

Vulgar Liberalism Watch

Kevin Carson

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Part I

If you follow the mainstream Democratic blogosphere, you know that any discussion of cooperation with libertarians will evoke the inevitable anti-libertarian slurs from some quarters. As Wilson says,

every time... somebody says something about reaching out to libertarians, then “Libertarianism” itself is put on trial.

The problem is, the people who presume to put it on trial are usually idiots, who know as little about the history of libertarianism as they do about the history of anything else.

Case in point: Logan Ferree, in a thoughtful post in his Daily Kos diary, described the vulgar liberal stereotype of libertarianism:

White men who are opposed to taxes, have read Ayn Rand one too many times (although once might be too many times) and like their guns and the Confederacy a lot.

And that’s a pretty cartoonish, not to say stupid, view for a “reality-based” movement that prides itself on its grasp of the irreducible complexity of reality and derides its enemies for black-and-white thinking.

...accepting this characterchure is like believing the description of liberals at Free Republic. Intelligent, rational liberals like ourselves can do better than that.

Can? Maybe. And some do—but all too many do not. The vulgar liberal caricature of libertarianism is, as Logan suggests, an almost exact mirror image of the know-nothingism at Free Republic. As Archie Bunker said, “People who live in communes are commune-ists!” And for the vulgar liberal, likewise, “Libertarians are just pot-smoking Republicans.”

Ferree cites Battlepanda’s recent post, “Two Flavors of Libertarianism,” as an example of a liberal willing to acknowledge the complexity of the real libertarian movement. Sure, the Catoids and pot-smoking Republicans are out there. They’re the advocates of what I call “vulgar libertarianism”: a crude pro-corporate apologetic barely disguised behind bogus “free market” principles. But there’s another flavor of libertarianism:

There is Free Market Anti-Capitalism and a Blogosphere of the Libertarian Left. There are libertarians that criticize big business and criticize the role that big government plays in creating big business.

There’s no shame in being unaware of this current of libertarianism. What *is* shameful, though, is not only being ignorant, but being *proud* of one’s ignorance—indeed, desperately clinging to one’s ignorance with the fervency of bigots everywhere.

Despite Ferree’s good efforts, the ignorance in some cases was invincible. Worse yet, some of it went beyond the point of sincere ignorance, and instead became evidence of bad faith. Wilson sums up, quite well, all too many of the ensuing comments on Ferree’s post:

But as the comments to Logan's post indicate, just saying the word "libertarian" gets some people riled up. Libertarians are greedy bastards, end of story. Some had the attitude of, "A LIBERTARIAN is voting for us? We don't want that!"

The worst of a bad lot was philgoblue, who was apparently channelling the idiot I debated earlier at Progressive Review.

Libertarians would also be against: Social Security The Minimum Wage Union Organizing Public Schools etc, etc... Moving in that direction is the very LAST thing Democrats should do.

When some libertarians attempted to explain their principled opposition to coercive taxation in a thoughtful way, or to point out the shortcomings of government-provided schools and roads, philgoblue's witty rejoinder was "Dumbfuck," and

because of some problems, you're for not building roads, levees and school?
Dumbass.

Logan Ferree, perhaps acting on the misapprehension that philgoblue's ignorance was genuine or that he was arguing in good faith, tried to explain the left-libertarian position:

A libertarian would argue that if you removed all of the regulations and government programs that aid the rich and the wealthy, the little guy wouldn't need Social Security, the Minimum Wage, or Public Schools. However you're dead wrong that they'd be opposed to union organizing.

I'll make you a deal. Get the Democrats to oppose government policies that benefit the rich and the wealthy. We do away with all of the programs that create an uneven playing field in favor of those at the top.

Libertarians will vote for Democrats because they'd be the only party pushing for reducing the size of government. After we've done everything we agree on, we can agree to disagree and start fighting again.

The result was what usually follows when one casts pearls before swine:

You're An Absolute Fool.

Without the protection of the collective, the wealthy and ruthless would eat 99% of us for breakfast. See most of world history and many current Third World nations.

Ferree, finally beginning to realize just what kind of utter jackass he was dealing with, responded:

You're an absolute idiot.

Without the power and authority of the state, the wealthy and the ruthless would have no way of maintaining their control over the remaining 99% of us. See most of world history and many current Third World nations. In most of the developing world it's the state, with the support of institutions like the IMF and World Bank, that is nothing more than the servant of multinational corporations.

Wasted breath, though. People like philgoblue are so emotionally dependent on their Art Schlesinger myth about the anti-plutocratic motivation of big government, he might as well have been speaking Esperanto. You can take people like philgoblue and rub their noses in the real history of corporate liberalism, and the role of big business in setting the Progressive and New Deal agendas, and they'll just go right back to repeating their historical mythology without missing a beat.

