How a Libertarian Capitalist Became a Libertarian Socialist

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A couple years back when I was working toward a philosophy major in college, I wrote a rebuttal the section of The Anarchist FAQ that covers anarcho-capitalism. I removed the rebuttal from the web because I didn't have the time or inclination to continue to maintain it or expand upon it. Three years later, I've come to find myself disagreeing with my old rebuttals and agreeing with the FAQ. What follows is my story.

I began my tenure as a right-wing libertarian by reading Ayn Rand, who dissuaded me from the rather muddled left-wing sympathies I held at the time. I was only a Rand enthusiast for a short time, however, and I soon developed an interest in the "more reasonable" free-market thinkers, such as von Mises, Nozick, Hayek, David Friedman, etc. I was an ardent supporter of unimpeded and "stateless" capitalism for the course of almost 3 years, and developed and/or adopted every possible philosophical and economic justification that can be conceived of for its defense. Before I graduated college, however, I expelled my belief that one can claim private property rights upon land. I advocated a labor theory of property, and

considering that land is not a produced good, I found that it wasn't defensible according to the principles I advocated. I concluded that one who hoards land is placing a restriction upon the liberty of others to use it or to travel by way of it without justification, and hence the claimant should compensate them by paying a land value tax to earn exclusive rights to it.

Despite my new Georgist land-socialist views, I still advocated a capitalist economic system with respect to produced goods. However, I did become much more critical of corporations, and I became upset with other libertarians for their lack of focus upon the injustices perpetrated by corporations. I wanted to abolish corporate charters, subsidies, intellectual property, regulatory privileges, land grants, etc., as I considered them violations of liberty. If you press a right-libertarian about the privileges corporations receive, they usually say, "Oh, well I'm against those", but they hardly ever take the initiative in directing any criticism against them. More often than not, they praise the alleged "virtues" of corporations, while focusing upon how the government violates these corporations "rights".

When I first became an "anarcho-capitalist", I thought corporate abuses could be avoided in an economic realm in which corporations didn't enjoy as many regulatory privileges. I initially liked all the "dot coms" and "ecommerce" companies — I considered the Internet industry to be one in which free market principles were respected, contrary to so many other industries. However, in the past year, I've seen all these companies become just as ruthless as any multinational. I thought that all of the "dot coms" were small as a result of the industry functioning according to genuine free market principles, but in reality, they were just small *to begin with.* Most of them are small no longer. Furthermore, the more prosperous of these companies are now seeking to benefit from state privilege, which is evident in the many intellectual property lawsuits that are currently pending in the ecommerce industry.

Since making the transition from right-wing to left-wing libertarianism, I've discovered that factionalism and sectarianism is just as pervasive here as it was there, if not more so. Technology is a good example of an issue that divides the anarchist movement. On one hand, there are the anarcho-primitivist luddites who eschew all forms of complex technology and wish to return to a hunter-gather society, and on the other, there are the anarchists who feel that technology can be beneficial if its development is directed by workers themselves in a manner that is accountable to the communities it affects. I fall somewhere in the middle between the two positions — I have no desire to return to a hunter/gatherer society, but would also prefer not to rely upon technology that requires a division of labor so extreme that productivity becomes an alienated and meaningless activity. Working within the computer industry, I also understand that when technological complexity transcends our ability to understand it, this is an instance of the machine being in control of us and not vice-versa. Whether technology is a form of liberation or domination is a topic hotly debated by anarchists, but they agree, contra the right-wing "libertarians", that a society in which human-created circumstances force people to "agree" to subject their will to that of a boss is by no means "free".

[The author has since modified his views, although he still rejects free-market libertarianism. See "Against Mass Society", *Green Anarchy* #6]

will only receive 10% of the revenues despite all of his hard work, while Smith gets to keep 90% for his hoggish self. Jones agrees to these conditions because he has no other option. Is Jones morally bound by his agreement to allow Smith to keep 8 in 9 parts of what what Jones produces? The capitalist, of course, answers, "Yes", and I once would have given the same answer, even though I knew intuitively that such an arrangement would be grossly unfair. My current answer is "No" — this relationship between Smith and Jones is inherently exploitive, and Jones is entitled to much better.

That completed my conversion to real anarchism, which is to say *libertarian socialism.* The evolutionary process was slow — it didn't happen all in one night. I continued to consider myself an individualist anarchist for awhile, and remained more attracted to the ideas of Tucker and Proudhon than any of the social anarchists. But as I read more Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, and Rocker and studied the Spanish Civil War and Russian Revolution, I concluded that social anarchism was a better alternative. Unlike the individualist or mutualist varieties of anarchism, anarcho-communism doesn't provide an avenue for capitalism to reestablish itself and it has had partial revolutionary success in the past histories of countries such as Spain and the Ukraine. What initially turned me off to social anarchism is the fact that many of its advocates don't address the prospect of what's commonly called the "tyranny of the majority", which I think is a valid concern. It cannot be emphasized enough that under anarchism, nobody would be forced to join a commune or a federation. If one wishes to be free to work independently of a democratic collective, this freedom would be acknowledged and respected, provided that one doesn't attempt to hoard more resources than one uses or employ people for a wage. Granted, anarchists wouldn't *ban* wage labor, but "agreements" in which workers sign away their liberty would not be enforced.

