

Left-Libertarianisms

“Libertarian” originally meant a believer in the doctrine of free will, later acquired the political meaning of a left anarchist, typically anarcho-communist or anarcho-syndicalist. That meaning survives in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the U.S.

Early in the 20th Century the opponents of liberalism stole its name, leaving believers in small government, free markets, and individual freedom nameless. We solved the problem by stealing the label “libertarian” from the left anarchists. The result is that while “left libertarian” is sometimes used to distinguish left anarchists from libertarians (modern sense) it is also used to label positions within the libertarian movement, most often ones that differ from conventional libertarianism by supporting policies usually identified with the left, such as income redistribution.

The oldest of those is geolibertarianism, based on the ideas of Henry George, a 19th century economist. Its central tenet is that since no individual has a just claim to the income from the site value of land, land being an unproduced resource, government ought to support itself by taxing all and only that income. Two recent books, *The Origins of Left-Libertarianism* and *Left-Libertarianism and its Critics*, both edited by Peter Vallentyne and Hillel Steiner, discuss that and other positions along similar lines.

Geolibertarianism grows out of, and attempts to solve, the problem of initial appropriation. It is very useful for land to be treated as private property. But libertarian philosophy mostly bases its justification of ownership on creation — and land, with rare exceptions, is not created by humans. Locke famously tried to solve the problem by arguing that humans acquire ownership over land by mixing their labor with it, but that solution raises a number of problems. Readers who share my interest in the issue may want to look at an old [article](#) of mine in which I offered some possible, if not entirely satisfactory, solutions.

Libertarian author Roderick Long, describes himself as a left libertarian in a different sense. Unlike geolibertarians, his difference from the mainstream of libertarianism is defined by conclusions, not the arguments that lead to them. On a range of issues that libertarians divide on, he accepts the alternative closer to left wing views. His post on the subject¹ lists nine. I agree with between five and seven of them, am neutral on one. The only one where I definitely disagree with him is his anti-punishment position, since I think it makes sense for some forms of punishment to be part of a legal system. The other part of his self-definition of left-libertarianism is agreeing with people on the left about a variety of issues not obviously political, for instance that race and gender are "largely social constructs." I disagree with that one and probably with some of the others.

Roderick's description of his position reminds me of several people who have come to something close to his position from what I think is the other direction, although I do not know his history well enough to be sure what direction he came to it from. They think of themselves as leftists but have been convinced by, or worked out for themselves, enough of the libertarian argument to be in some sense libertarians. Examples would be Cass Sunstein, who sometimes describes himself as a libertarian, Larry Lessig, whom I have occasionally tried to persuade that he should, and Scott Alexander, the author of one of the anti-libertarian faq's discussed in Chapter **XXX**, not all of which he still agrees with. James Scott, author of at least two books that I, and I think many other

¹ For his self-description on Austro-Athenian Empire, Roderick T. Long's Web Journal, see <http://praxeology.net/unblog08-05.htm#07>.

libertarians, like, is arguably another case, despite his efforts to make it clear to his readers that he is not one of those icky libertarians.

The next few chapters deal with my arguments with yet another sort of left libertarians, ones who want to modify libertarianism by adding to it elements from the high liberalism, based in part on the ideas of John Rawls, fashionable among political philosophers in academia. They call themselves Bleeding Heart Libertarians (BHL).