

How to be a progressive libertarian

by Eric Lormand, Agenda editor

I sometimes get asked things like, “Libertarians are on the right, and progressives are on the left. Which are you? A right libertarian or a left libertarian? Capitalist or socialist?”

I’m a libertarian, period. I think the dispute between left libertarians and right libertarians is the most interesting in all of political theory. I also think it’s very misguided, for reasons I’ll sketch in a moment.

For those who are new to these issues, you’re a libertarian to the extent that you take freedom to be what we should be working to make as widespread and complete as possible. Nonlibertarians might favor other ends instead or in addition—order, equality, diversity, strength, love, happiness, God’s happiness, etc. And in this context, you’re toward the right the closer you are to thinking economies should be capitalist, and you’re toward the left the closer you are to thinking economies should be socialist.

But there’s some tactical reasons for libertarians not to divide left/right, and there’s some principled reasons.

The tactical reasons are that many important issues already unifying the two sides can be achieved in the near-term if people act in unison. What the world needs now, first, is a reduction in militarism—whether used by states or by corporations or (to a much more limited extent) by workers—and in practice that mainly means curtailing the international physical aggression of the most powerful and quick-triggered state. Libertarians of all stripes have historically been at the forefront of opposing that. E.g., for a long time in the 60s and early 70s, right-libertarian journals were the only periodicals with reasonable circulation that would publish left-libertarian critics (e.g. Noam Chomsky) of US involvement in Vietnam and surrounding nations.

In the recent war in Kosovo, self-proclaimed leftists and capital-L capitalist Libertarians were the loudest critics of the war, and to some extent participated in each other’s forums and teach-ins and demonstrations. The most spectacular example is the website www.antiwar.com, which makes ample space available to both sorts of critics of the NATO bombings, as well as both sorts of critics of US actions in the run-up to war and the aftermath.

The site also focuses double-barreled criticism on US warmongering towards Iraq and other nations around the world.

The principled reason not to divide (yet) is, simply, that nobody has this stuff figured out; both ideals need more realistic formulations, and since there’s no reason to expect enlightenment to drop from the sky, both ideals need a kind of experimentation. E.g., how would a left-libertarian set of individuals—a voluntary society of socialists—repel invasion or keep a coercive vanguard party from arising? How would a right-libertarian set of individuals—a voluntary society of capitalists, perhaps seeking little or no government regulation—keep coercive monopolies from forming, or correct for the *huge* amount of past coercion (fraud, theft, murder) that puts present rich and poor at an unfair competitive condition, or, for that matter, insure that babies are fed? (I’m not asking all this as a challenge here, and I’m not suggesting that the problems are hopeless.)

So here’s what I’m really in favor of: self-determination under initial conditions that are as free as possible from (remnants of) coercion.

By “self-determination” I mean that (as far as possible) each person should have a voice in decisions proportional to how that decision could make them worse off. Roughly, if it won’t hurt you at all, you have no say in it, if it would hurt you a little, you have a little say in it, and if it would hurt you a lot, you have a lot of say in it. (Though there are lots of practical issues to work out—how to measure “hurt”, for instance—in practice, I think, this would be like a democracy, but with safeguards against a majority’s deciding to hurt a minority, because the minority’s “say” in the decision would increase.)

By “(remnants of) coercion” I mean (at least) current physical force and lingering effects of physical force in the (distant and recent) past, especially lingering wealth differentials to the extent that they’ve resulted from aggression—invasion, slavery, internal repression, etc. Though again there are lots of practical issues to work out—how to measure present effects of past evils—in practice, I think, this would involve significant reparations to large numbers of poor, working-class, and middle-class people, oppressed racial minorities and women, etc., around the world. (A graphic case is made in “The Real Foreign Debt”, a letter from a Native American chief, reprinted at right. There is more on the movement to forgive the “debts” of poor nations on p. 22.) There are extremely few well-off individuals and corporations in the world today—maybe none—who’ve earned their wealth without reliance on massive public subsidies (e.g., for R&D, or with blood spilled on the battlefield, etc. ... or see the examples related to home ownership on p. 7) or without reliance on force or threatened force. For similar reasons, though it’s worth mentioning separately, it would also mean a much more level-playing field for ideas, in education and the media.

I think these are conditions that libertarians should be working towards whether they are left-libbers or right-libbers. Right-libertarians sometimes wish to weaken the state with-



An unidentified right-wing participant in the mainly left-wing antiwar June 5th March on the Pentagon (see cover)

... or see the examples related to home ownership on p. 7) or without reliance on force or threatened force. For similar reasons, though it’s worth mentioning separately, it would also mean a much more level-playing field for ideas, in education and the media.

Well, suppose these general-libertarian conditions (of self-determination w/o coercion) could be brought about. Then would I favor left-libertarianism or right-libertarianism?

