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EVALUATIONS

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The Specter of Minarchy

Since I wasn't blogging over the holidays, I missed the online dust-up over [Chris Beam's big essay](#) on libertarianism's moment in the political sun. What earned Beam [the most pushback from libertarians](#) was probably the way he finished his piece: After briskly surveying libertarian thought, from Ayn Rand to [Will Wilkinson](#), he concluded with an extended argument that "libertarianism ventures down some fascinating paths but usually ends up deep in the wilderness." That wilderness, in his view, is the impossible dream of "minarchy" — a vision of government in which the state is "responsible for a standing army, local security, and a courts system, and that's it" — which Beam dismissed with the following critique:

Libertarian minarchy is an elegant idea in the abstract. But the moment you get specific, the foundation starts to crumble. Say we started from scratch and created a society in which government covered only the bare essentials of an army, police, and a courts system. I'm a farmer, and I want to sell my crops. In Libertopia, I can sell them in exchange for money. Where does the money come from? Easy, a private bank. Who prints the money? Well, for that we'd need a central bank—otherwise you'd have a thousand banks with a thousand different types of currency. (Some libertarians advocate this.) Okay, fine, we'll create a central bank. But there's another problem: Some people don't have jobs. So we create charities to feed and clothe them. What if there isn't enough charity money to help them? Well, we don't want them to start stealing, so we'd better create a welfare system to cover their basic necessities. We'd need education, of course, so a few entrepreneurs would start private schools ... The poorest students would receive vouchers that allowed them to attend school. Where would those vouchers come from? Charity. Again, what if that doesn't suffice? Perhaps the government would have to set up a school or two after all.

And so on. There are reasons our current society evolved out of a libertarian document like the Constitution. The Federal Reserve was created after the panic of 1907 to help the government reduce economic uncertainty. The Civil Rights Act was necessary because "states' rights" had become a cover for unconstitutional practices. The welfare system evolved because private charity didn't suffice. Challenges to the libertopian vision yield two responses: One is that an economy free from regulation will grow so quickly that it will lift everyone out of poverty. The second is that if somehow a poor person is still poor, charity will take care of them. If there is not enough charity, their families will take care

of them. If they have no families to take care of them—well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.

Of course, we’ll never get there. And that’s the point. Libertarians can espouse minarchy all they want, since they’ll never have to prove it works.

There are some difficulties with this story, nicely distilled by [Matt Frost’s suggestion](#) that “if Beam lived in China, his one-paragraph history of human organization might have mentioned the need for [population control](#) ... and, of course, a system of [residency permits](#). Because otherwise: Mogadishu! Only crazy uncles and trenchcoat-wearing dice-rollers think you should be able to just have babies and live anywhere!” Overall, though, Beam’s narrative represents a solid-enough dissection of libertarianism’s tendency toward ahistorical utopianism and [persistent self-marginalization](#). Indeed, if you asked a cross-section of smart conservatives why they don’t self-identify as libertarian, they’d probably make some points along these lines.

But Beam’s “of course, we’ll never get there” kicker substantially undercuts the power and relevance of this critique. It’s precisely *because* we’re so far from minarchy, with no prospects for getting even remotely close, that libertarian arguments deserve a bit more respect and consideration than Beam’s dismissive attitude affords them. If Congress was stocked with a few hundred members of the Paul family, if Penn Jillette ran the T.S.A., if the Cato Institute held veto power over every entitlement expansion and overseas military operation, it would make sense to use a long magazine article to fret, in detail, about the perils associated with the minimal state. But as it stands, Beam’s lengthy critique of minarchy seems better suited to a college bull-session argument than to an article about American political economy as it actually exists, in all its bloated and not-at-all minimalist glory.

In this real world, the crucial question for non-libertarians pondering the movement’s (modestly) growing influence isn’t whether a libertarian minarchy would be the utopia that some enthusiasts imagine or a dog-eat-dog nightmare instead. Rather, it’s whether a more-empowered libertarianism could have a salutary impact on debates over, say, the future of the entitlement system ... or the reform of [our incarceration policies](#) ... or [the growth of the national-security state](#) (to pick just a few rather pressing-seeming issues). And while there are many policy questions where I differ with the typical libertarian (starting with the subject of [today’s column](#)), I think the answer on all these counts is basically yes, for the reasons that [Conor Friedersdorf outlines](#):

... as I survey the biggest policy disasters in recent American history – the push liberals made in California to vest public employees with obviously unsustainable pension deals, the conservative approach to the Iraq War, the non-libertarian, bipartisan consensus that we ought to continue waging a War on Drugs ... I cannot help but conclude that it is the serial refusal of non-libertarians to grapple with the world as it is that causes our country

the vast majority of its avoidable trouble.

What about a voter who wants to grapple with the world as it is? I think he or she ought to conclude that libertarians hold very little power in this country (as Beam points out), that a Congressional majority that would implement their least mainstream ideas – returning to the gold standard, for example – is utterly implausible, and that electing more libertarians like Ron Paul is far more likely to advance the most popular libertarian policies, like an end to marijuana prohibition, smart cuts to the Pentagon budget, and rolling back the nanny state. Instead, non-libertarian pundits delight in focusing on the least likely libertarian ideas to be implemented, and pointing out real flaws in theoretical libertarianism – the Civil Rights Act dustup, for example – that have little bearing on actual political questions that face America. In this sense, it is non-libertarians who are making the ideal the enemy of the practical, and I wish they'd stop it.