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“Anti-Government Ideologues” and Coronavirus

Iain McKay

June 28, 2020

For an anarchist, it is annoying to see the right – whether Trump or Johnson, the Tories or the Republicans – proclaimed “libertarians” or “anti-government.” They are neither, not least because they are members of governments and so repeatedly and regularly use state power to further their own and their backers’ interests.

Yet this does not stop the likes of economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman arguing that “we may not get the [stimulus] program we need, because anti-government ideologues, who briefly got quiet as the magnitude of the Covid-19 shock became apparent, are back to their usual tricks.” (*Starve the Beast, Feed the Depression: Anti-government ideology is crippling pandemic policy*) Yet what are they actually doing? Krugman notes the following:

Everyone, and I mean everyone, knows what is really happening: McConnell is trying to get more money for businesses while continuing to shortchange state and local governments. After all, ‘starve the beast’ – forcing governments to cut services by depriving them of resources – has been Republican strategy for decades. This is just more of the same.

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Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
From Anarcho-Syndicalist Review #80, Summer 2020

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Which raises an obvious question: how is the politicians of a governing party seeking to funnel government money into the hands of business an example of “anti-government ideology” in action? In reality, it *is* government action and so these “anti-government ideologues” *are* responding to the crisis – they *are* using the government machine *they are part of* to funnel monies to the wealthy, to the capitalist class, to corporations. Yes, this is not what is required now. Yes, they are obstructing and squeezing out more sensible policies. Yes, they will cause vast suffering – but it is hardly “anti-government” when politicians use the bloody government to pursue their favored policies.

So how is a government bill which sought to give billions to corporations “anti-government ideology”? How was the goal of giving the head of the federal government *carte blanche* over \$500 billion “anti-government ideology”? How is skewing government action towards favored sections of capital an example of “anti-government ideology”? Is it that flawed and self-interested government action is not really government action? Is it that the recipients of government largess determine its “anti-government” credentials rather than the fact of government action?

Simply put, the government having the wrong – whether subjectively or objectively – policies is not “anti-government ideology”: it is government action. Thus we have the frankly bizarre situation that many – including well-educated professors – view giving \$500 billion to corporations as an expression of “anti-government ideology” but giving an identical amount to the people would be “government intervention”! Strange...

Then there is this example of cognitive dissidence:

Early Monday Trump tweeted out an assertion that he has the power to overrule state governors who have imposed lockdown orders – which suggests that we may have a constitutional crisis brewing, because as far as anybody knows he has no such

faire. 2. When the proletariat resist the proprietors, interfere to help the proprietors.

So a suggestion: how about replacing “anti-government” with “anti-worker”? This is a far more accurate label, not least because it resolves the apparent contradiction of “anti-government ideologues” being in the government and using it for their own goals.

ing practices during the current crisis. According to a *Guardian* report, dozens of employees at an American Apparel clothing plant in Selma, Alabama, took direct action on April 23 after two workers tested positive for coronavirus. The plant has remained open during the pandemic to manufacture face masks for a U.S. army contract. “We left for our own protection,” said employee Norma Kennedy. “Beforehand, management said if someone tested positive they would shut down and have the plant cleaned. When workers tested positive, they didn’t want to shut it down. They’re not really concerned about the workers.” Elsewhere, Ieshia Townsend, a McDonald’s worker in Chicago, walked off the job in protest of the lack of hazard pay, proper personal protective equipment, paid sick leave and health insurance benefits: “Workers like me are going on strike because McDonald’s and other billion-dollar corporations do not care about us as workers. They don’t care if we’re safe on the job, they don’t care if we’re sick on the job.”

As anti-government – and anti-capitalist – theorists, anarchists should be encouraging such actions and arguing that the only genuinely safe way of opening the economy is through workers’ control. Likewise, we need to resist the Trumpian death cult attempts to “open” the economy at the expense of working-class lives. We should be following the example of the medical workers who, in suitable PPE, protested the Astroturf “reopen the country” events. Solidarity, like mutual aid, in a pandemic is essential – profit-grinding is not and will get you killed. And we must never forget that there are better ways to help those workers who are suffering during the crisis.

To conclude: we must use a new, better, label to describe this. These words from the very first issue of *Freedom* (October 1886) are still appropriate:

To understand the Governmental application of *laissez-faire* learn the two following rules of thumb. 1. When the proprietors molest the proletariat, *laissez-*

power. (*Economists Aren’t the Ones Pushing to Reopen the Economy: On cronies, cranks and the coronavirus*).

