Millennial Libertarians: The Rebirth of a Movement and the Transformation of U.S. Political Culture

Kaja Tretjak
Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/477
MILLENNIAL LIBERTARIANS: THE REBIRTH OF A MOVEMENT AND
THE TRANSFORMATION OF U.S. POLITICAL CULTURE

By

KAJA TRETJAK

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr. Leith Mullings

___________________
Date
Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Gerald Creed

___________________
Date
Executive Officer

Dr. Jeff Maskovsky
Supervisory Committee

Dr. Donald Robotham
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

MILLENNIAL LIBERTARIANS: THE REBIRTH OF A MOVEMENT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF U.S. POLITICAL CULTURE

By

Kaja Tretjak

Adviser: Professor Leith Mullings

This dissertation examines the contemporary resurgence of libertarianism in the U.S., exploring a rapidly expanding, transnational network of hundreds of thousands liberty movement participants connected through student groups, community organizations, and established institutions, as well as through social media and a vast array of online forums. Grounded in 32 months of ethnographic fieldwork and over 200 interviews, it documents the rise of a profound disenchantment, particularly among millennials, with state-based solutions to pressing contemporary problems and, more broadly, with the nation-state project itself. Drawing on first-hand accounts ranging from elite boardrooms and think tank conference rooms, to political demonstrations and direct actions, to student reading groups and gatherings of cryptoanarchist communities, the dissertation situates the ethnographic study within the broader framework of a reconfiguration of U.S. populism in the era of the security state.

The project examines how established libertarian organizations, a key component of the longstanding U.S. conservative coalition, have helped infuse libertarianism with renewed relevance for a substantial part of an entire generation deeply disheartened by a world embroiled in economic crisis and heavily militarized systems of governance. Through the consolidation of a libertarian wing of the Republican Party, parts of the liberty movement are presently shaking up the very conservative coalition that helped usher forth the movement’s revival. But
libertarianism’s resurgence is also powerfully reshaping U.S. political culture beyond formal political processes, giving rise to a proliferation of libertarian spaces that expressly reject effecting change through electoral politics and policy in favor of changing “hearts and minds” by promoting libertarian principles and social organization. Simultaneously, growing numbers of millennials influenced by the liberty movement increasingly challenge its dominant trends, focusing on the experiences of vulnerable and marginalized groups — from urging the integration of libertarianism with a broader socioeconomic critique as well as antiracism, feminism, mutual aid, and labor solidarity, to revisiting the ideas of 19th century U.S. individualist anarchists. Thus, while the libertarian political establishment is likely to continue to expand over the coming years and secure a firmer place in the Republican Party, the movement simultaneously serves as a siphon — growing numbers of millennial libertarians are presently breaking from the political right and moving closer to various forms of left libertarianism, market anarchism, mutualism, and even social anarchism. The project thus illustrates the centrality of cultural formations beyond policy and electoral politics to the largest popular movement motivated by distinctly libertarian ideas in the postwar period, as well as to reconfigurations of U.S. liberalism.

The dissertation contributes to a burgeoning literature on the resurgence of antistatist theory and organizing in the new millennium. Scholars and activists alike continue to document especially the revitalization of social anarchist traditions permeating numerous contemporary struggles, tracing how the resuscitation of social anarchist thought and activism informs important parts of extant insurgency across the globe. The U.S. liberty movement presents another key but understudied aspect of the present antistate moment. The dissertation also builds on longstanding anthropological approaches to understanding the complex processes through
which political ideologies are shaped and constituted. Through an ethnographic lens, it interrogates how deeply ingrained U.S. ideologies of freedom, individualism, and even liberalism itself are interpreted, contested, and reappropriated to both challenge and reinscribe relations of power. The libertarian resurgence represents a crucial struggle over the very meaning and direction of U.S. liberalism in our historical moment.
Acknowledgments

No project of this scope can come to fruition without the contributions of numerous people who have in various ways provided expertise, inspiration, useful criticism, encouragement, mentorship, and, occasionally, much-needed distraction. My sincere thanks to members of the CUNY Graduate Center faculty for years of input and professional guidance in this project and beyond — especially my adviser Leith Mullings, as well as my dissertation committee members Donald Robotham and Jeff Maskovsky. Jeff’s generous encouragement and direction well before this project was even conceptualized made a profound impact in ways he does not know. Michael Blim, Gerald Creed, David Harvey, Louise Lennihan, Ida Susser, and Katherine Verdery provided much insight and counsel throughout my time at the Graduate Center. Many thanks also to Sandi Morgen, who kindly enabled me to share parts of my work at the University of Oregon and who provided additional input as my external dissertation reader. A special thanks to Ellen DeRiso, the able and extremely helpful assistant program officer in the CUNY Graduate Center anthropology program, and of course to the many colleagues who offered input and feedback throughout years of seminars and conference presentations.

My gratitude goes to everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this project, and who otherwise lent time and energy to helping me understand the intricacies and rich history of the liberty movement. Numerous organizations also provided access to resources, materials, and information critical to this research. I would like to thank especially the staff, members, and affiliates of the Alliance of the Libertarian Left and the Alliance of the Libertarian Left Distro; the Atlas Economic Research Foundation; the Cato Institute; the Center for a Stateless Society; Društvo Svetilnik, especially founder and president Tanja Štumberger Porčnik; the Foundation for Economic Education; the Independent Institute, especially research fellow Anthony Gregory;
the Institute for Humane Studies, especially Senior Programs Officer Nigel Ashford; the Ludwig von Mises Institute; Students for Liberty; and Young Americans for Liberty. A special thanks also to David Townes and to Students for Liberty’s Clark Ruper and Clint Townsend; Andrew Kaluza left us well before his time, but his memory lives on in the hearts of all who knew and loved him. The dissertation would not have been possible without these individuals and many others, too numerous to list here.

My heartfelt thanks to members of the Austin, Texas libertarian community for graciously welcoming an awkward stranger in the early stages of her dissertation research and sharing their spaces and experiences throughout a period of over two years: Brave New Books, Texans for Accountable Government, especially Executive Director Heather Fazio, the University of Texas Mises Circle, and the present and former members and affiliates of the Libertarian Longhorns at the University of Texas, Austin, especially Kaitlyn Barry, Joseph Boudreau, Lorraine DeNardis, Andy Fernandez, Michael Goldstein, Jeremy Guillory, Shawn Holan, Katelyn Horn, Norman Horn, Daniel Krawisz, Melanie McGuire, Taylor Metting, Justo Montoya, Michael Moore, Brent Mowery, Chris Nenandal, José Niño, Clark Patterson, Molly Reynolds, Rafael Rodriguez, and Jason Wohlfahrt. Many thanks also to many in the broader Austin activist community for their insight and wisdom, especially Rob Adams, Catherine Bleish, Richard Boland, Antonio Buehler, John Bush, Scott Crow, Sarah Dickerson, Harold Gray, Natasha Hansen, Alex Miller, Erin Miller, Chris Nielsen, Josh “Comrade” Pineda, Crystal Poole, Debbie Russell, Monica Savant, Audrey Steiner, and Sarah Stollak, as well as all the activists I met through the Peaceful Streets Project. Many of you have become close and trusted friends, and I thank you for your support and encouragement.
I am fortunate for the many other amazing people in my life who have proved an ongoing source of strength and inspiration, especially in the darkest times. Some have helped lay the foundations for this project, while others played critical roles at various stages. It is an empirical fact that much of this dissertation would not have been written in anything resembling a coherent manner without the longstanding support of Sarah Richardson and her “writing bootcamps.” Profound thanks also to Ashley Burczak, Heather Curry, Ben Dubin-Thaler, Sam Frank, Cody Hoesly, Dusty Hoesly, and Jeff Senter. Elan Abrell’s support was especially crucial to this project, which could not have even begun, let alone been completed, without his insight and countless hours of late-night discussion and strategizing.

I owe a great debt to my incredible family for lifelong encouragement and support: my parents, Dunya and Ziga, aunt Ana, uncle Boris, as well as late grandmother Manda, great aunt Marićka, and grandfather Franc, who passed away shortly before I embarked on this project—having studied economics in Vienna during the time of Ludwig von Mises prior to interrupting his studies to fight in the anti-Nazi Partisan resistance at home, he undoubtedly would have had much wisdom to share.

Finally, I cannot imagine completing this project without the love, encouragement, intellectual acrobatics, counseling sessions, and expert editorial assistance of Benjamin Godwin. This work is dedicated to him. Of course, all errors and omissions are my own.
Table of Contents

**Introduction** .............................................................................................................................................................................. 1
Millennial Libertarianism .................................................................................................................................................................. 3
Libertarianism and Conservatism: Ruptures and Continuities ........................................................................................................ 9
Breaking from the Right: Libertarianism as Siphon .......................................................................................................................... 22
The Antistate Moment ....................................................................................................................................................................... 26
Outline of the Book ............................................................................................................................................................................. 31

**Chapter One: A Political Coalition in Turmoil** .............................................................................................................................. 37
Conservative Coalition in Crisis .......................................................................................................................................................... 40
U.S. Conservatism: New Twists in an Old Tale ................................................................................................................................ 41
Blinded by the Right: Overlooked Feuding ...................................................................................................................................... 44
Millennial Libertarianism’s Institutional Roots ................................................................................................................................ 48
“Death to Fusionism!”: Conservative Panic ..................................................................................................................................... 51

**Chapter Two: The Rise of the Libertarian Political Establishment and a Grassroots Divided** .......................................................................................................................... 59
The Tea Party vs. the Liberty Movement: Generational Lines ........................................................................................................ 62
The Liberty Movement Enters Mordor ............................................................................................................................................... 67
A Grassroots Divided ........................................................................................................................................................................... 70
Toward a Place in the GOP ................................................................................................................................................................. 75
Hearts & Minds: Millennial Libertarians Beyond the Voting Booth ................................................................................................ 78
“Fabians or Marxists?”: The History of a Dilemma .......................................................................................................................... 84
Fiscally Conservative, Socially Liberal? ............................................................................................................................................ 89

**Chapter Three: Millennial Libertarian Journeys, from Paul to Proudhon** .......................................................................................... 95
It Usually Begins with Ron Paul ............................................................................................................................................................ 97
The Austrian Appeal in the 21st Century .......................................................................................................................................... 107
Freedom ............................................................................................................................................................................................. 119
The Individual ..................................................................................................................................................................................... 130
Libertarianism’s “PR Problem” ........................................................................................................................................................ 142

**Chapter Four: Millennial Libertarian Spaces in the Antistate Moment** ............................................................................................... 151
Protect and Serve Each Other ............................................................................................................................................................... 156
The Free State Project: A Microcosm of the Liberty Movement ...................................................................................................... 165
Natural Living, Food Freedom, and Small-Scale Production ........................................................................................................ 168
Bitcoin and the Peer-to-Peer Revolution ...................................................................................................................................... 173

**Chapter Five: Liberalism Contested: The Liberty Movement’s Tapestry of Intellectual Lineages** ......................................................... 183
Toward Mutualist Anarchism ............................................................................................................................................................... 188
Theorizing U.S. Liberalism ................................................................................................................................................................. 197
Bringing Anthropology In ................................................................................................................................................................. 205
Conclusion..............................................................................................................................................210

Bibliography.............................................................................................................................................216
# Table of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Ron Paul at the University of Texas, Austin April 26, 2012, and at California State University, Chico, April 3, 2012. Photographer unknown.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.otogodfrey.com">http://www.otogodfrey.com</a></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Ron Paul at the University of California, Los Angeles. April 4, 2012. When capacity was reached with hundreds still waiting outside, students climbed trees surrounding the venue to watch Paul's speech. Photographs by <a href="http://www.otogodfrey.com">http://www.otogodfrey.com</a>.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.otogodfrey.com">http://www.otogodfrey.com</a></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Libertarian Longhorns Anti-War Rally. April 15, 2011. Austin, TX. Author’s photograph.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.otogodfrey.com">http://www.otogodfrey.com</a></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Austin Alliance for Peace Rally. April 14, 2012. Austin, TX. Author’s photograph.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.otogodfrey.com">http://www.otogodfrey.com</a></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Konkin’s classic essay on counter-economics, reprinted by the Distro of the Libertarian Left. <a href="http://distro.libertarianleft.org/category/zines">http://distro.libertarianleft.org/category/zines</a>.</td>
<td><a href="http://distro.libertarianleft.org/category/zines">http://distro.libertarianleft.org/category/zines</a></td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Photographs of the New Year’s Day 2012 incident, taken by an anonymous bystander, that helped launch the Peaceful Streets Project. <a href="http://peacefulstreets.com">http://peacefulstreets.com</a>.</td>
<td><a href="http://peacefulstreets.com">http://peacefulstreets.com</a></td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Peaceful Streets Project founder Antonio Buehler making new friends while getting out the word about an upcoming Know Your Rights training in east Austin. June 2012.</td>
<td><a href="http://peacefulstreets.com">http://peacefulstreets.com</a></td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Peaceful Streets Project founder Antonio Buehler greets supporters after being released from jail following his second arrest during a copwatch action.</td>
<td><a href="http://peacefulstreets.com">http://peacefulstreets.com</a></td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Public-key cryptography. Courtesy of Daniel Krawisz.</td>
<td><a href="http://BenjaminGodwin.com">http://BenjaminGodwin.com</a></td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Facebook Mutualism group banner featuring key figures in the tradition.</td>
<td><a href="http://BenjaminGodwin.com">http://BenjaminGodwin.com</a></td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

ALL — Alliance of the Libertarian Left
CPAC — Conservative Political Action Conference
DIY — do it yourself
FEE — Foundation for Economic Education
GOP — Grand Old Party (Republican Party)
IHS — Institute for Humane Studies
LP — Libertarian Party
LvMI — Ludwig von Mises Institute
NSA — National Security Agency
P2P — Peer-to-peer
RNC — Republican National Committee
SFL — Students for Liberty
UT — University of Texas, Austin
YAL — Young Americans for Liberty
Introduction

2011 was the second year in a row that I traveled to Washington, D.C. for the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the country’s largest conservative gathering. But throughout the three-day affair, the predictable CPAC crowd of pudgy middle-aged men and pearl-clad women in business attire intermingled with a colorful cast of characters less likely to be associated with the nation’s largest annual conservative convergence. Sporting dreadlocks, sleeve tattoos, face piercings, and pink hairdos, representatives of groups from the Ladies of Liberty Alliance to various chapters of Students for Sensible Drug Policy joined other college-aged young people in, for the second year in a row, bringing now former Texas Representative Ron Paul victory in the CPAC presidential straw poll — once seen as a key indicator of which presidential hopefuls were favored by movement conservatives.

This project began as an ethnographic study of present-day conservatism in the U.S. As part of my broader interest in the role of ideas in social change, I was at that time focused on the production and dissemination of knowledge by conservative movement elites. In familiarizing myself with the movement’s disparate projects and varied intellectual traditions, I attended dozens of events organized by conservative think tanks, grassroots political organizations, and university centers spearheaded by conservative academics. But CPAC 2011 was markedly different. It ultimately became known as “the libertarian CPAC takeover” among attendees and observers across ideological lines.

During my first afternoon at D.C.’s Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, I entered the back of a packed auditorium as former Vice President Dick Cheney presented former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld with the CPAC Defender of the Constitution Award. Slowly making my way through the animated crowd, I found myself quickly surrounded by young people shouting “War
criminals!” and “Terrorists!” amidst loud booing and hissing. While some attendees retaliated with loud chants of “USA! USA!,” the event’s vibe felt much more akin to an antiwar demonstration than the nation’s largest conservative gathering. “Anti-war! Anti-hate! Together we will smash the state!” a group of roughly a dozen college-aged agitators promptly struck back at the patriots, several waving a huge black and yellow flag, bisected diagonally. “End the drug wars!” bellowed someone across the convention hall. In front of me, a tall, gangly young man wearing a red bowtie and slightly awkward-fitting suit chimed in with a shrill “Burn the Constitution!” to emphatic cheers and pats on the back.

I would have readily assumed that some kind of left activist group had infiltrated CPAC in protest, had it not been for the expressions on the sea of faces in the crowd. While several seemed equally perplexed, many bore the irritated expression of someone confronted, yet again, with a familiar and intensifying nuisance. For some, at least, the uproar was neither unexpected nor entirely out of the ordinary.

Event organizers removed a handful of particularly vocal hecklers. A group of people clad in Ron Paul gear rose and walked out en masse. An older gentleman standing nearby muttered, partly to me and partly to himself, “Wow. Cheney and Rumsfeld aren’t even safe at CPAC anymore. What is going on here?”

What is going on? Who are the hundreds of thousands of libertarians pouring energy into the liberty movement, as the rapidly escalating formation is termed by participants? Why is this phenomenon only now gaining widespread popularity, when established libertarian institutions date back many decades? And of what significance are these dynamics for U.S. political culture? This is the story of how participants in the liberty movement that first swept across the country in
the early 2000s are presently constructing disparate visions of possible futures, interpreting, contesting, and reconfiguring the U.S. liberal tradition.

**Millennial Libertarianism**

The nation-state system is presently in the midst of a metamorphic crisis, the full extent and particularities of which remain to be fully grasped. Departing from earlier debates about the end of the nation-state in the current era of globalization, scholars continue to interrogate processes from the rising power of multilateral agencies such as the IMF and World Bank; an increasing “privatization” of the state in various forms, in some parts of the world coupled with violence on the part of non-state groups (cf. Appadurai 2002); as well as the appropriation of governance by social movements and NGOs, the explosion of which in the postwar era has led to the emergence and intensification of “cross-border activism” through a wide range of “transnational advocacy networks” (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

The new millennium in the U.S. commences in a post-hegemonic moment across ideological lines, prompting diagnoses of “the waning of the utopian idea” as a fundamental historical and political symptom (Jameson 2004:36). A bleak dejection, indeed a desperation, haunts many spaces in the Marxist and related traditions. Debate continues as to what extent the crimes of actually-existing socialism, and the corresponding delegitimation of its attendant intellectual lineages, have disabused these traditions of utopian imperatives, leaving their foremost thinkers seemingly unable or unwilling to articulate political programs beyond social democratic reformism. Meanwhile, the global financial crisis of the late 2000s and resulting economic developments worldwide make a cruel joke of the visions promised by market-valorizing advocates of existing political economic arrangements. Since the early 1970s, the sharp shift away from public social provisioning has been peddled in the name of a *laissez-faire* ideal of
highly limited government across the board — with the exceptions of government protections for corporate behemoths, global military adventurism, rapidly intensifying surveillance, escalating militarization of law enforcement, and mass incarceration. Through a wide range of analytical frameworks, a vast literature on neoliberalism\(^1\) analyzes this transition from the welfare state. Anthropologists have taken the lead in continuously highlighting “the contingent, contradictory, and unstable character of neoliberal processes” (Tretjak and Abrell 2011:29), challenging totalizing views of neoliberalism that see it as a unitary, monolithic force acting everywhere upon the world. Rather than identifying the unifying strands of neoliberalism across disparate contexts, Clarke suggests understanding neoliberalism as a “social-political project that attempts to conform the world to its logic” (2001:10).

It is in this context that, in the late 2000s, the resurgence of libertarianism\(^2\) in the U.S. erupted in “the largest popular movement motivated by distinctly libertarian ideas about war, money, and the role of government we’ve seen in the postwar period” (Doherty 2009). While libertarian figures and institutions have aimed to mobilize a popular movement for decades, it was only recently that Ron Paul gained “rockstar status” among young people who routinely pack stadiums by the thousands for his speeches. Simultaneously, youth libertarian organizations

---

\(^1\) As is well known, neoliberalism as a political economic process aims to promote human well-being through an institutional framework comprised of ostensibly free markets, free trade, and private property rights guaranteed by the state, the actions of which beyond this ought to be highly limited. Contemporary policies under the neoliberal rubric include deregulation of private industry, privatization of public services, and reduction of public expenditures for social provision. The rise of neoliberalism is associated with the economic restructuring of Pinochet’s Chile under U.S. influence during the 1970s, and, subsequently, with the regimes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan more generally (Harvey 2005). Among other important contributions, analysts have theorized the different moments and changing forms of neoliberalism throughout its ascent to global prominence (Peck and Tickell 2002) as well as the potential transcendence into a post-neoliberal era (MacDonald & Ruckert 2009); the role of state action in neoliberalism (Bourdieu 2003; Sassen 1996); and neoliberalism’s ideological and political dimensions (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Klein 2007).

\(^2\) In this book, the term “libertarian” reflects a particular usage popularized in the U.S. and referring to a tradition heavily influenced by mainstream classical liberal political thought. It should not be confused with the meaning of “libertarian” in many other contexts, where the term is associated with social anarchist approaches that generally challenge private ownership of the means of production.
have grown dramatically: By 2013/14, Students for Liberty’s (SFL) global campus network has expanded to 1,369 student groups since its inception in 2008, while Young Americans for Liberty (YAL), also established in 2008, boasts a network of about 162,000 youth activists and over 500 student chapters across the U.S. Mises University, an intensive seminar billed as the world’s leading instructional program in the laissez-faire Austrian school of economics, began in 1986 with a mere handful of attendees, but now draws hundreds of students from around the globe to the Auburn, Alabama-based Ludwig von Mises Institute (LvMI) each summer. Further, the liberty movement increasingly transcends borders. In 2013/14, two new SFL Regional Executive Boards in Africa and South Asia joined existing Regional Executive Boards in North America, Europe, Brazil, and the Spanish-speaking Americas. In July 2014, 47 attendees gathered in Melbourne for the first annual Australia-New Zealand SFL Conference. European SFL spans campuses in 28 countries, and organized ten regional conferences across the continent in 2013/14; 560 attendees from 28 countries gathered in Berlin for the third annual European-wide conference in March 2014. African SFL unites 35 student groups across the continent. In July 2013, over 350 students gathered at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria for the first West African Regional Conference; 26 students from Ghana who raised funds to rent a bus to the conference were denied entry at the Nigerian border, unable to pay the bribes demanded by border guards.

While much recent attention to U.S. conservatism has focused on the tea party phenomenon, the liberty movement, whose participants do occasionally overlap with the tea party, is a distinct, largely unexplored assemblage frequently heavily critical of the tea party — in the words of one longtime libertarian in his late twenties, largely for its “rampant nationalistic and xenophobic” tendencies. Liberty movement participants in fact come from a broad range of political backgrounds. A substantial number joined the movement after supporting Barack
Obama in 2008, feeling intensely betrayed by that administration’s subsequent policies especially on war and civil liberties. Further, the movement increasingly attracts veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, with groups such as Veterans for Ron Paul playing an important role in disseminating the libertarian message.

FIGURE 1: Ron Paul at the University of Texas, Austin, April 26, 2012, and at California State University, Chico, April 3, 2012. Photographer unknown.

FIGURE 2: Ron Paul at the University of California, Los Angeles, April 4, 2012. When capacity was reached with hundreds still waiting outside, students climbed trees surrounding the venue to watch Paul’s speech. Photos by http://www.otogodfrey.com/.

Libertarianism presently holds a renewed relevance for a substantial part of an entire generation gravely disenchanted by a world embroiled in economic crisis and heavily militarized systems of governance, youth who share a deep-seated suspicion regarding the capability of state
action to meet the challenges presented by any number of contemporary dilemmas. While libertarian misgivings regarding state involvement in fiscal and economic affairs are well-known, approaches vary greatly within the strikingly multifaceted movement and draw upon disparate intellectual lineages. The single set of issues that presently unites the vast majority of U.S. liberty movement participants across ideological divides is a critique of state-sponsored violence: vehement opposition to U.S. imperialism and military action abroad, and corresponding outrage at civil liberties encroachments and intensifying surveillance at home alongside the war on drugs and systemic police abuse. Thus, profound esteem for former Congressman Paul’s lifelong commitment to non-interventionist foreign policy and outspoken critique of both parties on these fronts is nearly universal among the movement’s younger participants. Regardless of their, or Paul’s, other views, these young libertarians repeatedly tell me, his truly uncompromising antiwar advocacy is far and away from what they have seen in nearly any other politician. They are, they say, accustomed to panderers, careerists, and opportunists — in their life experience, the entire political system holds very little credibility.

In the present era of the security state, a significant segment of an entire generation sees state-based solutions as much more likely to exacerbate than resolve problems, and looks to the libertarian tradition in envisioning alternative modes of social organization. Largely born to baby boomers roughly between the late 1970s and early 2000s, these liberty movement participants are overwhelmingly socially progressive, particularly as regards support of LGBTQ communities. Their world is the post-9/11 U.S., marked by the war on terror and corresponding crusade against “domestic terrorism” that transcended the George W. Bush presidency into the Barack Obama administration. Their debates, driven by increasingly militarized systems of governance in the name of national security and public safety, focus on the extent to which the U.S. is, or
could become, proto-fascist or worse. Eyes glued to laptops, tablets, and smart phones, they intensely follow the ongoing whistleblower revelations of worldwide government corruption that further implicate the U.S. in torture and civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, using social media and online forums to dissect in detail each emerging piece of leaked information — from WikiLeaks publications to former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden’s release of classified information documenting the agency’s global surveillance apparatus. Their cynicism mounts as they struggle with why such concerns are not the domain of either political party. Today, more Republicans than Democrats oppose the NSA’s collection of phone and internet data as part of anti-terrorism efforts. In January 2014, the Republican National Committee nearly unanimously passed a resolution condemning the NSA’s domestic surveillance programs, drawing fire from many GOP officials. While almost certainly related to the present control of the White House by the Democratic Obama administration, such developments nevertheless fuel young liberty movement participants’ skepticism of Democrats as a serious alternative to the war hawkishness and disregard for civil liberties associated with Republicans. Most cannot recall a time when the U.S. was not at war. They are millennial libertarians.

---

3 A January 2014 Pew Research Center and USA Today poll found Democrats more supportive of NSA programs, with support decreasing across party lines. Of the 1,504 adults surveyed, 53 percent opposed the NSA’s data-collection practices while 40 percent were supportive, with 37 percent of Republicans and 46 percent of Democrats backing these efforts. The partisan gap is smaller than in June 2013, when 45 percent of Republicans and 58 percent of Democrats supported the measures. At that time, 50 percent of those polled supported such practices and 44 percent were opposed (Pew 2014).

FIGURE 4: Austin Alliance for Peace Rally. April 14, 2012. Austin, TX. Author’s photograph.

Libertarianism and Conservatism: Ruptures and Continuities

The import of the current historical moment notwithstanding, libertarianism’s resurgence could not have materialized on the present scale without the robust foundations built by libertarian and conservative institutions over the latter half of the 20th century. A key component
of the longstanding U.S. conservative coalition that marked the U.S. political landscape for much of the post-New Deal era, libertarian figures have aimed to mobilize a popular movement for decades, consolidating a humbling infrastructure of organizations and a robust intellectual foundation largely with the funding and support of conservative behemoths. Yet libertarian ideas have only recently gained widespread traction, particularly among youth. Today, movement participants sometimes joke that if you put two libertarians in a room, you get three theories of libertarianism. While this is of course somewhat of an exaggeration, the sentiment encapsulates the wide range of thought and values currently permeating the movement. Its various spaces, large and small, span a wide range of ideological commitments as well as rigorous — and often competing — intellectual lineages. A flourishing and rapidly expanding, transnational network connects thousands through student groups, grassroots community organizations, and established classical liberal institutions alike, as well as through social media and a vast array of online forums. Together, established libertarian and traditional conservative organizations have helped infuse libertarianism with renewed relevance for a generation both eager to challenge existing political economic arrangements and wary of formal political processes.

Paradoxically, libertarianism’s revival is at present rocking the very political coalition that helped bring this resurgence about. Many libertarians differ sharply with traditional conservatives on cultural and civil liberties matters while decrying the nationalistic bravado pervading tea party and neoconservative circles. These dynamics have shaken the Republican Party as Liberty Republican caucuses form across the nation and the rise of the libertarian “Rand Paul Republican” wing divides the GOP. Many of the ideas that have inspired the growing libertarian political establishment remain articulated in their most severe formulations by Ron Paul himself. In addition to a moratorium on the Transportation Security
Administration’s (TSA) airport searches, Paul has called for an immediate end to bailouts; an eventual end to the federal income tax; a trillion-dollar cut to the federal budget; the abolition of the Departments of Commerce, Education, Energy, the Interior, and Housing and Urban Development; as well as the repeal of the Patriot Act and the repatriation of U.S. troops stationed overseas. Paul remains one of the fiercest critics of the Federal Reserve, calling for the dissolution of the central banking system and a return to the gold standard — Austrian economic theory, which drives Paul’s critique of the monetary system, attributes “boom and bust” business cycles to state credit expansion, including the printing of additional notes by central banks and the ensuing devaluation of currency, a topic addressed in further detail in the final section of chapter three.

Despite antigovernment sentiments, however, much of the libertarian political establishment presently on the rise remains “system-supportive” (Diamond 1995:6), bolstering moral traditionalism and economic hierarchies through government — especially via policy efforts framed in the discourse of *laissez faire* and the support of predominantly Republican candidates who spew populist, market-oriented rhetoric. And despite their challenge to the current Republican establishment, many key liberty movement figures remain the familiar advocates of “limited government” of the sort that ushered forth the tax revolt of the late 1970s and early 1980s, recently termed “one of the great libertarian victories of the past few decades” by David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a longstanding libertarian think tank. Libertarians may quibble about fiscal policy and disagree about precisely where and how much public spending is permissible, but at the end of the day any budget cuts are a welcome blow to the power of the leviathan — even if, as is often the case in practice, such triumphs remain limited to the dismantling of services for low-income families and individuals.
But in another paradoxical twist, a rising trend presently thriving among millennial libertarians threatens the logic of limited government in significant ways — albeit, as critics would have it, with something far worse. Put another way by a young libertarian highly critical of the conservative/libertarian political coalition, “unintended consequences are a bitch.” She was referring to the blow dealt to the Republican political establishment by the liberty movement. But her observation is an equally apt account of developments beyond the arena of electoral politics and policy. As millennial libertarians take up the libertarian tradition on their own terms, their interpretations increasingly challenge the limited government framework of much libertarian thought. Today, a rapidly growing approach dominates the movement’s radical spaces and is particularly popular among youth: anarcho-capitalism or libertarian anarchism.⁴ Advocates of anarcho-capitalism promote social and economic arrangements grounded entirely in private law and “genuinely free markets,” devoid of any entanglements with the state. In this view, the state is unique in its fundamental monopoly on the legitimate use of force and is thus incompatible with a truly free society. Focused on the state as the primary obstacle to freedom, many in this tradition commonly ignore matters ranging from corporate power and structural poverty to cultural politics, including exclusion from civic life as well as the hierarchies of family structures and private institutions. This approach differs profoundly from the strategies of competing lineages aiming to hammer the nails in the coffin of neoliberalism, which reach outside of the liberal tradition itself and ardently highlight its consistent failure to deliver on its promises. Key anarcho-libertarian figures reinterpret the classical liberal tradition to frame their

⁴ For clarity and consistency I retain the movement’s own term “anarcho-capitalism” in referring to libertarian support for social and economic arrangements entirely devoid of the state. Movement participants also use the term interchangeably with “libertarian anarchism.” Both are particular usages stemming from the U.S. context, and many social anarchists reject the libertarian claim to the anarchist tradition in light of the strong libertarian commitment to a private property rights framework.
interventions as *the logical extension* of liberalism, even as they call for a departure from the liberal
democratic state — a subject explored in greater detail in chapter three.

The black and yellow flag waved by the chanting detractors of Cheney and Rumsfeld was
the flag of anarcho-capitalism. Replacing the red associated with social anarchism, the yellow
represents gold or, more broadly, means of exchange unhampered by state intervention.
Anarcho-capitalists insist that imposing limits on state action has never worked to secure true
freedom, in this view bundled inextricably with private property and unfettered market
exchange. This was what the young man wearing the bowtie meant in shouting, “Burn the
Constitution!” during CPAC’s presentation of the Defender of the Constitution Award. He was
not making a symbolic statement to the effect that contemporary politicians are corrupting the
vision of the country’s founders, a familiar sentiment in circles that seek to restore an idyllic U.S.
past and return to a bygone era prior to the intrusion of Big Government. In his view and that of
countless other libertarian anarchists, the metaphoric call to “burn the Constitution” represents a
rational progression *beyond* the liberal democratic state, seen as the logical conclusion of the
classical liberal trajectory. Paradoxically, then, the liberty movement — which attained its
present central role in U.S. political culture through a longstanding coalition with traditional
conservatism — is today not only destabilizing the Republican political establishment, albeit in
uneven ways, but increasingly fosters a turn away from engagement with the state and formal
political processes. As we will see in the following section, however, anarcho-capitalism is not the
sole antistate approach embraced by liberty movement youth.

The libertarian resurgence has also emerged hand in hand with the peer-to-peer (P2P)
revolution. Libertarian anarchists in particular have long been among the foremost champions of
decentralized, distributed P2P network structures. Countless libertarian forums apply Austrian
economics in support of the distributed digital currency and P2P payment system Bitcoin, at
times to the chagrin of established movement institutions. Bitcoin uses the secure communication
techniques of modern cryptography applied by countless other emerging initiatives — for
instance, the anonymous internet browser Tor and the online black market Silk Road — to
defend against surveillance, evade censorship, and engage in counter-economics. In the view of
many libertarian anarchist millennials, cryptographic communities both embody libertarian
social organization and demonstrate its desirability — enabling secure communication as well as
unregulated, consensual economic exchange absent any central authority or intermediaries.

The bowtie-wearing heckler was himself an avid participant in cryptographic
communities. His name was Scott, at the time an undergraduate student in his last year at a large
public university. He was from a small midwestern town, the son of a lab technician and an
elementary school teacher. While he received a college scholarship, it was not enough to cover all
of tuition and expenses, even combined with his part time jobs at the university library and
admissions office. Like many of his peers, he accumulated thousands of dollars in student loan
debt. And like many others seeking work upon graduation at the close of the new millennium’s
first decade, he found himself struggling in a tough market saturated by many qualified
applicants — in his case, the marketing and public relations industry. After the event, I
introduced myself and explained that I hoped to learn more about contemporary libertarianism
for my dissertation project. As was the case with many people I spoke with throughout my
fieldwork, he was at first somewhat reluctant to talk further but ultimately agreed, bringing along
his friend Alex.

“This is the guy who introduced me to anarchism!” he smiled, pointing to Alex as we
waited in an endless coffee line that wove throughout the bustling hotel lobby. Growing
increasingly animated, Scott recalled meeting Alex on an online libertarian discussion forum several years earlier. Before college, Scott didn’t have a particularly strong political identity. Although his dad on occasion listened to conservative talk radio and both parents consistently voted Republican, politics was not a central focus of life at home. He grew up attending church every Sunday with his family, who he described as “your typical small town conservatives. They didn’t go to rallies or meetings or anything like that.” One of his earliest childhood memories was helping his dad pick out a U.S. flag and display it on their front yard.

While attending a small, predominantly white public high school, he made a handful of good friends and spent his free time reading fantasy novels and playing video games. “But I got more and more interested in things happening in the world. I mean, things were messed up! The housing crisis and unemployment and everything. And the constant wars, militarization everywhere. Even years and years after 9/11, none of it seemed to be getting better.” In his senior year of high school, two friends moved across the country when their parents lost their jobs due to downsizing. Scott’s parents had to take out a second mortgage; they stayed up late at night talking about mounting bills and making things work. A fellow high school student who had joined the Army returned largely paralyzed from the neck down, having suffered a combat injury in Afghanistan.

Scott entered college looking for answers. “I wanted to get involved and learn about what people were doing about all this. For a while though all I found was the campus Republicans and Democrats and nothing they were saying struck me as very interesting or relevant. A lot of the same old, same old. We have the ISO (International Socialist Organization) too. I went to a meeting one time, my first year!”
“You what?” Alex laughed at him. He was teasing, but there was warmth in how he spoke to Scott, like a caring older brother. We had finally reached the café counter, and Alex bought our coffees.

“Yeah man, I told you! It was an anti-war speaker, it was good so I stayed for the discussion after. That was weird. It was all about how capitalism is evil, but there wasn’t any economic analysis there. They ended up talking for an hour about whether anything would change if people used violence to get rid of the elite. And who would count, and the ethics of that. It just seemed stupid.” Scott went on, “It just struck me as out of touch, kind of like a conservative meeting I went to on campus. That was all about how gay people are ruining the country. Whatever, it was like four people there,” he rolled his eyes.

Scott first encountered libertarianism that year. “I saw flyers up everywhere around campus. They said something about how both the left and right are wrong.” Through the campus libertarian organization, he became immersed in libertarian philosophy and Austrian economics. He read voraciously, from the classics of the Austrian school to the daily columns on the websites of organizations like Cato, the Foundation for Economic Education, and the Mises Institute. He attended libertarian conferences, carpooling to nearby towns with his new community of college friends, and engaged in countless online exchanges late into the night on forums such as the one through which he met Alex.

Alex was a libertarian anarchist, and had identified that way for years. “He always said that there’s nothing the government does that’s worth doing that can’t be done better through people freely associating with each other. He really gave me a lot to think about,” Scott told me. He described his extensive chats with Alex during years of “wrestling with this idea that you need some kind of state for society to function. I wasn’t interested in small-scale DIY communities. I
wanted to know if this thing is really a necessary evil for a complex society with technological innovation.”

For Scott, here was no turning back “from the logical conclusion” after reading the work of Murray Rothbard, the intellectual godfather of libertarian anarchists credited with furnishing then-nascent libertarianism with its first cohort of twenty-somethings in the 1950s (Doherty 2007:251), as well as with coining the term “anarcho-capitalism.”

“I was always talking to people and reading about the particulars of how this or that could be handled in a libertarian anarchist society. I read histories that showed how time and time again state involvement hurts people, even when it’s supposed to help. Yet we’re all still hoping that somehow it can be salvaged. For a long time I couldn’t bring myself to abandon the state idea altogether, no matter what the facts showed. Which is that it’s precisely the state that oppresses people and gets in the way of a prosperous world, a harmonious world, and it has since the beginning.”

Scott repeatedly noted how all of the thinkers and writers from whom he learned so much — from Ludwig von Mises to Milton Friedman to F.A. Hayek — stopped short of abandoning the liberal state. “It was Rothbard who spelled anarchism out for me intellectually, even though it took a while to sink in. For him it was the only logical conclusion, the logical extension of laissez faire and the classical liberal tradition. We’re the real liberals!”

Throughout Scott’s intellectual and political journey, Alex wasn’t just a mentor and constant source of information; he provided daily support when Scott’s newfound interests began causing tensions at home.

“One of the biggest things that kept fueling all of this for me was the wars. My parents didn’t get it. They thought I came back from college some kind of leftist hippie. I tried explaining
to them that if they were serious about all the limited government stuff, they need to see the full implications of that. Stop listening to all these conservative pundits and founding fathers worshipers. There was never some golden age of freedom in this country, and there never will be as long as the state is around, with the corporate and government elite at the top throwing the rest of us some crumbs every once in a while. I mean, look around. Economic devastation everywhere and the assholes at the top jet-setting all over the world. Meanwhile the rest of us can’t get jobs or are getting laid off, foreclosed on, even though we did everything right. Or worse, coming back from the Middle East in body bags.”

He caught himself becoming louder and his voice trailed off. After a few moments, Alex’s somber tone broke the silence.

“We’ve been lied to.”

Drawing encouragement from his quiet friend’s input, Scott went on, increasingly impassioned. “How many times did church start with prayers for our troops? Every Sunday we prayed for them. I walked around everywhere with those yellow ribbons, the whole neighborhood we covered with them. But what about everyone else dying in Iraq and Afghanistan? All those kids. No one ever mentioned that at church. No one ever talked about why any of it is necessary. It’s the duty of all Christians to condemn this carnage instead of getting in bed with the state propaganda machine.”

As it turned out, Scott was highly inspired by Norman Horn, the founder of the blog LibertarianChristians.com, who I came to know well during my fieldwork. Norman, who holds a master’s degree in theology, was finishing his Ph.D. in chemical engineering at the University of Texas in Austin while serving as the music minister at a local Church of Christ congregation. Scott described poring over the blog articles, even sharing several with his dad.
An outspoken critic of the war effort, Norman had drafted “An Open Letter for Peace,” which appealed to church leaders to lead prayers for those suffering wrongfully from the war: “We rarely, if ever, hear prayers for the innocent people in Iraq that die on a daily basis, either from indiscriminate killing by our own military or civil unrest that results from a country torn apart by war,” read the letter. It proposed “that if a church bulletin includes prayer request for ‘Family Members in the Military,’ that it should also include mention of the innocent and oppressed in Iraq and Afghanistan, especially our Iraqi and Afghan brothers and sisters in Christ, and for an end to war. Second, we propose that the church leaders take the lead in consistently mentioning the same in prayer with the congregation on Sunday mornings. If the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective, then surely instituting this practice will do good both for these victims and for our own spirits.”

Scott hoped his church would embrace the proposals, engaging in numerous conversations with the church leadership on his visits home from college. The church leaders, however, were not sympathetic. He ultimately distanced himself from the institution, continuing his spiritual journey and pursuing his interests in theology on his own.

“This has probably been the one thing that’s caused issues between me and my family. It wasn’t a rejection of Christian teachings, or even a real break with conservatism. The economic elements of conservatism in this country, the only ones my family’s really concerned with, come from classical liberalism, and what I was telling them about was the ultimate realization of that. But that dogmatic patriotism just completely blinded them. I didn’t understand before how powerful those ideas are. I mean, I did in the abstract but it was really hard to accept how my parents, my family, everyone around me couldn’t see through it.”
Amidst these developments, Scott’s full embrace of Rothbard’s “logical extension” ultimately arrived. His recollection bore a resemblance to “the click moment” described by some feminists in recounting an awakening of their feminist consciousness, the moment when the interrelation of their own freedom with the broader women’s liberation movement became clear.

