

Achilles' Heel or Samson's Haircut?

A response to E.J. Dionne, Jr.

"In politics, we often skip past the simple questions. This is why inquiries about the fundamentals can sometimes catch everyone short."¹ An attractive beginning that finishes with banalities.

To begin, the author's understanding of the Libertarian "creed" as "[a]nything government does beyond protecting people from violence or theft and enforcing contracts is seen as illegitimate" belies at the outset the author's political agenda -- namely, to legitimize the state.

This said, you can surely disagree with an individual's assumptions and thus discard his conclusion, or you can find fault with his conclusion by finding error in his logic. What you cannot do is trash a conclusion that is founded in fact and properly argued. Now, I will not attempt to unravel the author's convoluted logic in this brief passage, but go straight to the Libertarian conclusion that the author has turned into an assumption -- namely, when it comes to the state, smaller is, indeed, better.

Unlike the author, the libertarian begins by looking the state straight in the face and calling it out for what it is -- immoral. When the IRS or some other state agency comes knocking on your door and demands that you part with your hard earned income or face punishment, it engages in an act of extortion. If you do not kowtow to this threat, the state can confiscate your property (theft), take you into custody (kidnapping), or if you resist, engage in armed thuggery or even murder. And, all of this in the name of "the greater human good" -- namely, the state, aka government in the mind of the author.

What the libertarian so clearly understands, and the author religiously ignores, is that the state cannot exist in the absence of the aforementioned criminality. Quite logically, then, the Libertarian concludes that the state should be minimized wherever possible, and, if possible, even eliminated. In contrast, apologists, like the author, seek to glorify the aforementioned criminal acts in much the same way that war-mongers excuse the atrocities of war: by heaping praise on the victors with near zero regard for the cost of their destruction. Indeed, pointing to the more positively motivated government services that all states provide their citizenry -- some better than others, mind you -- follows the same sort of diversionary tactic as that of the war-monger. Ignore the immorality on which the state is founded and give praise to its "good works".

What is particularly outrageous about the author's attitude toward the Libertarian approach to government is his accusation that Libertarians are in search of utopia, and that the existence of the state is, well, after all, justification for its existence. In support of this argument he invokes the words of still another apologist and writes, "[i]f

¹ E.J. Dionne Jr. "Libertarianism's Achilles heel". Seattle Times, June 10, 2013. [online publication]

Libertarians are correct in claiming that they understand how best to organize a modern society, how is it that not a single country in the world in the early 21st century is organized along libertarian lines?" Is the answer to this question anything, but self-evident -- the state will have nothing of it. I will not over-challenge either author by asking what they mean by the term country in this context.

Some 53 percent of all American citizens, a large portion of America's banking industry, and not a few corporations depend on some form of state subsidy for their existence. Could Boeing remain competitive without the EXIM Bank? How about the riffraff that fill and soil our public meeting places only to scare away law-abiding, tax-paying citizens? The Libertarian favorite is, of course, the FED, our nation's private central banking cartel, who, as I write, is laying the foundation for an even greater economic collapse than the one in 2008 from which we have yet to recover.

All of this would not be so bad, of course, if one could choose to be a citizen or not, but the state will not permit this either. Indeed, you cannot leave one nation for another without a passport and not end up being deported, living as a fugitive of justice, or wallowing in a refugee camp as a stateless person.

Alas, we are the people, and we have the power to eliminate the state, but we cannot move forward without faith in ourselves and diminished respect for those who would claim to know better by pointing to the obvious as if it were some sort of utopian dream. For, in the end, the real argument is not one of utopia versus reality, but what, if anything, armed robbery can achieve better than voluntary acts of industry, commerce, trade, and charity. I submit very little. This, of course, is what Murray Rothbard is truly about -- something, of which no proponent of the modern welfare-warfare state has even the slightest notion.

Word Count: 797

Libertarianism's Achilles' heel

Originally published June 10, 2013 at 4:01 pm Updated June 10, 2013 at 6:31 pm

By E.J. Dionne Jr

WASHINGTON – In politics, we often skip past the simple questions. This is why inquiries about the fundamentals can sometimes catch everyone short.

Michael Lind, the independent-minded scholar, posed one such question last week about libertarianism that I hope will shake up the political world. I'll get to his query in a moment. It's important because many in the new generation of conservative politicians declare libertarianism as their core political philosophy.

Libertarians have the virtue, in principle at least, of a very clear creed: They believe in the smallest government possible, longing for what the late philosopher Robert Nozick, in his classic book "Anarchy, State and Utopia," called "the night-watchman state." Anything government does beyond protecting people from violence or theft and enforcing contracts is seen as illegitimate.

If you start there, taking a stand on the issues of the day is easy. All efforts to cut back on government functions — public schools, Medicare, environmental regulation, food stamps — should be supported. Anything that increases government activity (Obamacare, for example) should be opposed.

Rothbard's book concludes with boldness: "Liberty has never been fully tried in the modern world; libertarians now propose to fulfill the American dream and the world dream of liberty and prosperity for all mankind."

This is where Lind's question comes in. Note that Rothbard freely acknowledges that "liberty has never been fully tried," at least by the libertarians' exacting definition. In an essay in Salon, Lind asks:

"If libertarians are correct in claiming that they understand how best to organize a modern society, how is it that not a single country in the world in the early 21st century is organized along libertarian lines?"

In other words, "Why are there no libertarian countries?"

The ideas of the center-left — based on welfare states conjoined with market economies — have been deployed all over the democratic world, most extensively in the social democratic Scandinavian countries. We also had deadly experiments with communism, aka Marxism-Leninism.

From this, Lind asks another question: "If socialism is discredited by the failure of communist regimes in the real world, why isn't libertarianism discredited by the absence of any libertarian regimes in the real world?"

The answer lies in a kind of circular logic: Libertarians can keep holding up their dream of perfection because, as a practical matter, it will never be tried in full. Even many who say they are libertarians reject the idea when it gets too close to home.

The strongest political support for a broad anti-statist libertarianism now comes from the tea party. Yet tea-party members, as the polls show, are older than the country as a whole. They say they want to shrink government in a big way but are uneasy about embracing this concept when reducing Social Security and Medicare comes up. Thus do the proposals to cut these programs being pushed by Republicans in Congress exempt the current generation of recipients. There's no way Republicans are going to attack their own base.

But this inconsistency (or hypocrisy) contains a truth: We had something close to a small government libertarian utopia in the late 19th century and we decided it didn't work. We realized that many Americans would never be able to save enough for retirement and, later, that most of them would be unable to afford health insurance when they were old. Smaller government meant that too many were poor and monopolies were formed too easily.

And when the Great Depression engulfed us, government was helpless, largely handcuffed by this anti-government ideology until Franklin D. Roosevelt came along.

In fact, as Lind points out, most countries that we typically see as "free" and prosperous have governments that consume around 40 percent of their GDP. They are better off for it. "Libertarians," he writes, "seem to have persuaded themselves that there is no significant trade-off between less government and more national insecurity, more crime, more illiteracy and more infant and maternal mortality"

This matters to our current politics because too many politicians are making decisions on the basis of a grand, utopian theory that they never can — or will — put into practice. They then use this theory to avoid a candid conversation about the messy choices governance requires. And this is why we have gridlock.

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