

Matt Yglesias

Apr 11th, 2010 at 9:58 am

Positive Liberty

There's an interesting, if a bit baroque to folks outside the libertarian cult, debate taking place as to whether or not it makes sense to regard some point in the 19th Century United States as a golden age of human freedom. Will Wilkinson argues no in a [series](#) of [good](#) posts [on the subject](#). Still, it strikes me that even Wilkinson's mode of argument winds up conceding far too much to the nostalgia party.

The deepest problem with lost age of liberty thinking is highlighted in some of Bruce Bartlett's [comments on economic growth](#):

On the other, I think we tend to underappreciate the ways in which technology frees us. The blessings of things like cellphones, PDAs and the Internet compensate for an enormous amount of waste and inefficiency elsewhere in society and the economy. To the extent that technology boosts productivity, it makes the burden of government more bearable.

Another thing we tend to forget is the great benefit of the wealth that almost all Americans have today. **Not that many years ago, people had to spend an enormous percentage of their waking hours simply acquiring and preparing food.** Now, even among poor households, obtaining adequate food is a minor concern. Indeed, obesity is a far bigger problem among the poor than malnutrition. **The freedom to do things other than grow crops, raise livestock and cook on a wood stove is not one to be underestimated.**

This is the rub. Even if you want to completely leave race and gender issues out of the picture, to say that the average adult white male in 1880 had more economic freedom than does the average adult white male in 2010 you need to completely ignore the beneficial results of 130 years of economic growth and technological progress. After all, very poor people in 2010 probably pay little if any in net taxation but nobody thinks they're *better off* than highly-taxed NBA stars. The vast and unprecedented freedom enjoyed by 21st century Americans is largely encapsulated in the fact that a 21st century American can easily call his dad in New York or fly to Miami or turn on the air conditioning or buy blueberries year round or drive across town. In 1880, people didn't have electrical lights or flush toilets.

There's obviously an important debate about economic policy to be had. Perhaps we've grown richer despite the growth in the size of government and would be richer and freer still if we hadn't established a welfare state. But that's a totally different argument from trying to say that in the real world people today are less free than our impoverished farm-dwelling ancestors.

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68 Responses to “Positive Liberty”

1. *matt w* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:09 am](#)

very poor people in 2010 probably pay little if any in net taxation but nobody thinks they're better off than highly-taxed NBA stars

You're naively underestimating the [depravity](#) to which right-wing apologists will [sink](#).

2. *Rob* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:16 am](#)

Ahh the days of tariffs when we could be sure the little people bore the brunt of taxation.

3. *iluvcapra* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:21 am](#)

The libertarian's dream is to give everyone as many choices as possible, and to make sure poor people's choices are as Hobson-ian as possible.

They really won't be satisfied until people are starving to death on a regular basis — they “*know*” for a fact that there are a lot of “incompetent moochers” out there, and as long as they survive the libertarian will harbor the suspicion the system just isn't free enough.

4. *MD* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:23 am](#)

Its absurd to say very poor people pay little or no tax. They pay negative tax even after payroll taxes are considered, and it's your job as a professional pundit to know this sort of thing. The fact that they pay “taxes” at all is just the result of an accounting gimmick from politicians who want to enact programs without being seen to be increasing taxes. I know that your blog is explicitly partisan/ideological and that's fine (a good thing even), but you still should try to say stuff that's true.

Separately, this blog would be a lot better if we got less posts about Glenn Beck and some foolish Rep who said something strange...Because really,who cares? You're just increasing his ratings by perpetuating his fame. Before you click post, please consider “what would Tyler Cowen do?”

5. *Apsaras* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:23 am](#)

I can look outside and see all the five year old children playing in the commons. Look at all that wasted earning opportunity! That I can't put them to work in my blacking factory is the REAL tyranny, let me tell you.

6. *jonnybutter* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:29 am](#)

Quibble with Bartlett:

obesity is a far bigger problem among the poor than malnutrition.

Malnutrition and obesity are hardly mutually exclusive. Lots of horribly overweight people are also

horribly malnourished.

7. *Shooter242* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:31 am](#)

Everything is relative. Our poor are kings compared to 3rd world poor.

Healthcare believes families making \$88k need help, EITC benefits start at \$40k, and apparently [a family of four making \\$50,000 can avoid income taxes as well.](#)

Yikes, the poor only have availability of free food, housing subsidies, free education, subsidized transportation, Medicaid, and a myriad of other programs.

Whatever will our poor do? it's a catastrophe, a crisis, a possibility of living without HDTV!
Oh be still my aching heart.

8. *abb1* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:31 am](#)

I'm not an anarcho-capitalist libertarian, but the argument here, with substituting "wealth" for "freedom", is a fallacy.

The bird in a cage doesn't have to worry about food, but obviously it's not as free as its hungry brothers and sisters in the wild.

9. *cleek* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:33 am](#)

Before you click post, please consider "what would Tyler Cowen do?"

if i wanted to read Tyler Cowen, i'd read Tyler Cowen.

10. *John Smith* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:44 am](#)

In the 1880's, Libertarian's would be shipped to some island to suffer under the wretched government they both crave and deserve.

Or be hunted for sport...