If we got that far, I think we could build a just society either way (with kinks of the sort I mentioned above worked out—vanguard parties, coercive monopolies, etc.). Or in some combinations of ways—e.g., with some people living in a socialist way, and their neighbors living in a capitalist way. (See the article on the Indian state of Kerala, p. 5.) I believe in self-determination. I wouldn’t dictate the right/left choice even if I could.

Nevertheless, for myself, in the circumstances I described, I would choose the left-libertarian way, because I value cooperation and a safety-net (even with less production, if that turns out to be the cost, as it might not) over competition and a bottomless pit of despair (even with more production, if that turns out to be the benefit, as it might not). I believe the overwhelming majority of people would choose likewise (in circumstances where relevant ideas were not shielded from them by media monopolies built on past coercion). But I would understand the other choice. And if it turns out that very few other people would choose like me—imagine a kind of straw vote—I’d happily join the right-libbers rather than live alone or in a tiny commune of left-libbers.

So I’m a libertarian, period, for self-determination without coercion and remnants of coercion whether by state or boss or expert or coworker. It’s work to provide fuller details of such a picture of society, but it’s also exhilarating, and within our reach. It also has nothing obvious to do with capitalism vs. socialism, right vs. left. ☑

THE REAL FOREIGN DEBT

A letter from an Indian chief to all European governments to repay the gold and silver they borrowed between 1503 and 1660.

by Guacaipuro Cuautemoc

Here am I, Guacaipuro Cuautemoc, who have come to discover those who are celebrating the discovery. Here am I, a descendant of those who colonised America 40,000 years ago, who have come to discover those who discovered it 500 years ago.

My European brother at his border asks me for a written document with a visa in order to discover those who discovered me. The European moneylender asks me to pay a debt contracted by Judas which I never authorised to be sold to me. The European pettifogger explains to me that all debts must be paid with interest, even if it means selling human beings and whole countries without their consent. I am gradually discovering them.

I also have payments to claim. I can also claim interest. The evidence is in the Archivo de Indias. Paper after paper, receipt after receipt, signature after signature show that between 1503 and 1660 alone, 185,000 kilos of gold and 16 million kilos of silver were shipped into San Lucar de Barrameda from America.

Plunder? I wouldn’t say so. Because that would mean that our Christian brothers are violating their seventh commandment. Pillage? May Tanatzin have mercy on me for thinking that the Europeans, like Cain, kill and then deny their brother’s blood! Genocide? That would mean giving credit to slanderers like Bartolome de las Casa who equated the discovery of the Indies with its destruction, or to extremists such as Dr Arturo Pietri, who states that the outburst of capitalism and of the current European civilisation was due to the flood of precious metals! No way!

Those 185,000 kilos of gold and 16 million kilos of silver must be considered as the first of several friendly loans granted by America for Europe’s development. The contrary would presuppose war crimes, which would mean not only demanding immediate return, but also compensation for damages.

I prefer to believe in the least offensive hypothesis. Such fabulous capital exports were nothing short of the beginning of a Marshalltezuma Plan to guarantee the reconstruction of a barbarian Europe, ruined by deplorable wars against the Muslim foe. For this reason, as we approach the Fifth Centennial of the Loan, we must ask ourselves:

What have our European brothers done in a rational, responsible or at least productive way with the resources so generously advanced by the International Indoamerican Fund? The answer is: unfortunately nothing. Strategically, they squandered it on battles such as Lepanto, invincible armies, Third Reichs and other forms of mutual extermination, only to end up being occupied by the Yankee troops of NATO, like Panama (but without a canal).

Financially, they were incapable - even after a moratorium of 500 years - of either paying back capital with interest or of becoming independent from net returns, raw material and cheap energy that they import from the Third World.

This disgusting picture corroborates Milton Friedman’s assertion that a subsidised economy can never function properly, and compels us to claim - for their own good - the repayment of capital and interest which we have so generously delayed all these centuries.

Stating this, we want to make clear that we will refrain from charging our European brothers the despicable and blood-thirsty floating rates of 20 or even 30% that they charge to Third World countries. We shall only demand the devolution of all precious metals advanced, plus a modest fixed annum accumulated over 300 years.

On this basis, and applying the European formula of compound interest, we inform our discoverers that they only owe us, as a first payment against the debt, a mass of 185,000 kilos of gold and 16 million kilos of silver, both raised to the power of 300. This equals a figure that would need over 300 digits to put it down on paper and whose weight fully exceeds that of the planet Earth.

What huge piles of gold and silver! How much would they weigh when calculated in blood? To say that in half a millennium Europe has not been able to produce sufficient wealth to pay back this modest interest is as much as admitting to the total financial failure of capitalism. The pessimists of the Old World state that their civilisation is already so bankrupt that they cannot fulfil their financial or moral commitments. If this is the case, we shall be happy if they pay us with the bullet that killed the poet. But that is not possible, because that bullet is the very heart of Europe.

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