Sadly, Krugman does not explain how seeking autocratic power and concentrating even more power into the hands of the head of the government expresses “anti-government” ideology, feelings or policies. Presumably, if Trump does indulge his authoritarian instincts and refuses an election or refuses to admit defeat and the Republicans back him then we would have an “anti-government dictatorship”? Presumably any citizen protesters shot by troops – or by pro-Trump activists – in such a scenario would be victims of “anti-government government violence”?

Or, to take another example, Trump using government power to force the meatpacking industry to open and to protect the companies from future lawsuits. Then there is the awkward fact that Trump and the Republicans have been very happy to increase funding for the armed forces, indeed they even want to add a new branch – Space Force! – to the armed might of the state! How is that the action of “anti-government ideologues”? Or is it a case of “in space no one can hear you rant about Ayn Rand” and so does not count?

In the UK we have to suffer comments like these on “the innate Tory distrust of collectivism and state intervention – which Johnson shares, whatever his rhetoric” (John Harris, “We can’t hide behind the bunting – let’s face up to what’s happened to Britain,” *The Guardian*, 12 May). This completely ignores the fact that the Tories have made state intervention against, say, trade unions a leitmotif of their administrations (one which Johnson vocally championed and, in his election manifesto, promised to increase). Does this mean laws regulating workers’ organizations and actions are not “state intervention”? What of the centralization of funding and control under Thatcher, which gutted the independence of local councils? Is that not “state intervention”?

The facts are the Republicans and Tories are opposed to the state acting even slightly in the interests of the population but in favor of it acting in the interests of the elite, the capitalist class and their various hangers-on. Yet anti-worker policies and interventions are still state intervention. So we must neither forget that the state intervenes all the time, for numerous reasons, nor that these “anti-government ideologies” will never refuse to use the state to protect capitalist property rights. Nor will they refuse to use governmental forces if people decide not to pay rent, utility bills, etc. as a result of Covid-19 impacting their income. Nor let people act for themselves – they will send in police and troops if, say, homeless people take over a hotel or hospital staff take needed equipment from warehouses, private or public, without paying for it or getting permission from the appropriate bureaucrats.

That the right wants to limit state action to specific and very narrow sections of society does not mean government action is restricted or limited, for helping capital can be a very expensive business. Moreover, it increases state power, for it does not reduce the repressive functions which are its essence; in fact the powers of repression must be strengthened as free competition results in more discord and inequality. Thus the so-called paradox of “free market, strong state” is no such thing.

The government acting in the interests of business (or, at least, certain sections of it, as some bosses seem to be aware that dead workers cannot produce profits for them) is hardly “anti-government” – not least decreeing that capitalists cannot be sued by those (more correctly, their next of kin) who are infected as a result of being forced by necessity to go back to work. Still, this will not stop many on the left proclaiming elements of the right as “anti-government” or “libertarian” when the reality of the situation is clearly and obviously the opposite.

So in terms of left *and* right, the Situationists were correct: theory is when you have ideas and ideology is when ideas have you.

Although, is it fair to call the right ideologues when they clearly have no ideas?

Still, the right are seeking with unseemly haste to kill workers to “save the economy,” or, more correctly, the profits, interest and rent extracted from labor. Yet the dangers of reopening without disease control or a vaccine can be seen at the Smithfield Foods meatpacking plant in Sioux Falls, USA. Its boss offered workers a bonus if they showed up every day in April to increase attendance and it worked. However, in a pandemic, this simply encouraged the sick to haul themselves into work and so the plan backfired. Hundreds of Smithfield employees were infected, forcing the plant to shut down for more than three weeks. Another example: A hairstylist from Missouri potentially exposed more than 90 customers and colleagues to coronavirus after going to work for a week with symptoms of the disease.

The right want to repeat the same mistake across the whole economy. It is no coincidence that Senior White House Economic Adviser Kevin Hassett called working people “human capital stock.”

Needless to say, genuine libertarians – libertarian socialists – are urging people to understand and follow the advice of the experts. This means the epidemiologists rather than the politicians who filter that advice. Likewise, we should be dismissive of others who claim a competency where none exists. So, for example, while many economists have been asked – often not even asked! – to talk about how to manage the pandemic, few – if any – epidemiologists have been asked about managing the economy. Which seems unfair, particularly as most economists understand how a real capitalist economy works about as well as the typical epidemiologist.

Which brings the relevance of libertarian tactics to the fore. Direct action and solidarity is what we need now. Solidarity with our fellow workers means self-isolating until it is deemed safe not to. It means direct action when it is not safe. As such we applaud the welcoming sight of workers walking out when faced with unsafe work-