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Libertarianism: An Extremely Short Introduction

by J C Lester' The word 'liberty'

The words 'liberty' and 'freedom' are not usually distinguished in any systematic or significant way. They simply have different roots in the English language. 'Liberty' has its origins in the Latin 'libertas'. 'Freedom' comes from the Old English 'freedom'.

It is usually not necessary to discuss what we mean by a particular word. We can take it for granted that others mean the same thing as we do. But this is not always true with the fundamental words that arise in moral, social and political contexts. One such ambiguous and disputed word is 'liberty'. So it is necessary to give some kind of definition or even theory of 'liberty' before we can say clearly why it is important.

'Liberty' in its most general sense refers to the absence of constraints on something. Here we are interested in the absence of constraints on people by other people. There are two main ways to interpret this, which we can call zero-sum liberty and non-invasive liberty.

Zero-sum liberty

With zero-sum liberty, one person's loss of liberty is always another person's gain

in liberty. If someone takes my car without my permission, then I lose the liberty to use that car and the taker gains the liberty to use that car. This has implications that can be used as criticisms. 1) Such liberty cannot be maximised for all, it can only be competed over or shared in some way. 2) Competing over liberty does not sound desirable but is even equality of such liberty much better? What exactly does it mean? Why is it desirable? Does it require continual political intervention to enforce the equality? 3) In any case, it follows that the standard for what types of liberty matter (liberty to do this but not liberty to do that) must be something other than liberty. But many people think that a conception of liberty itself should be the standard of what is allowable. 4) This view means that we have to balance the 'liberty' of a thief, or other aggressor, against that of his victims. Do we really think that this is what we are, and ought to be, doing? The zero-sum conception of liberty gives us problems rather than solutions. Yet people do sometimes talk of liberty in this way.

Non-Invasive Liberty

Non-invasive liberty agrees with the popular view of liberty as not being interfered with, or not being proactively imposed on, by other people. Not being attacked or robbed is part of liberty; attacking or robbing people is not part of liberty. And this has implications that look more like solutions than problems. 1) In principle, anyone in a society can have complete liberty. 2) In principle,

everyone in a society can have complete liberty at the same time. 3) A clear and crucial distinction is now possible between (non-invasive) liberty and (invasive) licence. We can say that a thief, or other aggressor, is exercising licence and not liberty. And those who resist an aggressor (or use coercion to recover restitution from an aggressor) are merely protecting their own liberty, not limiting the (non-invasive) liberty of the aggressor. 4) Such liberty is not only desired by everyone but is generally also thought desirable for everyone, at least to a large degree.

External property ownership and even self-ownership itself are consequences of maximising non-invasive liberty. Therefore, expressed in more practical and plain terms, 'liberty' means being able to do what you like with your own body and your own property (as long as you are not thereby proactively imposing on the body or property of others). This sense of 'liberty' is what libertarians, or classical liberals, mean when they advocate liberty. This is also the dominant conception of liberty within Western history and it applies to any society that is described as generally 'liberal'. It is the importance of this liberty that we are explaining.

Limits on liberty?

Don't states, or governments, need to provide some vital legislation and tax-funded services? The radical libertarian answer is that the state provides nothing useful that liberty cannot provide better—by free choices, free markets and charity. People are the best judges of how to lead their own lives. And the free market, without the state, uses the price system to guide scarce resources into their most productive uses. Where people agree that help is needed, charity is more efficient and libertarian than state hand-outs.

By contrast, political intervention will inevitably be economically arbitrary and also invasive. It is arbitrary because the state has no economic way of determining what to do, how to do it or how much to do it. And it is invasive because it will necessarily aggressively interfere with people and their property. Thus even when there are some clear gainers as a result of an intervention, politics is always a negative-sum system that is destructive of wealth and liberty.

Let us briefly contrast liberty with politics in some general categories.

Physical infrastructure

'Physical infrastructure' means the things that are needed to connect individual homes and businesses. It includes such things as roads, railways, water and sewage, power supplies and telephone lines. People sometimes assert that the market either cannot provide these things efficiently or that it cannot provide them at all. But increasingly these are accepted as all being capable of efficient private production. When roads, for instance, are private (as they sometimes are now and were in the past) then tolls can ensure that only the users pay for them. And today, electronic charging and varying the price can minimise traffic congestion. For many years the lighthouse was held to be the archetypal, non-excludable, public good that the state had to produce. But we now know that even lighthouses were often provided privately, though always hampered by state 'assistance' that crowds out private alternatives.

Education

Before the start of major state involvement in education, in 1870, basic literacy in the UK was already over 90%. Today, depending on the source, somewhere between 20% and 50% of school leavers are reported to be functionally illiterate. At the same time, the state manipulates examination results

to pretend that educational standards are always rising. And the state's attempt to increase paper qualifications of all kinds adds bureaucratic waste. Educational standards will only rise again if the state gets out of the way at all levels. That said, a lot of education is mainly a consumer good that is wrongly presented as investment in human capital.