11. *Anon* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:48 am](#)

Then again, [maybe not](#):

For young Japanese, its back to the farm

As the Japanese recession has worsened, younger workers have taken the brunt of wage cuts and layoffs, especially in manufacturing. Now the government views the slump – Japanese exports fell almost 50 percent year-to-year in February – as a chance to divert idle labor to sectors that have long suffered from worker shortages, like agriculture. Many young Japanese, for their part, have shown a growing interest in farming as disillusionment rises over the grind of city jobs and layoffs. Agricultural job fairs have been swamped with hundreds of applicants; one in Osaka attracted 1,400 people.

12. *urgs* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:53 am](#)

The entire concept of “economic freedom” is not very usefull. No one can do whatever he wants. There are other people, one cant just ignore them. In the end, the freedom of rich people to exploit everyone else, for which economic freedom is nothing more but an euphemism for that, reduces the freedom of almost everyone a lot.

In the end, the concept reduces even the freedom of the rich, because they can go nowhere without security guards, because they life in constant fear that they or their children could reverse to the mean which lifes a horrible life.

13. *UserGoogol* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:54 am](#)

abb1: Matt presumably titled this post “Positive Liberty” for a reason, although he “forgot” to actually explicitly talk about it. Libertarians tend to focus on liberty as being the absence of coercion, but I’d say a more philosophically coherent form of liberty is liberty as being the positive ability to do what you want.

It’s not because they’re richer per se, but because this wealth allows them more options. A person who can’t buy a computer because computers haven’t been invented yet is harmed just as much a person who can’t buy a computer because the Gestapo has banned them.

14. *Max424* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:09 am](#)

I will never be able to enjoy the liberating technological advancements that will presumably come after I’m dead and gone. Therefore, like every human being who has ever lived, I am a slave; or at least not as free as I would have been had I been born later.

Am I getting this right?

15. *Pete* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:12 am](#)

Shooter McGavin:

Everything is relative. Our poor are kings compared to 3rd world poor.

Shooter always looking on the bright side.

The question is how did our poor become “kings.” I’d argue it was the GI Bill and public education, the labor movement and the welfare state (i.e. Obamacare) which helped distribute the wealth created by capitalism more fairly and created a middle class. These products of a democratic society helped create an economy which would draw hard working immigrants from across the globe.

16. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:16 am](#)

As someone who’s spent a certain amount of time immersed in the libertarian cult, it’s a bit surprising to see one of them abandon the mantra that freedom means only negative freedom, and embrace the idea that opportunity is the heart of freedom.

Of course, in this case, the expansion of opportunity is being provided by somebody for profit, and is more available to rich people than to poor people, so they're willing to make an exception. It's only when that opportunity is provided by society as a whole, in an egalitarian manner, that they object to defining freedom in a positive manner.

17. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:18 am](#)

Everything is relative. Our poor are kings compared to 3rd world poor.

Everything is relative. Our citizens' security from terrorism is downright kingly, compared to people in east-central Africa – ergo, we shouldn't worry about it.

Right, Shooter? “Better off than the 3rd world” *is* the standard, right?

18. *Talphon* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:20 am](#)

Shooter242 says:

Healthcare believes families making \$88k need help, EITC benefits start at \$40k, and apparently a family of four making \$50,000 can avoid income taxes as well.

Yikes, the poor only have availability of free food, housing subsidies, free education, subsidized transportation, Medicaid, and a myriad of other programs.

If you are not a family of four making 50k a year, you don't know diddly squat about what is going on. Speaking as a father in exactly such a family (approx 48k last year combined earnings of my wife and myself)... Fuck you, you have no idea. Free food? nope. Housing subsidies? nope. Free education? Sorry bub, I pay state taxes like everyone else. Subsidized transportation? are you talking about buses or what?

You're an ignorant idiot. When you add up all the ways we get the money vacuumed out of our pockets, all the hidden taxes and fees in everything from utilities to gas to car registration/plates to city taxes to sales tax to groceries to property taxes to insurance to home maintenance, you name it. The economy fails because today a family like me can't contribute to voluntary consumption because we don't have anything left. In our case, we fell on hard times 5 years ago and racked up 20,000 dollars in credit card debt (which rapidly ballooned out another 8k due to fees and ruinous rate increases). We've spent these last years paying all that off and are only 5 months away. No bankruptcy, we aren't lazy like that.

Now, my question for you is: why shouldn't a family of 4 who whose adult providers work in excess of 80 hours a week combined... shouldn't get to enjoy some of the largess of the richest country in the world? Please, tell me why you greedy selfish son of a bitch? In our eyes, you are the lazy bastard. Fuck you. You richies make the world on our backs, and act like you did it yourselves. We don't deny what you contribute, but it's not enough to justify what you take.

My apologies to Matt for the profanity in my reply. I consider honesty to be a foremost when communicating with other people, thus making it required.

19. *sparky* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:23 am](#)

in 1880 the average life expectancy of a caucasian in the US was about 40 years. Today it is double

that.

In the 1880s the number of miners killed in mining accidents numbered in the thousands each year. Today the news is dominated by the worst accident in many years – and the death toll is less than 30.

Did these changes occur via the free market system or because of government?

I would say that if the free market had had its way these changes might have happened eventually, but at the cost of how many other additional persons who died before their time while the marketplace was making its magic happen?

The government is charged with “promoting the general welfare” – on that basis alone, government has been a wild success. The argument could be made that more people owe the fact of their lives and their longevity to the government than any other single institution. You don’t have any freedom if you’re dead.

Maybe if the Libertarians could tell us exactly which parts of the hated government is actually taking away their freedom maybe we could discuss it.

