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GIVING

LIBERTARIANISM

A LEFT HOOK:

HOW TO MAKE

THE TRADITIONS OF

THE LEFT OUR OWN

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WHAT DO LEFT AND RIGHT REALLY MEAN?

Libertarians come in many hyphenated flavours, but very few genuine libertarians see themselves as being on the political left. So called 'Socialist' libertarians are not libertarians at all. They are as oxymoronic as meat eating vegetarians: any value set that would deny economic free association and true several property, denies personal liberty, and you are not a libertarian unless you advocate personal liberty as first amongst civil virtues.

Thus from this fairly self-evident proposition, most libertarians see themselves as either being on the 'right' or at least they do not see themselves as being on the 'left'. However just what do left and right really mean in this post-cold war era? I would contend that within the context of libertarianism, left and right are actually meaningless, ideologically speaking. Conservatives and socialists ascribe various meanings to these terms based on their respective statist perspectives. However as we do not share those views, we can safely look beyond their definitions and see rather different essential differences and similarities for ourselves. Whilst conservatives and socialists see what differentiates them, as libertarians our perspectives allow us to see the shared statist axioms that in fact make them so similar in modern western societies. This sort of observation is hardly ground breaking. In the 1940's Hayek pointed out in *The Road to Serfdom*

the truism (to us) that far from being the antithesis of the left, the Nazis were just another form of socialism. Similarly early 21st Century libertarians can see that there is actually little to choose between Tory 'Conservatism' and Blairite Labour 'Socialism' circa 2001 in real terms of policy and underpinning assumptions as to the role of the state.

USING THE META-CONTEXTUAL BAGGAGE

What libertarians need to understand is that there are indeed important differences between the 'left' and 'right', but they are meta-contextual rather than ideological, now that we no longer live in a simpler bipolar world. That is to say, the left and right come from very different traditions that strongly colour their respective views of how the world really works and thus how they interpret any ideological issue presented to them. Bearing this in mind, libertarians need to realise that by mentally allying themselves to the 'right', they are actually not making a useful ideological distinction at all. In fact, by doing so, they run the risk of clothing themselves in cultural meta-contextual baggage that is often profoundly unhelpful. What is needed is a more dispassionate analysis as to what other people understand by 'left' and 'right' and a more pragmatic, or dare I say, even cynical use of that meta-contextual baggage for our own purposes.

A TRADITION OF THOUGHT, NOT A PHILOSOPHY

For example, a key 'vibe' of the 'left' tradition is the view of the world as a struggle from the bottom against forces of hierarchy. Thus an anti-business proposition, that portrays the corporate boardroom as an essentially hostile power centre to the 'common man' employee is an 'easy sell' when presented to someone who views the world from within that meta-context.

However, a meta-context is just a tradition of thought, not a philosophy per se. Let us take the fact that as the airline industries across the world are said to be in dire

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

troubles, various interventionist governments are pouring tax monies into flag carriers to prop them up. This is not really the sort of issue to greatly exercise people on the traditional 'left', who view economic intervention as perfectly normal or the 'right', who view 'helping' companies as perfectly normal, provided they are big companies. However, this issue can indeed be made to resonate with the 'left' by framing it precisely in the terms that fit their traditions of thought:

“Yet again the boardroom is using its corrupting influence with politicians to screw the common man and take our tax money to reward poor management by the board and bale out some fat cat shareholders. It is hard to say who is worse, the incompetent directors who did not plan for unforeseen problems, the greedy shareholders or the money-for-the-boys politicians doling out our tax money.”

What have we just done? We have just made a seemingly 'anti-business' argument designed to fit within the meta-contextual world view of the left. We have also just made an argument in favour of laissez-faire.

WE MUST LEARN TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF THE LEFT

Many on the 'left' are actually natural allies of the libertarian view on civil liberties, yet they cannot extend the same logic to economic liberties. Part of the problem is the fact that libertarians, largely speaking from the meta-context of the 'right', frame economic issues in such a manner as to predispose opposition from the 'left'. If we are to rescue the 'left' from collectivism, we must learn to speak the language of the left and tap into deep traditions of resistance and non-deferential social values that could serve us well. It is not just a case of picking the issues to attract people from the left but how we present them.

NO IDEOLOGICAL COMPROMISE IS REQUIRED

Hostility to business regulation is almost invariably presented as a 'right' issue and framed in the language and meta-contextual frames of reference of the 'right'. Yet why not pitch this very issue to the left in terms that resonate for them as well?

“See how entrenched businesses work with their political stooges in government to keep under-capitalised common people from competing with them? They raise regulatory barriers to keep the working class would-be entrepreneurs out by raising the cost of establishing a new business, thereby keeping the market safe for the forces of oligopoly and faceless chain stores.”

Rather than the usual 'right' arguments, involving imposed costs to the established business being regulated, we take an equally true consequence of regulatory imposition and serve it up with a left spin. Whilst the use of language may be cynical, no ideological compromise is required and there is nothing dishonest about the argument being made. Once we realise that 'left' and 'right'

are just traditional meta-contextual frames of reference and do not have any real objective political content in and of themselves, we can effectively inject our libertarian memes into both the 'left' and 'right' world views. By doing this, we broaden our ability to communicate with people who might otherwise see us as being 'one of them' rather than 'one of us'.

When in the ring and fighting the good fight, do not deny yourself a good left hook.

The article above was first published on November 2nd 2001, as a posting on **Libertarian Samizdata**, the weblog (www.samizdata.blogspot.com), which is edited and run by Perry de Havilland (in association with the Libertarian Alliance). On January 30th 2002, Perry de Havilland did another posting for Samizdata (originally headed "Comments worth repeating") which shows the Left Hook approach in action:

Over on Little Green Footballs (also see link under 'posh blogs' section in sidebar), there is a lengthy series of entries in the comments section under an article about globalization and the people who are heading to New York to protest against it. Someone called Michele stated that she was "strongly against world trade". This astonishing remark was something that had to be answered and so I will repeat my remarks here:

To be "strongly against world trade" is to be in favour of poverty and against free association. It is to favour force over choice. It is to favour death and famine in the third world. Anyone who actually wants for the peoples of South America, Africa and Asia to prosper should be demanding not an end to world trade but the removal of **all** barriers to entry to the US and EU markets. At a stroke that would result in cheaper products for common working western people as cheaper African, South American and Asian goods become available. Immediately the economies of third world nations would improve as they could sell their products without immoral grotesque discriminatory tariff barriers.

Also, as a laissez-faire capitalist libertarian, I am **strongly** opposed to the World Bank, the WTO and the IMF ... these are institutions that support crony capitalism and big government. They subsidise neo-national socialist stupidity like that in Argentina and despotic kleptocratic regimes across the globe.

I am in favour of true free association and therefore laissez-faire and **true** globalization. I reject collectivism in all its coercive left and right wing forms and the violence and poverty they always lead to. Individualism and laissez faire capitalism without borders is the only moral option and the only option that can actually work at all in the long run.