“I was driving to my parents’ house for the holidays. It was on this residential road. A dad was walking behind a little kid riding a tricycle. Other people were walking around, a lot of families. Some people were throwing snowballs. It just kind of hit me. None of these people are doing anything because of the state right now. They’re having their own conversations, thinking their thoughts, planning their futures. If, let’s say, that little kid rode his tricycle into the road at full speed, the state wouldn’t be there to do anything. It would be other people — the dad, the drivers, maybe the other people right by him — that could jump in. Anarchism is here, it’s us.”

He went on, “The basic premise isn’t some theoretical abstraction. It surrounds us all the time, every day. I messaged Alex from my car, right when I pulled into my parents’ driveway. I said, ‘I think I’m an anarchist.’”

As we were parting ways several hours later, he asked whether I know about or happen to have bought bitcoin. I had, some time before at the suggestion of an Austin libertarian friend for a few dollars per bitcoin. “Hold on to it. We should really talk about that more . . . People are always thinking about libertarian anarchism as though some transition could happen overnight where all governments just disappear. And then they ask about everything insane that would happen after that. The future of libertarianism is cyberspatial.”

We kept in touch and met up again over two years later at a libertarian conference. He recalled out conversation at CPAC, and had been thinking about it lately. He told me he didn’t think he had quite the right words to describe his experience on that drive to his parents’ house.
And he had read something recently that he wanted to share, a few paragraphs in particular, because it conveys his experience very well. The selection was from a short piece by Jeffrey Tucker, the tech-savvy libertarian anarchist whose shrewd analysis, coupled with a playful, accessible style, has made him an icon in the eyes of young acolytes across the globe — some even donning his signature bowtie look. (Scott had, by that time, abandoned his bowtie. “I realized it looks a lot better on Tucker,” he grinned).

In the passages Scott showed me, Tucker (2013) described his own journey toward libertarian anarchism:

What I gradually discovered in the course of my daily life is that anarchism is all around us. The State does not wake us up in the mornings, make our beds, weave our sheets, build our houses, make our cars work, cook our food, cause us to work hard, produce the books we read, manage our houses of worship, give us clothes, keep the time, choose our friends and loved ones, play the music we love, produce the movies we watch, care for our kids, tend to our parents, choose where we vacation, dictate our conversations, make our holidays beautiful, or much of anything else. These are all things we do ourselves. We shape our own world. Through the exercise of human volition, we all work to make the world around us orderly. . .

We are on the ground floor of institutions like 3-D printing, alternative currencies, and cloud-based civilizations capable of giving us more movies, books, art, and wisdom than any human being in past ages could have acquired in several lifetimes. This newly emerged world is transforming our lives. Take notice: No State did this, no State approved this, and no State is guiding this.

Finally, let me admit that my anarchism is probably more practical than ideological—which is the reverse of what it is for the most well-known anarchist thinkers in history. I see the orderliness of human volition and action all around me. I find it inspiring. It frees my mind to understand what is truly important in life. I can see reality for what it is. It is not some far-flung ideology that makes me long for a world without the State but rather the practical realities of the human struggle to make something of this world though our own efforts.
Breaking from the Right: Libertarianism as Siphon

The economic hardship wrought by global structural transformation has profoundly impacted every facet of life in the U.S., including ushering forth unprecedented downward mobility in the middle classes (Storper 2000). Coupled with rapidly escalating militarization, the current political economic climate powerfully affects people like Scott. Even though he “did everything right,” the just deserts to which someone like him was duly entitled, the American dream of prosperity and endless opportunity brought about by hard work, if they ever existed at all, have vanished.

The themes permeating his account are evocative of Benson’s (2012:21) concept of “plighted citizenship.” Building on Berlant’s “imperiled privilege” (1997), Benson develops the concept to describe the prevalent model of an ideal citizen unfairly damaged but inherently worthy, one whose situation of disadvantage and misfortune does not index blameworthiness. This vernacular form of the politics of victimhood, which Benson examines in the context of U.S. tobacco farmers facing industrial restructuring, stems from a social context rife with assessments of who is deserving and who undeserving, of when compassion and pity are warranted and when indifference is acceptable. In this modality of citizenship, particular assumptions about the moral worthiness of certain types of people underlie how valuable to the nation as a whole they are perceived to be.

In part, this book explores the terrain on which such politics of betrayal and victimhood play out and take on new forms. These themes have been engaged extensively, for instance, in the context of fraught masculinity (Faludi 1999) and numerous studies of white working and middle class protest. Scott’s reflection upon his situation, reminiscent of a familiar populist politics, invokes the notion of “plighted citizenship”—much like the accounts of many liberty
movement participants. Yet the politics of millennial libertarians on these fronts manifest less in
demonizing particular groups deemed responsible for “taking our jobs” or unfairly benefiting
from status-conscious policies, although this certainly occurs. Rather, liberty movement
participants much more commonly embrace “colorblind” and related individualist perspectives,
although they are certainly not alone in this; an extensive scholarship interrogates the ideology of
colorblindness in other contexts, highlighting, in part, “the transformation of practices and
ideologies of racism to a configuration that flourishes without official support of legal and civic
While standard libertarian analysis takes (some) dynamics of power and domination extremely
seriously, other existing hierarchies and forms of subordination are erased through the imposition
of a shared plight. In the liberty movement, this occurs through deployment of the “individual vs.
the state” framework: we the people are being unjustifiably oppressed and exploited by state action.
This “individual vs. the state” account, even in its most radical libertarian formulation, has
important limitations. As some libertarian anarchists themselves routinely highlight, it is expertly
harnessed to promote specific political and business interests in the current system. But it further
acts to erase the particular impacts of broad-based political economic transformation upon those
differently situated across axes of race, class, and gender. As explored in chapter two, the
understanding of (state-based) oppression as a uniform condition both further entrenches and
helps reconfigure existing forms of subordination and stratification across such axes. In a twist of
irony, a hyper-individualist framework — by essentializing and privileging a certain form of
subordination — in fact serves to mask the highly particular experiences of differently situated
individuals.
Yet these points are not lost on many millennial libertarians. Paradoxically, the resurgence of libertarianism — facilitated in great part through the support of expressly conservative institutions — has also ushered forth a revival of left libertarian traditions centered on the experiences of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Small but rapidly expanding parts of the movement and fellow travelers are extremely critical of “vulgar libertarian” apologism (Carson 2007:142) for existing economic hierarchies, urging the integration of libertarianism with a broader socioeconomic critique as well as antiracism, feminism, mutual aid, and labor solidarity. Many consciously reject the term “capitalism,” opting instead for the moniker “market anarchist” to draw a sharp distinction between the market form and the economic features of actually-existing capitalism. Such approaches critique “vulgar libertarians” for imagining the end of state control as “freeing business to do much what it had been doing before, rather than unleashing competing forms of economic organization, which might radically transform market forms from the bottom up” (Chartier and Johnson 2011:6). Further, millennial libertarian efforts ranging from the blog Thoughts on Liberty to the Libertarian Anti-Racist Alliance challenge status-blind approaches and promote understandings of both privilege and structural inequality, all the while retaining as central the concepts of the individual, market exchange, and, in most cases, classical liberal understandings of private property.

While not limited to anarchist perspectives, many of these approaches are presently at the forefront of resuscitating the ideas of 19th century individualist anarchists, a widely under-researched topic. Individualist anarchism, a term deriving from 19th century anarchist thought and primarily associated with the U.S., refers to a loose set of philosophies highlighting the primacy of the individual will over external formations such as the community, custom, the state, morality, and religion. Profoundly influenced by French theorist and organizer Pierre-Joseph
Proudhon, U.S. individualist anarchists of the time included William Greene, Benjamin Tucker and Josiah Warren, as well as Ezra and Angela Heywood, imprisoned for disseminating birth control information. Moses Harman may have been the first to publicly attack marital rape in print in the 19th century, through his anarchist/feminist publication *Lucifer the Lightbearer*; his daughter Lillian refused to change her name following her non-state wedding (Presley 2014).

This individualist anarchist tradition was throughout the 20th century largely supplanted by, on the one hand, various forms of social anarchism associated with activists such as Emma Goldman and, on the other, by the Austrian school individualism that predominantly informs the liberty movement’s anarcho-capitalism today. While the individualist anarchism of the 19th century drew on both the classical liberal and socialist traditions, contemporary individualist anarchists largely remain grounded in the Austrian school of economics.

Increasingly, however, libertarians and fellow travelers engage the limitations of Austro-libertarianism through reviving the individualist anarchist lineage of the 19th century, even writing new translations of works by the writers and organizers of that time (cf. Wilbur n.d.-b). Through these practices, they make their own claims on parts of the liberal tradition. In reimagining “the individual,” these trends point to ideological connotations that have been grafted onto the concept through subsequent developments, and that serve to rationalize existing inequities — for instance, the prevalent explanation of racial and gender disparity as a matter of “individual failure” in a meritocratic society where all are free to determine their own destiny.

These are crucial development in U.S. political culture: The libertarian resurgence borne of the libertarian/conservative political coalition has created the opportunities for many to engage libertarian thought on their own terms and reorient it in new directions. In turn, a strikingly notable trend marks the personal and political journeys of growing numbers of young
liberty movement participants: Their enthusiastic encounter with libertarian thought, often fueled by Ron Paul’s challenge to the political establishment, leads to heightened involvement in the proliferating labyrinth of libertarian organizations, especially student groups. From there, many embrace anarcho-capitalism as the only reasonable alternative to the pitfalls of the tainted political process and violence of the security state. But over time and through a range of life experiences, growing numbers of movement participants become frustrated with the lack of attention to corporate power, structural inequality, dismissive attitudes toward race and gender-based hierarchies, and related elements prevalent in mainstream libertarian and anarcho-capitalist spaces alike. In turn, many gradually become more and more oriented toward various forms of left libertarianism, mutualism, and social anarchism again on the rise in the era of the security state. As philosophy professor and LvMI affiliate Roderick Long (2012) noted in his review of the 1971 libertarian classic *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*, “Perhaps nowadays it usually begins with Ron Paul — though it often ends someplace very different.”

*The Antistate Moment*

This book builds on contributions to understanding emerging forms of social mobilization and political culture under neoliberal governance by focusing specifically on the rapidly escalating resurgence of U.S. libertarianism, a predominantly white, male, and middle class movement home-grown in the U.S with its own — at times contradictory — series of claims upon the liberal tradition. The findings contribute to accumulating analyses that highlight the growing significance of an increasingly salient trend across liberal democracies in the new millennium, an era marked by pronounced suspicion of state action across ideological boundaries: Proliferating understandings of formal political institutions as ultimately protecting elite power and privilege at the expense of everyday people, intertwined with an acute
commitment to the self-determination and autonomy of communities and individuals. In the U.S. context, these dynamics arise simultaneously with a renewed focus on the local in terms of social relations — from the mantra of “supporting local businesses” to booming interest in self-sufficient, sustainable living through community gardening, family farms utilizing wind and solar power, food preservation techniques, crafts, and countless related homesteader skills — even as “local” sites entail porous boundaries across multiple spatial scales, as many scholars have highlighted.

Yet the terrain on which these developments occur is not a coherent, unitary landscape. People understand their situations and circumstances in radically disparate ways, and strategize accordingly. In turn, the grounded expressions and concrete outcomes of the antistate turn — in both social imaginaries as well as material realities and actual struggles — vary substantially in both degree and kind. Although the liberty movement serves as one central site of the antistate turn in the present historical moment, the trend is by no means limited to the movement. On what is today broadly understood as the U.S. political left, emerging developments increasingly question the liberal left’s reliance on state institutions in striving for genuine equality of access and opportunity for all. Even among supporters, from the committed to the grudging, the petitioning of formal government institutions — to, for instance, alleviate sharply rising rates of poverty, unemployment, and inequality and meet the mounting needs for housing, education, health, and other critical resources — increasingly appears as a matter of cynical pragmatism driven by a lack of meaningful alternatives; a “lesser of two evils” scenario where the high stakes and occasional limited victories demand engagement with the existing political process, but with increasingly dissipating passion and little genuine hope for any meaningful, lasting transformation. Such engagement may be easier to muster for those who recall the much more
robust welfare state of the pre-1970s that, for all of its exclusionary aspects along axes of race, class, and gender, nevertheless gradually provided a degree of economic security for the poor and the middle classes. Millennial libertarians have no such recollection. Indeed, they have very little reason to believe that, even if desirable, that past is today even remotely attainable.

Beyond the liberal left, insurgent mobilizations too continue to make a range of disparate demands upon the state — often accompanied by similar notions of pragmatism and concession. But apace these dynamics, we live amidst a powerful resurgence of antistatist theory and organizing. Both scholars and activists themselves have extensively documented the revitalization of social anarchist traditions permeating numerous contemporary struggles. Alongside this mobilization and direct action has evolved a robust body of anarchist thought that nuances and extends the historical legacy of anarchist traditions, dating to the 19th and early 20th centuries (cf. Amster and DeLeon et al. 2009; Lynd and Grubačić 2008; Scott 2012). For instance, writers have traced how the global resuscitation of social anarchist thought and organizing informs important parts of extant insurgency across the globe: from the Zapatista struggle for autonomous communities in Mexico (Vodovnik 2004) and massive global justice mobilizations (Bevington and Dixon 2005; Graeber 2009) to the uprisings of the Arab Spring (Douglas-Bowers 2013; Gelderroos 2013) and Occupy (Bray 2013; Schneider 2013), as well as decentralized protest tactics and mutual aid communities from Bolivia (Bjork-James 2013) and Brazil (Brooks 2013) to the Balkans (Grubačić 2010), among numerous others. Social movement analysis and theory extends far beyond the academy, a development that itself reflects the themes of decentralization and horizontalism that suffuse much of social anarchist thought. Some of the most salient nodes of social movement theorizing today exist not in the hallowed halls of academe but in independent online spaces — in vast networks of websites, blogs and discussion
forums that enable movement participants worldwide to share and debate both tactics and strategy as well as underlying philosophies and disparate approaches to social change (Bevington and Dixon 2005).

To be sure, suspicion of — and opposition to — the state and formal political processes from various standpoints is not in and of itself a novel phenomenon, having long informed social thought and mobilization across time and space. A gamut of contemporary formations — from revitalized social anarchisms to the liberty movement — extensively draw on those legacies. This book situates the rise of millennial libertarianism as one significant piece of the present-day antistate moment, the particularities of which vary greatly — a dynamic profoundly visible even within the movement itself. It thus seeks to turn a critical ethnographic lens on processes presently powerfully reshaping U.S. political culture, interrogating how deeply ingrained ideologies of freedom, individualism, and even liberalism itself are interpreted, contested, and reappropriated by emerging publics and counterpublics to both challenge and reinscribe relations of power.

Anthropologists studying processes of democratization and regime transitions across Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and elsewhere have drawn on the ethnographic method to investigate local meanings, contestations, and forms of power outside of official political institutions and formal regime shifts. Yet Povinelli notes that “Democratization as an ongoing failed or semi-successful or imaginary project in the middle of the arch-typical democracies [is] seldom the object of analysis. When [it is] . . . we are talking about the internal limits, contradictions, and tensions in democracy as they manifest in multicultural (or postcolonial) projects of material distribution” (Paley 2002:470). This book contributes to such anthropological approaches in the contemporary U.S. context, where formal systems of government have not
been subject to overt institutional change. Through an ethnographic study that situates the libertarian resurgence in a broader historical context marked particularly by economic crisis and the rise of the security state, alongside the rejuvenation of antistate politics and organizing, the book underscores the historical multivalence of U.S. liberalism — highlighting the constitutive elements of emerging struggles over what, precisely, liberalism is and should be. Further, it traces how these developments shape the imaginaries of and strategies for a post-liberal future.

What began as a study of U.S. conservatism and transformed into conventional place-based ethnography of several millennial libertarian communities in Austin, TX — one central hub of libertarian activity — over time evolved into something much more akin to an ethnography of political ideologies and their implications. It explores how participants in a burgeoning youth movement across disparate locales and virtual spaces struggle with the quintessential notion of freedom at the core of western political thought; negotiate understandings of the state, the market, the individual, and the social; and wrestle with dilemmas of status, privilege, and structural inequalities. These processes occur not only through conferences, meetings, webinars, and online debates, but during late-night conversations over drinks, at rallies and demonstrations, and through collaborations on local activist projects, even among virtual communities promoting a range of cryptocurrencies, systems of distributed, digital means of exchange — the rise of distributed P2P network structures championed by libertarian anarchists, among many others, itself signals the advent of a new, emerging form of governance.

But at issue are not merely floating discourses and disembodied narratives. Rather, the processes explored herein themselves constitute U.S. liberalism through an array of disparate claims upon and refashioned understandings of the powerful concept that remains the basis for social and political legitimacy in the U.S. Historically, a series of ideologies and movements have
staked claims to or within its auspices, some aiming to transcend it altogether. Many of their legacies have profoundly shaped material reality and actual, lived experiences: Liberalism has been a force for both inclusion and exclusion at different moments in U.S. history, serving the cause of egalitarian and inegalitarian efforts alike. The story of millennial libertarianism is the story of the processes and practices at the heart of one such struggle — one that may well prove to be the quintessential struggle over the meaning of U.S. liberalism in the present historical moment.

Outline of the Book

Funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant and the CUNY Graduate Center, research is grounded in 32 months of ethnographic fieldwork centered in Austin, TX — a university city in Ron Paul’s home state informally known as the libertarian capital of the U.S. due to its thriving, multifaceted libertarian community tightly networked with other libertarian hubs regionally, nationally, and beyond. Research further encompassed libertarian communities in Washington, D.C., New York City, as well as national and international events, conferences, and numerous intensive, week-long seminars for libertarian students held throughout the country; over 200 unstructured and semi-structured interviews as well as ten life history interviews; and countless hours of informal day-to-day interactions with movement participants across the country. Pursuant to professional ethical standards for qualitative research, the study protects the confidentiality of study participants who did not wish to be identified, with the exception of public figures. The names of study participants identified by first name only are pseudonyms, with minor changes made to any identifying information.

The first chapter explores the unraveling of the conservative/libertarian political coalition that dominated the U.S. political landscape for much of the post-New Deal era. Established
conservative and libertarian institutions may appear to be ho-hum regular fixtures on the political scene, all but devoid of purpose in light of the ostensible success of the market agenda under neoliberalism. Nothing is further from the case. Such institutions have played a central role in facilitating the libertarian resurgence, with substantial funding from the conservative movement’s flagship foundations. Yet, paradoxically, libertarians presently use many of the ideas popularized by movement conservatives against that movement itself, destabilizing the political coalition that brought it to power.

Many in the libertarian political establishment that began to coalesce through Ron Paul’s presidential bids are far from abandoning the political process altogether, aiming instead to consolidate a libertarian wing of the Republican Party. This project is proving substantially more successful than the attempts of traditional conservatives to interest liberty movement participants in their vision of a reinvented Reagan revolution. Despite having largely soured on the tea party phenomenon they see as thoroughly coopted by mainstream Republican operatives and politicians — an often overlooked generational divide between the tea party and the liberty movement — many millennial libertarians enthusiastically embrace the newly revived menace to the Republican establishment embodied in Ron Paul’s presidential runs. Thus, hundreds of thousands of millennial libertarians inspired by Paul build political efforts to restore a constitutionalist republic rooted in “personal responsibility,” notably through tax and fiscal reform as well as curbing runaway spending on “entitlements” alongside militarization and surveillance efforts in the name of security and safety. Through an ethnographic lens, the second chapter explores the role of millennial libertarians in the consolidation of this libertarian political establishment. But millennial libertarians are a multifaceted bunch. Many remain heavily skeptical of their peers’ political project, with criticism proceeding roughly along two lines. First,
many millennial libertarians point out that libertarian support of candidates with anti-government economic platforms entrenches social conservatism in government, since libertarian supporters overwhelmingly ignore the social conservative positions of these candidates (and many candidates downplay). Second, numerous millennial libertarians skeptical of the political process and the nation-state project broadly reject “the idea that we’re now supposed to put our trust in a new order of limited government politicians.”

Chapter two further examines the roles of the movement’s largest youth-based organizations — Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) and Students for Liberty (SFL) — in these developments, as well as notes the rise of increasingly multifaceted millennial libertarian communities as movement participants create their own independent, informal spaces. The chapter then grounds these contemporary developments in the history of the libertarian tradition throughout the latter half of the 20th century, particularly with regard to longstanding strategic questions around working within existing political processes. Finally, it situates the rise of millennial libertarianism within the present-day intricacies of established libertarian institutions, a labyrinth that reflects a dizzying amalgam of views on cultural politics, political economy, and civil liberties, as well as militarization and foreign policy — often in unlikely combinations.

Chapter three ethnographically traces the disparate personal and intellectual journeys of millennial libertarians outside of formal political processes. While these trajectories often begin with Ron Paul — who has supplanted novelist Ayn Rand as the primary entry point into libertarianism — they frequently lead to rather different spaces and approaches, the range and influence of which has exploded in light of the movement’s resurgence. From Austrian economics and libertarian anarcho-capitalism to “bleeding heart” libertarianism, left libertarianism, “free market anti-capitalism,” and mutualism, millennial libertarians are seeking ways to unpack and
ground their disenchantment with politics and state-based solutions — shared across various backgrounds and disparate life experiences. Through these journeys, millennial libertarians are increasingly challenging and reconfiguring key libertarian concepts and their implications. The chapter underscores the emerging struggles over the meaning of “freedom” and “the individual,” central to classical liberal and libertarian thought. It engages the increasingly disparate libertarian approaches to the economic constraints that, for many across the globe, presently render libertarian freedom into a meager handful of equally poor alternatives. Incorporating commitments to labor solidarity and highlighting how the current system promotes elite and corporate interests, millennial libertarians increasingly struggle with understandings of “the free market” as developed by key figures in the lineage they have inherited, revisiting the relationship between “the market” and “the state.”

They further wrestle with questions of status, privilege, and structural inequalities, all but absent in most libertarian spaces until rather recently. The chapter illustrates how most movement spaces systematically fail to engage contemporary scholarship on the structural elements of poverty, the processes that entrench and continually reproduce it, and its racial and gendered aspects. Interviews and fieldwork reveal both the widespread lack of familiarity with this work among libertarian youth, as well as the challenges inherent in communicating understandings of complex structural inequalities that persist absent formal institutional support. At the same time, small pockets of young libertarians are gradually challenging the “colorblindness” and related ideologies that pervade the movement, adopting antistatist approaches toward the historical and contemporary dynamics that limit individual autonomy particularly across class, race, and gender lines — interventions frequently met with dismissal and hostility. The chapter as a whole engages what some young participants term the movement’s
“PR problem”: Negative public perceptions of libertarians as unconcerned with the plights and lived experiences of everyday people broadly, and traditionally marginalized groups in particular—a theme interrelated with growing discussions among millennials as to why the movement remains disproportionately white and male. It concludes by examining how some millennial libertarians negotiate the implications of their economic analysis.

Chapter four explores the projects of the many millennial libertarians who have abandoned formal political processes, building efforts expressly and consciously situated outside of political frameworks and the purview of the state. Reviving the philosophy of agorism, long dormant within the movement, they focus on strategies such as direct action, entrepreneurship, and self-sufficiency—from grassroots police accountability activism fostering communities that “protect and serve each other” and regional webs promoting self-sufficient living, to emerging technologies grounded in decentralized, peer to peer networks. Although millennial libertarians see these efforts as consistent with their philosophical and political economic analysis, they transcend ideological and political boundaries and none is the exclusive domain of libertarianism as such. While some such projects arise from expressly libertarian spaces and then expand, others represent arenas where libertarians have simply played a role.

Chapter five situates the resurgence of libertarianism in a broader historical context, providing an overview of the intellectual lineages that inform the present-day movement’s various approaches and tracing the multifaceted traditions that have, over time, both contested and drawn on aspects of classical liberalism. The chapter next reviews more recent debates on the nature of U.S. liberalism and political identity, beginning with Louis Hartz’s seminal “liberal society” thesis and the criticisms and reconfigurations thereof—from the “multiple traditions” and “liberalism as exclusion” theses to the most recent “liberal multiplicity” approach. It then
introduces anthropological work on democracy to build on these debates. Specifically, it draws on these anthropological contributions to further inform the theoretical approach that treats U.S. liberalism as an inherently contested, protean concept constituted through political debate and struggle.

The conclusion offers some reflections on the implications of the contemporary liberty movement, both with respect to the U.S. political arena and, more broadly, for understandings of U.S. liberalism and the present crisis of the nation-state. It also identifies several potential avenues for further research.
Chapter One: A Political Coalition In Turmoil

At CPAC 2010 — the year prior to the heckling of Rumsfeld and Cheney — several hundred attendees packed an auditorium for a panel entitled “Two-Minute Activist: Saving Freedom Across America.” While the liberty movement’s presence still paled in comparison to what would occur at CPAC the next year, this particular session made liberty movement history. The event included a brief talk by Alexander McCobin, executive director of the then-nascent Students for Liberty, who graduated college in 2008 and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy. McCobin thanked CPAC for welcoming GOProud, an organization representing gay conservatives, as a conference co-sponsor — the group’s inclusion had caused intense controversy in conservative circles and led some organizations to boycott CPAC altogether. The talk was followed by Ryan Sorba, then-chair of California’s chapter of Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative organization founded in 1960 and widely credited with shaping the late 20th century political scene.¹ Sorba, a 2007 college graduate and author of the self-published Born Gay Hoax, launched into an anti-gay tirade, condemning CPAC for including GOProud and denouncing libertarian groups, shouting “the lesbians at Smith College protest better than you do!” when faced with massive booing from the crowd. While Young Americans for Freedom members spent the evening frantically explaining that Sorba does not represent the organization’s views and Sorba ultimately left the group to chair the Young Conservatives of California, the video of the panel went viral and remains a frequent reference point for young libertarians who bristle at any association with the conservative movement.

By 2011, the CPAC “libertarian takeover” — as both self-identified conservatives and libertarians referred to the milestone event — was undeniable. The conference overflowed with

¹ For more on the history and significance of Young Americans for Freedom, see Schneider (1998) and Thorburn (2010).
libertarian-themed panels, with attendees packed alongside ballroom walls, sitting on floors, and gathering in doorways, straining to hear the presentations. Youth-centered sessions drew hundreds of students. Ron Paul’s Campaign for Liberty organized nearly two-dozen events. Well before the commencement of Paul’s formal address, the roaring crowd could be heard throughout the hotel lobby and outside the auditorium, chanting “End the Wars!” and “End the Fed!” During the previous night’s Liberty Forum, featuring Paul and his son Senator Rand Paul, among others, the 1,200–seat Marshall Ballroom, set up theater-style for the event, exceeded capacity. A youth libertarian group had arranged discounted student rates in shared hotel rooms, but these quickly sold out and many students resorted to a nearby hostel, some sleeping on floors and couches due to lack of space.

During the conference, I attended the panel “How Political Correctness is Harming America’s Military” with a campus libertarian group leader who first became involved with libertarianism through the war issue. She had witnessed first-hand the devastating impact of war on friends and acquaintances returning from military service in Iraq and Afghanistan, two of whom had committed suicide. Having voted for Obama in 2008 out of her antiwar commitments and feeling profoundly betrayed by ensuing developments, she rapidly became disillusioned with both parties. At the panel, she grew increasingly horrified as former Marine Ilario Pantano, two-time GOP candidate for Congress in North Carolina, passionately declared that the ultimate founding document of the U.S. is the Bible and our problems stem from a refusal to recognize that the country was meant to be a Christian nation. The military must be grounded in God’s truth, he continued, attributing the thousands of U.S. veteran suicides to the “God-shaped hole in our hearts,” a consequence of chasing Jesus out of schools and courtrooms and allowing agents ofcommunist, atheist regimes to infiltrate the country’s key institutions. Presenting his case for
the divide between east and west boiling down to Christians and non-Christians, Pantano declared, “What are the Chinese afraid of? It’s not capitalism, it’s not Google, it’s not Wal-Mart, it’s not Boeing, it’s not Islam. They’re afraid of Jesus Christ.” Appalled, she called out loud enough to turn more than a few heads, “I’m afraid of you!”

Another evening panel, entitled Freedom’s Rising New Leaders, drew an animated, cheering crowd of several hundred for a range of libertarian speakers who forcefully condemned the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and spoke virulently against the conservative-perpetuated culture of fear in the name of national security, the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, and repression of civil liberties at home. Simultaneously, the Young America’s Foundation, an organization dedicated to supporting conservative youth which also preserves Ronald Reagan’s California ranch, co-sponsored a celebration of Reagan’s birthday centennial, featuring a cake in the shape of a cowboy hat-wearing former president and attended by a much more subdued and significantly older crowd.

“The warmongers are having a birthday party down the hall!” announced a group of college-aged attendees who had apparently paid a visit to the Reagan festivities en route to the libertarian New Leaders panel, half-running toward the ballroom where the event was taking place and giddily waving paper plates laden with cake in the air. The amused crowd of thirty or so milling about the ballroom entrance quickly seized the opportunity. A 20-something woman looked up from her cell phone: “Ugh, neocons. They might as well ship that to Iraq. Let them eat cake!” Her friend quickly chimed in, “What? No, those aren’t bombs dropping. That’s the sound of freedom falling from the sky!” Banter about conservatives’ historical support of the warfare state, ever-increasing U.S. militarization, blowback, and the unprincipled spinelessness of both political parties continued the entire way to the libertarian afterparty at a nearby three-story
bar, which soon expanded throughout the surrounding Adams Morgan neighborhood when the inundated venue, so packed with conference attendees that the crowd clogged the stairwells and prevented traffic flow, could no longer accommodate the onslaught of new arrivals that showed no sign of ceasing.

Conservative Coalition in Crisis

The conservative/libertarian coalition grew out of the opposition to the New Deal, but it has long outlived its usefulness, if it ever had any. The relationship between conservatives and libertarians is like the relationship of an abusive husband and a spouse with Stockholm Syndrome.

—Daniel Krawisz, libertarian anarchist and University of Texas, Austin graduate student

As recently as 2009, historian Kim Phillips-Fein could posit, in the epilogue to her compelling work grounding the rise of the modern conservative movement in the reaction against the New Deal by conservative businessmen, that “the very success of the market agenda has rendered the old political register of their rhetoric obsolete” (268). Today, some of the conservative businessmen’s early institutions continue to exist, but “seem to have lost their purpose in the world they helped to create, their urgent, embattled tone an echo of an earlier time” (265). In this view, conservative and libertarian organizations, once voices in the wilderness, have transformed into regular fixtures on the D.C. circuit while the businessmen’s early institutions such as the Foundation for Economic Education and the Mont Pelerin Society stubbornly, if somewhat tediously, regurgitate their founding principles of economic freedom.

The recent libertarian resurgence tells a radically different story. Anything but obsolete, established organizations key to the longstanding U.S. conservative coalition have played a crucial role in facilitating current dynamics. Infusing libertarianism with renewed relevance for a large part of an entire generation, their work has paradoxically sown the seeds of internal
upheaval. Millennial libertarians have taken up libertarianism on their own terms, imperiling the very political coalition that enabled its popularity — the topic of this chapter. But these developments are impacting U.S. political culture well beyond the Republican Party. They further present problems for the libertarian establishment, itself a multifaceted assemblage comprised of opposing values and worldviews. As millennial libertarians make their own series of claims to the liberal tradition, some adopt approaches to power and inequality that challenge those of dominant liberty movement figures and organizations as well, but from disparate perspectives and with a range of implications — dynamics explored further in the following two chapters.

_U.S. Conservatism: New Twists in an Old Tale_

Historically, both scholars and the public at large have understood libertarianism in the U.S. as little more than a subset or impulse within conservatism. The implications of a substantive distinction between present-day conservatism and libertarianism extend far beyond an abstract terminological point or academic debate. Rather, this distinction is the cornerstone for understanding crucial contemporary developments. In building an account of how various parts of the liberty movement are at present reshaping U.S. political culture, it is helpful to first examine the fluid constituent parts within the once-robust conservative coalition and their current predicaments.

The prevailing view that sees libertarianism as fundamentally intertwined with conservatism stems from the longstanding coalition between these and other political formations that dominated a significant portion of the 20th century. Familiar to students of U.S. conservatism is George H. Nash’s (1976:xvi-xvii) now classic formulation of the movement as comprised of three distinct schools of thought consolidated, over time, through a range of organizations and
journals: libertarianism, traditional conservatism, and anti-communism. To be sure, tensions abound among these strands and the history of the conservative movement is in part a history of the negotiation of these tensions. Perhaps most famously, National Review editor Frank S. Meyer (1960) aimed to articulate a consensus between traditional conservatives, concerned with virtue and an organic moral order, often as understood by particular forms of Christianity, and libertarians, committed to a vision of the autonomous individual and an economy unfettered by state action. In Meyer’s view, conservatives must reject a perceived antithesis between these two “tragically bifurcated branches of the Western tradition” and draw on both tradition and reason (359-360). Despite the visceral critique of Meyer’s work that followed, fusionism, as the synthesis of conservatism and libertarianism became known, won out, at least in the practical sense of a longstanding political coalition. Nash, whose own affinities lie with conservatism, suggests this occurred not because of a common acceptance of a worldview, but because traditional conservatives and libertarians, weary of increasing factionalization, recognized the need for practical collaboration to facilitate the growth of their movement. Further, they were unified by a common foe, bound together by “the cement of anti-Communism” (Nash 1976:179). Put another way by libertarian anarchist Murray Rothbard, “fusionism is a ‘myth’ in the Sorelian sense, an organizing principle to hold two very disparate wings of a political movement together and to get them to act in a unified way. Intellectually, the concept must be judged a failure” (1981a:363).

Nash’s profoundly influential schema of conservatism as a “big tent” balancing act has long informed social movement literature on the topic, far outlasting competing definition attempts. Yet as Jennifer Burns notes in her insightful retrospective on the seminal work, “while Nash intended his book to be a study of conservative intellectuals, historians have used it as a

---

3 For an overview of various earlier understandings of conservatism refuted by Nash, see Burns (2004).
synecdoche for right-wing phenomena of all kinds” (2004:455). Indeed, scholars across disciplines ground their analysis in his contribution. Increasingly proliferating treatments of the conservative movement ranging from studies of elites and national organizations to grassroots activists and everyday actors owe a great debt to Nash’s work, widely deemed “the indispensible starting point for any examination of the making of contemporary conservative ideology” (Himmelstein 1990:217 n.1). Even scholars who reject the term “conservative,” such as sociologist Sara Diamond who prefers “right-wing” or “rightist,” note that “Libertarianism, anticommunist militarism, and traditionalism have been the pillars of the U.S. Right,” with each “right-wing movement” ranking its priorities in distinct ways (1995:6-7). In this view,

What has unified the Right is a consistent set of principles in three realms of social endeavor: the economy, the nation-state in global context (military and diplomatic), and the moral order of behavioral norms and hierarchies on the bases of race and gender . . . these three realms correspond to the preoccupations of right-wing movements with protecting “free market” or “libertarian” capitalism; promoting anticommunism and, generally, U.S. military hegemony over much of the rest of the world; preserving traditional morality and supreme status for native-born white male Americans and for the nuclear family. (Diamond 1995:6-7)

The subject of Nash’s book, as he himself noted, was “conservatism as an intellectual movement in America, in a particular period,” that is from 1945 to the book’s original publication in 1976 ( xv). Yet the work’s very success in articulating crucial developments of the time — particularly how libertarians and traditional conservatives negotiated key differences to forge a powerful movement that profoundly shaped the cultural and political landscape for decades to come — has entrenched a particular understanding of U.S. conservatism. Today, treatments of

---

this topic generally presume a robust, if somewhat tense, conservative/libertarian coalition. The libertarian resurgence requires rethinking the present-day utility of this paradigmatic framework.

*Blinded by the Right: Overlooked Feuding*

At the core of conservative disunity in the 1990s lay the “great neo-paleo feud,” the ongoing power struggle between neoconservatives, committed to ostensibly promoting U.S. interests globally through military might and an assertive, interventionist foreign policy who were to gain popular notoriety during the second Bush administration, and self-identified paleoconservatives, successors to the Old Right and staunch, overwhelmingly Christian traditionalists who oppose neoconservative foreign affairs efforts as imperialistic and their views on social issues as impermissibly liberal.

A key episode in the neo-paleo strife that troubled the conservative movement for years was the Persian Gulf war, the first U.S.-led military action against Iraq. The antiwar faction formed the short-lived Committee to Avert the Mideast Holocaust, comprised of several paleoconservatives and libertarians, including the Cato Institute’s William Niskanen, aforementioned libertarian anarchist professor Murray Rothbard, Ron Paul, and writer and publisher Lew Rockwell, Paul’s close associate and former congressional chief of staff (Diamond 1995:287). It would take nearly another two decades for Paul to become enthusiastically embraced by thousands of young people who routinely pack auditoriums for his speeches, organize community gatherings, marches, and rallies in support of his unmatched consistency, and dedicate entire months and sometimes years of their lives to volunteer for his campaigns; and for Rothbard’s anarcho-capitalism to gain a “fan culture”-like reverence among youth, with millennial libertarians sporting shirts featuring a severe-looking Rothbard emblazoned with the slogan “Enemy of the State.” These figures would prove central to popularizing the tradition that
in the 2000s erupted onto the public stage, confounding observers with its blend of commitments and ideologies that do not easily map onto the political spectrum as conventionally understood. Yet the mainstreaming of any set of ideas often leads to unanticipated consequences. As this book aims to illustrate, the broad complex of values and philosophies held by liberty movement participants is striking. It should thus be noted that Ron Paul’s brand of libertarianism — and, and various parts of his life, Rothbard’s — that flirts with if not embraces paleoconservatism is by no means the only libertarian lineage permeating the resurgent movement. As noted in the introduction, the single set of issues presently uniting the vast majority of movement participants across ideological boundaries is fierce opposition to U.S. imperialism and military action abroad coupled with indignation at civil liberties encroachments and intensifying surveillance at home, alongside the war on drugs, police abuse, and related forms of state-sponsored violence. In turn, “Dr. No,” as supporters sometimes affectionately refer to obstetrician Ron Paul, commands the utmost respect for his uncompromising views on these fronts. Even when they disagree with him, movement participants routinely note his consistency and integrity. Paul, they observe, is a truly principled antiwar advocate — and has been throughout his entire career, even in the decades when few were listening. The years following Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential win saw large numbers of young antiwar Democrats join libertarian ranks over the President’s military and related actions. And thus, the millennial libertarian at-first-glance curious embrace of a rather conventional-seeming, socially conservative former Congressman in his 70s.

The rumblings of trouble for the conservative coalition on these fronts abounded for decades. I suspect that most of the hundreds of liberty movement participants I have spoken with over the nearly three-year course of my fieldwork would agree with the sentiment behind Diamond’s observations that, the libertarian ideal of state nonintervention notwithstanding, most
of the right has supported de facto state intervention that benefits elites as well as “the Pentagon system” (1995:8). At the heart of even the more moderate liberty movement participants’ rejection of the right and the Republican Party lies what is routinely described as conservative hypocrisy. Although many draw the line at various historical moments, commonplace in libertarian circles are observations similar to Reason editor Nick Gillespie’s that “At least since the election of St. Ronald Reagan, self-styled conservatives have repeatedly revealed themselves to be the biggest frauds or most delusional suckers in American politics,” disingenuously espousing commitments to meeting human needs through free markets and voluntary associations while centralizing power in Washington and printing and spending money “like LBJ on a bourbon-fueled bender” (2012).

At the time of Diamond’s writing in 1995, the “small number of purist libertarians” (8) strongly opposed to massive military spending and protectionist trade policies were little more than an afterthought. In turn, she was able to propose that “to be right-wing means to support the state in its capacity as enforcer of order and to oppose the state as distributor of wealth and power downward and more equitably in society,” non-controversially including libertarianism among other such tendencies (9). Rather than engage with the then relatively small number of “purist libertarians” and their increasingly disintegrating relationship with conservatism, scholars turned their eye to the mobilization of Christian evangelicals, observing how, in light of conservative infighting in the early 1990s, evangelicals were best positioned to mobilize a popular following, establishing themselves as both a successful faction within the Republican Party and a formidable grassroots movement throughout the decade.5

---

Yet other developments of the time signaled a brewing phenomenon that would not come to the forefront for years to come. Noting the marked increase in support for third political parties in 1995, the Chicago Tribune reported, “The distinguishing characteristic of these potential independent voters — aside from their disillusionment with Washington politicians of both parties — is their libertarian streak. They are skeptical of the Democrats because they identify them with big government. They are wary of the Republicans because of the growing influence within the GOP of the religious right” (Broder). By 2001, the GOP had a serious “libertarian problem,” with Libertarian Party office-seekers hurting the prospects of Republican House and Senate candidates (Miller). Conservative talk show host Michael Medved condemned the “purists and oddballs” who cost Republicans seats in the 2002 midterm elections by voting for the Libertarian Party as “losertarians” (2002).