20. *bdbd* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:25 am](#)

This doesn’t go back to the golden age of the 19th century, but here’s a tidy [BLS survey of household spending patterns](#) (in broad categories) since 1901.

21. *Brian* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:27 am](#)

LOL @ John Smith’s skilled use of the word “wretched,” above.

Anyway, while I sympathize with some of the nostalgia, it’s simply ahistorical. The US government and state and local governments intervened often in the affairs of the market and private life in the 19th Century, it’s just that it seemed more limited because the tools for intervention were also more limited.

22. *bdbd* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:30 am](#)

Also, I wonder whether the benefits that Bartlett claims for users of gizmos and other modern communications devices/methods aren’t actually expressed as an expansion of the area over which economic activity can be conducted, rather than as a savings in time it takes to conduct that activity. I wonder if people really spend less time engaged in economic to and fro, but with gizmos and PDAs and things, they can do it in a way that is both decentralized and “de-localized” — the span of everyone’s everyday world is much bigger with gizmos, etc.

23. *Brian L* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:32 am](#)

I think that the first government interference in the market we should remove is limited liability for corporate shareholders, etc. I’m curious to see who many people would invest in an enterprise if creditors and judgment holders had access to all of a person’s wealth, not just his investment in that enterprise.

24. *bdbd* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:39 am](#)

Brian L, that's a sure way to make sure nothing gets done or developed. Wilkinson or others might get dreamy about the 19th century maybe, but you're getting dreamy about the 12th century.

25. *DamnYankees* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:39 am](#)

This all goes back to the idea that fundamentally, the whole notion of negative liberty as being the goal is rather non-sensical. Libertarians act as though negative liberty is what we should be striving for, when in reality negative liberty is merely a means to an end – positive liberty.

Why is murder illegal? Because we want people to be able to exercise their ability to live. It's not because "preventing the end of life" is the goal. "Living life" is the goal!

You can set up these formulations in ways which make the libertarian position silly. Imagine the Roman Empire had a law on the books saying "any man who walks on the moon will be put to death". And then imagine they repeal this law. Has anyone's actual liberty gone up? Well, of course not. Because there has been 0 impact on anyone's life at all. The notion that the key point of "liberty" is the absence of restraint is just silly.

26. *RW* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:41 am](#)

When you add up all the ways we get the money vacuumed out of our pockets, all the hidden taxes and fees in everything from utilities to gas to car registration/plates to city taxes to sales tax to groceries to property taxes to insurance to home maintenance, you name it.

What you fail to acknowledge is that if you resided in a system of pure robber-baron laissez-faire capitalism, you'd probably have less after-tax income than you have today, because there would be less wealth available to individuals such as yourself.

Americans tend to do a lot of bitching about taxes, while simultaneously ignoring what they take from the system. They want to feel like net contributors and victims, but most of them are actually net takers and beneficiaries.

If you don't believe that, then there are a couple of easy metrics to measure this — the national debt and the budget deficit. If the government took in as much as it spent, then there wouldn't be a deficit, and the debt would be used more sparingly.

There is an abundance of stuff that is not paid for by users that benefit us. Our fuel taxes are inadequate for paying for our roads, yet those roads allow us both the freedom to travel and access to cheaper goods that are transported on those roads — by expanding the market, we get lower prices. We have subsidized educations that help us to earn more money and allow us to live easier lives, first responders who can do a great deal to help us when we get into trouble, and on and on and on.

Of course, there is waste in the system, and we should fix it. But that is not an issue of reducing the tax burden per se, so much as it is a matter of shifting that burden around and allocating the proceeds to more useful spending.

The right-wing has built its vision of government on the back of perpetual debt. They have no vision for the future, they're just practicing feelgood politics.

27. *Brian L* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:46 am](#)

bdbd, I know very well what I'm saying. And I'm not rhapsodizing for some ancient past. I'm just pointing out that government can create economic opportunity and market freedom by its actions. In the case of limited liability it helps the investor and greases the wheels of commerce. Other regulations protect other people.

28. *Emrys* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:48 am](#)

“The freedom to do things other than grow crops, raise livestock and cook on a wood stove is not one to be underestimated.”

And with it, our greater dependence on government to assure that the economy functions. During the nineteenth century, when the economy was largely agricultural, a family, through dint of hard work, could put aside enough actual resources to see them through hard times. Today, I doubt that is possible; ergo, the increased role of government (as was demonstrated during the recent economic downturn). Yes, technology has bought us many benefits and increased our economic output; to support the nation of today, without falling into third-world subsistence, this progress was necessary and will continue to be necessary. To say however that the technological benefits of the twentyfirst century give us a superior existence, I think is misleading; that technology is necessary to our very survival. So yes, there are some nice side benefits to the technology, but there were some nice side benefits to nineteenth century existence, including less intrusion into lives by government.

29. *riffle* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:52 am](#)

Isn't this tedious game the equivalent of those who think they're reincarnated— their past lives they were royalty rather than the infinitely more likely serf or peasant or worse?

Who was it who said (paraphrase) that the english gentry's lives in the Victorian era was the best way of life the world had ever known? Yeah— but there were a lot of feces-carriers and dirt scrubbers, etc, who supported Lord Do-Nothing in that glorious lifestyle.

The fact that Libertarians are playing a version of this game shows how Glib they are.

30. *ScentOfViolets* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 12:09 pm](#)

I think that the first government interference in the market we should remove is limited liability for corporate shareholders, etc.

