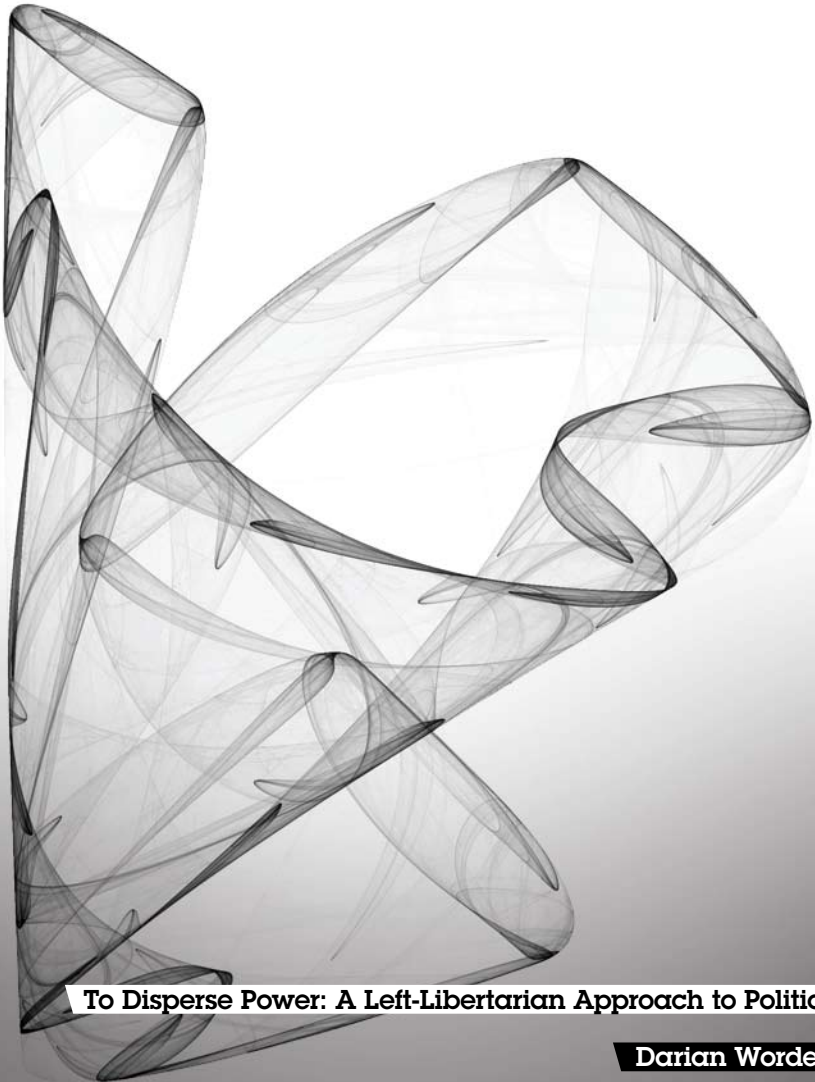


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To Disperse Power: A Left-Libertarian Approach to Politics

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To Disperse Power: A Left-Libertarian Approach to Politics

What does a left-libertarian want, and how should one move toward this goal?

Left-Libertarian?

“Left-libertarian” has a number of definitions. I tend to view the left-libertarian goal as follows:

To as much as possible disperse power in political, economic, and social relations among all individuals who respect the liberties of others, and displace authoritarian relations with consensual relations rooted in mutual cooperation.

What does that mean?

Political power is the power of coercion. Having unequal political power means being able to coerce others because you outrank them. Equalizing political power means that rules are agreed upon, interpreted, and enforced by people regarded as equals.

Economic power is the power to influence others through wealth. Just about everybody has some amount of economic power because just about everybody can create wealth by using mind and body. However, when some have much more than others they may have

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the ability to constrict the choices others can make. This does not mean that wealth can or should be held in equal part by all. When there is ample opportunity to pursue other alternatives, wealth loses its power to dominate.

Political power is the power of coercion.

expectations, and liberty is best assured by a culture that respects the freedom for individuals to develop rather than a culture that emphasizes rank and deference to those who outrank you.

