

Pope Francis Has Forgotten the Church's Own Grand Libertarian Legacy

Well, it's a pretty big deal when the Pope attacks libertarianism by name. It's even more interesting when my Spanish-language publisher believes that the Pope, in an academic paper, was attacking language used by me in particular, by implication but without citation.

In a choice passage, the Pope says that libertarianism "deceptively proposes a 'beautiful life'." The 2nd edition of my book *Beautiful Anarchy* ([*Una Bella Anarquia: Como Crear Tu Propia Civilizacion en La Era Digital*](#)) just came out in Spanish (the Pope's native language), with solid sales. It's not a stretch that [my book](#) has been targeted, but you decide (you can download the English version [here](#)).

When the Church anathematized views in the Middle Ages, the Popes were careful specifically to cite the works in question, so that there would be no confusion about the views being condemned ([see](#) the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, for example). Not so any longer. We are left to guess the identity of the interlocutor, and the Pope is thus free to mischaracterize.

Moreover, I only wish that the Pope's criticism had some substantive content to grapple with. Libertarians are always up for a good challenge. Sadly, the statement mostly amounts to caricature.

Here is the [full context](#) of what Pope Francis said:

Finally, I cannot but speak of the serious risks associated with the invasion, at high levels of culture and education in both universities and in schools, of positions of libertarian

individualism. A common feature of this fallacious paradigm is that it minimizes the common good, that is, “living well”, a “good life” in the community framework, and exalts the selfish ideal that deceptively proposes a “beautiful life”.

If individualism affirms that it is only the individual who gives value to things and interpersonal relationships, and so it is only the individual who decides what is good and what is bad, then libertarianism, today in fashion, preaches that to establish freedom and individual responsibility, it is necessary to resort to the idea of “self-causation”. Thus libertarian individualism denies the validity of the common good because on the one hand it supposes that the very idea of “common” implies the constriction of at least some individuals, and the other that the notion of “good” deprives freedom of its essence.

The radicalization of individualism in libertarian and therefore anti-social terms leads to the conclusion that everyone has the “right” to expand as far as his power allows, even at the expense of the exclusion and marginalization of the most vulnerable majority. Bonds would have to be cut inasmuch as they would limit freedom. By mistakenly matching the concept of “bond” to that of “constraint”, one ends up confusing what may condition freedom – the constraints – with the essence of created freedom, that is, bonds or relations, family and interpersonal, with the excluded and marginalized, with the common good, and finally with God.

Wow, this Sounds Grim

An ideology that asserts these things would indeed be terrible. It's hard to imagine that such an ideology could ever become “fashionable” at all. But of course the Pope only gets away with claiming such things because he defines libertarianism in a way that makes it incredibly easy to

attack – which is a solid indicator that the opposed position has been mis-rendered.

And sure enough, what the Pope claims libertarians believe is not only untrue; in some respects, it is actually the opposite of what libertarians believe.

Let me offer my own definition of libertarianism. It is the political theory that freedom and peace serve the common good better than violence and state control, thus suggesting a normative rule: societies and individuals must be left unmolested in their associations and commercial dealings so long as they are not threatening others.

I'm almost certain that most thinkers in the liberal tradition would be happy with that definition.

Is that view strange or exotic, dangerous or radical, to the point that the rise of such thoughts really do constitute a dangerous invasion of culture?

I don't think so. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, [wrote](#) essentially this in the *Summa Theologica* (2;96:2):

Wherefore human laws do not forbid all vices, from which the virtuous abstain, but only the more grievous vices, from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained: thus human law prohibits murder, theft and such like.

The *Summa* was written in the 13th century. His stand for limiting the state, and his championing of human freedom (however inconsistently), marked the beginning of a new era in philosophy, law, and theology. It pointed the way out of the feudal period and toward the emergence of the modern world. The ideas now called “libertarian” were essential building blocks of the political developments that took place over the

following 600 years.

Libertarianism is not an arcane, peculiar, oddball view of politics; it is a distillation of the wisdom of a mighty tradition encompassing the experiences of many cultures and the highest thought of the most serious thinkers from the late Middle Ages to the present.

What's in a Word?

Part of the problem is the word “libertarianism” itself. It seems like a neologism that signals a new invention from recent decades, an exotic political ideology with strange doctrines and claims, something that would take some time to study and understand. As with any grand intellectual tradition, it is easy to seize on one thinker, statement, book, or Internet posting, and caricature the whole. So long as that is that case, critics have the advantage: they can make up any scary description they want and it seems believable.

In fact, the term “libertarianism” was a postwar usage that was made necessary because the term liberalism seemed to have been corrupted. That generation made a judgement to bail from the word liberalism if only to distinguish what they believed from what the partisans of state power believed.

