

# **What it means to be libertarian**

Anarcho

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This is a write-up of my talk at the 2017 London Anarchist Bookfair. The programme blurb was as follows:

“2017 marks 160 years since Joseph Déjacque coined the word “*libertarian*” in an open letter challenging Proudhon’s patriarchal and market socialist views. By the dawn of the twentieth century, anarchists across the world had embraced the term. Today, it is now increasingly associated with the far-right. How did this happen? What does it mean to be a libertarian? Can you be a right-wing libertarian? Can we reclaim the word for the twenty-first century? These questions as well as the history of “libertarian” will be explored by Iain McKay, author of *An Anarchist FAQ*.”

It is based on my article “160 Years of Libertarian” which appeared in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* No. 71. I should note that this journal was originally launched in 1986 under the title *Libertarian Labor Review*, the change occurring in 1999 due to the forces discussed below. I am sure this write-up makes it sound better than it was. My talk ends with a question – is libertarian worth fighting for, or is it too associated with the right that we should let it be? The answer lies with you.

## **What it means to be libertarian**

It is interesting how words change their meaning. When I became an anarchist – thirty years ago this year – the term libertarian meant what it always did, namely a synonym for anarchist or a socialist close to anarchism. So, for example, Maurice Brinton and the group *Solidarity* were libertarians and there were various libertarian Marxists.

Overtime, I became aware of the right-wing use of the term – particularly in America. Today, we see the likes of Tory MPs proclaiming themselves “libertarians” and this is not challenged by the media, nor by their opponents.

So how did we get here?

## **Joseph Déjacque**

To understand how this happened we first need to recount the history of the term libertarian.

As well as my thirty years, this year also marks 160 years since Joseph Déjacque coined the word “*libertarian*” in an open letter challenging Proudhon’s patriarchal and market socialist views.

Déjacque was a very interesting character. We first hear of him during the 1848 revolution, during which he was imprisoned for socialist agitation. He was re-arrested in 1851 for a collection of poems and during his trial he prosecution described him as follows:

“Mr. Déjacque is one of those hateful socialists who hold society in horror, and who have no other aim, no thought but to constantly excite the wicked passions of those who possess nothing against those who do possess, so that their detestable doctrines may triumph. This is how one foments the hatred of tenants towards landlords and especially of workers towards bosses.”

So a fine, upstanding member of the community!

He escaped to London in 1851 after Louis-Napoleon's coup before moving to America. There, in 1857, wrote his letter to Proudhon and coins the word *libertaire* and the following year until 1861 he published the periodical *Le Libertaire, Journal du Mouvement social*, the first of many anarchist journals to use that title.

He returned to France after an amnesty, dying in poverty, in Paris, in 1864.

## Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

Given this, it is obvious that Déjacque's work cannot be viewed in isolation from Proudhon's.

Proudhon is a much misrepresented thinker, indeed he has been systematically distorted by many, not least Marx in his book *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

He is most famous for proclaiming "property is theft!" in 1840 but he also proclaimed "property is despotism" in *What is Property?*. This book is a systematic and devastating critique of liberalism. While it echoes Rousseau's earlier democratic critique, Proudhon extends his critique to both Rousseau and State Socialism. He showed how none of these will meet its stated goals and raised Anarchy as alternative – *association* to abolish capitalism and *federalism* to abolish the State

As I said, he is much misrepresented but one criticism is true – he was a sexist, a firm defender of patriarchy. This was why Déjacque – who considered himself a follower of Proudhon – raised his voice in 1857, denouncing him for being "a *liberal* and not a LIBERTARIAN [...] you cry out against the high barons of capital and you wish to rebuild the high barony of the male upon the female vassal" and urged him to "Be frankly, fully anarchist [...] Press on to the abolition of [...] property and authority in every form."

The following year saw Déjacque found *Le Libertaire* in which he expanded upon his Open Letter and advocated communism (free, of course) against Proudhon's market socialism – in other words distribution by need, not deed – and revolution against Proudhon's reformism

He was the first to draw these conclusions which became commonplace during and after the 1870s.

## After Déjacque

The term libertarian, however, did not immediately spread in usage but the critique of sexism was raised.