The aftermath of September 11, 2001 fueled further divisions, with heated arguments between conservatives and libertarians around civil liberties and the Patriot Act. The ensuing war on terror and related global military operations inspired all-out revolts against George W. Bush and “the neocon warmongers” throughout libertarian circles, with libertarians such as Libertarian Party co-founder Gene Berkman and Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute and Reason stating they would vote for antiwar Democrat Howard Dean if he were to win the 2004 presidential nomination (Shachtman 2003). The National Review, the staple of conservative news and commentary founded in 1955 by “the lion of the right” William F. Buckley, hemorrhaged contributors and supporters who rejected Bush-era approaches to foreign policy and civil liberties — many of whom later highlighted the similarities of Barack Obama’s administration on these fronts. In 2003, Liberty magazine editor R.W. Bradford called for an end to the libertarian-conservative alliance, observing that conservatives, once securely in power, have abandoned their
“claimed love of liberty and opposition to ever more powerful government” and become “the greatest advocates of an imperial foreign policy, of massive defense spending and of invading people’s homes in the names of the Wars on Crime, Drugs and Terrorism” (16). That year, Pat Buchanan co-founded the American Conservative as a platform for the Old Right nationalist tradition critical of interventionist foreign policy, but the magazine quickly took on a unique role, gaining much libertarian attention and “a devoted following as a sharp critic of the conservative mainstream” (Salam 2009). The publication has warmly embraced Ron Paul, who first galvanized youth with his 2008 bid for the Republican presidential nomination. All the while, the ostensibly tiresome established institutions were steadily promoting their ideas among young people, particularly college students, through free seminars, literature, organizing trainings, career development, and other resources. But until youth support for Ron Paul exploded onto the scene in the 2012 primary contest and Paul overwhelmingly swept the under-30 vote on a regular basis, few observers took notice.

**Millennial Libertarianism’s Institutional Roots**

At CPAC 2010, the year prior to Cheney and Rumsfeld’s troubled reception, the liberty movement made its first stand. Hundreds of lively Ron Paul enthusiasts, many college-aged, swarmed the halls of the Washington, D.C. hotel venue, engaging passers-by in conversations about the bloodbath ensuing from U.S.-led war efforts and the Federal Reserve’s destructive impact on currency and inflation. High-spirited and occasionally boisterous, the energetic bunch ensured their candidate swept the CPAC straw poll. That year Paul captured nearly one third of the vote in the highest straw poll turnout in CPAC’s 37-year history, with almost half the poll participants indicating they were students (Martin 2010b; Stein 2010). CPAC attendance was also markedly higher — up to 10,000 from 8,500 in 2009 — leading the Guardian to ask David
Keene, chair of the American Conservative Union, which organizes CPAC, for comment (Lott 2010). “He said it wasn’t due to an increase in advertisement. He instead chalked it up to good fortune and a backlash against the policies of President Obama. Both of Keene’s answers are true but not sufficient to explain the increase. Much of it had to do with a fight about a future for the right, and this year’s CPAC is where Paul chose to demonstrate his growing organisational strength.”

Circumstances aside, the libertarian resurgence could not have exploded on the present scale without the vast institutional support of organizations promoting limited government ideas over many decades. Underlying the liberty movement is an intellectualism grounded in a vast network of publications, conferences, online lectures, and trainings supported by such institutions. These efforts often share funders with conservative movement strongholds; for instance, the conservative Heritage Foundation found a significant funding source in the family foundations established by the billionaire Koch brothers, who also pour millions into projects focused exclusively on curbing government involvement in fiscal and economic affairs. In addition to academic contributions to economics and philosophy, the literature produced through this complex consists of literally hundreds of articles and books where readers can find an array of libertarian takes, and usually fierce debate, on virtually any issue. Just a few prominent topics span the brutal consequences of war, its interrelation with the state, and the bloodshed wrought by the U.S. war on drugs; credit expansion and the Federal Reserve; the impact of regulation on various economic sectors; and environmentalism absent state institutions. Increasingly, writers take on heavily antistatist questions, such as how private court systems and security forces, as well as voluntary institutions broadly, would function in a stateless society, or one with highly limited state intervention. Indeed, it is beyond the capacity of a full-time
ethnographer to entirely keep up with the literature and commentary that regularly pours forth from various spaces within the liberty movement, especially the internet, and spans policy debates, theoretical developments of libertarianism across academic disciplines and philosophical lineages, as well as movement strategy and tactics. Further, both classic and contemporary libertarian contributions can be accessed in a wide array of formats — from original economics texts downloadable in full online, to synthesized position papers, to highly accessible bullet-point outlines targeted toward youth and high school audiences.

Many of these contributors and their readership come together at various gatherings sponsored by established libertarian institutions such as the Ludwig von Mises Institute (LvMI), which organizes the annual Austrian Economics Research Conference — formerly the Austrian Scholars Conference — and the aforementioned Mises University summer program. At least four other libertarian institutions — the Cato Institute, the Independent Institute, the Institute for Humane Studies, and the Foundation for Economic Education — offer similarly popular, weeklong student seminars focused on disparate topics. The Institute for Humane Studies, associated with George Mason University, is particularly committed to social change through the power of ideas and today organizes about a dozen student seminars each summer to promote libertarian thought, awards over $750,000 per year in scholarships largely to graduate students, and actively assists with the academic job hunt through mentoring, career development webinars, and other resources — helping place over 1,200 professors in classrooms over the past fifty years, “where they teach over a quarter of a million students each year. And those students are exposed to libertarian ideas not just in a 30-second advertisement or debate answer, but for an entire semester, rigorously and in depth” (Zwolinski 2012). Aside from travel costs, most of these programs are free for accepted students, with housing and meals — as well as plenty of
social networking time — provided. It is not uncommon to leave laden with books and other literature, distributed free of cost. At several such seminars I attended, a handful of students participating for the second or third time brought along an empty suitcase for this purpose.

“Death to Fusionism!”: Conservative Panic

In 2011, the conservative boycott of CPAC intensified, with the Heritage Foundation, one of Washington D.C.’s largest and most influential think tanks, and the Media Research Center joining the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America, the American Principles Project, American Values, Capital Research Center, the Center for Military Readiness, the law firm Liberty Counsel, and the National Organization for Marriage in withdrawing from CPAC. Prominent conservatives including South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint, former Arkansas Governor and 2008 presidential contender Mike Huckabee, and Ohio Representative Jim Jordan also joined the boycott. While many cited the participation of GOProud, the organization representing gay conservatives, as a factor in their decision, some expressly noted CPAC’s growing libertarian presence. The American Family Association’s Bryan Fisher blogged, “It’s time for CPAC to change its name or change its tune. I’ve repeatedly made the point that it is no longer the ‘Conservative’ Political Action Conference; it’s instead become the LPAC, with the ‘L’ standing for ‘Libertarian.’ It’s a simple matter of truth in advertising.”

“CPAC has become increasingly libertarian and less Republican over the last years, one of the reasons I didn’t go this year,” Huckabee told Fox News in 2010 (Martin). Amidst that year’s CPAC boycott, various leaders urged conservatives to instead attend the annual Values Voter Summit organized by the Family Research Council, aiming to develop the event as a rival to CPAC. By contrast, the Summit, where panels focused largely on abortion, sexuality, and national security, was marked by a minimal youth presence and distinct lack of the energy and
enthusiasm brought by young libertarian activists to other events. In an interesting turn of events, Ron Paul also won the Values Voter Summit 2011 straw poll, illustrating his appeal to social conservatives—a subject taken up in the next chapter. The harmless, repellant “chirping sectaries,” as prominent conservative thinker Russell Kirk, quoting T.S. Eliot, characterized libertarians in a 1981 anti-libertarian tract, could no longer be ignored.

Referring to Nash’s leading “big tent” understanding of conservatism, historian Jennifer Burns aptly notes that “Nash’s definition — and historians’ acceptance of it — represented the final victory of conservative efforts at self-definition” (2004:453). With that definition in crisis, a tremendous lot is presently at stake for conservatism. Conservative positions on cultural and national defense issues are today simply unable to interest or mobilize youth en masse in any way even remotely comparable to the energy of the liberty movement.

Further, millennial libertarians are intensely critical both of national defense and cultural conservatism. Ardently resisting ever-expanding militarization, they are also increasingly both socially liberal and opposed to state enforcement of morality. While generally happy to build alliances with both conservative and other efforts around particular issues when expedient, many young liberty movement participants routinely stress the futility of a broader coalition with conservatism, whose key commitments they see as diametrically opposed to their own — a view that extends to economic questions, the ostensible common ground between the two movements.

“Conservatives don’t believe in real free market, voluntary exchange. They believe in the current system, which is best described as corporatism — giant corporations and business interests dominate the political and economic sphere, in coordination with politicians and state agencies, to the point where they are essentially one and the same,” explained a seasoned liberty movement activist in her late twenties, clarifying the term used by countless young libertarians to
describe existing political economic arrangements. A colleague helping her distribute literature to
CPAC passers-by added,

Wall Street, the bankers, giant conglomerates that quash competition through so-called intellectual property and various licensing and permitting schemes . . . they’re all in bed with the politicians and the bureaucrats. It’s the elite screwing over everyone else. God bless them, but the liberals and most of the left think giving government more power is somehow going to fix this. It hasn’t, and it won’t.

At national conferences, regional rallies, and local meetings, bars, and living rooms around the country, the liberty movement is increasingly stripping away the carefully constructed layers that have papered over the differences between conservatives and libertarians for decades.

“The older, libertarian establishment crowd tends to be way too tolerant of conservatives. A lot of them still think there’s something to be gained from this coalition, when conservatives never deliver on the free market talk. Conservatives are turncoats. They’re for business as usual. They talk up markets, but they’re all for state intervention when it’s their company that’s getting the subsidies. God forbid the bloated military-industrial complex that accounts for the largest part of the budget is even mentioned, that’s untouchable,” a libertarian community activist told me following a day of flyering for an upcoming Austin antiwar rally.

A libertarian graduate student articulated the current state of affairs during a lengthy conversation of this topic thus:

Conservatives give lip service to the free market, but that just isn’t what they care about or what actually motivates them. The core motivations of the two different movements just don’t seem like they have anything in common. Conservatives support homeschooling so they can teach their kids that evolution didn’t happen or something, and homeschooling, alternative schooling, should be available and economically viable, but that’s no different than lots of other groups that are libertarian on specific issues that libertarians can help out with. There shouldn’t be this idea that there’s some permanent connection between conservatives and libertarians.
Following an extensive exchange about the need for libertarians to break with the conservative coalition that has unduly led many to become apologists for the economic status quo and build alliances with the left around war, corporate welfare, and social issues, a young staffer at a libertarian organization expressed the sentiment bubbling up among young liberty movement participants nationwide — “Death to fusionism!”

By CPAC 2012, liberty movement energy was directed elsewhere, with Ron Paul declining the invitation in light of presidential primary campaign obligations and youth libertarian organizations, while maintaining a presence at the event, focusing on movement-building efforts other than mobilizing CPAC attendance. With GOProud back to being prevented from participating, the conference had largely returned to business as usual, overrun with various Republican groups gearing up for the presidential election, poking fun at Democrats, and campaigning for their preferred primary candidate. The only break in the ho-hum proceedings came in the form of a protest march by Occupy D.C., in preparation for which conference organizers clamped down on security, checking registration badges at each session door in fear of event disruption by protesters. While that danger never materialized, the specter of the liberty movement continued to haunt conference proceedings.

Although the liberty movement’s physical presence was much more subdued than in years past, its impact in absentia was equally striking: A number of events concerned the state of conservative movement, while the theme of conservative crisis in light of libertarianism’s resurgence routinely reared its head in talks and Q&A sessions throughout the conference. “If you read the recent issue of Time magazine, you will learn that there is supposedly a conservative identity crisis,” announced a panelist from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a conservative organization focused on outreach to college students. “Well, I’m happy to tell you I don’t read
Time magazine,” to weak laughter from the audience. A palpable, thinly-veiled desperation seeped through repeat public reassurances that no crisis within the longstanding coalition exists, or if it does, it is either nearly over or presents little more than a bump in the road. It thus seemed entirely fitting that George Nash himself, the intellectual father of the “big tent” understanding of conservatism, partook in several CPAC 2012 panels.

Joining Nash in the session entitled “Is Fusionist Conservatism Still Possible?,” representatives of the Heritage Foundation and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute spoke insistently on the dire need to educate youth about the beauty of the all-but-forgotten fusionist philosophy, the solid foundation of the conservative movement which enables different people to take on different roles, whether their primary commitments lie in economic, social, or national defense issues. “Fusionist conservatives reject big government,” stressed the panelist from the Heritage Foundation, highlighting the ostensible appeal of the approach for libertarians and outlining how it underlies the work of figures from Jesse Helms to Michelle Bachmann, who, according to the speaker, may not think of themselves as fusionist conservatives but are guided by the philosophy.

I later recounted the talks to a fellow CPAC attendee, a college undergraduate active with several libertarian organizations. “Seriously? What a joke. Conservatives reject big government, right. Government small enough to fit in my uterus!” she smirked, pausing for a moment. “And big enough to bomb the hell out of brown people around the world, apparently.” Laughing, her friend, a fellow college libertarian activist, added, “Come on now. If you don’t vote Republican, then the terrorists win!”

Less public conservative exchanges revealed far greater anxiety about the prospects for reviving the “three-legged stool” of conservatism. “We need to rebuild the Reagan coalition,” a
concerned CPAC speaker told his colleague as they walked together to take an event podium. “Social and economic conservatives have to unite,” another speaker frantically explained to a fellow presenter during a break between sessions. Despite frequent loud proclamations to the contrary, conservatives are well aware of the challenges their movement currently faces and have devoted attention to this issue for years. Interestingly, liberty movement participants themselves are usually absent from conservative efforts that present various claims regarding what is or ought to be appealing to libertarians about the conservative coalition. As was the case at the CPAC 2012 panels, these exchanges generally remain between conservatives, some of whom also identify as libertarian but who are relatively inactive in the liberty movement and whose primary commitments lie with defense or cultural politics — specifically, constraining reproductive freedom through state action and opposing same-sex marriage.

One of the more developed arguments for why libertarians ought to support state-sanctioned marriage limited to male-female unions is made by former economics professor Jennifer Roback Morse (2012) of the Ruth Institute, a project of the National Organization for Marriage (NOM) that opposes same-sex marriage and promotes lifelong marriage between women and men. Grounded in the ostensible public function of marriage — the interest of children which, in this view, is best served by two opposite-sex parents — the argument was echoed in the CPAC 2012 panel “The Phony Divide Between Fiscal & Social Conservatives: Protecting Marriage as a Case Study,” in which both a co-founder and the chair of NOM participated alongside movement legend Phyllis Schlafly and other conservatives.

No one on the panel challenged this view. When I posted Morse’s article in a number of online libertarian forums for feedback, a throng of millennial libertarians quickly attacked the

---

argument, pointing out how it conveniently lacks historical treatment — human societies managed to avoid collapsing into chaos for countless years without state involvement in marriage arrangements — and dismantling the underlying assumption of inherent “male” and “female” traits. Yet conservative arguments geared at libertarians and focused on revitalizing the conservative coalition rarely reach that audience. Rather, they often quickly devolve into an echo chamber of reassurances that may have the effect of appeasing conservatives, but does little to persuade millennial libertarians to partake in the conservative coalition.

In closing the session on fusionism, Nash diplomatically warned co-panelists against glossing over the conservative movement’s historical tensions, reiterating his oft-made insight that the movement has proved strongest when faced by a perceived external threat. Citing various predictions of a conservative civil war during the George W. Bush presidency, Nash pointed out how Barack Obama “forced conservatives back to their roots in a hurry,” with the tea party movement emerging very early on in his presidency. Yet this represents only a fraction of recent developments and sidesteps entirely the liberty movement youth, who see both Bush and Obama, as well as their respective political parties, as anathema. A reading of today’s political landscape through such a binary, whereby, in Nash’s words, “a sense of external challenge from the left has roused various branches of the right to hang together,” is fundamentally unable to explain contemporary developments. In fact, conservative attempts to replace the old glue of anti-communism with the enemy of “radical Islam” and build unity around the war on terror has instead fueled not only one of the largest schisms in the conservative coalition since the New Deal, but a mobilization against the entire political process.

Even so, Republican politicians and operatives, alongside key parts of the libertarian establishment, have worked to harness the energy of millennial libertarians in the service of
consolidating a populist, libertarian wing of the GOP. Many millennials actively embrace this project, while others remain fiercely antagonistic — bringing to the surface longstanding divides within the libertarian tradition and mirrored in many others. This is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter Two:  
The Rise of the Libertarian Political Establishment and a Grassroots Divided

On December 16, 2007, well over a year before the first gatherings of what would become known as the tea party movement, between two and three thousand Ron Paul supporters gathered in downtown Austin for what organizers called the Austin Tea Party. A drum and fife corps led a march from the Texas State Capitol building down Congress Avenue, many demonstrators donning the colonial-era attire of wigs, frilly collars, breeches, stockings, and buckled shoes. Having arrived at Auditorium Shores on the edge of Town Lake, marchers reenacted the Boston Tea Party of 1773, loading large brown crates onto a boat that was soon “attacked” by a group disguised as Mohawk warriors. Thunderous applause and cheering resonated from the shoreline as the group tossed the crates overboard, each embossed with large stenciled label — “Gitmo,” “Iran War,” “IRS,” “National Debt,” “Federal Reserve,” and “Torture,” among others. The side of the last crate read “Don’t tase me, bro!” — the plea of Florida college student Andrew Meyer after security forcibly pulled him away from a microphone during a question and answer session following a campus speech by U.S. Senator John Kerry. As six campus police officers held down Meyer, struggling and calling for help, he shouted the catchphrase prior to being stunned with a Taser by one of the officers. The phrase went viral earlier that year, with a YouTube video of the incident accumulating over seven million views. Ron Paul supporters staged similar Boston Tea Party reenactments throughout the nation at the same time, with Paul himself partaking in his own district’s event in Freeport, TX. On that day, the 2008 Ron Paul presidential campaign raised over $6 million.

While organizers called these actions Tea Parties, U.S. protestors have long used similar tactics in highlighting government overreach, with numerous Tax Day demonstrations including references to the Boston Tea Party. What is today popularly understood as the tea party
movement did not exist at the time of these events. As emerging scholarship has shown, the tea party itself is a multifaceted and complex formation (cf. Bauer 2013; Westermeyer 2013). Yet the dominant imagery that was to become widely associated with the tea party phenomenon — a sea of U.S. flags and constitutionalist, limited government slogans coupled with signs comparing Obama to Hitler and vocal concerns as to whether he is a “Muslim,” a “socialist,” or even a U.S. citizen — was well over a year in the making, erupting on a national scale in mid-2009. While increasingly distinguishing himself from a crowded field of Democratic presidential nomination hopefuls throughout 2007, few at the time saw a serious contender in Barack Obama, whose meteoric rise and ultimate presidential win almost certainly helped galvanize what is now known as the tea party movement. In the winter of 2007, Obama had yet to win the Iowa caucus, the first election of the primary season for both parties, and proceed to mount a series of challenges for expected frontrunner Hillary Rodham Clinton. He would not become the first black presidential nominee of either major U.S. party until the summer of 2008. Few of the thousands at Ron Paul’s Austin Tea Party were concerned with the dynamics of either major party at the time.

It is difficult to fully capture the exuberance of Ron Paul supporters, many of whom have dedicated months and sometimes entire years of their lives to volunteer for his presidential campaigns. The term “moneybomb,” referring to what is usually a one-day fundraising frenzy aiming to dramatically boost contributions and publicity, originates with Paul’s social media-savvy supporters, who raised millions using the tactic. One striking element of Paul’s presidential runs is that most actions organized on his behalf were truly grassroots — the independent work of volunteers not coordinating with the official campaign. Through online message boards and

---

1 For an in-depth account of Ron Paul’s young base from the standpoint of a supporter, see Doherty (2012).
meetup groups across the country, Ron Paul enthusiasts have, on their own, organized hundreds of thousands of fundraising events in addition to promotional rallies, concerts, banner drops, as well as “blockwalking” and “sign-waving” actions — small groups signing up for time slots of walking door to door to promote the candidate, or standing near busy intersections with signs, sometimes for hours at a time. During both the 2008 and 2012 Ron Paul presidential runs, volunteers contacted the Ron Paul camp on a daily basis hoping to book an appearance by the candidate. If Paul was able to attend, they often handled all of the logistics and event publicity — occasionally leading to tensions between staffers and volunteer organizers who felt deprived of opportunities to meet the candidate, get front-row seats, or other perks they thought appropriate in light of their contributions.

Many of Paul’s most devoted supporters are indeed driven by the familiar populist narrative of a constitutional republic gone astray as “runaway spending on entitlements” presage a nation “going broke” and facing a moral crisis triggered by an erosion of personal responsibility. This approach envisions a U.S. future in decline pending serious “entitlement” and tax reform that would return the country’s government “to the people” — a vision illustrative of the “domestication” of U.S. politics (Stewart 2005) not oriented toward the global reconfigurations underlying contemporary political economic arrangements. A number of Paul advocates have long histories of immersion in this tradition, coming from families that ardently backed Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential run. Some grew up in homes heavily involved with the John Birch Society, the organization that, under the leadership of Robert Welch, Jr., became known particularly for its opposition to the civil rights movement as a communist front and sensationalist denunciation of President Dwight Eisenhower as a tool of communist operatives. In the 1960s, conservative patron saint William Buckley Jr. became a leading opponent of the
Birchers, concerned that “the right-wing upsurge in the country would take an ugly, even Fascist turn” and deeming the claims against Eisenhower “paranoid and idiotic libels” (Judis 2001:193-200). The John Birch Society, now dramatically declined, has only recently rejoined CPAC after years of exile from the mainstream conservative movement.

Yet the Austin Tea Party organizers and attendees came from radically disparate vantage points and analyses — some would become actively involved with the tea party activism that was to follow while others would fiercely reject it — but shared a common disgust with the political status quo. As the tea party as we now know it grew, so did the hostility of millennial libertarians toward the phenomenon, which most perceived as a cooptation of their mobilization by mainstream Republican operatives and attention-hungry politicians. As countless young movement participants described, what began as a grassroots revolt against government overreach and state-sponsored violence was captured by “neocons” like Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann. In turn, during the years of the tea party occupying center stage in media headlines and popular commentary, analysts at times distinguished between the “Ron Paul” and “Sarah Palin” wings of the tea party. Less noted, if at all, is that the divide was especially salient across generational lines. Millennial libertarians largely saw the former as a genuine challenge to the political establishment as a whole, and the latter as a crude jingoism masquerading in the tired Republican discourse of reform and limited government.

The Tea Party vs. the Liberty Movement: Generational Lines

The 2007 Austin Tea Party was the first political event Christina attended that was organized in support of a political candidate. Nineteen years old at the time, she had moved to the U.S. from South America with her family as a child and lived predominantly in Dallas until relocating to Austin for college. It was obvious even then, she said, that Paul wouldn’t win. She in
fact knew little about Paul in attending the event. Her concern was with the havoc being wreaked by the war on terror and the drug wars. For the first time in her recollection, a nationwide movement was coalescing on these fronts, and promoting the message seemed important. Thousands of people were getting together for demonstrations all over the country; the internet was ablaze with Ron Paul and libertarian discussion forums.

She dated her interests in social change to middle school, when she helped found a student Amnesty International chapter. “Really as long as I can remember I’ve wanted to make my life and my career about understanding big political and economic questions, and using that to help people,” she recalled. “None of it came from a religious imperative, I’ve really always been an atheist but I can relate to people who say they’re basically spiritual. What I think is problematic is institutionalized religion, and the kind of suffering it has caused in the world historically. I was interested in that all through high school. But once I kind of tapped that out and solidified where I stand, I moved on to other issues.”

Her interests increasingly led her to seek out sources of information outside of her high school curriculum, and she developed a strong skepticism and critique of institutional authority, both within and outside of a state framework. “[Noam] Chomsky is probably one of the bigger influences, I read a lot of his stuff early on. I also listened to Pacifica, like Democracy Now with Amy Goodman.” What she struggled with constantly, she noted, was the tendency of the left to seek solutions through government and formal political processes.

“That might have something to do with how I grew up, I don’t know,” she laughed, a wide smile lighting up her big brown eyes. She lit a cigarette. “Nobody at home buys into the politicians, like any random person you asked on the street would tell you trusting them is stupid. At the same time, people have real problems, right. So if you can get the system to do something
about that, it’s better than nothing.” Most recently, she had been reading accounts of the civil rights and feminist movements, as well as anti-poverty initiatives in the U.S. She was particularly interested in debates among activists who have long grappled with whether, and to what extent, state mechanisms can be used toward liberatory ends.

“There are obviously important reasons people work through the state. There is serious poverty and inequality.” She recounted how her parents struggled after the move to the U.S., although ultimately both found good jobs in the medical field. “My sister and I grew up comfortable, we lived in a middle class type of suburb. I think for a lot of people like us, it’s hard to understand real economic hardship so it’s maybe easier to dismiss how important things like social safety nets are. And say screw the government, we should just rely on each other.” This, she said, was an issue she was constantly raising with her friends, a group of libertarian Ron Paul supporters who she met through an online meetup group and with whom she had attended the Austin Tea Party. “But getting the state involved does seem to cause its own share of problems most the time. Probably all of the time. But no one knows what the alternative is, that’s the whole problem.”

She paused for a drink of water, wiping beads of sweat from her face. It was close to a hundred degrees, just another Austin summer afternoon about two and a half years after that first Tea Party reenactment. A group of us had been talking outside for nearly an hour, sitting in a circle on a University of Texas campus lawn kept green by sprinklers working overtime each evening.

“She has a hard time with Ron Paul because he’s a Republican and she still believes in the Democrats too much,” spoke up a young man, leaning against his bicycle. It was covered with Ron Paul stickers and peace signs. Despite the weather, he was wearing a black hoodie, a
thick bicycle chain around his waist. His name was Josh, and he was also a member of Christina’s meetup group. He just began work as a tattoo artist and played in a rockabilly band. He left an abusive home at seventeen, and had been working odd jobs ever since, apprenticing at a friend’s tattoo shop in his spare time.

He turned to Christina. “We’ve talked about this, you still think the Democrats are better because their rhetoric makes them sound like they care about people more. And we know it’s all the same bullshit, like how it was Clinton that dismantled welfare programs, you showed me those articles. And now Obama is supposed to be some savior, just watch what . . .”

She cut him off abruptly. “Stop man-splaining everything. I didn’t say I believe the Democrats, I said that it’s not entirely correct to say that there is no real difference between the parties. Because the platforms are different, especially on reproductive rights. And even though the whole system isn’t set up to help people, that does end up having a real impact in a lot of cases. Like in local races or when there are judicial appointments.”

“OK, but what does that have to do with Ron Paul? If you believe in voting you can still do that strategically in those cases where you think something worse will happen if you don’t.” Christina nodded, taking another sip from her water bottle.

Josh went on, “He’s not perfect, but Ron Paul is the only politician calling out everybody on the wars, and now we’re a huge movement. I don’t even believe in the political system. And I don’t care, because he can’t win, it’s symbolic no matter what all those kids online say. This is a way to say ‘fuck you’ to all those assholes in politics.” He grew increasingly frustrated. “What I’m getting at is that there’s this idea out there that good people who care about people have to vote for Democrats. Even though everybody knows hardly anything good happens through politics. So
many people can’t ever see outside the box, I keep running up against this everywhere. Ron Paul is . . . what is that word? He’s disabusing people of this idea of this false choice.”

“Yeah, I know. I just . . .” Christina trailed off briefly. “There’s so much weird shit tied up with it all. Look at how the tea parties got hijacked by the neocons, now the tea party is Sarah Palin and a bunch of lying Republicans. And scary mobs who don’t have a bigger analysis and blame Obama for everything. Even in the Ron Paul circles . . . all that crap about founding fathers and the Constitution. That can get really scary really fast.”

Millennial libertarians consistently differentiate between the tea party and the liberty movement. Those who participated in the early Ron Paul Tea Party events routinely describe a process of cooptation of the concept by parts of the Republican establishment. “Then all the grassroots crazy came out too, with the racism and xenophobia,” Josh had said earlier. “Scapegoating immigrants for the economic issues. Plus the USA fanaticism, the nationalism. I didn’t want to have anything to do with it anymore. I still organize Ron Paul events, but I got way more into libertarian thought. I’m going to Mises Academy [the Mises Institute’s week-long program in Austrian economics] this summer.”

Other commentators have noted the process of disenchantment with the tea party in the years after its national emergence. Similarly, quantitative studies show a split tea party, with less than half of tea party supporters identifying as libertarian. In a 2012 study on the tea party by the libertarian Cato Institute, the authors compile local and national polling data to find that about half the tea party is socially conservative and half is libertarian, when “libertarian” identifies voters who are fiscally conservative but socially moderate to liberal, even if the term “libertarian” is not familiar to them (Kirby and Ekins). But not all libertarians are tea party supporters. The

---

2 See, e.g., Blackmon and Levitz (2011) for accounts of former participants disenchanted with both a rise in tea party social conservatism and with compromises made by tea party politicians.
authors interpret Washington Post data to find that only 44 percent of libertarians consider themselves supporters of the tea party, and New York Times data to show that only 46 percent of libertarians consider themselves supporters. Further, the study found that libertarians broadly are even less loyal to the GOP than the subset of tea party libertarians, with 40 percent reporting voting equally for Democrats and Republicans.

Josh’s mention of the Mises Institute peaked Yuri’s interest, and he looked up from the large volume in his lap. He had been sitting with us quietly, reading Murray Rothbard’s classic Man, Economy, and State — for the third time. I first met Yuri some months back at an economics seminar organized by a libertarian institution. His passion was Austrian economics. Less excited by activist projects and the spectacle of demonstrations, he largely engaged with the liberty movement by writing numerous pieces in the Austrian tradition for various journals and websites.

“I don’t mind Ron Paul, he’s a great way to get out the message. He’s bringing tons of people to libertarianism. But he’s still a politician. The real issue is whether the movement can keep growing on this momentum. And what’s going to happen when this thing gets to Mordor,” invoking a moniker for Washington, D.C. commonplace among more antistatist millennial libertarians.

The Liberty Movement Enters Mordor

In addition to the significance of age in libertarian support of the tea party movement, little attention is paid to the mixed responses of millennial libertarians to another crucial development, one that did not coalesce until well after Ron Paul’s first presidential run. The liberty movement had begun to coin its own political establishment, with Ron Paul at the helm. Young Americans for Liberty (YAL), the movement’s largest youth-based organization, grew out of Students for Ron Paul during the Texas Congressman’s first bid for the Republican
presidential nomination in 2008. In less than eight months, Students for Ron Paul formed over 500 college and high school chapters across all 50 states and signed up over 26,000 students for Paul’s campaign. Under the leadership of Jeff Frazee, then in his early 20s and the former head of Students for Ron Paul, YAL aimed continue the grassroots support galvanized by Paul’s first campaign.

Highly focused on electoral politics, YAL works to identify and train new leaders to “reclaim the policies, candidates, and direction of our government,” according to a YAL national officer in her early twenties. Chapters are officially recognized campus student organizations and follow YAL rules, including paying dues and completing a chapter plan. Due to its electoral politics orientation YAL is regarded by some millennial libertarians as “the practical version” of Students for Liberty, the movement’s other large youth organization, and by others as overly hierarchical and “much more culturally conservative and tied to Paul’s paleocon tradition.” YAL also publishes the magazine *Young American Revolution* and organizes several nationwide activism initiatives annually, encouraging chapters to participate by providing a comprehensive activism guide, $100 activism grants, and activity-themed kits that include event-specific flyers, fact sheets, and ideas for enhancing the event. Past activities have included the Obama = Bush initiative, in which chapters distributed a questionnaire highlighting the similarities between the policies of the Bush and Obama administrations, particularly regarding bailouts, foreign intervention, and the erosion of civil liberties. The effort targeted “disaffected Obama supporters and politically-lost college students to show them liberty is the answer,” aiming to “tear down the falsely alleged Republican vs. Democrat dichotomy, and educate students about liberty, which offers the only genuine alternative to the political status quo” (Liberty 2012a). In YAL’s Visualize the Debt initiative, 78 chapters across 32 states built visual displays, such as “debt clocks,” on campus to
illustrate the rapidly rising amount of each U.S. worker’s debt share. To encourage participation, YAL also sponsors activism contests in which chapters compete for prizes in categories ranging from Best Overall Event to Most Media Attention Earned.

In 2011, YAL debuted the Campaign Bootcamp program, hosting ten day-long events in key states across the country to train over 1,000 grassroots activists in preparation for the 2012 election season and connect local leaders with volunteer and full-time campaign positions. The organization began to demonstrate its political muscle during the 2010 U.S. Senate GOP primary elections, helping to supplant Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s protégé, Trey Grayson, with Ron Paul’s son Rand in the minority leader’s own state of Kentucky. Rand Paul’s defeat of Grayson, endorsed by the likes of Dick Cheney, Rudy Giuliani, and Senator Rick Santorum, was part of the internal Republican Party turmoil that would only intensify over time.

YAL’s 2013 National Convention brought together the group’s top 300 youth leaders, representing over 200 campuses across 46 states, for a four-day activist and campaign training. Keynote speaker Ron Paul was joined by his son Rand, alongside U.S. Senators Ted Cruz from Texas and Mike Lee from Utah as well as U.S. Representatives Justin Amash from Michigan and Thomas Massie from Kentucky. At least some of the successful candidates heavily backed by the tea party so reviled by many millennial libertarians were now the anointed heroes of the libertarian political establishment.

Because the liberty movement is a loose assemblage of networks across various scales and not united by a formal platform or single decision-making body, participants’ approaches to these developments vary widely. Tens of thousands of millennial libertarians are eager participants in YAL political efforts and similar initiatives, thrilled at the opportunity to reclaim the political process from the violent grip of the “the political class” in the service of a truly limited
government that respects the rights of each individual. Simultaneously, the skepticism of others has extended from conservatism and the Republican Party to the libertarian establishment broadly on two fronts: “the smuggling in of cultural conservatism through the back door, and the idea that we’re now supposed to put our trust in a new order of limited government politicians,” a leader of the University of Texas libertarian student group aptly summarized the dilemma.

In the aforementioned Cato Institute study, the authors make the case that the tea party has strong libertarian roots and is a functionally libertarian influence on the Republican Party (Kirby and Ekins 2012). Thus, the study argues, the tea party phenomenon bucks the conventional wisdom that Republican candidates must persuade socially conservative voters to win elections; increasingly, Republican candidates must appeal to tea party voters on libertarian economic issues. But while it may be ever more the case that “religious bona fides are no longer sufficient to win” Republican primaries (38), many candidates simply deemphasize their socially conservative platforms in pursuing the tea party and liberty movement vote. Such politicians instead present themselves as “true constitutionalists” focused on reducing government size and spending.

A Grassroots Divided

The worst thing for the movement that could come out of this entire Ron Paul thing is a repeat of what happened with Reagan — that all of these Ron Paul supporters get brought into the Republican Party and end up just promoting more false free market rhetoric. It makes perfect sense from the Republicans’ perspective.

Thus lamented a concerned libertarian student activist from New York City during the peak of Ron Paul’s bid for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination. Much had changed since 2007, when the Congressman — long perceived by Capitol Hill colleagues as a bit of a kook full of fringe ideas — first galvanized the liberty movement nationwide and became a living
legend in the eyes of hundreds of thousands of young supporters. The 2010 midterm elections saw well over a hundred candidates with significant tea party support seek office in Congress, all under the Republican ticket (Zernike 2010). While the bulk of these races occurred in solidly Democratic districts, a sizeable amount — about thirty percent — ultimately won. Despite Paul’s prescient invocation of Boston Tea Party imagery well prior to the emergence of the tea party as such, various warring factions lay claim to the movement. The midterm elections only intensified accusations of cooptation by the Republican mainstream. Polls during the 2012 Republican primaries showed that voters who support the tea party are in fact less likely to support Paul, preferring instead conservative stalwarts Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum. In South Carolina, Paul did best among voters opposed to the tea party, placing behind Gingrich, Santorum, and Mitt Romney with thirteen percent of the vote. And yet, a libertarian establishment was consolidating in Washington. Throughout the 2012 election season, Paul and his allies channeled even more of their energies into supporting “liberty Republicans” endorsed as “true constitutionalists.”

In the high-profile 2012 Republican U.S. Senate primaries in Texas, liberty movement participants, as well as myself, were inundated with e-mails and phone calls on behalf of Ted Cruz. The tea party and libertarian favorite had forced a run-off with David Dewhurst, the Texas Lieutenant Governor under Governor Rick Perry with deep establishment ties and millions in personal wealth. Publicity for Cruz poured in from both established libertarian organizations and the Cruz campaign. According to the campaign, contact information was obtained from those who had signed up to attend the Tea Party Express Tour, which visited Austin in May and featured appearances by both Ron Paul and his son Senator Rand Paul in addition to Cruz. Numerous libertarian groups, including YAL and Ron Paul’s Campaign for
Liberty, endorsed Cruz and filled supporters’ mailboxes with countless emails in support of the “pro-liberty” candidate.

But as a Washington Post commentary (Sullivan 2012) observed, part of the reason that fiscal issues so heavily drove the Republican primary race between Cruz and Dewhurst “is that both are so socially conservative on almost every issue that conservative voters would be hard pressed to find fault with either.” Following Cruz’ crushing defeat of Dewhurst, a spokesperson for Dick Armey’s FreedomWorks noted that wins by candidates such as Cruz would “force Romney to the right” (Montgomery 2012). FreedomWorks, a key tea party organizational mechanism, had played an important role in the 2010 midterm elections. Cruz ultimately won the seat, becoming the first latino senator from Texas.

“I’ve endorsed Ted Cruz because he has pledged to end warrantless searches, restore the Fourth Amendment, audit the out-of-control Federal Reserve, and fight to finally start cutting the size and scope of our federal government,” read an e-mail sent on behalf of Ron Paul by his Liberty PAC. YAL, which actively works to match young people with campaign jobs, internships, and volunteer positions “on the frontlines fighting for liberty,” helped place at least two members in high-level, full-time jobs with the Cruz campaign as state field coordinator and state youth director — the organization prominently advertises its “Work for the Revolution” job application to supporters. The Super PAC Concerned American Voters, which supported Cruz, similarly reached out to liberty movement participants in seeking applicants for twenty full-time jobs “working to elect pro-liberty candidates at all levels of government” via e-mail, sent on behalf of the former national youth director of Ron Paul’s 2012 campaign. Meanwhile, the Ron Paul camp and allies snubbed John Jay Myers, Libertarian Party nominee for the U.S. Senate Texas seat. “I didn’t join this party to be a Republican. If I wanted to be a Republican I would have
joined the Republican Party,” Myers said. “The real problem with Ted Cruz is he’s a social conservative, not a libertarian” (Quinn 2012).

Indeed, some liberty movement participants balked both at Cruz’ positions and at libertarian-oriented organizations’ endorsement of him, as well as of other Republican candidates. Cruz draw wrath for his views on immigration — including categorical opposition to amnesty for undocumented people living in the U.S. — and particularly his position that “We need to do everything humanly possible to secure the borders. Electronic surveillance, a wall, helicopters and, most importantly, boots on the ground. If elected, the first thing I will do is triple the Border Patrol” (Siggins 2012).

Cruz has also “fought to protect innocent human life” in several significant court cases, authoring a U.S. Supreme Court amicus brief for 13 states defending the federal ban on late-term abortion procedures, upheld by the Court in a 5-4 decision. He further drafted a Court amicus brief for 18 states defending New Hampshire’s parental notification law, which required that a girl’s parent or guardian be notified in person or by certified mail at least 48 hours before an abortion is to be performed (Senate N.d.).

Cruz staunchly opposes same-sex marriage, stressing his credentials in this arena by routinely noting his role, as solicitor general, in vacating a divorce granted by a Beaumont, TX state court to two men who had obtained a civil union in Vermont. Cruz explained during the February 22 Republican primary debate that intervening in the case on behalf of the state was important in protecting “traditional marriage” because advocates of gay marriage in Texas — which does not recognize same-sex unions and defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman — are building a legal strategy “so you could say, well of course they can get married if they can get divorced.” He also worked with Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott, by whom
he was appointed, in writing a letter to the U.S. Senate in support of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defines marriage as the legal union of one man and one woman for federal and interstate recognition purposes. During the same primary debate, Cruz thus criticized one of his Senate race opponents, former Dallas mayor Tom Leppert, for marching in the city’s gay pride parade: “When the mayor of a city chooses twice to march in a parade celebrating gay pride that’s a statement, and it’s not a statement I agree with.”

One night shortly before the Cruz-Dewhurst runoff election, I joined several University of Texas libertarian leaders at a local café following a meeting. The conversation quickly turned to the relationship between Republicans and the liberty movement. People shared experiences with their early tea party involvement — before, as millennial libertarians often note, it was harnessed by Republican agendas and tainted with “blatant nativism.” Much like numerous younger movement participants’ early tea party immersion, the involvement of many with the Ron Paul campaign comprised but one part of a much broader quest for meaningful political philosophies — explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

The activists soon began discussing the ongoing election campaigns. “I’m really disgusted by all of these so-called liberty Republicans and how cool with that a lot of people in our movement are. Like I get all of these Ted Cruz messages and calls almost every day,” a recent college graduate shared with the group. “All of my friends in the movement, even the ones who have conservative views personally, don’t believe in using the state to force that on other people. Sometimes I forget how not all libertarians are like that.”

Reading through an email from YAL promoting Cruz on her phone, another activist added, “Man, YAL is really conservative. And it’s really scary that they’re focused so much on winning elections. This is not about carving out a space within the Republican Party!”
As the conversation continued into the night, one of the activists recalled an event we had recently attended — the YAL Campaign Bootcamp. He turned to me, observing, “That was a perfect example of what we’re talking about.”

**Toward a Place in the GOP**

“Constitutionalist conservative.” “Liberty Republican.” “Ron Paul Republican.” “Tea Party libertarian.” Thus identified the majority of the approximately sixty participants in the Campaign Bootcamp organized by YAL in Austin, one of ten such events launched by the national organization across key states in preparation for the election battles of 2012.