Almost every time that any of these powers are vastly unequal, it is because they are all unequal. Having a large share of one means having the ability to trade for the others.

Equality in power enables individuals to have their best chance of

Social power is the power exercised through custom, tradition, or social expectation. Respect is rooted in social expectations, and liberty is best assured by a culture that respects the freedom

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flourishing. Society is best when individuals are at their best, and individuals do better in a better social environment. Autonomy does not necessarily mean relying on nobody, but instead having the ability to effectively choose who to rely on.

If there was a left-libertarian political platform, what might it look like?

Speaking broadly, but specifically enough to show orientation, a left-libertarian approach is libertarian in that it makes a priority of maximum individual liberty, equal liberty for all. It is also mutual, or cooperative, in that it emphasizes voluntary organizations for the common benefit of participants.

This does imply moving in an anarchist direction. Anarchism is not merely a utopian dream where nobody is ever harmed, but can refer to a state of affairs where no rulership is broadly considered legitimate power. One does not have to fall under the label left-libertarian to be an anarchist or have to be an anarchist to be a left-libertarian but there are general tendencies in common.

A Hypothetical Platform

If there was hypothetically a left-libertarian political platform, what might it look like? Let's consider seven points for now.

1) Withdrawal of the military empire and a rollback of the internal state security apparatus.

2) Break up the power of political and economic elites by highlighting and disrupting their connection, and by creating and expanding grassroots economic power.

Points 1 and 2 will immensely benefit the economy and liberty of the average person under American government power.

3) End the Drug War, eliminate police brutality, and bring more accountability to police.

The government police force is the enforcement arm of the authoritarian state. It is an organization that enforces its own monopoly, and responds to political power. While this inherent function will encourage bad behavior, within the context of a government police force, things can be made better by reassigning the political priorities that police forces respond to and introducing more accountability and community control into police forces. Grassroots efforts like copwatch and copblock are essential to holding the police forces in check.

4) Roll back draconian anti-migrant policies and seek to eliminate power imbalances based on differences of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

Points 3 and 4 will drastically cut the prison-industrial complex and its modern slavery economics.

5) Establish more libertarian, mutual education.

The authoritarianism that children are subjected to from the time they first salute the flag until the time they are permitted to enlist and vote is of critical importance. Addressing this issue should take priority over issues of school cost or the welfare of school staff. Regionally-divided government education also is a major contributor to economic segregation and wasteful municipal redundancy. Left-libertarians should seek to break the power of the schooling establishment and engage in serious efforts to create education alternatives that invite participation.

6) Protection of the environment in accord with human needs.

A healthier human environment – including the urban environment – leads to healthier people and relations. Wild places are important for human development. Today, rather than restrict pollution by treating it as injury to persons or possessions, the costs of pollution tend to be shifted to the least powerful.

7) Popular access to small arms.

While the organization of heavy weapons and the means to restrict weapons of mass destruction should be considered further, combat rifles and pistols should be generally available in order to hinder the ability of certain parties to monopolize power by monopolizing arms.

With the above “platform” for action in mind, some things should be

considered. It could be argued that these points are more important than ending the state, since without the existence of broad libertarian and mutualist understanding, and the power to challenge authority, the ending of the state would only see the rise of new forms of authority rooted in social and economic power and won through political maneuvering. And while some of these points would have to be pursued outside of the system, in theory a country could exist where these points are all satisfied but there is still a government.

However, just because these planks theoretically could be accomplished under the existence of a state does not mean that the state should not be eliminated. The state is authoritarian and will exert authority. It is a dangerous establishment of legitimated authority that would always have to be kept in check. It is the primary tool that elites use to rule and to privilege others according to how much they help them keep in power.

The seven points, then, would be best pursued with the end goal of eliminating the state, but in cooperation with people who wish to implement

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these points but do not necessarily want to end the state.

By making the state less valuable, we make it less powerful and therefore more vulnerable. Doing so will present opportunities to demonstrate libertarian principles in action. But movement toward liberty will be opposed by powerful enemies. Putting the state on the defensive, possibly even threatening the basis of its existence, will be necessary to win.