French members of the International, Eugene Varlin and André Léo (both of whom would become Communards) made similar points to Déjacque. Léo, for example, rightly argued against those French Internationalists who embraced Proudhon's sexism as well as his mutualism:

"These so-called lovers of liberty, if they are unable to take part in the direction of the state, at least they will be able to have a little monarchy for their personal use, each in his own home [...] Order in the family without hierarchy seems impossible to them – well then, what about in the state?"

Needless to say, this position was echoed by Bakunin, Kropotkin and almost all others.

However, *Anti-Authoritarian* was the preferred term in the federalist-wing of International.

The next recorded use of libertarian was at a French regional anarchist Congress in November 1880, which talked about “libertarian communism.” January the following year saw a French manifesto issued on “Libertarian or Anarchist Communism.” Six years later, in 1887, individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker quoted a Belgium socialist (Ernest Lesigne) in *Liberty*:

“There are two Socialisms [...] One is dictatorial, the other libertarian [...] One wishes that there should be none but proletarians. The other wishes that there should be no more proletarians”

In 1895 Sébastien Faure and Louise Michel began publication of newspaper *La Libertaire* while the following year saw Kropotkin state “modern Socialism is forced to make a step towards libertarian communism” while Malatesta argued that “the name *libertarians* [is] accepted and used by all anarchists”. By 1899, Henry Glasse was discussing the issue in *Freedom*, noting that the “term ‘Libertarian’ in place of ‘Anarchist’ seems to be used with increasing frequency” and how the “newer term pleases me better.” Three years later he wrote of “Anarchism (or Libertarianism, if you prefer)”.

So by the dawn of the twentieth century anarchists – and just anarchists – across the world had embraced the term and this remained the case for most of the century. Indeed, when George Woodcock published *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* in 1962 he made no mention of right-wing “libertarians” at all. Yet, today, it is now increasingly associated with the far-right, particularly in America. How did that happen?

## **Theft is property!**

As the term “Liberal” became increasingly associated with the New Deal in the US, some American right-wing liberals privately pondered using the term “libertarian” to describe their ideas. They probably became aware of the term via American Charles T. Sprading’s 1913 book *Liberty and the Great Libertarians*. Sprading was associated with Tucker’s *Liberty*, so undoubtedly picked up the word there and his book is a mish-mash, including *actual* libertarians – like Kropotkin, Wilde, Tucker, Bakunin, Goldman (on syndicalism!) – but many liberals. However, American right-wing liberals did not start using the term as their preferred label until the late 1950s. Murray Rothbard – one of those involved at the time – recalled:

“One gratifying aspect of our rise to some prominence is that [...], we, ‘our side,’ had captured a crucial word from the enemy [...] ‘Libertarians’ [...] had long been simply a polite word for left-wing anarchists, that is for anti-private property anarchists, either of the communist or syndicalist variety. But now we had taken it over, and more properly from the view of etymology; since we were proponents of individual liberty and therefore of the individual’s right to his property.”

So deliberate theft – something Rothbard claimed to be opposed to:

“Every individual in the free society has a right to ownership of his own self and to the exclusive use of his own property. Included in his property is his name, the

linguistic label which is uniquely his and is identified with him. A name is an essential part of a man's identity and therefore of his property [...] defense of person and property [...] involves the defense of each person's particular name or trademark against the fraud of *forgery* or *imposture*."

The hypocrisy is clear – if Anarchists think property is theft, for Rothbard theft is property!

## Property is despotism!

Ignoring the blatant hypocrisy, what of Rothbard's claim they were entitled to take the name because their ideology "more properly" fitted its meaning?

This is just an ideological version of immanent domain or primitive accumulation, something which Rothbard was, in theory, against but ignoring that, if you read Rothbard you quickly see his whole-hearted defence of very authoritarian things.

So, for example, a person "does not have a 'right to freedom of speech'; what he *does* have is the right to hire a hall and address the people who enter the premise." He "has no *right* to speak but only a request" that the owner "must decide upon" while owners "have the right to decide who shall have access to those streets" and "have the absolute right to decide on whether picketers could use their street" while "the employer can fire" a worker who joins a union "forth-with."

