

What Is Left-Libertarianism?

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LEFT-LIBERTARIANISM HAS BEEN getting a lot of buzz recently in the broader American libertarian community. The term “left-libertarian” has been used many ways in American politics, and there seems to be some confusion within the libertarian community itself as to who left-libertarians actually are.

The basic ideas of left-libertarianism, as we at the *Alliance of the Libertarian Left* (ALL)[†] and *Center for a Stateless Society* (C4SS)[‡] identify with that label, are broader than our organizations alone.

The 1990s were a sort of Steam Engine Time for the general idea of libertarianism with a left-wing orientation, and the use of free market ideas as a weapon against the evils of corporate capitalism; a number of thinkers have developed parallel lines of analysis independently of one another, and it has grown into a large and loose-knit ideological tendency. But considering the disproportionate role ALL and C4SS have played in the growing prominence of this tendency, it’s only appropriate to explain where we’re coming from and what we mean by left-libertarianism.

The oldest and broadest usage of “left-libertarian,” and perhaps most familiar to those in the anarchist movement at large, dates back to the late nineteenth century, and includes pretty much the whole non-statist, horizontalist or decentralist Left — everybody but Social Democrats and Leninists, basically. It was originally used as a synonym for “libertarian socialist” or “anarchist,” and also commonly included syndicalists, council communists, followers of Rosa Luxemburg and Daniel DeLeon, etc. Many of us at C4SS would consider ourselves part of this broader left-libertarian community, although what we mean when we call our position “left-libertarian” is more specific.

To the general public these days, “left-libertarian” is more apt to call to



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† <http://all-left.net/>

‡ <http://c4ss.org/>

mind a school of thought exemplified within the past twenty years by Hillel Steiner and Peter Vallentyne, among others. Most adherents of this philosophy combine a belief in self-ownership and the non-aggression principle with left-wing views on the limited extent to which individuals can remove property from the common and acquire unlimited rights of disposal over it simply by mixing their labor with it. It overlaps heavily with Georgism and Geolibertarianism. Although this version of left-libertarianism is not co-extensive with what we promote at ALL / C4SS, and some of our members would object to aspects of it, it's easy to imagine an adherent of this philosophy being at home among us.

Within the Anglospheric libertarian community, and those who describe themselves as “liberal” elsewhere in the world, “left-libertarianism” might be associated with Murray Rothbard’s and Karl Hess’s attempt at an alliance with anarchists in the SDS around 1970, and left-Rothbardian movements like Sam Konkin’s *Agorism* that grew out of it.[†] Although left-Rothbardianism and Konkin’s *Agorism* are not the official position of the ALL / C4SS, it’s fair to say that we have some organizational continuity with Konkin’s *Movement of the Libertarian Left*, and a significant part of our oldest core membership come from the left-Rothbardian and Konkinite tradition. I myself do not. We are a multi-tendency coalition that includes left-Rothbardians, classic 19th century individualist anarchists, Georgists, and many other traditions.

There is also a tendency among American libertarians to confuse us with “Bleeding Heart Libertarians,” which is actually the name of a specific blog.[†] Although there is some good writing there and they’ve published some of our stuff, we are not bleeding heart libertarians as such. Bleeding Heart Libertarians are a lot closer to “liberalitarian” fusionism, with deviations ranging from Cass Sunstein’s “libertarian paternalism” to the defense of sweatshops and Israeli settlements. Not to mention most of them aren’t anarchists, and we are.

So now that we’ve considered all the things that we of ALL / C4SS are not, and do not mean by “left-libertarianism,” what do we actually stand for? We call ourselves left-libertarians, first, because we want to recuperate the left-wing roots of free market libertarianism, and second because we want to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of free market thought for addressing the concerns of today’s Left.

† See also: <http://agorism.info>

† <http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/>

The Broad Left-Libertarian Tradition.

Classical liberalism and the classical socialist movement of the early 19th century had very close common roots in the Enlightenment. The liberalism of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and the other classical political economists was very much a left-wing assault on the entrenched economic privilege of the great Whig landed oligarchy and the mercantilism of the moneyed classes.

As the rising industrialists defeated the Whig landlords and mercantilists in the 19th century and gained a predominant position in the state, classical liberalism gradually took on the character of an apologetic doctrine in defense of the entrenched interests of industrial capital. Even so, the left-wing — even socialistic — strands of free market thought continued to survive on the margins of establishment liberalism.

