

DAILY BEAST

The Insidious Libertarian-to-Alt-Right Pipeline

Is it just a phase they go through—or is there something about libertarianism that attracts, well, uh, you know, racist kooks?

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Libertarianism has an alt-right problem. Many prominent leaders of the alt-right have, at some point, identified as libertarian. I am curious as to... why?

Milo Yiannopoulos has billed himself (and has been billed by others) as libertarian. About a year ago, he came clean about that. According to Business Insider, the alt-right troll Tim Gionet (aka “Baked Alaska”) formerly “identified as a carefree, easygoing libertarian” who “supported Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul’s bid for the White House, firmly opposed the war on drugs, and championed the cause of Black Lives Matter...”

Gavin McInnes bills himself as a libertarian, but he founded the Proud Boys—a men’s rights group that is considered part of the alt-right. Augustus Invictus, a Florida attorney who literally drank goat’s blood as part of an animal sacrifice, ran for senate in the 2016 Libertarian Party primary and spoke at Liberty Fest. Recently popular among college libertarians, Stefan Molyneux evolved into a pro-Trump alt-righter. And Richard Spencer was thrown out of the International Students for Liberty conference this year after crashing the event.

It is also true that many of today’s alt-righters are disaffected conservatives. However, there are many more conservatives in this country than there are libertarians, which suggests a disproportionate number of today’s prominent alt-righters began as libertarians.

“It’s ironic that some of these people start off calling themselves libertarian, but they are the antithesis of everything that the libertarian project stands for—which is cosmopolitanism versus parochialism, individualism vs. group identity, and libertarianism or autonomy versus authoritarianism,” Nick Gillespie, editor in chief of Reason.com tells me.

Granted, there are a few similarities between the two groups. For example, paleoconservatives (think populist nationalists like Pat Buchanan) and libertarians both tend to be anti-interventionist in foreign policy. But there are also multiple contradictions. Jeffrey A. Tucker, content director for the libertarian Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), lists five differences between the alt-right and libertarians. And yet, it seems observably true that libertarianism is disproportionately a gateway drug to the alt-right. Again, the question is... why?

Some would explain this away as normal. “People change ideologies all the time,” David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, told me in an interview. “Some libertarians become conservatives, some become welfarist liberals, a few drift into creepy extremes. Jason Kessler apparently was in Occupy Wall Street before he became an alt-right leader. The original neocons were leftists first. Hillary was a Goldwater Girl.”

Speaking of Barry Goldwater, it’s also true that a principled libertarian like him might end up on the wrong side of civil rights issues simply because he fears the expansion of central government and prioritizes the freedom of business owners over the right of individuals to be served at a lunch counter. This conundrum has proven to be a vexing enough problem for libertarians to overcome. However, it does not fully explain the link between libertarianism and today’s alt-right.

Like any emerging ideology, the alt-right didn’t just materialize out of nowhere. There were forerunners crying in the wilderness who were generally viewed as harmless kooks. “The paleo-libertarian seed that Ron Paul, Murray Rothbard, and Lew Rockwell planted in the 1990s has come to bear some really ugly fruit in the last couple of years as elements of the alt-right have made appearances in various libertarian organizations and venues,” writes Steve Horwitz, an economist who writes at Bleeding Heart Libertarians.

The Ron Paul Revolution might not have amounted to much electorally, but it would be wrong to underestimate the impact he has had on libertarianism and the alt-right. “In a way, Ron Paul is the guy who lit the fuse,” Nick Gillespie says. “And he embodies some of those contradictions [between libertarianism and the alt-right].” Gillespie tells me that Richard Spencer came up to him at the Republican National Convention in 2016 and said that he was activated into politics because of Paul. Gillespie sees Paul’s legacy as very mixed, as someone who was “simultaneously... positing this very libertarian worldview, but then he’s also speaking to people’s fears and anxieties.” If one were looking for the missing link to explain this phenomenon, Ron Paul (and his paleolibertarian allies) would be a good place to start.

Still, my guess is that this has as much to do with attitude as it has to do with ideology. One explanation for why young libertarians metastasize into alt-righters is self-selection bias. Some of the people drawn to libertarianism are predisposed to be seduced into the alt-right. In this regard, they are merely passing through a libertarian phase. “Libertarianism is an unpopular view. And it takes particular personality types to be open to taking unpopular views,” explains Kevin Vallier, an associate professor of philosophy at Bowling Green State University, who writes for the blog Bleeding Heart Libertarians. “Some of these personality types are people who are open to new experience, love the world of ideas and have a disposition for independent thought. However, some of these personality types simply enjoy holding outrageous and provocative views, who like to argue and fight with others, who like insult and... shock.” Vallier continued, “The worst flaw in the contrarian trap is that it makes libertarians open to views that deserve to be unpopular and despised, including the thinly-veiled racism of the sort Hans Hermann Hoppe trades in from time to time.” (Note: Some see Hoppe’s support of what he calls a “pro-European immigration bias” as an example of “thinly-veiled racism.”)

As a political philosophy, libertarianism is somewhat unique in its unflinching support of free speech. In some cases, this free speech is unsavory. If you’re anti-political correctness, libertarianism might seem like a good place to land—even if you don’t buy into the whole

libertarian philosophy. This affinity for libertarianism “wears off when they realize that we’re principled, that no, we’re not just trolling,” says Gillespie.

David Boaz provided yet another explanation. “Some people may become libertarians because they’re angry,” Boaz says. “For a while, it’s enough to be angry at the government. But ultimately libertarianism is about peaceful cooperation—markets, civil society, global trade, peace—so it just isn’t angry enough for some people. Racial intolerance is a way to be angry at the whole world. And I think you hear that in some of the alt-right types.”

The most recent example of this transformation is [Christopher Cantwell](#), who has garnered 15 minutes of infamy by virtue of appearing in that [viral Vice documentary](#) about Charlottesville.

On a post-Charlottesville blog post, [Cantwell discussed his conversion from libertarianism to the alt-right](#). “As immigration became a leading news story in America and Europe,” he writes, “Lew Rockwell gave a talk titled ‘[Open Borders Are an Assault on Private Property](#).’ From here, I decided to read Hans Hermann Hoppe’s ‘Democracy: The God That Failed.’ From these, I realized that the libertine vision of a free society was quite distorted. The society we sought actually would provide far more order and control than [would] modern democratic governments. It would encourage more socially conservative behavior and less compulsory association. Just when I thought I had everything figured out, I was once again reminded of my naivety.”

Cantwell continues, “People should be free to exercise complete control over their own person and property. If blacks are committing crimes, or Jews are spreading communism, discriminating against them is the right of any property owner. The fact that he may or may not miss out on good blacks or Jews is a risk he takes, and the merit of his decisions will be proven out by the market. Since a libertarian society would permit this, it seemed foolish that I should be compelled to support a democratic government policy which did not... It was only after all this that Donald Trump seemed worth taking seriously.”

A friend of mine who is libertarian suggests that other libertarians never liked Cantwell, and that he was simply using libertarianism “as a shield for expressing a lot of disturbing viewpoints.” Despite the negative stereotypes, casting yourself as libertarian still has some cache. Celebrities like Bill Maher and Vince Vaughn have identified with the label—which seems to be a way of expressing some conservative viewpoints while still supporting the decriminalization of marijuana and distancing yourself from social conservatism. Libertarians won’t continue to enjoy this status if the alt-right is allowed to tarnish their philosophy, too.

Over at [HotAir](#), Taylor Millard says that conservatives and libertarians need to purge white supremacists. If they are smart, they will follow his advice.