In short, no freedom of speech, association or assembly – which is hardly libertarian.

*So, no property, no liberty... It gets worse.*

Rothbard opposed the State because it "arrogates to itself a monopoly of force, of ultimate decision-making power, over a given territorial area" he then admitted in an end note to the same chapter that "[o]bviously, in a free society, Smith has the ultimate decision-making power over his own just property, Jones over his, etc.!" Such is the power of ideology, allowing you ignore common features:

*"If the State may be said to properly own its territory, then it is proper for it to make rules for everyone who presumes to live in that area. [...] So long as the State permits its subjects to leave its territory, then, it can be said to act as does any other owner who sets down rules for people living on his property."*

Opps! So he is against the State *not* because it is authoritarian but because it does not own its territory justly!

Yet does *anyone* own their property justly? Of course not – look at history, it is a product of centuries of coercion. So why does Rothbard think so? Because he creates a lovely "just-so" story – which is not even original, he simply regurgitates John Locke. Yet Locke postulates that the State is created when landlords decide to form a joint-stock company amongst themselves and the State *does* own its territory justly because the landlords do! According to that "just-so" story, at least...

Ah, it may be objected, but people can leave and find a better master. Ignoring the awkward but relevant question of *what if you don't want masters?*, this objection ignores the reality of economic power. Rothbard, needless to say, denies this exists in capitalism but also has this to say about the abolition of slavery and serfdom in the nineteenth century:

“The *bodies* of the oppressed were freed, but the property which they had worked and eminently deserved to own, remained in the hands of their former oppressors. With economic power thus remaining in their hands, the former lords soon found themselves virtual masters once more of what were now free tenants or farm labourers. The serfs and slaves had tasted freedom, but had been cruelly deprived of its fruits.”

So if “market forces” (“voluntary exchanges”) result in the few owning most of the property then that is fine and raises no questions about the (lack of) liberty of the working class but if people are placed *in exactly the same situation* as a result of coercion then it is a case of “economic power” and “masters”!

***Such is the power of ideology – it allows you to write a book which contradicts itself!***

## **Voluntary does not equal libertarian**

He is not alone – look at a Robert Nozick who defends both voluntary slavery (“The comparable question about an individual is whether a free system will allow him to sell himself into slavery. I believe that it would”) and voluntary dictatorship (“if one starts a private town, on land whose acquisition did not [...] violate the Lockean proviso, persons who chose to move there [...] would have no right to a say in how the town was run”)

It is a strange notion of freedom which postulates that you are not free if you cannot become a slave... It does, however, show the bankruptcy of the intellectual culture that this is considered *libertarian!*

David Ellerman has recounted the long history of contractual defences of tyranny and slavery and both Rothbard and Nozick derive their ideas from John Locke, a seventeenth century English Philosopher – “The Father of Liberalism”.

For Locke, people have property in the person, the worker owns their labour and from this weaves a just-so story which turns the commons into private property. As labour being someone’s property, it can be sold and so the master (the wealthy owner) now owns that labour and its product, not the worker.

This negation of the starting principles comes as no surprise as Locke’s work is all about justifying the – to use his words – the “subordinate relations of wife, children, servants, and slaves”. Locke, then, invokes “consent” to defend subordination, *not* liberty. As can be seen by what he uses self-ownership and “consent” to justify: inequalities in wealth; masters and servants; patriarchy; non-absolute monarchy; government by the wealthy few; contractual life-time slavery (termed “drudgery”); *actual* slavery; and hereditary serfdom

Indeed, the only thing it did not seem to allow non-hierarchical social relationships... Unsurprisingly, for as Carole Pateman suggested “Contracts about property in the person inevitably create subordination.”

This shows that the notion that “consent” equates to libertarian is simply false and why opposition to coercion is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* definition for libertarian.

## The power of money in the market-place of ideas

This self-contradictory rubbish should never have gone anywhere except for three key factors. First, the Lockean roots of modern bourgeois ideology. Second, it reflects the reality of the bourgeois economic regime. Third, it is very helpful for the ruling class (who, of course, ignore when it suits them).

