



Give the Libertarians a Break

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Given the recent attacks on my libertarian friends in Haaretz, it seems that they don't enjoy great public relations. And if you don't buy into their social and economic theories, then your criticism is perfectly legitimate, although there is no need to turn them into caricatures of ideological fanatics.

Since I was affiliated for two decades as a research fellow with the Cato Institute in Washington – the premier think tank that promotes the libertarian agenda – and served as secretary of state in the shadow cabinet (do not laugh please) of the U.S. Libertarian Party, and was the foreign policy advisor to Ron Paul, the libertarian presidential candidate in 2008, I feel an obligation to contribute my two cents to the debate. After all, my name had appeared in Cato's publications above the name of Friedrich Hayek – one of the intellectual icons of the libertarian movement and Nobel laureate in economics – because both our last names started with an H.

Although I have moved away in recent years from the libertarian movement ideologically and politically and today identify myself as a liberal, for example supporting the basic tenets of the welfare state – I reject the notion that libertarianism or classical liberalism is associated with the “extreme right.” I reject this notion all the more so because I don't accept the assumption that Donald Trump-style populism is the product of libertarian ideas – an assumption that some Ha'aretz writers advance.

For example, it would be ridiculous to believe that the Cato Institute or other libertarian groups would have promoted an amendment to the U.S. Constitution akin to the Israeli “Nationality Law,” which would have defined the United States as an Anglo-Saxon or Christian state. If anything, most American libertarians support almost free immigration and a clear separation between religion and state, and they oppose restricting the civil rights of Americans of Muslim descent under the guise of the war on terror.

It may not be surprising that the main focus of the discussion in Ha'aretz was on libertarian support for free market principles, but this is only one element of an entire agenda which favors free immigration, drug legislation, full rights for LGBT people (David Boaz, the vice president of Cato, came out of the closet three decades ago, when it was not yet in vogue), complete support for freedom of expression and press and opposition to any form of censorship.

These and other ideas completely contradict the agenda of the American conservative movement and the current Republican Party. They advocate the expansion of the war on drugs, seek to impose restrictions on immigration, oppose same-sex marriage, and believe that the government has the right to censor material that harms national security or the so-called traditional values of the American nation and Christianity.

While many on the political left today believe that those who do not fully embrace the values of political correctness should be censored, and call for government regulation on social media – a position that many Trumpists support – libertarians represent the few voices that are pushing against the inquisitors on both the right and the left of the political map. They support instead the free market, literally, of opinions and ideas.

As a former research fellow at the Cato Institute, I was in charge of preparing working papers and writing books that centered on the principles of libertarian foreign policy, based on reducing U.S. military involvement and its defense budget. They strongly opposed the war in Iraq and the turning of the war on terror into military adventures and ideological crusades in the Middle East. At the same time, they backed the nuclear deal with Iran and the promotion of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement – positions that run contrary to those of the Republican Party and the hawkish right in the U.S.

And now, American-Jewish supporters of the Israeli right are trying to create in Israel a libertarian-nationalist hybrid known as the Kohelet Forum, which seeks to empower the state in order to advance nationalist goals, but opposes at the same time the state's role in the socio-economic sphere. In the opinion of these people, increasing the defense budget and realizing the Zionist vision do not necessarily require an activist government. Such a logic is similar to the logic of Jews for Jesus.

Libertarian intellectuals believe that free international trade strengthens economic and cultural cooperation between nations – so-called globalization – and helps advance world peace. Nationalist and populist Trumpism has come out against these ideas, and seeks to eliminate the remnants of the libertarian tradition in the Republican Party. It does not support a free market but rather crony capitalism – corrupt capitalism based on mutual interests between business and government. The behavior of Trump and his supporters, including the refusal to accept the results of the presidential election, is proof of their utter disregard for the principles of the U.S. Constitution, which is the foundation of a classic liberal system.

Classical liberalism, including its libertarian version, is in retreat in today's political environment among rising extremism on both the right and the left in the West. Collectivist ideologies – both nationalist and socialist – are being revived in opposition against globalization or “neoliberalism” and the so-called elites.

But even that will pass. Joe Biden will try to moderate the free market forces unleashed by Ronald Reagan, who was trying to weaken the foundations of the welfare state built by Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt. In the end, however, we in the West will return to the starting point of our intellectual odyssey, where the protection of the political and economic freedom of individuals – the supreme libertarian value – will return to the heart of the political debate.