Power Vacuum?

I want to talk about power vacuums.

The phrase “power vacuum” might seem like it’s just something statisticians made up to scare people into submission, but it’s actually a useful concept to think about.

A power vacuum would imply that nobody has power. But what is power other than the ability to influence and effect changes, possibly concerning the behavior of others. Oppression is not the existence of power, but results from power imbalances or conflicts over power. When the authorities amass

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power they take it from individuals and communities – leaving a power vacuum in the common person’s life. But empowered people, with libertarian ethics, are better able to resist the impositions of others. So the left libertarian goal is not really to eliminate power, but to disperse power among all individuals who respect the liberty of others.

but widespread empowerment. The left-libertarian project then could be seen as a mass project of ethical, individual empowerment.

When power is dispersed, the state of affairs is not really a power vacuum,

As a matter of fact, libertarian-minded movements have seen some success in filling a power vacuum with the power of people mobilized by ideology and good organization, at least until being defeated by overwhelming statist attacks and deceptions. The Paris Commune and the anarchist movements in Ukraine, Spain, and Shinmin province can be thought of using this framework.

Movement from Below

The basis of left-libertarian political action is movement from below, from outside the political system, toward a free and just society.

Consensual, cooperative organization and networking provide the foundation for the future free society.

Libertarian social organization:

- 1) Provides libertarian structure to fall back on if current authorities fail,

making it more difficult for other authorities to move in.

2) Incentivizes behavior, going beyond leading by example by setting expectations and creating incentives. When there are concrete benefits of participating in libertarian action, then more people will participate in them and abide by the included social norms.

It might be helpful to think of human organization as a series of networks, some more or less formal than others, some more or less libertarian than others.

By establishing formal or informal networks to meet needs outside of authorities and elites, left-libertarians will eliminate the real and perceived value of authorities and elites. These networks could operate on varying degrees of ideological commitment. They should never be thought of as deceptive front organizations to enlist useful idiots, but rather as means to work together on shared values while further developing values. Cooperative action then establishes a basis for further cooperative action and takes over the functions of authorities.

There are a number of examples of people with various political identities using mutual aid or cooperative networks. Within the Arab Spring uprisings, the Greek anti-authoritarians, and the Occupy gatherings, people have found it expedient and liberating to help meet each others' needs outside of establishment means. Friendly societies have in earlier times helped participants find jobs, resources in hard times, or pooled medical expenses. Activist centers make it easier for people with shared values to participate in improving the world. Organizations like Food Not Bombs or Fr33 Aid provide more compassionate and personalized care than bureaucratic structures are typically capable of.

To develop these alternative networks to their fullest potential while discussing and demonstrating libertarian paths is a key component of liberation.

By establishing formal or informal networks to meet needs outside of authorities and elites, left-libertarians will eliminate the real and perceived value of authorities and elites.

From Above

But if we talk about movement from below, we should think about how action from above can effect a libertarian transition.

We certainly don't want to do for the word "libertarian" what Lenin did for "communist." His revolution gave the world an activist state that was

supposed to direct the revolution from above that would eventually result in a withering away of the state and an end to exploitation.

Change should be primarily driven and established from below.

Theoretically, though, the interim towards a libertarian or more strictly

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anarchist society could benefit from a government of transition adjudicating disputes between political bodies and helping to ensure peaceful relations with outside powers.

It does seem like it would be a difficult task to ensure peace with other states, especially when:

a) major country with a huge military, including nuclear weapons, is seen as “collapsing” into anarchy

b) international finance worries about getting paid

c) a power-vacuum is seen that is ripe for exploitation (this would of course be mitigated by grassroots free association empowering individuals acting cooperatively, as previously

discussed)

d) anarchists and revolutionaries are undermining foreign states

Foreign politicians might be on the lookout for someone who looks like he has some clout and is able to do business. Maybe people who are into the politician thing could then have a positive role, talking to the outside, placating nationalist tendencies. Maybe such a person could even be a representative of consensually-based confederated communities or organizations of polycentric law.

There is a problem here though: we’re talking about structures and institutions, but what about people and personalities?

Who is in the dismantling state or transition state?