And then:

Brian L, that's a sure way to make sure nothing gets done or developed. Wilkinson or others might get dreamy about the 19th century maybe, but you're getting dreamy about the 12th century.

That conclusion is . . . debatable. But I would suggest that there is a difference between limited liability and limited culpability.

31. *MSR* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 12:10 pm](#)

bdbd and Brian L.

I'd like to expand on bdbd's point, which I think is spot on. The government provides a large number of really valuable services which are essential to the prosperity of the nation. Incorporation, for example. There is no requirement under force of law compelling you, or anyone else, to incorporate their business. Exxon/Mobile is free, under the law, to revert to being a private company. It is, however, extremely valuable to use this service provided by the government.

Today's current political debate is between a liberal position that we the people ought to provide these services, charge money for them and then spend the money on being able to continue to provide the services and on our general welfare. This is commerce and trade, pure and simple.

The alternative is the current conservative model in which we the people are obligated to provide these services to certain individuals and groups and should be forbidden from requiring anything whatsoever in return. This constitutes "hand outs".

32. *Anon Says:*

[April 11th, 2010 at 12:17 pm](#)

"If you are not a family of four making 50k a year, you don't know diddly squat about what is going on."

Statistic have spoken. The income of 52k pays the about average cost of federal government, mainly 20% of their income. Whatever help that family gets from government, they pay for dollar per dollar. So one had better hope this family of four is worse as allocating money than Congress.

Reference:

<http://elsa.berkeley.edu/%7Esaetz/piketty-saezJEP07taxprog.pdf>

33. *ScentOfViolets Says:*

[April 11th, 2010 at 12:22 pm](#)

What you fail to acknowledge is that if you resided in a system of pure robber-baron laissez-faire capitalism, you'd probably have less after-tax income than you have today, because there would be less wealth available to individuals such as yourself.

Perhaps what you have here is a muddled idea of what constitutes "economic freedom". For years, it seemed that the debate was implicitly over more equality versus faster growth. Yes, the argument went, more people might be better off now if the gini coefficient were lower, but this would come at the expense of the rate of growth. Thus, in twenty years, or fifty, or two hundred – at *some* undefinable point in the future – the higher growth rate would make everyone then alive better off than they would have been otherwise. The nice thing about this argument was that it all came down to opinion.

However, the latest and best evidence now seems to indicate that all other things being equal, a smaller gini coefficient than what we have now leads not only to more people being immediately better off, but to faster growth as well. So the old premises are no longer operable. Does this mean the scuffle over "economic freedom" has died down? Not at all. Without skipping a beat, we now have defenders of the faith saying that with these sorts of restrictions, the wealthiest of the wealthy wouldn't be quite so well off. That is, even if overall growth was higher, at the top end, those John Galts wouldn't be rewarded enough, and in twenty or fifty or one hundred years, instead of being worth trillions, they would only be worth hundreds of billions, being bilked out of their rightful shares by the parasitic proles.

I don't know what the next stage of the argument will be, but I do know that until the definition of "economic freedom" is formally defined and recognized, it will be an emotive term used to obfuscate, and not a denotative term used to clarify.

34. *Adirondacker12800* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 12:30 pm](#)

cook on a wood stove is not one to be underestimated.

and cooking on a wood stove is much better than cooking in a fireplace. 19th Century for all it's faults was a time of technological wonder.

35. *bob mcmanus* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 12:40 pm](#)

Slowly, very slowly, like two unhurried compass needles, the feet turned towards the right; north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-south-west; then paused, and, after a few seconds, turned as unhurriedly back towards the left. South-south-west, south, south-east, east. ...

36. *LaFollette Progressive* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 1:11 pm](#)

Wilkinson rightly notes that 1880 America offered liberty only to a minority of the population, and Bartlett rightly notes the positive liberties generated by technological progress, and both of these are useful correctives to the "lost golden age" mythos. But nobody seems to be seriously considering that there has been a causal connection between the demise of "small government" and the equalization of liberty.

Without liberal government programs, you had the cherished liberty to spend your paycheck in any way you wanted, and this *necessarily* included the freedom to lose your life savings in a bank failure or a stock market collapse, depend on church soup lines to feed your family when you start dying of black lung disease, get sick from buying a snake oil remedy, owe more money than you can possibly earn to the company store, choose among any place to live within the ghetto that business owners collaborated to consign you and your kind to live, and get your skull bashed in for exercising your liberty to organize a labor union and negotiate for higher wages.

This effort to distinguish between the Golden Age of Small Government and the lack of liberty in 1880s America makes Wilkinson's argument far more ideologically and historically incoherent than Kling's. Kling at least has enough self-awareness to recognize that his goal is to recreate a society where it is POSSIBLE for all the abusive anti-libertarian economic institutions of the 1880s to once again exist, and that only the good intentions of property owners would exist to prevent this from happening.

In other words, the sane libertarians are the ones who don't make any sense. The crazy ones have a perfectly coherent philosophy. They understand the massive potential harms to the liberty and well-being of most Americans that their policies would entail, and they support them anyway.

37. *brandon* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 1:19 pm](#)

Isn't all this eliding the fact that libertarianism is the ideology of the lost frontier, and the "Golden Age of Human Freedom" is the golden age of where you could pick up and move to a (previously depopulated of course) big empty land if you chafed at the restrictions of civilized life?

