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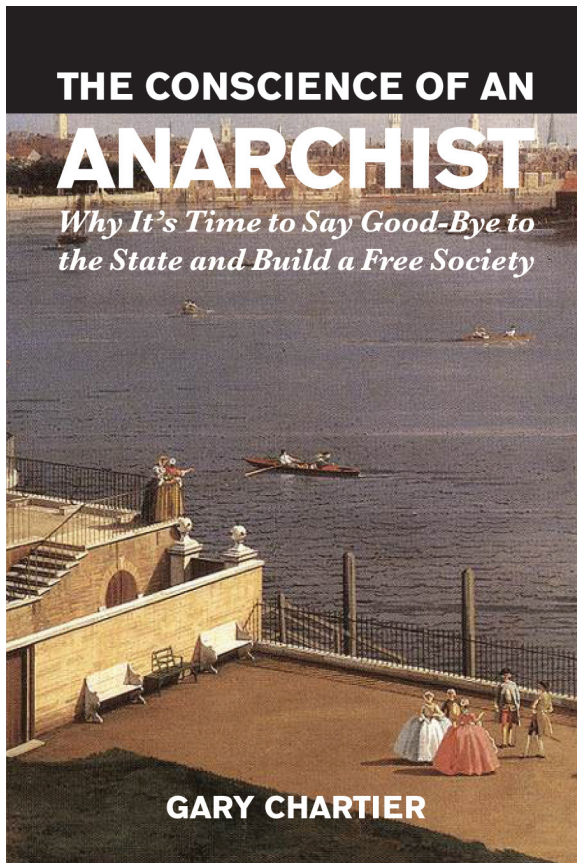


**Proletarian Blues**

**Pootmop! & POOTMOP Redux!**

**Roderick T. Long**

**Radical Reprints**



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controlled capitalism,” or the like — to prevent my being taken to mean something I don’t. (The common use of the term “capitalism” to apply to the existing social system is yet another reason to avoid using it without an explanatory qualifier as a term for what one is defending, lest one be taken for a defender of the status quo.)

Incidentally, Stephan uses [Ayn] Rand’s words to explain why he embraces the term “capitalism”: “For the reason that makes you afraid of it.” But this is a straight line if I ever heard one; it’s practically begging Kevin to make precisely the same response about “socialism.” The truth is, though, that there are good and bad reasons to be afraid of the term “capitalism,” just as there are good and bad reasons to be afraid of the term “socialism.” (And ditto, of course, for “selfishness,” the term Rand was defending in the passage Stephan quotes.) That is precisely why one needs to disambiguate, and to avoid assuming that everyone means and has always meant the same thing by terms like “capitalism” and “socialism,” or phrases like “private ownership of the means of production,” that one does oneself.

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*By Roderick T. Long*

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control by workers via the market and *laissez-faire*; the aforementioned anarchist thinkers – to whose ranks [Benjamin] Tucker also belongs – favour the latter option. (Thus when Tucker calls himself a “socialist,” he means socialism-2.) The following chart may be helpful:

### Control of the Means of Production

		How Associated	
		Privately	Socially
Control by whom	Workers themselves	<b>Individualist anarchism</b> (whether mutualist or agorist) [capitalism-1, socialism-2]	<b>Paradigmatic socialism</b> (whether state-socialist or anarcho-communist) [socialism-1 & 2]
	Capitalist owners	<b>Paradigmatic capitalism</b> [capitalism-1 & 2]	<b>Corporate-state capitalism/fascism</b> [socialism-1, capitalism-2]

Thus Hodgskin, Tucker, *et al.* would fall in the upper left quadrant, and Marx and Kropotkin in the upper right. The chart doesn't accommodate everyone ([William] Godwin and [Mikhail] Bakunin seem to fall somewhere between the top two quadrants, for example), but it's a start.

A further complication is that it's a matter of dispute among the various parties whether existing capitalist society is closer to the bottom left or bottom right quadrant (and why). Also, both state-socialists and right-wing libertarians tend to regard capitalism-2 (capitalist control) as a natural result of capitalism-1 (private control) – though they disagree as to whether to cheer or boo about that result – while left-wing libertarians tend to regard capitalism-2 (capitalist control) as the pernicious result of socialism-1 (state intervention), and promote capitalism-1 (a genuine free market) in the expectation that it will eventuate in socialism-2 (worker control).