Eugene, considerably more civil than philgoblue, repeated the assertion about anti-unionism, and added that

the "little guy" needs all those programs not because of government aid to corporations, but because of the nature of capitalism itself. Unless you're looking to abolish capitalism, you'll never be free of the need for a minimum wage or social insurance.

The "nature of capitalism itself," as it actually exists, is statist. We on the libertarian left disagree among ourselves on terminology, especially in regard to the C-word. Like many individualist anarchists past and present, I like to distinguish "capitalism" from the free market, and to reserve the former term for a system of privilege in which the state intervenes in the market on behalf of capitalists. But semantic differences aside, most of us libertarian lefties consider the size and power of corporations under "actually existing capitalism," and the extreme concentrations of wealth, to be the result of state intervention in the market on behalf of the rich and powerful. And unlike Eugene, we've actually tried to make a case for our position, rather than just asserting it.

On the union thing, Eugene was quickly confronted by a self-styled free market libertarian and card-carrying union member. And by the way, I know of at least three free market libertarians (Tom Knapp, Brad Spangler, and myself) who are card-carrying Wobblies. (Here's Knapp's post on the subject, and here are my comments.) [**Note**—Rad Geek emails: "Make it four, for what it's worth; IU 640, Hotel, Restaurant, and Building Service Workers here. (Which reminds me, I need to get caught up on my monthly dues...)"]

Eugene, unfortunately, wasn't having any of this; he regurgitated philgoblue's *idee fixe*:

I am familiar with the variants of libertarianism... [?!] "Economic libertarians" are really greedy Republicans who want to couch their desire for exploitation in some sort of language of rights and freedoms.

And Karmafish added:

Economic libertarian... is more or less the equivalent of Social Darwinism.

In other words, "Don't confuse me with the facts. I'm comfortable with my hate." It doesn't matter how many times you produce documented evidence of free market libertarians who are enemies of corporate power, or of the fact that most state intervention benefits the plutocracy at the expense of the working class, or even that such policies were drafted by the plutocracy. They've got their fingers jammed in their ears as far as they'll go, shouting "la la la la la" at the top of their lungs.

It's so much more comfortable to believe that large, powerful corporations arose out of a "laissez-faire" economy, and that government intervention is the remedy rather than the cause

of corporate power. And that the sun shone out of FDR's ass, that he was some kind of populist tribune, a "traitor to his class" who put down the "economic royalists."

Logan Ferree confronted them with the indisputable fact that many economic libertarians are neither "greedy Republicans" or "social Darwinists"; and yet they're still parroting the exact same dogma they were before, as if he'd never written the post. I repeat: beyond a certain point, you have to conclude that you're no longer dealing with genuine ignorance, but with someone who is knowingly and deliberately repeating a lie.

The one saving grace in this whole ugly clusterfuck was DawnG, who wrote:

The problem... with lumping people into categories is that it opens the door for stereotypes that, whether rational or absurd, don't fit everyone labled in that category.

I thank you for giving us some insights into the minds of a libertarian and hope you don't take the reactionary and judgemental componants of our community as representatives of the whole.

Follow-Up

Since I first posted "Vulgar Liberalism Watch," I found several more links to excellent posts on libertarian attitudes toward labor unions. Thanks to freeman, lc, who links to several of them in this post.

Rad Geek links to some good recent stuff by Roderick Long and Brad Spangler, as well as this great post at No Treason, by frequent Mutualist Blog commenter Joshua Holmes, on libertarian attitudes toward labor unions.

What do libertarians have against labour unions? This question struck me the other day (because it was better than studying for Business Associations) and I wondered why libertarians have so much bile for labour unions.

As an example of the genre, he cites George Reisman, one of the more viscerally vulgar libertarian writers at Mises.Org. Holmes, in considering the possible reason for so much anti-union bile, includes these standout comments:

Reason 1: Unions wouldn't exist in a free market.

Answer 1: Why wouldn't they? Perhaps they would actually be the dominant system for large-scale production enterprises. [Indeed; no particular reason that labor wouldn't be the firm and hire capital, instead of the other way around. KC]

Answer 2: Neither would the water department. How much bile do you have against public water?

Reason 2: Unions get government protection.

Answer: Sure, who doesn't? The corporations whose products libertarians enjoy and often lionise enjoy government protection themselves. Direct subsidies, research grants, uneven tax laws, transport subsidies, bureaucratic regulation, etc. all contribute to the success of numerous corporations. Libertarians seem less bothered

by this than with (admittedly unjust) laws such as the prohibition on firing striking workers.

