

WHY THE POLITICAL LEFT SHOULD CONSIDER LIBERTARIANISM



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I begin by assuming that the vast majority of people want to live in a benevolent world, one which is interested in the welfare of all of its inhabitants. Given this assumption, the question before us is not so much whether or why we advocate this ideal, but rather, what is the best way to construct a society which manifests it.

Quite obviously, there are a spectrum of opinions as to what sort of society comprises an optimally benevolent order. I will argue that the tenets of classical liberalism, or Libertarianism, are best suited for promoting a society in which all individuals have the opportunity to realize their life potential, and I will specifically address this argument to the concerns of the political left.

The Left (quite rightly) advocates social freedom. Thus, the Left maintains that each individual should possess full decision-making authority with regard to his or her lifestyle. Each individual should therefore be free to determine, and act upon, his or her own religious beliefs, sexual preference, bodily autonomy (e.g., with regard to abortion, substance consumption, etc.), opinions, and general life ambitions.

With regard to the advocacy of such social freedom, the political Left and Libertarianism are in agreement. Libertarianism goes beyond the Left, however, in also advocating economic freedom. That is, Libertarianism

espouses freedom in financial endeavors (i.e., a free market) and defends property rights as well as civil rights. This economic and social freedom by necessity requires a limited government. The more expansive a state is, the more financial burdens it places on the taxpayers. Relatedly, the more decision-making authority the state holds, the more restricted is individual choice.

I propose to the political Left that the goals of individual opportunity and social justice are best realized through preserving both social and economic freedom, and that the Left's current attempt to achieve social welfare through state mechanisms at the expense of economic liberty may be more damaging than enhancing of these goals. While by no means an exhaustive list, the following are several reasons why the Left should consider Libertarianism, and correspondingly, economic freedom:

1. Ideological consistency

The Left insists that individuals should be free to determine all aspects of their lives — except how to spend their money. Taxes supporting state programs consume a substantial proportion of our income. While we no doubt approve of some of the state's spending, most of us would not voluntarily spend our money to support every one of the state's current programs to its present

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

extent. How many of us, for example, have ever paid more than we owed in taxes because we were enthusiastic about how our money was being spent by the government and wanted to contribute more? Why, I would ask the Left, should a person be free to do as she chooses with her body, time, intellect, beliefs, and aspirations, but not her money?

2. Psychological benefits of rewarding good choices

There is something innately gratifying in being able to reap the benefits of one's own labors. It seems inherently fair to us that we should be entitled to enjoy the success of our efforts. Most of us appreciate fairness and would prefer that the world were more, rather than less, just. Thus, there is a psychological benefit to living in a society that promotes such fairness by allowing industry to be rewarded.

The flipside — punishing those who make a responsible effort — seems inherently unfair. For example, consider the person who is very health conscious. He does not smoke, he exercises regularly, he eats a healthy diet, and he takes the time to have regular, preventative check-ups. Is it fair that he should have to fund the additional healthcare costs of those who do not make such an effort and therefore more frequently become ill?

I am not, I should note, arguing that everyone should simply fend for themselves. Some people, by virtue of the luck of the draw, are at a disadvantage, and will need assistance in realizing their life potential. Such people are entitled to assistance, but the best means of providing such assistance is a separate question which I will address later. I am presently making the point that self-determination — the capacity for sovereignty in choice — is one of the unique aspects of being human, and as such, good, responsible choices should be lauded rather than discouraged.

3. Avoiding the unintended consequences of state intervention

One of the major disadvantages of government efforts to address social and economic inequalities is the inevitable creation of unintended, and generally adverse consequences. Such unintended consequences can be socially as well as economically detrimental.

For example, if a state offers financial assistance to its citizens in need, it must necessarily either restrict the immigration of peoples into the country, or else create a second-class citizenry not eligible for needed assistance. Otherwise, the state will risk bankruptcy by the movement of peoples from less wealthy countries into the country offering financial support. Consequently, by providing financial assistance to its nationals, the state not only prevents the free movement of peoples, but also promotes xenophobia.

In considering any sort of state action, then, the advantages which accrue by such action must be balanced against an honest appraisal of the associated negative consequences. (And because such consequences may not be anticipated or apparent for several years, extra

caution is warranted before undertaking any intervention.) Furthermore, the evaluation of a proposed state program should be compared with those of alternative modes of services provision' namely those offered by the private sector. Since state-run programs tend to be highly bureaucratic, slow in response to change, and unable to consider more particular circumstances in their universalist applications, they will be subject to more, and more severe, unintended consequences than their less centralized private counterparts.

4. Inaccuracy of criticism of Libertarianism

A primary criticism of Libertarianism by the Left is that it produces a selfish society in which the rich get richer and the poor are abandoned. I certainly agree with the Left's premise that a socio-political system in which some of its members are destitute and left unassisted is neither desirable nor viable. This, however, does not describe a Libertarian society.

We are all, by virtue of our common humanity, morally obligated to promote the welfare of our fellow persons, a fact which responsible Libertarians acknowledge. The same sense of fairness that permits the enjoyment of the results of one's labors also mandates the provision of assistance to those who, through the misfortune of circumstance, require it.

I am optimistic enough about human nature to believe that in a free society, communities would voluntarily look after the needs of their disadvantaged members, and that this assistance would be provided in a caring and personalized fashion rather than in the impersonal, bureaucratic state manner. But I am not so optimistic as to believe that people are willing to pay twice. It seems unlikely that we will see many voluntary community welfare efforts as long as people know that their taxes are already funding state assistance programs. The danger of the Left's agenda is its suggestion that the existence of a state welfare program relieves us individually of our fundamental human responsibility toward those in need.

Very few people argue for either an entirely anarchistic or an entirely autocratic society. The challenge for the rest of us is then to determine the optimum amount of state involvement in our lives, recognizing that any increase in governmental power is necessarily going to involve a cost in terms of personal liberty and choice. The political Left has travelled half the distance in advocating social freedom, but economic freedom is also necessary to realize a truly free society.

Now more than ever, the protection of individuality is imperative. Improving transport and the ever-widening availability of communications technology is facilitating the mass movement of peoples and ideas, increasingly diversifying our societies. We need a political structure, as well as a cultural climate, that respects and protects this heterogeneity. Every one of our society's members is entitled to the opportunity to discover, pursue, and claim his or her unique life ambitions, and only freedom from state coercion in both the social and economic realms provides such an environment.