When I was discovering this (and becoming a hardcore Linux user in the process), I was working as a customer service representative in a large and very well known software corporation (not Microsoft). The act of *working* instead of going to school gave me a new respect for organized labor movements. Additionally, it gave me an appreciation for the extent to which corporations screw their customers. As I spent the next six months working for this producer of buggy software, I came to the realization that my job as a "customer service" rep involved little more than developing clever rationalizations to defend this company's fraudulent activities. Most other reps bought into the company's rationalizations — most of the employees, including the supervisors, sincerely believed that the company provided "world class" service to the customers, which couldn't be further from the truth. I'm ashamed to say that I bought into *some* of the propaganda as a result of searching for ways to pacify irate customers. And because of the position that we were in — that is, being constantly screamed at and criticized for policies beyond our control — it was impossible to refrain from becoming extremely resentful towards rightfully upset customers. Finally, the company adopted some nasty new policies which were so obviously indefensible that I had to end my relationship with the company on general principle. I left completely disillusioned with corporate culture.

Although I favored free markets, I did so because I considered them to be necessitated by the principles that I held. Principles always came *first* for me — not economics. However, around the time that I quit working at the software corporation, it finally truly sank in that businesses couldn't *care less* about principles. The questions "Is it right?" or "Is it just?" do not even enter the minds of the decision makers of capitalist businesses — such questions are beside the point in their eyes. Although I was a right-libertarian at the time, I held my views because I genuinely believed that they followed logically from my beloved principle of self-government. Even though I

knew that *many* capitalist businesses were completely lacking in principles, I did ignorantly believe that this was only true of large government aided corporations. It was very disheartening to learn over time that this fact applies to *most* businesses, regardless of whether or not they happen to be corporations that profit from state favor. If they don't actually receive favors from the state, then it is typically their *aim* to receive them.

A week after I quit the software company, I got lucky and snagged a job providing tech support at a local ISP. I thought to myself that this company, being a local business, would be fundamentally different. While I do greatly prefer working for the ISP to working for the mega-software giant, it quickly became obvious to me that the motivations and principles (or lack thereof) of the president and major shareholders of the ISP are no different from that of any major corporation. Although the ISP is relatively small as of now, it doesn't aim to remain as such for very long. I will say that an ISP's expansion is generally not favored by employees, as it forces us to take responsibility for customer issues that we're in no position to fix (as was so common with the software company). Furthermore, those who run the company still think of the employees as a cost to be minimized. The rule is to hire as few as possible, pay them as little as possible, and make them work as often as possible. Since starting with the company, I've taken on many more responsibilities than just tech support, but my wages haven't risen. Despite the technical nature of my job, the workers at the nearby grocery store make more than I, as they're unionized and I'm not.

My experience in the work world forced me to seriously reconsider my advocacy of capitalism in any form. As I was still very committed to libertarian principles, I began to study the "socialist anarchists". (I put "socialist anarchist" in quotes, as I now consider such a term to be a redundancy — anarchists are necessarily socialists.) I forced myself to consider the fundamental disagreement that separates Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta from Rand, von Mises, and Friedman. My answer to myself: The advocates of capitalism believe that one can sign away or sell off one's liberty, whereas anarchists do not. As a right-wing libertarian capitalist, I was of the opinion that one could enter into a morally binding agreement in which one sacrifices one's liberty in exchange for a wage. My position was that a worker would be committing fraud against the employer if he attempted to retain rights to the full product of his labor. My argument was that if an employer has a "legitimate" prior claim upon the capital being used, then he has the right to dictate its terms of use. The laborer doesn't have the right to anything more than what the capitalist agrees to give, just as the capitalist doesn't have the right to take anything more than what the laborer agrees to give. (Of course, I didn't realize in my early "anarcho-capitalist" days that capitalists almost always demand more than what the worker initially agrees to give.)

My current position is that one cannot be ethically bound by agreements that restrict one's liberty to be self-governing. It has always been my view that one cannot be bound by an agreement to be a slave. Although one can enter into a contract that mandates one to serve as a slave, one should be considered free to cease honoring that contract at any time. However, I hadn't been applying this principle to all forms of domination — I only applied it to full-time chattel slavery, not to wage slavery, domestic tyranny, etc. When I was working out my views regarding this issue, I decided to simplify my decision by subjecting myself to a thought experiment: Jones is a individual who has zero access to capital, which excludes him from being self-employed. He must must find somebody who will share access to capital if he is to continue to eat. Fortunately, Smith has plenty of capital, and is willing to share it — under certain conditions of course. Smith says to Jones that he can use Smith's capital to produce, *provided* that Jones engages in 90% of the productivity while Smith engages in 10%. Also, Jones