The introductions drew looks of discomfort from the handful of college-age attendees who described themselves as “just libertarian,” or “libertarian anarchist.” The majority of the Bootcamp attendees appeared in their forties and older. Many had driven to Austin from small towns and suburbs throughout Texas to learn effective campaign tactics for winning local elections. Several were currently or planned to become involved in campaigns in their hometowns. Yet the event ultimately represented a trend of far greater significance than any single set of campaign tactics: promoting social conservatism while speaking the language of liberty. Bootcamp presenter Mike Rothfeld, then a senior consultant at Ron Paul’s Republican presidential primary campaign, opened the training with a virulent indictment of “illegals,” “baby-killing,” and “radical homosexuals” — themes that permeated the rest of his presentation and served as examples in most hypothetical scenarios. While the Bootcamp’s stated and oft-repeated objective was electing “pro-liberty,” “non-establishment” candidates, the implication of this mission was clear: it is not only compatible with, but in fact dictates, electing representatives committed to putting a stop to the travesty of “babies being ripped out of mothers’ wombs,” among other social conservative cornerstones. Toward the session’s end, a college-aged Ron Paul
advocate asked whether focusing on the abortion issue is strategically wise, given that so many younger Paul enthusiasts support reproductive freedom. Rothfeld replied that the polling data is clear: “You must be pro-life to win a Republican primary. That is a fact.”

In the course of his talk, Rothfeld identified a core Paul campaign goal. Describing the internal wings of U.S. political parties, he recalled a reporter’s question to Ralph Nader following the 2000 presidential election. The reporter, Rothfeld said, had asked Nader if he regrets running, having cost Al Gore the presidency. Not at all, Nader replied — now Democrats will pay more attention to the party’s progressive wing than its establishment wing. It is the progressive wing that Barack Obama represented in the 2008 Democratic primaries, Rothfeld continued. Similarly, he said, Mitt Romney represents the Republican Party’s establishment wing: “The whole fight is about who will become the conservative, pro-life candidate. Our hope at the Ron Paul campaign is to become that conservative candidate.”

Indeed, as the emergent libertarian political establishment directs efforts toward claiming a space within the Republican Party, it increasingly unveils ties to other expressly conservative projects. The YAL Bootcamp was no exception — the conservative infrastructure loomed large behind the event’s undertaking of promoting “liberty candidates.” To be sure, in his presentation Rothfeld made clear that abortion and the other issues used in the examples throughout his talk constitute only his own personal motivations for political involvement, taking the time to describe these in some detail: “I believe a baby in a mother’s womb is a life and the highest obligation of government to protect. I believe that the blood of Jesus Christ is available for salvation to anyone who wants it anywhere in the world.” Distinguishable from any personal motivations, Rothfeld stressed, the campaign technologies he teaches are “ideologically neutral” — quoting Morton Blackwell, renowned conservative activist and founder of the Leadership Institute. Alma mater of
Grover Norquist, Ralph Reed and Karl Rove, the Institute has taught “conservatives the nuts and bolts of how to succeed in the public policy process” since 1979, striving “to produce a new generation of public policy leaders unwavering in their commitment to free enterprise, limited government, strong national defense, and traditional values” (Horwitz 2005; Institute 2013). Prior to his work on Ron Paul’s 2008 presidential campaign, YAL Executive Director Jeff Frazee, also in attendance at the Bootcamp, served as the Institute’s Deputy Campus Services Coordinator. The Institute played a significant role in helping launch YAL, and continues its extensive sponsorship.

Rothfeld’s view of the path to power, shared by many on the electoral politics scene, is diametrically opposed to what he termed the “education theory” of social change. It is not through persuading the masses or changing hearts and minds that one attains power — it is through getting votes and striking fear into establishment politicians. What ultimately matters, stressed Rothfeld, is not people’s motivations, but their votes. It doesn’t matter whether they support your candidate for the same reasons you do — identify them, show them how your candidate speaks to the issues important to them, and get them to the polls. He could have added that Republican outreach to the liberty movement is a case in point.

While the Bootcamp’s socially conservative rhetoric did not appear to strike much of a cord with the vast majority of participants, a handful of younger people — leaders and members of libertarian student organizations throughout Texas — vented their frustrations following the talk. Gathered outside in a small circle, students in business attire described being “offended” and “disgusted,” particularly by Rothfeld’s anti-gay stance. “I was this close to just walking out and slamming my nametag down in front of Frazee — you know, do the sheriff thing, give up the badge,” said a campus organizer as the students traded similar stories.
“Man you should have seen him [Rothfeld] speak at the [YAL] national convention, it was even worse,” another student chimed in.

“What?” responded the first organizer, nearly laughing. “How could it be worse?!"

The conversation continued as the students noted that YAL is a good organizing tool for campus libertarians, but that many chapters across the country are “YAL in name only” and do not reflect the election-focused, conservative-friendly approach of the Bootcamp and the national organization broadly. One leader, still shaken, discussed looking into changing his campus group’s name upon returning home. “I don’t want to be associated with this,” he said.

*Hearts & Minds: Millennial Libertarians Beyond the Voting Booth*

This activism infrastructure started with think-tanks and pressure groups spreading the ideas, and even crafting the policy proposals to implement them. But with the advent of dedicated support networks for student societies and young people to bring them together, this has allowed an initially small number of activists to inspire each other, create their own social groups, and consequently expand them even further. Perhaps most importantly, the success of these ideas-based groups is likely to be more sustainable than any overtly political or partisan project. Unlike political party youth groups, they lack the wannabe politicians and careerists, have a much broader appeal across the political spectrum, and aren’t dependent on individual political figures or the popularity of parties.

—Anton Howes (2012), UK Liberty League co-founder and former Students for Liberty Executive Board member

In the fall of 2011, zombies took the streets of Austin, TX. Just in time for Halloween, Texas students organized the Founding Fathers Zombie Crawl, marching on the State Capitol dressed as zombies in 18th-century garb to show politicians that constitutional violations have the founding fathers rolling in their graves. Led by “town crier” Andrew Kaluza wearing a tricorn hat, knickers, and bloody white shirt — then Students for Liberty’s Campus Coordinator from the University of Texas, San Antonio — students lurched and moaned through downtown
Austin in colonial-style wigs, lace-trimmed jabots, and green makeup. Shouting “End the Patriot Act!” and “The war on drugs is unconstitutional!” while waving signs like “Politicians Need Brainnnsss!,” some stumbled zombie-style and others literally crawled on the sidewalks, capturing the attention of both passers-by and the local media.

The spectacle drew on the familiar symbolism associated with tea party rallies, invoking imagery associated with the country’s founding and calls for the return to a lost constitutional republic ideal. Yet most of the event’s message focused on civil liberties and the wars on terror and drugs. While many of the zombies expressed their firm commitments to sound money through the iconic libertarian slogan “End the Fed!,” the same group could be heard shouting, “Death to the state!” and “Everyone secede!”

Several participants self-consciously reflected on the juxtaposition: “I think of all of these founding fathers things in the march as symbolic. It’s a funny way to get people’s attention . . . I don’t believe in the state or in electoral politics. Those are the very reasons we are in this situation right now,” told me a second-year University of Texas undergraduate student, who identified as an anarcho-capitalist.

An organizer of the event, face dripping with green make-up, added: “Let the statists come. Once they read Rothbard they’ll change their mind.”

At the time, the student group Libertarian Longhorns at the University of Texas, Austin was particularly well-known for “high success rates of converting minarchists” — a good-naturedly pejorative movement term to describe libertarians who favor highly limited state institutions for the protection life, liberty, and property. A pleased group leader proudly described the organization’s success in educating students about anarchist ideas: “A whole lot of students walk in the first meeting as minarchists and graduate anarchists.” Indeed, few begin
their intellectual journeys in an anarchist tradition. Millennial libertarian discussions often revolve around how modes of social organization could function absent at least some minimal state structures, such as court systems, police, and the military. Today, an “anarchist vs. minarchist” debate is a nearly obligatory affair on any libertarian student group’s schedule of annual campus events. As a result of the massive amounts of energy invested in extrapolating the nuances of how a stateless society could not only avoid collapse but flourish and thrive, young converts to libertarian anarchism quickly become seasoned in explaining the basic principles to doubtful newcomers and rebutting the most common objections — occasionally exchanging knowing glances and asking sarcastically, “but who will build the roads?”

Beyond its significance in the consolidation of its own GOP wing, the Ron Paul extravaganza is also an indicator, and in many ways a catalyst, of a broader phenomenon. An in-depth look at the Paul-centered euphoria reveals an organized contingent of grassroots millennial libertarian activists committed to mobilizing ideas and building a movement, not simply promoting a candidate. At the core of millennial libertarian efforts outside of the formal political arena is Students for Liberty (SFL), the structure, vision, and approach to social change of which varies considerably from the more politics-oriented YAL. The Zombie Crawl was in fact organized as an informal action the night before the 2011 SFL Regional Conference in Austin. SFL has no chapter structure and significant overlap with YAL exists; many participants see the groups’ work as complementary, with numerous formal YAL chapters also receiving SFL assistance. The presence of both organizations was palpable each year that I attended CPAC, their tables in the main exhibit hall abuzz with chattering students throughout the three-day gathering.
Although the day-long YAL Campaign Bootcamp was coordinated in partnership with the SFL Regional Conference and took place on the same October weekend in 2011, the two events stood in stark contrast. The SFL conference drew about 150 students from across the state, many of whom militantly decried conservatism, partisan politics, and the broken electoral system, and included numerous self-identified libertarian anarchists. In contrast to YAL speaker Rothfeld’s take on power that was to dominate the next day’s Bootcamp, the SFL conference highlighted the importance of ideas — an approach that also guides the work of several other libertarian efforts. Most of the YAL Bootcamp participants did not attend the conference, and vice versa.

In line with SFL’s overarching commitment to fostering change through developing and promoting the philosophy of liberty among youth, the group’s trademark theme of winning hearts and minds — rather than elections — pervaded the conference, entitled “Innovating Liberty with the Life of an Idea.” Giving the keynote address was director and producer John Papola, whose online hip-hop videos “Fear the Boom and Bust: A Hayek vs. Keynes Rap Anthem” and “Fight of the Century: Keynes vs. Hayek Round Two” helped breathe new life into “the dismal science.” The first video propelled Papola to instant millennial libertarian celebrity status, garnering over four million YouTube views with its depiction of the famed clash between the approaches of the two economists.

A vibrant assortment of young people comprised the SFL audience: Suits mingled with dreadlocks, ex-Republicans joked with ex-Democrats about their “statist” political pasts, anarchists argued with limited government advocates about the particularities of transitioning to a true libertarian society. A microcosm of millennial libertarianism, conference attendees came from different backgrounds and prioritized different issues, from war, militarization, and the war
on drugs, to the federal reserve and fiscal policy, to the police state, civil liberties, and ever-increasing surveillance. But all shared a profound disenchantment with the political economic status quo and a deep suspicion of electoral politics and policy as the remedy.

SFL, a global network of student groups, provides training and resources to over 500 campus organizations nationwide, recently launching European, Canadian, and African counterparts. Growing from around 100 participants at the inaugural 2008 gathering, the 2012 International Students for Liberty Conference, held in Washington, D.C., drew over 1,000 students. SFL focuses on developing and promoting libertarian ideas through offering a broad spectrum of libertarian groups free literature, the Journal of Liberty & Society, protest grants, and regular webinars on a wide range of issues. According to Executive Director Alexander McCobin, “We are rejecting the typical top-down model of student organizing where groups are expected to take directives from the national office. Instead we empower students to advance liberty through whatever strategies they think will be effective on their own campuses” (Liberty 2011:3). Growing from a full-time staff of three to five, in 2010/11 SFL completed its first campus coordinator program with 24 student leaders serving as “libertarian community organizers” (19), extending SFL’s virtual campus presence by providing ground support to start 143 student liberty organizations across the country and sustain numerous groups already within the SFL network. Another 58 coordinators have been selected for 2011/12, undergoing a rigorous training program culminating in a weekend retreat in Washington, D.C. SFL has developed Alumni for Liberty to keep graduating students involved in the network and held nine regional conferences in 2010, drawing well over a thousand unique participants. The number of regional conferences grew to twelve in 2011.
Lively socials and other activities suffuse millennial libertarian communities as participants build the movement by creating their own spaces independently of national organizations. In Austin, the home base for much of my fieldwork, it is no exaggeration that “there’s a libertarian event for every night of the week,” as activists frequently tell new arrivals. In addition to weekly meetings of several University of Texas, Austin (UT) student organizations attended by dozens and not limited to students — including the Libertarian Longhorns, the economics-focused UT Mises Circle, and, during his last presidential run, UT Youth for Ron Paul — those interested can participate in regular events at the libertarian bookstore Brave New Books and join Texans for Accountable Government, a political action committee that meets monthly at a local restaurant. 2013 brought the monthly social Liberty on the Rocks to Austin, a networking staple in Washington, D.C. launched by a non-profit of the same name and adopted in numerous other cities including Dallas and Houston. Further, one can partake in the informal socials of the Alliance of the Libertarian Left, join the libertarian Toastmasters chapter Speaking for Liberty, or assist with libertarian-launched grassroots organizing efforts ranging from initiatives opposing war and police violence to building neighborhood organic gardens. Similarly vibrant hubs of various sizes permeate the country — the nearest to Austin being libertarian activity at Texas State University in San Marcos, a mere 30 miles away — as libertarian activists increasingly collaborate not only online or at events organized by the longstanding, established institutions, but create their own, nascent organizations and informal spaces.

Millennial libertarian leaders in fact consciously articulate the historical lessons of both libertarianism and conservatism: long-lasting, sustainable movements thrive on institutions and broad-based intellectual traditions that outlast and overshadow the impact of political candidates, single issue efforts, or isolated direct action tactics. Rife with vibrant debate carried out routinely
in journals, online forums, and at community events, parts of the movement grow ever more multifaceted — and further at odds with not only the GOP, but also with the libertarian political establishment — on a near daily basis.

“Fabians or Marxists?” The History of a Dilemma

Today as decades earlier, a critical fault line within the libertarian tradition remains the extent to which the electoral politics arena — and, more specifically, either the Republican or a third party — is considered an avenue for meaningful change.

The questions confronting millennial libertarians on these fronts are neither novel nor limited to this particular social and political movement — the history of libertarianism throughout the late 20th century is in fact partially a history of clashes over this issue. In 2012, many movement participants skeptical of electoral politics nevertheless cast a vote for libertarian icon Ron Paul in the Republican presidential primary contest, noting Paul is by no means a perfect candidate but citing particularly his ardent antiwar stance, longstanding criticism of the Federal Reserve and U.S. monetary policy, as well as the campaign’s critical function in disseminating the libertarian message and galvanizing the movement. Some maintained involvement with the Libertarian Party, turning their support to former New Mexico governor and 2012 Libertarian Party presidential nominee Gary Johnson after Paul lost the Republican nomination. Similarly, many who unenthusiastically viewed Paul’s son Rand as simply another mainstream conservative politician embraced the Senator following his March 2013 criticism of domestic drone use during his historic 13-hour filibuster delaying the confirmation of CIA director John Brennan. Yet numerous others, many in the recently resuscitated libertarian anarchist traditions, scoff both at the prospect that anything good could come of backing most politicians — let alone, in the words of one libertarian anarchist, a “closeted fascist” such as Ron
Paul. Such skeptics were hardly surprised at Rand Paul’s apparent about face a month following the filibuster when he clarified his stance on drone use in “imminent threat” cases, telling Fox Business Network that “If someone comes out of a liquor store with a weapon and fifty dollars in cash, I don’t care if a drone kills him or a policeman kills him” (Ungar 2013).

A brief look at libertarianism’s history in the U.S. reveals that the questions with which various strands of the movement grapple today are by no means unprecedented. Strikingly similar conflicts between libertarians committed to various degrees of radicalism and disparate ideas about how to best effect change have permeated the burgeoning movement throughout the 20th century. A key figure in these dynamics was the aforementioned Murray Rothbard, the Bronx, NY-born founder of anarcho-capitalism who first inspired libertarian twenty-somethings in the 1950s. At that time, Dwight Eisenhower’s prominence in the Republican Party had thoroughly alienated Rothbard and his cadre. Simultaneously, this group was quickly becoming disenchanted by the lack of radicalism among early libertarian institutions such as the Foundation for Economic Education, whose founder Leonard Read scandalized libertarian anarchists in 1954 with his proposition that government can force citizens to pay taxes for their own protection. The ensuing skirmish was perhaps the first significant “anarchist-minarchist” clash, although the term “minarchist” to describe libertarians who favor limited state action to protect life, liberty and property was not coined until somewhat later — one of many witticisms devised by anarchist Samuel Konkin, who saw libertarianism as radically leftist and played a key role in forging the libertarian left, a subject taken up in the next chapter.

In Rothbard’s day, the night was young for institutions that would prove crucial in disseminating the libertarian message, their development pushed along significantly by “the

---

3 For historical treatments of postwar libertarianism through the 1990s, see also Kelley (1997) and Raimondo’s biography of Rothbard (2000).
Kochtopus,” another Samuel Konkin moniker for the vast network of established libertarian organizations and projects built with the support of billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch that today includes the Cato Institute, the Reason Foundation, which also publishes Reason magazine, and the George Mason University-based Institute for Humane Studies and Mercatus Center. The Koch family foundations — part of the liberty movement’s dominant current that overlaps with mainstream conservative formations — also fund the tea party-affiliated FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, as well as conservative behemoths such as the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society, among others.

In the 1970s, Rothbard co-founded the Cato Institute, today an influential libertarian think tank, along with Charles Koch and Ed Crane, then Libertarian Party chair who backed Ed Clark’s high-profile 1978 California gubernatorial campaign and subsequent bid for the presidency. Commentators and libertarians alike frequently reference the schism between “the Kochtopus” and the Rothbardians, the particulars of which have been detailed elsewhere.⁴ In sum, the radical Rothbard saw the Cato Institute’s efforts to appeal to a broader constituency as the selling out of libertarian principles, especially miffed by what he described as opportunism and soft-pedaling by Crane and Koch; extensive infighting culminated in the firing of Rothbard from Cato. Rothbard, who claimed his shares in the Institute were taken from him illegally and who passed away in 1995, would no doubt draw some satisfaction from the fact that Crane has recently found himself at odds with the Koch brothers, settling a high-profile shareholder lawsuit over majority control of the think tank in 2012.

Following the schism, Rothbard went on to head academic programs at the Ludwig von Mises Institute (LvMI), today a leading center in the promotion of the laissez-faire Austrian school

⁴ Rothbard published his account of the split in a “Special Conflict Issue” of the Libertarian Forum (1981b). For an overview of the issue, see also Doherty (2007).
of economics. There, he profoundly influenced the organization as a radical alternative to the policy-oriented Cato and the “minarchist,” limited government approach of many Koch-sponsored organizations. The longstanding rift between “the Kochtopus” and the Auburn-based LvMI, in the courtyard of which Rothbard’s bust stands today next to that of Mises himself, reflects enduring disparities that permeate the movement. Focusing on research and education, LvMI, with its anarchist, Rothbardian bent grounded in natural law, eschews attempts at influencing government, instead providing valuable resources to those interested in Austrian economics and libertarian thought. Hundreds of students descend upon Auburn each summer for Mises University, the intensive, week-long seminar in Austrian economics. The organization further offers nationwide seminars, online courses with Institute-affiliated faculty, and a robust, free online database of literally thousands of contemporary and historical books and articles on these topics.

It is thus that at the dawn of the 1980s, libertarians faced a critical impasse: were they “to play the role of the Marxists — the hard-core fire-breathing theoreticians — or the Fabians — the gradualists who try to effect some version of the radical goals within the system?” (Doherty 2007:433). While this analogy does an injustice to the referenced historical debates where “the Marxists” in fact held a wide range of disparate positions, it illustrates how libertarianism in the late 20th century was no stranger to the internal disputes that typically permeate growing movements. Younger, more radical liberty movement participants familiar with this history, much like some active at the time, frequently attribute the decline of libertarian activity during this period to the rise in prominence of the Libertarian Party. In the eyes of many, the Party has tainted libertarianism with infighting and bureaucracy while diluting the overall message. Despite achieving high visibility during the 1980 Ed Clark presidential run — which secured a vote total
double what the Libertarian Party would win again until Gary Johnson’s 2012 run — the Party, in severe debt following the campaign, was further crippled by internal feuds and factionalizing. To this day, the Party constitutes a relatively minor part of the movement, although in certain local contexts Party staffers play important roles in facilitating movement activism. Some young movement participants also serve as convention delegates and partake in election campaigns, particularly during big election years such as 2012, when many rallied behind Johnson. For these reasons, when today’s movement participants introduce their views, many are careful to identify as “small-l” libertarians — indicating their distance from the Libertarian Party.

It was in this context that a critical figure emerged on the national political scene and — at least for a time — placed a final nail in the coffin of the libertarian moment. Ronald Reagan forced the libertarians’ “revolution or reform” hand faster than most had imagined possible. Many found homes in Reagan’s Washington, where the Cato Institute relocated in 1981 from San Francisco, either working for the administration or various libertarian-oriented policy organizations. These had grown in number and legitimacy with funds provided by conservative behemoths such as the Olin Foundation and the Scaife and Koch family foundations. Despite the proliferation of libertarian thought in the arenas of economics and political theory throughout the 1980s, many libertarians were ultimately appalled not only by Reagan’s record on civil liberties and foreign policy, but also by his economic legacy — specifically his wielding of antigovernment rhetoric while increasing tax revenue in various forms, heightening tariffs, increasing import quotas, taking credit for deregulation measures implemented by the Carter administration, and adoption of inflationary monetary policies. Rothbard characteristically summed up Reagan’s impact both on the U.S. and libertarianism in his scathing “Ronald Reagan: An Autopsy”:
As the Gipper, at bloody long last, goes riding off into the sunset, he leaves us with a hideous legacy. He has succeeded in destroying the libertarian public mood of the late 1970’s, and replaced it with fatuous and menacing patriotic symbols of the Nation-State, especially The Flag, which he first whooped up in his vacuous reelection campaign in 1984, aided by the unfortunate coincidence of the Olympics being held at Los Angeles. (Who will soon forget the raucous baying of the chauvinist mobs: “USA! USA!” every time some American came in third in some petty event?) He has succeeded in corrupting libertarian and free-market intellectuals and institutions, although in Ronnie’s defense it must be noted that the fault lies with the corrupted and not with the corrupter . . . It is a decidedly unlovely and unlibertarian wasteland, this picture of America 1989, and who do we have to thank for it? Several groups: the neocons who organized it; the vested interests and the Power Elite who run it; the libertarians and free marketeers who sold out for it; and above all, the universally beloved Ronald Wilson Reagan, Who Made It Possible.

(1989)

Millennial libertarians find themselves facing a strikingly similar fork in the road regarding approaches to social change. Discussion on these fronts flourishes across disparate movement spaces, expressed by participants in more radical and grassroots initiatives as well as those involved with established institutions — such as the Institute for Human Studies, focused on facilitating the development of libertarian-minded intellectuals, and SFL, similarly oriented around promoting libertarian ideas. Yet the intricacies of the libertarian labyrinth extend far beyond contrasting views of electoral politics and policy as mechanisms of social change.

_Fiscally Conservative, Socially Liberal?: The Dizzying Intricacies of the Libertarian Establishment_

As opposed to the “Kochtopus” Beltway institutions which are generally perceived as more cosmopolitan and socially progressive, the radical Rothbardian wing associated with LvMI is known to attract socially conservative supporters — many of whom embrace the common position that libertarianism is perfectly compatible with social conservatism when the latter remains one’s personal commitment and is not directed toward using state power to enforce particular moral norms. Yet the “Kochtopus” _Reason_ magazine was quick to document the
prominence in some libertarian circles of figures such as Gary North, a writer affiliated with LvMI and the “paleolibertarian” circle of the Institute’s founder Lew Rockwell, Ron Paul’s longtime friend and colleague. Parts of North’s work aim to consolidate Austrian economic approaches with the theological conservatism of his mentor and father-in-law R.J. Rushdoony, the leader of the Christian Reconstructionism movement. Christian Reconstructionism, the Reason article notes, advocates positions that even committed fundamentalists find “scary,” including the execution (possibly by public stoning, depending on the offense) of gay people, women guilty of “unchastity before marriage,” and those who curse or strike their parents, among others (Olson 1998). Particularly irksome to the vast numbers of libertarians opposed to state enforcement of morality is North’s call to “use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God. Murder, abortion, and pornography will be illegal. God’s law will be enforced. It will take time” (North 1982:25).

Such severe views are extremely rare even in the movement’s more socially conservative spaces, and North doesn’t draw on these elements of his work at LvMI events. Most young liberty movement participants have never heard of Christian Reconstructionism, and those who have generally laugh it off as “insane.” Despite the socially conservative commitments of many affiliated with LvMI, such topics are rarely the subject of public talks, although the organization has come under fire for promoting views that see the right of secession, not slavery, as the cause of the “War of Northern Aggression,” as argued by LvMI-affiliated economics professor Thomas
DiLorenzo (2002).\textsuperscript{5} LvMI scholar and \textit{New York Times} bestselling author Thomas Woods, who cite historians Eugene Genovese and Donald Fleming as influences, penned a letter of non-apology in response to criticism of his association with the League of the South, a “Southern Nationalist” organization whose ultimate goal is a free and independent Southern republic — recalling a time when organizations on the left, many in a decentralist tradition themselves, “gave you the courtesy of not automatically assuming that the reason you favored decentralism was so you could oppress people” (2005).

Nevertheless, the cultural politics divide among the movement’s established institutions persists and is not lost on millennial libertarians. Some affectionately refer to the Cato Institute as “Gayto” due the organization’s perceived openness toward gay staffers. Fellow Cato interns jokingly warned a student of Southeast Asian descent to “be careful” in attending LvMI’s summer Mises University program, teasing that they weren’t aware that “non-white people were allowed to attend” — the student ultimately reported the program enjoyable and beneficial.

LvMI is especially friendly with Ron Paul, longtime friend and associate of Institute founder Lew Rockwell who \textit{Reason} identified as chief ghostwriter of the now infamous Ron Paul newsletters rife with racist and antigay content, a role Rockwell has denied (Sanchez and Weigel 2008). Brink Lindsey, former vice president of research at the Cato Institute and vocal proponent of breaking with conservative ranks, wrote of Paul:

I hadn’t known about his old newsletters and their cesspool of racism and homophobia. But I didn’t need to know about them to know that I wanted nothing to do with Ron Paul’s brand of libertarianism.

Here’s why. I’m a libertarian because I’m a liberal. In other words, I support small-government, free-market policies because I believe they provide the institutional framework best suited to advancing the liberal values of individual

\textsuperscript{5} See also, DiLorenzo (2006).
autonomy, tolerance, and open-mindedness. Liberalism is my bottom line; libertarianism is a means to promoting that end.

Ron Paul, by contrast, is no liberal. Just look at his xenophobia, his sovereignty-obsessed nationalism, his fondness for conspiracy theories, his religious fundamentalism — here is someone with a crudely authoritarian worldview. The snarling bigotry of his newsletters is just the underside of this rotten log. (Lindsey 2008)

The shortcomings of the “fiscally conservative, socially liberal” understanding of the liberty movement are further illustrated by a perhaps counterintuitive twist commonplace in the libertarian world: The anti-conservative Lindsey was one of the foremost libertarian supporters of the Iraq War, prompting Justin Raimondo of Antiwar.com, an openly gay libertarian in Ron Paul’s paleolibertarian tradition, to condemn the “hostility of the Beltway faux-libertarians toward the Paul campaign” as rooted in Paul’s fierce antiwar stance (2007). Further illustrating the movement’s divisions on these fronts, Raimondo continued, “Lindsey and his fellow creative geniuses are too good for the poor untutored hoi polloi who don’t go to the gym four days a week and are neither feminists nor gay. In Lindsey’s lexicon, ‘Forward-looking’ means ‘people like me,’ and ‘backward-looking’ stands for non-feminist non-gay non-gym-going proles, who don’t count anyway.”

To complicate matters further, the Cato Institute is itself not, as some would have it, a beacon of social progressivism. As is the case with many established libertarian institutions, Cato associates contribute to a range of antifeminist polemics, a partial result of libertarianism’s longstanding coalition with conservatism from which few libertarians emerged unscathed. Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh, who popularized the term “feminazi” to disparage feminists, credited his friend Thomas Hazlett, former Cato Institute adjunct scholar, with coining the term (1992:193). In the vein of ally organization Independent Women’s Forum, Cato
Institute publications generalize about the positions of “radical feminists,” dismiss sophisticated feminist analyses of patriarchy, and refuse to acknowledge non-state forms of coercion broadly.

Indeed, it was philosophy professor Roderick Long, senior scholar at the ostensibly culturally retrograde LvMI, who co-authored the piece “Libertarian Feminism: Can This Marriage Be Saved?” (2005), striving to reconcile libertarian and feminist commitments and recognize insights each approach has for the other. LvMI, largely through Long and collaborators such as Charles W. Johnson, has in fact hosted a range of libertarian efforts that aim to merge critiques of state power with subverting other forms of domination — explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Rothbard, LvMI’s patron saint, was himself prone to antifeminist tirades, declaring, “And so, at the hard inner core of the Women’s Liberation Movement lies a bitter, extremely neurotic if not psychotic, man-hating lesbianism” (1970).

In the face of the liberty movement’s complexity, millennial libertarians describe an intellectual and political journey across the movement’s wide-ranging political and social spaces that grow and expand on a daily basis. Having spent some time with Paul’s brand of libertarianism and various policy and electoral politics initiatives, numerous millennials explore libertarian spaces not tied to the political arena. Developing and nuancing their own views and affiliations, sharing their experiences with others, and engaging with disparate movement trends, they interrogate various parts of the tradition they have inherited. In the process, they engage and remake ideologies at the heart of western political thought and U.S. liberalism. The libertarian resurgence facilitated, in part, by established conservative and libertarian institutions and foundations has thus not only troubled a powerful political coalition and shaken up the GOP, reviving for millennials the longstanding questions about the limits of working within formal political processes. It has ushered forth a vibrant, dynamic complex of counterpublics that
challenge existing political economic arrangements from various — and conflicting — perspectives.
Chapter Three:  
Millennial Libertarian Journeys, From Paul to Proudhon

Of Ron Paul’s countless taped interviews, certainly the most unique is the then-Congressman’s cameo in 2009’s *Brüno*. The mockumentary is headlined by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, whose projects often entail interviews with the unsuspecting who are unaware they are being set up for self-revealing ridicule. The movie follows a gay Austrian fashion commentator, played by Cohen, as he attempts to find fame in the U.S. by making a sex tape with a celebrity. A segment features an interview with Ron Paul, who *Brüno* has “mistaken” for RuPaul, a popular performer who often makes appearances in drag. While waiting in a hotel room under the pretense of a lighting problem in the adjoining room where the interview is being filmed, a painfully uncomfortable Paul endures extensive flirting by *Brüno*. He ultimately angrily storms out of the room, shouting that the interview is over: “That guy is queerer than the blazes!” yells Paul. “He’s queer, he’s crazy! He put a hit on me! He took his clothes off!” Indeed, Cohen had dropped his pants, revealing a bright purple thong.

Christina played the film clip her phone’s YouTube app several times in a row, her friends convulsing with laughter.

“Queerer than the blazes!”

“I really shouldn’t even be laughing, he’s so awful. But it’s hilarious!”

It was months after the end of Paul’s 2012 campaign, but Christina had broken with the Ron Paul camp much earlier — a very difficult time for her. She had come to the University of Texas from a small Dallas high school, not knowing anyone in Austin. Feeling lost and overwhelmed at one of the country’s largest universities, she found a tight-knit community in the liberty movement. Several people she met through Ron
Paul’s campaigns, including Josh and Yuri, became her closest friends, having connected over their shared quest for meaningful alternatives to the political status quo and suspicion of state power. Their friendships grew increasingly strained as Christina not only became a vocal critic of Ron Paul, but came to question many of the liberty movement’s core tenets.

Concerned in particular with the struggles of historically marginalized groups, Christina had always felt wary of Paul’s strong socially conservative views as well as his individualist philosophy that does not account for the structural roots of inequality. Yet she was energized and stimulated by the various antistatist perspectives she encountered in circles of Ron Paul supporters, which traversed political commitments and ideologies. During his speeches, Paul himself regularly highlights this spectrum, reading aloud signs held up by attendees — from “End police violence!” and “Close Gitmo now!” to “Raw milk!” Thus at a rally at the Texas state capitol building, Paul drew massive cheers and applause from a section holding a large “Smash the state!” banner when he enthusiastically noted, “We even have anarchists here!”

Like Christina, many millennial libertarians who over time part ways with the Ron Paul scene describe their involvement with both Paul supporters and the broader liberty movement as pivotal in their development as thinkers and activists. While established institutions play a central role in libertarianism’s renewed popularity and thus in the trajectories of millennial libertarians, equally significant are the ensuing communities forged by movement participants themselves. Christina noted the uplifting, energetic mood of millennial libertarian spaces of various stripes: “Everywhere I went, people were so forward-looking and upbeat, even though the issues were extremely serious. War, torture, suffering, poverty. But there wasn’t this doom and gloom that I’ve
come across in other places, with people wringing their hands about how horrible everything is and how everyone’s oppressed and dwelling on that. I think that gets internalized . . . In the movement there is a real awe of market forces and their potential to help people. There is a very genuine commitment to the idea that a truly free market economic system is the best way to promote human flourishing across the board.”

For Christina, what initially began as criticism of Ron Paul’s views would over time extend to central libertarian concepts, propelling her across various parts of the movement in a political and personal journey similar to that of increasing numbers of millennial libertarians. Throughout this process, some are increasingly challenging and reconfiguring key libertarian concepts and their implications. Drawing on intellectual and political lineages both within and outside of the liberal tradition in rethinking the central categories of “freedom” and “individual,” they unsettle existing understandings of libertarianism itself. In turn, the resurgence toward which key libertarian figures and institutions have worked for decades — while shaking up the Republican Party and consolidating a libertarian establishment — has also enabled some movement participants to engage libertarian thought on their own terms and reorient it in new directions.

It Usually Begins with Ron Paul

Amid Ron Paul’s two consecutive CPAC presidential straw poll wins and sweep of the youth vote during the 2012 Republican primaries, Christina noted another significant Paul triumph: the 2011 straw poll at the Values Voter Summit, the leading annual conference for socially conservative activists, where Paul took a relatively-whopping 37 percent of the vote.
To be sure, Paul advocates are known for packing such events to support their candidate. Of the 3,400 who attended the Summit, 1,983 voted in the poll. About 600 registered Saturday morning — the event’s final day — rather than for the full Summit, voted for Paul, and left after he spoke, according to Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council that organizes the Summit. “You do the math,” Perkins added (Knickerbocker 2011). Nevertheless, the strong biblical themes woven throughout Paul’s address along with his vehement anti-abortion stance — combined with his career as an obstetrician who routinely notes that he has delivered over 4,000 babies — appeal to many social conservatives.

That Paul is generally uncomfortable around gay people routinely surfaces in the libertarian grapevine, articulated perhaps most prominently by Eric Dondero, Paul’s former senior Congressional aide and longtime campaign coordinator. “Is Ron Paul a homo-phobe? Well, yes and no. He is not at all bigoted towards homosexuals. He supports their rights to do whatever they please in their private lives. He is however, personally uncomfortable around homosexuals, no different from a lot of older folks of his era,” Dondero wrote in a lengthy statement (2011). He went on to cite several examples, including a 1988 trip to the Bay Area organized by longtime openly gay libertarian Jim Peron. “But Ron thought the world of him. For 3 days we had a great time trouncing from one campaign event to another…We used Jim’s home/office as a ‘base.’ Ron pulled me aside the first time we went there, and specifically instructed me to find an excuse to excuse him to a local fast food restaurant so that he could use the bathroom. He told me very clearly, that although he liked Jim, he did not wish to use his bathroom facilities. I chided him a bit, but he sternly reacted, as he often did to me, Eric, just do what I say.
Perhaps “sternly” is an understatement. Ron looked at me directly, and with a very angry look in his eye, and shouted under his breath: ‘Just do what I say NOW.”’

In discussing these sides of Ron Paul with Paul enthusiasts who shared her commitment to reproductive freedom and support of LGBT communities, Christina was largely persuaded that the disagreeable personal views of candidates are not legitimate reasons for withdrawing support, insofar as such commitments do not affect their work and policies. She noted that most people likely have at least one friend who holds some position they find abhorrent, but the friendship is maintained anyhow. The beginning of the end for Christina was seeing how Paul’s personal views extended into policy and public forums: “Actually, I’m not sure if it was that, or more how other libertarians excused and rationalized it.”

Most observers of the 2012 Republican presidential primaries recall the media firestorm over the racist and antigay Ron Paul newsletters. Printed since at least 1978 on a largely monthly basis under different titles and by different entities, the newsletters featured articles that mostly lacked individual bylines — but all under a banner featuring Paul’s name, and many written in the first person. While much attention focused on the newsletters’ rampant racist content, the newsletters also had quite a bit to say about gay people, and particularly about AIDS.1 In 1994, one article callously proposed that one of three factors in the rise of AIDS infection “from the gay point of view” is that “they enjoy the attention and pity that comes with being sick.” A 1990 piece written in the first person read, “I miss the closet. Homosexuals, not to speak of the rest of society, were far better off when social pressure forced them to hide their activities.”

---

1 The original newsletters were republished in a New Republic (2011) exclusive.
Yet another article written in the first person praised “My old colleague, Congressman Bill Dannemeyer” who “speaks out fearlessly despite the organized power of the gay lobby.” The article went on to approvingly cite some of these courageous statements, such as: “AIDS was originally known as GRIDS — gay related immune deficiency syndrome. For political reasons it was changed to AIDS. A whole political movement has been created and sustained on a single notion: homosexual sodomy.” Dannemeyer, a longtime antigay activist, was one of two prominent politicians who championed the infamous 1986 California ballot initiative that would authorize quarantines of people living with AIDS and give officials the authority to order blood tests and report results to the state, a measure opposed by the vast majority of officials and health experts at the time.\(^2\) Over the years, he went on to propose several related policies.

The notorious newsletters were insufficient to deter most hardcore Paulites, however. Supporters stressed that he has repeatedly disavowed their content, asking the public to stop playing “gotcha” with past controversies and focus on Paul’s substantive views at issue in the 2012 campaign. Online, Christina found liberty movement figures who were less forgiving. Some described in detail the “paleolibertarian” strategy of courting the hard right cooked up by Paul’s circle during the 1980s. The chickens are now coming home to roost, they said, a blowback that will haunt the movement until it expressly rejects that unsavory history and reclaims libertarianism from the right.\(^3\)

“I was done with the whole Paul thing when I read those newsletters, but I couldn’t believe how many people didn’t think it was a big deal. It was really shocking, actually, to see how hard people worked to look the other way and make up excuses for it.

\(^3\) For a succinct version of this argument, see Horwitz (2011).
There were all out Facebook wars over it. People are so invested in this one man,” Christina recalled.

She began noting contradictions between Paul’s stated philosophy and his record on reproductive freedom and LGBT issues. “Everyone touts him as the ultimate principled, consistent politician, but surprise! He doesn’t take the states’ rights position when it doesn’t come out how he wants. And his supporters just don’t seem to care. People will point it out, and it makes no difference to them. The issues are different, but it reminds me of Democrats always excusing Obama on the wars, on civil liberties. On spying.”

Grounded in his understanding of freedom as the absence of government coercion, the central tenet of Paul’s political philosophy is that “the proper role for government in America is to provide national defense, a court system for civil disputes, a criminal justice system for acts of force and fraud, and little else” (2007). In turn, his strict constitutionalist jurisprudence adamantly rejects grounding any extension of rights to same-sex couples in the U.S. Constitution, as evidenced in his criticism of the Supreme Court’s 2003 Lawrence v. Texas decision. Lawrence held Texas sodomy laws unconstitutional, decriminalizing same-sex sexual activity. Paul wrote on the matter: “Ridiculous as sodomy laws may be, there clearly is no right to privacy nor sodomy found anywhere in the Constitution. There are, however, states’ rights — rights plainly affirmed in the Ninth and Tenth amendments. Under those amendments, the State of Texas has the right to decide for itself how to regulate social matters like sex, using its own local standards” (2003). For many who disagree with this view, it nevertheless serves as another admirable example of Paul’s trademark consistency in rejecting any legislation not
expressly authorized by the U.S. Constitution — a stance that earned him his nickname, Dr. No.

Thus, Paul’s support of the now-overturned Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) caused some turmoil in movement circles. The law, in part, defines marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, codifying the non-recognition of same-sex marriages for all federal purposes. DOMA’s impact is substantial. The General Accounting Office found that 1,138 federal provisions implicated benefits, rights, and privileges contingent on marital status, including insurance benefits; Social Security survivors’ benefits; veterans’ benefits, including pensions and survivor benefits; taxes on income, estates, gifts, and property sales; and immigration matters (2004).

Criticisms of Paul on this issue — and of libertarians with similar views — are many and disparate. Several movement figures noted that Paul’s DOMA position is incompatible with federalism, as the law in fact marks the first time in U.S. history that marriage has been defined on the federal level — “the nationalization of marriage.” While taking the common libertarian position that keeping the state out of marriage entirely would be ideal, other movement participants posited that until this is feasible, the appropriate libertarian stance is support of marriage equality and individual liberties for all — some say, even through federal action, as federalism does not always advance liberty. Yet others responded to Paul’s statement by challenging the constitutionality of DOMA on grounds other than federalism, arguing that there exists no legitimate justification for restricting the individual rights of gays and lesbians. Some saw Paul’s DOMA statement, issued during a stop in Iowa during the 2012 primary contest, as pandering to Iowa conservatives. So much for the principled Congressman from Texas, they noted. Many simply expressed profound disappointment that Paul publicly and
voically defended the “traditional definition of marriage” as that between a man and woman.

Countless supporters, however, glossed over the DOMA episode in a vein similar to the newsletters debacle. No candidate is perfect, they stressed repeatedly, highlighting his admirable other views. Especially on foreign policy, they noted, few speak truth to power as vocally, passionately, and consistently as Paul. But Christina was unwilling to subordinate the significance of some issues to others in this way. Particularly important to her was reproductive freedom, and she again highlighted how Paul bends his political philosophy to fit his socially conservative beliefs.

