Libertarianism: Bogus Anarchy

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A distinct mainstream movement specific to the United States, Libertarianism had its inception during the 1960s. In 1971 it formed into a political party and went on to make a strong showing in several elections.[1]

Libertarianism is at times referred to as "anarchism," and certain of its adherents call themselves "anarchists," e.g., the economist James Buchanan.[2] More significant, the work of US individualist anarchists (Benjamin Tucker et al.) is cited by some Libertarians.[3] Accordingly, it may rightly be asked whether Libertarianism is in fact anarchism. Exactly what is the relationship between the two? To properly decide the question requires a synopsis of anarchist history.

The chronology of anarchism within the United States corresponds to what transpired in Europe and other locations. An organized anarchist movement imbued with a revolutionary collectivist, then communist, orientation came to fruition in the late 1870s. At that time, Chicago was a primary center of anarchist activity within the USA, due in part to its large immigrant population.[4] (Chicago was also where the Haymarket affair occurred in 1886. An unknown assailant threw a bomb as police broke up a public protest demonstration. Many radicals were arrested,

[1] David DeLeon, *The American As Anarchist: Reflections On Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), p. 147; Jay Kinney;

"What's Left? Revisiting The Revolution", in Stewart Brand, ed., *The Next Whole Earth Catalog* (Sausalito, CA: Point, 1980), p. 393;

David Miller, *Anarchism* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1984), p. 4. By itself, the fact that Libertarianism formed a political party and has attempted to attain power through the electoral system seriously undermines its claim to be anarchism.

[2] James M. Buchanan, "A Contractarian Perspective On Anarchy", in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Anarchism: NOMOS XIX* (New York: New York University, 1978), p. 29. Libertarianism is also referred to as "anarcho-capitalism" and "philosophical anarchism." The word "libertarian" was used by French anarchists in the 1890s as a synonym for "anarchist." Consequently, some contemporary anarchists refer to themselves and/or anarchy as "libertarian." But here there is no implied connection to Libertarianism. Michael P. Smith, *The Libertarians And Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 2, 3.

[3] David Friedman, *The Machinery Of Freedom: Guide To Radical Capitalism*, Second Edition (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), pp. 37, 113; Murray Rothbard, *For A New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1978), pp. 51–52.

[4] Bruce Nelson, Beyond The Martyrs: *A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists*, 1870–1900 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1988), pp. 4, 15, 25; Laurence Veysey,

The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-Cultures in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 35.

and several hanged on the flimsiest of evidence.) Despite off and on political repression, the US anarchist movement continued in an expansive mode until the mid-1890s, when it then began to flounder. By 1900, anarchy was visibly in decline.[5]

But like its counterpart in Europe, anarchism's marginalization in the United States was temporarily slowed by the arrival of syndicalism. North American syndicalism appeared 1904–1905 in the form of a militant unionism known as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Anarchists entered the IWW along with revolutionary socialists. The alliance did not last long.[6] Internal squabbles soon split the IWW, and for a time there existed anarchist and socialist versions. Finally, with involvement of the US in WWI, the anarchist IWW, and anarchism in general, dropped from the public domain.[7]

Anarchy in the USA consisted not only of the Bakunin-collectivist/syndicalist and Kropotkin-communist strains, but also the Proudhon-mutualist/individualist variant associated most closely with Benjamin Tucker. Individualist anarchy actually had a longer history of duration within the United States than the other two, but not only because Proudhon preceded Bakunin and Kropotkin. There were other individualist anarchists before Tucker who had ties to various radical movements which predate Proudhon. Within the United States of early to mid-19th century, there appeared an array of communal and "utopian" counterculture groups (including the so-called free love movement). William Godwin's anarchism exerted an ideological influence on some of this, but more so the socialism of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier.[8] After success of his British venture, Owen himself established a cooperative community within the United States at New Harmony, Indiana during 1825. One member of this commune was Josiah Warren (1798–1874), considered to be the first individualist anarchist.[9] After New Harmony failed Warren shifted his ideological loyalties from socialism to anarchism (which was no great leap, given that Owen's socialism had been predicated on Godwin's anarchism).[10]