Thomas Hodgskin, a classical liberal who wrote in the 1820s through 1860s, was also a socialist who saw rent, profit and interest as monopoly returns on artificial property rights and privilege. Josiah Warren, Benjamin Tucker and the other American individualists also favored a free market form of socialism in which unfettered competition would destroy rent, profit and interest and guarantee that “the natural wage of labor in a free market is its product.” Many individualist anarchists associated with Tucker’s *Liberty* group had close ties to radical labor and socialist groups like the Knights of Labor, the International Workingmen’s Association and the Western Federation of Miners.

This strand of libertarianism was also on the cultural Left, closely associated with movements for the abolition of slavery, and for racial equality, feminism and sexual freedom.

As the class wars of the late 19th century raged on, “free market” and “free enterprise” rhetoric in mainstream American politics came to be associated more and more with the militant defense of corporate capital against radical challenges from the labor and farm populist movement. At the same time the internal split within the anarchist movement between communists and individualists left the latter isolated and vulnerable to colonization by the Right. In the early 20th century, “free market libertarianism” came to be closely associated with right-wing defenses of capitalism by Mises and Rand. The surviving individualist tradition was stripped of its older left-wing, pro-labor and socialistic cultural traditions, and took on an increasingly right-wing apologetic character.

Nevertheless, even then some remnant of the older left-wing tradition survived in American libertarianism. In particular Georgists and quasi-Georgists like Bolton Hall, Albert Nock and Ralph Borsodi straggled along through the mid-20th century.

Against Vulgar Libertarianism.

We on the Libertarian Left consider it utterly perverse that free market libertarianism, a doctrine which had its origins as an attack on the economic privilege of landlords and merchants, should ever have been coopted in defense of the entrenched power of the plutocracy and big business. The use of the “free market” as a legitimizing ideology for triumphant corporate capitalism, and the growth of a community of “libertarian” propagandists, is as much a perversion of free market principles as Stalinist regimes’ cooptation of rhetoric and symbols from the historic socialist movement was a perversion of the working class movement.

The industrial capitalist system that the libertarian mainstream has been defending since the mid-19th century has never even remotely approximated a free market. Capitalism, as the historic system that emerged in early modern times, is in many ways a direct outgrowth of the bastard feudalism of the late Middle Ages. It was founded on the dissolution of the open fields, enclosure of the commons and other massive expropriations

of the peasantry. In Britain not only was the rural population transformed into a propertyless proletariat and driven into wage labor, but its freedom of association and movement were criminalized by a draconian police state for the first two decades of the 19th century.

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South. Tens and hundreds of millions of peasants were dispossessed from their land by the colonial powers and driven into the wage labor market, and their former holdings consolidated for cash crop agriculture, in a global reenactment of the Enclosures of Great Britain. In not only colonial but post-colonial times, the land and natural resources of the Third World have been enclosed, stolen and plundered by Western business interests. The current concentration of Third World land in the hands of landed elites producing in collusion with Western agribusiness interests, and of oil and mineral resources in the hands of Western corporations, is a direct legacy of four hundred years of colonial and neo-colonial robbery.

The Radical Possibilities of Freed Markets.

We of the Libertarian Left, as we understand it at C4SS, want to take back free market principles from the hirelings of big business and the plutocracy, and put them back to their original use: an all-out assault on the entrenched economic interests and privileged classes of our day. If the classical liberalism of Smith and Ricardo was an attack on the power of the Whig landed oligarchs and the moneyed interests, our left-libertarianism is an attack on the closest thing in our own time: global finance capital and the transnational corporations. We repudiate mainstream libertarianism's role in defense of corporate capitalism in the 20th century, and its alliance with conservatism.

We of the Libertarian Left also want to demonstrate the relevance of free market principles, free association and voluntary cooperation in addressing the concerns of today's Left: Economic injustice, the concentration and polarization of wealth, the exploitation of labor, pollution and waste, corporate power, and structural forms of oppression like racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

Where robbery or injustice have been done, we take an unflinching stand for full rectification. Wherever ownership of land by neo-feudal elites persists, it should be treated as the rightful property of those whose ancestors have worked and used it. Peasants evicted from land to raise cash crops for Cargill and ADM should be restored to them. Haciendas in Latin America should be opened up for immediate homesteading by landless peasants. The title to vacant and unimproved land in the United States and other settler societies that has been enclosed and held out of use by absentee

landlords should be voided. In cases where land originally claimed under such an illegitimate title is currently worked or inhabited by tenants or mortgage-payers, full title should be immediately transferred to them. Corporate title to mines, forests and oilfields obtained through colonial robbery should be voided out.