What motivates them?

How do they give up power? They probably worked hard to get into a position to effect change from above and they might be convinced that they’re the best people for the job.

Are they seeking to direct loot into their own pockets?

Are they cutting deals to sell out the revolution?

Politicians, however, will be influenced by culture and the ways in which respect and reputation can be improved within the prevailing cultural

context. This goes back to incentives. People who might otherwise become politicians clutching at every string of power might instead seek to gain influence through persuasion, not coercion, and they might find they are more persuasive when viewed as one of the good guys. Such a cultural shift is best created outside of the political system.

What about constitutionalist politicians?

In the short term they can be helpful at creating an atmosphere more conducive to positive changes – opening up space for activists and reducing the harm done by government in foreign and domestic affairs.

In the long term it is better to acknowledge the failures inherent in the system and move forward from this reality with an eye toward developing the better traditions.

If everyone signs on as a partisan of a political campaign, that then focuses everyone at a single point that's failure could destroy the movement and the credibility of ideas it professes – and this is a point that is likely to bring many failures, as effecting change on the initiative of the top of the political system means working through politicians and bureaucrats and entrenched interests.

On the one hand, the greater success of politicians who use libertarian talking points can make other politicians pander in this direction. But what part of the platform would they listen to, and what if they just co-opt the good rhetoric? And if good intentions from the top get twisted into harmful policies when they reach the ground then the credibility of the initiator is stained.

Both in order to create cultural expectations for those in power when it is time to disperse power, and in order to ensure a healthy counter to whatever politician comes into power, it is essential to have organization from below.

Conclusion

If it's not possible to have a completely free society today, let's make it a freer society today and

If it's not possible to have a completely free society today, let's make it a freer society today and make the foundations for a free society soon.

A left-libertarian approach is to build from the bottom up to displace the rule of political and economic elites and social authoritarians.

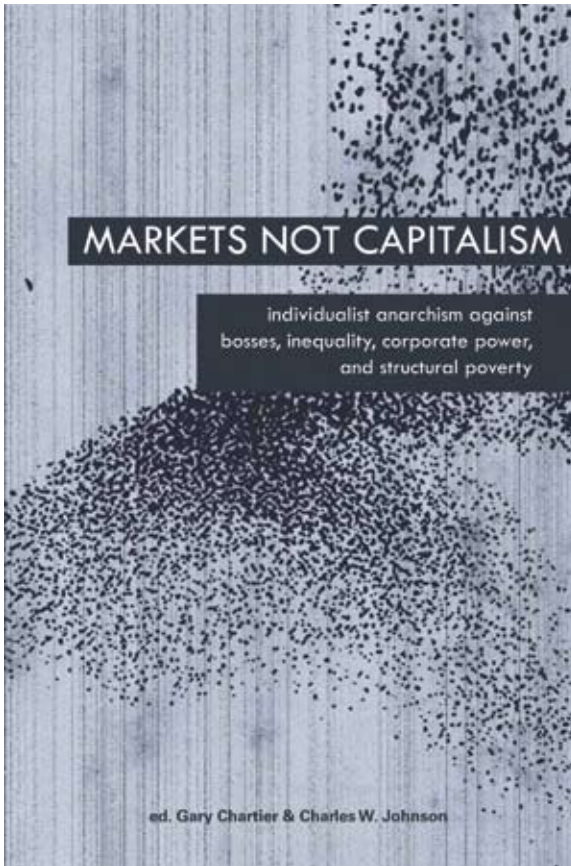
make the foundations for a free society soon. This is a path that requires flexibility, but it also requires an informed skepticism toward political sales pitches. A left-libertarian approach might or might not be explicitly anarchist, but it shares basic principles with anarchism and moves in that direction.

A left-libertarian approach is to build from the bottom up to displace the rule of political and economic elites and social authoritarians. It is for a society of free, autonomous, and flourishing individuals and the communities they create together.

By Darian Worden

ALLiance writer Darian Worden is a graduate student of history, a news analyst at Center for a Stateless Society, and a host of the internet radio show Thinking Liberty. His essays and other works can be viewed at DarianWorden.com.





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