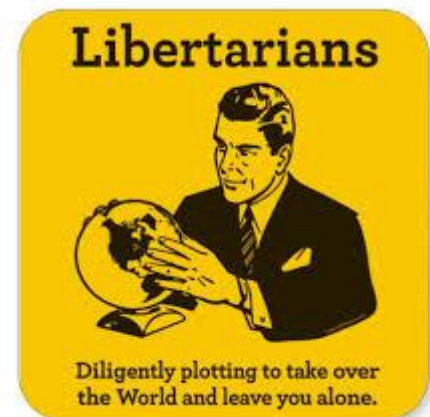


My Week with Libertarians: An Accidental Socratic Socialist vs. Capitalism's Euthyphros



This story begins where all good stories do; I hit a bit of a rut with the second to last chapter of my dissertation, a dissertation which looks at the psychological aspects of capitalism that undermine arguments for global justice that are deeply entrenched in the liberal political-philosophical tradition. When I get stuck, I try to motivate myself by reminding myself how necessary this kind of demystifying critical scholarship is. Naturally, I usually turn to Fox News for such motivation. However, for whatever reason, I decided to look on Facebook for something that would piss me off and send me on a writing blitz.

I had no intention of writing anything about my experience. Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, Robert Nozick and a few Tea Party platforms have been plenty for me to work with. I was looking for motivation and inspiration—what I found was all sorts of both.

Here is what I learned about libertarians (some of which I knew or could have guessed, but to experience it first hand and to have successfully resisted the urge to slam the computer closed was something that I will remember until I

die—or lose my mind). In fairness to libertarians (another idea that they think is a complete joke: I was told several times that because there are always some natural differences between people and luck varies, doing anything that exacerbates this unfairness—however preventable—is completely acceptable because we can't ever get rid of all unfairness. Follow the logic? Me neither), I don't think that a thoughtful, sophisticated libertarian political philosophy would actually include all of these dimensions exactly as they were presented to me. With that qualification, much of what follows represents actual-existing libertarianism (and these points are not wholly inconsistent with those made by the most prominent purveyors of this philosophy like Mises, Friedman, and Rand...Paul).

1. Everything the government does based on taxation is violent. Taxation in and of itself is violent and coercive, even if it is voted on by an actual non-corrupt direct or representative democracy. Yet, manipulative practices of capitalists, including proven-psychologically manipulative advertising and marketing are not coercive in any way.

2. Free exchange cannot harm anyone under any circumstances. I asked if I sold someone a bomb, not telling them it was set to detonate in ten minutes—though never telling them the opposite—and the person I sold it to was killed along with several bystanders, would that constitute a harm from free exchange? My interlocutors agreed this was a free exchange, but it was not the free exchange that was harmful, it was the bomb. (I also used the more realistic example of pollution, but they were even more dismissive of that possibly being a real harm or the result of unregulated trade.)

3. Relatedly, lying and coercion should be outlawed, but they oppose all government attempts to enforce this, because obviously that would be central planning and

Hitler did that (and apparently from what I was told, that inspiration came from Marx. I'm still waiting for the textual or historical bases for that claim...I won't be holding my breath much longer).

4. After one generation, people have no responsibility for where their inheritance came from (e.g. from slavery or other forms of outright theft).

5. Inheritance though is legitimate, yet everyone's wealth (not acquired during any recent theft and/or government policy) was acquired and/or maintained through hard work.

6. An individual does not benefit from society if they work hard and make a lot of money, no matter what their career is (unless they are a college professor because "they contribute nothing to society"), and therefore owe nothing to anyone else. Even asking the question of where their justification for their irrevocable right to whatever they possess, however obscenely excessive amongst so much extreme poverty of their fellow citizens or human beings globally comes from, makes you a "bullshit Marxist" and worthy of death or at least grievous bodily harm.

7. Libertarians like to quote John Locke—out of context. They may (as they did to me) accuse you of intentionally misquoting Locke when you post the exact language from Locke that asserts (in Ch. 2 Sec. 6 of the *Second Treatise of Government*): "Every one as he is bound to preserve himself, and not quit his station wilfully; so by the like reason when his own Preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of Mankind." Instead of saying "well I guess I don't agree with Locke," they would rather accuse me of lying.

8. Anything that is not profitable by definition has no social importance (see any college degree that cannot

obviously get you a job like "Women's' Studies" or "Race" (though I think they meant African-American Studies?). I was told that no matter how useful and necessary these fields may be for society (a point none of the avowedly non-racist, non-misogynistic libertarians would concede to), because they are not profitable they are "stupid majors."

9. Military wages paid by the government are not in any way in principle similar to a college professor's wage from a public university. Why? Because a military is necessary and education is not. I was told twice that I was forbidden from speaking on the topic because I was too biased, being an instructor at a public university. However, the soldiers were not too biased to speak on the subject.