Paul’s take on reproductive freedom is rarely a topic of discussion among supporters; due to its divisiveness, the issue itself is relatively marginalized in the movement broadly. As Christina noted, Paul supporters’ analysis on this issue essentially falls into one of three categories. Anti-abortion, limited government advocates argue that “protecting the unborn” is a key government duty. Paul supporters who view reproductive freedom decisions as best left to individual women again look the other way, pointing out that no candidate is perfect and that Paul prioritizes many other important issues that warrant support. Paul supporters of this persuasion frequently posit that a U.S. president has little impact on reproductive freedom, glossing over judicial and non-judicial appointments, veto power, and using the administration to further a range of policies. Commonly coupled with this perspective is that reproductive freedom is essentially a non-issue because “abortion will never be illegal in the U.S.” Thirdly, many argue that Paul’s anti-abortion position is consistent with his limited government views in that this is an issue that ought to be decided on a state rather than federal level — a longstanding Paul stance for which he faces criticism from many abortion foes. However,
Paul’s Sanctity of Life Act — which he introduced in Congress in 2005, followed by different versions twice in 2007, 2009, and 2011 — would have defined human life and legal personhood as beginning at conception at the federal level. The Act would then have provided that each state has the authority to “protect the lives of unborn children residing in the jurisdiction of that State” and removed jurisdiction from the U.S. Supreme Court and federal courts on this issue. Paul has also voted several times for the federal ban on late-term abortion procedures; the bill was initially vetoed by President Bill Clinton but ultimately enacted in 2003 under George W. Bush and upheld by the Supreme Court in a 2007 5-4 decision. “To summarize my views — I believe the federal government has a role to play. I believe Roe v. Wade should be repealed. I believe federal law should declare that life begins at conception. And I believe states should regulate the enforcement of this law, as they do other laws against violence,” Paul wrote in his signing statement of the Personhood Pledge, which the anti-abortion Christian ministry Personhood USA asked all Republican candidates to sign in 2011.

The notion that federal courts lack the right to review the constitutionality of state laws lies at the core of Paul’s legal and political philosophy, a view pervasive throughout the emerging libertarian political establishment. Even the movement’s rapidly growing anarchist elements often see any form of decentralization as a positive development that brings us one step closer to a “truly free” libertarian society. “But people with anarchist leanings who just support all devolutionist policies because they supposedly increase freedom really aren’t considering how this can hurt real people,” Christina observed. She was referring to the fact that in the U.S., reproductive freedom restrictions are particularly severe at the state level. These include onerous facility regulations not related to patient safety that dramatically decrease abortion access; parental notification laws for
minors; unnecessary procedures such as required, non-medically indicated ultrasounds; and mandated and often misleading counseling and waiting periods that impose obstacles particularly for low-income women and those in rural areas. A record number of state abortion restrictions were enacted in 2011, with 55 percent of all reproductive-age women living in states hostile to abortion rights in 2011, up significantly from 31 percent in 2000. “The people who say that Roe v. Wade will never be overturned so this is not an issue also aren’t considering this kind of chipping away of access to abortion,” Christina added. “They’re making it clear that this issue hardly worth talking about and is way less important than the ‘real problems’ like foreign and monetary policy.”

Not all liberty movement participants who oppose state power broadly find the states’ rights argument compelling, pointing out that historically, U.S. states have been as complicit as the federal government in civil liberties violations, among other forms of oppression. “Yes, let’s replace a tyrannical federal government with tyrannical state governments. Fantastic,” sarcastically opined one of Christina’s friends who had been watching the Brüno clips with us. Nevertheless, some movement participants, albeit skeptical of formal political processes, maintain that policy change is easier at the state level, which they see as more accessible and responsive to constituents than Washington, D.C. “I’m not convinced by that at all, especially in the bigger states,” noted the friend. “But in any case, all of this romanticizing of local politics is really misguided.” At least some movement participants share this perspective. During a similar conversation, another angered libertarian had commented, “This political theory that people who live really close to you should have the power to regulate the intimate details of your life is a terrible one. My neighbors should shut the fuck up and mind their business.”
Christina’s growing clash with the liberty movement’s dominant strains, however, was not limited to her disagreement with many of Ron Paul’s positions and what she saw as hypocritical application of federalist ideas. Increasingly, she was questioning the broader underpinnings of libertarian thought, at least as most commonly articulated. In particular, her impending struggle with the central concepts of “freedom” and “the individual” reflects growing trends within the liberty movement’s more radical spaces. Increasingly, some within the movement draw on a range of intellectual lineages to rearticulate these core tenets of the liberal tradition, highlighting how dominant movement analysis erases existing political economic constraints ad legitimizes status hierarchies — challenging the meaning of “libertarianism” itself.

“It usually begins with Ron Paul!” she laughed, referencing a prevalent pun on *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*, Tuccille’s (1971) classic account of the early liberty movement in the U.S. For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, Rand and her philosophy of objectivism provided a seminal point of entry into libertarianism, despite her loathing for the movement she saw as a “monstrous, disgusting bunch” of “intellectual cranks” who “substitute anarchism for capitalism.” Nearly all millennial libertarians are familiar with Rand’s legacy and many remain sympathetic to at least parts of her approach; objectivist organizations continue to have a small presence on college campuses and Rand’s novels have enjoyed a resurgence in popularity of late given the movement’s growth. But in stark contrast to its heyday and influence on an earlier generation of libertarians, objectivism is today a distinct minority within libertarian spaces — movement participants regularly mock its cult-like aspects, terming adherents “Randbots”

---

4 For historical accounts focused on Ayn Rand and objectivism, see Burns (2009) and Heller (2009).
and “Randoids.” The newly appropriated catchphrase “It usually begins with Ron Paul”
gestures toward Ron Paul supplanting Rand as the primary entry point into the liberty
movement. Incidentally, Paul is adamant that his son’s name is not a reference to the
novelist.

But rather than referencing Ron Paul’s role in this regard, Christina was
highlighting how her criticisms of Paul led to a broader questioning of dominant liberty
movement ideas. As philosophy professor and LvMI affiliate Roderick Long (2012) noted
in his review of It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand, “Perhaps nowadays it usually begins with
Ron Paul — though it often ends someplace very different.”

_The Austrian Appeal in the 21st Century_

Josh, the tattoo artist and onetime Ron Paul enthusiast, had returned from the
summer Mises University program at LvMI captivated by Austrian economics and
libertarian anarchism. During the Paul campaign’s second go-around, he was much more
concerned with popularizing these ideas than the candidate, spending his free time
composing posts for Yuri’s Austrian economics blog and collaborating on libertarian
journal articles.

Josh was strikingly less troubled than Christina by the prospect of replacing
government social safety nets with civil society, volunteerism, and charity initiatives.
Herself wary of the drawbacks of using state mechanisms in assisting the poor and
marginalized, Christina nevertheless struggled with abandoning the notion entirely. Yet
Josh’s ambivalence toward social welfare programs was not a result of the “dependency
theory” view, widespread in the liberty movement as well as elsewhere, that sees welfare
as breeding a culture of dependency intertwined with behaviors such as out-of-wedlock
child-bearing, female-headed households, and participation in the informal economy (Murray 1984). He had himself relied on food stamps and other state assistance during several stretches of time over the past few years.

Josh has been living on his own with sparse family contact since leaving his father’s Oklahoma mobile home the day after high school graduation. His recollections of growing up were dominated by memories of avoiding the explosive, alcohol and drug-fueled rage of his abusive father, and moments of comfort with his mother, a heroin addict who drifted in and out of his life between stints in prison, rehab, and periods of living on the streets while estranged from her husband. While not judgmental of people in need of services and support, he saw little hope in government poverty relief programs, which he described as a cumbersome, bureaucratic labyrinth “that’s better than nothing, but I always thought there’s got to be better ways to help people. All of their requirements and policies and meetings kept getting in the way when I was trying to get anything done.” Frustrated with the system, he “stopped wasting time and energy dealing with it,” instead supporting himself by selling marijuana in between low-wage jobs and help from friends. “The welfare system has so many problems, it’s hardly even worth it for what you end up getting. A lot of people just try to do different things to get by on their own anyway.”

Josh’s experiences reflect welfare state scholarship that shows poor people rarely rely on either welfare or low-income work alone. Rather, these are often combined with one another as well as with other strategies of making ends meet, including different forms of private assistance, support from communities of friends and family, and work in informal economies (Edin and Lein 1997; Newman 2001; Scharff 1998; Scott 2003). Further, studies illustrating the limitations of the U.S. welfare state both prior to and
following its recent retrenchment have extensively documented its historically racialized and gendered aspects, which demean and demoralize while excluding particular groups and reinforcing various social hierarchies (Abramovitz 1996; Kingfisher 2002; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Mullings 1997). Libertarian policy approaches too have noted the time-consuming, demeaning, and inefficient aspects of the bureaucratic maze that presently comprises federal anti-poverty programs, proposing — in the vein of Hayek’s minimum income floor and Friedman’s negative income tax — a guaranteed income as preferable to the existing labyrinth (de Reugy 2014).

Many of those concerned with the shortcomings of social welfare and related institutions in terms of uplifting the vulnerable have identified solutions in reconfiguring and expanding welfare state regimes. In her study of working class adulthood amidst the economic insecurity and instability of twenty-first century life, Silva (2013) interviews 100 white and black young people born in the U.S., with U.S.-born parents, who work low-wage jobs and do not hold a college degree. She found the emerging working-class adult self to be characterized by widespread distrust of social institutions and isolation from others, among other tendencies. Feeling bewildered and betrayed, these young adults have learned to trust no one but themselves. Silva’s analysis in large part sees hope in revamped government programs and economic intervention. That sentiment, however, is significantly less, if at all, visible in the words of the young people she interviews, a point not taken up in the book itself.

Young people like Josh and Scott from CPAC do not believe in government solutions. From a different class background and significantly more stable home life, Scott was disenchanted with the situation in which he found himself — ridden by debt with meager job prospects amidst a crumbling economy — despite working his way through
college and doing “everything right.” But, like Josh, he saw little promise in seeking change through state channels and established political processes. Their life experiences have led increasing numbers of young people toward the critique of corporatism or crony capitalism, an understanding of the existing political economic system as marked by a partnership between big business and big government and prominent especially in more militantly antistatist parts of the liberty movement. Both Josh and Scott, alongside numerous millennial libertarians, dismiss the political process as a tool of what Josh termed “the corporatist political class,” with its “tribal feuds” between liberals and conservatives: “Each side is trying to convince us to side with them, which just distracts people into fighting over crumbs while the entire system survives by screwing over people like us, you and me, everyday people.” This concern is further developed by philosophy professor Roderick Long of LvMI (2010):

I’m very concerned about the tendency for libertarian free-market rhetoric to be co-opted by the establishment right, as well as for radical leftist rhetoric to be co-opted by the establishment left. Conservative policies are marketed as protecting ordinary people against big government, while liberal and progressive policies are marketed as protecting ordinary people against big business. But in actual practice, though some policies may favour the government side a bit more while others favour the business side more, both sets of policies tend to reinforce a ruling partnership between big government and big business at the expense of ordinary people, with the bulk of economic distribution going upward rather than downward (for familiar public-choice reasons); and the political battles that dominate mainstream headlines are thus mainly squabbles between two wings of the ruling class.

Increasingly, young people are finding an alternative in libertarian philosophy combined with the Austrian economic framework. “It was just this magical place,” Josh said of LvMI. “It was incredible to be surrounded by so many people who have no problem saying the state should be abolished, its obvious to them. And at the same time, to have
access to all these ideas about why. The main libertarian principles are so basic and simple, which is one of the reasons I like libertarianism so much. How it’s grounded in logic. So many people have thought and written about this for so long! And there are so many Austrians out there right now!”

In 1974, Friedrich Hayek received the “first free-market Nobel” Prize in economics, along with “leftist maverick” Gunnar Myrdal (Rothbard 1992:3). This recognition, occurring in the historical context of the 1970s recession and a broader revitalization of free market economics, is generally credited with sparking renewed interest in Austrian thought. Eclipsed for decades by the ideas of John Maynard Keynes that became firmly established in the 1930s, the Austrian revival, as is to be expected in any vibrant intellectual tradition, brought with it extensive internal debates and the development of several competing paradigms of Austrian thought. The points of contention are varied, and have been detailed at length elsewhere. Today, while the Austrian school remains a heterodox approach marginalized within the economics profession, strongholds exist at institutions throughout the U.S. and internationally. The economics department at George Mason University (GMU), the school that also houses the libertarian Mercatus Center and Institute for Humane Studies, is one of the few programs where one can obtain a Ph.D. guided by faculty in the Austrian tradition. New York University, the Austrians’ first home in the U.S. where Mises taught upon emigrating in 1940 in light of the German threat, for some time served as an Austrian beachhead. Israel Kirzner, who received his doctorate under Mises, and Ludwig

---

5 For an introduction to Austrian economics, see, e.g., Butler (2010), Callahan (2002), and Taylor (1980). For contemporary issues and research, see, e.g., Boettke (1994a), (1994b), and (2010). For an historical perspective on the Austrian school, see Schulak and Unterköfler (2011) and Vaughn (1994). For a critique of Austrian economics by a former Austrian and its distinctions from neoclassical economics, see Caplan (1997).
Lachmann, a former colleague of Hayek whose radical subjectivism forms its own Austrian paradigm, carved out a niche for Austrians at the university by the early 1980s. Today, with Kirzner serving as professor emeritus, only Mario Rizzo — also affiliated with the Institute for Humane Studies and the Foundation for Economic Education — remains actively teaching in the Austrian tradition at NYU. Austrianism today has a growing presence at San Jose State University and West Virginia University, while individual Austrian economists remain scattered throughout U.S., including Walter Block at Loyola University and Ben Powell at Suffolk University.

It is the framework popularized by Murray Rothbard and associated with LvMI that is most expressly wrapped up with libertarian political philosophy, a fundamental point of contention among Austrians beyond substantive theoretical and methodological arguments. Many LvMI affiliates remain frustrated at the GMU crowd’s reluctance to actively use economics as a weapon against state intervention. For their part, the GMU Austrians and their colleagues, themselves libertarians, often stress the importance of preserving economics as a value-free science, despite the numerous compatibilities of Austrian economics and libertarian political philosophy. Due to longstanding divisions on this front, for instance, those affiliated with LvMI and those in the GMU circle, along with their colleagues at other institutions, rarely interact or attend the same events. The latter generally present at libertarian seminars held by the Institute for Humane Studies and Foundation for Economic Education rather than at LvMI. The politics of citation and choice of publication venues further reflect these divisions.6

---

6 For more on this issue, see Doherty (2007:427-438), especially his interview with GMU economist Peter Boettke.
In enthusiastically describing the appeal of the “basic and simple” libertarian approach “grounded in logic,” Josh was in part referring to the non-aggression principle (NAP), central to the liberty movement’s political philosophy. Also termed the non-aggression axiom, zero aggression principle, or anti-coercion principle, it axiomatically declares illegitimate the use or threat of coercion against persons or property where coercion is understood as physical force. Movement participants generally define being a libertarian as adhering to the NAP, however formulated or derived, although Murray Rothbard’s approach is particularly influential among millennials.

While the NAP concept in various forms far precedes J.S. Mill’s harm principle, Rothbard’s is a deontological method grounded in natural law, opposing the initiation of force and fraud irrespective of consequences — in contrast to, for instance, the consequentialist anarcho-capitalism of David Friedman (1978) who refuses to link the validity of his claims to morality. Thus, while consequentialist libertarians — those in the tradition of Milton Friedman and the Chicago school of economics who stress the desirable consequences of free market policies using cost/benefit approaches, as well as those influenced by the public choice theory of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock — have profoundly influenced the discipline of economics and political science, large parts of the liberty movement today consist of natural law libertarians influenced by Rothbard. Some version of the NAP, however, plays a central role in libertarian philosophy broadly, and various consequentialist approaches embrace it as a key principle because it tends to lead to favorable outcomes.

The NAP is closely tied to the question of property rights, since what constitutes aggression against one’s property depends on the property system in question. In his extensive contributions that span economics, history, and philosophy and include over...
twenty books, Rothbard drew heavily upon the work of Mises, with whom he had few scruples and whose New York University seminar he regularly attended throughout the 1950s while working on his doctoral degree in economics at Columbia. Here Rothbard departs from his mentor, who, using the Austrian framework, posited that a value-free defense of the free market grounded in private property rights exists without resorting to questions of ethics. Rothbard disagreed, noting instances where government intervention in the economy serves the interests of one group, albeit at the expense of another. In cases where interventionist measures do help some people, the results are not always unsatisfactory to all — a value-free defense of the market economy does not stand by itself.

In *The Ethics of Liberty* (1982), Rothbard develops the philosophical foundation of the NAP, grounded in self-ownership and heavily indebted to Locke’s conception of property. In short, all persons rightfully own their own bodies. It is from this principle of self-ownership that private property rights follow. Property is legitimately acquired, as famously argued by Locke, through homesteading — “mixing one’s labor” with unowned property, as well as through gift or voluntary exchange. Rothbard summarizes this lynchpin of libertarian philosophy thus:

The basic axiom of libertarian political theory holds that every man is a self owner, having absolute jurisdiction over his own body. In effect, this means that no one else may justly invade, or aggress against, another’s person. It follows then that each person justly owns whatever previously unowned resources he appropriates or “mixes his labor with.” From these twin axioms — self-ownership and “homesteading” — stem the justification for the entire system of property rights titles in a free-market society. This system establishes the right of every man to his own person, the right of donation, of bequest (and, concomitantly, the right to receive the bequest or inheritance), and the right of contractual exchange of property titles.
The full implication of Rothbard’s philosophy is severe, and shared by anarchist libertarians partial to other justifications for the NAP: The state is unique in its fundamental monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and must thus be abolished entirely. Writes Rothbard:

But, above all, the crucial monopoly is the State’s control of the use of violence: of the police and armed services, and of the courts — the locus of ultimate decision-making power in disputes over crimes and contracts. Control of the police and the army is particularly important in enforcing and assuring all of the State’s other powers, including the all-important power to extract its revenue by coercion . . . Only the State obtains its revenue by coercion, by threatening dire penalties should the income not be forthcoming. That coercion is known as “taxation,” although in less regularized epochs it was often known as “tribute.” Taxation is theft, purely and simply even though it is theft on a grand and colossal scale which no acknowledged criminals could hope to match. It is a compulsory seizure of the property of the State’s inhabitants, or subjects.

It is Rothbard’s uncompromising anarchist stance, which insists that the state — the principal violator of rights the abolition of which would benefit all — is not required to produce public goods nor to maintain law and order, that increasingly informs the perspectives of many millennial libertarians. Libertarian anarchists dominate the contemporary liberty movement’s radical spaces, generally grounding their economic analysis in the Austrian school. Libertarianism thus remains a political philosophy, albeit one where proponents generally draw on either the Austrian or neoclassical traditions for economic explanations. Simultaneously, however, some trends within the movement relegate economics to an ancillary position within the overall ideology. While many such libertarians espouse Austrianism as a default economic position, they remain open, or agnostic, about the possibility of other economic theories, the principles of which align with libertarianism.
The well-known Lockean concept of property in oneself is thus central to the Rothbardian anarchist framework. If everyone owns themselves, and no one may coerce or aggress against anyone else or their property, there exist no legitimate grounds for non-consensual government. In Rothbard’s hands, libertarian anarchism is derived from a central tenet of classical liberalism — its “logical conclusion” that so animated Scott. Josh too was enamored of the libertarian anarchist framework that proceeds from a single axiom, the NAP, which renders illicit only the initiation of physical force against others and their property. On this point, Gordon (2007:35) observes that Rothbard’s *Ethics* is in one sense mistitled, given that Rothbard sharply distinguishes between ethics and political philosophy. For instance, in deducing that people are free to engage in voluntary exchange, a key part of his political philosophy, he makes no case that all such exchanges are morally desirable, that is, ethically defensible. It follows that activity seen by some as immoral but which does not contradict the NAP, for instance sex work or drug use, should not be legally prohibited — a key libertarian notion.

While libertarian spaces are rife with debate, such discussion overwhelmingly takes place within the auspices of the NAP. Describing his life-altering experience at the summer Mises University program at LvMI, Josh recounted endless conversations in lounges and dorm rooms about what types of scenarios do and do not violate the NAP. He had befriended economics professor and LvMI fellow Walter Block, the irreverently charismatic author of over two dozen books. Embraced by millennial libertarians as a leading anarcho-capitalist figure, the former Rothbard pupil credits his mentor with providing the final push toward his full acceptance of the anarcho-capitalist philosophy.

During his time in the Mises University program, Josh became a strong advocate of Block’s popular “plumb-line” libertarian approach. In Block’s view, libertarianism is
entirely compatible with any cultural formation that is consistent with the NAP: “For example, there is nothing in libertarian law which forbids promiscuity, or drug taking, rock music, raves, nudism, macrobiotic diets, Ben and Jerry ice cream, the wearing of earth shoes, beads, etc. . . . All that is needed for compatibility with libertarianism and any other doctrine is respect for the nonaggression axiom of the former” (2007:156). In fact, says Block, there is actually a case to be made for greater negative attention to be focused on libertarians who veer too far to the right, rather than “the liberal or pinko” (163) variants, insofar as many of the former support an aggressive foreign policy.

In Block’s view (2003), hypotheticals aiming to highlight the ostensibly problematic aspects of the NAP misunderstand the nature of libertarianism. Such examples include the permissibility, under the NAP, of a 10th-floor apartment owner refusing admittance to a person hanging on the owner’s balcony flagpole, having fallen from above; or the permissibility of a cabin owner setting up a booby trap to kill a lost, starving hiker who breaks into his stocked building, guarded by a “no trespassing” sign:

These arguments implicitly assume that libertarianism is a moral philosophy, a guide to proper behavior, as it were. Should the flagpole hanger let go? Should the hiker go off and die? But libertarianism is a theory concerned with the justified use of aggression, or violence, based on property rights, not morality. Therefore, the only proper questions which can be addressed in this philosophy are of the sort, if the flagpole hanger attempts to come in to the apartment, and the occupant shoots him for trespassing, Would the forces of law and order punish the home owner? Or, if the owner of the cabin in the woods sets up a booby trap, such that when someone forces his way into his property he gets a face full of buckshot, Would he be guilty of a law violation? When put in this way, the answer is clear. The owner in each case is in the right, and the trespasser in the wrong. If force is used to protect property rights, even deadly force, the owner is not guilty of the violation of any licit law.
The question of when deadly force is justifiable to protect property, here uncontroversially swept aside by Block, is somewhat more contested both in the movement broadly and among anarchist libertarians themselves. But his basic premise that libertarianism does not speak to questions of morality, and is thus compatible with all NAP-abiding cultural formations, is widely accepted. In turn, “plumb-line” libertarianism says nothing about the kinds of values or morals a society should espouse, or how these are to be inculcated, short of compliance with the NAP; that is the business of members of society to settle among themselves.

Josh, like many of his peers especially during their early introduction to Austro-libertarian anarchism, loved the stark simplicity of the NAP: “I think it’s brilliant to just make physical force the only thing that’s off limits legally. You can’t control people’s behavior anyway, whether it’s good for them or not. Let people be free to make their own decisions about their lives.”
Following his stint at Mises University, Josh grew more and more at odds with Christina. Increasingly, he spent his free time in groups devoted to the study of Austrian economics and Rothbard’s political philosophy. When they did get together, casual lunches and coffee runs ended in lengthy arguments. At the heart of their divergent views, however, was no longer the candidacy of Ron Paul. As each became more familiar with various lineages of libertarian thought, their clashing perspectives implicated some of the tradition’s central concepts.

Unlike Josh, Christina was not impressed with the NAP. In particular, she saw the focus on physical force as erasing other important factors that constrain individual choices. An prominent example is what she and others term economic coercion — for instance, the situation of impoverished people, with few alternatives due to any number of hardships beyond their control, working under horrific conditions for very low wages. Such a work environment does not violate the NAP, unless physical force is used or threatened. Out of the available options, workers choose the best according to their preferences. That is sufficient, in most analyses, to satisfy the NAP.

“This to me is a perverse idea of freedom. It’s choice-fetishism. As long as there is a choice, any choice, it doesn’t matter between what alternatives, then we no longer need to be concerned about it.” She elaborated, “Of course, they’ll always say you can be concerned and do any number of things not involving government, but none of these kinds of ancaps ever do. They don’t even think about doing anything unless there’s ‘a gun in the room,’” she rolled her eyes, referring to the popular metaphor invoked in assessing whether a given scenario represents a NAP violation. “They like to just sit around coming up with extreme hypos that rationalize horrible outcomes to scandalize people. And then
they pat themselves on the back for defending freedom. What the hell kind of freedom is that?!”

While Josh found simplicity and logic in the “plumb-line” libertarian approach, Christina was frustrated by the reluctance of many libertarians to look beyond the provisions of the NAP — which does not specify, beyond the issue of the threat or use of force, what kinds of values or preferences should guide people’s behavior. Here, Johnson’s (2008) distinction between “thick” and “thin” libertarianism is useful. Walter Block’s type of “plumb-line,” NAP-only libertarianism is as compatible with atheism as evangelical Christianity, as compatible with feminism as misogyny, as long as adherents to any of these do not aggress against others or attempt to impose their beliefs using or threatening force — including, crucially, through the coercive power of the state, which always operates “at the barrel of a gun.” In contrast to this “thin” libertarian view, “thick libertarians” posit that the NAP ought to be in some way integrated with commitments to other social and cultural projects. The types of values that inform such projects are of course a contested matter. Yet a growing chorus of voices within the movement increasingly argues that libertarianism ought to incorporate a broader socioeconomic critique, integrating, for instance, antiracism, feminism, mutual aid, and labor solidarity — a development bemoaned by other movement participants, who see it as the influence of a “politically correct” leftism.

In turn, Christina soon found that she was not the only one in libertarian circles underwhelmed by the Rothbardian natural law approach and frustrated by the apparent lack of concern with the wellbeing of others. One of her earlier discoveries was the popular blog Bleeding Heart Libertarians (BHL), launched in 2011. Libertarians, as blog co-founder Matt Zwolinski (2011) notes in one of his earliest posts, are not known for
their sympathy to the ideas of social justice. The project thus seeks to emphasize that the most effective path toward the meaningful flourishing of humanity as a whole is grounded in the institutions of free markets and private property, without regard to — and indeed, in spite of — elite interests:

The libertarian tradition is home to multiple figures and texts modeling commitment both to individual liberty and to consistent concern for the marginalized, both here and abroad. We seek here to revive, energize, and extend that tradition — to demonstrate that contemporary libertarians can, in addition their traditional vindication of individual liberty, offer effective, powerful, and innovative responses to the problems of economic vulnerability and injustice and to their social, political, and cultural consequences.

While most libertarians do believe that free markets in fact best serve the interests of the marginalized, “this fact does not seem to play an essential role in the moral justification of those markets. It is, it seems, merely a happy coincidence,” writes Zwolinski. In contrast, he identifies a type of “bleeding heart libertarian” whose appreciation for libertarian institutions and practices — market mechanisms, voluntary social cooperation, private property rights, individual liberty — is grounded in how these contribute to important human goods, “and especially the way in which they allow some of society’s most vulnerable members to realize those goods.” The view of Zwolinski and fellow “strong bleeding heart libertarians” holds that libertarian institutions “depend in part for their moral justification on the extent to which they serve the interests of the poor and vulnerable.”

Libertarians have expressed formulations of this sentiment in the policy and electoral politics arena as well. For instance, in 2006 the Cato Institute’s Brink Lindsey made a case for “libertarianism,” a progressive fusionism in the form of a political alliance between libertarians and liberals, in the U.S. sense of the term:
[An] honest survey of the past half-century shows a much better match between libertarian means and progressive ends. Most obviously, many of the great libertarian breakthroughs of the era — the fall of Jim Crow, the end of censorship, the legalization of abortion, the liberalization of divorce laws, the increased protection of the rights of the accused, the reopening of immigration — were championed by the political left . . . Both [liberals and libertarians] generally support a more open immigration policy. Both reject the religious right’s homophobia and blastocystophilia. Both are open to rethinking the country’s draconian drug policies. Both seek to protect the United States from terrorism without gratuitous encroachments on civil liberties or extensions of executive power. And underlying all these policy positions is a shared philosophical commitment to individual autonomy as a core political value.

Lindsey’s approach focuses on the political challenge of developing an economic policy, and corresponding vision of reform, behind both which liberals and libertarians could rally. It does not problematize actually-existing capitalism, urging progressives to instead overcome “knee-jerk antipathy to markets” and “bitter denunciations of the unfairness of the system” in favor of building a pragmatic political bloc:

> The basic outlines of a viable compromise are clear enough. On the one hand, restrictions on competition and burdens on private initiative would be lifted to encourage vigorous economic growth and development. At the same time, some of the resulting wealth-creation would be used to improve safety-net policies that help those at the bottom and ameliorate the hardships inflicted by economic change. Translating such abstractions into workable policy doubtlessly would be contentious. But the most difficult thing here is not working out details — it is agreeing to try. And, as part of that, agreeing on how to make the attempt: namely, by treating economic policy issues as technical, empirical questions about what does and doesn’t work, rather than as tests of ideological commitment.

As noted, however, many millennial libertarians are more compelled by broader approaches to current political economic arrangements than by the particulars of policy reform. The last time I saw both Christina and Josh together, we met Yuri on the University of Texas campus. On our way to a cafe, we passed an anti-sweatshop student

---

7 Lindsey (2006) outlines a range of policies around which such a coalition could mobilize and notes already existing alliances.
group promoting an event to expose the conditions endured by workers in Mexican
maquiladoras. Commenting on the display, Josh recounted the common libertarian
argument that this type employment in fact constitutes the best option for poor workers in
the global south. While certainly not ideal, it provides a meaningful alternative to the
existing options of, say, begging or scavenging. As these countries develop under
capitalism, the argument goes, working conditions and wages will improve.

It didn’t take long for Yuri to provide the oft-cited corollary: the factories of
Industrial Revolution-era Europe, however nasty, ushered forth standards of living far
superior to those that came before. With increased productivity and competition come
improved conditions and higher wages — had these enterprises been stymied by
government regulations at the start, the entire process would have likely occurred on a far
smaller scale, or not at all.

Christina was unsympathetic. “Why are you apologizing for these shit conditions?
You’re saying that this is just how it is, everyone has to deal, and then you’re surprised
when people think you don’t care about other people, or say that libertarians are just
arrogant assholes.”

She went on, comparing the analysis to what she described as the crudest type of
Marxist determinism, where the stages of history ultimately lead to capitalism’s demise.
With a mischievous grin, she later confided, “I love making that analogy to Josh, it really
pisses him off!”

Her ultimate concern, she said, was not with the objection to state intervention.
She too remained heavily skeptical of the state as a tool for progress. Rather, she was
disturbed at the lack of interest in identifying and supporting alternative means of
improving global working conditions: “I’d like to see more libertarians show things people are doing to help with this situation without using the government apparatus.”

Amidst the explosion of dynamic spaces emerging through libertarianism’s resurgence, Christina quickly found approaches that systematically fuse market analysis with ardent critique of structural poverty and other forms of subordination. While certainly not in the majority, a quickly proliferating, multifaceted part of the movement collaborating under the broad rubric of the libertarian left is rearticulating parts of the libertarian tradition while drawing on other lineages. The rise in popularity of left libertarianism warranted a 2011 piece in the American Conservative, penned by left libertarian advocate Sheldon Richman:

They are standard libertarians in that they believe in the moral legitimacy of private ownership and free exchange and oppose all government interference in personal and economic affairs . . . they are leftists in that they share traditional left-wing concerns, about exploitation and inequality for example, that are largely ignored, if not dismissed, by other libertarians. Left-libertarians favor worker solidarity vis-à-vis bosses, support poor people’s squatting on government or abandoned property, and prefer that corporate privileges be repealed before the regulatory restrictions on how those privileges may be exercised. They see Walmart as a symbol of corporate favoritism — supported by highway subsidies and eminent domain — view the fictive personhood of the limited-liability corporation with suspicion, and doubt that Third World sweatshops would be the “best alternative” in the absence of government manipulation.

Nathan Goodman (2013), who blogs for the Center for a Stateless Society — one among a growing number of anarchist spaces synthesizing market approaches with a critique of oppression and subordination — encapsulates this orientation in the context of the sweatshop labor issues that so troubled Christina:

There is a lesson to be drawn from “best of alternatives” arguments regarding sweatshops, but it’s not a lesson of “sweatshops are fine.” Instead, it’s a lesson that rather than boycotting sweatshops or calling for them to be banned, we should try to determine what is constraining.
workers’ options and help them resist that.

This resistance can take a lot of different forms. It can mean organizing against US imperialism. It can mean doing solidarity work with labor organizers who are facing Pinkerton style suppression from sweatshop bosses. It can mean providing microloans to people in the global south who want to start their own businesses. It can mean doing solidarity work with those who are resisting the land monopoly. It can mean standing against intellectual property that is used to suppress local economies in the global south. It can mean standing against so-called “free trade” agreements that globalize intellectual property and other pro-corporate and anti-worker policies. It can mean organizing against agribusiness subsidies that have destroyed local agriculture throughout the rest of the world. It can mean working to abolish borders and immigration restrictions, so people are free to travel to countries with better economic opportunities.

But people like [professor of economics and Austrian scholar] Ben Powell don’t end their talks on sweatshops by discussing strategies like this. Instead, they argue that capitalist development will move countries with sweatshops past that phase, and in doing so they promote inaction and gratitude towards captains of industry. Where corporate capitalism has created a real problem, they simply praise corporate capitalism and state that it will “develop” its way past the problem. And that’s not the right way to address this at all.

As discussed briefly earlier, Josh and countless millennial libertarians are highly drawn to the notion of “corporate capitalism,” which they find speaks to their lived experiences and disenchantment with formal political processes and state-based solutions. Yet the critical distinction between the market form and the economic features of actually-existing capitalism that so often captures the imaginations of millennial libertarians equally often underpins a slippage that legitimizes existing political economic arrangements. Many libertarians thus treat existing business practices as though they are taking place in the context of a genuinely free market, while selectively highlighting how the current system is far from a free market in other contexts. This tendency is what Kevin Carson (2007) terms “vulgar libertarianism”:
Vulgar libertarian apologists for capitalism use the term “free market” in an equivocal sense: they seem to have trouble remembering, from one moment to the next, whether they’re defending actually existing capitalism or free market principles. So we get the standard boilerplate article in The Freeman arguing that the rich can’t get rich at the expense of the poor, because “that’s not how the free market works”—implicitly assuming that this is a free market. When prodded, they’ll grudgingly admit that the present system is not a free market, and that it includes a lot of state intervention on behalf of the rich. But as soon as they think they can get away with it, they go right back to defending the wealth of existing corporations on the basis of “free market principles.”

Roderick Long (2010), who is affiliated with LvMI as well as the Center for a Stateless Society and the Alliance of the Libertarian Left, calls this tendency right conflationism:

“The error of treating the virtues of a freed market as though they constituted a justification of the evils of existing corporatist capitalism.” But, he notes, much of the left is guilty of the converse: “Treating the evils of existing corporatist capitalism as though they constituted an objection to a freed market.” In Long’s view, as well as in the view of many likeminded libertarians, the myth that the prevailing economic system is an approximation of a free market (“rather than, as I see it, a long-established and ongoing system of massive government intervention on behalf of the corporate elite”) thus simultaneously masks and entrenches the corporatist reality:

[O]n the right (including, alas, large sections of libertarianism), the case for free markets is distorted into a defense of existing corporate privilege, while on the left, the case against existing corporate privilege is distorted into a case against free markets — so that each wing of the ruling class offers itself as an antidote to the other, and alternatives to both are rendered invisible.

For many, the understanding of freedom dominant in the liberty movement collapses this distinction between a free market and the present corporatist reality. Increasingly, they are adopting the self-identification of “market anarchist” rather than “anarcho-capitalist,” signaling the complicity of the term “capitalism” with the existing system:
To a very significant degree, the economic system we have now is one from which peaceful, voluntary exchange is absent. An interlocking web of legal and regulatory privileges benefit the wealthy and well connected at the expense of everyone else (think patents and copyrights, tariffs, restrictions on banking, occupational licensing rules, land-use restrictions, etc.). The military-industrial complex funnels unbelievable amounts of money — at gunpoint — from ordinary people’s pockets and into the bank accounts of government contractors and their cronies. Subsidies of all kinds feed a network of privileges businesses and non-profits. And the state protects titles to land taken at gunpoint or engrossed by arbitrary fiat before distribution to favored individuals and groups. No, the economies of the US, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, and Australia, at least, aren’t centrally planned. The state doesn’t assert formal ownership of (most of) the means of production. But the state’s involvement at multiple levels in guaranteeing and bolstering economic privilege makes it hard to describe the economic system we have now as free. So if “capitalism” names the system we have now, anyone who favors freedom has good reason to be skeptical about capitalism.

(Chartier 2011)

Themselves rife with debate, market anarchist approaches fundamentally reject the notion that the market form “must entail a social order of bosses, landlords, centralized corporations, class exploitation, cut-throat business dealings, immiserated workers, structural poverty, or large-scale economic inequality” (Chartier & Johnson 2011:3).

The emerging prominence of such approaches has very likely helped propel the widespread use of the “crony capitalism” slogan by the liberty movement’s mainstream. Youth libertarian organizations today commonly distribute “Crony Capitalism = Phony Capitalism” merchandise such as shirts and stickers. On Valentine’s Day 2012, Young Americans for Liberty and Students for Liberty promoted National Crony Capitalism Day, providing student campus groups with tabling kits to “expose the love between big business and big government to college students.”
Christina first came across the concept at one such event. From there, it took only a handful of conversations and a few internet searches for her to find the work of Kevin Carson and his analysis of “vulgar libertarianism.” An independent scholar and prolific writer, Carson has emerged as a central figure associated with the recent revival of mutualism — a long-dormant tradition that increasingly plays a central role in the transition of many young libertarian anarchists away from the heavily propertarian Rothbardian framework. While crudely dismissed as socialist especially by the more purist adherents of Rothbardian anarchism, Carson’s work can be seen as a “gateway drug” of sorts for millennial libertarians exploring the limits of the Austro-libertarian lineage. A former anarcho-capitalist in his late twenties thus described his journey:
Austrian economics and the libertarian critique of the state made a lot of sense to me when I was looking for ways to understand what’s happening in the world. Libertarians do great outreach, and they speak to a lot of big issues. Opposing the state is really important. I spent years thinking of myself as an ancap . . . Basically I got really fed up with the cesspit of apologizing for poverty and big business in the name of freedom. For a lot of ancaps, what we have is “free market” enough when it’s convenient, like defending sweatshops and Wal-Mart and McDonald’s. The history of the state in creating the current system and the private property regime is just not dealt with. Then I read Carson . . . It changed my entire analysis. I never looked back.

In a matter of weeks, Christina read all of Carson’s writing, available online free of cost, and became heavily involved in discussing his and related ideas in several online forums. She even playfully adopted his self-identification, announcing “I’m a free market anti-capitalist!”

Christina was particularly interested in analyses of how current economic vulnerability is, as a historical matter, largely a product of the power of the state and the elite privilege it secures. Carson (2012) explores the state mechanisms responsible for depriving working people of the resources and leisure to develop self-organized safety nets:

Writers like Kropotkin and E.P. Thompson describe elaborate self-organized safety nets — cooperatives, mutuals, friendly societies, etc. — created by workers for themselves. These met a huge volume of needs. But their effectiveness was limited by the fact that they existed in a society — like ours — of privilege and artificial property rights.

The effectiveness of the self-organized welfare state was limited by the resources of an exploited class. In a freed market, where labor is not burdened by such parasitic rent extraction by the privileged, the working class would have a lot more resources to devote to a mutual/cooperative welfare state.

In general, artificial scarcities and artificial property rights are the main source of the overclass’s ill-gotten wealth, and the main reason for the underclass’s poverty. Government systematically redistributes income
upward to the classes that control it. The welfare state is a way of giving just enough of it back to the hardest-hit to prevent destabilizing levels of homelessness and starvation from imperiling the system.

Christina became immersed in the implications of such an approach. As the passage suggests, Carson favors a system of property rights that departs from the standard libertarian and Austrian economic frameworks. His contributions are part of a growing series of exchanges between activists and thinkers outside of formal academic and research institutions aiming to resuscitate and build upon a range of 19th century individualist anarchist thought. While in close conversation with, and sometimes coming from, Rothbardian anarchism, these thinkers draw in particular on the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Benjamin Tucker, among others. Chapter five returns to these developments in their historical context.

*The Individual*

Inseparable from the central notion of freedom in classical liberal and libertarian thought is, of course, the concept of the individual. It should come as no surprise that at present, many libertarian approaches see a profound tension between a commitment to the centrality of this concept and the recognition of persisting structural barriers that result in social hierarchies and group stratification, for instance, across race and gender lines. To be sure, millennial libertarians overwhelmingly condemn individual prejudice and reject the kind of crude bigotry exemplified by Ron Paul’s infamous newsletters. Amidst the controversy, Paul took this position as well, asserting in a statement that the inflammatory quotations “are not mine and do not represent what I believe or have ever believed. I have never uttered such words and denounce such small-minded thoughts.” In the same statement and on other occasions, Paul stressed that, “In
fact, I have always agreed with Martin Luther King, Jr. that we should only be concerned with the content of a person’s character, not the color of their skin.” This adamant commitment to the irrelevance of factors such as race and gender — not only in terms of individual relationships, but in current social structures broadly — is pervasive among millennial libertarians and the spaces of established libertarian institutions alike, informing much of the liberty movement across generational lines.

