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The Libertarians on the Anti-Krugman Cruise Just Want to Be Left Alone

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A cruise ship, by its very nature, is a floating monument to capitalism. Thousands of passengers are paying thousands of dollars for the chance to be upsold. Special dinner? Excursion ashore? Botox? All available for a price. Cruises offer distinct fare classes, staff primed to cater to any impulse, and all-day ice cream buffets.

This particular ship, the Celebrity Solstice, bound for Alaska's Inside Passage, holds about 2,800 patrons and looks like the offspring of a jet-age airport and a Las Vegas casino, lightly dosed on acid. Up in the top-floor Sky Observation Lounge, 111 passengers, all varying flavors of libertarian, are assembled for the fourth annual Contra Krugman Cruise, a weeklong meetup for like-minded listeners of the eponymous podcast. As its moniker implies, the show is dedicated to rebutting the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman's weekly New York Times column. Its hosts, Tom Woods and Bob Murphy, dissect Keynesian dogma and revel in finding reversals in Krugman's positions and in plain old partisanship.

But neither podcast nor cruise is really about Krugman, per se. Sure, the podcast's introduction calls him a "destroyer of nations," but the man himself is merely an avatar—intellectual shorthand for people who see the state as the solution and regulation as the answer. (Woods's taste runs more to Murray Rothbard, a theorist who once called the state "a parasitic institution that lives off the labor of its subjects.") For the crowd in the Sky Lounge, the true point is one another. "Being a libertarian tends to be lonely," says Adam Haman, a gregarious 51-year-old poker player from Las Vegas who's been on every Contra Cruise. A week with these people is his ideological safe space. A place to be in the majority, instead of the fringes. His way to be around "people who think that libertarianism is the right way to have a civil society."

For one brief week, Contra Cruise-goers would get that civil society at sea. Here's a community of people who believe that aggression is wrong, that taxes are tantamount to theft, and that most big societal institutions are rigged. They are largely, though not entirely, white, and they are generally open to home-schooling their children. Woods and Murphy are to be their pied pipers, leading them through a week of economic seminars, libertarian party games, and Oxford-style debate on topics such as the merits of pacifism, with bonding and dad jokes to spare.

In his Sky Lounge welcome talk, Woods obliquely compares Murphy's bulky frame to a whale's. When Murphy later takes the mic, he begins in whale song. The crowd, having spent some time at the open bar, absolutely loses it.

“If you trash us, that helps us. Anybody who is driven away from our cruise by an article like this was never going to spend thousands of dollars with us anyway”

Woods and Murphy got to know each other when they were both lecturers at the Mises Institute for Austrian Economics, a libertarian think tank in Auburn, Ala. It champions the work of Ludwig von Mises and the school of Austrian economics: the belief that market forces can and should determine the price of everything, even money itself. The institute is also the fruit of a rather famous libertarian schism: Rothbard co-founded it in 1982, after leaving the Cato Institute, which he'd also co-founded, and accusing the Koch brothers, Charles and David, of watering down libertarianism. (Rothbard, who died in 1995, argued for “right-wing populism” in support of neo-Nazi David Duke, and his work has been embraced by some members of the alt-right.)

Some Mises followers, including several who are on the cruise, identify as “AnCaps,” or anarcho-capitalists, meaning they'd happily get rid of the state and let society self-regulate through the free market. Woods is among them, a 47-year-old AnCap historian who lives in Florida and has written 12 books and also hosts another podcast, The Tom Woods Show. It's less econ-focused than Contra Krugman, with Woods and his ideologically compatible guests often critiquing political correctness, which they call “allowable opinion.” Inclined toward neoconservatism in college, he changed his mind and began to question interventionist foreign policy after the first Gulf War. He was an early member of the League of the South, which he says was formed to study Southern history and Jeffersonian democracy. It's since been designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, and Woods calls its latest turn “off the rails” and abhorrent.

In conversation, he's direct, at times confrontational. He says he expects this story to be negative. “If you trash us, that helps us. Anybody who is driven away from our cruise by an article like this was never going to spend thousands of dollars with us anyway.”

Murphy is far more laid-back, with a rumpled-professor mien that disguises a darkly comic sensibility. He's 43, an economist specializing in climate change at the Institute for Energy Research, a nonprofit in Washington that promotes free markets and has received funding from conservative donors. Murphy discovered Austrian economics in high school and chose Hillsdale College in Michigan, which is famous in conservative circles for rejecting federal funding. The draw for the budding economist, though, was the school's library, which held Mises' archive.

Some 20 years and a lot of scholarship later, he found himself being pitched by his Mises Institute colleague on a joint podcast. Woods was struck by how much of Murphy's writing on the 2008 financial crisis cast Krugman as his mainstream foil. The two libertarians were friends, but Murphy was initially unconvinced. “I'm going to become known as the economist who disagrees with Krugman,” he recalls thinking. “It's going to be a negative.” But he enjoys deconstructing opposing ideas. Plus, he has a remarkable memory, especially where Krugman is concerned.