Dean Russell in 1955 was [among the first](#) to suggest the replacement, a new synonym:

Many of us call ourselves “liberals.” And it is true that the word “liberal” once described persons who respected the individual and feared the use of mass compulsions. But the leftists have now corrupted that once-proud term to identify themselves and their program of more government ownership of property and more controls over persons. As a result, those of us who believe in freedom must explain that when we call ourselves liberals, we mean liberals in the uncorrupted classical sense. At best, this is awkward and subject to

misunderstanding. Here is a suggestion: Let those of us who love liberty trade-mark and reserve for our own use the good and honorable word "libertarian."

An unanticipated problem with this language strategy was that it inadvertently cut the new libertarianism off from its long and grand liberal tradition. So let's be clear: when we are talking about libertarianism we are talking about the successor and the living embodiment of liberalism in the classical tradition. Understood in this way, it doesn't seem so bizarre.

The Church and Liberalism

Not only that: Catholicism's role in modern history has been to serve as a benefactor of the liberal cause. From the time of St. Thomas and his successors, the Catholic Church began a long move from its Constantinian tendencies in the first millennium, gradually dispensing with the aspiration to unify Church and state and toward an embrace of the emergent liberal tradition. It occurred first in the realms of banking, when the Church served as a [defender](#) of the Medici banking cause against the reactionary forces that tried to stop the dawn of modern commercial life. It liberalized its rule against usury, for example, and defended the rights of property and commercial trade between nations.

The end of slavery was perhaps the greatest triumph of liberalism before the 20th century, and here the Catholic Church had been a force for human rights and justice long before others caught on.

The writings of [Bartolomé de las Casas](#) from 1547, for example, continue to inspire with their moral passion against the atrocities against human rights perpetrated by many states. None of the ancient philosophers dared imagine a world of universal equality for all persons, but the Catholic Church did, based on the conviction that all individuals are made in

the image and likeness of God and are thereby deserving of certain rights.

The late scholastic tradition of Catholic social thought, centered in Spain, has been frequently credited with [giving birth](#) to economic science itself. This was because these scholars were not only moral idealists; they were imminently practical men who sought to understand how the real world works, all in the interests of understanding how people can have better lives. They gradually discovered that the interests of the individual person and the common good were not in conflict but could both be realized through liberalization of all spheres of society.

The Catholic Church in these years was a force for progress in giving voice to the rise of [women's rights](#). This is a complicated history, with ebbs and flows, but a strain of thought here extended from the high regard afforded to the mother of Jesus gradually to come to champion a view of women very different from that of antiquity. Even today, the Church extols four women as Doctors of the Church.

Following the Reformation and the rise of nationalism, the Church – as an international institution representing the stable interests of no one state in particular – served as a bulwark against the unchallenged power of princes and for the Augustinian view that no state leader can displace the authority of God and that “an unjust law is no law at all” – a statement cited by St. Thomas and later by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his [Letter from Birmingham jail](#).

Catholic Opposition to Statism

In other words, the long ethos of Catholicism has been toward favoring exactly what the Pope just denounced: the view that a presumption for liberty over coercion should be the prevailing norm in political life.

It is for this reason that the Catholic Church positioned

itself against socialism at the very dawn of idea in the modern world. In 1878, forty years before the Bolshevik Revolution, Pope Leo XIII wrote in [Quod Apostolici Muneris](#) that the socialists were plotting to “leave nothing untouched or whole which by both human and divine laws has been wisely decreed for the health and beauty of life.”

Above all, he wrote, the socialists were wrong to “assail the right of property sanctioned by natural law; and by a scheme of horrible wickedness, while they seem desirous of caring for the needs and satisfying the desires of all men, they strive to seize and hold in common whatever has been acquired either by title of lawful inheritance, or by labor of brain and hands, or by thrift in one’s mode of life.”

The Pope stated firmly that Catholicism “holds that the right of property and of ownership, which springs from nature itself, must not be touched and stands inviolate. For she knows that stealing and robbery were forbidden in so special a manner by God, the Author and Defender of right, that He would not allow man even to desire what belonged to another, and that thieves and despoilers, no less than adulterers and idolaters, are shut out from the Kingdom of Heaven.”

This anti-socialist activism (Jesus was [no socialist](#)) continued through the Church’s resistance against both Bolshevism and Nazism, and led Catholicism to play a huge role in the eventual overthrow of tyrannical regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and following.

The Second Vatican Council

The apotheosis of the liberal spirit in Catholicism was beautifully affirmed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. This represented the final coming to terms with liberalism that had been brewing for many centuries. It was here that the Church finally and dogmatically affirmed the right of religious liberty as a pillar of human rights.

[Dignitatis Humanae](#) (1965) provides what might be considered the best state of liberalism/libertarianism devised in the second half of the 20th century:

*This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that **no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs**, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.*

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.

*It is in accordance with their dignity as persons-that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility-that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy **immunity from external coercion** as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature.*

A consistent application of this principle lands you exactly where libertarians are on matters of politics, economics, culture, and international relations.

Vatican II further affirmed that seeking a better life through liberty is at the very core of the human experience. This aspiration requires certain institutional conditions, such as the right of private property. The inspirational and beautiful document [Gaudium et Spes](#) (1965), traditionally seen as a masterpiece of exposition that sums up the spirit of the Council, said the following:

Private property or some ownership of external goods confers on everyone a sphere wholly necessary for the autonomy of the person and the family, and it should be regarded as an extension of human freedom. Lastly, since it adds incentives for carrying on one's function and charge, it constitutes one of the conditions for civil liberties.