Reason 3: Unions attempt to raise wages above the market rate.

Answer 1: In other words, unions attempt to get more for workers. So what?

Answer 2: The market rate, if I understand it, is what buyers and sellers are willing to bear. There is no objectively correct wage for labour — it is the result of the interplay of market actors. Workers will, of course, push for higher wages, just as management will push for higher profits...

Freeman also links to a post by Spangler in support of the NYC transit strike.

So there's a wealth of examples out there, if you look for them, showing that libertarians are not monolithically anti-union, and some of us free marketers are even pretty union-friendly. In fact, you don't even have to look for them. As I indicated in the original post, I practically rubbed philgoblue's and eugene's noses in such examples; and, gentlemen, if either of you is reading this, consider your noses duly rubbed once again.

So what's the deal? Confronted with such examples, why do so many liberals continue to cling so desperately to their false stereotype of libertarianism? The examples they cite of labor exploitation, pollution and other corporate malfeasance have about as much to do with genuine free markets as with Pinochet's Chile. In fact, they seem to be gleefully taking vulgar libertarian apologists for Pinochet at their word in their definition of libertarianism. Are they really unaware that anti-corporate, pro-union free market libertarians exist, and that there's a fairly substantial community of us? Surely philgoblue can't plead sincere ignorance, after he's been practically clubbed over the head with links proving just that. Are they really unaware of the extent to which corporate power benefits from state intervention, and the present system deviates from a free market? I fear the truth, rather, is that they deliberately reject evidence contrary to their crude black-and-white stereotype, and consciously embrace the most vulgar of vulgar libertarian ideas on "free markets," because they don't *want* to know the truth. It would make it a lot harder to hold on to their instinctive aesthetic revulsion against free markets, and their illusion that paternalistic, technocratic corporatism exists to benefit "the little guy." Simply put, it's more comfortable to be ignorant, and they'll fight to the death to keep from learning anything.

I say it once more: When somebody confronts you with evidence that your caricature of them is wrong, and you then calmly repeat that caricature without batting an eye, you're no longer ignorant. You're a liar.

Second Follow-up: More on Labor Unions

In "Follow-Up: Vulgar Liberalism Watch," I pointed to several libertarian blog posts as evidence that not all free market advocates share the vulgar libertarians' employer-skewed scenario of free labor markets, and that some are even quite union-friendly. Now Ian Bertram of Panchromatica points me to this:

It may be of course that the ASI is really saying that employers should be able to hire and fire for any reason whatsoever without those fired having any remedy. If we accept this for the sake of argument, what would be the implications of such a radical approach?

First of all we need also to assume a completely free market in labour, with employers and employees able to seek whatever terms they wish and to negotiate with each other about those terms. It seems likely that employers would use agents to carry out the negotiations since the CEO of a company is not going to want to have to constantly negotiate with each and every worker directly. These agents would probably be directly employed since the work would be ongoing, although it presumably could be outsourced as is frequently the case with accounting services.

On the employee side they would presumably also want to employ someone to negotiate on their behalf. After all their normal working skills are unlikely to include the skills needed for negotiations, (although I suppose some workers could develop those skills over time and with extra training and may wish to move into this area, thus allowing for 'upskilling' in the labour force). Inevitably this will not be by direct employment, but through some form of agent. Over time, economies of scale and the workings of the market are likely to lead to these agents combining into larger units much as other businesses do. Some will be more successful than others and will therefore gain more business. Some may diversify into areas other than simple wage negotiations and into areas such as holidays, pension benefits etc.

Over time, relationships between employers and employees agents would begin to stabilise into formal agreements, with contracts setting out terms of employment for a defined period.

Hang on – this is beginning to sound very familiar! Isn't this a trade union?

I would add that, in a free labor market, what's good for the gander is good for the goose. If employers are free to refuse or withdraw employment for any reason or no reason, then workers are likewise free to withdraw their labor for any or no reason. That means that, in the absence of a freely negotiated contract, workers are free to engage in secondary sympathy or boycott strikes. Teamsters and longshoremen are free to refuse to handle scab cargo. The Railway Labor Relations Act and Taft-Hartley are out the window.

The great CIO organizing strikes of the early '30s, remember, were won before the Wagner Act passed. They were won by non-government-certified unions, without any union-shop contract clause to help them. The union membership was created, in other words, by the very act of striking. Paid union membership in a plant might be just a few percent, until a flying squadron announced a walkout—at which the entire labor force joined by voting with its feet. I suggest it might actually be easier to organize disgruntled workers by such means, in hot blood, than to get them to jump in cold blood through all the hoops of the NLRB certification process.