38. *RW* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 1:28 pm](#)

Isn't all this eliding the fact that libertarianism is the ideology of the lost frontier, and the "Golden Age of Human Freedom" is the golden age of where you could pick up and move to a (previously depopulated of course) big empty land if you chafed at the restrictions of civilized life?

The irony of this, of course, is that homesteading was a massive government giveaway program that transferred the assets of conquered indigenous people into the hands of others who could colonize and secure the land on the government's behalf.

The early United States was fortunate to have vast quantities of resources to steal at its disposal. Had the natives been able to contain the size of the country or beat back their invaders, we would be a very different place today.

39. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 2:02 pm](#)

During the nineteenth century, when the economy was largely agricultural, a family, through dent of hard work, could put aside enough actual resources to see them through hard times.

Except, of course, for when they couldn't, and they starved, or lost everything. Which was depressingly often.

40. *jeff* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 2:41 pm](#)

highly-taxed NBA stars

You mean undertaxed, correct? 35% – on income – is a pretty low historic and international figure as you well know.

41. *StevenAttewell* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 3:28 pm](#)

Interesting post. A few thoughts:

Regarding economic freedom, I've always thought that there is something really cramped about the way that libertarians, et al. describe economic freedom – because it's always from the perspective of the entrepreneur, never from the perspective of the worker.

[The workplace is the least free place in America](#) – it's somewhere where most civil liberties are understood to be waived, where rule of law, equal protection, and due process have only really been available for a short period of time and for a highly restricted set of circumstances – civil rights violations, labor law violations – and even then, it's more hypothetical than actually experienced.

So from that perspective, regulations like health and safety, labor law, and civil rights protections actually increase, not decrease economic freedom for the majority of people by limiting the economic freedom of the elite to deny them their economic freedom.

42. *Gmorbgmibgnikgnok* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 3:55 pm](#)

the beneficial results of 130 years of economic growth and technological progress

Yes. Even more so the last 30 years in China and India, in large part because their governments decided to get out of the way of business. Huge numbers of people have risen out of poverty. Nevertheless, many remain, and will probably require some targeted government re-intervention if they're ever going to improve.

The technological aspect of India's growth is interesting, because it probably wouldn't have been possible before 1990. That's when the erbium-doped fiber amplifier (EDFA) became a commercial reality, in turn making high-speed undersea fiber-optic networks profitable. The coincidental arrival of India's economic liberalization with the advent of the EDFA was very fortunate.

On the other hand, in an alternate reality with no EDFAs, India would have been forced to go into manufacturing instead of software, build roads, and employ millions of illiterate villagers. Whether they could have competed with China is debatable, but the villagers would not have felt so shut out of the Indian economy as they do now.

43. *Julian Elson Says:*

[April 11th, 2010 at 4:28 pm](#)

My thoughts:

1. Does this sort of Sen/Nussbaum "capabilities approach" to freedom actually just turn everything good into "freedom" or "capability?" Not quite, I suppose — I think that its advocates would acknowledge that while, say, whether you can marry a spouse who is of a different race or same sex as yourself is a matter of freedom, your marriage could still suck, that would be worse than your marriage being good, and this has nothing to do with capabilities. Still, I'm a bit worried that we're trying to rephrase everything which is good as "freedom," like airline service, when we're really just abandoning the vocabulary to talk about good things in terms unrelated to freedom.

I'd be prepared to say that some paleolithic hunter-gatherer really was freer than I am, and that her similarly free rivals might be free to attack her hut, kill her boyfriend and kids, and keep her as a slave. (Yes, of course she loses her freedom then, by either standard or capabilities approach views, but just because freedom is precarious doesn't mean it isn't real.) To say that she was never really free, because she wasn't secure, or didn't have a cell phone, or whatever, doesn't strike me as the correct use of "free" in the English language. I think cell phones and security are good, and I think freedom is good, but I don't think security or cell phones are freedom.

2. I'd guess that since the "Golden Age" of the 19th century, the life of the average non-human animal in the USA has gotten quite a bit worse. Treatment of animals has never been good, but I'd say that the emancipation of horses from being a primary power source (and their consequent numerical diminution) does not make up for the significant deterioration of the conditions (never good) of immense numbers of chickens and pigs. This is not a necessary consequence of economic growth or anything, and it's something we can and, I hope, will address without going back to Gilded Age, but if one's going to mention how great it is that food is so cheap, it only seems fair to keep in mind why that is, and what the other consequences are.

44. *Blake Says:*

[April 11th, 2010 at 4:42 pm](#)

Wasn't the golden age of libertarianism really the feudal system? If, as a serf, instead of having to pay any taxes I just have to pay rent to my lord, then we've really reached the small government ideal.

There's no need for any government at all, since the lord can spend his money on setting up whatever charities, and hiring whatever soldiers, he sees fit.

45. [Sylvester Berthiaume](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 5:30 pm](#)

I really enjoy reading the articles on this blog. I'll bookmark this so I can read more later

46. [Julian Elson](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 5:35 pm](#)

Blake, IANAMS (I am not a medieval scholar), but I think there's an extent to which that's true and an extent to which it's not. The rural manorial system did have a *pacta sunt servanda* aspect that no doubt appeals to many libertarians who see consensual contractual obligations as the foundation of law, but the heritable nature of such obligations would probably strike many libertarians as contrary to the principles of liberty — along with the fact that serfs were legally tied to the land, which I doubt many libertarians would like.

