legacy that fascism pulled heavily from. And this is something most left-wing antifascists I've read squirrel around a little bit. They recognize it, they just don't focus on it that much, in part because the condemnation of the modern regulatory state is so inextricable from such awareness.

If the book as a whole were a little stronger *Right-Wing Collectivism* would have stood as a wonderful counterbalance to the focuses of leftist antifascists. Leftists have been generally loathe to truly grapple with just how central hostility to the market and to "the merchant class" are within fascist thought, not just as a dog whistle for antisemitism but often as the root of it. This avoidance is how you get all kinds of flagrant nonsense like many marxists' declarations that fascism is bourgeois and a "stage of capitalism." And in the worst corners of the left this is the point of commonality between nazis and tankies, both historically happy to rant about "rootless cosmopolitans." Of course actual antifa scholars like Shane Burley are quite honest about fascism's frequent hostility to markets, but it's rarely a central focus, covered more as a footnote or as prompt for anti-market leftists to do more recruitment. Tucker is thus a breath of fresh air on this and his implicit view of history as a struggle between liberty and power rather than social groups is a refreshing return to plumbline anarchism.

slowly infested and corrupted to the point where the literal goddamn nazis see it as their primary recruiting base. A movement constrained to the most narrow anti-statism, so it could be better surrounded and consumed.

It's not that libertarians "forgot" that the right was a threat the same as the left, it's that they were systematically defanged against power save in the most inane suburbanite-got-a-speeding-ticket variety. There are countless glorious exceptions, of course, I count many as friends. But on the whole, the robust proponents of liberty have been thinned out of libertarianism. A political coalition with fewer and fewer points of commonality, much less deep substance, stripping what should be a rich ethics down to the most superficial and myopic of formulisms.

One can't merely declare oneself opposed to both right and left forms of collectivism and think the problem of power solved. Tucker righteously eviscerates the historical "progressives" but he returns again and again to simplistic just-world thinking about "progress" that frames the left and right as both revanchisms, longing for everything past, seeking revenge on a modern world that has improved in every respect.

The centralization of private power is simply not to be cast in with all the social decentralizations and erosions of hierarchy as equally a measure of progress. Even Rothbard recognized the injustice of oligarchy. The accumulation of greater wealth in the hands of a few is not "progress" in any positive sense. I would ask Tucker to examine how much he — in his ecstatic optimism — is implicitly framing the runaway concentration of wealth as a matter of *natural hierarchies*. A fascist concept if ever there was one.

There is a frame in which liberalism/libertarianism is proclaimed as a cosmopolitan embrace of freedom and positive-sum cooperation rather than a war of all versus all. But if you're going to adopt such a definition of liberalism/libertarianism you should damn well openly admit that

the context of statism. A fascist can be an anti-statist, although he cannot be an anarchist — as he does not oppose domination itself nor seek the liberation of all — and thus such anti-statism is weak to the slightest gust of wind.

For liberty to win we must not just critique *The Nation* — that is to say the narratives of mass and collectivism that underpin nationalism in its statist expressions — but also critique nationalism as an atrophy of conscience and concern.

The state is bad, but it is only the apex predator in a vast ecosystem of power dynamics in our society.

We would do well to avoid brutally simple diagnoses. We would do well to see the war between liberty and power as a stunningly sweeping one that touches every corner of our culture and habit. The solutions to the state will not come through statist thinking. To defeat central planners we must avoid the conceits of a central planner who thinks there is but One Problem that can easily be targeted and rooted out. We must grow to appreciate just how thickly the unseen can surround and underpin a single visible evil.

The most stark passage in *Right-Wing Collectivism* deals with a younger Tucker being approached by a wealthy and charming benefactor delighted in his politics and who — it is revealed — desires to recruit him as a nazi. Annoyingly, Tucker doesn't name the damn woman as is his ethical duty, but I take his revulsion as genuine. Tucker provides this passage to illuminate that the even though the left owns academia the nazis have continued lurking in places of influence. It's a good point that anyone from a right wing background desperately needs to hear, but it is a bit undercut by his relative inaction and lack of self-reflection on the situation.