Yet, as the robust scholarship on race and inequality has routinely demonstrated, while express racism has decreased in many parts of the world, racial inequality persists and is even exacerbated in some cases. The practices and ideologies of racism have in large part transformed into complex formations that thrive without formal institutional support — buttressed by individual and cultural explanations for inequality. In the U.S. context, “colorblindness” has emerged as both a legal standard and “a particular kind of social order” (Brown et al. 2003:7). A broad range of scholars has investigated the colorblindness ideology, which explains “racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (Bonilla-Silva 2003:2).

Claiming that the legislative victories of the 1960s civil rights movement have ended racism and that we live in a color-blind society where each individual is free to determine his or her destiny, proponents of color blindness have sought to undermine many of the measures won during the civil rights period designed to prohibit and correct the consequences of the 300-year history of discrimination, such as affirmative action in education and employment, minority voting districts, and federal enforcement of antidiscrimination laws . . . Ironically, these frameworks incorporate the oppositional language of the civil rights struggle, calling for individuals to be judged “not on the color of their skin but on the content of their character,” a phrase made famous by Martin Luther King’s August 28, 1963, “I have a Dream” speech at the historic March on Washington, DC. . . . Similar to earlier forms of racism, these new formulations seek to make the social appear natural and ruthless inequality appear as common sense. (Mullings 2005:476)
Key to the colorblindness ideology is the concept of the individual embraced by much of the liberty movement: inequality is rationalized as the outcome of individual failure, cultural traits — “and, in a pinch, biological limitations” (Mullings 2005:678) — unrelated to the history of conquest, enslavement and centuries of express state-enforced discrimination, nor to contemporary reproduction of racial inequities. Several libertarian professors have found themselves in hot water after stumbling into this arena in the classroom and at public talks. Libertarian spaces are rife with victimhood narratives detailing experiences of persecution for championing unpopular or unfashionable ideas, peppered with self-representations as freedom fighters struggling against an Orwellian thought police. Beyond sloganeering, however, libertarian colorblindness advocates systematically fail to engage the extraordinarily broad contemporary scholarship on the structural elements of poverty, its racial and gendered aspects, and the various national and transnational processes that entrench and continually reproduce it across various axes — both through and outside of state processes. When the issue of the roots of existing inequality arises, many millennial libertarians — as well as key movement figures, especially in anarcho-capitalist spaces — on occasion refer to The Bell Curve’s (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) assertion of racial differences in intelligence, presenting the all but discredited theory as an equally valid alternative to approaches that stress historical circumstances and structural conditions. Much more frequently, the go to authority, if one is cited, is The Bell Curve co-author Charles Murray’s Losing Ground, published in 1984. Not addressed are the particulars of the swath of subsequent research that has challenged the dependency theory approach, relegating it into relative obscurity in the field of poverty studies.

Many otherwise very astute and well-informed young people in the liberty
movement are nearly entirely unfamiliar with this research. As part of this project, I interviewed 100 libertarian-identified college students from various backgrounds, in part about their views on the roots of poverty and inequality. Nearly half have intentionally avoided courses that would provide an introduction to these topics, citing critiques of the “politically correct” university that permeate the institutional spaces they occupy — seeing, for instance, the integration of ethnic and gender studies into the academic curriculum as a leftist political project not worthy of serious intellectual inquiry. Further, most did not take courses in subjects such as anthropology and sociology that would address these topics, majoring instead in economics, philosophy, and political science as well as the natural sciences and professional preparation programs. Of the fifteen who recalled taking a course that addressed status disparities across race and gender lines, five indicated the course/s did not equip them to understand current debates about the root causes of inequality. The five students, who all identify as white, instead described these courses as:

“Preachy stuff about tolerance. I wanted to learn about the real research behind why some groups do better than others, not do role-plays about how we shouldn’t judge people,” 20 year-old male, economics major, New York, NY.

“Cheesy exercises that were supposed to show how most of the world’s resources is in the hands of a few rich people, but didn’t really explain why it’s like that. It was like we were supposed to just think it’s bad,” 21 year-old female, economics major, Atlanta, GA.

“Confusing. I get there are a lot of bigoted people and they can create messed up policies. I think there is privilege there for certain people. But I don’t know what they [professors] mean when they say ‘structural’ or ‘institutional’ racism. There are just
individuals making decisions . . . Like racist cops that do profiling and bust more people of a certain race, or bank employees who don’t give loans to somebody because of how they look. So how does it not come down to just racist people?” 19 year-old male, computer engineering major, Austin, TX.

“The class made it sound like you’re basically screwed if you’re not born white and at least a little well-off financially. That sounds so hopeless, why would people want to think like that? There’s a lot of prejudiced people out there, I know. But none of us were there for slavery and segregation. That had nothing to do with us. How can we ever get beyond that if we keep talking so much about all of the differences between people, like between black and white people and latino people. I think it divides us instead of making us stronger,” 20 year-old female, philosophy major, Los Angeles, CA.

While illustrative of millennial libertarian approaches to these topics broadly, the students’ statements also highlight the challenges inherent in understanding and communicating the nature of increasingly complex transfigurations of racism that flourish without formal institutional support. Many young libertarians unequivocally dismiss and are often quite hostile to such approaches, despite lacking familiarity with the social scientific evidence in which they are grounded. Yet some express genuine interest in this research, as well as reveal how foreign it remains to the movement broadly.

One such example is a conversation among young libertarians during a planning meeting for a day-long conference. Of about ten young people, some in their late twenties and others in college, a handful — both men and women — wished to include a panel of speakers addressing the question of why relatively few women participate in the movement. While millennial libertarian groups targeting college students have been more
successful at involving women than their forebears, prominent movement figures, writers, and presenters remain overwhelmingly male.

The topic of why women are significantly underrepresented in libertarian spaces arises relatively frequently, and solicits a common range of responses. Almost shockingly often, participants in such discussions state that the philosophy stresses logic and reason, traits they associate with men. Replied one witty critic of this view,

As a woman, and especially a pregnant woman, analytical consistency and rigor are definitely not for me, so I guess I won’t be a libertarian. I prefer feeling my way to views about the means of production, using my vagina for guidance.

Some millennial libertarians note that the “sausage-fest” dominating many movement spaces contributes to the disregard of gender hierarchies perpetuated outside of a state framework. A 21 year-old female student group leader shared,

Look, I’m a libertarian, I believe in markets and civil liberties and I oppose the wars . . . But when it comes to gender . . . and racism . . . there are real problems in the movement. Free markets won’t fix those inequities. Not everyone, but especially a lot of the men, do not take that seriously at all. People are so focused on state coercion . . . there are lots of things that should be taken seriously that can happen even in a stateless utopia, like patriarchy and racism. When I raise it, they’re dismissive and laugh it off. It’s a real problem.

I noted the example to share with Christina, who had been compiling a list of parallels between “vulgar libertarians and vulgar Marxists” with which to further taunt Josh. The top item was “Just focus on building the revolution/libertopia and don’t worry about racism and patriarchy. If they even exist, they will disappear when the economic issues are resolved.”

As is common both in libertarian online spaces and meetings, this particular panel proposition was met by angry bristling toward what the other event organizers perceived as a concession to “politically correct conformism” and “identity politics groupthink.”
The meeting soon disintegrated, with opponents of the panel leaving the room. Jesse, a soft-spoken young man who was quiet for most of the exchange stayed behind. He was a recent engineering graduate and longtime advocate of Austrian economics, working as a computer programmer at a software company. As he talked with the group that had proposed the controversial panel, his genuine demeanor provided some insight into the dynamics at play. He thought the panel was a good idea, and was interested in the reasons behind the movement’s gender distribution:

But before you can get libertarians to take the gender disparity seriously, though, you have to show why that particular category is relevant at all.

One of the others in the room asked him to clarify what he meant.

Well if you studied the prevalence of red-headed people in the movement, or people who are tall. And you found that there is some huge underrepresentation of them. Well I don’t think people think those categories are tied to anything important. So probably no one would care, right? . . . So you’d have to show that the gender category is different somehow.

His interlocutor noted that the overall levels of female political participation broadly and the clear irrelevance of sex to ability, coupled with extensive documentation of historical and current gender-based disparities, indicate there is very good reason to assume that something about the movement is a deterrent and driving the underrepresentation.

Well I think you’d have to prove the case about these disparities. I don’t see this kind of inequality in and of itself as bad when there is free association. People are not all going to like to do the same kinds of things . . . Why would you think that any kind of disparities or discrimination against women in society, even if it still exists, has anything to do with it?

Replied another participant,

Right well the issue is why they’re not joining. It seems likely that a big problem is what you said — maybe a lot don’t want to join because libertarians don’t think gender matters, or race, or whatever because the official discrimination laws are off the books. And there is plenty of evidence that it still does.
“Yeah. Well you would really have to show why it would still matter. I mean in some significant way. Obviously there’s always going to be sexists and people with dumb stereotypes . . . I don’t think most libertarians would just accept that it matters in that way. I want to know more about it too.”

Jesse’s response highlights much of the movement’s fundamental lack of familiarity with notions of systemic inequality as both historically entrenched and continually reproduced — barriers along axes of gender and race that often take form in much more complex ways than coercion “at gunpoint.” But most participants see such notions as something to be “accepted,” a fashion of the day rather than grounded in evidence-based research — the extent of which is thoroughly foreign to many. While this may be difficult to understand for readers immersed in critical approaches to the social sciences, the worlds of these young people overwhelmingly do not engage such perspectives. Despite the fluency of many in other arenas, they have, for much of their lives, thought about freedom, coercion, the individual, and the social in particular ways that render such approaches significantly less intuitive.

Many young libertarians also follow in the footsteps of the movement figures they admire, focusing on state oppression and violence as a uniform condition. Behind the concern with, for instance, police violence and the war on drugs, is the coercive power of the state — most often understood in an “individual vs. the state framework” that erases the particular and disproportionate impact on certain groups and communities. The ensuing reproduction of racial hierarchies in most libertarian analyses appears as little more than an afterthought — although is noted far more often than non-state forms of subordination.
A monthly online feature of the longstanding Foundation for Economic Education illustrates these dynamics. Aiming to help libertarian readers explore timely issues, the organization regularly solicits two short editorials taking opposing views on a key topic, and asks readers to vote for the more persuasive. In 2014, two young women addressed “A Question of Privilege.” The editor of the “sex positive, state negative” blog Sex and the State Cathy Reisenwitz, who is also an associate at Young Voices, an organization that connects voices of the millennial generation with media outlets, argued that libertarians “should be more concerned about issues of class and privilege”:

While the State is the primary mechanism by which this preservation [of unearned power held by those in traditionally privileged classes] is done, a libertarianism that seeks to remove the power to abuse without examining the cultural attitudes, ignorance, and prejudices that form the basis of that desire is a libertarianism not worth having . . . What privilege means is that people of differing identities experience markedly different forms of oppression . . . Acknowledging privilege isn’t putting people in categories or discriminating against them. It’s recognizing that one’s identity shields oneself from firsthand knowledge of others’ oppression. This isn’t a description of how things should be. It’s an admission of how things currently are.

Julie Borowski, who runs the popular YouTube channel Token Libertarian Girl and is currently a FreedomWorks policy analyst, argued that “libertarians should stay focused on individual rights”:

Libertarians should remain committed to maximizing freedom and opportunity for all individuals rather than playing identity politics and collectivizing people . . . We all have a common enemy in an oppressive state that restricts our ability to live our lives as we see fit.

_Libertarianism is about increasing freedom for every single individual._

Libertarians want everyone to have the opportunity to achieve prosperity and happiness. We advocate for an environment that allows people to flourish and achieve their dreams. We want every child to be able to get a great education that prepares them to succeed in life. We want every person to have access to affordable and high quality health care . . . These
are not white people issues. These are not black people issues. These are not rich people issues. These are not poor people issues. These are human issues.

While both analyses saw the state as the primary obstacle, the former argued that libertarians ought to take seriously the ensuing stratification that presents different barriers for differently situated people. Twenty percent of readers agreed, with eighty voting for the other position.

While this is simply an informal poll, it serves as another example of how an emerging set of debates on these fronts is gradually being introduced into movement spaces by small groups of millennial libertarians. The topics of privilege and subordination across gender and race lines are also regularly engaged by Thoughts on Liberty, launched in 2013 by several young women with the aim of serving as the premier blog for women libertarian voices. Blogger Gina Lutrell (2014) offered another understanding of individualism, noting that the Foundation for Economic Education poll framework, in pitting privilege against individual rights, perpetuates a false binary: “those who want to achieve a society where everyone is considered by their individual personalities and merits cannot achieve their goals without first battling systemic privilege.”

Similarly, the recently launched the Libertarian Anti-Racist Alliance provides an online discussion forum for anti-racist activism and actively opposes “colorblindness” in favor of “race consciousness,” aiming to popularize the notion within the liberty movement:

You may have heard some libertarians advocate for some form of extreme atomistic individualism (e.g. “we’re all individuals, society doesn’t exist, and groups don’t exist”). This is harmful because it abstracts away real-life differences between individuals which arise based on their voluntary (or involuntary in the case of race) membership in various social groups, and
ignores the role that social understandings of race and racial prejudice play in perpetuating contemporary social and economic problems (e.g. the Drug War and the over-representation of African-Americans in the U.S. prison system). This is an unrealistic, unscientific and counter-productive position to take. The idea of Race Consciousness . . . is an alternative position which encourages people to acknowledge the cultural differences that have emerged based on our socially constructed notions of race, appreciate them and to take them seriously when engaged in analysis of social and economic issues.

The initiative is the work of JP Gonzales and James Padilioni, Jr. JP, finishing undergraduate studies in cognitive science at the University of California Merced, presently serves on the Students for Liberty (SFL) executive board. Primarily concerned with social justice issues, JP identified with the left throughout high school but became heavily involved with the liberty movement in college. He found the libertarian philosophy powerful both as a “critique of statist solutions to complex social problems” and in advancing the goals of “equality of opportunity and social justice traditionally associated with the left.” James is also active in the youth movement, having founded a student SFL group as an undergraduate at West Chester University in Pennsylvania and currently serves on the SFL international executive board. He regularly writes articles on the topics of race and racism for SFL, and is presently a doctoral student focused on slave culture and resistance as well as the musicology and political economy of jazz. As with other approaches to privilege and status gradually gaining steam among some millennial libertarians, the ideas being introduced by JP and James remain highly contested.

Much more widespread understandings of the individual consider the concept nearly exclusively in relationship to private property ownership. Particularly in anarcho-capitalist spaces, the dominant focus is the individual’s right to exclusion inherent in the very notion of private property. Thus, the anarcho-capitalist society puts an end to the
“forced integration” imposed upon private property owners by states “through various non-discrimination, affirmative action, and multiculturalist policies” (Hoppe 2001b). Private property owners’ right to exclusion — or, more diplomatically, voluntary association — is central to most versions of libertarianism, to different effects. It is thus that during his 2010 U.S. Senate campaign, Rand Paul — son of liberty movement icon Ron Paul — unproblematically declared his opposition to parts of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 barring discrimination on the basis of race by private businesses — a position that stirred intense public outcry but one that is relatively uncontroversial in many libertarian circles, and one to which his father also subscribes.

To be sure, some libertarians — particularly those in the world of public policy — take somewhat different approaches to the voluntary association argument. While generally critical of race-conscious government programs, those working in the many libertarian-oriented think tanks in and beyond the Beltway stress some version of limited government and equality under the law over anarcho-capitalist stateless societies. For this, they are condemned as faux libertarians by purists in the endless debate of what it means to be “a real libertarian.” For many radicals the answer is simple: libertarianism as such is a philosophy grounded in private property rights and a radical critique of the state. The right to discriminate — to exclude — is thus inextricably bound up with this vision of the free society. It is strict adherence to private property rights, best enforced by private parties, that is the lynchpin in this approach — not the various individual liberties compatible with this system, nor any benefits it may also hold for the vulnerable and marginalized. Pragmatic concessions too are largely impermissible.

In this vein, LvMI’s Jeffrey Tucker (1997) critiques the Cato Institute’s David Boaz, who, in writing about individualism as a key tenet of libertarianism, asserts that the
Libertarian extension of dignity to more people, including women and historically marginalized racial groups and religions, marks one of the greater triumphs of the western world. Replies Tucker, “Far from being a victory for liberty, the extension of civil rights (that is, the right to trespass) has been a complete disaster and a major source of tyranny of our times.” Moreover, he asks, “since when has the purpose of libertarianism — a political theory delineating the boundaries of property rights — been to progressively extend ‘dignity’ to whole groups?”

The reader is left with no doubt about where Boaz stands on lifestyle issues (drugs, sex, speech, etc.) and the policy concerns of the punditry class (how this or that program can be improved), but is left to speculate on precisely how strict Boaz’s utopia would be with regard to the protection of property rights, or how or on what level of society those rights would be enforced.

Libertarianism’s “PR Problem”

In 2012, the satirical newspaper the Onion covered the so-called “fiscal cliff,” the sharp decline in the federal budget deficit that could have occurred beginning in early January 2013 due to a range of tax cut expirations and spending reductions required by previously enacted laws. “Going over the cliff,” many experts believed, could plunge the nation into recession unless Democrats and Republicans reached a compromise agreement. Second on the Onion’s list of what will happen if legislators fail to act? “Total breakdown of effective government will turn large parts of the country into an unimaginably hellish libertarian paradise.”

As libertarianism’s popularity among millennials grows, so does the tradition’s visibility in contemporary popular culture. Yet another example is the comedy series Park & Recreation’s Ron Swanson, the staunch libertarian director of the parks and recreation
department who believes the park system should be privatized and thwarts its effectiveness at every turn. But the Onion’s satirical commentary also represents a common perception of libertarianism’s implications: without government, life will become “unimaginably hellish,” except for an elite few. Such views of libertarianism by commentators and the public alike are not surprising in light of the intentionally provocative views put forth by some of the movement’s leading figures. Many of the movement’s younger ambassadors in college classrooms and debates across the country notoriously follow suit, reveling in being perceived as purposefully incendiary and confrontational, even arrogant — to the great chagrin of other millennial libertarians frustrated with libertarianism’s “PR problem,” who tend to also be significantly more sympathetic to social justice questions. But the issue extends well beyond self-representation and the themes considered throughout this chapter so far, into the realm of the movement’s central economic analyses.

“A lot of people really just aren’t informed about economics. They blame economic downturns on markets when they are actually caused by state intervention,” said Yuri, the young Austrian school devotee who by now had read Rothbard’s Man, Economy, & State for the fourth time — this time alongside Keynes’ General Theory (1936), “the antithesis of sane economic prescriptions.”

Yuri was referring to the subject of the “Fear the Boom and Bust” music video, the aforementioned libertarian sensation that revolves around Mises and Hayek’s economic explanation of the “boom and bust” of business cycles. That a hip hop video about such a seemingly dry topic would garner over four million YouTube views is less curious from the perspective of millennial libertarians, for many of whom this is a central concept in any introduction to Austrian thought. Austrian business cycle theory lies at the
core of libertarian commitment to sound money and opposition to the Federal Reserve and central banking broadly. In 1974, some four decades after the publication of his ideas, Hayek would receive the Nobel Prize in economics for his contributions on this front.

Austrian economics grounds the cause of cyclical business swings in state intervention: credit expansion, including the printing of additional notes by central banks and the creation of new demand deposits tied to federal debt monetization as well as fractional reserve banking. It is this unremitting injection of additional money into the system that leads to the continuous rise of prices, or inflation. As a result, market interest rates initially drop below the level they would attain absent such expansion of credit. In the Austrian view, the interest rate reflects the ratio of present goods valuation to future goods valuation. A shift in favor of more future goods would lead to a lowering of the interest rate due to a greater preference of future goods over present goods, and the converse. The interest rate thus tends toward a point where the amount of funds that savers are willing to invest in production equals the amount that entrepreneur-producers are willing to obtain and use for productive purposes.

Through saving and investment, a certain amount of resources is directed toward the production of capital goods rather than consumer goods. The interest rate thus signals the extent to which capital goods production may be undertaken:

The role which the rate of interest plays in these deliberations of the planning businessman is obvious. It shows him how far he can go in withholding factors of production from employment for want-satisfaction in nearer periods of the future and in dedicating them to want-satisfaction in remoter periods. It shows him what period of production conforms in every concrete case to the difference which the public makes in the ratio of valuation between present goods and future goods. It prevents him from embarking upon projects the execution of which would not agree with the limited amount of capital goods provided by the saving public.
Credit expansion, in the early stages of which the interest rate drops, leaves entrepreneur-producers unable to differentiate between funds stemming from real savings and those created artificially. Here, the economic boom occurs: As a result of the faulty interest rate signal, business decisions are made as though the valuation ratio of present to future goods has dropped, when this in fact did not take place. Mortgages and loans become more affordable. Investments in capital goods and the corresponding extension of the production process are undertaken. Entrepreneur-producers operate as though heightened demand for capital goods exists, buying more land, sophisticated machinery, and hiring new workers. But savings available for capital goods production have not increased. In the case of a short-term credit expansion, the economic bust inevitably follows. The demand for consumer goods has in reality not dropped and the longer-term investments in production expansion are misplaced. When the newly created money begins to run out, projects that had appeared profitable are revealed as overoptimistic. Construction halts and factories close, unemployment and bankruptcies skyrocket. Businesses fail, workers are laid off, spending and investment plummet. Commerce at large, including firms that did not make bad investments, is affected, culminating in an adjustment process referred to a recession or depression. In the case of longer-term credit expansions malinvestment is compounded, intensifying the inevitable adjustment process. According to Mises, indefinite credit expansion ultimately leads to the collapse of the monetary system and the money economy, as in the great European inflations of the 1920s — the phenomenon known as Katastrophenhausse, or the “crack-up boom” (1949:428). Due to political realities, however, this outcome appears less likely than the
disruptive pattern of credit expansion and contraction leading “to successive cyclical downturns. The cyclical process becomes self-perpetuating and proceeds to the ‘stop-go cycle,’ a familiar phenomenon in Great Britain and one becoming familiar in the United States” (O’Driscoll 1977).

In terms of concrete examples, Austrians perhaps most famously take up the depression of 1920-21 in arguing against political solutions to economic busts. Historian and Ludwig von Mises Institute fellow Tom Woods (2009:51) contends that it is precisely due to the lack of fiscal and monetary stimulus at that time that the economy quickly recovered, a point articulated earlier by economist Joseph Schumpeter.

The economic situation in 1920 was grim. By that year unemployment had jumped from 4 percent to nearly 12 percent, and GNP declined 17 percent. No wonder, then, that Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover — falsely characterized as a supporter of laissez-faire economics — urged President Harding to consider an array of interventions to turn the economy around. Hoover was ignored. Instead of ‘fiscal stimulus,’ Harding cut the government’s budget nearly in half between 1920 and 1922. The rest of Harding’s approach was equally laissez-faire. Tax rates were slashed for all income groups. The national debt was reduced by one-third. The Federal Reserve’s activity, moreover, was hardly noticeable . . . By the late summer of 1921, signs of recovery were already visible. The following year, unemployment was back down to 6.7 percent and it was only 2.4 percent by 1923 . . . The federal government did not do what Keynesian economists ever since have urged it to do: run unbalanced budgets and prime the pump through increased expenditures.

Along with most Austro-libertarians, Yuri acknowledges that, in the current context, breaking the “boom and bust” cycle via the complete absence of state intervention in the economy would cause profound hardship for some time: “It’s true that things would be pretty bad for a while, until the economy readjusted. People with skills in sectors that are unproductive would have to transition to other sectors. All of that would take time.”
But in this view, “the alternative is a lot worse. The current system is not viable. There’s only so long that state credit expansions can keep extending these cycles. And the kind of financial collapse that happens after that will be a lot, a lot worse.”

I was less interested in arguing the particulars of century-old debates around government’s role in the economy than in how proponents integrate this economic analysis with popularizing the libertarian movement. Yuri agreed that, from the perspective an actual person’s lived experience rather than as an economic abstraction, this “adjustment period” is extremely significant: “Yes, there is no getting around that the fix hurts, that’s the problem with the mess we’re in. It’s like tearing off the band-aid.”

So, in a context of widespread immiseration, unemployment, and suffering, why would any substantial number of ordinary people support a cause that offers no actual reprieve for some time, only the promise of reward at a future point — even if the underlying economic analysis is correct? Austrian time preference theory itself suggests that the likely scenario in such a hypothetical is mass support of alternatives presenting themselves as providing immediate help, however false they may be.

Yuri stared at me blankly. “But . . . that’s economics. It’s just how it is.”

In light of the central role that business cycle theory — alongside the threats of hyperinflation and ultimate collapse of the monetary system — occupy in the analysis of so many millennial libertarians, and especially those in the libertarian anarchist tradition, I was routinely struck by how rarely movement participants engaged the implications of this theory. For all the lectures, articles, and seminars on the particularities and danger of state credit expansion mechanisms, those most invested in eradicating the boom and bust cycles they see as borne of such intervention appeared to give the least thought to what is
to be done, should this occur, about the adversity wrought by the ensuing “period of adjustment.” It seemed enough that their economic analysis would be proven correct. In many presentations and discussions about this topic, there was almost an underlying assumption that some form of libertarian society would logically follow. Some ancap circles entertain the idea with a blasé smugness that would be difficult to associate with anyone who had witnessed first-hand anything resembling life under conditions of severe hardship. It was thus particularly striking to stumble upon a place where millennial libertarians saw in this very issue a predicament of epic proportions. Perhaps tellingly, this entailed leaving the United States.

In September 2011, I had the opportunity to visit Vienna, which was at the turn of the 19th century the home of Austrian economics and the school’s central figures, including Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, and F.A. Hayek. The occasion was LvMI’s Supporters Summit, five days of lectures, tours, and social events celebrating the Austrian school and, as noted in promotional materials, “the entire intellectual movement that came to the defense of liberty in an age of the total state.”

At the event, I met up with Yuri who, like myself, had been visiting family in that part of the world and extended his trip to attend the Summit. I had never seen him nearly remotely as excited about anything other than an economics text as when we walked through the classrooms of the grade school attended by Mises, part of a guided walking tour of significant Austrian economics sites. The day ended with a gathering at Café Künstler, where Mises and his circle would regularly venture following fortnightly, invitation-only seminars in his office. From 1920 to 1934, the late night gatherings were comprised of discussion, poetry, and music. Philosopher Felix Kaufman penned a series of songs for the group — based on Austrian folk melodies and popular songs, they
incorporated witty commentary about both the key debates of the time and members of
the circle themselves. A total of 28 of these songs had been published in German, and was
translated into English, with full musical scores, for the first time by the LvMI in 2010.
At Café Künstler, attendees received copies and sang a number of the songs, led by the
Institute’s Jeffrey Tucker, donning his signature bowtie look and accompanied by a piano
player. “O quae mutation rerum,” Yuri hummed all throughout the walk to our hostel —
“Oh, how things change,” the chorus of a farewell song to Mises, preparing to leave
Vienna in light of the Nazi threat, as Hayek had earlier. The lyrics bemoan the breaking
of the Mises Kreis, and offer hope that it will someday reunite.

While the Summit was primarily a gathering of the LvMI’s longstanding sponsors,
the organization provided student fellowships for several young people, including a group
from several universities in Austria and Germany. I had had similar conversations with
several as I had with Yuri, and they shared their thoughts about the severe conditions that
eliminating various forms of credit expansion could entail. Even though many did not
know each other and I spoke with each alone, it was striking that, as soon as the topic
arose, all four immediately highlighted the very same concern.

Toward the end of the event, Yuri and I joined a 20 year-old economics student
from Germany for coffee. I had not spoken to him at length before, and I was curious
whether his response would resemble the others.

I had barely finished my first sentence, asking what such a transition period might
look like, when he cut me off.

“Yes, yes. This is a big thing, a serious problem. Weimar Germany.”
Yuri turned to me. “Ooooh, that’s what you meant when we were talking about that earlier? Yeah I mean hyperinflation like that is possible. Weimar Germany went off the gold standard, if the state credit infusions keep coming it’s not out of the question that . . .”

“No, this is not what I am trying to say,” replied the German student.

“Oh.” Yuri looked a bit puzzled by the grave expression on his face. “Well what did you mean then?”

“What happened after.”
Chapter Four: Millennial Libertarian Spaces in the Antistate Moment

In a 2014 promotional video, the electoral politics-focused Young Americans for Liberty dramatically features the powerful statement of 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater: “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”

The popular quote was the work of Karl Hess, Goldwater’s speechwriter and the primary author of the Republican Party’s 1960 and 1964 platforms. But soon thereafter, Hess revolted against both government and corporate power. After working extensively as a welder, he joined Students for a Democratic Society and worked with the Black Panther Party during the Vietnam era. By the 1970s Hess was in Washington, D.C., placing self-built and self-managed technology for raising food and capturing solar power in the service of the then-predominantly black, working class neighborhood of Adams-Morgan, where he grew up (Hess 1979).

In the context of the disparate journeys of millennial libertarians who venture outside of the political arena, the trajectory of Karl Hess becomes less anomalous. The preceding chapters have explored various aspects of the contemporary liberty movement, from electoral politics and policy efforts to the wide range of initiatives aiming to popularize libertarianism while disseminating, building upon, and refashioning libertarian ideas from different perspectives. But given the widespread antipathy toward formal political processes of these liberty movement participants, what do they actually do? Political and educational interventions aside, what kinds of communities and projects do they create? The answer may surprise some outside observers, as millennial libertarians overwhelmingly focus on building spaces and movements they see as

---

1 In his autobiography, Hess notes that he came across the phrase in a letter from Abraham Lincoln biographer Harry Jaffa (1999:168-70).
consistent with libertarian principles, but that resonate across ideological commitments and political philosophies.

Particularly among the movement’s millennials, an approach dormant for several decades is powerfully gaining ground: the philosophy of agorism — from the Greek agora, in the sense of an open marketplace — whereby voluntary market processes would provide services competing with and superior to those of the state. Over time, the moral authority and outright power of the state would become so thoroughly undermined that market anarchist legal and security enterprises developed underground could emerge and ultimately suppress formal government. The philosophy is the work of libertarian anarchist Samuel Edward Konkin III, affectionately known as SEK3, and longtime collaborator of former Goldwaterite Karl Hess. Expressly rejecting the political system and policy interventions, Konkin, alongside science fiction author J. Neil Schulman, developed what he saw as a revolutionary strategy to ultimately bring about a society in which all social relations are voluntary exchanges. His New Libertarian Manifesto (1980) lays out the central means of agorism: counter-establishment economics — the exclusion of all state-approved action (“the white market”) as well as violence and theft (“the red market”) in favor of “the free market, the Black Market, the ‘underground economy,’ all acts of civil and social disobedience, all acts of forbidden association (sexual, racial, cross-religious), and anything else the State, at any place or time, chooses to prohibit, control, regulate, tax, or tariff” (n.d.-a).

While Konkin and his allies envisioned the philosophy as a revolutionary strategy, they noted its appeal for many “who wish only to live their lives as free as possible and associate with others like-minded.” The approach of agorism sidesteps economic policy reform and the problems posed by overt, large-scale economic transitions that troubled the libertarian students in Vienna. Rather, the focus becomes strategies such as direct action, entrepreneurship, and self-
sufficiency. Konkin — widely known for his witticisms and the source of libertarian monikers that persevere today, including “minarchist,” “the Kochtopus,” and “Nozis” to describe followers of philosopher Robert Nozick — declared his *Manifesto* a black market best-seller.

![Counter-Economics poster](image)


Weaving together the contributions of Hess and Konkin, among others, libertarian anarchist Per Bylund (2006) proposes a two-pronged libertarian strategy. The first is a “vertical” approach of building decentralized infrastructure and technologies in creating self-reliant neighborhood and regional networks: “Hess’s experience is that one can provide for a whole neighborhood’s demand for vegetables through setting up greenhouses on a fraction of the
available rooftops. Also, through using the pumps from old washing machines and left-over construction materials, the people in this neighborhood community were able to set up a fish-breeding facility producing hundreds of pounds of fish annually.” Bylund unites the local production of essential goods and services with the corresponding “horizontal” approach developed by Konkin: Making use of one’s own personal contacts in engaging in black market activity and developing ever-expanding private trade networks. Because participating in activity not sanctioned by the state is not always the ideal approach for everyone, focusing on community technologies presents a viable alternative:

The point I’m trying to make here is not that we should all go rural, live like cavemen, and grow our own vegetables. I’m saying we should stop thinking in terms of centralization and large-scale production. Hess stresses the fact that most, if not all important technology is equally or better suited for small-scale use on a family or community level. We do not need to rely on global corporations or the nation-state to get our hands on what we treasure in life.

Like agorism’s earlier proponents, countless young libertarians have abandoned formal political processes to launch efforts expressly and consciously situated outside of political frameworks and the purview of the state. This chapter provides an overview of some of these projects, from grassroots police accountability activism fostering communities that “protect and serve each other” and regional webs promoting self-sufficient living to libertarian engagement with emerging technologies grounded in distributed, peer-to-peer networks.

That alternative institutions and communities promoted by millennial libertarians would also appeal particularly to those who identify with the political left is not unprecedented. Historically, a number of anarchist libertarian figures have argued that the movement is in fact best allied with the left. Murray Rothbard, the father of anarcho-capitalism, had his own “time on the left” throughout the 1960s (Payne 2005), collaborating on the Radical Libertarian Alliance, a coalition between libertarians and the New Left around anti-imperialism that
ultimately collapsed under ever-increasing factionalization (Konkin N.d.-b). Rothbard and anarcho-communist Murray Bookchin partook in the shortlived 1968 Left-Right Anarchist supper club, along with Karl Hess, who also played a key role in the Radical Libertarian Alliance. Building on these earlier collaborations, Konkin spearheaded the Movement of the Libertarian Left in the late 1970s.

None of the projects constituting this trend are the exclusive domain of libertarianism as such — police accountability activism in particular has a rich U.S. history that dates back many decades and spans a wide range of tactics and strategies. While some projects arise from expressly libertarian spaces and then expand, such as the Austin-launched Peaceful Streets Project, others represent arenas where libertarians have simply played a role. Consciously aiming to promote cohesion and avoid internal strife, participants often set rules against using these spaces to advance any single set of political ideologies — for instance, Peaceful Streets activists agreeing that the group will not endorse any expressly political efforts and that the many participating supporters of Ron Paul are not wearing Ron Paul gear during actions such as leafleting and community trainings. The agorism-inspired projects of liberty movement participants represent one aspect of emergent grassroots efforts that eschew centralized authority in favor of distributed networks with equipotential rights of participation. Michael Bauwens (2005) of the P2P Foundation describes the peer-to-peer relational dynamic broadly as:

A form of human network-based organisation which rests upon the free participation of equipotent partners, engaged in the production of common resources, without recourse to monetary compensation as key motivating factor, and not organized according to hierarchical methods of command and control. It creates a Commons, rather than a market or a state, and relies on social relations to allocate resources rather than on pricing mechanisms or managerial commands.
Anarchist blogger Melanie Pinkert (2010) indirectly addresses the rise of new, counter-hegemonic collaborations across ideological boundaries in the context of the ever-present question of why there are so few women anarchists and libertarians. Her analysis not only astutely highlights the gendered aspects of caregiving, but also gestures toward the appeal of counter-hegemonic projects that meet real human needs irrespective of political orientation:

The fact is that every one of us had our baby diapers changed by a woman. And there is a damn good chance that your adult diapers will be changed by one too. Complete independence and freedom are an illusion. It is an illusion that women are not in a position to hold. We are interdependent. And we are only free in so far as everyone is willing to share in taking responsibility for the caregiving that is a fundamental need for all humans.

Whoever is addressing the real life situations that women face is going to get their attention — whether that is liberals offering government social programs, conservatives offering church social programs, or anarchists offering something new. Talk to me about how to have the freedom to pursue my dreams without leaving a mountain of young, old, sick, and dying to fend for themselves and I’ll listen.

Protect and Serve Each Other

In the early morning hours of New Year’s Day 2012, Antonio Buehler pulled into an Austin 7-Eleven for gas. The 35 year-old West Point graduate, a former Army Ranger who served tours in Kosovo and Iraq, was the designated driver for the night and taking his friend home in the friend’s truck. After refueling, Antonio and his friend began getting back into the truck when they heard a woman scream violently. Turning around, they witnessed Austin police officer Robert Snider forcefully jerk the woman out of the passenger seat of a nearby car and throw her on the ground. Officer Patrick Oborski joined Snider as he applied continued upward pressure on the woman’s arms in a maneuver considered to be a torture move by the U.S. military. Antonio tried to take pictures of what he believed was a violent assault; when the
woman noticed him, she begged him to record the incident, and he then began loudly demanding that the officers stop abusing her.

The officers ultimately arrested the woman and escorted her to a police cruiser. They had pulled over the car in which she was a passenger after observing the vehicle driving without headlights. As Officer Oborski conducted a field sobriety test on the driver, the woman had yelled from the passenger seat to her friend that she did not have to submit to a sobriety test. Speech is not sufficient to “interfere” with a police investigation, and the passenger was never charged on this count. Instead, despite being seated in the car until forcibly dragged out by an officer, she was arrested for public intoxication, a Class C misdemeanor. Nearly two weeks following the arrest, and after the woman shared her story with the media, the Austin Police Department filed two new charges against her for resisting arrest and failure to obey a lawful order—noted her attorney, “[I]n all of my years of doing criminal law, I would be hard-pressed to find not only a Class C where additional charges were filed weeks after, but the very fact that a lieutenant from APD called my client to tell her about these additional charges two weeks later.”

Immediately following the woman’s arrest, Officer Oborski turned and walked aggressively toward Antonio, demanding “Who do you think you are?!” A video recording later aired repeatedly on local news stations shows Buehler putting his arms down by his side, with his palms forward and taking several steps back, while Oborski continued moving toward him. The video then shows Oborski violently thrusting his hands into Antonio’s chest several times, pushing him back until he was trapped between the bed of the truck he had been driving and the officer. After repeatedly pushing Antonio in the chest while Antonio kept his arms raised with palms facing forward, yelling, “what are you doing, why are you touching me?,” Oborski forcefully tackled him to the ground and handcuffed him. Antonio says he was then taken to the “BAT Mobile”—
a converted bus used by the Austin Police Department for breath alcohol testing—where he blew into a breathalyzer machine, and was told by the technician that he “broke” the machine by “blowing too hard” when no alcohol was detected.

He was then escorted to another police vehicle where Oborski confronted him: “You don’t fuck with police, you fucked with the wrong cop this time and now you’re going to fucking pay.” Antonio didn’t learn what the officer meant until being taken downtown to the Travis County Jail. In addition charging him with resisting arrest, a Class A misdemeanor, Oborski had claimed Antonio has spit in his face, and further charged him with felony harassment of a public official—a third degree felony offense carrying a prison sentence of two to ten years.


Upon being released from jail the following day, Antonio learned from the friend he was driving home that witnesses were present on the scene, but the officers had prevented them from sharing their contact information with him. Antonio immediately began using social media to seek out the witnesses and posted fliers around the 7-Eleven location. Several stepped forward, including someone who had recorded video footage with a cell phone from a distance and left the scene unbeknownst to anyone present. The police department refused to release the police
vehicle camera recordings as well as the 7-Eleven security camera footage, pending criminal proceedings. During the entire 15 months it would take until a grand jury heard Antonio Buehler’s case, that cell phone recording was the sole public evidence of what happened that night, and of the officers’ misrepresentation of the facts. Not only did the officers violently aggress against the woman and Antonio; Antonio never spit on Oborski, nor did Oborski wipe his face, as claimed in his police affidavit (2012)—“No spit, no wipe!” read the flyers soon plastered all over the city.

Following the incident, Antonio met with several friends and supporters at Brave New Books, Austin’s libertarian bookstore that also provides free space for a wide range of libertarian-oriented meetings and events. Following his experience in the military, Antonio had become both an ardent anti-war activist and supporter of Ron Paul’s presidential bid. Having relocated to Austin from New York about a year prior to the New Year’s incident, he quickly became a part of the city’s libertarian community and regularly shared his own personal experiences in a variety of public forums, from trans-partisan anti-war events to Ron Paul rallies. The small group, largely acquainted through libertarian circles, planned a strategy to build on the momentum provided by Antonio’s case: his media outreach, along with the credibility provided by his educational and military background, had already made his story a local news phenomenon. The mission of the group was to bring about a cultural shift where individuals understand their rights and hold law enforcement officials accountable, and communities protect and serve each other. Rather than aiming to petition officials or otherwise engage the political process, the group expressly opted for the tactics of community organizing, non-political and non-violent direct action, and use of new media technologies. By stressing the non-political, transpartisan nature of
the project, the activists aimed to unite Austinites across ideological divides to shed light upon police abuse rampant throughout Austin — the Peaceful Streets Project was born.

![Peaceful Streets Project Facebook banner](http://peacefulstreets.com)

**FIGURE 9:** Peaceful Streets Project Facebook banner. [http://peacefulstreets.com](http://peacefulstreets.com).

I learned about Antonio’s case through the libertarian grapevine, and joined the effort to build the organization. The group soon recruited activists from a variety of backgrounds to help with the project, including several extensively involved with Occupy Austin. One of the group’s earlier actions was an “Occupy APD” rally in support of Antonio. Held in front of Austin Police Headquarters, the action brought together representatives of Veterans for Ron Paul, Occupy activists, libertarian student group members and longtime liberty movement participants, as well as members of the general public.

In the months that followed, the Peaceful Streets Project became a central hub of Austin community organizing. Through “Police Complaint Departments,” volunteers recorded testimony of Austinites wishing to share their own experiences of police misconduct. Volunteers gathered stories by tabling in public spaces, particularly outside of the county jail where those being released were provided free snacks, water and cell phone access. The collected testimony is
made available on the organization’s website, underneath a quote from James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street*:

[I]f one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected— those, precisely, who need the law’s protection most!— and listens to their testimony.