The show's format is straightforward. Woods, the snarky showman, summarizes and reads part of a Krugman column, setting up a deadpan disquisition on Austrian economics from Murphy. Woods won't reveal audience numbers, but he says his personal show has almost 50,000 weekly listeners and that many of them overlap. Contra Krugman will sometimes take on Democrats, socialism, the mainstream press, political correctness, and even Donald Trump, but Krugman remains its animating force. Episode 170 dissects a 2018 column in which Krugman argues that

partisanship overrides even the most die-hard monetary hawk and that Republicans who objected to prime rate cuts by the Federal Reserve under President Obama were hypocritically changing their stripes under Trump. In response, Murphy rattles off Krugman's reversals on debt and deficits over the years. In the George W. Bush years, he says, they mattered so much that Krugman changed his mortgage. In the Obama years, decidedly less so. Come Trump, deficits matter again. "So clearly," Murphy says, "he was a hypocrite there." (It's worth noting that macroeconomic conditions have also varied significantly.) Krugman was unavailable for comment.

Episode [178](#) is based on a February column that lauded Elizabeth Warren's [child-care plan](#). "Don't worry," Murphy says. "Krugman assures us it's not going to be too expensive. It's only \$70 billion per year!" The idea that government and regulation might help is almost ludicrous to Murphy. His flat Rochester, N.Y., accent gives way to sarcasm, cranking higher. "That's why health care is so affordable to everybody. Because the government has gone into those two areas, regulated the heck out of it. And subsidized it. And that's why the two areas of American society that everyone agrees are great and efficient are education and health care."

When Matt and Becky Jones were en route to the cruise from Omaha, she worried the week would be a real-life version of a squabbling libertarian Facebook group. Instead, the couple found two kindred spirits, Noah and Liz Boren from Indiana. (The cruise has its share of single men—a libertarian stereotype—but more than half the passengers are in couples.)

Matt and Becky, both in their 30s, are two-time Obama voters who grew disillusioned by forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and frustrated by the Democratic Party, which they think is consumed by hysteria over every action by Trump. "There are people dying in Yemen right now because we are funding the Saudis," Becky says. "I don't give a shit what Trump tweeted from the toilet this morning."

The two couples repeatedly stay up until the early morning, bonding and sharing their libertarian conversion stories and the isolation they felt when explaining their new politics to friends and family. (More than once they roll into the morning seminars hung over.) "We told his mom about the whole idea of libertarianism," Becky says over dinner one night. "And she was like, 'Oh, so you just want kids to starve in the street?' And we were like, 'Jesus Christ, when about free markets and not being taxed to death did you get we want kids to starve in the street, Pam?'" Across the table, the Borens dissolve into knowing laughter. This was a budding friendship that would last beyond the cruise.

Noah and Liz, who are also in their 30s, host their own fledgling podcast, [When Can I Quit My Job?](#), about financial independence and early retirement, and it turns out the Joneses are listeners. "Some nonfamily members!" Liz says, laughing. The Borens started podcasting after learning the how-tos from Woods's website. Indeed, podcasts were integral to their libertarian conversions. While he was on his rounds as a mail carrier in Fort Wayne, Ind., Noah had started listening to comic Joe Rogan's freewheeling and chaotic show, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which led him to Woods's podcasts. He fell into what he calls a libertarian rabbit hole, increasingly feeling as if neither major political party was the right home for him. He also became disenchanted with working for the government. The shows he was listening to promoted the kind of financial independence he and Liz were seeking; he left the Postal Service and now sells land, and she works in customer service.

There is a sense, especially among the more recent converts aboard the *Celebrity Solstice*, that many of the tenets they'd grown up with had failed. Student debt was an inescapable albatross. Education didn't necessarily get you ahead. Politicians promised things, then lied. If everything felt broken, why not become an individualist who doesn't believe in any system? The election of Trump only solidified their belief that government was a joke. Late one night, Haman, the Las Vegas poker player, says, "He's so bad, he's finally making everyone view the presidency as I always have."

Politics isn't the only arena where skepticism of large institutions is evident on board. Libertarians' distrust of the banking system has made them natural enthusiasts for cryptocurrency, which is independent of the banking system and the Federal Reserve. There are no formal seminars on crypto, but it's a frequent topic of conversation when passengers mingle at the Sky Lounge at night or eat under the giant chandeliers of the ship's Grand Epernay dining room. (Contra Cruise passengers sit separately from the rest of the 2,700 guests, and Murphy and Woods rotate tables so they can join everyone at least once.)