Then he founded his own commune ("Modern Times") and propounded an individualist doctrine which nicely dovetailed with Proudhon's mutualism arriving from abroad.[11] Warren's activities attracted a number of converts, some of whom helped to further develop American mutualism. The most important of these were Ezra Heywood (1829–1893), William B. Greene (1819–1878), and Lysander Spooner (1808–1887). The advent of the Civil War put an end to much of the utopian movement and its communal living experiments. Individualist anarchism was itself reduced to an agitprop journalistic enterprise of some measurable popularity.[12]

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[5] Ibid., p. 35.

[6] Sima Lieberman, *Labor Movements And Labor Thought: Spain, France, Germany, and the United States* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), p. 247.

Dorothy Gallagher, *All The Right Enemies: The Life and Murder of Carlo Tresca* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1988), pp. 60–61.

[7] James Joll, *The Anarchists*. Second Edition (London: Metheun, 1979), pp. 201–203; Miller, pp. 134–135;

Terry M. Perlin, *Anarchist-Communism In America*, 1890–1914 (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1970), p. 294.

[8] John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America*, 1825–1860 (New York: New York University, 1988), pp. 28, 62.

[9] James J. Martin, *Men Against The State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America 1827–1908* (New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1957), pp. 14, 17;

William O. Reichert, *Partisans Of Freedom: A Study in American Anarchism* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University, 1976), p. 66.

[10] G.D.H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners 1789–1859* (London: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 87–88.

[11] Martin, p. 97.

[12] Veysey, pp. 35, 36.

And in this form it found its most eloquent voice with Benjamin Tucker and his magazine Liberty. Tucker had been acquainted with Heywood and other individualist anarchists, and he subsequently converted to mutualism.[13] Thereafter he served as the movement's chief polemist and guiding hand.

The Proudhonist anarchy that Tucker represented was largely superseded in Europe by revolutionary collectivism and anarcho-communism. The same changeover occurred in the US, although mainly among subgroups of working class immigrants who were settling in urban areas. For these recent immigrants caught up in tenuous circumstances within the vortex of emerging corporate capitalism, a revolutionary anarchy had greater relevancy than go slow mutualism. On the other hand, individualist anarchism also persisted within the United States because it had the support of a different (more established, middle class, and formally educated) audience that represented the earlier stream of indigenous North American radicalism reflecting this region's unique, and rapidly fading, decentralized economic development. Although individualist and communist anarchy are fundamentally one and the same doctrine, their respective supporters still ended up at loggerheads over tactical differences.[14] But in any event, the clash between the two variants was ultimately resolved by factors beyond their control. Just as anarcho-communism entered a political twilight zone in the 1890s, American mutualism did likewise. Tucker's bookstore operation burned down in 1908, and this not only terminated publication of Liberty, but also what remained of the individualist anarchism "movement." The aggregate of support upon which this thread of thought had depended was already in dissipation.[15] Individualist anarchy after 1900 receded rapidly to the radical outback.

What then does any of this have to do with Libertarianism? In effect, nothing, aside from a few unsupported claims. Libertarianism is not anarchism, but actually a form of liberalism. It does, however, have a point of origin that is traceable to the same juncture as anarchism's marginalization. So in this limited sense there is a shared commonality. To be more precise, the rapid industrialization that occurred within the United States after the Civil War went hand in glove with a sizable expansion of the American state.[16] At the turn of the century, local entrepreneurial (proprietorship/partnership) business was overshadowed in short order by transnational corporate capitalism.[17] The catastrophic transformation of US society that followed in the wake of corporate capitalism fueled not only left wing radicalism (anarchism and socialism), but also some prominent right wing opposition from dissident elements anchored within liberalism. The various stratum comprising the capitalist class responded differentially to these transpiring events as a function of their respective position of benefit. Small business that remained as such came to greatly resent the economic advantage corporate capitalism secured to itself, and the sweeping changes the latter imposed on the presumed ground rules of bourgeois competition.[18]

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[13] Edward K. Spann, *Brotherly Tomorrows: Movements for a Cooperative Society in America 1820–1920* (New York: Columbia University, 1989), p. 146.