And those early industrial union victories were won by strategic leadership planning strikes the way a general staff plans a military campaign. The successful strikes involved multiple echelons of defense, with strikes at every stage in the production process. In some cases, the support of transport workers turned them into regional general strikes. The whole body of labor legislation, with Taft-Hartley and the various transport labor relations acts at its heart, was created to outlaw just such a successful strategy. The object of corporate liberal legislation was to domesticate the labor revolution of the early '30s, and to place the rank-and-file under the firm supervision of union bureaucrats at the local plant level.

As Ian said, it was the employers who wanted to bring contract and predictability into the process. My guess is that, without Taft-Hartley and Wagner, they might well again be begging for the kind of stability that a union contract provides. As I recall, one of the reasons that Gerard Swope and like-minded employers favored industrial unionism in the '30s was precisely that they were so much easier to deal with than a whole gaggle of craft unions, any one of which could disrupt production unpredictably. In other words, the industrial union could potentially solve the same problem that earlier attempts at company unions were intended to solve. The leadership of an industrial union, if given the government-backed power to suppress wildcats and enforce contracts, was a handy tool for labor discipline.

I'll take it one step further. I suspect that labor relations are potentially a case of asymmetric warfare. That is, in a situation of labor war, the cost and risk to the workers of circumventing management surveillance and control will be a fraction of the cost to the employer of implementing it. It's a lot like the old offensive-defensive arms race in the days of ballistic missile defense, when offensive counter-measures were a lot cheaper than the defenses.

For example, if you think about it, you can probably think of a hundred ways to raise costs and reduce efficiency on your job, with virtually no chance of getting caught. Many of them, like working to rule, are nothing more than glorified passive-aggression.

Another example: the authors of the Cluetrain Manifesto argue that unauthorized communication between workers and customers is, contrary to the assumptions of clueless management, the best promotional tool a company can have. What they neglected to mention is that, when workers are disgruntled, telling customers the truth about the company is the best way to break it. In the absence of unions, the workers' only real bargaining leverage may be the customer's favorable image of the company. For the customer to see the worker as his ally and the company management as their common enemy is the bosses' worst nightmare. "Open mouth sabotage" is just another form of the "swarming" that so alarmed David Ronfeldt et al in their work on "netwar." In this age of networked activism, it's possible for disgruntled employees, through a campaign of emails, letters, phone calls, discussion board posts, and anonymous websites, to totally overwhelm their employers with negative publicity.

Lane Kirkland once suggested, only half-heartedly, that he was tempted to seek a repeal of all labor legislation since Norris-LaGuardia (which simply took federal militias and courts out of labor disputes). He speculated that, if labor and management were allowed fight it out with all the weapons at their disposal in a free market, labor would do better than under the present regime. I suspect he was right. After all, as the slogan goes, all we have to do is fold our arms, and we can bring their world to a stop.

Part II

Sometimes the biggest obstacle libertarians face in communicating with "progressive" liberals is libertarians: i.e. the common liberal impression, often justified, that libertarians are just pot-smoking Republicans who see corporate welfare queens as the victimized party in modern society. As I've said before,

in my list of statist evils, the guys who are breaking legs rank considerably higher than the ones handing out government crutches. All too many libertarians could care less about the statism that causes the problems of income disparity, but go ballistic

over the statism intended to alleviate it. It's another example of the general rule that statism that helps the rich is kinda sorta bad, maybe, I guess, but statism that helps the poor is flaming red ruin on wheels.

But sometimes the obstacle is the utter tenacity with which liberals themselves hold on to their own misconceptions: e.g., that the state is the only possible means of coordinating cooperative behavior between human beings, and that the only alternative is a Hobbesian free-for-all.

This was illustrated by an interesting open thread at John Quiggin's blog. It was quickly taken over by a discussion of the benefits of cooperative behavior in game theory.

The beginnings were quite promising. Meika started with a link to a story about Timothy Killingback's work.

Under the typical public goods game, an experimenter gives four players a pot of money. Each player can invest all or some of the money into a common pool. The experimenter then collects money thrown into the pool, doubles it and divides it amongst the players. The outcome: If every player invests all the money, every player wins big. If every player cheats by investing a just few dollars, every player reaps a small dividend. But if a cooperator squares off against a cheater – with the altruist investing more than the swindler – the swindler always gets the bigger payoff. Cheating, in short, is a winning survival strategy.

Under the new model, the team introduced population dynamics into the public goods game.

