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Karl Hess

Where Are the Specifics [of Libertarianism] ?

1969

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Karl Hess expresses, in the clearest and most powerful way, the fact that (a) libertarianism is a revolutionary idea and a revolutionary movement, and (b) libertarians are not there to defend private property, per se, but to uphold the life and freedom of all human beings. And it is this property (individual life and liberty) that is "most brutally and constantly abused by state systems whether they are of the right or left." This article originally appeared in *The Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1, No. 6, June 15, 1969

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Where Are the Specifics [of Libertarianism] ?

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Libertarianism is clearly the most, perhaps the only truly radical movement in America. It grasps the problems of society by the roots. It is not reformist in any sense. It is revolutionary in every sense.

Because so many of its people, however, have come from the right, there remains about it at least an aura or, perhaps, miasma of defensiveness, as though its interests really center in, for instance, defending private property. The truth, of course, is that libertarianism wants to advance *principles* of property but that it in no way wishes to *defend*, willy nilly, all property which now is called private.

Much of that property is stolen. Much is of dubious title. All of it is deeply intertwined with an immoral, coercive state system which has condoned, built on, and profited from slavery; has expanded through and exploited a brutal and aggressive imperial and colonial foreign policy, and continues to hold the people in a roughly serf-master relationship to political-economic power concentrations.

Libertarians are concerned, first and foremost, with that most valuable of properties, the life of each individual. That is the property most brutally and constantly abused by state systems whether they are of the right or left. Property rights pertaining to material objects are seen by libertarians as stemming from and as importantly secondary to the right to own, direct, and enjoy one's own life and those appurtenances thereto which may be acquired *without coercion*.

Libertarians, in short, simply do not believe that theft is proper whether it is committed in the name of a state, a class, a crises, a credo, or a cliché.

This is a far cry from sharing common ground with those who want to create a society in which super capitalists are free to amass vast holdings and who say that that is ultimately the most important purpose of freedom. This is proto-heroic nonsense.

Libertarianism is a people's movement and a liberation movement. It seeks the sort of open, non-coercive society in which the people, the living, free, distinct people may voluntarily associate, dis-associate, and, as they see fit, participate in the decisions affecting their lives. This means a truly free market in everything from ideas to idiosyncrasies. It means people free *collectively* to organize the resources of their immediate community or individualistically to organize them; it means the freedom to have a community-based and supported judiciary where wanted, none where not, or private arbitration services where that is seen as most desirable. The same with police. The same with schools, hospitals, factories, farms, laboratories, parks, and pensions. Liberty means the right to shape your own institutions. It opposes the right of those institutions to shape you simply because of accreted power or gerontological status.

For many, however, these root principles of radical libertarianism will remain mere abstractions, and even suspect, until they are developed into aggressive, specific proposals.

There is scarcely anything radical about, for instance, those who say that the poor should have a larger share of the Federal budget. That is reactionary, asking that the institution of state theft be made merely more palatable by distributing its loot to more sympathetic persons. Perhaps no one of sound mind could object more to giving Federal funds to poor people than to spending the money on the slaughter of Vietnamese peasant fighters. But to argue such relative merits must end being simply reformist and not revolutionary.

Libertarians could and should propose specific revolutionary tactics and goals which would have specific meaning to poor people and to all people; to analyze in depth and to demonstrate in example the meaning of liberty, revolutionary liberty to them.

I, for one, earnestly beseech such thinking from my comrades.

The proposals should take into account the revolutionary treatment of stolen 'private' and 'public' property in libertarian, radical, and revolutionary terms; the factors which have oppressed people so far, and so forth. Murray Rothbard and others have done much theoretical work along these lines but it can never be enough for just a few to shoulder so much of the burden.

Let me propose just a few examples of the sort of specific, revolutionary and radical questions to which members of our Movement might well address themselves.

- Land ownership and/or usage in a situation of declining state power. The Tijerina [*] situation suggests one approach. There must be many others. And what about (realistically, not romantically) water and air pollution liability and prevention?
- Worker, share-owner, community roles or rights in productive facilities in terms of libertarian anal-

ysis and as specific proposals in a radical and revolutionary context. What, for instance, might or should happen to General Motors in a liberated society?

Of particular interest, to me at any rate, is focusing libertarian analysis and ingenuity on finishing the great unfinished business of the abolition of slavery. Simply setting slaves free, in a world still owned by their masters, obviously was an historic inequity. (Libertarians hold that the South should have been permitted to secede so that the slaves themselves, along with their Northern friends, could have built a revolutionary liberation movement, overthrown the masters, and thus shaped the reparations of revolution.) Thoughts of reparations today are clouded by concern that it would be taken out against innocent persons who in no way could be connected to former oppression. There is an area where that could be avoided: in the use of government-‘owned’ lands and facilities as items of exchange in compensating the descendants of slaves and making it possible for them to participate in the communities of the land, finally, as equals and not wards.

Somewhere, I must assume, there is a libertarian who, sharing the idea, might work out a good and consistent proposal for justice in that area.

Obviously the list is endless. But the point is finite and finely focused.

With libertarianism now developing as a Movement, it earnestly and urgently requires innovative proposals, radical and specific goals, and a revolutionary agenda which can translate its great and enduring principles into timely and commanding courses of possible and even practical action.

“What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.”

Thomas Jefferson, 1787

Note

[*] Reies Tijerina (see Wikipedia) was an activist who, during the '60's and '70's, fought for the land rights of the descendants of the Spanish and Mexican colonists.