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Libertarianism: Left or Right?

by Sheldon Richman

My own notion of politics is that it follows a straight line rather than a circle. The straight line stretches from the far right where (historically) we find monarchy, absolute dictatorships, and other forms of absolutely authoritarian rule. On the far right, law and order means the law of the ruler and the order that serves the interest of that ruler, usually the orderliness of drone workers, submissive students, elders either totally cowed into loyalty or totally indoctrinated and trained into that loyalty. Both Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler operated right-wing regimes, politically, despite the trappings of socialism with which both adorned their regimes....

The far left, as far as you can get away from the right, would logically represent the opposite tendency and, in fact, has done just that throughout history. The left has been the side of politics and economics that opposes the concentration of power and wealth and, instead, advocates and works toward the distribution of power into the maximum number of hands.

—Karl Hess, *Dear America*

Is libertarianism of the Left or of the Right? We often avoid this question with a resounding “Neither!” Given how these terms are used today, this response is understandable. But it is unsatisfying when viewed historically.

In fact, libertarianism is planted squarely on the Left, as I will try to demonstrate here.

The terms were apparently first used in the French Legislative Assembly after the revolution of 1789. In that context those who sat on the right side of the assembly were steadfast supporters of the dethroned monarchy and aristocracy — the *ancien régime* — (and hence were conservatives) while those who sat on the left opposed its reinstatement (and hence were radicals). It should follow from this that libertarians, or classical liberals, would sit on the left.

Indeed, that is where they sat. Frédéric Bastiat, the radical *laissez-faire* writer and activist, was a member of the assembly (1848–1850) and sat on the left side along with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the “mutualist” whose adage “Liberty is the mother, not the daughter, of order” graced

the masthead of *Liberty*, the newspaper of the American libertarian and individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker.

(Proudhon is also famous for saying, “Property is theft,” but the full context of his work makes clear that he meant absentee ownership resulting from state privilege, for he also wrote, in *Theory of Property*, “Where shall we find a power capable of counterbalancing this formidable might of the State? There is no other except property.... The absolute right of the State is in conflict with the absolute right of the property owner. Property is the greatest revolutionary force which exists.”)

From early on libertarians were seen, and saw themselves, as on the Left. Obviously, “the Left” could comprise people who agreed on very little — as long as they opposed the established regime (or restoration of the old regime). The French Left in the first half of the 19th century included individualists and collectivists, laissez-faire free-marketeers and those who wanted state control of the means of production, state socialism. One could say that the Left itself had left and right wings, with the laissez-fairists on the left-left and the state socialists on the right-left.

But however you slice it, libertarianism was of the Left.

Left, Right, and the state

Left and Right did not refer merely to which side of the assembly one sat on or one’s attitude toward the regime. That attitude was a manifestation of a deeper view of government. The Left understood that historically the state was the most powerful engine of exploitation, although the various factions disagreed on the exact nature of exploitation or what to do about it. Marx had no monopoly on the idea. On the contrary, he appropriated it (then degraded it) from the early 19th-century bourgeois radical liberals Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer, who first formulated the theory of class conflict. In the liberal version two classes (castes) arose the moment government engaged in plunder: the plunderers and plundered. The plunderers were those who used the state to live off the work of others. The plundered were those the fruits of whose labor were stolen — all members of the industrious classes, which included those in the marketplace who produced and exchanged peacefully and who were not themselves plundering others. (Marx changed the Comte-Dunoyer thesis for the worse by moving employers with no links to the state from the industrious to the exploiter class. This related to his labor theory of value, which divided groups on the Left, an interesting issue that is beyond the scope here. For more, see my article “Libertarian Class Analysis,” *Freedom Daily*, June 2006.)

Thus the Left was identified with the liberation of workers (broadly defined). Today we don’t associate libertarians with such a notion, but it was at the heart of the libertarian vision. You can see it in Bastiat, Richard Cobden, John Bright, Thomas Hodgskin, Herbert Spencer, Lysander Spooner, Tucker, and the rest of the early liberals who never failed to emphasize the role of labor in production.

