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A Primer on Non-Libertarianism

Brian Doherty | January 4, 2011

Missed this in the holiday rush, but last week Conor Friedersdorf wrote an amusing turnaround on Chris Beam's *New York* explanation/takedown of libertarianism, over at Andrew Sullivan's site. Whole thing worth a look, but my favorite part:

Here is how Beam defines the political philosophy for readers of *New York*:

Libertarianism is a long, clunky word for a simple, elegant idea: that government should do as little as possible. In *Libertarianism: A Primer*, Cato Institute executive vice president David Boaz defines it as “the view that each person has the right to live his life in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others.” Like any political philosophy, libertarianism contains a thousand substrains, ranging from anarchists who want to destroy the state to picket-fence conservatives who just want to put power in local hands. The traditional libertarian line is that government should be responsible for a standing army, local security, and a courts system, and that’s it—a system called minarchy. But everyone has his own idea of how to get there. Washington-think-tank libertarians take an incrementalist approach within the two-party system. The Libertarian Party offers a third way. Ayn Rand–inspired Objectivists promote their ideas through education. *Reason* magazine preaches the gospel of cultural libertarianism. Silicon Valley techno-entrepreneurs would invent their way to Libertopia. Wall Street free-marketers want deregulation. The Free State Project plans to concentrate 20,000 libertarians in New Hampshire. “Seasteaders” dream of building societies on the ocean. And then there are the regular old Glenn Beck disciples who just want to be left alone.

This is a perfectly fair if what you're doing is defining libertarianism with the space constraints of a magazine article. But I submit that it has all the flaws and limits of

this:

Non-libertarianism is a long, clunky word for the view that even if a person is respecting the equal rights of others, he or she doesn't have a right to live life in the way of their choosing. Like any political philosophy, it contains a thousand sub-strains, ranging from communists to fascists. The traditional non-libertarian belief is effectively that government should operate free of strict limits established by first principles or the Constitution. But everyone has their preferred vision of life in a non-libertarian state. Washington-think-tank non-libertarians take an incrementalist approach within the two-party system. The Green Party offers a third way. Jesus Christ-inspired Catholics promote their ideas through education. Oprah preaches the gospel of cultural non-libertarianism. Ivy League public policy wonks would invent their way to Non-Libertopia. Wall Street corporations want bailouts and regulations that disadvantage competitors. No project is needed to concentrate a majority of non-libertarians in New Hampshire. And then there are the regular old AARP members who just want Social Security and Medicare to continue without any cuts until they die.

Matt Welch [took on Beam's article](#), as [did Radley Balko](#), right here on Hit and Run.