Volunteer teams hit the streets to reach out particularly to Austin’s marginalized communities disproportionately affected by police abuse, especially the predominantly black and latino neighborhoods on the city’s east side — spending countless over-100 degree days flyering the streets and going door to door to speak with community members about free upcoming events. Having had some organizing and legal experience on police misconduct issues, I developed a training curriculum on knowing your rights in police encounters. In my months of volunteering with the project we hosted numerous such trainings, which provided donated food and were held at locations ranging from bookstores to east side public libraries and churches to the local community college.

In the year and some months since its inception, the Peaceful Streets Project has held over a dozen such trainings and spearheaded scores of copwatch actions, where volunteers record police interactions for the public’s protection. A substantial base of volunteers is associated with the liberty movement; much of the donations making the organization’s work possible come from libertarian donors who regularly fund cooperative grassroots efforts launched by activists in libertarian circles.

During this time, Antonio remained a constant target, receiving intimidating phone calls and being stared down and followed by several officers while facing the very real possibility of years in prison. But this only fueled his commitment to police accountability activism. Prior to the grand jury hearing on the New Year’s Day incident, he was arrested two additional times.
during copwatch actions and charged with misdemeanor offenses for allegedly “interfering” with an investigation—a widespread tactic in suppressing otherwise legal video monitoring of police encounters.


In the summer of 2012, he led the Peaceful Streets Project in organizing the first annual Police Accountability Summit, which gathered over 200 people at an east Austin community space. At the event, the Project placed 100 free digital videocameras in the hands of trained Austinites without phones with recording capability, committed to monitoring police activity in
their neighborhoods. The Summit brought together young and old Austinites of disparate backgrounds, from different parts of town, and across political divides for a free day of police accountability education and activism, with breakfast and lunch provided: families with children—as well as a youth group of young folks who enthusiastically partook in the event’s discussions—joined longtime organizers from Austin’s black and latino communities, activists from Occupy Austin and various other organizations, students, and many others including several of Austin’s homeless. Victims of police abuse moved participants with tragic stories of lives scarred forever by police violence. A local artist presented the family of Byron Carter, Jr. with two paintings of Carter, a 20-year old black man shot and killed in 2011 by Austin Police Department officers who fired into the vehicle in which he was a passenger.

In addition to training sessions on knowing your rights in police encounters and on recording police activity safely, participants heard from a wide range of speakers, including Rene Valdez of Austin’s Resistencia Books, community organizers Debbie Russell and Scott Crow, personal safety instructor Micheal Cargill, Texas Civil Rights Project founder and director Jim Harrington, and Pete Eyre of copblock.org, a longtime liberty movement activist. The Summit also featured prerecorded interviews which Project volunteers conducted with Austin’s Paul Hernandez, founding member of the local Brown Berets, and Robert King, former Black Panther, political prisoner and the only freed member of the Angola 3, who spent 29 years in solitary confinement in Lousiana’s Angola prison. That year, the Peaceful Streets Project was voted Best Grassroots Movement of 2012 — and Antonio was voted Best Activist of 2012 — in the Austin Chronicle’s Best of Austin, a popular annual readers’ poll conducted by the independent weekly publication.
Fifteen months after the New Year’s Day 2012 incident, the Travis County grand jury finally convened to hear the cases of both Antonio and the female passenger. Four weeks later, the jury chose not to issue any felony indictments against Antonio. He was instead indicted for failure to obey a lawful order, a Class C misdemeanor punishable by up to a $500 fine. The grand jury further did not indict the passenger on the charges of public intoxication and failure to obey a lawful order. They did, however, indict her for resisting arrest, a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail.

During the summer of 2013, the Peaceful Streets Project organized the second annual Police Accountability Summit in Austin. Chapters of Peaceful Streets have formed in Houston, Dallas and New York City, all launched by individuals active in the liberty movement. Additional chapters are currently forming in San Antonio and El Paso, Texas as well as in Sacramento, California; Pueblo, Boulder, Colorado Springs, and Denver, Colorado; Vero Beach, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; New Orleans, Louisiana; Boston, Massachusetts; Bismark, North Dakota; Greenville, South Carolina; Provo, Utah; Lewis County, Washington; and Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

*The Free State Project: A Microcosm of the Liberty Movement*

One of the most well-known libertarian initiatives remains the Free State Project, a political migration effort aiming to recruit at least 20,000 libertarians to relocate to New Hampshire and build a beachhead of the like-minded. Participants sign a statement of intent to relocate to New Hampshire and work toward a society in which the sole role of civil government is the protection of individuals’ rights to life, liberty and property. As provided by the Free State Project’s participation guidelines, the first 5,000 people to sign the statement chose the destination state through a vote, using a simple Condorcet method. Participants pledge to move
as soon as possible within five years of 20,000 people signing the statement. To date, over 14,000
have signed and over 1,100 have become “early movers” — relocating to New Hampshire prior
to the 20,000 signature benchmark.

Established in 2001 and guided by the slogan “Liberty in our lifetime,” the Free State
Project began with observations regarding the inability of libertarians to elect federal candidates
to office. While the Project itself is a non-profit organization the sole purpose of which is to work
toward the relocation of 20,000 liberty-supporting individuals into a single state, New Hampshire
was chosen in part because its low population ensures greater impact upon the political system.
In turn, the Project has been portrayed as everything from a radical right secessionist scheme to a
sinister political takeover devised by the Koch brothers. In this sense, both the Project and its
popular representation are microcosms of the broader liberty movement. Some Project
participants are indeed Republicans with tea party sympathies, and several have run for office
themselves. Once elected, they sponsor legislation such as repealing the state’s Property Assessed
Clean Energy program that allows municipalities to finance new renewable and energy efficient
projects through offering loans to participating property holders. That bill was introduced by
Carol McGuire, a libertarian activist who moved to New Hampshire as part of the Project and
was elected to the state’s House of Representatives in 2008. Her bill ultimately passed with
amendments, permitting financing through the issuance of municipal revenue bonds but not
from general municipal revenues. Carol’s husband Dan won a House seat several years after his
wife’s first election, proposing legislation such as a bill to repeal the federally-funded New
Hampshire Rail Transit Authority providing commuter rail and related public transportation
services. The bill passed, but was ultimately vetoed by the governor.
But Free State Project participants and supporters in the House, including the McGuires, also routinely join many Democrats on issues such as marijuana law reform. The House has passed measures to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana four times over the past five years. These Representatives also support a range of related marijuana bills, from legalizing the substance altogether to sanctioning it for medicinal use. Similarly, when the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) faced public outrage for civil liberties violations stemming from the implementation of airport pat downs and body scanners in 2010, the House passed a bill requiring law enforcement officers to document complaints relating to administrative searches by TSA agents.

Further, as is the case in the liberty movement broadly, a substantial number of “Free Staters” reject the political process altogether, focusing instead on civil disobedience actions and community projects. Thus, activists arriving through the Free State Project, alongside locals and longtime residents, have launched Free Keene — an effort based in the New Hampshire city and aimed toward replacing government with voluntary alternatives using peaceful, market-based actions. The community’s activities are disseminated via several vibrant online forums, promoting a wealth of activism and related efforts.

Alongside fellow police accountability activists, Pete Eyre, the copblock.org organizer who presented at the Peaceful Streets Project’s Summit, is heavily involved with Free Keene. Pete and allies identify as voluntaryists — in its contemporary manifestation, a libertarian philosophy that stresses individual sovereignty and nearly synonymous with anarcho-capitalism grounded in the non-aggression principle. Free Keene provides Free Staters with the option of signing The Shire Society Declaration, which stipulates that that no form of political governance may be relied upon to secure the individual rights of life, liberty, or property, and that binding
obligations may only be created consensually, through explicit voluntary association. The Declaration was inspired by “A New Covenant,” an essay penned by libertarian science fiction writer L. Neil Smith — not to be confused with the aforementioned science fiction author J. Neil Schulman, Konkin’s collaborator. Aware that the mix-up is commonplace especially in libertarian circles, Smith once signed a letter to Konkin, “Neil (L., not J.)”

*Natural Living, Food Freedom, and Small-Scale Production*

Efforts inspired by the Free State Project are mushrooming throughout the country on various scales. In this vein, Austin libertarian icons John Bush and Catherine Bleish have launched Lone Star Libertopia, a grassroots effort to encourage both liberty movement activists and others “working to create a free, prosperous, and sustainable world to move to Central Texas and participate in the liberty evolution already taking place.” Through regular social events, the initiative creates networking opportunities and aims to promote the area as an activist destination. Some who have already relocated, those traveling to central Texas, and numerous local activists have fostered a community at the couple’s Blush Family Farm, a resource for anyone interested in learning about growing food, raising chickens, and sustainable living broadly. Life on the 2.4 acre farmstead is the subject of Sovereign Living, a television show concept developed by the couple that documents their challenges as parents transitioning toward a more self-sufficient lifestyle devoid of dependence on centralized institutions. Portraying the family’s attempt to reduce their energy consumption through a combination of preservation and solar power and goal of growing, trading and farming half of their food needs, the show also offers a look at the natural home birth of the couple’s second child. With the first three episodes currently in post-production, the duo is traveling to similar activist and community spaces across the country to show sneak-peeks and raise money to finish the full season.
A co-founder and former executive director of Texans for Accountable Government, a non-partisan, Austin-based political action committee dedicated to limiting the reach of government, John gradually moved away from the political arena toward addressing social and economic problems through grassroots, community efforts. As the longtime host of the daily morning radio talk show Rise Up Radio on the Liberty Radio Network, he highlights radical solutions that everyday people can adopt in addressing injustice and building resilient communities, from gardening and sustainability, to sound money and alternative currencies, to local mobilization such as the Peaceful Streets Project, of which he is a founding member.

In late 2012, John spearheaded Austin’s non-profit Center for Natural Living and currently heads the Center, of which the television show is a project. Other Center initiatives include organizing health education meetings in marginalized communities; providing fluoride water filters to new or expecting mothers; assisting low-income families with alternative education needs and accessing nutritional supplements and natural health remedies; and building a community garden alongside biodiesel processing and aquaponics systems. At the launch party for the Center, children frolicked in the backyard of a local café amidst community members enjoying local food, raffles, and a silent auction. The event brought together a range of speakers, from Arturo Arredondo of the Texas Aquaponic Group, an expert in aquaponics who helps Texans convert backyards into farmyards using aquaponics in conjunction with other personal food production methods, to MariMikel Penn of New Life Birth Services, an experienced midwife providing prenatal and post-partum care alongside home birth and birth center services. Also sharing the stage were the Peaceful Street Project’s Antonio Buehler; John van Deusen of Austin’s Food is Free Project, which teaches neighborhoods how to line their streets with front yard community gardens built from salvaged materials; and Max Elliott of Urban Roots, which
provides Austin youth with paid internships to work on the organization’s east Austin sustainable farm in east Austin and donates 40 percent of each year’s harvest to local soup kitchens and food pantries. Seed funding for the Center was provided by John Ramsey, the 22-year-old Ron Paul supporter who became a millionaire overnight when his grandfather passed away in 2010. Ramsey directed a part of his fortune into building the Liberty for All super PAC, backing Paul-endorsed candidates including U.S. Representative Thomas Massey from Kentucky and opposing several establishment Republicans. But Ramsey’s interests have increasingly expanded beyond the electoral arena to supporting community-based solutions and social entrepreneurship — the topic of his own speech at the launch event.

Food politics in particular is rapidly gaining a prominent place both in libertarian activism and cross-ideological alliances. In 2012, the libertarian magazine Reason recruited Baylen Linnekin, the director of Keep Food Legal, to pen a regular column for its website. Linnekin’s non-profit organization advocates for “food freedom,” “the right of every American to grow, raise, produce, buy, sell, share, cook, eat, and drink the foods of their own choosing” (Keep Food Legal 2012). In part, it works toward abolishing all agricultural subsidies and subsidized crop insurance as well as defeating restrictive food bans and regulations. Such government action, in Linnekin’s view, never favors “the little guy” and disadvantages the production of healthy food, a key factor in healthy food accessibility problems faced by low-income areas. He further highlights the potential of the issue to foster activist coalitions:

People on the left and right and in between have a variety of views on any number of issues. But when it comes to food, they tend to be united in the idea that it’s up to them and families for what they should be eating. A lot of people realize that the government and corporations are working hand in hand in keeping them from being free to make those choices. (Holt 2012)
But libertarian activism on this front is not limited to opposing government action. Scores of libertarians throughout Texas joined the 2013 March against Monsanto international campaign in opposition to the GMO giant. Austinites of all political backgrounds took to the streets in an anti-Monsanto march on May 25, 2013, in solidarity with over 400 similar events held that day across 45 countries. Following the march, John Bush and other libertarians teamed up with local food activists to plan a Grow Your Own action in conjunction with the next march. The event brought together volunteers in a day-long effort to help Austin area low-income communities grow their own food by sharing skills and assisting with labor.

Increasingly, liberty movement participants and fellow travelers stress decentralized, small-scale production as an alternative to corporate capitalism. Mutualism proponent Kevin Carson is particularly active among libertarians and libertarian-leaning anarchists presently collaborating with others in various parts of the world to document emerging variants of mutual aid economies. Such a project is fundamentally different from partaking in the ebb and flow of various management fads:

More often, management simply pays lip service to the latest management theory fad du jour, which supposedly stresses worker empowerment, while continuing to practice Taylorism in actual fact. I used to work in a hospital that brought in outside consultants to talk about Deming and “quality circles” and similar bullshit out the wazoo. There were three separate offices, side by side, with the word “Quality” in the job title on the door. Here’s the funny part: most of the problems they sought to address (patient falls, hospital-acquired infections, medication errors, etc.) were the result of deliberate under-staffing. Shit happened because people working on the floor didn’t have time to slow down, notice things, or think about what they were doing. But management’s “solution” was to do everything but increase staffing: more “incident review” committees doing “root cause analysis,” more “process improvement committees,” more tracking forms for us to waste time filling out, more agitprop handouts (“Hey, you stupid people! Don’t you know you’re supposed to wash your hands?”), ad nauseam. On a weekday, there were probably more middle management people sitting in committees thinking up new ways to interfere with our jobs, than there were nurses providing direct patient care. All management theories, no matter how theoretically
empowering, translate in practice into Taylorism. That’s because they’re
implemented by bosses! Duh!
(Carson 2005)

Supporters of cooperative and employee-owned models of economic organization
highlight a number of case studies, from the Mondragon cooperative group in the Basque region
of Spain to the flexible manufacturing networks of the Emilia Romagna region in northern Italy.
The latter, which in the 1940s counted among Europe’s poorest areas, by 2005 produced the
highest GDP per capita in the country; in Bologna, the region’s center, 45 percent of the GDP is
produced by cooperatives, which deliver 85 percent of the city’s social services (Swinney 2005).
Similarly, anarchist Eugene Plawiuk documents economic development in various parts of Africa
attained not through large-scale farming but through the collective farming by small villages and
family farmers — especially inter-village cooperatives developed primarily by women, for
instance throughout Senegal (Carson 2005). Supporters of the growing cooperative movement
point to such market models of “self-managed cooperative capitalism” as an alternative to the
failed monopoly capitalism schemes that have attempted to introduce large-scale, fertilizer-based
agribusiness operations into the region — schemes that are in fact detrimental to sustainable
agriculture, mining, forestry, and industrial production. As Plawiuk observes however, such
cooperative associations require access to both capital and markets.

Carson observes that these small-scale, decentralized economic models have much in
common with the ideas of Kirkpatrick Sale (2007), Barry Stein (1974), Lewis Mumford (1974),
and Jane Jacobs (1970), as well as Murray Bookchin (2004) and Peter Kropotkin (1906). For
instance, flexible, multi-purpose machines and factories could meet the full range of local needs
without requiring large amounts of overbuilt, underused production facilities. As Sale wrote,
quoting noted agrarian and self-sufficiency experimenter Ralph Borsodi, two-thirds of the
manufactured goods we consume could be produced most economically on a small scale. Both Jacobs and Stein highlighted the key role of an engaged workforce in the innovation process, and particularly the significance of local inventiveness — such as finding creative new uses for readily-available raw materials, ways to recycle scrap, and ways for one firm to effectively use the byproducts of another in its production process. Further, according to Stein, small, local firms serving local markets can respond much more effectively to changes in local demand, helping insulate the local economy from business cycle fluctuations.

*Bitcoin and the Peer-to-Peer Revolution*

The internet is ablaze with debate about the decentralized digital currency and peer-to-peer payment system Bitcoin,² with literally hundreds of thousands of articles and online discussion forums analyzing its prospects and limitations. From Bill Gates’ description of Bitcoin as “an intellectual tour de force” to Al Gore’s statement of support because “the “regulation of money supply needs to be depoliticized,” the innovation is drawing headlines around the world despite being perceived as little more than a gimmick until rather recently. In November 2013, the market value of all bitcoins in circulation was estimated at US$10 billion. Over 20,000 online retailers and thousands of brick and mortar establishments now accept the currency as payment. Most recently Overstock.com became the first major retailer to do so, with the company’s CEO asserting, “You want money to be based on something that no government mandarin can wish into existence with the stroke of a pen.”

Yet a mere four to five years ago, few outside of select tech and libertarian circles were aware of the development that would soon take the world by storm. First described in a 2008

---

² Generally, “Bitcoin” capitalized refers to the technology and network whereas “bitcoin” lowercase refers to the currency itself.
paper published under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto, Bitcoin was introduced as open source software in early 2009, when the first bitcoins were issued. It operates on an entirely decentralized, peer to peer basis, requiring no third party to protect against double-spending. Through various online exchange sites, bitcoins are bought and sold at variable prices against the value of other currencies. Bitcoin uses public key cryptography to control the creation and transfer of money. Users send payments by broadcasting digitally signed messages to the network. Participants known as miners verify and timestamp transactions into a shared public database called the block chain, for which they are rewarded with transaction fees and newly minted bitcoins. While during the first exchanges 1,309.03 bitcoins amounted to one U.S. dollar, over the past several months bitcoins have traded at record high levels, with the exchange rate vacillating between $800 to $1000 per bitcoin.

Fierce advocates from the very beginning, liberty movement participants continue to play a crucial role in promoting the currency and related developments. Austin alone is home to at least five Bitcoin groups, all launched by longstanding liberty movement participants. The Texas Bitcoin Conference, set for March 2014 at Austin’s Circuit for the Americas, is expected to draw thousands of members of the Bitcoin community. Many of Bitcoin’s foremost proponents reside in Austin and are well-known members of tech and libertarian circles. Several were heavily involved in the 1980s and 90s cypherpunk scene, of which Julian Assange is likely the most infamous former affiliate. The heavily anti-statist cypherpunks advocated the widespread use of cryptography as a route to social and political change, stressing the defense of privacy in the electronic age.

The liberty movement heavily supports Bitcoin due to its potential to undermine state currencies, with many once-avid gold standard supporters redirecting their energies toward the
phenomenon as a superior alternative. Through the lens of Austrian economics, money is merely that commodity which best satisfies the properties necessary for useful exchange in an open market. Historically, in this view, gold and silver have emerged to fill this role, so long as the government stayed out of the way. It is the unique properties of these metals that make them excellent money: they are scarce, fungible, uniform, transportable, have a high value-to-weight ratio, are easily identifiable, are highly durable, and their supplies are relatively steady and predictable. But alongside its ostensible ability to circumvent inflation, capital controls, and international sanctions, Bitcoin also means complete ownership of money both in storage and transfer, with no one able to prevent people from purchasing or spending it; millions in bitcoins can easily and privately be transported across state lines on a USB drive. In turn, for many libertarians, Bitcoin, with its specific attributes, is an even better form of money than both currency backed by precious metals and what the marketplace currently enjoys — or, in Austrian parlance, is forced to use. In the words of one longstanding Bitcoin advocate and ardent libertarian, “Every day a more resilient economy is being built, and not at the point of a gun, but voluntarily — not by decree of Bernanke, but by spontaneous, self-interested private order.”

University of Texas, Austin graduate student and libertarian anarchist Daniel Krawisz thus describes the significance of “The Killer App of Liberty” and its relationship to libertarianism:

Bitcoin is an enormous improvement over PayPal, credit cards, banks, and it is even superior to gold in many ways. It can be teleported instantly anywhere in the world without relying on any institution other than a distributed network of computers. A Bitcoin wallet, properly secured, cannot be stolen. Banks are obsolete. It is more difficult to create new Bitcoin than to create gold. It would be possible to create a machine that makes gold with nuclear reactions. It would be much more difficult to convince the Bitcoin community to accept a change to their software that would allow their currency to be inflated. Bitcoin is potentially, and I believe very probably, one of the greatest inventions in history. It fights squarely on the side of libertarians.
If Bitcoin becomes money, the government’s control of money will have ended. There will be no more banks for governments to collude with. The dark age of inflation will be over. Though Bitcoin is only four years old, it has already shaken world markets. Almost anything that is sold online can be bought with it. Argentinians and Iranians use it to escape capital controls. US regulators are openly mocked on television for expressing the possibility of regulating it. Its growth is already astonishing, and as it grows, it only becomes more useful. It is like the Blob. No one can stop it.

(N.d.-c)

As noted, Bitcoin operates using public-key cryptography, a prominent topic in numerous new online forums under the rubric “crypto-anarchy.” Krawisz thus describes the basic premise:

Suppose there are two algorithms which are inverses of one another. Both are fast to do forward and very slow to reverse. One algorithm can be used to encrypt and the other to decrypt. I keep the decryption algorithm secret but let my friends see the encryption algorithm. Now they can send me messages but only I can read them, and I have not given away any secrets that I cannot afford to have compromised. In fact, I can let my enemies see the encryption algorithm too. They can do nothing with it but make their own messages to me. The final upgrade is that everyone has two algorithms. Everyone keeps one algorithm secret and publicizes the other. How can we discover so many algorithms? Typically there is a class of algorithms, each of which is specified by a number, or key. So we each have a public key and a private key. This is public-key encryption. Now any two people can communicate securely even if they do not begin with a secure channel . . .

![Public Key Cryptography](https://example.com/public-key-cryptography-diagram)

**FIGURE 12:** Public-key cryptography. Courtesy of Daniel Krawisz.
The magic of public-key cryptography comes from the fact that it gives people the ability to prove that they have a secret without revealing it. Think about how paradoxical that sounds for a moment. Yet it is quite easy to understand now. If I wish to verify your identity, I simply send you a message encrypted by your public key and ask you to tell me what the message said. Only the holder of the private key can answer the question correctly. This seems nonintuitive to us because our technology does not rely on it. The fact that we still use such primitive technologies today like credit cards, which have their number printed right on them, or forms of identification such as social security numbers is backwards. They have been obsolete for decades. There should never be a reason to show your password or identity number to anyone else, ever. (N.d.-b)

In the views of Krawisz and fellow libertarian crypto-anarchy enthusiasts, cryptographic communities both embody libertarian social organization and demonstrate its desirability. Such organization reduces the need to rely on strength for defense, promoting independence while fostering decentralization by decreasing the need to coordinate through third parties:

A community which combines cryptographic secrecy, public-key authentication, and digital signatures is a voluntary community tied together by contracts and reputation. It requires no central authority because the records it relies on to establish reputation can be stored on many different computers.

Thus, it is resilient against government attack . . . There is no need to speak in abstract terms with people who won't listen until we turn blue. Just build the networks and people will be attracted to them. Once people get used to them, they will demand them. (N.d.-b)

As illustrated throughout this chapter, millennial libertarian practices on the ground — projects outside of formal political processes and educational initiatives aiming to disseminate libertarian ideas — increasingly transcend political and ideological divides. Such developments are further visible in the proliferation of online discussion forums — which libertarians of various stripes have either helped launch or widely participate in — organized around promoting concrete, applied initiatives. For instance, the Facebook group Resilient Communities Project brings together thousands to share knowledge relevant to building decentralized communities.
“that anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change” (N.d.). Discussion topics range from urban and organic gardening and cooperatively-organized caregiving services to open source technology.

Many such forums expressly eschew platformist bickering. For example, the Facebook group Reconstructing Society is dedicated to multi-tendency discussion of various strategies for both reforming existing institutions and creating new institutions to conform to the principles of individual liberty, social responsibility and environmental conservation. Rather than promoting any single set of political ideologies, it aims to serve as a forum for interaction between multiple reform movements. Similarly, the Worker Cooperative Effort group brackets discussion of political ideologies in favor of discussing the implementation of worker-owned cooperatives and to help existing cooperatives meet various challenges. Likewise, the Anti Statist Cease Fire Zone group tables political debate in order to focus on “practical projects we can undertake in our communities to increase resilience, cooperation, and self sufficiency to reduce dependency on the nation state and corporations” (N.d.).

Central to Bitcoin and other developments being discussed and implemented through these and a wealth of other spaces is the emergence of peer to peer (P2P) technology. Popularized by the file-sharing system Napster in 1999, P2P networking is a distributed application architecture that allocates workloads between peers. In contrast to client-server models, P2P systems lack a central administrator and peers both consume as well as provide resources, for instance bandwidth, storage space and computing power. Increasingly, collaborative P2P systems aim to achieve goals beyond conventional file and processor cycle sharing (Bandara 2013). More broadly, P2P refers to an ethos permeating discrete movements and projects that do not
necessarily consciously identify this commonality. Thus the Amsterdam-based P2P Foundation aims to serve as a matrix “to inspire the creation and linking of other nodes active in the P2P field, organized around topics and common interests, locality, and any form of identity and organization which makes sense for the people involved” (N.d.). The Foundation strives to serve as a meeting place for those broadly agreeing, in part, that:

[T]he “distributed network” format, expressed in the specific manner of peer to peer relations, is a new form of organizing and subjectivity, and an alternative for many systems within the current socio-economic and cultural-political order, which though it does not offer solutions per se, points the way to a variety of dialogical and self-organizing formats, i.e. it represents different processes for arriving at such solutions; it ushers in a era of “nonrepresentational democracy,” where an increasing number of people are able to manage their social and productive life through the use of a variety of autonomous and interdependent networks and peer circles; that global governance, and the global market will be, and will have to be, more influenced by modes of governance involving multistakeholdership.

Many proponents view P2P as a new information commons, requiring fundamental changes in the intellectual property regime as reflected by, for instance, the free and open source software movement. The key distinction between free/open source software and traditional software lies in the treatment of source code. Source code refers to the product written by human software programmers, which is then translated into object code, only readable to computers and expressed in a series of ones and zeroes. Distributors of traditional software, such as for instance Microsoft, only include object code with their product, while free and open source software includes the source code as well. In turn, any open source software user can not only operate the software, but also study, modify and build upon it.

The disagreements and differences between free software and open source software advocates themselves — particularly with regard to the intellectual property frameworks they promote and corresponding justifications — are complex and space does not permit a detailed
account here. Perhaps the most popular libertarian tract on the issue is Stephan Kinsella’s *Against Intellectual Property* (2008), which posits that the very existence of patents, including copyrights and trademarks, is contrary to a free market. Grounded in anarcho-capitalist analysis, Kinsella’s central argument is that all intellectual property regimes use the state to create artificial scarcities of non-scarce goods, and are coercive in that they violate both property rights and the freedom of contract. Countless liberty movement participants draw upon the framework popularized by Kinsella, a frequent speaker at various movement events, in promoting a wealth of emerging technologies — from Bitcoin and cryptography practices to open design and 3D printing, discussed below.

Of course, none of these or related innovations are uniquely libertarian in nature, and are promoted by a wealth of advocates across political and ideological lines for various purposes. From its inception, however, libertarians maintained a substantial presence in parts of the free and open source software movement, and remain actively involved in P2P developments. In this vein, the 2011 live-streamed Agora I/O “unconference” featured extensive technology-related presentations in a unique format. The event promoted conversations on all visions of liberty — I/O means “input/output” in computer terms — “not only by creating a free market in relevant knowledge but also by being an experiment in liberty itself. The Agora I/O vision is for an anarchic event where order arises spontaneously. We issue the call to action. We create a central repository of information. You give presentations. You organize meetups around the country to coincide with the Agora I/O unconferences. Anyone can speak and participants can choose which speakers they will engage with. Call it coopetition!” (N.d.).

The project is organized on an egalitarian, horizontal model whereby online channel-makers create channels — collections of speaker presentations organized around a topic —
through which speakers present 55-minute talks; both can freely sell website ad space and their own products as well as solicit donations. Speakers self-select and participants choose which speakers to watch. Anyone anywhere can participate for free, and events go on around the clock — for a small fee, participants can watch ad-free. Agora I/O also promotes in-person meetups, where participants gather in real life while socializing with others online. Technology-related talks ranged from building ad-hoc, off the grid secure networks to open design technology, a nascent development with potentially profound implications that is widely embraced by the liberty movement.

Open design applies open source software concepts to the development of physical products. In addition to the software that drives the hardware, users are also given hardware design — such as mechanical drawings, schematics, list of required raw materials, data needed to manufacture circuit boards, integrated circuit layout data, and source code used to describe the structure, design and operation of electronic circuits.

Users thus design and build the final product themselves. A wide variety of alliances and organizations have emerged to develop the potential of open design — in particular, 3D printing, the production of a three-dimensional solid object of essentially any shape from a digital model. In light of widespread internet access and inexpensive computer technology, 3D printing presents a promising avenue for customized sustainable development solutions — local communities could easily and economically produce designs from readily available resources to meet their needs (Pearce 2010).

Numerous companies, alongside various independent enthusiasts, are developing affordable 3D printer models for home desktop use. In 2013, 25-year-old market anarchist Cody Wilson, a law student at the University of Texas, Austin, caused a media uproar and became an
overnight libertarian legend by producing a functional gun using a 3D printer purchased online. His non-profit organization Defense Distributed develops open source gun designs, making blueprints available online for free to anyone, anywhere, at any time — earning him a spot on Wired.com’s list of 15 Most Dangerous People in the World (Beckhusen 2012). Wilson appeared on a range of national talk shows and continues to be revered at libertarian group meetings focused on 3D printing nationwide. But not all movement participants are equally thrilled about his notoriety. A libertarian anarchist student group leader noted,

Frankly I was really put off by how he [Wilson] presents himself on television, it makes the entire movement look crazed and gun-nutty . . . I obviously support people’s ability to have guns, but 3D printing has so much potential to help people around the world. It completely undermines economies of scale. Things can be made extremely cheaply and in massive quantities . . . So many communities could produce what they need locally using this technology, even using byproducts and things that would otherwise be waste. I would really like to see more libertarians talk about that.

3D printing is but one of a range of emerging technologies that libertarians, among others, see as key to building a genuinely free society. In a forthcoming book, Krawisz situates the P2P framework as a central tenant of libertarian strategy:

If an entrepreneurial idea is to be adopted, it must be attractive to people who are not concerned with government risk. It is unacceptable to propose that people just stop putting money in banks and trade only in gold coins, as did both Rothbard and Mises. Libertarian entrepreneurship must simultaneously increase the division of labor and reduce risk. As successful as the homeschooling movement has been, it can never directly challenge the control of the public schools over children. An idea that promotes atomism makes everyone poorer. Not an easy sell, and self-defeating in the end too. Loners stand no chance against the state.

The strategy, therefore, is to promote decentralization by enabling people to coordinate with one another by a shared system of rules or traditions rather than through a mediator. Promote independence from particular organizations by promoting greater dependence on networks and on society as a whole.

(N.d.-a)
Chapter Five: Liberalism Contested: The Liberty Movement’s Tapestry of Intellectual Lineages

There would be little or no “tolerance” and “openmindedness” so dear to left-libertarians. Instead, one would be on the right path toward restoring the freedom of association and exclusion implied in the institution of private property, if only towns and villages could and would do what they did as a matter of course until well into the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. There would be signs regarding entrance requirements to the town . . . (for example, no beggars, bums, or homeless, but also no homosexuals, drug users, Jews, Moslems, Germans or Zulus), and those who did not meet these entrance requirements would be kicked out as trespassers. Almost instantly, cultural and moral normalcy would reassert itself.

— Hans-Hermann Hoppe (2001a:211), on the anarcho-capitalist society

The writing of economics professor and philosopher Hans-Hermann Hoppe have earned him the devotion of many anarcho-capitalists, and the label “anarcho-fascist” in other movement spaces. A central figure in the Ludwig von Mises Institute and former student of Jürgen Habermas, Hoppe boldly asserts the superiority of monarchy to democratic forms of government in building the case for anarcho-capitalism—his own preferred mode of social organization, which he somewhat tellingly terms the “natural order.” Hoppe brings a unique flavor to the anarcho-capitalist vision. His ideal anarcho-capitalist society is “characterized by increased discrimination, segregation, spatial separation, uniculturalism (cultural homogeneity), exclusivity, and exclusion.” It is “distinctly un-egalitarian: ‘elitist,’ ‘hierarchical,’ ‘proprietary,’ ‘patriarchal,’ and ‘authoritarian,’ and its stability depends essentially on the existence of a self-conscious natural — voluntarily acknowledged — aristocracy” (2001b).

While Hoppe’s argument regarding monarchical rule and his description of the natural order society are intentionally inflammatory, the underlying principles are quite consistent with standard libertarian analysis. This particular combination of unapologetic
rawness and basic libertarian economic and philosophical concepts has earned him a substantial fan following of contrarian young anarcho-capitalists worldwide, with his work translated into over twenty languages. In sum, although, in Hoppe’s view both monarchy and democracy are deficient, democracy is worse due to the structural incentives built into democratic forms of government. While his observations regarding actually-existing monarchies and democracies may be subject to empirical challenge, Hoppe uses this framework to make his case for an economically stable alternative to democracy. Much of his anarcho-capitalist classic *Democracy: The God That Failed* is dedicated to the intricacies of “the natural order,” where “every scarce resource, including all land, is owned privately, every enterprise is funded by voluntarily paying customers or private donors, and entry into every line of production, including that of property protection, conflict arbitration, and peacemaking, is free” (2001b).

Hoppe, however, goes beyond stressing the key role of private property and exchange in libertarian thought, expressly linking libertarianism to social conservatism. Contemporary conservatives, he writes, are rightly concerned about “the decay of families, divorce, illegitimacy, loss of authority, multiculturalism, alternative lifestyles, social disintegration, sex and crime. All of these phenomena represent . . . scandalous deviations from the natural order” (2001a:190). In a passage that has perhaps stirred the most intense debate in libertarian circles, he writes:

There can be no tolerance toward democrats and communists in a libertarian social order. They will have to be physically separated and expelled from society. Likewise, in a covenant founded for the purpose of protecting family and kin, there can be no tolerance toward those habitually promoting lifestyles incompatible with this goal. They — the advocates of alternative, non-family and kin-centered lifestyles such as, for instance, individual hedonism, parasitism, nature-environment worship, homosexuality, or communism — will have to be physically removed from society, too, if one is to maintain a libertarian order.
Much has been made of this paragraph, ardently defended by Hoppe’s supporters. He may be making the case in his usual provocative manner, they say, but ultimately he is simply restating the basic voluntary association principle: anyone can form a covenant excluding anyone else from their private property and then treat the excluded as trespassers. The passage, however, suggests more than limiting communities to those who have mutually agreed to be bound by certain restrictions. Rather, it expressly states that tolerating this particular list of undesirables is incompatible not only with protecting family and kin, but with maintaining a libertarian order. In this sense, Hoppe’s view is in the distinct minority among millennial libertarians. Nevertheless, his biting, heady style remains an inspiration to many. Even the debates regarding his more controversial assertions in numerous student libertarian group meetings and socials nationwide foster the continual building of community spaces where participants nuance their ideas, build relationships, and ultimately grow the liberty movement on the ground. As this book has attempted to illustrate, the contemporary liberty movement — and its more radical spaces in particular — is a complex labyrinth of disparate values and commitments. The following pages situate the contemporary movement’s various intellectual lineages in a broader historical context.

Despite the throngs of anarcho-capitalists who revere Hoppe’s writing on anarcho-capitalism as groundbreaking radical philosophy, his analysis is simply another reincarnation of a longstanding tradition. In 1887, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies developed the concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, usually translated as “community” and “society,” respectively, to describe a key distinction between social systems. Gemeinschaft is thus typified by small-scale, often rural and peasant formations
where traditional rules govern simple, face-to-face social relationships. Gesellschaft, on the other hand, describes the societies of modernity, marked by government bureaucracies, large organizations, and impersonal, indirect human relations.

The alienation and disenchantment following the rise of industrialization in Europe led a vast range of modernity’s critics to romanticize Gemeinschaft. As the oft-noted false promise of equality under liberalism grew ever more apparent in the post-Enlightenment era, many have called for the abandonment and rejection of “bourgeois right” as hopeless in securing any form of meaningful, substantive equality, even as they wrestled with the necessity of liberalism’s rights and liberties framework that, for all of its weakness and hypocrisy, is able nevertheless able to secure some set of basic protections.

Generally, however, critiques of liberalism grounded outside of the modernity paradigm itself — rather than in the Enlightenment tradition that makes use of a liberal framework to extend beyond it — hark back in some form to critiques of Gesellschaft of the German romantic tradition, a conceptual apparatus that emerges in other configurations elsewhere, but is particularly striking in German social and political theory. Critiques grounded outside of the modernity paradigm highlight the spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical degradation of capitalism and its profoundly alienating effects in contrast to a romanticized, earlier way of being that stresses communal, even ethnic, ties — easily slipping into a base nativism, and, historically, at least a flirtation with fascism. Analyses stemming from such a framework proceed along essentially two avenues: Liberalism can be rescued, albeit not in a democratic sense but reconfigured as an elitist social order with freedom for some set of individuals only. Or it cannot, thus requiring some form of radical rupture, a fundamental break the onset of which calls for a charismatic figure able to bring it about and leads yet again to, at best, an elitist humanism whereby politics is
always the politics of an elite.

As a result of historical and political developments, critiques of actually-existing capitalism in the U.S. are hardly ever associated with the political right. This is far less the case in parts of Europe, where the German romantic tradition retains a significantly more salient presence. A notable contemporary exception is the U.S. historian and author Christopher Lasch who over the course of his life fused a Marxian critique of capitalism with cultural conservatism. In his view, 20th century political economic developments have reduced social relations into an “amorphous democratic mass”; public life became faceless and anonymous (1965:11). Post-war consumerism gave rise to a distinct personality type, characterized by, in part, boundless admiration for fame and celebrity, fear of aging, of commitment, and of lasting relationships, including religion — a “culture of narcissism” (1979). Opposed to divorce and to abortion, Lasch lamented the deterioration of the traditional patriarchal family he attributed to this disintegration of social cohesion.

As we have seen, several figures in the history of U.S. conservatism have in fact seen the encroachment of market exchange into nearly every facet of life as profoundly in tension with strong social cohesion and moral rigor. Like Lasch, they remained most concerned by the conservative coalition’s libertarian elements. But these tensions were masterfully papered over by the fusionist alliance of the U.S. conservative movement, and never took root in U.S. public consciousness at large. Yet the concern remains central to many movement conservatives’ skepticism of libertarianism. By coupling his vision of the anarcho-capitalist society, grounded exclusively in private property and private law, with the restoration of a particular type of deep, communal bonds, Hoppe attempts to appease a longstanding concern about the disruptions of capitalism unleashed — a concern for
which the German romantic tradition is the age-old remedy.

*Toward Mutualist Anarchism*

Advocates of “plumb-line” libertarianism such as Walter Block take Hoppe — and left libertarians alike — to task for attempting to link particular norms and values to libertarianism. As discussed already in chapter three, this plumb-line view, articulated below by a libertarian anarchist in his mid-twenties, insists that libertarianism is entirely compatible with any cultural formation that is consistent with the non-aggression principle (NAP):

“These libertopia scenarios proposed by different people just show us how very different libertarian societies could be. They could be horrific. I mean, I sure as hell wouldn’t want to live in Hoppe’s society. Even if his Gestapo didn’t have me removed for being a commie or whatever. But societies based on the NAP, on private property, could be radically different when the emphasis isn’t on excluding and oppressing people, which by the way also happens right now all the time, obviously. A peaceful and harmonious world where we take care of each other is much more feasible when we get the state out of the way.

The constant within the presently dominant, Rothbardian mode of anarcho-capitalist analysis is Rothbard’s iconic formulation of the NAP. Rothbard’s anarchism is not a critique of Gesellschaft, although it is certainly compatible with such, as Hoppe shows. As already discussed in chapter three, Rothbard proceeds from a central classical liberal tenet, Locke’s concept of self-ownership: “the Lockean concept of property in oneself can be considered the keystone of the Rothbardian intellectual edifice” (Modugno 1998:61).

Rothbard himself saw his philosophy as the logical extension of classical liberalism, a reading embraced by countless libertarian anarchists in this tradition who, like Scott from CPAC, describe themselves as “the real liberals.”

It is Rothbard’s merit to have seen, more clearly than any previous writer, what follows from accepting [Locke’s self-ownership concept] . . . If each
person owns himself, and no one may aggress against another, no scope for involuntary government remains. Once stated, the conclusion seems obvious; but prior to the individualist anarchists of whom Rothbard is the most thoroughgoing and consistent, this conclusion had escaped notice. (Gordon 1998)

The term “individualist anarchist” used by Gordon in the above passage is not one particularly common in the U.S. political lexicon. Anarchism is much more widely associated with social anarchism, the broad spectrum of which includes anarcho-communism, anarcho-syndicalism and collectivism.¹ But alongside the more familiar social anarchism first popularized in the early 20th century U.S. by figures such as Emma Goldman, classical liberalism provided the point of the departure for another, long-dormant intellectual lineage that is only recently being revisited.

