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Building a Movement with Less Hiding Space for Foulness

William Gillis

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Two weeks ago we all learned that Brad Spangler, a professed libertarian and anarchist once of some prominence, is a child molester. There have always been hidden monsters and no movement, community or culture is entirely immune. But while we've spent the last two weeks recoiling in horror and crushed under the sadness of these revelations, one of the most striking dynamics to come out of this has been how many women in the liberty movement are only now being listened to.

To be sure, it's easy to see creepy behavior in a far more sinister light with hindsight, but many of Spangler's semi-public actions were still clearly objectionable in their own respect, of the kind that alienates community members and poisons movements. Many of us in the movement totally failed to see this side of him. But some of us did, to varying degrees, and it's worth asking why the behavior that *was* visible remained in large part unnoted and unchallenged.

Spangler frequently escalated sexual content on his Facebook and in exchanges with people in ways generally felt inappropriate,

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often appealing to a thin veneer of “sex-positivity” to justify things that seemed wildly out of place in the context most people thought they were engaging with him. He was, in a word, creepy. He made misogynistic statements, crossed people’s boundaries without any sign that he cared to avoid them, and actively leveraged his status and influence to act predatorily towards younger women. The details of accounts go all over the place. I myself happened to defriend him over a bit of his transmisogynistic ranting a friend pointed out to me. But others who tuned in more to his feeds had concerns. Several times I got variations of “oh yeah I like what the Center publishes but I never considered writing for you because I thought you had a bigger connection to Brad and he’s a creep.”

As it turns out these asides in private were reflective of a large number of women who felt disinclined to speak up given the culture and dynamics of our movement. And when someone did—we now all know—they were immediately aggressively discredited and silenced. It should in no way be contentious to state that we should have done more as a community to listen to people with concerns about Spangler’s behavior.

Make no mistake, child molestation is its own unique evil, but it lies on a spectrum of predatory and dehumanizing perspectives and behaviors deeply connected to misogyny. Spangler did not act in a vacuum. And it is baldly disingenuous to assert that recognizing the complex but deep dynamics tying him and the branches of patriarchy equates dismissing his moral culpability. A soldier can be not one whit less to blame for murder if his superiors — and indeed the institutions and toxic cultural dynamics of statism and warfare — are to blame as well. Spangler made his choice, but patriarchal narratives of sexual entitlement to the bodies of others and the timidity many of us have shown in confronting & organizing against predatory & alienating patriarchal behavior were to some degree co-conspirators.

We’re always going on about how non-state approaches to fucked up dynamics can be so much more effective — and ulti-

mately they can be — yet this is precisely the kind of situation where we should easily be able to demonstrate that, and instead we’ve come up empty.

Socialist movements are famous for cloaking foulness under organizational bureaucracy and losing real horrors in opportunistic firing circles. But many libertarians seem content to worship a noxious kind of callousness in which nothing can be admitted matters until a breaking point is reached. Today there is — ironically — no better portrait of a seized up and unnatural, undynamic system, incapable of organic adaptation, capable of responses only in desperate fits, than portions of the libertarian movement.

Overcrediting gossip without a clear evaluation of probabilities given sources and myriad other considerations can obviously be quite problematic, but locking our mouths closed until there’s something approaching 100% proof or consensus is an insane overreaction.

Markets work through the brilliantly self-organizing decentralized conveyance and evaluation of information. Insofar as we suppress that among ourselves — insofar as we declare that we know better than our compatriots what information is pertinent to their decisions and what they can be trusted to evaluate rationally — we suppress signals and leech dynamism from the market. We in effect reproduce some of the irrationality of state capitalism.

People are intelligent, they have agency, they can update their probability/risk assessments from new info without turning into lynch mob. Publicly pointing out someone’s problematic behavior shouldn’t be a big deal. People certainly shouldn’t have to fear being widely dismissed and harassed for doing so. And if our instincts and social organisms that might successfully navigate the myriad tensions involved without turning to team sports and vengeful gossip *have* withered away, well let this be a wake up call to get started rebuilding them.