The *minimum* list of demands of left-libertarianism should include abolition of all artificial property rights, artificial scarcities, monopolies, entry barriers, regulatory cartels and subsidies, by which virtually the entire Fortune 500 gets the bulk of its profits. It should include an end to all absentee title to vacant and unimproved land, all “intellectual property” monopolies, and all restrictions on free competition in the issue of money and credit or on the free adoption of any and all media of exchange chosen by the parties to a transaction. For example, the abolition of patents and trademarks would mean an end to all legal barriers that prevent Nike’s contractors in Asia from immediately producing identical knock-off sneakers and marketing them to the local population at a tiny

fraction of the price, without the Swoosh markup. It would mean an immediate end to all restrictions on the production and sale of competing versions of medications under patent, often for as little as 5% of the price. We want the portion of the price of all goods and services that consists of embedded rents on “property” in ideas or techniques — often the majority of their price — to vanish in the face of immediate competition.

Our agenda should include, also, an end to all artificial barriers to self

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employment, home-based enterprise, and vernacular or self-built housing and other means of low-cost subsistence — that includes licensing and zoning laws or safety codes. And it should include an end to all legal restrictions on the right of labor to organize and to withhold its services under any and all

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circumstances or to engage in boycotts, and an end to all legal privileges that give certified union establishments the right to restrict wildcatting and other direct action by their rank-and-file.

restoration of unlimited liability (as it existed under the original common law of torts) for polluting activity like fracking and mountaintop removal. And it must include, obviously, the role of the U. S. warfare state in securing strategic access to foreign oil basins or keeping sea lanes open for oil tankers.

In the case of pollution and resource depletion, the left-libertarian agenda must include an end to all privileged access to land by extractive industries (i.e. the collusion of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management with oil, mining, logging and ranching companies), all subsidies to energy and transportation consumption (including an end to airport and highway subsidies, including the use of eminent domain for those purposes), an end to the use of eminent domain for oil and gas pipelines, the elimination of all regulatory caps on corporate liability for oil spills and other pollution, an end to the doctrine by which minimal regulatory standards preempt more stringent preexisting common law standards of liability, and a full

Corporate capitalism and class oppression live, move and have their being in state intervention on behalf of the privileged and powerful. Genuine free markets, voluntary cooperation and free association will act like dynamite at the foundations of this system of oppression.

Any left-libertarian agenda worthy of the name must also include a concern for social justice and combating structural oppression. That means, obviously, an end to all state-enforced discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation. But it means much more.

True, as libertarians we oppose all legal restrictions on freedom of association, including laws against discrimination by private businesses. But we should enthusiastically support direct action to combat injustice in the social realm. And historically, state non-discrimination laws have served only to codify, grudgingly and after the fact, gains won on the ground through direct action like bus boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins and the Stonewall riots. We should support the use of direct action, social pressure, boycotts and social solidarity to combat structural forms of oppression like racism and rape culture, and challenging internalized norms that perpetuate such systems of coercion.

Intersectionality and Multidimensional Liberation.

In addressing all forms of injustice, we should take an intersectional approach. That includes a repudiation of the Old Left practices of dismissing race and gender concerns as “divisive” or something to be postponed “until later” in the interest of class unity. It also includes a repudiation of racial and gender justice movements dominated by upper-middle-class professionals, that focus solely on black or female “faces in high places” and “cabinets / boardrooms that look like the rest of America” while leaving the power of those high places, cabinets and boardrooms untouched. The assault on one form of entrenched privilege must not be seen coming at the expense of other struggles; rather, the struggles are all complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Paying special concern to the intersectional needs of the least privileged comrades in each justice movement — women and people of color in the working class; poor and working women, women of color, transgender women

and sex workers within feminism; women and poor and working people within the racial justice movement; etc. — does not divide these movements. It actually strengthens them against attempts by the ruling class to divide and conquer by exploiting internal fracture lines as a source of weakness. For example, the big land-owners defeated the tenant farmer unions in the American South of the 1930s by encouraging and exploiting racial discord and causing the movement to split into separate black and white unions. Any class, racial or sexual justice movement that ignores the intersection of multiple forms of oppression among its own members, instead of paying special attention to the special needs of the least privileged, leaves itself open to the same kind of opportunism. Ultimately, any such attention to intersectional concerns must include a safe spaces approach that creates a welcome atmosphere of genuine debate for all, without the chilling effect of deliberate harassment and slurs.

