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Liberty Creates Order **by Sheldon Richman**

David Brooks, the *New York Times*'s resident neoconservative, delights in peddling a false alternative: freedom or social order. His latest column hawking this snake oil comes in the form of advice to the struggling Republican Party: "If the Republicans are going to rebound, they will have to reestablish themselves as the party of civic order." In other words, give up freedom.

I have no wish to defend the Republicans. Heaven knows there's nothing left to defend. In a mere eight years that party embroiled the United States in two murderous invasion-occupations, ushered in a dramatic decline in civil liberty, spat on the decency of Americans by authorizing and applauding torture, bailed out big banks, and spent the country into mind-numbing debt.

But according to Brooks, the Republicans' problem is that all they care about is freedom! "Republicans are so much the party of individualism and freedom these days that they are no longer the party of community and order," he writes. Is he kidding?

Republicans certainly talk about freedom. They just they never get around to actually respecting it. Small-government rhetoric is like a costume they don when they need votes or money.

But back to Brooks's false dichotomy. To create it he has to invent a straw man. He pits "untrammelled freedom and the lone pioneer" against social customs, community, and order.

The flaw in Brooks's argument is that history's most authentic advocates of individual liberty (they weren't Republicans) saw harmony, not conflict, between freedom and community. Freedom, they realized, blossomed within a community, not just because of the benefits bestowed by the division of labor (as important as they are), but because of the rewards of deep human contact. Man's nature as a social animal is not an argument against liberty. Quite the contrary. Liberty, Proudhon said, is the mother, not the daughter, of order.

What real individualists oppose — is *coercive* community. Here's where Brooks shows either his ignorance or his disingenuousness. I defy him to name an individualist philosopher who extolled the life of the hermit. By nature individuals form communities. They don't need to be coerced. The bedrock laws most people respect — those concerning life, liberty, and property

— began as spontaneously evolving reciprocal social customs born of people’s desire to engage in material and “spiritual” exchanges with one another.

Brooks writes, “The emphasis on freedom and individual choice may work in the sparsely populated parts of the country. People there naturally want to do whatever they want on their own land. But it doesn’t work in the densely populated parts of the country: the cities and suburbs.... People in these areas understand that their lives are profoundly influenced by other people’s individual choices.”

Brooks is unaware that individualism — once known as liberalism — began in cities. The medieval countryside was steeped in coercive order and tradition. People sought escape to the city because “city air breathes free.” In cities, rights evolved to demarcate one person’s free sphere from another’s. Individualism was never “atomistic.”

Brooks complains that those who place great value on the market order, “which is a means, ... are inarticulate about the good life, which is the end.” The great individualist philosophers were never inarticulate, but they understood, as Brooks does not, that what constitutes the good life is none of the government’s damn business. What rational person would want George W. Bush or Barack Obama or John Boehner or Barney Frank to have any say in the matter?

Brooks asks, “What threatens Americans’ efforts to build orderly places to raise their kids? The answers would produce an agenda: the disruption caused by a boom-and-bust economy; the fragility of the American family; the explosion of public and private debt; the wild swings in energy costs; the fraying of the health-care system; the segmentation of society; and the way the ladders of social mobility seem to be dissolving.”

Has he no clue that every problem he names has its origins in government interference with freedom, voluntary community, and the market order?

Contrary to Brooks, the problem with Republicans is not their (empty) expressions of individualism. Rather, it’s their hypocritical refusal to take their own words seriously.

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