[14] For example, see the vitriolic exchange between Kropotkin and Tucker. Peter Kropotkin, *Modern Science And Anarchism*, Second Edition (London: Freedom Press, 1923), pp. 70–71. Benjamin R. Tucker, *Instead Of A Book, By A Man Too Busy To Write One* (New York: Haskell House, 1969), pp. 388–389.

[15] Martin, pp. 258–259.

[16] See, Stephen Skowronek, Building A New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982).

[17] See, Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate 1870–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

[18] David M. Gordon, *Richard Edwards and Michael Reich, Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), pp. 109, 110.

Nevertheless, because capitalism is liberalism's raison d'être, small business operators had little choice but to blame the state for their financial woes, otherwise they moved themselves to another ideological camp (anti-capitalism). Hence, the enlarged state was imputed as the primary cause for capitalism's "aberration" into its monopoly form, and thus it became the scapegoat for small business complaint. Such sentiments are found vented within a small body of literature extending from this time, e.g., Albert Jay Nock's Our Enemy, The State (1935); what may now rightly be called proto-Libertarianism.[19]

As a self-identified ideological movement, however, Libertarianism took more definite shape from the 1940s onward through the writings of novelist Ayn Rand. The exaltation of liberal individualism and minimal state laissez-faire capitalism that permeates Rand's fictional work as a chronic theme attracted a cult following within the United States. To further accommodate supporters, Rand fashioned her own popular philosophy ("Objectivism") and a membership organization. Many of those who would later form the nucleus of Libertarianism came out of Objectivism, including two of its chief theoreticians, John Hospers and Murray Rothbard.[20] Another conduit into Libertarianism carried a breakaway faction from William F. Buckley's college youth club, the Edmund Burke-style conservative Young Americans For Freedom.[21] More academic input arrived from the Austrian school of neoclassical economics promulgated by F.A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises (of which the economist Rothbard subscribes).[22] All these marginal streams intermingled during the mid to late 1960s, and finally settled out as Libertarianism in the early 1970s.[23]

It is no coincidence that Libertarianism solidified and conspicuously appeared on the scene just after the United States entered an economic downturn (at the same time Keynesian economics was discredited and neoclassical theory staged a comeback). The world-wide retrenchment of capitalism that began in the late 1960s broke the ideological strangle hold of a particular variant of (Locke-Rousseau) liberalism, thereby allowing the public airing of other (Locke-Burke) strains representing disaffected elements within the capitalist class, including small business interests. Libertarianism was one aspect of this New Right offensive. It appeared to be something sui generis. Libertarianism provided a simplistic status quo explanation to an anxious middle class threatened by the unfathomed malaise of capitalism and growing societal deterioration, i.e., blame the state. And this prevalent grasping at straws attitude accounts for the success of Robert Nozick's popularization of Libertarianism, Anarchy, State, And Utopia (1974). It rode the crest of this polemic rift within liberalism. The book was deemed controversial, even extreme, by establishment liberals (and social democrats long pacified by the welfare state), who, secure in power

[19] Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy, The State* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1935).

Peter Marshall, *Demanding The Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 560.

Veysey, p. 36.

[20] John Hospers, *Libertarianism: A Political Philosophy for Tomorrow* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), p. 466.

Ted Goertzel, *Turncoats And True Believers: The Dynamics of Political Belief and Disillusionment* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992), pp. 141, 263.

[21] DeLeon, pp. 119–123; Micheal G. Newbrough, *Individualist Anarchism In American Political Thought* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1975), p. 216.

[22] Murray Rothbard is the "academic vice president" of the Ludwig von Mises Institute at Auburn, Alabama, and contributing editor to its publication, *The Free Market.* Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr., ed., The Free Market 11(7–8), July-August 1993, 1–8.