In cities — when they were first resettled after the desolation of the dark ages — there was something of a libertarian aspect, with private guilds taking over governance. However, once those urban guilds were established, they did not, of course, prefer free market policies: they implemented a system based on regulated and constrained trade. In short, if democracy in countries with large authoritarian movements leads to “one man, one vote, one time,” the resettlement of cities in the Middle Ages lead to “free markets, for a few years.”

Then, of course, there are the restrictions on personal freedom which I doubt libertarians would like. If you think that, say, Jesus was actually the natural child of Joseph and Mary and was only *adopted* to be the son of God, and you told anyone else about your views, you could end up being very crispy. Certainly, such basic liberal (whether classical liberal, American-style liberal, or libertarian) ideas as freedom of speech or freedom of religious conscience were not respected.

47. [Julian Elson](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 5:37 pm](#)

sunt, not sunta.

48. [Morgan Warstler](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 6:12 pm](#)

I will never be able to enjoy the liberating technological advancements that will presumably come after I'm dead and gone. Therefore, like every human being who has ever lived, I am a slave; or at least not as free as I would have been had I been born later.

Max, This is a real problem, it bugs me you don't get it.

EVENTUALLY there would have been an Internet in any alternative universe – libertarians know we could have had it 10 years earlier. If Reagan hadn't happened, we'd have half the people on dial up even now. You don't believe this, or don't want to even imagine it, but I KNOW it in my bones. I see the rules and regulations and KNOW we're missing out on future shit... largely because in 1980, when I was 10 I was camped out on BBS's ready for the Internet, and the speed of development even in a pro-business Reagan era, was hindered PRECISELY because of the Ma Bell bullshit your people had laid on us before I was even born.

Technology / Invention develops faster or slower based entirely on the kind of economy deployed.

Democracy means shit. Authoritarianism means shit. They are window dressing. Capitalism means everything.

The only thing that truly benefits the poor is new inventions... said simply, the ice box caused women's rights. but deeper than that, moving money from pile to pile doesn't really do much, what does VERY MUCH is setting up the economy so that invention is rewarded by profit, so that there are no limits on invention, that's why the "free" market is so damn important.

This doesn't mean we don't need government, it doesn't mean we can't provide a safety net, **it just means in our efforts to provide these things, we should step a gingerly as possible around the golden goose.**

Talphon,

No man, fuck you. You better be damn grateful for the broadband, and the \$400 HDTV, and the UNLIMITED WORLDWIDE phone calls for \$30 per year. You ungrateful fuck.

Look around in a state of wonder like any moral man does. What an asshole...

49. [RanDomino](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 7:08 pm](#)

If by "people" you mean "rich white males", then yes, "people" were more free in the 1800s.

50. [Julian Elson](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 7:20 pm](#)

I don't know, RanDomino. If you're talking "positive liberty" in the sense that Yglesias is talking about here, then rich white males still had to put up with, say, considerably greater likelihood of dying of tuberculosis that we have today, and of course they didn't have other "positive capacities" like riding on airplanes. If you're talking negative liberties, I'm not sure what negative liberties rich white males have lost. Perhaps some "freedom of contract" rights like hiring children have been lost, but, on the other hand, laws against sodomy have been invalidated. I'm inclined to think rich white males are freer than ever.

51. [StevenAttewell](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 8:42 pm](#)

Following the thread of the importance of the 14th amendment, I'd also point out that rich free white males who were abolitionists found out the limits of their liberty if they attempted to exercise free speech in a slave state – and even in some free states.

52. [Glaivester](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 9:19 pm](#)

This is the rub. Even if you want to completely leave race and gender issues out of the picture, to say that the average adult white male in 1880 had more economic freedom than does the average adult white male in 2010 you need to completely ignore the beneficial results of 130 years of economic growth and technological progress.

That would be a very good point, if arguing with someone who says that he would give up all of the technology of the 21st century to have the limited federal government of the 19th.

Libertarians tend to be nostalgic for certain aspects of the 19th century, not for everything about it.

Blacks had more equality under Reagan than under Lincoln or Roosevelt. Would you argue that this means that Reagan is a better proponent of civil rights than Lincoln or Roosevelt?

53. [Glaivester](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 9:27 pm](#)

Libertarians tend to focus on liberty as being the absence of coercion, but I'd say a more philosophically coherent form of liberty is liberty as being the positive ability to do what you want.

I don't see it as more philosophically coherent as a definition of liberty; you may argue that the positive ability to do what you want is a better measure of well-being, but "well-being" is a different concept than "liberty."

Your argument seems to be that the positive ability to do what you want is more important to "well-being" than the absence of coercion, but that could simply be taken to mean that liberty is not the sole measure of well-being.

Now, if you wish to argue about whether or not the 19th century was a golden age of liberty based on whether private coercion is better or worse than government coercion (or based on whether or not the source of coercion [i.e. more localized like the states or more centralized like the federal government]), then that is a real argument on the issue.

But the goal here simply seems to be to change the definition of liberty so as to deprive those who disapprove of coercion from having a word with which to describe their preferences.

54. [Jay](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:36 pm](#)

"Now, even among poor households, obtaining adequate food is a minor concern. Indeed, obesity is a far bigger problem among the poor than malnutrition."

Exactly back-asswards. Obesity *is* often malnutrition. Statistically and realistically, our poor are now the obese, BECAUSE of cheap, processed "food products" and the lack of exertion needed to create and/or prepare food.