Musician Dan Hagen was turned on to Bitcoin by another passenger on the *Contra Cruise* two years ago. He decided to buy some as an experiment in the fall of 2017. "I put \$100 down when it was at \$7,000," he says. "Instantly it shot up, I liked how it felt, I put in another couple hundred bucks." But he sold off his holdings not long afterward, in part because Bitcoin futures started being listed on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and that was too mainstream for him. "I didn't trust it. There are powers that be that don't want this to take off," he says.

Tatiana Moroz has her own cryptocurrency, Tatiana Coin. A musician like Hagen, she's performed on multiple *Contra Cruises*. (The cruise covers their costs, and they sing in the Sky Lounge most nights.) She was once a Dennis Kucinich supporter, until a friend started sending her online documentaries, including one called *America: Freedom to Fascism* that contends that the Internal Revenue Service and Federal Reserve are perpetrating frauds on the public. In 2012 she recorded a folk album, *Love and Liberty*, inspired partly by the antiwar singer-songwriters of the 1960s. Around the same time, she learned about Bitcoin. She'd been managing recording studios in New York, increasingly frustrated that artists were paid only at the end of the chain after record companies and streaming services got their cut. Tatiana Coin seemed like the perfect way to make money and connect with her audience. In practice, Tatiana Coin works more like a digital gift certificate on her website than a true cryptocurrency, but it fits with her independent philosophy. "You have a direct connection with your fans, with no intermediary, and you retain that forever, as long as they hold the coin." *Celebrity Cruises*, however, still doesn't accept cryptocurrency, so onboard perks, drinks, and excursions ashore have to be paid for the old-fashioned way.

As the *Celebrity Solstice* sails to gold rush-era ports and past the Tongass National Forest, it's impossible not to feel awe and at least some twinge of concern that thousands of visitors are being bused to the edge of a glacier that was a little bigger last year. On one of the cruise's last days, two short horn blasts sound: wildlife on the starboard side! It's a group of harbor seals, gray sausages peering up at the massive ship from a small floe. The passengers hurry over to look.

Alaska's Inside Passage is almost comically stunning—sky and water, bald eagles overhead. At one point, while an episode of *Contra Krugman* is being taped, a few audience members are distracted by leaping humpback whales outside the conference room windows.

The libertarian view on climate change can be a little hard to pin down. For Contra Cruise passengers, it ranges from “caused by solar flares” (disproven) to “actually, we may need governments on this one.” Most passengers are somewhere in the middle. Gene Balfour, who’s running for Parliament in this fall’s Canadian election as a member of the People’s Party, a breakaway group founded by a former Conservative cabinet minister, sketches out a theory that questions aspects of human-driven climate change, arguing that there’s not enough carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to cause the Earth to warm. (Multiple peer-reviewed studies have found there’s enough carbon dioxide and water vapor to trap radiation and create warming.)

Murphy, in a lecture to a full room of about 100 people, offers the thesis that yes, climate change is real, and humans caused “some of the warming,” stressing that he’s arrived at that conclusion after studying mainstream data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Yale economist and Nobel laureate William Nordhaus. But, he adds, the scientific consensus is overstated, and attempts by governments to mitigate the threat are sure to be a mess and potentially make the world poorer. In a libertarian world, he argues, society would be richer and the costs of mitigation could be borne by individuals and philanthropies instead of governments and taxpayers. “If humanity really does face this problem, there’s technological ways to deal with it,” Murphy says to the crowd. “And that’s kind of the pattern of history. As opposed to just relying on a systematic coordinated effort of governments around the world to do the optimal carbon tax.”

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After all the morning lectures and debates over dinner, the Contra Cruise was in the end about having good, clean, unregulated fun. In a conference room on the 14th floor, Libertarian Pictionary was under way. One team was laughing deliriously as it tried and failed to draw the Affordable Care Act. (The cardinal rules of Libertarian Pictionary, it became clear, are to maintain a self-aware sense of humor and to guess “Ron Paul!” anytime anyone draws anything.)

At a talent show, Laura Blodgett, a home-schooling mother of seven from Idaho, performed a song called Krugman, You’re So Wrong, set to the tune of Linda Ronstadt’s You’re No Good. There was even libertarian Family Feud, complete with sound effects, projected graphics, and team names such as the Mises Pieces. Murphy was the event’s Richard Dawson or Steve Harvey, depending on your vintage.

“Name something,” he said into the microphone, “you associate with California.”

“Taxes!” shouted one of the contestants. Ding, ding, ding! On to the second contestant.

“Nuts and flakes!”

Wrong, though “insanity” later appeared on the board. Other correct answers: “bad for business,” “communism,” and “marijuana.”

Another question: “If Paul Krugman retires, who should Bob and Tom refute?”

“Alexandra something!”

Close enough. The answer on the board was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Others were Robert Reich, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Donald Trump. That was the Contra Cruisers:

railing against the Left, but almost as angry at the Right. At sea, literally and politically. Unable, and in many cases unwilling, to participate in mainstream politics but thrilled to be part of a floating utopia where everyone agreed.