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Thanks to the ambiguity of the terms “socialism” and “capitalism” I tend to avoid using them without some kind of qualifier – e.g. “state socialism,” “free-market socialism,” “corporatist capitalism,” “worker-

### Proletarian Blues

I've finally gotten around to reading Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, a book I've seldom seen libertarians mention without a sneer. But in fact it is a mostly excellent book.

Ehrenreich went “undercover” to document the lives of the working poor and the Kafkaesque maze of obstacles they face: the grindingly low wages; the desperate scramble to make ends meet; the perpetual uncertainty; the surreal, pseudo-scientific job application process; the arbitrary and humiliating petty chickenshit tyrannies of employers; the techniques of intimidation and normalisation; the mandatory time-wasting; the indifference to employee health; the unpredictably changing work schedules, making it impossible to hold a second job; etc., etc.

None of this was news to me; I've lived the life she describes, and she captures it quite well. But it might well be news to those on the right who heroise the managerial class and imagine that the main causes of poverty are laziness and welfare.

Of course the book has its flaws. One is the author's attitude toward her “real” working-class colleagues, which sometimes struck me as rather patronising. The other – and this is what invokes the libertarians' sneers – is her economically clueless, hopelessly statist diagnosis and proposed solutions. She thinks the problems she talks about are caused by “the market,” an entity concerning whose operations she has some strange ideas. (For example, she thinks the reason housing prices are so high is that both the rich and the poor need housing, and so the prevailing prices are determined by the budgets of the rich. She notes in passing that this effect doesn't seem to apply to food prices – even though both the rich and the poor presumably need food too – but seems blissfully untroubled by the inconsistency in her theories.) And her suggestions for fixing the problem include a higher minimum wage (a “remedy” that would throw many of the objects of her compassion out of work) and more public assistance.

But Ehrenreich's misguided diagnoses and prescriptions occupy at most a tenth of the book. The bulk of the book is devoted to a description of the problems, and there's nothing sneerworthy about *that*. And libertarians will

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win few supporters so long as they continue to give the impression of regarding the problems Ehrenreich describes as unimportant or non-existent. If you're desperately ill, and Physician A offers a snake-oil remedy while Physician B merely snaps, "stop whining!" and offers nothing, Physician A will win every time.

So if Ehrenreich's solutions are the wrong ones, what are the right ones? Here I would name two.

First: eliminate state intervention, which predictably works to benefit the politically-connected, not the poor. As I like to say, libertarianism is the proletarian revolution. Without all the taxes, fees, licenses, and regulations that disproportionately burden the poor, it would be much easier for them to start their own businesses rather than working for others. As for those

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who do still work for others, in the dynamically expanding economy that a rollback of state violence would bring, employers would have to compete much more vigorously for workers, thus making it much harder for employers to treat workers like crap. Economic growth would also make much higher wages *possible*, while competition would make those higher wages *necessary*. There would be other benefits as well; for example,

Ehrenreich complains about the transportation costs borne by the working poor as a result of suburbanisation and economic segregation, but she never wonders whether zoning laws, highway subsidies, and other such government policies have anything to do with those problems.

Second: build worker solidarity. On the one hand, this means formal organisation, including unionisation – but I'm not talking about the prevailing model of "business unions," conspiring to exclude lower-wage workers and jockeying for partnership with the corporate/government elite, but *real* unions, the old-fashioned kind, committed to the working *class* and not just union members, and interested in worker autonomy, not government patronage. (See Paul Buhle's *Taking Care of Business* for a history of how pseudo-unions crowded out real ones, with government help.) On the other hand, it means helping to build a broader *culture* of workers standing up for one another and refusing to submit to humiliating treatment.

