



Are libertarians 'ultraconservative'? Are 'free markets' 'liberal'?

By Timothy P. Carney | FEBRUARY 10, 2014 AT 12:17 PM

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The libertarian Cato Institute is "ultraconservative," in the telling of the New York Times. And somehow, Cato (motto "Individual liberty, free markets, and peace") is "strikingly different" from an advocate for "freedom" and "a free and open market economy."

In Washington, we get into lots of discussion about the nuances of political ideology — you've got progressives, neoliberals, libertarians, social conservatives, and so on. Normal people shouldn't be expected to be versed in all these distinctions. You might even say an education reporter shouldn't need to be versed in these fine distinctions — until she starts hanging part of her article on distinguishing between ideologies.

The New York Times' higher-ed reporter Tamar Lewin writes of Chinese dissident Xia Yeliang today. Xia has just joined the Cato Institute. Lewin writes:

"The political labels of Professor Xia and the Cato Institute, in Washington, are strikingly different. Professor Xia got into trouble in China for being too liberal, while the institute is known as libertarian or — less to its liking — ultraconservative. But the professor and Cato officials say they have the same focus."

This strikes me as either a stretch to create tension where there is none (a standard writer's crutch) or a real blindness to ideology.

First, "liberal" used to mean — and in most of the world still does mean — something pretty close to "libertarian." At least, we can say that the non-U.S. notion of liberal has much overlap with the D.C. idea of libertarian.

The Times tells us Xia was "a drafter of Charter 08," a document calling for reforms in China. What reforms?

The Charter's first "fundamental concept" is "freedom."

Here's a translation:

Freedom: Freedom is at the core of universal values. The rights of speech, publication, belief, assembly, association, movement, to strike, and to march and demonstrate are all the concrete expressions of freedom. Where freedom does not flourish, there is no modern civilization to speak of.

Some of the Charter sounds a bit "liberal" in the contemporary U.S. sense, but other parts sound exactly like U.S. libertarian priorities:

Guarantee citizens' right to freedom of association. ...

Guarantee freedom of religion and freedom of belief, and implement separation of religion and state so that activities involving religion and faith are not subjected to government interference.
...

Establish and protect private property rights, and implement a system based on a free and open market economy; guarantee entrepreneurial freedom, and eliminate administrative monopolies ...

[G]uarantee taxpayers' rights. ...

And a memo to the keepers of the NYTimes Style Guide: the term "ultraconservative" means nothing if it includes a think tank whose home page currently is headed by an article demanding liberalized immigration laws, with a pot decriminalization piece further down.

I understand Lewin couches the term "ultraconservative" by saying Cato is "known as ... ultraconservative." That's not really true. To the degree some people describe them that way, those people are abusing language.