It is worth pointing out here that the word “socialism” also has undergone change from earlier days. Tucker, who proudly accepted the description “consistent Manchester man” (Manchesterism denoted the laissez-faire philosophy of the English free-traders Cobden and Bright), called himself a socialist. “Capitalism” was identified with state privileges for owners of capital to the detriment of workers, and hence was despised as an exploitative system. Interventions such as taxes, regulations, subsidies, tariffs, licensing, and land policy restricted competition and hence limited the demand for labor as well as opportunities for self-employment. Such measures reduced labor’s bargaining power and depressed wages, which for the Left libertarians constituted state-sponsored plunder. Their solution was a thoroughgoing laissez faire, freeing competition and maximizing workers’ bargaining power. (Unions were seen as a way for workers to help themselves, at least until laissez faire could be ushered in. Later, the big government-connected unions were suspected of being part of an effort to co-opt the labor movement and lull it safely into the establishment.)

Libertarians also showed their Left colors by opposing imperialism, war, and the accompanying violations of civil liberties, such as conscription and arbitrary detention. (See, for example, the writings of Bastiat, Cobden, and Bright.) Indeed, they didn’t simply condemn war as misguided; they also identified it as a key method by which the ruling class exploits the domestic industrious classes (not to mention the foreign victims) for its own wealth and glorification. Libertarianism and the anti-war movement went hand in hand from the start.

Modern-day libertarianism

That libertarianism is not perceived today as it was in the 1800s — even, alas, by most libertarians — is the result of several factors that sent the earlier movement into decline. As a result, movements not always dedicated to individual liberty have stepped into the breach, leaving libertarianism to look like a quirky branch of conservatism. Murray Rothbard discusses that decline in his classic essay “Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty,” which should be read by anyone with an interest in this subject. (See also Roderick Long’s lecture, “[Rothbard’s ‘Left and Right’: Forty Years Later](#),” online at the Ludwig von Mises Institute website).

Rothbard writes,

Thus, with Liberalism abandoned from within, there was no longer a Party of Hope in the Western world, no longer a “Left” movement to lead a struggle against the State and against the unbreached remainder of the Old Order. Into this gap, into this void created by the drying up of radical liberalism, there stepped a new movement: Socialism. Libertarians of the present day are accustomed to think of socialism as the polar opposite of the libertarian creed. But this is a grave mistake, responsible for a severe ideological disorientation of libertarians in the present world. As we have seen, Conservatism was the polar opposite of liberty; and socialism, while to the “left” of conservatism, was essentially a

confused, middle-of-the-road movement. It was, and still is, middle-of-the-road because it tries to achieve Liberal *ends* by the use of Conservative *means*.

In other words, state socialism (as opposed to Tuckerite free-market socialism) promised prosperity and industrialization (liberal ends) through government control of the means of production (conservative means). This is sometimes known as the Old Left, because the New Left, or at least aspects of it, was more skeptical of large-scale industrialization.

What I've presented here should confirm the early libertarians' leftist bona fides. Moreover, these distinctions carried over into the early twentieth century. For example, H.L. Mencken and Albert Jay Nock, who were individualist libertarians by any standard, were regarded as men of the Left in the 1920s. But by the next decade, they and their allies were perceived as being on the Right. Too often libertarians placed themselves there and embraced their conservative "allies."

Part of the reason for this comes from the temptation to believe that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. When state socialists attacked the market ("capitalism") as part of their criticism of America, the right wing, the conservatives, defended economic freedom rhetorically (while usually ignoring the corporatist features of capitalism in order not to alienate their business allies). The rhetoric made them appear to be comrades in arms with the libertarians, many of whom accepted them as such. It was an unfortunate error because from then on libertarianism looked like a defense not really of economic freedom, but of the existing corporate-state alliance. Libertarianism thus moved to the Right, and libertarians (with exceptions) were happy to think of themselves that way.

As a consequence, the movement gives the impression that the free market equals the prevailing state capitalism. To be sure, libertarians protest taxes, regulation, and even business subsidies, but they too often defend particular actions by particular businesses (oil companies, for example), forgetting that business today is the product of years of corporatism. (This memory lapse is what "free-market anti-capitalist" writer Kevin Carson calls vulgar libertarianism.) The classic example is Ayn Rand's much-ridiculed essay, "America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business." (But it is clear from *Atlas Shrugged* that she understood what corporatism is.) The impression is reinforced by the disproportionate amount of effort given to denouncing welfare for poor people and the relatively scant time devoted to opposing corporate welfare.

Needless to say, all of this has robbed the movement of its vitality and hence its recruitment potential.

Much more could be said on this subject. A search on the Internet will quickly turn up a great many relevant writings by modern libertarian writers, besides Carson and Long, on libertarianism's left-wing roots. Suffice it to say here that if the movement is to again inspire the victims of government power, it will need to rediscover those roots.

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