



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 6, 2014

Libertarians Branded “New Communists” at Bloomberg.com

The trite joke used to be that right-wing zealots would look for communists under the bed. A pair of political commentators writing at [Bloomberg.com](#) apparently can find them at the Cato Institute, or perhaps at LewRockwell.com. According to venture capitalist Nick Hanauer and Eric P. Liu, a former domestic policy adviser to President Bill Clinton, “radical libertarians” are the “new communists.”



The authors acknowledge the apparent contradiction. “Most people would consider radical libertarianism and communism polar opposites: The first glorifies personal freedom. The second would obliterate it. Yet the ideologies are simply mirror images,” they contend. “Both attempt to answer the same questions, and fail to do so in similar ways. Where communism was adopted, the result was misery, poverty and tyranny. If extremist libertarians ever translated their beliefs into policy, it would lead to the same kinds of catastrophe.”

Since the “extremist libertarians” rarely get the opportunity to translate their beliefs into policy, Hanauer and Liu are hard pressed to find evidence in support of their thesis. They go so far as to claim Somalia as an example. “It is in failed states such as Somalia,” they contend, “that libertarianism finds its fullest actual expression.” Really. While some hardcore libertarians are self-proclaimed anarcho-capitalists, most would welcome a return to good old U.S. constitutional government. It might be possible to find American libertarians calling for a central government run by rival tribal chieftains, but they would be rarer than hens’ teeth.

The authors define “radical libertarianism” as “the ideology that holds that individual liberty trumps all other values.” That’s a stretch. Libertarians by definition hold liberty as their primary value. So did many, perhaps most, of the Founders of our Republic, especially those who risked their “lives, fortunes and sacred honor” for freedom and independence from the British empire. Surely it is true of those who composed and ratified the Bill of Rights. But individual freedom need not “trump,” but may co-exist with other values worthy of the name. It should, however, trump any “value” attached to the alleged “right” of some to the fruits of the labor and enterprise of others. It should trump also the “value” of having government compel some people to provide services others may want, as is the case with the federal “contraceptive mandate” in the maze of regulations in what is known as ObamaCare. Obviously, “all other values” include the value of public safety. Perhaps Hanauer and Liu know of libertarians radical enough to claim freedom of speech does include, in the memorable phrase of Justice Holmes, the right of “falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic.” If they do, they might tell us about them some time.

“A President Paul,” they claim, would “rule by tantrum, shutting down the government in order to repeal laws already passed by Congress.” They cite no example of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) doing any such thing. They describe Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) as one “whose highest aspiration is to shut down



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government,” and claim Grover Norquist, founder and president of Americans for Tax Reform, “has made a career out of trying to drown, stifle or strangle government.”

To paraphrase (slightly) “Cool Hand Luke,” “Yeah, that poor ol’ government needs all the help it can get.” The radical shoe, in fact, belongs on the other foot. While government is necessary and useful to some extent, its excessive bureaucracy, taxation, and regulations have combined in many instances to “drown, stifle or strangle” individual enterprise. Yet these commentators apparently regard as an anarchist anyone who argues for a less ambitious role for the federal government. If they know of any instances of Paul, Cruz, or Norquist debating “whether government should even exist,” they have not favored the readers of their *Bloomberg* article with them.

Proposals to do away with the income tax, or even to eliminate its “progressive” feature, furnish more examples of “radical libertarianism” or the “new communism,” the authors claim. If so, then what was the United States before the adoption of the income tax in 1913 — home of the old communists? There are, after all, other streams of revenue, such as tariffs, excise taxes, and the per capita taxation recognized by the original Constitution. It is commonly argued that today’s government has undertaken far more activities than it did in the early years of the 20th century and thus needs more revenue. Right. And that’s the problem.

As for progressive taxation, the top rate on the income tax exceeded 90 percent in the 1950s and early 60s. Is that not a confiscation of wealth without “due process of law”? One of the foremost advocates of a “flat tax” has been Steve Forbes — an unlikely anarchist or “new communist.”

“A Koch domestic policy,” Hanauer and Liu claim, “would obliterate environmental standards for clean air and water, so that polluters could externalize all their costs onto other people.” Again, no specifics are offered to support that characterization. Surely, not all opposition to environmental laws is radical, since many of the laws are themselves radical. A sensible environmental policy would put people and their property ahead of the welfare of the snail darter, the spotted owl, the Elderberry long-horned beetle, the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly, and the Delta Smelt for whose sake the federal diversion of water has contributed greatly to a drought in northern California.

The authors claim radical libertarians believe “humans are wired only to be selfish, when in fact cooperation is the height of human evolution.” One need not be a radical libertarian to believe people naturally tend to pursue their self-interest. And it is true that Ayn Rand, who has a significant following among libertarians, published a collection of her essays entitled, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, in which she expressed a dim view of even voluntary altruism. Not all libertarians, even “radical libertarians,” subscribe to that view, however. Many, perhaps most, believe that voluntary sharing of one’s goods and services to help those in need is a noble deed. They also believe that voluntary cooperation in commercial enterprise is the most efficient and fruitful means of production, as well as the method most respectful of human liberty.

Hanauer and Liu, on the other hand, seem to believe cooperation must ever be mandated and directed by government. They might try reading (or possibly rereading) Leonard Read’s essay [I, Pencil](#), a fascinating account of all the activities and exchanges that go into the creation of a seemingly simple pencil. Now if at some point, perhaps during the New Deal, there had been created a federal Department of Pencil Production, two things would now be true. The first is that there would either be a shortage of pencils or they would be a good deal more expensive than they are now. The second is that Hanauer and Liu would argue that anyone who wanted to do away with the department, rather than call for an improvement of its regulations, should be regarded as a “radical libertarian” and thus a “new



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communist.”

Thomas Jefferson argued that the Constitution authorizes the Congress to legislate penalties for only four categories of crime — counterfeiting, treason, piracy, and “Offenses against the law of nations.” (Article I, Section 8) Today the federal criminal code is so voluminous that Harvey Silvergate a few years ago wrote a book claiming the average American commits as many as *Three Felonies a Day*. Yet Hanauer and Liu — and unfortunately many others — regard calls to “Roll back the state” as evidence of “extremism.”

Yet the pair seems to regard as benign the support some libertarians give to same-sex “marriage.” The idea that a government should by legislative act, or worse by judicial fiat, arbitrarily redefine the ages-old meaning of marriage is something truly radical. The idea that such a novel concept of marriage may be imposed contrary to vote of the people, as happened in California, is the ultimate triumph of ideology over the principle of self-government, as well as both common sense and long-standing tradition.

The radical expansion of the arbitrary power of government has been going on for so long that many have come to believe that it is opposition to it that is radical. Long ago George Orwell wrote: “We have now sunk to a depth at which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.”

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