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Libertarian Think Tank Let Boss Sexually Harass Workers

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Libertarians hate coercion. To the extent that the anarcho-capitalist right justifies its worldview in moral terms, it is through an appeal to the obscenity of brute force. The problem with the welfare state, according to many libertarians, is not that it redistributes resources from rich to poor but that it accomplishes this by threatening wealthy tax dodgers with imprisonment. Individual liberty is sacrosanct, and just social policies are those that do not violate a person's will through a threat of state aggression.

The logical flaws of this “nonaggression principle” are myriad. But most spring from the libertarian's insistence on applying it arbitrarily, to suit his movement's political goals: Property rights cannot exist unless the state threatens violence against those who would flout them — but libertarians believe property rights are good (even when they derive from historic acts of coercion like, for example, slavery), and so the enforcement of property rights is not coercion.

More broadly, libertarians fail to grapple with the reality that, for most individuals in an advanced society, the most coercive force in day-to-day life isn't the state, but *the boss*. And while it's true that it is easier to leave an employer than a nation, the former still isn't easy. At the bottom of the economic ladder, the alternative to accepting the arbitrary dictates of an abusive manager can be accepting an empty stomach. On the higher rungs, failure to tolerate coercion at the office might not cost a professional basic nutrition, but it *can* imperil her most deeply held ambitions. As the #MeToo movement has amply demonstrated, private institutions and actors can exercise immense coercive power over individuals, with devastating and widespread consequences.

But libertarians worry far more about the liberty of the boss than that of the worker. And so the libertarian Cato Institute has vigorously opposed attempts to curb coercion in the workplace through regulation or unionization — and published a book encouraging female workers to pursue “non-adversarial alternatives to reporting [sexual] harassment to corporate or legal authorities.”

Here's how the nonaggression principle was applied within Cato's hallowed halls:

Three former employees of the famed Cato Institute say they were sexually harassed by Ed Crane, the 73-year-old co-founder and president emeritus of the think tank and one of the most recognizable figures in the libertarian movement.

One former employee said Crane asked her to take off her bra. Another said he compared her breasts to pornographic images on his computer. A third said he sent her an email on breast

augmentation. Crane also settled an additional sexual harassment claim by a former employee in 2012, her lawyer confirmed to POLITICO... The events described to POLITICO, which have never publicly been reported, began at least 20 years ago and continued until Crane's 2012 departure.

The story goes on to describe these incidents in harrowing detail, while making it abundantly clear that they weren't aberrant improprieties, but characteristic of the environment that female staffers were forced to accept, if they wished to maintain their place at one of the libertarian movement's premier institutions.

A Cato executive, who has since left the institute and did not respond to messages, gathered several young female employees together and suggested they stage a choreographed song-and-dance number for Crane's birthday, the former researcher said.

... The former employees say that Cato under Crane was a freewheeling culture, in which some other men followed his lead in making inappropriate comments. During the workday, Crane would sometimes drink vodka mixed with Crystal Light, according to three former employees. And especially when Crane had been drinking, he made comments about women's bodies and clothing both in front of them and behind their backs.

... Whenever a new crop of interns arrived, which happened three times a year, Cato would distribute headshots and short bios of the interns to staff. The handout was colloquially known by some men around the office as "The Menu," according to two former Cato employees.

Cato insists that it has "a pretty explicit policy against sexual harassment" and a "robust complaint process" for employees, which includes an anti-retaliation policy. And the working atmosphere at the think tank has reportedly improved since Crane's departure.

The cause of Crane's decades-long misbehavior was not his think-tank's ideology. Conduct like his has, of course, proven pervasive in liberal institutions, from NPR to the *New Republic*. But the fact that such harassment is so thoroughly bipartisan and trans-ideological is part of *why* libertarianism's refusal to grapple with the reality of workplace coercion — or accept the legitimacy of those remedies most likely to mitigate it — is so deeply misguided.