The forms of such ownership or property are varied today and are becoming increasingly diversified. They all remain, however, a cause of security not to be underestimated, in spite of social funds, rights, and services provided by society. This is true not only of material property but also of immaterial things such as professional capacities....

By its very nature private property has a social quality which is based on the law of the common destination of earthly goods.

What About the Common Good?

This concern over the “common destination” of goods seems to be at the core Pope Francis’s concern is the idea that libertarianism pushes the rights and interests of individuals against the common good. This is a frustrating point to make because it has been the major project of the liberal tradition (from the Scottish Enlightenment to the present) to argue that these are not inconsistent, that one need not be set against the other. The seeking of the good of all does not require the violation of individual rights and interests, and the assertion of individual rights and interests need not conflict

with the good of all.

Consider the words of the man who is widely considered the leading libertarian genius of the 20th century, Ludwig von Mises. In his 1927 book [Liberalism](#), he argued that only liberalism seeks the good of all, as opposed to the interests of one special interest or another.

With the advent of liberalism came the demand for the abolition of all special privileges. The society of caste and status had to make way for a new order in which there were to be only citizens with equal rights. What was under attack was no longer only the particular privileges of the different castes, but the very existence of all privileges. Liberalism tore down the barriers of rank and status and liberated man from the restrictions with which the old order had surrounded him...

Present-day political parties are the champions not only of certain of the privileged orders of earlier days that desire to see preserved and extended traditional prerogatives that liberalism had to allow them to keep because its victory was not complete, but also of certain groups that strive for special privileges, that is to say, that desire to attain the status of a caste. Liberalism addresses itself to all and proposes a program acceptable to all alike. It promises no one privileges. By calling for the renunciation of the pursuit of special interests, it even demands sacrifices, though, of course, only provisional ones, involving the giving up of a relatively small advantage in order to attain a greater one. But the parties of special interests address themselves only to a part of society. To this part, for which alone they intend to work, they promise special advantages at the expense of the rest of society...

The liberals maintained that with the elimination of all the artificial distinctions of caste and status, the abolition of all privileges, and the establishment of equality before the

law, nothing else stands in the way of the peaceful cooperation of all members of society, because then their rightly understood, long-run interests coincide.

(My deceased friend Michael Novak was so impressed by these passages that he wrote [an entire book](#) on the topic of liberalism and the common good, understood in precisely the same way as the Catholic tradition has celebrated for so long.)

Individual and Community

The digital age has provided unprecedented opportunities for individuals to curate their associations, sources of entertainment, spiritual influences, and professional choices. As I read through Pope Francis's statement, he seems to think that celebrating such opportunities (as I have done frequently) necessarily means to disparage community norms and the good of the whole. By implication, he seems to object that the needs of the community ought to come before the wishes of individuals.

But here is the problem. It is a fact of human life that every single individual is different. You could say that it was designed to be that way. The great discovery of liberalism was to observe that it is possible for individuals to pursue their interests in a way that does not sever community attachments but rather strengthens them. That this is true is ever more obvious in our times. Technology has made it so. Curated lives have coincided with ever more community connection across groups and nations.

It is the great burden of the liberal tradition to forever explain that the path toward community runs through the pursuit of individual interests in voluntary cooperation with others. We've tried to explain this for hundreds of years, but the message seems to forever require restatement and explanation.

To be sure, liberalism cannot and does not promise the salvation of souls; that is the domain of the great religions. Liberalism does not seek to displace the role of religion in society. It only seeks to provide the best possible conditions for the flourishing of human society in a material sense through the building of freedom as the essential framework for the good of all.

As Mises says, liberalism “promises nothing that exceeds what can be accomplished in society and through society. It seeks to give men only one thing, the peaceful, undisturbed development of material well-being for all, in order thereby to shield them from the external causes of pain and suffering as far as it lies within the power of social institutions to do so at all. To diminish suffering, to increase happiness: that is its aim.”

The Wrong Target

In summary, libertarianism seeks a freer world, a world of universal rights, the building of institutions that give the rise of human dignity the best possible advantage over powerful interests, mostly associated with states, that would seek to violate those rights and diminish that dignity. Liberty cannot guarantee a “beautiful life” but such a beautiful life would impossible to imagine or achieve without liberty. To observe that is not “deception” but a description of the wonderful opportunities available in our times.

To be clear, I am absolutely not saying that the Catholic tradition of politics amounts to libertarianism. There are too many anomalies and contradictions to make such a claim. What I am saying is that the Church has proven itself capable, through a long history, in variously speaking about liberty and politics in a libertarian voice, and this is for a reason: the faith genuinely believes that the truth will set the world free.

Libertarians are not unwelcome invaders, but rather champions of the continued progress in the world that the Catholic Church itself aims to serve and support.

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