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Juneteenth, and the Right-Wing Conception of “Freedom”

Kevin Carson

November 18th, 2024

Billy Binion (“Juneteenth is a Celebration of Freedom,” *Reason*, June 19) writes that, despite widespread right-wing aversion to Juneteenth as a holiday, the GOP “in some sense still fashions itself as the party of freedom.”

Matt Yglesias is most famous these days for his almost daily garbage takes; but years ago, back when the Republican progression toward fascism had gone no further than the Tea Party stage, he aptly commented on the incoherence of right-wing conceptions of freedom:

I continue to be fascinated by the way in which the rhetoric of “freedom” is always so closely associated with authoritarian populist nationalist movements. Absolutely nothing in the imagery of the video or the policy agenda of the Republican Party is suggestive of freedom. It’s full of flags and grim-faced folks

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and bourgeois respectability and military jets flying in tight formation. It's an ad from a conservative politician that's about exactly what an ad from a conservative politician ought to be about — about preserving a way of life against Muslims, freeloaders, sexual deviants, and other threats.

Whenever the white, right-wing, and Evangelical demographic talks about its “freedoms,” you can get a good sense of what they mean by “freedoms” by translating it into “white folkways.” Whatever substantive content “freedom” has for them is wrapped up in a haze of 90s CMT video imagery about little white frame churches, porch swings, pickups, checkered picnic table cloths, gingham, flags, guns, and Murca HOO-raw!

And the “threats” to these “freedoms” — i.e. white folkways — all boil down in one way or another to anything that undermines their status as the American cultural default by allowing people who are unlike them to exist in public: e.g. the very sight of multiracial commercials or TV sitcoms, trans people on beer cans, people speaking Spanish or same-sex couples holding hands in public, or schools teaching the actual history of slavery and acknowledging the existence of LGBT people.

In short, their idea of “freedom” has about the same substantive content as “Freiheit” in Nazi ideology. Remember when Sarah Palin talked about the “pro-America parts of America”? Just change “the people” to “Volk,” and we're getting into some serious *deja vu*.

This is true as well for much of the “libertarian” right. Witness, for example, this tweet from the Libertarian Party of New Hampshire's Twitter account: “Anyone who celebrates Juneteenth should be deported from America.” This is far from atypical for them. They subsequently tweeted: “Degenerates must be expelled in order to maintain a libertarian social order.”

You might think “libertarian” is an odd self-designation for people who object to a holiday celebrating the end of slavery, and who

call for physically removing “degenerates” from society. The Mises Caucus, which controls both the national and New Hampshire Libertarian Party organisations, has about as much to do with actual liberty as the crossed-hammer stormtroopers in “Waiting for the Worms” (a song which LPNH probably has on repeat — probably only a matter of time until they adopt “final solution to strengthen the strain” as an official motto). But it’s nothing new.

There has long been an authoritarian strain on the “libertarian” right. This was true at least as long ago as 1969, when Walter Block enthusiastically defended “voluntary slavery” — along with the implied right of the slave owner to beat, torture, and mutilate the person who “voluntarily” sold themselves into slavery — as a logical implication of self-ownership and freedom of contract.

And this has become even more true in recent years, starting with the rise of the so-called “paleolibertarian” movement of Ron Paul and Lew Rockwell in the 90s. The intellectual gray eminence — or Joseph Goebbels, if you prefer — of this movement is Hans Hermann Hoppe, and its primary institutional home is the Ludwig von Mises Institute. Unsurprisingly, the Hoppean/paleo community includes under its umbrella the ruling Mises Caucus of the Libertarian Party, and Walter Block (who continues to advocate “voluntary slavery” to this day).

The essence of the Hoppean project is to create an authoritarian society — their ideal society is one in which every square foot of land is privately appropriated by predominantly white, Christian owners, no one can exist anywhere without permission from the land-owners, and “degenerates” and socialists are “physically removed” or “helicoptered” in order to purge the society of those who are incompatible with its “libertarian” character — but to do so entirely in ways that are fully consistent with self-ownership and the non-aggression principle.

It’s odd that people whose substantive values are thoroughly authoritarian, and who have no sympathy whatsoever with

human agency or human flourishing, even care about consistency with formal “libertarian” principles... but here we are.

And here’s where we also are: If you want to know anything about actual human freedom and liberty, don’t listen to right-wingers.