However, a key factor of the appropriation of “libertarian” was the funds of the Koch Empire. Their father made his fortune in Stalinist Russia (no freedom for workers there!) and after he returned to America aimed to break unions there (State intervention against unions is fine, apparently...). His sons have used this wealth to fund numerous “libertarian” thinktanks and projects.

So, yet more defenders of “non-coercion” whose their fortunes owe much to coercion. As with Locke, incidentally, who was wealthy man who invested in the slave trade – but worry not, he simply invented another nice little “just-so” story to intellectually secure those investments.

In addition, there was the formation of a political party with the aim of taking government power which, as Marxists would confirm, is a good way to ensure your notions become associated with a word. So, for Rothbard, a “free” society will come later once his party seized power and the State withers away... *Marxo-capitalists*, anyone?

## What now?

So we have seen how libertarian was coined and how it was stolen. We can see what it means to be libertarian – to be opposed to both public and private hierarchies, in favour of self-management *always*.

Proudhon had attacked political and economic hierarchies while Déjacque and other anarchists extended that analysis and critique to the home – for both logic and justice demands it. In other words, associations of free and equal people in *all* spheres of life, for liberty needs equality to be meaningful.

Consent, then, does not justify authoritarian social relationships as Proudhon argued:

“Liberty is inviolable. I can neither sell nor alienate my liberty; every contract, every condition of a contract, which has in view the alienation or suspension of liberty, is null”

Simply put, exploitation and oppression possible in voluntary organisations – particularly if wealth is monopolised by the few. Kropotkin put it well:

“modern Individualism [is] a powerful indictment against the dangers and wrongs of government, but its practical solution of the social problem is miserable – so miserable as to lead us to inquire if the talk of ‘No force’ be merely an excuse for supporting landlord and capitalist domination.”

To which the answer is, yes!

This means you simply cannot be a right-wing “libertarian” for capitalism is inherently authoritarian, it is “despotism” as Proudhon recognised in 1840. The so-called “libertarians” of the



right are nothing more than voluntary *archists*, voluntary authoritarians. Like Locke, they seek to defend such hierarchies.

Worse, as Proudhon first argued, liberalism cannot be genuinely anti-State as the State is needed to defend property and its power. As Kropotkin argued, “while they advocate no force for changing the existing conditions, they advocate still more force than is now used for maintaining them. As to Anarchy, it is obviously as incompatible with plutocracy as with any other kind of -cracy.”

This is why, in America, the term has been completely reversed its meaning: from opposition to bosses to support (indeed, worship) of bosses; from opposition to the State because it defends property and its power, to opposition to (certain aspects of) the State because it does *not* defend them well enough; from opposition to private hierarchies, to support for private hierarchies; from opposition to wage-labour because it was a form of slavery, to support for slavery as a form of wage-labour.

Property, not liberty, is the basis of their ideology – which suggests that *propertarian* would be a better term for them. Once you understand that, their bizarre positions become understandable and they themselves should stop using the word libertarian for, as Rothbard noted, “if a current title to property is criminal in origin, *and* the victim or his heir can be found, then the title should immediately revert to the latter.”

Do not hold your breath waiting for *that* to happen...

## Conclusions

So there is an easy way identifying real from fake libertarians, ask them whether *property is theft*? If they say “yes” then embrace them as a true friend of liberty.

Ultimately, it comes down to what does liberty mean? Does freedom mean the end of oppression or the ability to oppress? Does your liberty end at the workplace door? Or by a marriage ceremony? Is liberty opposed to slavery or does it express itself by it?

To be a libertarian means fighting to increase individual freedom *everywhere*. It does *not* mean rationalising private tyranny and so we need to dump the falsehood of “property in the person” as this notion *degrades* our concept of liberty, hollowing it out so that *slavery is freedom* becomes a point for serious debate rather than ridicule. For, to state the obvious, I do not “own” my person, *I am myself* – I cannot alienate myself. Hence Kropotkin’s point that Anarchy is “criticism of hierarchical organisations and authoritarian conceptions in general”.

Finally, is libertarian now too corrupted by association with the right? Should we leave the term? If so, should we also reject Anarchist? Rothbard tried to steal that too.

I think *libertarian* is worth fighting for: do you?

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