10. Lastly, and this one truly is the most egregious: voluntary slavery (including pimping) is okay so long as it is agreed to "voluntarily." When I inquired as to what counted as "voluntary," I found out nearly everything we do is voluntary by virtue of the fact that we do it. I came to the conclusion that according to libertarians on Facebook, the only things that wouldn't be voluntary would be if you were given very specific drugs that made you 100% susceptible to suggestion and/or were attached to strings like a marionette and someone was literally controlling your movement.

What surprised me the most, I must say, were the number of people who came to my defense either by "Liking" a comment I made or by posting something expressing their agreement, thanking me for being polite and continuing to challenge libertarians to provide justifications for their views and provide more coherent arguments for their opposition to alternatives, but the most humorous gestures of support asked me more or less why I was wasting my time arguing with fundamentalist "psychos." Little did they know, they were

answering their own questions.

Though I began my week with the libertarians, and this weird case of gonzo political philosophy, simply trying to get inspired to write forcefully and creatively against capitalism, I continued on because of the support from like-minded Leftists and the few middle-of-the-road people who posted that the debate was helpful or interesting to them.

Once I realized where these debates were headed, I looked back on a number of previous posts on this page and the comments that followed. There are tens of thousands of people following this page, and about 300 to 500 might "Like" or comment on a particular post. From what I found there was very little beyond masturbatory self-congratulating and fully-capitalized (pardon the pun) posts of agreement and reinforcement. With that said, I found out that not everyone who follows or comments on a far-right wing libertarian page or blog does so because they agree that page. Sometimes, they're people like me who know they disagree and just enjoy calling out the bullshit, but sometimes they are people who are overworked, raising children, with little time to figure out their own political views or are unsure what to do with all the conflicting narratives, so they follow a variety of pages representing different political perspectives (I only know because I asked a couple of these people that exact question).

Gaining access to the so-called "undecided" with clear, cogent, rational argumentation from the radical Left against the contradictory, cold-hearted, idealism of unquestioned belief in the unregulated "free" market and the complete rejection of all government and all taxation, is worth the effort. Though my experience certainly hasn't made me more sanguine about the possibility of the Internet and social media being a potential progressive public sphere, it didn't completely erode that hope either.

Though I have always understood the value of a good

conversation and a good argument with smart people, I don't think I have ever come close to arguing for as long and as in-depth with as many different people who seemed to hate me than I did during my week with the libertarians of Facebook (though some were rather explicit and appeared to possess some intimate knowledge about what kind of phrasing does and does not count as an illegal threat of bodily harm...). What I learned, more than anything, is how passionately people can believe that capitalism is inherently just and how viscerally they react when someone merely questions it—never mind providing ample historical and contemporary evidence for its injustice (and I also learned to never EVER ask a libertarian what the “free” in “free trade” or “free exchange” means).

For the first time, I felt like I knew how Socrates must have felt arguing with Euthyphro and how difficult such conversations can become when they take place on social media (though I was pleasantly surprised at how few people attempted to derail the conversation with absurd trolling—at worst there were vague threats and mindless sloganeering).

I wanted to conclude by saying that my experience provided evidence for the importance of the Socratic figure in a social-mediatized society, and although solidarity found me at times, I may have provoked these people more than I successfully convinced the unsure or inspired the already-Leftists. I think reminding those on the Left of the ideological baggage we are up against and the violent fervor with which people defend capitalism, are important take-aways from my experience. I am thoroughly depressed about the possibility for genuine democracy in a society so thoroughly conditioned by the ideals that I confronted in my view brief but all-too-long encounter on Facebook, but not so depressed to ignore the possibility that as easily as these people were convinced of the virtuousness of their beliefs, so too they can be unconvinced or convinced of our alternative. We're only generations behind capitalism, but luckily we have conscience

and truth on our side—along with the contradictions of capitalism, which eventually everyone will be unable to ignore.

Perhaps I got precisely what I should have expected or perhaps this experience represents little more than an aberrational coterie of the American Right—but based on the success of Tea Party candidates and Donald Trump’s unconscionably popular racism-driven superrich-as-hero worship (though Trump himself is not a libertarian, his “message” is certainly popular with them), I think this experience represents more of a scary microcosm than it does some fringe exception. According to Reuters’ polling done in April 2015, 20 percent of Americans self-identify as libertarians, and 32 percent of people aged 18- 29 adopt that label. As opposed to labels like liberal or conservative, labels like socialist or libertarian tend to get used more often when the person has some idea of what those labels actually mean. Having 32% of young people sympathetic to these far-Right ideas, regardless of the increase in favorability to the term “socialism” (now 31 percent), should motivate us more than ever to call-out the injustices and sheer hypocrisies that are central to American libertarianism.

I am still processing the experience myself, but I, at the very least, accomplished my goal: these people certainly inspired me to keep writing and working toward a more just and emancipated society—however we can.

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