What could go so catastrophically wrong that a literal fascist could ever think of propositioning a sincere proponent of liberty?

The answer, of course, is libertarianism. A movement that once unquestionably demanded the abolition of borders,

For those who might suspect opportunism or shallow commitment on Tucker's part, there are many parts of *Right-Wing Collectivism* where an anarchist spirit undeniably pierces through. The horror he expresses upon reading *The Turner Diaries* is sincere and moving. And Tucker takes shots against the right-wing inclinations of his own audience in many cases where he doesn't have to, for instance correctly diagnosing efforts to tear down confederate statues as a positive cultural development — not to erase history but to refuse to condone symbols of unimaginable oppression explicitly erected in the 20th century as *fuck yous* to the civil rights movement.

Unfortunately, Tucker's focus on the state creates its own kind of myopia. If the left fails to really grapple with how anti-market fascism ultimately is, Tucker fails to really grapple with the problem of nationalism outside of formal statist contexts.

While all fascists embrace life as a zero-sum power struggle, hunger for a return to a mythologized past, and fetishize national identity, this core motivation often operates orthogonally to issues of the state. In terms of ethical values fascism is now and always the exact opposite of anarchism, but there are nevertheless many *anti-state* fascists, for whom the "nation" may exist at the scale of tribes. We must remember that fascism originally arose in Italy in no small part from nihilistic militants who saw the state as an enemy. That fascists happily shift their stance on the state without a glimmer of shame is to be expected, the state is not the central feature of fascism as an ideology and movement. Rather, mass murdering statist authoritarianism is its usual output. In much the same way that marxism is not best defined at root by the dystopian leviathans it inexorably generates.

We must recognize that while fascism is evil incarnate its expressions need not inherently take the form of formal statism. Many of today's fascists salivate at the thought of a decentralized race war, not even bothering to once again pursue the path of bureaucratic and industrialized extermination.

Tucker's analysis of nationalism is right there in the title: Collectivism. But nationalism isn't so much about the worship of some collective spirit as it is about cutting off lines of engagement and empathy with outsiders. Nationalism *can* take the form of a grandiose building up of One's Own, a surrender of individual agency and autonomy to this reassuring spectre, but the only thing nationalism really requires is the severing of compassion and contact beyond the tribe. In this manner, nationalism can look a lot like a cancerous sort of individualism, "why should I care about anyone other than My Family??" "We've got ours, so fuck you lot."

One is reminded of certain hunter-gatherer tribes so callous they laugh at the cries of one of their own desperately in need of help, but actively collaborate in the murder of outsiders for sport. In many respects, this could be argued to be fascism at its most basic, the brief flirtation with Third Reich style pageantry boiled away. A brutal nationalism so sharp it seamlessly becomes the most toxic sort of individualism.

This overfocus on the state and failure to see to the ethical, social, and historical issues beyond it is, I feel, to blame for Tucker's regrettable embrace of the term "liberalism."

On the one hand, obviously Tucker's lauding of "liberalism" is a valorous push to repolarize libertarianism against conservatism, reaction, tradition, etc. However, to anarchists it's just as obviously a push too short and this is hilariously evident in Tucker's grandiose praise for the Libertarian Party in the same chapters in which he embraces "liberalism."

I've written before about the duality at play when it comes to critiques of "liberalism" — universally derided for myopia and cowardice, but from *dramatically* opposed perspectives. Anarchists have nothing in common with those who critique liberalism for being too timid to embrace slaughter and authoritarianism. But at the same time we must stick to our critiques of liberalism's spineless and halfassed ethics and strategy.