Likewise for the children of affluent or middle-class, busy, working parents, who often eat processed, and microwaved meals, and are not allowed out of the house, so they play computer games all day instead of exercising outdoors- or at least working in their own garden.

55. [StevenAttewell](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 10:45 pm](#)

I would argue that the idea of positive liberty rests on the recognition that coercion is not the sole property of the state, and the understanding that in order to exercise liberty – to **act**, free from coercion – requires both the absence of coercion and the capacity for independent action.

The great divide in classical liberalism arguably was between those who thought that those who lacked that capacity – understood at the time as ownership of land, but since then much more broadly understood – should be denied freedom, and those who thought that the means should be distributed to the masses in the form of education and free land.

Positive liberty emerges from the latter. As Roosevelt said, “necessitous men are not free men.” If you have to keep your job to keep your health care, you are not free to tell your boss to go to hell if he seeks to coerce you. If you’re standing in the shape-up in front of a factory gate, or the docks, or the “slave auction” of domestic workers on 125th, or the parking lot of a Home Depot and you must work today or be evicted, you are not free to refuse a starvation wage or any other form of coercion.

56. [Glaivester](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:09 pm](#)

Malnutrition and obesity are hardly mutually exclusive. Lots of horribly overweight people are also horribly malnourished.

That is a good point. The fact that substances that provide calories (i.e., fat, carbs, and proteins) are nutrients does not mean that they are the only nutrients, or that increasing the uptake of these nutrients will solve all nutritional deficiencies.

Resources in an economy behave in a similar way, which is why assuming that labor is a homogenous resource which can be immediately and effortlessly harnessed to provide the support for its employment is wrong. Just as one needs all of the appropriate nutrients to be healthy, a job requires all of the appropriate inputs to be productive.

This is why there is unemployment during the bust; because the resources need to be structured in such a way that everyone who wants a job can do something that actually produces something useful. To simply give people make-work jobs so they won’t be idle with the idea that we can harness all of their productive ability is like assuming that we can cure scurvy-related problems with iron and folic acid metabolism by increasing the doses of iron and folic acid. The problem isn’t a lack of these items, but a lack of the vitamin C needed to process them properly.

57. [Glaivester](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:11 pm](#)

#55: Of course, you are assuming then that everyone else owes you a living, aren’t you, and if anything is required of you to earn it, that is coercion?

58. [Colatina](#) Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:39 pm](#)

I’m pretty surprised that MattY doesn’t really put any distance between himself and the right-wing utilitarianism that the Bartlett quote represents. It’s fine to say that human liberty and economic prosperity march, more or less, hand in hand. It’s another to say that richer people are, the necessarily freer they are. Of course billionaires have all kinds of fun opportunities that other people don’t have. But that’s not the kind of freedom that people are talking about (or should be talking about) when they make judgments about political and economic systems. The fact that someone lives in a prison camp rather than not and the fact that someone lacks the chance to get an education are serious deficiencies in human freedom. The fact that I don’t have a jet pack to fly around in or the fact that I can’t get in a helicopter and tell it to fly me over Mount Fuji are not.

Now, of course the positive opportunities provided by economic welfare obviously do have something to do with freedom. Someone who is working basically all their waking hours doing mindless toil, with no time for leisure and no resources for self-development or self-expression, is not very free, even if the state may protect their civil rights and keep their tax burden light. Being wealthier would make that person more free. But that’s not the same as saying that someone who has air conditioning and indoor

plumbing is more free than those who don't.

This is a pretty important point for advanced, wealthy democracies, because while there are still some serious problems with economic fairness and opportunity in these societies, from the perspective of freedom the problem is with a stupid, frivolous mass culture and individual choice rather than the policies of the state. Individual negative freedom is about as wide as can be, and opportunities for self-development are pretty abundant, but the things that people actually choose to spend their time doing are often as stultifying as the toil of the factory worker c. 1910.

59. *ScentOfViolets* Says:

[April 11th, 2010 at 11:42 pm](#)

But the goal here simply seems to be to change the definition of liberty so as to deprive those who disapprove of coercion from having a word with which to describe their preferences.

No. The goal here – your goal – is to change the definition of coercion. For example: A woman through no fault of her own is stranded in the desert and is doomed to die of dehydration until a Good Samaritan comes along and offers her a ride back to civilization. However, he won't do it for free. His price is \$50,000 and access to her favors for the next 20 years, starting now in the back of his Jeep. Is this woman being coerced? Most people I know would say yes. Most libertarians would say no, that he is not coercing her in any way.

Don't try to impart unique meanings to words as if you get to decide what the definitions are, and don't try to make "physical coercion" the only type of coercion possible.

60. *Colatina* Says:

[April 12th, 2010 at 12:26 am](#)

"Libertarians tend to focus on liberty as being the absence of coercion, but I'd say a more philosophically coherent form of liberty is liberty as being the positive ability to do what you want."

First of all, it's not just libertarians who define freedom negatively. A lot of welfare liberals, do too. Some socialists and radical feminists talk about freedom as the absence of coercion, too—they just criticize the very narrow way in which libertarians and conservatives define coercion.