The Relevance of Left-Libertarianism.

Libertarians — often by our own fault — have been dismissed by many as “pot-smoking Republicans,” adhering to an insular ideology mainly of white middle-class males in Silicon Valley startups. In all too many establishment libertarian publications and online communities, the reflexive tendency is to defend big business against attacks by workers and consumers, landlords against tenants, and Walmart against Main Street, dismissing any critics as enemies of the free market and treating corporations as if they were proxies for market principles. It’s paralleled by a similar tendency to dismiss all concerns for racial and sexual justice as “collectivist.” The result is a movement seen by poor and working people, women and people of color as utterly irrelevant to their concerns. Meanwhile, white male 20-something tech workers explain the lack of women and minorities by reference to their “natural collectivism,” and morosely quote Nock from “Isaiah’s Job” to each other.

We on the Libertarian Left don’t want to be relegated to the catacombs, or be the modern-day equivalent of Jacobites sitting in the coffee houses and reminiscing about Bonnie Prince Charlie and the ’15. We don’t want to moan about how society is going to hell in a handbasket, while the majority of people fighting to change things for the better ignore us. We want our ideas to be at the center of struggles everywhere for justice and a better life. And we can only do this by treating the real concerns of actual people as if

they're worthy of respect, and showing how our ideas are relevant. This is what we aim to do.

KEVIN CARSON (2014)

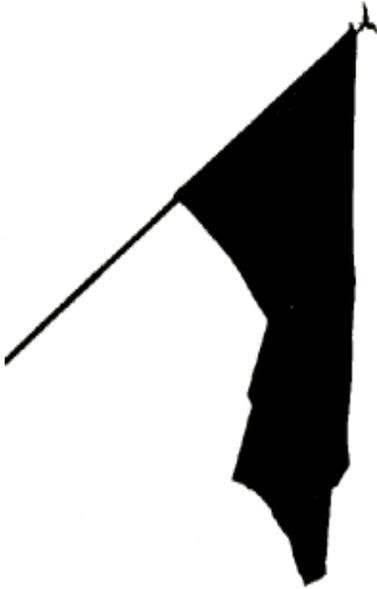
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MARKET ANARCHY



*. . . what we always meant by socialism wasn't something you forced on people, it was people organizing themselves as they pleased into co-ops, collectives, communes, unions. . . . And if socialism really is better, more efficient than capitalism, then it can bloody well **compete** with capitalism. So we decided, forget all the statist shit and the violence: the best place for socialism is the closest to a free market you can get!*

Market anarchists believe in market exchange, not economic privilege. We believe in free markets, not capitalism. We are *anarchists* because we believe in a fully *free, consensual society* — order achieved not through political government, but free agreements and voluntary cooperation on a basis of equality. We are *market* anarchists because we recognize free market exchange, characterized by individual ownership, voluntary contracts, free competition, and

entrepreneurial experimentation, as a medium for peacefully anarchic social order. But the markets we envision are nothing like the privilege-riddled markets we see around us under government and capitalism.

Mutualists believe that most present inequalities come not from the results of market forces but from the perversion of these forces. A market is, after all, only a system of voluntary exchange. The state has stepped in and granted preferential treatment to certain individuals and groups. This created the vast inequalities that we see. Even if the market were to give rise to certain problems, these could be offset by voluntary associations such as guilds, trade unions, community groups and co-operatives.

Agorism is revolutionary market anarchism. In a market anarchist society, the positive functions of law and security will be provided by market institutions, not political institutions. Agorists recognize, therefore, that those institutions cannot develop through political reform. Instead, they will come about as a result of market processes. As government is banditry, revolution culminates in the suppression of government by market providers of security and law. Market demand for such service providers is what will lead to their emergence. Development of that demand will come from economic growth in the sector of the economy that explicitly shuns state involvement (and therefore can not turn to the state in its role as monopoly provider of security and law). That sector of the economy is the counter-economy – black and grey markets.