Individualist anarchism, deriving from 19th century anarchist thought and primarily associated with the U.S., refers to a loose set of philosophies highlighting the primacy of the individual will over external formations such as the community, custom, the state, morality, and religion. Profoundly influenced by French theorist and organizer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, U.S. individualist anarchists of the time included William Greene, Benjamin Tucker and Josiah Warren, as well as Ezra and Angela Heywood, imprisoned for disseminating birth control information. Moses Harman may have been the first to publicly attack marital rape in print in the 19th century, through his anarchist/feminist publication *Lucifer the Lightbearer*; his daughter Lillian refused to change her name following her non-state wedding (Presley 2014). Just as the classical liberal tradition metamorphosed from an attack on landed aristocracy and chartered monopolies

---

¹ To be sure, providing a systematic overview presents numerous challenges. In light of the wide range of approaches, influences, and cross-pollination, as well as the nature of anarchism as a living theory, significant exceptions exist to nearly every generalization. For an introduction to social anarchism and its various trends, see McKay (1993). See also, Doherty (2007:427-438), Graham (2001), Guerin (1989), Kirby (2012), and Woodcock (2000).
into a legitimization of the emerging ruling classes in the form of industrial capitalists and large corporations throughout the 19th century, the individualist anarchism of the time “turned the weapons of free market analysis against the statist props of capitalist privilege” (Carson 2007):

The shift toward reaction was by no means uniform, however. The revolutionary and anti-privilege character of the early [classical liberal] movement continued in many strands of liberalism. Thomas Hodgskin, squarely in the classical liberal tradition and also by far the most market-oriented of the Ricardian socialists, criticized the power of the industrial capitalist in language reminiscent of Adam Smith’s attack on landlords and mercantilists — and on very much the same principles. (Carson 2007)

While anarchism in the U.S. could be very broadly delineated into its social and individualist strains, by the 20th century the latter had faded into obscurity. Individualist anarchism only resurfaced with Rothbard, in a rather different form and severed from its earlier socialist influences. In turn, many social anarchists reject the notion that the individualist anarchism grounded in Austrian or related economic theory constitutes a part of the anarchist movement (McKay 2007:Intro). This is due in large part to steadfast anarcho-capitalist emphasis on private property rights and wage labor, and corresponding acceptance of rent, interest, and profit as legitimate forms of income.

The hostility of social anarchism’s proponents toward Rothbardian anarcho-capitalism is in large part motivated by differing approaches to property. Crucial to social anarchism broadly is some form of communal ownership of the means of production and the attendant abolition of wage labor. This tends to entail a needs-based distribution system based on the self-management of workers, with some social anarchists arguing for a moneyless system where the product of labor is freely shared among those contributing.
Even non-capitalist markets, in this view, amplify rather than shrink inequities of wealth and power over time, while individual ownership of the means of production reproduces hierarchical, authoritarian social relations (McKay 2007:A3).

The contemporary revival of the anarchist philosophy of mutualism, however, has stirred debate both among social anarchists and their Austrian-informed counterparts. Emergent collaborations and exchanges are spearheading developments and realignments on both fronts, with many social anarchists, Rothbardian anarcho-capitalists, and other market anarchists increasingly pointing to mutualism as legitimate, acceptable, or interesting even if they do not adopt the self-identification. It should be noted that these developments have taken place predominantly outside of academic spaces, and stem from movement participants themselves.

While at odds with many of anarcho-capitalism’s central tenets, mutualist anarchism, or mutualism, warrants attention in any contextualization of the present-day liberty movement. In some form, the philosophy informs the analysis of many market anarchists and left libertarians described in chapter three — those rejecting any association with “capitalism,” understood as the present political economic system. Various online discussion forums and social media sites are ablaze with conversations between self-identified mutualists and a range of liberty movement participants; simultaneously, prolific writers associated with mutualism’s revival — most notably independent scholars Kevin Carson and Shawn Wilbur — regularly engage with key liberty movement figures as well as social anarchist writers and activists, alongside near-daily exchanges on the internet’s many discussion spaces dedicated to the philosophy of mutualism. In turn, in addition to representing an important revitalization of a long-dormant tradition, mutualism also plays a significant role in the intellectual and political
development of numerous liberty movement participants. As was the case for Christina, Carson’s work in particular is a key element in the transition of many millennial libertarians away from both Ron Paul-type politics and the heavily propertarian approaches associated with Rothbard’s anarcho-capitalism.

![Mutualism banner](http://BenjaminGodwin.com)


The question of what, precisely, it means to be a mutualist dominates many spaces dedicated to the approach that build on the 19th century individualist anarchist lineage. Mutualism’s proponents are today faced with the complex task described by Wilbur (n.d.-a) thus:

We are simultaneously recovering a Tradition (which was itself in search of its Ideal), distilling our Ideal from that Tradition, and trying to build some sort of Movement. That’s a lot to be tackling all at once, and it’s complicated by the fact that the differences within the Tradition of Mutualism have been arguably a bit more complicated than those facing the broader anarchist movement, so that what we have in practice are several new Mutualisms, which have different understandings of the Ideal, different identifications within the Tradition, and different relations to other parts of the Anarchist Movement.

Wilbur describes the mutualist ideal as “reciprocity of the highest order.” But he is careful to note that mutualism as such is not a specific social, political or economic system:

It is — at its core — an ethical philosophy. We begin with mutuality or
reciprocity — the Golden Rule, more or less — and then seek to apply that principle in a variety of situations. As a result, under mutualism every meaningfully social relation will have the form of an anarchic encounter between equally unique individuals — free absolutes — no matter what layers of convention we pile on it. To the extent that our conventions, institutions and norms respect that basic premise, we can call them "mutualist." To the extent that we commit ourselves to viewing our relations through this lens, and exert ourselves in the extension of mutualistic freedom, we can call ourselves "mutualists." We don’t take anarchy lightly and understand that archic relationships and coercive force come in lots of forms, and the exertion matters — if mutuality is reduced simply to an outcome of this or that system, mutualism as such almost certainly disappears.

Wilbur has spearheaded the project of revisiting mutualism’s historical roots through extensive translation and archiving of classical anarchist writing, disrupting the once-dominant history of anarchism that saw mutualism as a sort of historical sidenote rather than a central, formative tenet of the tradition. Through interpretation and expansion of mutualist theory informed by deep historical analysis, Wilbur focuses in particular on the contributions of Proudhon and their distinction from the work of U.S. individualists such as Josiah Warren and Benjamin Tucker. This approach takes mutualist thought in a direction different from the “big tent” view adopted by many identifying with the philosophy, where mutualism represents either a nebulous middle ground between social and market anarchism or a synthesis of social anarchism with a commitment to genuinely free market exchange.

Perhaps the most common contemporary application of mutualism posits a stateless market-based system alongside property rights based on Proudhon’s framework of occupancy and use. In this view, heavily influenced by Benjamin Tucker, the ultimate source of exploitation and inequity is state action and the corresponding privileging of elites: state-created monopolies of money, land, tariffs and patents, alongside state
enforcement of existing private property rights. Land ownership is legitimate only so long as it remains in use or occupation, with some mutualists extending this view to ownership of capital goods. Many also stress a model where groups of workers, through cooperatives and other voluntary associations, jointly own the means of production and freely exchange the product with others. Some present-day mutualists are particularly interested in building institutions informed by the philosophy, particularly through cooperatives and the P2P movement described in the last chapter. These projects draw on 19th century proposals such as mutual banks — interest-free banking models that would disrupt the monopoly on credit held by banks and benefit participants rather than bankers.

Wilbur (2012) warns about the dangers of collapsing mutualism into a form of market anarchism, noting, for instance, the usefulness of accepting or rejecting market arrangements on a much more specific basis. Proudhon, in Wilbur’s reading, offers a robust toolkit with which to nuance such analysis, particularly with regard to how markets function as emergent orders, and sometimes as virtual, collective agents; Proudhon’s work may, in this sense, shed further insight upon the relationship between circulation and concentration, in the sense of property and capitalist accumulation. Further, an emphasis on markets tends to distract from the conscious application of the principle of mutuality at the heart of the philosophy, developed by Proudhon as a kind of reciprocity between propertarian and communist poles in social relations.

This approach is in some ways a departure from the mutualist project of integrating elements of Austrian economics into classical political economy, pioneered

---

2 For the full exposition of this influential view, see Tucker (1911).
3 See, e.g., Greene (1850).
particularly by Kevin Carson. As noted earlier, Carson’s work increasingly serves as the “gateway drug” that steers market-friendly millennial libertarians away from anarcho-capitalism. A 32 year-old one-time anarcho-capitalist summarized her experience this way:

I was doing a lot of antiwar work, and their [libertarian] analysis there is really solid. In getting involved more, I really thought of the market process and private property as the best way to organize society . . . The reason I’m a libertarian is because I care about making the world a better place for everyone, to sound cheesy. But I got very disturbed at how rarely that seemed front and center. So I had been moving more and more toward left libertarianism, reading [Roderick] Long and [Charles] Johnson. I always thought that libertarians need to pay more attention to structural racism, patriarchal social relations, coercion not always tied to the state. But the left has such a weak economic analysis, and a knee-jerk reaction against markets. I get that there’s good reasons for this given how much the rhetoric of markets is used for policies that hurt people, but it doesn’t make for solid economic analysis . . . Kevin Carson’s writing was really helpful in getting me to think through the implications of a super propertarian system tied to wage labor. I’d never call myself an ancap now, more like some sort of mutualist.

Taking up the Austrian perspective on its own terms, Carson is able to speak to those in the Austro-libertarian tradition and articulate points of contention that some have loosely identified themselves, but have not seen systematically analyzed in the language of political economy. His contributions further help dislodge the view of anarchism as socialism’s poor cousin; in developing an anarchistic approach to economic analysis, wrote fellow mutualist Larry Gambone (2007) in a review of Carson’s Studies in Mutualist Political Economy, “Carson has produced our Das Kapital . . . The most important aspect of this book, the one that should overshadow other differences [among schools of
anarchist thought], is that the economic analysis of exploitation and capitalism has been placed on a solid anarchist basis. We need no longer play second fiddle to the Marxists.”

The revival of mutualism further highlights emergent modes of governance organized around peer-to-peer logic. Carson focuses on the potential of localized, small-scale economies particularly in *The Homebrew Revolution: A Low Overhead Manifesto* (2010), a study of lean and agile microenterprises from neighborhood workshops and desktop production to household enterprises and online, horizontal networks of peer producers using open source design. The book traces the historical growth of government to combat the corporate economy’s built-in contradictions and destabilizing tendencies, insulating giant corporations from market forces that would otherwise lead to their destruction. In contrast to this high overhead, profoundly bureaucratized conventional economy marked by enormous capital outlays and cost-plus markups, Carson draws on a range of conceptual models in describing an emerging alternative economy. The latter, comprised of resilient informal and household economies, takes technologies developed in the service of corporate capitalism and adapts them to small-scale production, employing material inputs far more efficiently than capitalism while simultaneously making use of its waste. Decentralized production thus potentially holds the same liberating effects that access to the commons offered everyday people prior to their mass dispossession — ultimately enabling them to defect from wage labor entirely:

> Large inventories, high capital outlays, and high overhead have the same effect on mass-production industry that shit has on a human body bloated by constipation. The higher the fixed costs required to undertake an activity, the larger the income stream required for a household or firm to service that overhead; the enterprise must either get big or get out, and the household must have multiple sources of full-time wage income to survive.

---

4 In part, Carson aims to build a practical and theoretical foundation for a mutualist “free market socialist economics” by reformulating the labor theory of value in light of marginalist and subjectivist critique.
The alternative economy, on the other hand, operates with almost no fixed costs, so that almost all its revenue is free and clear and it can survive prolonged periods of slow business. Because it’s organized stigmergically, with modular open-source designs, innovation costs are spread over the widest possible product ecologies with a minimum of transaction costs. The alternative economy is breeding the rats in the nests of corporate dinosaurs.

(2010)

Mutualism’s revival and its increasing popularity among millennials further illustrates the disparate ways through which various parts of the movement confront, reproduce, and reconfigure key aspects of the liberal tradition. Indeed, such processes of contestation have marked U.S. liberalism — as well as countless other traditions — all along.

*Theorizing U.S. Liberalism*

With the liberty movement at a historical high point, movement participants are negotiating their own roles in the movement and struggling to shape its direction. The preceding chapters have illustrated a range of libertarian frameworks and approaches. Among the more well-known is the advocacy of a “night watchman” state, the role of which is limited to protecting life, liberty, and property — a perspective that at times overlaps with the tea party phenomenon, although, as discussed in chapter two, numerous issues drive a wedge between the liberty movement and the tea party, especially across generational lines. Less familiar to outside observers is anarcho-capitalism, the rapidly growing school of thought particularly popular with significant numbers of the liberty movement’s youth. Crucially, however, both of these approaches lay claim to the classical liberal tradition — the former through a reverence for a bygone era of “limited government” and “individual freedom”; the latter through asserting unequivocally that a stateless society grounded exclusively in private property and private law is the logical extension of classical liberalism.
Approaches tied to the revival of mutualism draw on yet other aspects of classical liberal thought, particularly as extended by the individualist anarchists of the 19th century. An ethnographic study of the processes through which millennial libertarians make and remake the liberal tradition thus informs understandings of how U.S. liberalism, among other ideologies, is constituted broadly. This approach illustrates that developments in U.S. political culture are best understood not through attempting to arrive at some authoritative definition of liberalism itself, but through the contextualized study of grounded struggles over its meaning, and the attendant reconfigurations of the nation’s peculiar political lexicon. The following pages draw on the contributions of anthropology to buttress a particular approach to the understanding of U.S. liberalism which sees the formation as constituted by struggles over its meaning — an approach equally applicable to other political ideologies and traditions. In turn, the project of understanding “what liberalism is” is best served by exploring the complexities and particularities underlying key struggles over its meaning and direction in a given context, rather than by identifying fixed analytical categories and mapping these across historical moments.

Scholars across disciplines have long engaged the U.S. liberal tradition in interrogating the nation’s political identity and the notion of American exceptionalism. Perhaps no other work has proved as enduring in capturing the imagination of thinkers on these fronts as Louis Hartz’s The Liberal Tradition in America (1955:9), which asserted, in sum, that the U.S. is inherently liberal, characterized by a monolithic creed — a Lockean “fixed, dogmatic liberalism” — to which all successful political arguments throughout the nation’s history lay claim.
Hartz’s framework dominated the discourse on U.S. politics and national identity throughout the 1960s, and remained influential even as scholars began to vehemently challenge its central tenets. The critiques are manifold. Abbott (2005) characterizes these as falling into two categories: The first line of criticism alleges that Hartz fundamentally ignores the diversity of U.S. political thought, especially but not exclusively along racial lines. Thus, his analysis is blind to crucial elements of U.S. political culture and alternate legacies, from racism, black political discourse, and feminism to feudalism, republicanism, and socialism, among others. In turn, he fails to grasp the extent to which these and other formations both competed with and drew upon U.S. liberalism. The powerful ideologies of, for instance, U.S. nativism, racism, and patriarchy all but disappear in a historical narrative that declares the nation’s fundamental values to be ubiquitously liberal democratic at a time marked by express legal exclusions from the rights and duties of citizenship along racial and gender lines. For example, Smith (1993) famously examines citizenship laws from the republic’s founding to the progressive era, at each historical stage highlighting laws that formally excluded large sections of the population. In turn, he identifies an “inegalitarian, ascriptive Americanism” driving the “inarguably illiberal” arguments behind these laws, a tradition that must be disentangled from Hartz’s Lockean liberalism (26).

The second set of criticisms identified by Abbott takes Hartz to task for overstating the consensus within U.S. political culture by presenting liberalism as a dominant force and neglecting the contested nature of the category itself. Thus, his approach erases both competing interpretations of Locke and historically contingent understandings of

---

liberalism as such: “The degree to which eighteenth and nineteenth century American political actors and thinkers would have recognized themselves as fellow participants in a tradition properly designated ‘liberalism’ is, at best, a matter of dispute” (Smith 1993:24-26). In this view, then, Hartz’s thesis ultimately reinscribes a rather recent account of both Locke specifically and liberalism broadly. Similarly, other critics point to multiple interpretations of even the most robustly circumscribed concepts, charging Hartz with a blind spot regarding competing meanings distilled over time from the presumed Lockean consensus (Greenstone 1993).

In another helpful overview of these debates, Stears (2007) organizes criticism of Hartz’s thesis into three distinct sets of arguments, the last two of which are not addressed by Abbott: The “multiple traditions” thesis, the “liberalism as exclusion” thesis, and the “liberal multiplicity” thesis. The “multiple traditions” thesis attacks Hartz for neglecting the dynamics of exclusion that shape many of the nation’s cultural assumptions and political outcomes — the approach identified by Abbott in his first category. As Stears notes, this view illustrates a certain partiality to the liberal tradition that even Hartz himself may not have shared, “implicitly acquitting” liberals and their ideals by attributing the “good” about U.S. political history to liberalism and the “bad” to a competing ascriptivist tradition.

In response, the “liberalism as exclusion” thesis developed in the years that followed lays the blame for much of the less savory, exclusionary episodes of U.S. history at the feet of liberalism itself. Building on earlier work in this vein, Katzenelson (1999) and King (1999), for example, developed accounts of a systematic complicity between liberalism and the politics of exclusion: Liberalism either provides the ideological legitimation for the existing free market capitalist economic system rooted in self-interest
and private property; inherently privileges a particular cultural experience, namely that of white middle-class men, by promoting, for instance, distinctly individualist ethics; or some combination of these. In all cases, it overlooks the interests of those who cannot flourish in such systems. Further, proponents of the “liberalism as exclusion” thesis showed how exclusionary policies were often justified in the language of liberalism itself. For example, 19th-century campaigns to disenfranchise African-Americans in New York were not grounded in the ostensible innate superiority of white property holders, but rather on ideas borrowed explicitly from Lockean liberalism (Scalia 1998). Arguments for disenfranchisement invoked universalistic liberal notions of self-interest to argue that voting should be limited only to those who, based on their socio-economic position, would conduct themselves in the public interest.

Advocates of the “liberalism as exclusion” thesis also highlight how self-identified liberal political actors often play a key role in maintaining the politics of exclusion, illustrating how liberals routinely compromise their commitments to countering exclusion in order to attain broader goals, such as legislative majorities or electoral coalitions. As Katzenelson (2005) argues in his work on the profoundly racially discriminatory elements of key New Deal programs, the success of liberal political movements thus often coincides with exclusionary outcomes. In the “liberalism as exclusion” view, then, Hartz correctly understood the U.S. as distinctly liberal; but the sinister “ascriptivism” identified by Smith and other proponents of the “multiple traditions” thesis are in fact in some form or another products of liberalism itself.

The “liberal multiplicity” thesis, however, highlights the complexity of the U.S. liberal tradition and the inability of both the “multiple traditions” and “liberalism as exclusion” theses to sufficiently capture these intricacies. The work of Foner (1998),
Gerstle (1994), and Horton (2005), for instance, shows how liberal ideals have been crucial for self-definition, as well as a profound source of contestation throughout the nation’s history. Liberalism, in this framework, is not a stable or predetermined concept, nor is its history an evolutionary narrative marching toward an imminent goal. Rather, it is located within particular historical contexts, remolded through the clash of dissenting and dominant voices, produced and reproduced through political struggles. Embodying a broad complex of values, liberalism has been claimed by historically embedded actors for a wide range of — at times contradictory — purposes. Invoked to both dissent from and justify the status quo and to express a gamut of grievances, hopes, and fears, it is lived and experienced across space and time in ways that dismantle any neat scholarly definitions.

Thus,

The liberalism of our own time, with its emphasis on racial equality, minority rights, and expansive notions of individual freedom, differs substantially from the liberalism of the interwar years, which was focused on taming capitalism; further, both liberalisms differ from Progressivism. All three represent a substantial departure from the classical liberal program of limiting the government’s right to interfere with the economic and political liberties of its citizens. (Gerstle 1994:1045)

Abbott (2005) ultimately makes a case for a return to Hartz, arguing that the analytic concepts Hartz employs in his treatment of U.S. political development — liberal reform, liberal enlightenment, the American democrat, the liberal Thermidor — can in fact offer a plausible interpretation of more recent events. Applying these concepts to the turmoil of the 1960s, he argues that Hartz’s thesis — all the blind spots and missing parts critics correctly identify in his historical analysis notwithstanding — remains the most compelling analysis of U.S. political development. Abbott, in his 1960s test case, thus aims to illustrate how Hartz’s central analytical categories can help explain the sudden
emergence of 1960s protest and cultural experimentation; their rapid escalation; as well as the decade’s “stalemated” end (103). Using Hartz, these developments can be understood as struggles over the meaning and direction of U.S. liberalism that in many ways parallel earlier contests over liberal identity.

Such a reading first appears as a formulation of the “liberal multiplicity” thesis, raising the question of whether that approach is in fact not novel, but rather itself a return to Hartz — an updated Hartzean liberal society view of the sort offered by Abbott, with much more attention to disparate forms of exclusion and struggles among various ideologies and lineages that constitute U.S. liberalism. Abbott does not address this issue in his piece, which does not engage the “liberal multiplicity” scholarship. But the “liberal multiplicity” approach and Hartz’s liberal society thesis, even in Abbott’s updated form, differ in key ways. Hartz did indeed note the significance of “domestic conflict,” of arguments within the liberal tradition itself, in ways at times downplayed by critics (1955:20). But such conflict, in his analysis, took place upon a “terrain” (20), one that does indeed frame U.S. political arguments and discourse, but does so rather narrowly. Approaches stressing the protean character of U.S. liberalism highlight how that terrain is reconfigured, time and time again, through the very struggles that constitute it.

Stears identifies a different challenge for proponents of the “liberal multiplicity” thesis, one related to the boundaries of U.S. liberalism:

If American liberalism is now to be understood as a variable creed — a tradition best approached through a series of arguments about the meaning and implications of shared ideals — then we need a clearer recognition of where liberalism stops and other political traditions start. Otherwise, the very idea of liberalism will cease to add any analytic value to our search for political explanations. (2007:98)
The section that follows draws on the contributions of anthropology to show that, contra Stears, it is precisely the imperative to arrive at a bounded definition — some set of criteria that one can use to discern whether a formation is or is not “liberal” — that adds little analytic value to the quest of understanding political development. Thus, Foner understands “freedom,” a keyword deeply embedded in U.S. political identity, as “‘an essentially contested concept,’ one that by its very nature is the subject of disagreement.” (1998:xiv). Numerous examples illustrate this contribution. Activists in the civil rights movement mobilizing in the name of freedom, for example, soon found that very powerful concept reappropriated by their opposition, which asserted their freedom of association. On the academic front, recent scholarship on emergent modes of governance directs attention to the coercive powers of freedom, highlighting how new technologies of governance instill self-regulation rather than rely on interventions by experts whose specialized knowledge authorizes them to govern others (cf. Miller and Rose 2008; Rose 1993, 1999). In yet another context, Marx famously wrote that capitalist production renders workers “free in the double sense” — free to sell their labor power and free from the means of production (1976:272). In this way, of course, he aimed to highlight how the capitalist economy divorses producers from the means of producing commodities themselves, compelling them to sell their labor through necessity. The contemporary usage of the term “economic freedom” to legitimize any number of political economic developments of the past few decades is, at least on its face, far less steeped in irony.

To be clear, none of this should be taken to mean that such “essentially contested concepts” are somehow useless or devoid of meaning. Millions around the globe have won very real, material gains as a result of popular struggles waged in the name of, for instance, freedom and related liberal concepts. Far from being meaningless, such
concepts have been and remain central to social and political economic transformation. Precisely as a result of this, attempting to arrive at some authoritative definition, a “real” meaning, of inherently contested concepts is a futile endeavor from an analytical perspective (while in political mobilization, insisting on a particular meaning in a specific context is of course tremendously useful). Rather, deeply entrenched notions such as freedom, and liberalism itself, can serve as helpful guides in understanding developments in U.S. political culture and the nation’s peculiar political lexicon: “What is important is not so much the evolution of a single definition as the multiple purposes to which the idea . . . has been put, and the broader belief systems these usages illuminate” (Foner 1998:xv).

Bringing Anthropology In

The “liberal multiplicity” approach shows how liberalism has been a force for both inclusion and exclusion at different times in U.S. history, serving the cause of egalitarian and inegalitarian efforts alike. Thus struggles about who is entitled to the full rights and duties of citizenship have themselves helped shape U.S. character and identity. This analytical approach is one with which anthropologists are very familiar.

Anthropologists of democracy, for instance, have routinely noted that “political forms are not neatly differentiable but rather complexly intertwined, and the discourses labeling certain regimes as democracies are strategically deployed by groups with strong interests in particular definitions and contested by others differently situated in relations of power” (Paley 2002:471). One of the central contributions of the anthropological approach, then, is recognizing the constitutive nature of such struggles, rather than establishing an a priori definition of democracy: “Such an analysis of manifest (false) versus
latent (true) content does little to explain either the power of the state or the many effects of contestatory practices” (Nelson 1999:102).

Early studies of democracy following the global transitions of the 1970s were predominantly conducted by political scientists concerned with political institutions, formal regime shifts, and comparative country studies. Yet, over time, democracy has emerged as a prominent theme in the work of anthropologists as well. Drawing on the ethnographic method, these approaches looked beyond official political transitions to the local meanings, circulating discourses, multiple contestations, and changing forms of power accompanying the installation of new political regimes. Alongside a range of contributions of political theory and other fields with an ethnographic sensibility, such perspectives also began to inform analysis of places such as the U.S., the governments of which had not been subject to massive regime shifts and institutional change (Agamben 2000; Brown 1995; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Fraser 1997; Honig 2001; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Anthropologists thus began to identify dissonances between discourses of democracy and practical manifestations on the ground. Even ostensibly clearly antidemocratic beliefs were revealed to be otherwise, as ethnographers challenged universalist assumptions of Western democratic practices themselves. Thus, the Comaroffs argue that support for a one-party state in Botswana is not a rejection of democracy, but rather the supplanting of a procedural democracy by a substantive democracy that entails both deliberation over policy matters and accountability by those who govern (1997).

Of particular relevance to this book is anthropological work that locates contested definitions of democracy both in state discourses and national self-understandings. For
example, Aihwa Ong (1999) shows how in parts of Asia, democracy is presented less in terms of individual rights than as the state’s ability to provide welfare benefits to citizens. Thus, Singapore “prides itself on being a ‘home-owning democracy’” (208) in that citizens expect the state to secure “universal home ownership, high-quality education, and unending economic expansion” (208). Rather than reifying an “Asian” cultural essence, such approaches gesture toward meanings of democracy other than elections and individual liberties.

Craig Calhoun (1994:237-60) directs attention to strategic deployment of the term democracy and competition over its meanings, its myriad manifestations in institutions and social arrangements, and how attendant discourses circulate within and among countries. Anthropologist of eastern Europe Katherine Verdery understands democracy, along with “Europe . . . civil society, and nation as key symbolic operators, elements in ideological fields, rather than as organizational realities” (1996:105). Matthew Gutmann posits that “democracy’s very multivalence is a key reason for the zeal with which so many people have employed the term to dramatically different ends in recent history” (2002:11). As these observations suggest, meanings of “democracy” are fiercely contested among differently situated groups with vested interests in disparate outcomes.

In another seminal work of ethnography, Fernando Coronil (1997) illustrates how democracy took on a profoundly disparate set of meanings for actors unevenly situated in relations of power in Venezuela. Through a historical analysis, he shows how, over time, meanings ranged from universal suffrage to the population’s partaking in the benefits of massive public works projects while being excluded from political rights such as freedom of expression and participation in political parties under a military dictatorship. Here, military regimes claim the term democracy to legitimate their rule. In other contexts,
militaries exercise their power through procedural democracy itself, with the armed forces remaining a key player in the emergent “democracy” even after official regime transitions (Warren 2000). Such embeddedness of the military is quite literally the case in post-dictatorship Argentina, where former officers of the Dirty War have run for office and been elected to positions of political power (Taylor 1993).

While in some such cases the term “democracy” seems substantively inapplicable, Diane Nelson (1999:102) has warned against seeing democracy as nothing but a “mask for military rule.” Aiming to avoid an understanding of the state and civil society as separate, enclosed entities, “one corrupt and repressive, the other noble and liberatory,” she instead argues that they are interpenetrated at every point. The work of Jennifer Schirmer (1998) on Guatemala thus illustrates the centrality of the armed forces to the shape of democracy — and, conversely, the utility of democracy to the armed forces. She illustrates how the repressive structures of the Guatemalan military are enacted and perpetuated through, rather than in spite of, civilian rule:

Rather than naked military rule based on emergency measures, juntas, and coups — instruments of power that have lost their legitimacy internationally — it is the appropriation of the imagery of the rule of law, of the mechanisms and procedures of electoral democracy, that is perilous to the human rights of Guatemalans . . . After decades of naked military rule, the Guatemalan military have crafted a unique Counterinsurgent Constitutional State in which State violence has been reincarnated as democracy.”

(2, 258)

Just a cursory overview of several seminal ethnographic studies illustrates the relevance of this scholarship for understandings of U.S. liberalism and for how political ideologies are constituted broadly. Situated in myriad contexts across space and time, these perspectives highlight the limitations of aiming to understand inherently contested concepts by imposing a priori definitions from above. Rather, it is the historically
grounded, contextualized processes of struggle that themselves constitute the meanings of these concepts. Close, careful attention to these processes begins to shed light upon the broader belief systems and political developments in which such concepts are invoked toward disparate ends. The liberty movement’s internal dynamics, and its disparate claims to and departures from the liberal tradition, represent one series of such processes. More broadly, the contemporary resurgence of libertarianism has ushered forth a new set of political struggles, contestations powerfully reshaping U.S. political culture. At stake — yet again — is no less than the very meaning and direction of U.S. liberalism itself.
Conclusion

The implications of libertarianism’s resurgence, and particularly its popularity with growing numbers of millennials, are profound. Spanning electoral politics and policy interventions; direct action and educational initiatives geared at changing hearts and minds; and independent projects aiming to build resilient, self-sufficient communities and meet their needs, the multifaceted constellations that comprise the contemporary liberty movement represent a central struggle over the meaning and direction of U.S. liberalism.

In the arena of electoral politics and policy, these developments have unsettled the longstanding conservative/libertarian political coalition and immersed the Republican Party in turmoil for the time being. As a result, parts of the liberty movement are successfully consolidating a libertarian wing of the GOP — represented by figures such as U.S. Senators Ted Cruz and Rand Paul as well as U.S. Representatives Justin Amash and Thomas Massie. As discussed in chapter two, tens of thousands of millennial libertarians are highly involved in the project of forging a libertarian political establishment, motivated especially by the serious predicaments of growing economic insecurity as well as escalating militarization and surveillance. Seeing an overreaching, out of control federal government as the primary source of a wide range of contemporary problems, politics-oriented movement participants view the Republican Party mainstream as hopelessly hypocritical, and aim to elect representatives genuinely committed to strictly limited government. Simultaneously, many Republicans have taken to identifying as libertarian without substantively altering their positions, striving to benefit by allying with the popular movement; some consider the public “conversion” to libertarianism by Fox commentator Glenn Beck to be one such instance. Further, as Republican politicians increasingly attain office with the aid of libertarian efforts, candidates stress their
commitment to limited government on the economic front while downplaying their socially conservative positions — numerous “pro-liberty” Republicans ultimately find common cause with the Party’s mainstream on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

Political libertarian efforts are likely to exacerbate rather than decline over the coming years. Especially in light of the lack of organized political alternatives with popular appeal, we can expect additional high-profile electoral campaigns in this vein — forthcoming presidential bids by Sen. Rand Paul, the more traditional conservative-leaning son of movement figurehead Ron Paul, and Sen. Ted Cruz, a darling of many limited government libertarians, would be unsurprising in the least. While many movement participants support such efforts with the genuine objective of challenging state power to improve the situation of everyday people, there is little reason to expect outcomes substantially different from similar political developments in the past. The popularization of market-based approaches undertaken by parts of the movement not invested in formal political processes too risk being harnessed in the service of particular political projects. In the arena of policy, such contributions are more often than not taken up piecemeal and applied without regard to context. Especially in light of the concessions and compromises inherent in the world of politics, the project of “shrinking government” quickly translates into the rollback of social services, anti-poverty programs, and related social safety nets, alongside initiatives that disproportionately burden the vulnerable and marginalized — not, for instance, into curbing corporate welfare, militarization, or mass incarceration. In this sense, the movement’s impact on everyday lives may prove powerful indeed, although not by disrupting state power or dislodging the state-sponsored elite privilege that concern numerous movement participants.
By coupling a commitment to market-based solutions as the best remedy for pressing social and economic questions, with, for instance, support of LGBT communities and fierce opposition to the wars on terror and drugs, escalating militarization broadly, and increasing global surveillance, millennial libertarians exemplify the complex processes through which political ideologies and traditions are constituted. An ethnographic engagement with the movement’s many spaces illustrates how young people are making their own series of claims on the liberal tradition, shaping the meanings and futures of libertarianism and the U.S. liberal tradition alike. Across disparate locales and virtual spaces, millennial libertarians draw on a wide range of intellectual and political traditions they have inherited as they struggle with the quintessential notions of freedom and the individual at the core of western political thought; wrestle with questions of status, privilege, and structural inequality; and negotiate competing understandings of “the free market” and the role of the state in facilitating existing political economic arrangements. The stories of young people inspired by the libertarian resurgence that first swept across the country in the early 2000s illustrate how circulating discourses about deeply held U.S. ideals have served to rationalize and entrench disparities along axes of class, race, and gender. Yet these notions are being continuously interpreted, contested, and reappropriated to both challenge and reinscribe relations of power.

The libertarian resurgence represents a crucial struggle over the very meaning and direction of U.S. liberalism in our historical moment. These dynamics simultaneously illustrate that U.S. liberalism, like other political traditions and ideologies, cannot be understood as a fixed, bounded concept. The incredible gravity of appeals to liberalism as the basis for social and political legitimacy in the U.S., alongside the array of ideologies and movements staking a claim within its auspices, present a strong temptation for
scholars to develop and impose *a priori* definitions — to focus on delineating the boundaries of liberalism in the sense of identifying abstract ideological configurations and specific practices as characterizing liberalism itself. But ethnographic approaches illustrate the limitations of such a method, revealing how the messy, complex struggles on the ground over the meanings and implications of the liberal tradition shape that very formation. Such struggles are themselves *constitutive* of liberalism and its varied manifestations across time and space. To be clear, this understanding of liberalism as a protean, contested formation is anything but a deconstructionist argument. Rather, an approach that focuses on the existing struggles over the direction and meaning of liberalism — the actors involved, their motivations, grievances, analyses, and strategies — reframes the question of the boundaries of liberalism, from what criteria demarcate liberalism as such, to who benefits (and who does not) under existing conditions, and how.

A significant part of an entire generation, gravely disenchanted by a world embroiled in economic crisis and the heavily militarized systems of governance of the security state, has turned away from state-based solutions in confronting the challenges of our day. While many millennial libertarians aim to implement their visions of freedom by restricting government through formal political processes, other parts of the movement increasingly eschew formal politics and policy, instead directing energy toward educational efforts geared at changing “hearts & minds,” as well as collaborations across ideological lines. The liberty movement presents one key site of the present antistate moment. But the salience of this moment is by no means limited to the liberty movement, where its expressions already differ substantially as participants adopt a range of often clashing interpretations of their world and disparate approaches to social transformation. Much has transpired since David Graeber lamented in 2004 that, although “anarchism is
veritably exploding right now” (2) academia has failed to keep up. While a growing and important scholarship is exploring contemporary forms of disparate anarchist traditions and organizing across the globe, these developments also indicate a need for further research directed toward the subjectivities and everyday practices emerging in a moment that gives rise to such mobilization. How does the antistate moment manifest in the practices of individuals and communities not expressly involved in these mobilizations, and to what ends? How does it vary across time and space? What are its different representations throughout popular culture and other cultural and political formations? What new coalitions and convergences does it inform? In what ways is it already being appropriated toward other ends and political projects, and with what results?

Substantial parts of the liberty movement strive toward social transformation not in the halls of formal political power, but by participating in coalitions and projects across ideological boundaries focused on, for instance, anti-war and police accountability organizing; “off the grid” alternative economies; promotion of emerging technologies such as 3D printing, open design, secure communication methods, and other distributed, open-source projects; as well as a swath of cooperative organizational models and DIY community efforts. Although these projects illustrate the compatibility of at least some libertarian frameworks of social organization with those of other traditions, none are the exclusive domain of libertarianism as such. As discussed in chapter four, the notion of peer-to-peer distributed networks with equipotential rights of participation increasingly refers to an ethos permeating movements and projects that not only aim to achieve goals far beyond conventional file and processor cycle sharing, but work outside of technological frameworks entirely. These dynamics signal a mode of governance embodied in autonomous and interdependent networks and peer circles, highlighting the
need for research beyond analysis of neoliberal governance at work, approaches that
direct attention to novel, emerging practices and their attendant subjectivities. The
prospects of future trends and formations informed by this organizing logic are highly
contingent, uncertain, and manifold — much like those of millennial libertarians, who
continue to make their own history, albeit under circumstances existing already, given
and transmitted through the past.
Bibliography

Abbott, Phillip

Abramovitz, Mimi

Agamben, Giorgio

Agora I/O


Andrew, John A.

Anti Statist Cease Fire Zone
N.d. https://www.facebook.com/groups/antistatistceasefire/.

Appadurai

Bandara, H. M. N. Dilum and Anura P. Jayasumana

Bauer, A.J.

Bauwens, Michael
Beckhusen, Robert  
http://www.wired.com/2012/12/most-dangerous-people/.

Benson, Peter  

Berlant, Lauren  
1997 The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship.  

Berthoff, Rowland and John Murrin  

Bevington, Douglas and Chris Dixon  

Bjork-James, Carwil  

Blackmon, Douglas A. and Jennifer Levitz  

Block, Walter  


Boettke, Peter J., ed.  


Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo

Bradford, R.W.

Brown, Wendy

Brown, Michael with Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and David Wellman

Burns, Jennifer


Butler, Eamonn

Bylund, Per

Calhoun, Craig

Callahan, Gene

Caplan, Brian


Doherty, Brian


Dondero, Eric

Ericson, David and & Louisa Green, eds.

Escobar, Arturo and Sonia E. Alvarez

Fischer, Brian

Foner, Eric

Fraser, Nancy

George, Robert P.

Gerstle, Gary
Gillespie, Nick
2012 Is There a Crisis in the Conservative Movement? Time, February 1.
http://ideas.time.com/2012/02/02/what-is-a-conservative/slide/is-there-a-crisis-in-the-conservative-movement-2/.

Graeber, David

Graham, Robert, ed.

Greenstone, J. David

Grubačić, Andrej
2010 Don't Mourn, Balkanize! Essays After Yugoslavia. PM Press.

Guérin, Daniel

Gutmann, Matthew C.

Harrison, Faye V.

Hartz, Louis

Harvey, David

Himmelstein, Jerome L.

Honig, Bonnie

Hoppe, Hans-Hermann


Howes, Anton 2012 Where Are All the Libertarians Coming From? The Independent, March 2. http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/03/02/where-are-all-the-libertarians-coming-from/.


King, Desmond 1999 In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain. Oxford University Press.


Kirby, David and Emily Ekins  

Kirk, Russell  

Klein, Naomi  

Kloppenberg, James T.  

Krawisz, Daniel  


Limbaugh, Rush  

Lindsey, Brink  

Long, Roderick  


Long, Roderick and Charles Johnson  
2005 Libertarian Feminism: Can This Marriage Be Saved? May 1.  
http://charleswjohnson.name/essays/libertarian-feminism/.
Lynd, Staughton and Andrej Grubačić
2008 Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History. PM Press.

Marx, Karl

McKay, Iain

McNaught, Kenneth

Medved, Michael

Meyer, Frank S.

Miller, John J. and Ramesh Ponnuru

Miller, Peter and Nikolas Rose

Morse, Jennifer Roback

Mullings, Leith

Nash, George H.
Nelson, Diane M.

North, Gary

Olson, Walter

Ong, Aihwa

Onion, The

Orren, Karen

Paley, Julia

Paul, Ron


Peck, Jamie and Adam Tickell

Phillips-Fein, Kim

Pinkert, Melanie
Presley, Sharon  

Raimondo, Justin  


Resilient Communities Project  

Richman, Sheldon  

Rose, Nikolas  


Rothbard, Murray N.  
1970 The Great Women’s Liberation Issue: Setting It Straight. The Individualist. May,  


1989 Ronald Reagan: An Autopsy. Liberty 2(4), March,  


Salam, Reihan  
Sanchez, Julian and David Weigel  

Sassen, Saskia  

Scalia, Laura J.  

Schirmer, Jennifer  

Schulak, Eugen Maria and Herbert Unterköfler  

Scott, James C.  

Shklar, Judith N.  

Smith, Rogers M.  


Stears, Marc  

Swinney, Dan  

Taylor, Julie  
Taylor, Thomas C.  

Tretjak, Kaja and Elan Abrell  

Tucker, Jeffrey A.  

2013 To Free One’s Mind. The Freeman, February 23.  
http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/to-free-ones-mind.

Vaughn, Karen I.  

Verdery, Katherine  

Vodovnik, Ziga, ed.  
2004 Ya Basta! Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising. AK Press.

Wade, Peter  

Warren, Kay B.  

Westermeyer, William H.  

Wilbur, Shawn P.  
2012 Mutualism and “Market Anarchism.” Mutualism.info, August 2.  

N.d.-a Anarchism’s Ungovernability, and What It Means To Be a Mutualist.  

N.d.-b Working Translations.  
Winant, Howard  

Woodcock, George  
2000 Anarchism. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Woods Jr., Thomas E.  
http://www.lewrockwell.com/lrc-blog/in-case-you-were-wondering/.

http://mises.org/daily/3788.

Zwolinski, Matt  