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Libertarians have more in common with the alt-right than they want you to think

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After the alt-right march on Charlottesville last month, Matt Lewis, writing at the Daily Beast, pointed out the existence of an apparent “libertarian to alt-right pipeline,” an ideological trajectory through which those who begin life as ordinary, freedom-loving libertarians wind up more aligned with the torch-wielding demonstrators.

Members of the non-mainstream right were quick to distance themselves from the alt-right, which is a small, far-right movement that seeks a whites-only state. Taylor Millard, writing on Hot Air, heaped abuse on the alt-right, calling them “grifters” and “fakers,” and calling on his fellow conservatives and libertarians to decisively “purge” the alt-right from their ranks. Nick Gillespie, an editor at the libertarian magazine Reason, denied that there is any “pipeline” between libertarianism and the alt-right, arguing that real, liberty-loving libertarians reject the collectivism and authoritarianism of the alt-right. Michael Brendan Dougherty, writing in the National Review, similarly asserted that there’s not much to the whole idea of a “libertarian-to-fascist” pipeline, that fringes will be fringe, and that “kooks” will always congregate there.

It’s probably true that *some* of the overlap between libertarians and alt-righters can be explained by their companionship as members of the political fringe. But it’s not purely accidental, either. Historically, prominent libertarian thinkers have made the decision to cultivate ties with the nationalist far right, and have viewed racial demagoguery both as an efficacious political tool and an intellectually defensible position. The libertarian-to-fascist pipeline may have been forged partially by coincidence, but it was also crafted and maintained.

In the early 1980s, economist Murray Rothbard left the libertarian Cato Institute, which he had helped found. Rothbard’s impatience with respectability politics and the moderate tone enforced by the Kochs on their organization (including Reason magazine) led to his departure. He made common cause with another dissident libertarian named Lew Rockwell, founder of the Mises Institute, a home for a more hardcore brand of thought than was permitted at Cato.

A self-confessed admirer of Joseph McCarthy’s political tactics, Rothbard wanted to put some emotional meat on the spare, abstract bones of libertarian economics. Rockwell, who shared Rothbard’s strategy, penned a series of virulently racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic newsletters on behalf of Ron Paul, in hopes of crafting a viscerally appealing emotional aura around libertarianism. “We are constantly told that it is evil to be afraid of black men, it is hardly irrational,” one missive went. “I think we can safely assume that 95 percent of the black males in [Washington] are semi-criminal or entirely criminal,” said another. With these themes, Rothbard and Rockwell brought sensation and visceral feeling to a libertarianism that had otherwise been a matrix of lofty abstractions.

The fullest articulation of Rothbard's strategy — and a piece of political cynicism for the ages — appeared in his 1992 essay "Right Wing Populism," an apologia for former Ku Klux Klan grandee David Duke's failed presidential run. Rothbard found much to like in Duke's positions: "lower taxes, dismantling the bureaucracy, slashing the welfare system, attacking affirmative action and racial set-asides, calling for equal rights for all Americans, including whites: What's wrong with any of that?"

Rothbard went on to argue that the mainstream libertarian project of trying to convince "intellectual elites" by spreading "correct ideas" through institutions such as Cato and Reason had failed. Libertarian intellectuals were, after all, part of a corrupt and feckless ruling class, so they had an invested self-interest in perpetuating their situation. The elites had to be overthrown.

Rothbard's eight-point program for toppling these elites included a call to "abolish affirmative action, set aside racial quotas, etc., and point out that the root of such quotas is the entire 'civil rights' structure, which tramples on the property rights of every American." Also in his program was a call for economic nationalism, under the ominous heading "America First."

Perhaps it's not fair to lay blame for Rothbard the heretic at the feet of the mainline libertarian church, which attempted to purge him. But even putting Rothbard aside, his views were too widely shared to be dismissed as a fluke. Rothbard's disciple Hans-Hermann Hoppe has kept alive his master's dialogue to this day: His Property and Freedom Society's yearly symposiums have hosted talks by Richard Spencer, Jared Taylor and Peter Brimelow, founder of VDARE, the anti-immigration site that also counts Hoppe as a contributor.

Hoppe's book "Democracy: The God that Failed" cites specious scholarship on the IQ differences inherent in race to support his arguments, presents an "anarcho-capitalist" defense of segregation as the prerogative of property owners, and is so unabashedly anti-egalitarian he doubts the basic humanity of people who don't fit into his ideological schema. A characteristic passage goes: "A member of the human race who is completely incapable of understanding the higher productivity of labor performed under a division of labor based on private property is not properly speaking a person, but falls instead in the same moral category as an animal — of either the harmless sort (to be domesticated and employed as a producer or consumer good, or to be enjoyed as a "free good") or the wild and dangerous one (to be fought as a pest)."

How did Rothbard, Hoppe and others end up keeping company with the likes of Spencer, Taylor and Brimelow? The problem is that libertarian principles, which revolve the abstract notion of self-interest, are really not principles at all; they have no content and allow anything to be attached to them. Abstract self-interest alone can provide no instructive rule of thought and can disqualify no particular course of action, because each person is free to concoct what is in their best interest, and because "aggression" can be and has been defined in a variety of spurious ways.

It was the very bareness of the idea of self-interest and liberty as such that allowed Chris Cantwell, the weeping neo-Nazi made infamous in Vice's coverage of Charlottesville (and avid reader of Hoppe and Rothbard) to make conceptual space for racism: "People should be free to exercise complete control over their own person and property. If blacks are committing crimes, or Jews are spreading communism, discriminating against them is the right of any property owner."

It's a quick step from here to full-on white nationalism, which interprets history and politics as the story of different races pursuing their collective self-interest. It shouldn't come as a great surprise that enshrining self-interest as the core of morality would lead to a cynical worldview that takes all action to be struggle or manipulation. The "liberty" of libertarianism is merely negative; and a mind guided with the mere concept of its own interest can be led to anything or to nothing. For this reason, the intellectual wasteland of libertarianism continues to provide a safe space for fascists: It simply has philosophical room for them, and no particular injunctions to turn them away.