

# The Wichita Eagle

## Aaron Ross Powell: Libertarians want to make world better for everyone

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If you believe Nick Hanauer and Eric Liu, libertarians are nuts. In a recent commentary, they gave a litany of reasons for “Why libertarian society is doomed to fail” (Sept. 11 Kansas.com). The trouble is, they’ve managed not only to misunderstand libertarianism, but also to ignore the very problems libertarians see in the authors’ own preferred big government solutions.

Hanauer and Liu attack “radical libertarianism,” which they define as “the ideology that holds that individual liberty trumps all other values.” Yet this isn’t quite right, whether we’re talking about moderate or radical libertarianism. Liberty isn’t the ultimate value. But it is the ultimate political value. It holds this status not because we shouldn’t care about other values, but because a state that aims at liberty will enable us to realize much more of what we value than one that aims at something else. Whether the goal is wealth, happiness, health, culture or any other value we hold dear, political liberty will bring us more of it than officious government.

The authors then call out libertarians for our “defective” theory of human nature. They tell us libertarians believe “humans are wired only to be selfish, when in fact cooperation is the height of human evolution.” But libertarians embrace free markets and voluntary association, which both require and encourage cooperation. What libertarians are skeptical of is not cooperation, but the use of, and threat of, force to coerce people into taking part in schemes they don’t approve of, or that harm them, or that aren’t as efficient or effective as other means. Is it “cooperation” when the state forces poor, minority children into failing schools? Is it “cooperation” when politically connected businesses get regulators and legislators to craft rules in their favor? Is it “cooperation” when politicians send young men and women to die in unnecessary wars? Cooperation, far from being anathema to libertarianism, is in fact a core libertarian value.

Hanauer and Liu tell us that libertarians believe “societies are efficient mechanisms requiring no rules or enforcers.” Yet no libertarian thinks society can function without codes of conduct and methods for enforcing them. Libertarians believe strongly in the rule of law – much more so, in fact, than many on the left and right who would carve out exceptions in statutes and regulations to benefit political friends and powerful interest groups.

The authors also make a mistake when they claim that libertarians believe rolling back the state is the solution to every problem. It's not. Rather, it is often the way we can enable solutions, in whatever form they may take. Private individuals are capable of amazing things if given the opportunity to exercise their ingenuity. Too often, the state stands in the way, protecting established industries and special interests by preventing the growth of new and better ones.

This isn't a path to progress Hanauer and Liu are willing to entertain, however. Instead, they see the very act of shifting power from government to private citizens as destructive and necessarily at odds with the very idea of creation. Yet we need only look at the inventions and discoveries that have radically improved our lives to see how much creation occurs outside of the direct control of the state. Libertarians demand policies to accelerate that, not to undermine it.

Defenders of the status quo are always quick to label as unreasonable those who advocate for a different and better world. There was a time when activists for democracy were called unreasonable, and told that turning over power to the people was a laughable idea. "Reasonable people" argued for solutions within the systems of monarchy and theocracy. Hanauer and Liu are just modern versions of these "reasonable people."

Libertarians believe the status quo isn't good enough. Not because we're selfish or destructive or anti-community, but because we want to make the world better for everyone – and believe freedom is the best catalyst for progress.