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In Praise of “Thick” Libertarianism

Sheldon Richman

April 4th, 2014

I continue to have trouble believing that the libertarian philosophy is concerned *only* with the proper and improper uses of force. According to this view, the philosophy sets out a prohibition on the *initiation* of force and otherwise has nothing to say about anything else. (Fraud is conceived as an indirect form of force because, say, a deceptive seller obtains money from a buyer on terms other than those to which the buyer agreed.)

How can libertarianism be concerned with nothing but force? This view has been dubbed “thin libertarianism” by Charles W. Johnson, and it strikes me as very thin indeed. (Jeffrey Tucker calls it “libertarian brutality”; his article explains this perhaps startling term.)

As I see it, the libertarian view is necessarily associated with certain underlying values, and this association seems entirely natural. I can kick a rock, but not a person. What is it about persons that makes it improper for me to kick them (unless it’s in self-defense)? Frankly, I don’t see how to answer that question without reference to some fundamental ideas. Different

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Retrieved 04/23/2025 from c4ss.org

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libertarians will have different answers, but each will appeal to some underlying value.

Let's get specific. Are there distinctly *libertarian* grounds for disapproving of racist conduct that does not involve the use of force? Some libertarians say no. They might hasten to add that while libertarians, as *human beings*, ought to disapprove of racism, they cannot do so *as libertarians*, because their political philosophy only speaks to the proper and improper uses of force.

On the other hand, libertarians often quote Ayn Rand on the issue, even if they wouldn't quote her on much else:

Racism is the lowest, most crudely primitive form of collectivism. It is the notion of ascribing moral, social or political significance to a man's genetic lineage — the notion that a man's intellectual and characterological traits are produced and transmitted by his internal body chemistry. Which means, in practice, that a man is to be judged, not by his own character and actions, but by the characters and actions of a collective of ancestors.

The freedom philosophy is intimately related to ethical, political, and methodological *individualism*. Therefore, the philosophy should be expected to detest any kind of *collectivism* — and particularly its “lowest, most crudely primitive form” — even in its nonviolent manifestations.

To put it more concretely, if a libertarian observed a growing propensity to embrace (nonviolent) racism, that person, *qua* libertarian, ought to be concerned. Why? Because that attitude and resulting conduct can be expected to eat away at the values conducive to libertarianism. It's the same sort of reason that a libertarian would be concerned by, say, a growing acceptance of Keynesian ideas, even though merely holding and advocating those ideas does not require the use of force.

It is true that carrying out Keynesian ideas requires the use of force (taxation, monopoly central banking, and state “socialization of investment”), while one can imagine a racist society in which no force is used. But although a society of racist pacifists is not a logical impossibility, it strikes me as highly unlikely. In its denial of dignity to individuals merely by virtue of their membership in a racial group, there is a potential for violence implicit in racism that is too strong for libertarians to ignore. As I’ve written elsewhere,

A libertarian who holds his or her philosophy out of a conviction that all men and women are (or should be) equal in authority and thus none may subordinate another against his or her will (the most common justification) — that libertarian would naturally object to even nonviolent forms of subordination. Racism is just such a form (though not the only one), since existentially it entails at least an obligatory humiliating deference by members of one racial group to members of the dominant racial group. (The obligatory deference need not always be enforced by physical coercion.)

Seeing fellow human beings locked into a servile role — even if that role is not explicitly maintained by force — properly, *reflexively* summons in libertarians an urge to object. (I’m reminded of what H. L. Mencken said when asked what he thought of slavery: “I don’t like slavery because I don’t like slaves.”)

But it doesn’t end there. I can think of another reason for libertarians to be concerned about racism, namely,

it all too easily metamorphoses from subtle intimidation into outright violence. Even in a culture

where racial “places” have long been established by custom and require no coercive enforcement, members of a rising generation will sooner or later defiantly reject their assigned place and demand equality of authority. What happens then? It takes little imagination to envision members of the dominant race — even if they have professed a “thin” libertarianism to that point — turning to physical force to protect their “way of life.”

So I’m puzzled by the pushback whenever someone explicitly associates the libertarian philosophy with values like tolerance and inclusion. We don’t care only about force and its improper uses. We care about individual persons. So we properly have concerns about any preferences that tend to erode the principle that initiating force is wrong.

As one who embraces the principle of charity, I believe the pushback is motivated by an understandable fear that “thick,” or “humanitarian,” libertarianism might have the effect of watering down libertarian ideas about individual rights and property. To be sure, progressives mistakenly believe that the wrongness of racism in itself justifies government edicts against nonviolent forms of racism, such as invidious discrimination in hiring and accommodations. But we should be wary of the principle “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Libertarians should have no trouble condemning racism in terms of their political philosophy while emphasizing that nonviolent racism can and, under appropriate circumstances, should be met only by nonviolent — and specifically, nonstate — countermeasures.