These two solutions are of course complementary; an expanded economy, greater competition among employers, and fewer legal restrictions on workers makes building solidarity easier, while at the same time increased solidarity can and should be part of a political movement fighting the state.

to what either of these much-contested terms means. As I've pointed out previously, many people – especially socialists, but often capitalists too – hear "private ownership of the means of production" as implying, by definition, "ownership of the means of production by someone other than the workers," and take this to be definitive of capitalism; that's not part of what Stephan means by the term, but it's a widespread and longstanding use – as is the use of the word "socialism" (by the 19th-century individualist anarchists, for example) to mean worker control of industry, not necessarily in a centralised or collective or communal manner. The ownership-by-capitalists/ownership-by-workers way of understanding the capitalism/socialism distinction is at least as old and well pedigreed as the private/public way of understanding it.

To quote from one of my favourite authors (i.e. myself):

We've seen a number of anarchist thinkers – [Thomas] Hodgskin, [P.J.] Proudhon, [Stephen Pearl] Andrews, [Lysander] Spooner, [Herbert] Spencer – whose views are not easily classified as "socialist" or "capitalist," since, in one way or another, they seek the putatively socialist *goal* of worker control of industry, via the putatively capitalist *means* of private ownership and market exchange. Part of the problem is that there are (at least) two distinct ways of understanding the contrast between capitalism and socialism. In the first meaning, socialism-1 favours control of the means of production by *society* (whether organised via the state or not), whereas capitalism-1 favours control of the means of production by private (albeit perhaps contractually associated) *individuals*. In the second meaning, socialism-2 favours control of the means of production by *the workers themselves*, while capitalism-2 favours control of the means of production by someone *other* than the workers – *i.e.*, by capitalist owners.

These two meanings are often run together, with socialism entailing control *by* the workers in their *social* capacity (perhaps anarchically, perhaps via the state) and capitalism entailing control *by* capitalists in their *private* capacity. But that leaves open two harder-to-classify options – control by capitalists via the state, and

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“capitalist” and “socialist” libertarians, then, is that one group hears the phrase “private ownership of the means of production” and thinks, “ah yes, producers getting to keep what they produce,” and the other group hears the same phrase and thinks, “ah yes, producers not being allowed to keep what they produce.” My advice to both groups, then, is: try not to use this phrase without explaining it, and don’t automatically assume you know what others mean by the phrase when they use it.

### **POOTMOP Redux!**

Stephan [Kinsella] objects to Kevin [Carson’s] defense of the term “socialism.” “Words have meanings,” Stephan insists, and apparently the word “socialism” just means “centralized control of the means of production”

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there’s no simple fact of the matter as to what either of these much-contested terms means.

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acceptable instance of *pootmop*. To “capitalist” libertarians, *pootmop* contrasts not with worker-owned co-ops but with the ownership of the means of production either by the state or by society at large.

Now there are, to be sure, many “socialist” advocates of worker control who envision such control as being exercised either via the state (*e.g.*, Marx, at least in the short run) or via society at large (*e.g.*, Kropotkin). But there are a good many “socialists,” particularly in the anarchist tradition, who favour something like decentralised, bottom-up networks of autonomous local workers’ co-ops – which would count as *pootmop* by some standards and not others.

A problem for mutual communication between the “capitalist”

– while “capitalism” likewise apparently just means “a system in which the means of production are privately owned.”

But there’s no simple fact of the matter as

That’s the left-libertarian movement I’d like to see. And people keep telling me it doesn’t exist. Good lord! I *know* it doesn’t exist; why else would I be urging that it be brought into existence?

Of course I’m also told that it *can’t* exist. Libertarians tell me it won’t work because leftists don’t care enough about liberty; leftists tell me it won’t work because libertarians don’t care enough about the poor and oppressed. In short, each side insists that it’s the other side that won’t play along.

Now the answer to this is that some will (and have) and some won’t – but that we should do what we can to *increase* the number who will. So here’s a general challenge.

If you’re a libertarian who thinks leftists don’t care about liberty, why not *become* a leftist who cares about liberty? That way there’ll be one more. Or if you’re a leftist who thinks libertarians don’t care about the poor and oppressed, why don’t you *become* a libertarian who cares about the poor and oppressed? Once again, that way there’ll be one more. And in both cases there’ll also be one fewer libertarian of the kind that alienates leftists by dismissing their concerns, and likewise one fewer leftist of the kind that alienates libertarians by dismissing *their* concerns.