Reconsider Tucker's characterization of fascism as claiming that, "society does not contain within itself the capacity for its own self-ordering." To the contrary, many fascists would claim that ethnic collectivism is a quite natural self-ordering that emerges spontaneously when not suppressed. That it emerges through *violence* is for many of them no stain on its character. The sin here, in their eyes, is the way such paroxysms of violence are presently "artificially" suppressed.

One doesn't have to speculate of fascists who position themselves against statism precisely because a functioning state with any sort of rational self-interest in its own powerbase will be less than fully bloodthirsty and as inclined to ethnic cleansing. Let us never forget that the decentralized genocide in Rwanda was in many respects more efficient than the centralized genocides of the Third Reich.

If anything this should be a distinctly *libertarian* insight. Decentralization provides great efficiencies over centralized planning, not just in the obtainment of the fruits of a peaceful and creative existence, but also in the achievement of misery and abject evil. The market is a tool to provide people what they want. It is not enough just to free the market from the state, we must work to ensure that values of cosmopolitanism and compassion dominate the whole of humanity.

I've spoken out about this repeatedly but there's an insufficiently noted tangle in our political language when it comes to the term "nationalism." Is it the worship of an all mighty collective entity or spirit (The Nation) or is it a closing off of empathy, engagement, and connection with others beyond some arbitrary point? Should our models of "nationalism" center on the particularities of the modern nation-state or should they focus on tribalism?

These two dynamics and representative systems interplay and intermingle in practice, but I think the latter must be recognized as the truly pernicious root. And thus we must understand fascism as something that can be largely removed from

an education or achieving economic autonomy a thicket of regulatory constraints were introduced. Things like minimum wage laws were *intended* to be barriers to entry, to largely remove specific groups of people from employment, decreasing their bargaining power and creating a surplus pool of labor incapable of providing for itself.

Tucker focuses on how Eugenicists intended these laws to exclude (and ultimately exterminate) those they saw as degenerates, but it's worth drawing our attention back to the economic implications. While barring your aunt from selling tamales is bad for *the market*, it's good for *capital*. What removes choice and the collaborative competition of free association forces the desperate competition of labor for employment and increases the rate of profit — precisely the thing healthy markets should drive to zero.

Tucker doesn't tackle details very much in *Right-Wing Collectivism*, but he does when it comes to Progressivism, and his rage is quite well placed. Did you know for example that women's wages were higher relative to men in 1920 than they were in 1980? Almost anyone who's read any left-libertarian is familiar with just how horrific Progressive policies were and their long shadow, but Tucker's in good form here and the endless quotes from Progressives extolling the most horrifically racist, sexist and ageist justifications for now well-received laws are blood-curdling.

But of course, Tucker retains his blindspot when it comes to the perniciousness of capital in addition to the state. So for example a progressive is rightfully excoriated for objecting to women's employment because labor would make them ugly, but Tucker skips right on by the context of oligarchical elites employing desperate laborers in backbreaking work that really would scar the bodies of both men and women.

I cannot overemphasize the way this focus on the evil of statism warps and blinds *Right-Wing Collectivism*.

Nothing is more in keeping with "liberalism" as an epithet than an embrace of electoral politics. You want to compare things to marxism? There is no more crucial mistake in marxism than the embrace of the state as a tool. Libertarians often forget that Marx explicitly, albeit unconvincingly, set liberty as the goal. Capture the state and it will wither away! This strategy is utter nonsense. It's a waste of energy, a massively inefficient investment that can only backfire, and — worse — it reveals a stark lack of trust in the people, their creativity and spontaneous order. When libertarians retreat to adopting the means of their enemies it reveals the paucity of their imaginations.

For all of Tucker's talk about fascism he studiously avoids talking about fascist regimes like Franco's Spain or Pinochet's Chile. Where are the poetic odes to the student dissidents abducted off the streets, tortured and raped to death, the mass murder done in silence while their parents waited forever for the disappeared? Where does Tucker grapple with the legacy of Milton Friedman and the Chicago school's complicity in these crimes against humanity that scar generations to this day? Where is the fucking outrage, the scorching self-criticism at the ways that middle-class apathy for anything beyond tax rates and business regulation kept these regimes in power? Myopia is the defining characteristic of liberalism, and we must not lose sight of that or its horrific effects.