Players were broken into groups and played with other members of their group. Each player then reproduced in proportion to the payoff they received from playing the game, passing their cooperator or cheater strategy on to their offspring. After reproduction, random mutations occurred, changing how much an individual invests. Finally, players randomly dispersed to other groups, bringing their investment strategies with them. The result was an ever-changing cast of characters creating groups of various sizes.

After running the model through 100,000 generations, the results were striking. Cooperators not only survived, they thrived and maintained their numbers over time. The key is group size.

Terje supplemented this with a recommendation of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* for its "insights in the area of altruism arising from systems that are seemingly driven by payoffs for selfish action." He added:

To a large extent it is why I think the use of state based coercion to supposedly enforce and ensure altruism and co-operative behaviour is mostly flawed and unnecessary. Most of what the state currently does in the name of altruism (ie the welfare state) can be better achieved in the long term by individual acts of charity, free market dynamics and civil society.

This is the point at which Paul Kelly, our exemplary vulgar liberal, jumped in:

Regarding welfare etc, quite often those individuals decide it is more efficient and rational to do these things collectively, through a central authority. It makes economic sense.

Frequent Mutualist Blog commenter P.M. Lawrence confronted him on the issue:

Actually, no, PK, it doesn't make economic sense — unless of course the range of options has been restricted beforehand. Guess what, in our time and place it has been restricted like that.

Lawrence was kind enough to direct Kelley to my blog for some relevant material. Kelly's response:

So everyone should wander around guessing who is the most needy and give them money? Just pick the skinniest person? Or should research be done?

And they say the government schools aren't teaching critical thinking skills! Lawrence's rejoinder:

I'm sorry PK, was there some reason you didn't find the material I referred you to at Kevin Carson's site, or is it just that you think I should spoonfeed things?

Surely you aren't under the impression that (a) the problems would be as great as they are now if only efforts were made to engineer them out (rather than provide governmental palliative care for them), and (b) that only a government can ever handle problems?

Fatfingers attempted to interpret Kelly's comments in a charitable light (i.e., finding some way of reading them as something other than total idiocy)...

PM, don't confuse collectivism for government. PK talks about collectives, and you assume government. While I personally believe government will inevitably organically arise from collectives, for the purposes of thought experiments, stick with the given parameters.

...but Kelly wasn't having any of it:

You're right PM, I'm not going to read a long economic paper explaining why it's better for everyone to walk around making their own individual decisions. I would prefer a spoonfeeding please.

Lawrence came back:

Fatfingers, I did not "assume" that PK was talking about governments. He was explicitly talking about central authority, not merely some form of co-operative or collective action. That's what a government is. If you are obliged to submit to it, it qualifies under the walks like a duck test.

Finally, tipped off by Lawrence to the interesting thread, I stopped by and left a comment:

As P.M. Lawrence said, it is Paul Kelley who assumes that cooperative effort can only be organized through government, and PML who is trying to get it into PK's head that cooperative (or collective) effort can be achieved by voluntary means.

The fact that PK automatically dismisses any suggestion that voluntary cooperation is possible as a call for "everyone [to] wander around guessing who is the most needy and give them money," suggests to me that PK's problem goes beyond mere historical illiteracy. The underlying problem is far more basic: an inability (or unwillingness) to recognize a non sequitur in his own argument. If he is unable to acknowledge a fundamental logical flaw in his argument, all the empirical evidence in the world won't do him any good.

But I'm more than willing to accept a person's admission that he's too lazy to follow a simple link that directly concerns the validity of a general assertion he made, or that he's uninterested in any evidence as to whether his opinion is correct—just so long as he's willing to admit that his opinion is, as a result, absolutely worthless.

For anyone else who is interested, though, there is a wealth of historical material on associations for mutual aid among the working class before the rise of the welfare state. Kropotkin's last two chapters on the recent history of Europe in *Mutual Aid* are a good starting point.

E.P. Thompson has a great deal of good information on sick benefit societies, burial societies, and other mutuals in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Colin Ward's *Anarchy in Action* contains a section on the "welfare road we failed to take."

Dr. Bob James is one of the best historians of working class friendly societies in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many of his articles can be found at the "Radical Tradition" site.

Finally, Section J.5.16 of *An Anarchist FAQ* has an amazing amount of material on such self-organization, including extended block quotes and many, many references.

The kinds of voluntary mutual aid described by these writers were first suppressed by the capitalists (because they were seen as potential breeding grounds for subversion, and a possible basis for mutual economic support during strikes), and later crowded out or suppressed by regulation when the New Class decided that working class self-organization was atavistic and should be supplanted by the benevolent supervision of "qualified professionals." David Beito's *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State* is a history, in large part, of the latter phenomenon, in addition to a good account of mutual aid organizations themselves.

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