This brings me to another issue I’ve been meaning to [write] about.

Hayek famously argued that the concept of “social justice” was meaningless, because society is not a moral agent that could be guilty of injustice. But the concept of social justice need not imply that “society” in the abstract is responsible for anything. To condemn social injustice is simply to say that there are systematic patterns of exploitation and oppression in society, and that *individuals* are responsible either for unjustifiably contributing to this situation, or unjustifiably failing to combat it, or both.

But, the libertarian may object, are these problems really issues of *justice*?

Well, Aristotle distinguishes between “general” justice on the one hand and “special” or “particular” justice on the other. General justice is concerned with interpersonal moral claims in general: it’s the entire interpersonal dimension of morality, “the whole of virtue in relation to another.” Special justice is concerned with a particular *sort* of moral

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Aristotle is in regarding *only* special justice as legitimately enforceable, whereas Aristotle also regarded parts (not all) of general justice as legitimately enforceable. Still, even Aristotle agreed that some aspects of general justice (generosity, for example) are not properly enforceable, and that special justice was *especially* the concern of law.

Now it's often assumed that libertarians can properly have no use for left-wing concepts of "economic justice" and "social justice." But many of the concerns that left-wingers treat under these heads actually *are*, directly

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Thus there's no reason whatever for libertarians to surrender the concept of social justice to the *statist* left, or to let the concept stand as an obstacle to cooperation with the not necessarily or not irretrievably *statist* left.

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claim, the sort that nowadays we would call "rights"; Aristotle lists what one is owed in virtue of being a citizen under the constitution, what one is owed as a result of a contractual agreement, and what one is owed by a wrongdoer as a result of having been a victim of illegal injury, as examples of special justice.

Special justice obviously corresponds more or less to the realm of libertarian rights, while general justice correspondsto interpersonal morality more generally. Where libertarians most crucially depart from Aristotle

or indirectly, questions of libertarian rights, since many of the disadvantages that burden the poor, or women, or minorities, are indeed the result of systematic violence, definitely including (though not necessarily limited to) state violence. So many issues of "social justice" can be accepted by libertarians as part of special justice.

Now it may still be

true that some issues of "social justice" go beyond libertarian rights and so beyond special justice. But these may still properly be regarded as issues of justice if they fall under *general* justice. Even in cases where treating one's employees like crap violates no libertarian rights and so should not be legally actionable, for example, it still violates interpersonal moral claims and so may be regarded as in this broader sense an issue of justice. Thus there's no reason whatever for libertarians to surrender the concept of social justice to the *statist* left, or to let the concept stand as an obstacle to cooperation with the not necessarily or not irretrievably *statist* left.

### **Pootmop!**

As a number of left-libertarians have noted, both "capitalism" and "socialism" are ambiguous terms, bound up with various sorts of confusions. (That's one reason I try to avoid using them, at least without some sort of qualifying prefixes, adjectives, or scare-quotes. Incidentally, I'm pleased to see that one of my own discussions of this problem is featured – for now – on Wikipedia's Issues in Anarchism page.) But there's

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private ownership of the means of production  
(*henceforth* pootmop).

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*one* definition of the word "capitalism" that might *seem* perfectly straightforward and unambiguous. Yet actually I think it is no such thing.

The definition I have in mind is: *private ownership of the means of production* (*henceforth* *pootmop*). One thing that most libertarians in the so-called "capitalist" tradition don't realise (it took me years to realise it) is that when most socialists hear or use this phrase they take it to imply, *by definition*, the ownership of the means of production *by people other than the workers who do the producing* – so that a society in which most firms are worker-owned co-ops would not count, in their eyes, as one characterised by *pootmop*.

This of course is not at all what "capitalist" libertarians take the phrase to mean; although they may tend to assume the traditional hiring-of-labour as the paradigm or default instance of *pootmop*, a society of worker-owned co-ops – whether or not "capitalist" libertarians would find such a system likely or desirable – would be a perfectly

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