[23] Newbrough, p. 217.

for decades, were now under sustained attack by their own right wing. Yet at bedrock, Nozick's treatise was nothing more than old wine in a new bottle, an updating of John Locke.[24]

Libertarianism is not anarchism. Some Libertarians readily admit this. For example, Ayn Rand, the radical egoist, expressly disavows the communal individuality of Stirner in favor of liberalism's stark individualism.[25] Plus Robert Nozick makes pointed reference to the US individualist anarchists, and summarily dismisses them.[26] This explicit rejection of anarchism is evidence of the basic liberalist ideology that Libertarians hold dear. But more specifically, within the movement itself there exist factional interests.[27] There are Libertarians who emphasize lifestyle issues and civil liberties (an amplification of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty). They want the state out of their "private" lives, e.g., in drug use and sexual activity. Others are chiefly concerned with economics. They champion laissez-faire *"free-market"* neoclassical economics, and fault the state for corrupting "natural" capitalism. Although both groups despise the state intensely, neither wants to completely do away with it. This minimal state position, sufficient by itself to debar Libertarianism from classification as anarchism, is embraced by Rand, Buchanan, Hospers, and Nozick.[28] More revealing, however, is why Libertarians retain the state. What they always insist on maintaining are the state's coercive apparatuses of law, police, and military.[29] The reason flows directly from their view of human nature, which is a hallmark of liberalism, not anarchism. That is, Libertarianism ascribes social problems within society (crime, poverty, etc.) to an inherent disposition of humans (re: why Locke argues people leave the "state of nature"), hence the constant need for "impartial" force supplied by the state. Human corruption and degeneracy stemming from structural externalities as a function of power is never admitted because Libertarianism, like liberalism, fully supports capitalism. It does not object to its power, centralization, economic inequality, hierarchy, and authority. The "liberty" to exploit labor and amass property unencumbered by the state is the quintessence of capitalism, and the credo of Libertarianism née liberalism, all of which is the utter negation of anarchism.

Lastly to be addressed is the apparent anomaly of Murray Rothbard. Within Libertarianism, Rothbard represents a minority perspective that actually argues for the total elimination of the state. However Rothbard's claim as an anarchist is quickly voided when it is shown that he only wants an end to the public state. In its place he allows countless private states, with each person supplying their own police force, army, and law, or else purchasing these services from capitalist venders.[30] Rothbard has no problem whatsoever with the amassing of wealth, therefore those with more capital will inevitably have greater coercive force at their disposal, just as they do now. Additionally, in those rare moments when Rothbard (or any other Libertarian) does draw upon individualist anarchism, he is always highly selective about what he pulls out. Most of the

[24] John Gray, *Liberalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), pp. xi, 41; J.G. Merquior, Liberalism: Old and New (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 138.

[25] Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p. 135.

[26] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, And Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 276.

Also see, Tibor Machan, "Libertarianism: The Principle of Liberty", in George W. Carey, ed., *Freedom And Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America and The Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1984), pp. 40–41.

[27] Goertzel, p. 262.

[28] Gray, p. 42; Hospers, p. 417; Nozick, p. 276; Rand and Branden, pp. 112, 113.

[29] Hospers, p. 419; Nozick, p. ix; Rand and Branden, p. 112.

[30] Murray N. Rothbard, "Society Without A State", in Pennock and Chapman, eds., p. 192.

doctrine's core principles, being decidedly anti-Libertarianism, are conveniently ignored, and so what remains is shrill anti-statism conjoined to a vacuous freedom in hackneyed defense of capitalism. In sum, the "anarchy" of Libertarianism reduces to a liberal fraud. David Wieck's critique of Rothbard, applicable to Libertarianism in general, will close this discussion.

"Out of the history of anarchist thought and action Rothbard has pulled forth a single thread, the thread of individualism, and defines that individualism in a way alien even to the spirit of a Max Stirner or a Benjamin Tucker, whose heritage I presume he would claim — to say nothing of how alien is his way to the spirit of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, and the historically anonymous persons who through their thoughts and action have tried to give anarchism a living meaning. Out of this thread Rothbard manufactures one more bourgeois ideology."[31]

[31] David Wieck, "Anarchist Justice", in Pennock and Chapman, eds., pp. 227–228.

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