Healthcare

Whether or not it is a sign of medical progress, it is significant that there were more hospital beds in the UK before the start of the National Health Service in 1948 than the NHS has beds today. And they did not have two administrators for each bed. The NHS is a bottomless pit of waste and poor healthcare that becomes worse the more tax-money it receives. A move towards full private insurance would greatly improve healthcare. Also, the state regulation of medical qualifications and drugs is a barrier to competition that further lowers health standards.

Welfare payments

Before the state implemented so-called National Insurance funded by compulsory "contributions" (in effect a tax on jobs), people were already opting for a variety of genuine welfare-insurance schemes. The state crowded out those private schemes with its own wasteful version. We should return to the voluntary schemes. The tiny percentage of people who would have no insurance or savings and are perceived to be in genuine need would be far better helped by charity.

Victimless crimes

States often pick on some voluntary or consensual activities and declare them to be 'crimes'. The major example of our

time is recreational drug use. We are told that people suffer ill health and even die from using certain drugs. There are also the harmful effects on others of drug-user crime and gangsterism. A typical libertarian reply is to argue that usage dangers are grossly exaggerated. Drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, and other legal activities, such as some sports, are statistically more damaging to health. Many long-term, illegal-drug users remain in as good health as comparable non-users. To the extent that they do not, this is partly because of the unreliable quality of the drugs caused by the illegality itself. The illegality also reduces the supply of the drugs and so raises their price. And this is what prompts some users to commit crimes to pay for them and attracts sellers who can only operate outside the law.

Social justice

If 'social justice' means not having damaging and unnecessary social differences in society, then only liberty approaches giving us this. For instance, the modern state often uses aggressive coercion to 1) impose some degree of material equality, and 2) prohibit discrimination with respect to a person's race, sex, etc. But the free market promotes both of these insofar as they are economic. 1) Over time, competition causes differences in income and profit to be reduced. Any remaining differences are necessary to reward the greater productivity that still exists. 2) Businesses do not discriminate on an arbitrary basis concerning employees or customers, or they would be out-competed by businesses that do not. Imposing greater equality and non-discrimination than liberty allows is both unjust and inefficient.

The real class conflict

People sometimes complain that the 'class system' is unjust (possibly conflating it with the, mainly, caste

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system of aristocracy). But insofar as individuals and families can achieve varying degrees of socio-economic success according to their own efforts under conditions of free competition, such meritocratic 'class' is what encourages people to be socially productive. However, there is a genuine problem of class conflict. There is the class of those people who are (net) tax-receivers. They live off the class of those people who are (net) taxpayers. The tax-receiving, or tax-parasitic, class needs to be abolished so that those people find productive jobs in the free market.

Law and order

Common law that protects people and their property originally evolved without the state. State legislation typically flouts that law and thereby the liberty it preserves. And if we include all the security guards, store detectives, night watchmen, doormen, and so forth, then state police have always been a minority of overall policing. But state police are a very expensive and inefficient tax-parasitic minority that aggress against liberty more than they protect it. A move towards depoliticised law and full private policing would give us the law and order that we largely lack today.

National defence

'National defence' means defending the population of a country (the nation). This rarely, if ever, happens. At best, political 'national defence' is more about defending an existing state from a competing state that is hardly any worse, if worse at all, and certainly not worth the death and destruction caused by defending it. But many wars are aggressive attacks on other countries on one pretext or other. The result is invariably vastly more death and destruction than if the attacks had not taken place. This not only applies to recent invasions of other countries but even more so to becoming unnecessarily

involved in conflicts leading up to and including World Wars I and II. A voluntarily funded national defence would stick to real defence. And as we have seen in Vietnam and Afghanistan, a country with polycentric and grassroots resistance can be impossible to conquer and rule.

Tacit consent to politics?

Do we tacitly consent to taxes and legislation by living in a country and participating in democracy? And by this consent is politics libertarian after all? No. We do not consent to crime just because we live in an area where crime is known to exist. Nor do we consent to crime if we find a way of recovering some of the value of what was stolen from us. We do not, in fact, have democracy but elected oligarchy. If we attempt to minimise any damage that our rulers do by voting for the least bad candidate, then that is not to consent to the damage the state causes. The state does rest on majority acceptance that it is needed. But this popular error cannot make state aggression either libertarian or legitimate.

The way forward

If all this is true, then the state is really a giant criminal organisation. Its taxation is extortion and its legislation is authoritarianism. But if we can persuade enough people to see that liberty is the most important social value and that politics is liberty's greatest enemy, then eventually the state can be rolled back. It is true that there has never been a large society without a state. There has never been one without disease either. But both politics and disease are evils that ought to be resisted and reduced as far as possible.

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Recommended further reading:

The Libertarian Alliance is an independent, non-party group, with a shared desire to work for a free society.

Friedman, David D. [1973] 1989. *The Machinery of Freedom: Guide to Radical Capitalism*. 2nd ed. La Salle, IL.: Open Court.

Narveson, Jan. 2008. *You and The State: A Fairly Brief Introduction to Political Philosophy*. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield.

Rothbard, Murray N. [1973] 2006. *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*. 2nd ed. Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute.

www.la-articles.org.uk (This offers a host of libertarian articles.)