

Why Are Libertarians So Danged Libertarian?

[James Joyner](#) · Tuesday, January 11, 2011 · [15 Comments](#)

Balloon Juice's [DougJ](#) is angry that institutional libertarianism — and specifically “*Reason* magazine, Megan McArdle, and the CATO Institute” — isn't more angry about corporate excess. He challenges readers: “Go peruse *Reason* magazine and see if you can find a single article about corporate abuse of power.”

This strikes me as a strange criticism. It's like demanding to know why NARAL doesn't spend more time advocating for the plight of stray cats or why PETA doesn't seem to care about the homeless.

Libertarianism, by any definition, is concerned about intrusion on individual liberty *by the government*. See, for example, the introductory paragraph for [Wikipedia's entry on Libertarianism](#).

Libertarianism is the advocacy of individual [liberty](#), especially freedom of thought and action.^[1] Philosopher [Roderick T. Long](#) defines libertarianism as “any political position that advocates a radical redistribution of power [either “total or merely substantial”] from the coercive state to voluntary associations of free individuals”, whether “voluntary association” takes the form of the free market or of communal co-operatives.^[2] [David Boaz](#), libertarian writer and vice president of the [Cato Institute](#), writes that, “Libertarianism is 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” and that, “Libertarians defend each person's right to life, liberty, and property—rights that people have naturally, before governments are created.”^[3]

Now, like Doug's co-blogger [Erik Kain](#), I've got libertarian instincts but am by no means a big-L libertarian. There are times when I think government action is useful when the gang at *Reason*, CATO, and even the lovely and talented McMegan would beg to differ. And I actually worry about, and from time to time write about, corporate power and its abuses. But that's not the agenda of big-L libertarians, let alone house organs for the movement.

In fairness to Doug, in an earlier post on the subject, he more-or-less recognizes all of the above but implies that what's really happening is that libertarians are just [doing the bidding](#) of their corporate overlords:

Philosophically, libertarianism is about the rights of the individual. But in its current incarnation, it is just as often about the rights of corporations.

This is why libertarianism has no relevance in modern American politics. There are undoubtedly places in the world where governments have absolute power and corporations have very little. But this isn't one of them.

While Doug and I would doubtless differ where the lines are drawn, we agree that there is a role for governmental intervention to protect individuals against corporations. For example, even Adam Smith recognized the need for state action to guard against the tendency of businessmen to collude to fix prices. And it's rather obvious to anyone who studies the matter that a good deal of regulation of business is actually done at the behest of industry rather than the best interests of consumers.

But, again, libertarians see the state as the chief problem. Regulations intended to help individuals actually hurt them by constraining choice and yielding unintended consequences. Minimum wage laws help ensure that, on aggregate, people can earn a "living wage." But, at the micro level, a job that pays \$2 an hour is better than no job if you're homeless. Or a teenager trying to make some spending money. Social Security has helped keep our oldest citizens out of poverty. But being forced to save for a retirement you may not live to see means less money to invest in your shorter term future. Pick a government program intended to protect the little guy from Big Business and there's a libertarian argument for why it's done more harm than good.

Too often, big-L libertarianism and Institutional Libertarianism winds up being the equivalent of a political theory seminar, ignoring larger social realities. In that sense, Doug's right that it has little relevance in practical politics. But, for reasons that [Ross Douthat](#) outlines, small-l libertarianism — and even the philosophizing of the *Reasonoids* — can be a useful counterpoint to the arguments of mainstream Progressive and Conservative thinking and help move the debate.

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