

The uncomfortable reality of libertarianism



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When asked in what time period her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, took place in a letter from a fan, Ayn Rand wrote back saying that it "takes place in the near future, about ten years from when one reads the book." With her surging popularity in the past year, many feel as if her dystopia has already come.

Rand is a huge influence on free market advocates and libertarians (although don't call her one), but underscores the difficulty in promoting free market economics. Brink Lindsey, a vice-president at the Cato Institute, was quoted in an op-ed by Heather Wilhelm in last Friday's *Wall Street Journal* calling her "extremist" and "intolerant" who "undermines" free market supporters' "capacity to get anything done." He supports a "bleeding heart libertarianism" that explains why free markets and economic liberty are the best help for the poor and disadvantaged.

Sounds great, if only it were so simple. As many have said before, facts are stubborn things, but unfortunately, people are even more stubborn. If it were as simple as pointing out that a liberal, in the true sense of the word, economy is best for the poor and disadvantaged, then everyone would be a libertarian.

Unfortunately, however, it isn't that simple, and for a simple reason: libertarianism doesn't feel good. It is, more than anything else, an ideology based in reality, and as is often the case: reality sucks.

Chocolate covered terms like freedom, liberty, and choice are useful and good, but the devil, as always, is in the details.

People don't want to hear that they can't have unlimited access to free health care, that it is a good which must be provided by other people, and not a right. They don't want to hear that about education either, to which the same applies.

They don't want to hear that failure is an inevitable part of life. Companies and institutions will fail and people will lose jobs, and we cannot nor should not try to prevent it from happening.

People don't want to accept that taxing the rich and increasing government spending on welfare programs for the poor is not charity, as that involves one voluntarily giving money, and creates a dependency on government as well as an incentive not to work and advance one's station in life.

They don't want to hear that lower income people should not own houses because they often can't afford them. People must live within their means and should not be subsidized at the expense of the taxpayer.

Ideas such as these have noble intentions, but as Milton Friedman said, "One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results."

Libertarians don't criticize these things because they want to, but because someone, anyone, must. Libertarianism doesn't make people feel good, and above all else, people like to feel good.

And as opposed to Lindsey's "get anything done" fallacy, it isn't that libertarians don't want to get anything done, but rather, having come to terms with their uncomfortable reality, they want it done right. Pragmatism is way overrated, and often the government "solutions" are much worse than the problems they intend to solve.

The heart of libertarianism lies instead in its honesty and straightforwardness. It promises freedom as the best way for society to achieve equality. And with this freedom comes a great deal of responsibility on the individual's part. There is no fatal conceit, to use Hayek's term, that we can simply legislate away societal ills, but it is ultimately up to the individual. It doesn't pretend to be perfect, but just the best that is available.

In addition, it does not have the arrogance to pretend that politicians and bureaucrats have the prescience and knowledge to plan and direct people's lives. It assumes that individuals are best suited to make decisions for themselves and their loved ones.

The uncomfortable reality of libertarianism will always remain, and it will be tough for many to overcome and accept. There is plenty of hope in libertarianism and has undoubtedly been the greatest bringer of prosperity the world has ever had. It has brought both more hope and prosperity than the utopia-like ideas of the left, which ultimately have only led to failure.

In the end, the best thing to do is, like Milton Friedman, smile and present your ideas in as straightforward a manner as possible, like Rand, and hope that people can accept the uncomfortable feeling and the frustration that comes with them.

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