



Climate denial has destroyed the libertarian movement

January 27, 2020

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Leading libertarian intellectuals are now disavowing the label (Tyler Cowan says he's now a "State Capacity Libertarian") thanks to the total failure of libertarianism to cope with climate change.

John Quiggin ([previously](#)) explores how, at the start of the climate debate, libertarians advocated for "market based" solutions, like tradeable emissions credits, something dubbed "free-market environmentalism." The model had been used successfully to fight acid rain, and it was appealing to libertarians as it "would supply incentives to find the most cost-effective path toward reducing emissions."

Climate activists weren't fond of the idea, favoring instead a limit on pollution itself (this traces a similar arc to the debate on smoking, which started with "sin taxes" on tobacco but really only made progress when these were augmented with absolute prohibitions on smoking in most places and strict curbs on the sale and marketing of tobacco products).

But once emissions credits became a reality, libertarians almost unanimously rejected them, and switched from "free market environmentalism" to straight-up climate denial. As Quiggin says, the problem with tradeable emissions is that it rebuts the core tenet of libertarianism: John Locke's idea that property rights arise spontaneously from nature, rather than being created by governments hoping to achieve specific policy goals.

But more deeply, "Affluent white men who don't like being told what to do are by far the most important constituency for libertarianism. Such men would consider it a dreadful imposition to have to pay, whether directly or indirectly, for the right to drive a car or use air conditioning."

This created a steady-state in which the climate steadily worsened and libertarians steadily denied that their cities were underwater, on fire, or gripped by pandemics, repeating expensive talking points about solar cycles or crooked scientists who were hoping to dismantle capitalism (IOW: "Reality has a well-known leftist bias").

But Trump disrupted the steady state. When he took office, the libertarian frontrunners abandoned any pretense of commitment to anything except more power and money for people who were monied and powerful, leaving the few standards-bearers for the movement with no

way forward. Even as the Cato Institute abandoned its climate denial stance, it still argued that the climate crisis couldn't be averted by state intervention, despite the fact that markets had totally failed to come to grips with it.

Quiggin reckons with the incoherence of markets-only thinking in his masterful 2019 book Economics in Two Lessons, which explores the power, limitations and dangers of using markets to solve our problems in a thoughtful and clear way.

Having abandoned intellectual credibility in the fight to stop climate action, libertarianism has no future as a movement. Trumpism will soon swallow up what's left of its organizational structure. Individuals have a number of choices available, from Niskanen-style "libertarianism" to the fantasy of "going Galt." But the libertarian moment is well and truly over.

Global warming is the ultimate refutation of Lockean propertarianism. No one can pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere while leaving "enough and as good" for everyone else. It has taken thirty years, but this undeniable fact has finally killed the propertarian movement in the United States.