More importantly, I don't agree that the idea of freedom and the "positive ability to do what you want" is philosophically coherent. One big problem is that it doesn't suggest any kind of baseline. What kind of wants count as desires the denial of which would constitute a lack of freedom? Things which humans, left unimpeded, could normally do? Things which humans should aspire to do? Things which are currently impossible given current technology, but in the future might be possible? Things which are against the laws of physics? It would be bizarre for me to say that the fact I can't instantly travel to Alpha Centauri is a deficiency in my freedom. But it's pretty conventional to say that lack of access to education, or not having the right to vote, are. The latter are genuine positive freedoms, not simply because some people might want to vote or get an education.

It's the fact that you actually have to make some distinction between things a (positively) free person would be able to do and things a free person may or may not be able to do that makes people retreat to negative concepts of freedom which focus on the absence of external impediments. Positive conceptions of freedom are harder to pull off but better.

61. *Aqua Regia* Says:

[April 12th, 2010 at 12:48 am](#)

Would the last man alive on earth be the most free man in history? There would be no one who could coerce him.

62. [StevenAttewell](#) Says:
[April 12th, 2010 at 12:57 am](#)

57 – I’m asserting that if you have to work to survive and someone can take advantage of that fact and a monopsony or oligopsony position in the labor market, you can be self-coerced.

This isn’t anything particularly radical. It’s right there in Adam Smith: “What are the common wages of labour, depends everywhere upon the contract usually made between those two parties, whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower the wages of labour.

It is not, however, difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in the dispute, and force the other into a compliance with their terms. The masters, being fewer in number, can combine much more easily; and the law, besides, authorizes, or at least does not prohibit their combinations, while it prohibits those of the workmen. We have no acts of parliament against combining to lower the price of work; but many against combining to raise it. In all such disputes the masters can hold out much longer. A landlord, a farmer, a master manufacturer, a merchant, though they did not employ a single workman, could generally live a year or two upon the stocks which they have already acquired. Many workmen could not subsist a week, few could subsist a month, and scarce any a year without employment. In the long run the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him; but the necessity is not so immediate.”

Historically speaking, people have in the past been so reduced economically that they sell themselves into slavery to survive. That doesn’t make it any less slavery.

63. [Bart](#) Says:
[April 12th, 2010 at 8:15 am](#)

The year you cite, 1880, was pre-Haymarket. That particular affair was over American labor’s fight for the eight hour day, something we now take for granted.

64. [Catoismymotor](#) Says:
[April 12th, 2010 at 9:48 am](#)

It is sad how many of you don’t know what it means to be a libertarian. Feed your brains at the provided links.

<http://www.lp.com>

<http://www.cato.org>

65. [Aatos](#) Says:
[April 12th, 2010 at 10:14 am](#)

You had the liberty of working 70 hours a week and dying at 40, if you didn’t die at 30 from some poison sold by a liberated and unlicensed “professional,” at 20 in a liberated, unregulated factory or mine accident, or at 10 of a liberated infectious disease.

Libertarianism is conservatism: take for granted all your current privileges and wish for less accountability.

66. [Lizard](#) Says:

[April 12th, 2010 at 11:56 am](#)

This is a point I've been making for some time, WRT to the unfortunate agrarian/primitivist strain of libertarian thought: If your only choice is "Stare at a mule's butt for 20 hours a day, or starve", the fact no one is forcing you to pick one over the other doesn't make you more free. This applies equally to the same strains of thought on the left, where there's a lot of overlap, seen in all sorts of hippie communes and "back to nature" movements. Having your choices dictated by the necessities of raw survival doesn't make you any more free than having your choices dictated by, well, a dictator. This is the constant calculation everyone living in a society must make — is the freedom I gain from having other people grow food, build houses, forge metal, write computer programs, etc, greater than the freedom I lose by agreeing to limitations on my otherwise moral actions? (I have an innate right, for example, to exact justice on those who have wronged me; I choose to cede that power to the State in return for the benefits of having a presumably neutral third party enact that right for me.) There is, of course, a tipping point, where your actions are so constrained that no amount of extra time is enough, because the things you might wish to do with that time are themselves limited. (Leftist apologists tend to cite the alleged high literacy rate of Cuba; what's the point of a high literacy rate when the only thing there is to read is what the government provides?)

67. [chris](#) Says:

[April 12th, 2010 at 12:03 pm](#)

Blacks had more equality under Reagan than under Lincoln or Roosevelt. Would you argue that this means that Reagan is a better proponent of civil rights than Lincoln or Roosevelt?

Yes, but only because he was carried kicking and screaming on the shoulders of giants.

By Reagan's time, openly fighting against equality was out of the Overton Window for anyone who wanted to win elections. Lincoln, IIRC, pretty openly said that blacks were inferior, but that they should just be treated more decently than they were at the time.

68. [StevenAttewell](#) Says:

[April 12th, 2010 at 12:43 pm](#)

Aatos, Lizard:

Don't forget the existence of private coercion in the 19th century. If the reason why you might die in a factory accident is that the bosses chain shut the factory doors or the reason that you might die in a mine explosion is that mine owners have bought off the government and gunthugs beat the crap out of anyone who complains about safety standards (and they own the newspapers, and the housing, and the store), you're being coerced.

If the reason that you're staring at a mule's ass twenty hours a day is that the landlord has trapped you in debt peonage and has the legal right to send bounty hunters after you if you try to get off the land, you're being coerced.

Private coercion is rife throughout the 19th century, and it didn't disappear in the 20th century — libertarians need to read more labor history, especially the parts about how the IWW had to win free speech in the face of beatings, jailings, and mob violence.

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