Tucker doesn't really stop at all to analyze fascism's opposition to communism. In his picture, it's a few minor differences over things like religion and whether one's collectivism is on racial or class grounds. And certainly this is true if you're comparing fascists with authoritarian communists, but communism comes in many flavors including ardent opponents of the state, even in the form of anarchists with solid footing in the war between liberty and power. It's critical that we understand that what fascism opposes in "communism" is precisely

what it opposes in liberalism — that is to say, their definition of communism is precisely “caring about everyone” and they see that as a bad thing, the most primordial and despicable infection in our world.

Tucker mentions this just once, on page 151 of *Right-Wing Collectivism*, noting that fascists hated communism’s universalizing. He doesn’t explore this because it would involve eroding the rhetorical power of absolute and singular definitions when it comes to “left,” “right,” and “liberalism.” But I’m strongly of the opinion that we need to be able to look at what people really mean, and not necessarily which banner they fly. Under certain definitions, the right, left, and liberalism are each fucking terrible, and under other definitions, they can be valorous.

This is of course also true when it comes to terms like “capitalism:” some seeing only the oligarchy and immiserating, rent-seeking hierarchies of our present order, while others seeing the dynamic anarchy of free association eroding all traditions and power relations, aggressively reducing profit margins. Of course, which of these notions you see as positive or negative is yet another matter entirely.

It’s amusing to read Tucker’s book as a counter-balance to Alexander Reid Ross’ *Against The Fascist Creep*. As an anarchist Ross sees the left as the humanist project of liberation for all, a grand coalition of those who actually care about overthrowing tyranny versus the defenders of power and domination on the right. But Tucker sees both left and right as champions of power and domination opposed to humanist liberalism.

At the same time Tucker is speaking to an audience that he knows sees the terms “left” and “right” in exactly the opposite frame as Ross. If someone is a tyrant that makes them *by definition* a leftist, and if someone seeks neither to rule or to allow others to rule them, they’re right-wing. Duh. This is a frame that would place King Leopold as a leftist and Leo Tolstoy as a right-winger, but somehow this makes perfect sense to the people pickled in the right wing’s discursive world. And

I think this obliges some charitableness to Tucker, I mean this is literally the level of the audience he’s trying to reach.

Obviously I think it’s a mistake to treat the right’s critique of communism as always the anti-authoritarian critique of collectivism, when in practice it’s often a critique of caring about strangers or the outgroup. It can be an effective rhetorical strategy to reframe a group’s orientation by defending their position in a way that reframes the reasons they hold said position, but the danger is always that the good justification won’t truly replace the bad justification, just muddle them together. And ignoring the bad reasons some people hold a position you share can lead one to an inaccurate picture of the world.

For example, Tucker repeats the claim that fascism is a response to the perceived danger of imminently arising leftist tyranny. This is a common canard among the right, but I’m not sure the proof is really there. It seems rather that authoritarian leftist and right-wing movements arise at the same time not in response to each other but in response to the same conditions, and only THEN feedback in strength through fearmongering about the threat of the other.

On the other hand, Tucker’s right-wing biases can be a strength.

The strongest parts of *Right-Wing Collectivism* are Tucker’s exploration of Eugenics and the Progressive Era. His is a righteous fury at the myriad ways in which profoundly racist and sexist notions were applied by central planners. While leftists make a lot of noise about their legacy we often forget just how much of our modern institutions and norms were the conscious result of deeply white supremacist and patriarchal people.

This is one of the places where libertarian discourse holds much-needed correctives. So much of the regulatory state, so many of the regulations that liberals and social democrats instinctively defend and see as champions of the common man were, in fact, dreamed up with vicious intent. The moment women and ethnic minorities were in risk of getting